

joshua

A scenic photograph of a river at dusk. The sky is a clear, pale blue. In the foreground, a dark street lamp stands on the left, and the front corner of a classic car is visible on the right. A person is silhouetted against the water, fishing from the grassy bank. In the background, a bridge with multiple concrete piers spans the river, with trees and foliage on the far bank. The water is calm, reflecting the sky and the bridge.

Gary Kelly

...for Cody and Joshua

Joshua

**Revised edition
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Chapter 1

A young man approached the reception desk at Taree Base Hospital. “Good morning,” the attendant said with a practiced smile, then asked what she could do for him. But the young man remained silent. “I’m sorry. Is there a problem? Are you able to speak?” she continued.

To the woman’s surprise, the young man then mimicked her words. “What can I do for you? I’m sorry. Is there a problem? Can you speak?”

“Oh, God, we’ve got a bit of a lulu here,” she mumbled under her breath, then picked up a phone. “Can you ask the head nurse to come to reception, please. Yes, it’s urgent.” The receptionist replaced the phone in its cradle. “Take a seat, please,” she said to the young man. “You’ll be attended to shortly.”

“Take a seat please. You’ll be attended to shortly,” he repeated.

“Over there.” She pointed to a row of chairs in the corner of the room. “Take a seat over there.”

The young man’s eyes followed the direction of the attendant’s finger. He thought for a moment, then seemed to comprehend her request. “Take a seat over there?” he asked as he mimicked a squatting motion and pointed to the chairs.

“Yes, sit down over there.”

Once the young man was seated, he took one of several magazines from a pile, studied it briefly, turned it right way up, and then discarded it in favor of another. After briefly scanning a few magazines, he spotted a book, ‘The Concise Macquarie Dictionary’. A few minutes later he replaced the book on the table and returned to the magazines. Occasionally, as he browsed the magazines, he referred again to the dictionary before resuming his reading. “Any more of

these?" he said loudly across the room to the receptionist?

"Are there none you like?" she asked, expecting him to either nod or shake his head.

"Oh, yes, I enjoyed them all."

"Oh, my God! So you can speak!"

"Well, I can now."

"What is your name?"

"Sorry, I don't have that information."

"You don't know your name? Do you know who you are? Do you know where you come from?"

"Sorry," he shrugged. "I was hoping you could tell me. There are lots of people here... I thought maybe someone might know how to help me."

Just then the head nurse entered the room.

"What seems to be the problem?" she asked the receptionist.

"Amnesia, I think."

The nurse, a middle-aged buxom woman with gray hair worn in a bun, sat next to the young man.

"Hello, I'm Dorothy, head nurse. Do you remember anything about yourself?"

"Not a thing, I'm sorry. Does that mean you'll send me away?"

"No, no, no... on the contrary. However, we'll need to do some tests to see what we can find. In the meantime, let's call you ZYX. Do you have any ID on your person... like a wallet with a driver's license? Check your back pocket for me, please."

The young man followed the nurse's suggestion and produced a brown leather wallet which he handed to the woman. Inside, she found a number of cards, including a driver's license. "There we go! You're Warwick Freeman. Now, that was easy wasn't it? And you live at 3 Bells Drive." She rose from her chair and headed to the reception desk where she gave

the attendant the license and asked her to check the phone book. The head nurse then took the phone from the receptionist to complete the call.

“Hello, the Freeman household? I’m Dorothy from Taree Base Hospital. We have a young man here who seems to have a memory problem... hopefully temporary.” Dorothy read the license details.

“That doesn’t make sense,” said the mature male voice. “I’m Warwick’s father and he’s here in the living room watching television.”

“You mean right there, with you, in the same room?”

“Yes.”

“He doesn’t have a twin brother?”

“No, he’s an only child.”

“Ask him to check his wallet. We might be dealing with a theft here.”

After a few moments’ pause: “Yes, he has his wallet, and everything seems to be intact.”

“Driver’s license?”

“Yes.”

Fifteen minutes later, Warwick Freeman and Warwick junior entered Taree Hospital reception. They were given directions to proceed to a room where the mysterious ZYX had been taken for questioning by hospital staff. Police had also been notified and were on their way.

The only person not to suffer stunned silence when the two Freemans entered the room was ZYX himself. “What’s the problem?” he asked innocently.

“You two are identical,” the head nurse finally managed to stutter. “Absolutely identical, right down to the clothing. This is crazy... it can’t be happening!”

The nurse then answered a knock at the door. Two burly policemen were invited inside. They

introduced themselves as Detective Sergeant Rowles and Detective Senior Constable Rocque. “What seems to be the problem here?”

“These two...,” the nurse began as she gestured to where the young man had been standing only moments beforehand. But he had mysteriously vanished. “Where’s ZYX?” she cried as her eyes hurriedly scanned the room. “He was here a second ago. What the...? We all saw him with our own eyes!”

It took a good ten minutes of excited talk and disbelief to explain – at least to some extent – what had occurred before Rocque and Rowles had entered the room. “He was the spitting image of me,” Warwick junior insisted, “he was even wearing my eyebrow ring – exactly the same as mine! And I mean exactly! He was here! I saw him!”

“Is this door the only way in or out of here?” asked Rowles.

“Yes, the only way,” Dorothy answered.

“Then how do you explain his sudden and mysterious disappearance from this room?”

Every available police officer in the district was brought in to search the hospital and its grounds, and later the town itself for ZYX, but with no success. A forensic search of the room produced only a single strand of hair obtained from the spot where the young man had stood, plus his fingerprints. Warwick junior agreed to undergo DNA testing to compare his with that extracted from the sample hair. Fingerprints were also compared which were found to be identical.

The results of the DNA test completely puzzled Rocque and Rowles. The two hair samples were also identical except for one curious but inexplicable

difference... one of the hairs was at least 10,000 years old.

“We’ll have to issue a missing person’s report,” Rocque suggested. “Mug shot, newspaper, TV news, posters, all the usual paraphernalia.”

“Oh?” Rowles asked as he placed the DNA report in a folder. “What mug shot?”

“Warwick Freeman junior’s, of course.”

“And Warwick Freeman junior’s fingerprints? And Warwick Freeman junior’s everything else? We’d have the entire country looking for Warwick Freeman junior. The poor kid would be driven nuts by amateur super sleuths, not to mention... never mind. And what’s the charge?”

“Impersonating Warwick Freeman junior, stealing his wallet and personal ID for starters.”

“How do we know he impersonated anyone? And he didn’t steal anything. How can you steal something that’s not missing? And you’re forgetting something, Senior Constable Rocque... the only thing missing is a person who was allegedly in a room before we entered it and who then mysteriously disappeared... a person that we don’t know for sure ever existed or still exists. Try explaining that to the commissioner. And think about this, mate, every time we or some other officer mistakenly apprehends Warwick Freeman junior, we’ll be obliged to investigate him – over and over again – only to discover what? That he’s the missing person? How do we ensure that? How would we know that the person we have in custody is the real Warwick Freeman or the alleged impersonator unless, at the same time, we had both of those blokes in the same room standing side by side? Even then, how would we identify who’s who?”

“DNA test.”

“Right, how simple,” Rowles grumbled sarcastically. “One has a 10,000 year old strand of hair. No living person has 10,000 year old DNA, constable, or does that come as a surprise to you? I’ll tell you what we’re going to do, Senior Constable Rocque, we’re going to mark this case ‘unsolved due to lack of evidence’, file it away and hope it never sees the light of day again.”

Chapter 2

Sixteen-year-old Aboriginal Jesse Maguire relaxed on the bank of the Manning River after casting a fishing line. He'd heard that bream and flathead were running that evening. "G'day, mate," he said as a Kelpie cross sniffed his yellow bucket. "Nothing in there for you, fella. And when there is, it won't be... for you, that is. That'll be human tucker. My mom is expecting me to bring home the bacon... fish, in this case."

The dog sat next to Jesse and appeared to take an interest in proceedings. "Are you new around here?" the boy asked. "I don't think I've seen you before. How's tricks?" Then the boy checked the dog's collar and name tag. "Ned? That's an unusual name for a dog. Makes sense, though. Red Kelpie... red, ned. You're a good looking fella." And with that, Jesse placed an arm around the animal and gave his head a friendly rough-up. "I'd like a dog," he lamented, "but we don't have a fence. But if I did have a dog, I reckon a dog like you would be heaps cool."

Jesse got lucky that evening and, within less than an hour, had caught two bream at about a pound each. "Well, that's it Ned," he said as he gathered his yellow bucket of fish and his fishing rod, "I gotta get home with the tucker before my mom freaks. Nice to meet you." When the dog began to follow, the boy halted for a moment. "Sorry, Ned, you can't come with me. You better go back to your own place. Home! Go on! Home, Ned! Off you go."

In typical canine fashion, the dog tilted its head sideways in an attempt to understand the boy's instruction.

"Home," Jesse continued, "don't you understand? Home." The dog plonked its butt on the

grass as Jesse walked a short distance. When he about faced, he saw that the dog had remained in the same spot, despite its puzzled expression. “Stay there,” Jesse reaffirmed, “that’s a good boy,” and then continued his journey home, glancing occasionally over his shoulder to make sure he wasn’t being followed by Ned.

A few days later, Jesse returned to the Manning’s north bank to fish and was surprised to see his best friend from school waiting for him. “What are you doing here, Anthony?”

“Waiting for you.” Like most of Jesse’s friends, Anthony was non-Aboriginal. Jesse’s mom, a full-blood Aboriginal, was adopted and raised by white folks. She preferred to raise her three sons on the white side of town.

“You hate fishing,” Jesse continued.

“I do? Anyway, I need to see you.”

Jesse filled his bucket with river water, and then began to attach bait to the hook of his fishing rod. “I don’t get it... we’ve been together most of the day at school. What gives?”

“Are you ready for this? I’m not Anthony.”

“Yeah, right. What is this? You’re always crazy, Anthony, but this is way over the top, man.”

“Why do you like Anthony so much?”

“What? Will you cut this crap? It’s getting kinda scary. If you’re not Anthony, who are you? His twin?”

“I followed you to school and copied him.”

“This is weird, Anthony. Are you on something?”

“Remember Ned?”

“Ned who?”

“The Kelpie.”

“The dog? How do you know about the dog? I never mentioned it to you. What’s going on here, Anthony? You’re not making any sense. Lemme check your left eye.” Anthony’s left eye was faulty, slightly skewed and provided only 25% vision. “Yep, that’s you alright,” Jesse concluded, “partial sight. What’s this bullshit you’re giving me about not really being Anthony?”

“I just told you.”

“This is a sick... and it’s not funny. So stop it!”

“Who would you like me to be? I’m not sure how to get to know you. You were nice to me when I was Ned but a dog can’t speak. So I figured if I was Anthony...”

“Who are you? What are you? What the hell is this all about? You’re being scary, Anthony – or whoever the hell you are.” But as Jesse spoke, Anthony disappeared. An instant later, Jesse was alone on the bank of the Manning River. “My mind is going troppo,” he mumbled to himself as he cast his line into the water. “I’m hallucinating or something.” Then he took his mobile phone from his pocket, found Anthony’s number in memory and pressed call.

“Anthony? Where the hell are you?”

“Jesse? What’s the panic? I’m home watching the umpteenth repeat of M*A*S*H. What’s bugging you?”

“Nothing... don’t worry about it.”

“You’re not making any sense, Jesse.”

Meanwhile, ZYX was increasingly concerned about his identity. Who or what was he? Indeed, was he a he? Or a she? Or an it? He was aware, however, that his being – such as it was – consisted of pure energy with no visible attributes such as a physical

presence, apart from those he was able to assume by copying. Clearly, he had originated from another place, but where? And how did he arrive in this strange environment? His only hope was to somehow befriend an earthling and gain their trust in order to unravel this mystery. ZYX didn't belong here on Earth. It was imperative that he find his true home and return to normalcy.

“Gary,” Dr David Hardy called as he entered the medical center waiting room and recognized his patient. Gary Kelty rose from his seat and headed toward the doctor's room.

“Good morning, Dr Hardy. How are you today?”

The doctor stood to one side of his doorway to allow his patient entry. “Oh? Why so formal all of a sudden? What happened to ‘G’day, David’? Take a seat. How's everything at home?”

“Fine, thanks. Well, sort of fine. I have a problem. It's a bit complicated... not easy to explain.”

“Let's check your blood pressure first.” Dr Hardy wrapped a black band around Kelty's arm and checked the device's digital output. “That can't be right.”

“What does it say?”

“Zero. You're obviously not dead. Let me try again.” Hardy repeated the procedure only to receive the same readout. “Damn it, this machine must be out of order.”

“No, David, it's not out of order, and there's nothing wrong with my blood pressure. I need help with something else.”

“Let me try the stethoscope.” The doctor then placed the listening device over Kelty's heart. “That's impossible,” he said.

“You’re not listening to me, David. I can explain what’s happening here.”

During the next ten minutes, the doctor listened intently to his patient’s story. “And that’s why I’m here, David. I overheard Kelty talking about you to his neighbor and decided that you’re probably the best person to confide in. He speaks very highly of you.”

“I see. You’re working on new novel, is that it, Gary? I don’t understand how you’re doing this ‘no pulse, no heartbeat’ thing, but I don’t appreciate it. I’m a professional medical practitioner with better things to do than play silly games.” The doctor stood and was about to open his door when Kelty vanished into thin air. The doctor quickly scanned the room then waved his hand through the empty space that his patient had occupied just a moment ago. Hardy then opened the door of his room and peered into the hallway. “Gary?” he called.

“In here, David.”

The doctor turned around to discover that his patient had somehow reappeared, seated in the same spot. “This has to be some sort of hypnosis,” Hardy reasoned as he shook his head. He closed the door and, while wearing a stern, red-faced expression, he said to Kelty in a controlled but menacing tone, “Undo whatever it is you’ve done, Gary, and piss off out of here. Consider our doctor/patient relationship dissolved forthwith. Take your silly tricks somewhere else.”

Once Kelty had vacated the Taree Medical Center building, Dr Hardy immediately phoned his patient’s home number. “Hello, Gary Kelty speaking,” was the response.

“Sorry, Gary... I accidentally dialled your number instead of another patient’s.”

Chapter 3

Dr Hardy walked from his consulting room to the Medical Center's office and reception area. "Did anyone see Gary Kelty arrive and leave?" he asked the staff as a group. They all confirmed that they had. "Did anyone notice anything strange... anything different?" No, they hadn't.

"Is something wrong?" one of them asked.

"Well, yes... but I'm not sure what. However, at least you witnessed his arrival and departure, which means I'm not all of a sudden daft."

The doctor returned to his room where he took his own blood pressure and pulse. His machine worked perfectly. He picked up his phone and punched in a number.

"It's Dr David Hardy here. Could I speak to Detective Sergeant Rowles please."

"Rowles here."

Hardy proceeded to inform the detective of his experience with Gary Kelty. "Kelty mentioned an incident at the base hospital when he assumed the identity of Warwick Freeman junior and I was wondering..."

"If it really happened? Yes, it did, doctor. Have you spoken to Gary Kelty? I mean, the real one?"

"He answered his home phone when I called just a few minutes ago... shortly after the impostor left the medical center. It would have been physically impossible for Kelty to cover that distance in such a short time."

"Are you saying that what has happened already – this mystery person or thing manifesting itself as a copy of someone else – 'is' physically possible?"

“Well, no, sergeant... of course not. That is, I don't believe so. On the other hand... Incidentally, I've seen nothing about the Warwick Freeman Junior incident in the Manning Times.”

“No, and I'd appreciate it, doctor, if you'd keep this business with Kelty to yourself. We don't want to panic the public. Imagine if you went home to your wife and wondered if it were really her. There's something very strange happening here and I suggest we keep a lid on the matter until we sort out what it is. Meanwhile, I'll send the forensic team out to the Medical Center. Please cancel your patients for the rest of the day, Dr Hardy... or use another room. What's Gary Kelty's home phone number?”

Despite Kelty's astonishment and confusion, he agreed to undergo a DNA test to compare his with that of whomever or whatever it was that visited Dr Hardy earlier in the day. As expected, the two samples matched precisely except for the age difference of about 10,000 years.

After school, Jesse Maguire asked his friend Anthony to ride the bus with him into town for a Coke and a donut at the Triple C Food Court before going home. “There's something I need to tell you, Anthony. You're not gonna believe it. Just humor me, okay.”

The boys seated themselves at a table after buying their snacks. “Well?” Anthony asked. “Is it about that new chick at school? She's a real honey, mate, and she's been giving you the eye... big time. Fire away, Jesse, I'm all ears.”

“She's not real, Anthony.”

“Yeah, right. Did you notice those booberoonies, man? How could you not? Hey, don't

tell me your hormones have suddenly lost the plot, hahaha!”

“Just listen to me, okay. And don’t laugh. This is serious.” Jesse told his mate the tale of what had happened at the river recently when a vision of Anthony appeared. “And that’s when I phoned you while you were watching M*A*S*H.”

Anthony shook his head for a seemingly long time. “Hey, Jesse, you know how I feel about drugs, man,” he said solemnly.

“I wasn’t on anything... honest. I was stone cold straight, Anthony... not even a beer! Besides, you know that I feel the same as you do about drugs. They’re a no-no. Not only that, my mom would kill me if I experimented with anything.”

“Are you gonna check with a doctor?”

“No.”

“The school counsellor?”

“No.”

“The cops?”

“Forget it! If I tell them I saw a vision of you – when it wasn’t really you – they’ll send me away, man. Jeez, if *you* don’t believe that it really happened, there’s no way they will.”

“It’s probably some kinda psychological problem, Jesse. Some hallucination thingy. You can’t go through life with whatever it is that’s fooling with your brain like that. Besides, that new chick is too awesome to lose. Trust me... she’s crazy about you.”

Before going home, Jesse explained that he wanted to pick up a book from the library. Anthony offered to accompany him. While there, waiting their turn at the counter, Anthony nudged his mate. “Don’t look now,” he said in a hushed voice, “but there’s a

guy in the computer section reading a screen. He looks just like you – he’s even dressed like you.”

Jesse waited a few seconds, then glanced over to the computer section. “It’s him,” he whispered.

“The guy who pretended to be me?”

“It has to be. It sure as hell is not me sitting over there. What’ll we do?”

“Call the cops.”

“He’ll just disappear. You can’t catch him.”

Just then, the librarian handed Jesse the book he wanted. He signed for it, and then the two boys walked toward the exit. “I tell you what,” he said to Anthony, “how about you approach him and act as if nothing’s wrong. I’ll go home and phone you later to check what happened. Maybe he’ll tell you something... who or what he is and what the hell he’s doing here.”

“Sounds kinda scary, mate.”

“Okay, no worries, if you’re too chicken...”

“Okay, okay... I’ll do it. You owe me for this, Jesse. Big time!”

Jesse left the library and hurried home while Anthony summoned his best acting skills and approached ZYX at the computer. “Hey, Jesse, how’s it going? Catching up on schoolwork?”

“Anthony! G’day... didn’t expect to see you here. Yeah, just doing a bit of research stuff... life on earth, human behaviour, that kinda thing.”

“That’s not what we do at school.”

“No... yeah, I know that, but I just wanna broaden my knowledge... you know, learn about things we don’t necessarily do at school. You look kinda nervous, are you okay?”

“Yeah, uh, fine... fine. Hey, you wanna go for a Coke or something?”

“I’m not thirsty but I’ll come with you.”

Instead, the boys wandered down to nearby Queen

Elizabeth park and sat together on a bench overlooking the broad and lazy Manning River.

“So,” Anthony began, “are you interested in that new chick at school or what?”

“What chick?”

“The one with the big boobs.”

“Well, yeah... what makes you think I’m not?”

“You act kinda suspicious or something when she shows up.”

“Why should I?”

“That’s what I wanna know. She’s hot, man, like major hot. Sometimes I don’t understand you at all.”

“Tell me about it, Anthony, I don’t understand me either.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m not me.”

“I know.”

“You know?”

“Yeah... I know.” Anthony studied the far side of the Manning for a moment, then took a deep breath. “I was with Jesse at the library counter when I saw you at the computer. Jesse went home while I... Anyway, who the hell are you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know who or what I am or where I come from.”

“Yeah? Well, I’m scared shitless, I can tell you that. I don’t even know why I’m talking to you like this. Maybe it’s because you look familiar disguised as Jesse. Hey, listen, by the way, when you’re that chick with the big booberoonies, who’s the best looking, Jesse or me?”

“You.”

“Really? Serious?”

“Awesome.”

“Hahahaha! Wait till I tell Jesse this! He’ll spew! Hahahaha! Hey, that’s cool. By the way, what’s your name?”

“I don’t know. The head nurse at the hospital called me ZYX. Listen, Anthony, there’s nothing to be afraid of, okay. I don’t mean any harm to anyone or anything... really. I just wanna know who I am and maybe get back to wherever it is I belong.”

“What do you look like? I mean, without someone else’s body?”

“Nothing, at least nothing human eyes like yours can see. I use other senses. I’m pure energy. But it’s easy for me to copy something – anything – like that tree over there.”

“Don’t! Jesus Christ! I don’t wanna be seen talking to a damn tree. So what now?”

“I was hoping you could suggest something. If I ask for help from the authorities, they freak. They don’t even give me a chance to explain. I got thrown out of a doctor’s office today. Anthony? Tell me honestly, do I still scare you?”

“Well, yes... but also no... not as much anyway.”

“Will you help me?”

Anthony pondered the leisurely flow of the river for a moment before answering. “Okay,” he shrugged. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Chapter 4

Jesse phoned Anthony at 6pm, eagerly anticipating the news. “ZYX said when he’s that chick with the big melons he thinks I’m better looking than you, Jesse. Hahaha! Actually, he said I’m awesome.”

“Cut the crap. What happened?”

“He’s some kinda alien.”

“Nooooooo. Really? Why? Just because he can look exactly like someone else and disappear at will?”

“Seriously, he needs our help, Jesse, and I said we’d try.”

“We? Who’s we? That thing – whatever he or it is – scares the hell outta me, Anthony. I wish he’d just disappear... and that’s not meant to be a joke.”

“He’s lost. He has no recollection of who he is or where he comes from. He can’t go to the authorities, mate, or he’ll be busted.”

“He’ll just disappear.”

“Yeah, like back to square one. He needs our help, Jesse.”

“Where is he now?”

“God knows. Maybe he’s reading the news on TV or something. Hahaha!”

“It’s not funny, Anthony... how can we ever be sure we’re talking to the real you or me? You could be ZYX right now for all I know.”

“Whaaaaaaaahahahahaha! Spooky, spooky! Oooooooo!”

“Stop it, Anthony!”

“Hey, how do you know it’s me?”

“Because ZYX isn’t that stupid. Okay, so how are we going to help him? What kinda hair-brained scheme have you got in mind?”

The boys agreed that ZYX needed a proper identity... a permanent one at least while he was on

Earth. They also agreed that his assumed identity could not be that of a living person, or recently deceased.

“Who?” Jesse asked.

“I dunno... exactly. Someone from history or whatever. We’ll need to discuss it with ZYX.”

Next day, during lunch break at school, the ‘new chick’ approached Jesse and Anthony as they sat together on a bench in the quadrangle. “G’day Z,” Anthony said, “take a seat.”

“Z?” the girl responded as she sat between the lads. “Who’s Z?”

“You mean you’re not ZYX? C’mon, Z, don’t play games. If you want us to help, then you gotta be serious.”

“Sorry, guys, but this assuming an identity thing is kinda fun. Okay, okay I’ll be serious.”

“You need a reliable identity... a permanent one so we always know it’s you. You can’t just appear as whoever you fancy whenever you want. Okay? And you’ll need to live somewhere permanently.”

“Like where?”

“There’s always someone hanging out at Jesse’s place... friends who stay a month or whatever.”

“Whoa, hang on a second!” Jesse protested.

“We haven’t discussed this! And what about my mom? What if she says no?”

“And another thing, Z, you can’t continue to be that girl.”

“That girl?”

“The one you are now. You’re too... well, distracting. I mean...”

“Yes, I know what you mean.”

“You’ll need to be a bloke. You know... a mate... a male. It’s less complicated. By the way, what sex are you?”

“You mean male or female like here on this planet? Neither.”

“How weird.”

“Oh? You think I’m weird? Hahaha! I got news for you guys. You’re the weird ones.”

“How about Joshua?” Jesse suggested. “The one from the Bible – Moses’ apprentice. He was cool. He parted the waters just like Moses did and marched around Jericho until the walls fell.”

“What’s Joshua got to do with anything?”

Anthony asked, not understanding Jesse’s drift.

“Z could be Joshua. Anyway, I like the name – Josh...u...a. It rocks.”

“Yeah, right,” Anthony mocked. “We just whip out a photo of Joshua and whammo, instant Joshua.”

“Can you copy a painting or an illustration?”

Jesse asked ZYX.

“I could try. But I wouldn’t have the real Joshua’s personality.”

“Use your own. He was around in the late Bronze age, about 1200 BC, so who’s gonna know?”

“That’s only a little over 3 millennia.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind... I’ll explain later.”

Meanwhile, Anthony was still unconvinced.

“Joshua was an Arab,” he contended. “What the hell are we doing hanging with an Arab?”

“What’s wrong with an Arab?” Jesse argued.

“And what about ID... Medicare, school papers and all that other stuff?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” ZYX shrugged. “I can fix that no problem. Hey, it’s almost time for class, guys, so how about I go back to the library this afternoon and research Joshua. I’ll see you after school.”

“Where?”

“In the park... away from other people. I might need a bit of a cosmetic touch-up here and there. This will be the first time I’ve copied an illustration.”

After school, in the park by the Manning River, Jesse and Anthony arrived to see a Biblical figure dressed in white robes, one of which was draped over his head. Around his waist was a short pleated skirt. His muscular legs were criss-crossed with narrow leather bindings and on his feet were leather sandals. His handsome, rugged face was bearded.

“You look like someone out of Ben Hur,” Anthony joked. “Not only that, you look like you’ve been sketched.”

“Can you copy bits and pieces, Joshua?”

“How do you mean, Jesse?”

“I’ve got an idea.”

Within less than a minute, ZYX had copied a combination of various skin tones, colors and other physical attributes of his friends and amalgamated them with the likeness of Joshua to assume an individual appearance. “No beard,” Jesse insisted. “Ditch the whiskers, mate. You need to be about our age.” Then Jesse suggested a short trip to the local Saint Vincent de Paul op shop where, for just a few dollars, they managed to dress Joshua in modern clothing.

“C’mon, guys,” ZYX complained as he checked his reflection in the store mirror, “now I don’t look anything like Joshua.”

“How do you know?” Jesse commented. “No one alive has ever seen him. Anyway, I think you look just fine... almost as good looking as me.”

Maggie Maguire, a handsome, full-blood Aboriginal woman with long black hair, rules her three

boys with an iron rod. She's aware of the general behaviour of many of the Aboriginal children who live at the Purfleet settlement on the south side of town, which can be less than exemplary. She prefers to live in town where her boys have the opportunity to assimilate seamlessly into white society; to be respected by their peers. Moreover, Maggie was herself raised by whites after being adopted as a baby.

Jessie was born to a white father who is estranged from the family. Jesse has had almost no contact with him and is not particularly bothered by it. The younger siblings, Thomas and Michael, were born to another white man who lives further down the coast. He and his sons have a fairly close relationship – he hosts them at his house during school holidays.

“Hi, mom, this is my friend Joshua. Joshua – this is my mom, Maggie.”

“G'day, Joshua,” Maggie smiled. She wiped her hand on her apron and shook the hand of Jesse's new friend. “I'm just preparing dinner. You're welcome to stay if you like. There's plenty for everyone. So how long have you known Jesse?”

“Uh... not all that long, but we're good mates.”

“Yeah,” Jesse agreed, almost too enthusiastically, “we're good mates. You wanna check out my room?”

Joshua followed Jesse into his room where the new house guest explained that he couldn't stay for dinner. “I can't eat or drink. This is not a real body like yours. It's only a copy... kinda hollow inside with no internal organs.”

“No problem... just tell mom you're not hungry.” Jesse emerged from his room, situated just across the hall from the kitchen. “Mom? Is it okay if Joshua sleeps over?”

“No problem as long as he accepts us as we are... nothing fancy... spare mattress on the floor. Be sure to let his folks know.”

“He doesn’t have any folks. He’s an orphan.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“That’s cool, mom. Oh, and Joshua says he’s not hungry.”

“Not hungry? I never met a boy with that problem,” she laughed.

Chapter 5

Inevitably – albeit unexpectedly – Maggie Maguire insisted on giving Joshua the 3rd degree at the dinner table. She wanted to know where he came from, who his original folks were – “You have the appearance of a person born in the Middle East,” she noted – and asked many other questions about his life, all of whose answers Joshua was unable to deliver.

“He’s got amnesia, mom,” Jesse finally explained to his mother. “He has no idea who he is or where he’s from.”

“You said he’s an orphan.”

“He is... kinda.”

“Oh, dear! Well, he should go to the proper authorities. The boy needs help!”

“Tried that already, mom. It’s a long story.”

Jesse decided against volunteering any further details about his new friend, especially in the company of his two siblings, for fear of complications. The two younger boys would no doubt be thrilled with the idea of having their own genuine alien at home. The news would be all over town the following day. “You’ll have to trust me, mom. I know what I’m doing here... or at least I think I do.”

“With all due respect to Joshua, Jesse, he’s a stranger in my house, and I have the safety and well-being of my family to consider.”

Joshua rose from his chair, “You’re right, Mrs Maguire. I’ve been here only a short while and I’m already causing friction. Please accept my sincere regret and apology. I’ll leave now.”

“No you won’t!” Jesse insisted. “Don’t you dare do that... that disappearing thing you do. Now sit down.”

“If it helps, Mrs Maguire...” Joshua began as he resumed his chair...

“Call me Maggie, please.”

“If it helps, Maggie, there’s nothing about me you need to fear. You’re right, I do need help and Jesse has offered to provide it. He and Anthony are the only friends I have. They trust me, and I hope you can trust me as well.”

“Are you a bank robber?” Thomas asked in wide-eyed seriousness.

“No,” Joshua laughed. “Nothing like that, mate.”

“If you’ve got amnesia, you might be someone really, really famous!” Thomas’s large brown eyes twinkled in anticipation of new excitement about to enter his life. “I like Joshua, mommy, and I think he should stay.”

“Me too!” his elder brother Michael agreed. “He’s cool.”

When Maggie returned from her Aboriginal Art class at TAFE next afternoon, she found the house absolutely spic and span. Even all the dishes in the kitchen sink had been done. Washing up was supposed to be Jesse’s chore but he was less than enthusiastic about it, to put it mildly.

“Is this what you call Aboriginal art?” Joshua asked Maggie as he pointed to one of several works in the living room.

“Yes.” Maggie was proud of her work and justly so. She had gained quite a reputation in local art circles.

“It’s very pleasing to the eye... does it have any sort of cultural meaning?”

“Its meaning is connected to the earth. Aboriginal art tells a story but not in the white man’s

way. Aboriginal art is about the soul and The Dreaming. It's about how the spirits talk to us as artists and we paint whatever they say. At least, I do. It's a sort of intuitive thing. By the way, thanks for all the housework, Joshua. You didn't need to go to all that trouble, you know."

"No trouble at all."

Soon afterwards, the boys arrived home from school – noisily, of course – and the immediate focus was once again on their new guest. "The house looks different," was Thomas's first reaction. "How come it's so clean and tidy?"

"You can thank Joshua for that," Maggie answered, "and I'll thank you to keep it that way. And that goes for you too, Jesse, and you Michael."

Once the homecoming fuss had settled down, Joshua took the opportunity to join Jesse in his room. "So how was your day?"

"Where did you put all my stuff when you cleaned my room?"

"In drawers, of course. That's what drawers are for."

"Where is everything?"

"Open the drawers and check, you dingaling."

"When you're gone, mom is gonna want me to keep the place tidy. Do you realize what you've done, you jerk?"

"You want me to undo it? It takes just a few seconds."

"Too late now. Anyway, how do you do all that stuff... like disappear and make things happen just by waving your hand around?" Jesse sat on the side of his bed, and slapped the blanket as an invitation to Joshua to join him.

“I dunno. I just can. I went to the library again today. I’m trying to learn as much as I can about Earth and human history. Is there another library in town?”

“What’s wrong with this one?”

“Nothing... it’s just that I’ve read it all.”

“In one day? Yeah, right. So what’s Einstein’s theory of relativity?”

“ $E = mc^2$, energy and mass are equivalent and transmutable.”

“Okay, smartie pants, so you got lucky. Here’s another one – who discovered Australia?”

“A 16th century maritime map in a Los Angeles library vault proves that Portuguese adventurers, not British or Dutch, were the first Europeans to discover Australia.”

“Really? Okay, so you wanna help me with my homework?”

“That’s cheating.”

“Joshua? Seriously, if you’re so smart, what do you think of us?”

“Human beings? Kinda cute and interesting but... well, not all that bright, if you know what I mean. No offence, Jesse, but... well...”

“What’s wrong with us?”

“Wrong? Take that library in town, for example, it pretty much contains all the knowledge known to mankind. Do you have any idea what that means? It means you guys know diddly squat. But don’t worry about it because I’m in the same boat right now due to my amnesia.”

“There’s something I’ve been trying to figure out – how did you learn English?”

“In the hospital waiting area... there was a dictionary there, and I read all the magazines and listened to people. You know something, Jesse? I’m kinda glad that I’m here, at least for a while. There are

so many things I want to know, like why you guys behave and think like you do.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Exactly.”

Just before dinner, Jesse mentioned to Joshua that Maggie would become suspicious if his friend declined to eat again. “It doesn’t look right.”

“So how do I get rid of the food? I can’t put it in my mouth like you guys do. Besides, it’s gross... dead things... yukko!”

“You can make yourself appear and disappear, right? Why not the food?”

“You’re a genius, Jesse. Lemme work on it.”

Jesse attended football training that night, which he did twice a week. He decided not to invite Joshua because the team would ask too many questions about his new and mysterious friend. Instead, Maggie took advantage of Jesse’s absence to satisfy her curiosity about her guest. She asked Joshua why he wasn’t interested in attending Jesse’s school.

“If I did, I’d be a teacher. I don’t mean to sound egotistical, Maggie, but I already know everything... at least as much as the teachers do.”

“Hah! Typical teenage male. Even if you do know everything, Joshua, you need an interest; something to keep you occupied. Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Not that I know of.”

“I’d be surprised if you didn’t... you’re a very good looking young man. So, tell me, what are you doing about this amnesia thing?”

“I’ve read about it. Sometimes it sorts itself out, triggered by something familiar. In some cases, amnesia lasts less than 24 hours. But most causes of

memory loss are organic, caused by disease or trauma. Neither of those conditions applies to me. Functional causes are psychological factors, such as defense mechanisms. Hysterical post-traumatic amnesia is an example of this. Psychological factors don't apply to me either."

"You make it sound as though you're not human," Maggie laughed. "I think you need professional help, Joshua. Why don't you let me talk to a few people on your behalf."

"I'd rather you didn't. No offence, but there are aspects of my situation that you're unaware of. I'd explain further but your son would prefer I didn't."

"Jesse! What the hell would he know? He's a boy! Don't listen to his advice, Joshua. He wouldn't know his ass from his elbow. I mean, I love him dearly but... we're not talking about a head cold here, we're talking about something very serious. You need professional help, Joshua."

Chapter 6

Jesse arrived home from football training, one sock up, one sock down, and covered in grass stains. He said his hellos and hit the shower right away.

“He loves his sport,” Maggie explained.

“There’s not much of him but that doesn’t stop him from mixing it with the bigger boys. He has no fear. By the way, Joshua, about this amnesia business, if you can remember your name, that’s a good start.”

“My name? Joshua is not my name. Jesse gave it to me... he likes it. He told me about Joshua from the Bible, so I read the book.”

“The whole book?”

“Yep. You know, Joshua was a pretty tough guy. He chopped off people’s heads and did all kinds of warlike stuff – gruesome things – in the name of God.”

“Seems like nothing much has changed.”

As the pair chatted, Jesse, wrapped in a towel, emerged from the bathroom and disappeared into his room. A few seconds later, he dashed across the hall and into the kitchen. He was just about to offer Joshua a cold drink when he remembered that it would be a waste of time. Then he went next door to the living room and joined the others

“250 push-ups tonight,” he announced. “Not all at once, though. I’m stuffed, and my shoulders hurt.”

“Start counting as fast as you can,” Joshua grinned, and then spread the length of his body on the floor. His torso was a blur as he raised and lowered it two or three times a second. When he’d reached 300 push-ups, he resumed his seat on the sofa. “How’s that?”

“I don’t believe it!” Maggie gushed. “How on earth did you do that? And you didn’t even raise a sweat!”

Later, in Jesse’s room as the boys prepared to turn in for the night, Jesse sat on the side of his bed and complained about Joshua’s performance. “Don’t do that again.”

“What?”

“The push-up thing, or anything else that makes me look inferior in front of my mom.”

“What’s with all this football business anyway? Why push yourself so hard?”

“To get fit.”

“You’re already fit.”

“To stay fit.”

“It’s more than that.”

“It’s a guy thing. Before training starts, we kick a ball around and talk. I didn’t know a lot of the guys at first but I do now. We’re mates.”

“So it’s a social thing... camaraderie... being one of the guys.”

“Yeah.”

“Do they ever say anything about your color?”

“About being Aboriginal? No. Well, sometimes as a joke but they don’t mean anything racist. They’re pretty cool. They like my mom, too.”

“By the way, while you were away, Maggie said I should seek professional help with the amnesia thing. She sounds pretty determined. She’s even thinking about talking to a few people on my behalf.”

Jesse plumped his pillow and snuggled under the covers. “Let’s talk later, Joshua. I’m buggered.”

Joshua didn’t need to sleep. He wasn’t human. But out of courtesy, he pretended to accept the hospitality of his hosts, including the offer of a bed.

When he was sure everyone was sound asleep, he went to the kitchen, turned on the computer and then spent the rest of the night researching various web sites.

Despite his amnesia and total lack of recall about his origins somewhere in space, he couldn't shake the feeling that human beings were still in their infancy in terms of evolution. Various contradictions were glaringly obvious, at least to Joshua, but apparently not to humans. In fact, evolution itself was a contentious issue. On one web site, he read:

The Oklahoma House of Representatives has passed a bill that says that a student can receive a passing grade in an Earth Science class IF they say that the Earth is only 6,000 years old, even though that answer is WRONG. The student cannot be graded down if they say that what they are being taught interferes with their religious beliefs.

The bill states: "A school district shall treat a student's voluntary expression of a religious viewpoint, if any, on an otherwise permissible subject in the same manner the district treats a student's voluntary expression of a secular or other viewpoint on an otherwise permissible subject and may not discriminate against the student based on a religious viewpoint expressed by the student on an otherwise permissible subject."

Sally Kern is primary author of the bill. The very same hatemonger who speaks out against the gay lifestyle comparing being gay to cancer and that gays are more dangerous than terrorists. She wants the Christian bible, as SHE interprets it to be the law of the U.S. not unlike Saudi Arabia where Islam is the law. Her husband is a Southern Baptist preacher.

The bill goes to the Senate for a vote and, with the Senate being dominated by Republican/Conservatives, will probably pass.

Joshua intuitively felt an overwhelming desire to respond to the author's statement, but what could he say? That he was an alien with amnesia in a borrowed human body, and that he instinctively knew that the viewpoints expressed by Sally Kern were illogical?

"You're up already," Jesse grumbled as he staggered sleepily into the kitchen, opened the fridge door and stared blankly inside.

"I've been reading about you guys."

"Us?" Jesse's attention was diverted from the fridge for a moment to check the computer screen.

"You as in your species."

Jesse returned his attention to the contents of the fridge and finally selected a carton of milk. "And have you reached a conclusion?"

"Yep."

"Such as?"

"You don't wanna know."

"You're right," Jesse agreed as he filled a bowl with cereal and added milk. "I got too many things happening today... a mock court trial where our school argues the case with another school – like we're the prosecution and they're the defence – then we play the other school in a footy match, and then after school I've got footy training again and tonight I play basketball."

"What do you do in your spare time? So, tell me, all this stuff you do... it's all about competition – winners and losers?"

"Yeah."

"What if you lose?"

"We won't."

During the day, Joshua visited a local church. It was empty apart from an elderly woman lighting a

candle. Joshua studied the Stations of the Cross as well as the beauty of the building with its magnificent stained leadlight windows, and tall ceiling timbers that formed a cruciform shape.

“You’ve never visited Our Lady of the Rosary before?”

Joshua turned to face the voice behind him.

“No. It’s very impressive.”

“The House of God deserves no less. I’m Father Samuels, Tom Samuels,” the man said as he introduced himself and extended his hand.

“Joshua... uh, Joshua Maguire. Pleased to meet you.”

“I’m afraid there’s no service today, Joshua. But there are services on Sunday. However, you’re welcome here any time, and if there’s anything I can help you with, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Now that you mention it, Father, how old is Earth?”

“Old? Well, that depends on what you believe in – if you’re a Creationist, it’s about 6000 years, give or take.”

“And if you’re not?”

“Well, according to science, it’s hundreds of millions.”

“And what do you believe?”

“I believe what the Bible teaches. It’s much less complicated. You see, Joshua, scientific theories only serve to confuse people. People want the truth, not a whole lot of mind-numbing gobble-de-gook. People want a yes or a no, not a whole bunch of maybes. People want certainty, and that’s what the Bible gives them. You see that little old lady over there – the one lighting the candle – she’s frail these days, not quite the full quid, to quote the vernacular, heh heh. She’s not interested in how old the Earth is, she’s

interested in her faith – she’s interested in the simple things of life – and she’s interested in spending life everlasting in the glory of the Kingdom of God.”

“That’s what she believes?”

“Well, of course!”

Chapter 7

Jesse returned home from school with the news that his team had lost both the mock court trial and the football match against the opposing team. “Our plans weren’t good enough,” he explained as he removed his school clothes in his room and changed into a pair of shorts. “Maybe we’ll do better tonight at the basketball game.”

“What plans?” Joshua asked.

“Game strategies. You always have a game strategy when you play a game.”

“So what kinda strategy do we have for getting me home... wherever that is?”

“We don’t – at least not yet. Jeez, Joshua, I hadn’t thought about a plan. I don’t even know where to start! You’ve read all the stuff at the library and studied everything on the internet. No clues? Not even a tiny hint?”

“Only one... that my origin must be beyond the limited boundary of human knowledge.”

“You mean like outside the solar system or whatever?”

“Possibly. To tell you the truth, Jesse, I don’t know where to start either. I could be stuck here forever!”

“Would that be so bad?”

“Put yourself in my shoes.”

After an early dinner, Anthony arrived to drive Jesse to the sports stadium where the basketball match was to be held. Thomas and Michael watched TV in the living room while Maggie sat at the computer in the kitchen. “I’ve noticed you haven’t used the shower since you arrived,” she said to Joshua as he entered the room. “There’s no need to ask, you know, just go

ahead and use it. There are spare towels in the linen cupboard. Otherwise you might cost me a fortune in room deodorizer.”

Joshua’s “borrowed” body didn’t behave in the same way as a normal human’s; it didn’t perspire or create waste. “Shower? Well, if you’re sure it’s okay, Maggie.”

“I insist.”

“I’ll do the dishes first.”

“No you won’t... that’s Jesse’s job.”

“Well, in that case what’s mine?”

“You’ve done enough already. Besides, you’re our guest. By the way, any luck with the amnesia thing? I’ve spoken to a few people I know and they suggest that it’s a temporary state, and that you’ll wake up one morning with your memory restored. But I was thinking that it might be useful to have a DNA test done, and fingerprints.”

“Been there, done that. No luck.”

“Really? How strange! Did they list you as a missing person? Your folks must be missing you... perhaps if...”

“I appreciate your concern, Maggie, really I do, but Jesse and I are working on a plan.”

“What kind of plan?”

“Uh... well, we haven’t figured it out yet but we’re working on it.”

“I scored the first goal!” Jesse announced with a Cheshire cat grin as he strode down the hall after arriving home. “It was a three-pointer! Woohoo! And we trashed the other team.” The proud lad entered the kitchen and headed straight to the fridge. “I’m starving. Hi, mom, hi Joshua. Where are the two-minute noodles?”

“In the cupboard,” Maggie answered nonchalantly as she stared at the computer screen. “Where they always are... and congratulations on winning the game.”

“You should have seen me, mom. I was awesome!” Jesse opened the cupboard, took a pack of chicken and corn noodles and proceeded to cook them in the microwave. “You want some?” he asked Joshua. “Oh, right... I forgot. So how was your day?”

“So, so.”

“You should have been at the game, man, I’m a legend big time.”

“Is that the game where you throw a big round ball through a hoop?”

“That’s the idea, yeah.”

“And the other team’s purpose is to try to prevent you from achieving that?”

“Yeah.” Jesse removed the steaming noodles from the microwave, added chicken powder from a small sachet, and stirred the bowl contents with a fork.

“So if the other team wasn’t there, you could toss the ball through the hoop without any trouble?”

“That would be pointless, Joshua.”

“Why?”

“Because it wouldn’t be a game... there would be no competition. Don’t you know anything?”

“All these games you play,” Joshua commented as he watched his friend purse his lips and blow air onto the hot noodles before taking a forkful, “they are all about winning and losing, right?”

“Right. Yow! That’s hot!”

“So you can’t have a winner without a loser, right?”

“You’re a genius, Joshua.”

“I don’t understand the point.”

Jesse figured there was nothing to be gained by continuing the conversation. Instead, he gulped his noodles as he studied the computer screen to see what his mom was doing. “Chatting again?” he asked.

“You shouldn’t be watching over my shoulder,” Maggie complained. “Anyway, we’re just discussing Aboriginal art.”

“Who’s we?”

“A bloke from Oregon – Richie... he’s interested in that sort of thing.”

“And...?”

“And nothing. Go take a shower, Jesse, you smell abominable.”

Jesse finished his noodles and added the bowl to the already full sink. “Don’t worry, mom, I’ll do the dishes tomorrow.”

“You’ll do them tonight, otherwise no internet for the rest of the week.”

“Jeez, mom, that’s blackmail! Anyway, I’ll take a shower first.”

“I’m taking a shower too,” Joshua said. “We can shower together.”

“We can WHAT?”

“Well, I thought...”

“You thought wrong, Joshua. Guys don’t shower together.”

“Why not?”

“They just don’t.”

“But what about locker rooms and footy teams and that kinda thing? I’ve read about it.”

“That’s different.”

“What’s different about it?”

“Just trust me, okay? Showering together in a private bathroom is different... very different. It’s a no-no. How about you shower first and I do the dishes. Then I’ll take my turn.”

Once Joshua had retired to the bathroom, Maggie turned to her son and said with an expression of concern, “That was a strange thing for Joshua to say. Do you think he’s a bit weird or something?”

“Yes, he’s weird, but not the way you’re thinking, mom. He’s forgotten stuff. It’s the amnesia.”

A few moments later, Joshua’s muffled voice called from behind the bathroom door. “Jesse? I’ve never showered before! What do I do now?”

“Figure it out, dummy,” Jesse yelled, then attended to the dishes.

When Joshua finally emerged from the bathroom, he was starkers. “I think I figured it out okay,” he commented as he entered the kitchen. Maggie was still glued to the computer screen and didn’t notice, but Jesse certainly did. “Bloody hell, Joshua! Get out of here and put some damn clothes on! Now!”

Maggie turned around just in time to see Joshua’s bare bottom disappear from view. “Nice butt,” she said, then casually resumed her internet chat.

“Mom! It’s not funny!” Jesse complained.

“Who said anything about funny?”

“The guy doesn’t know how to behave. He’s forgotten everything. It’s worse than I thought... I’m not sure how the hell I’m gonna handle this.”

Chapter 8

As the boys climbed into their separate beds and prepared to turn in for the night, Joshua quietly said to his friend, “Nothing personal, Jesse, but I gotta figure out where I came from as soon as possible. I don’t think I can handle being with you humans for too much longer.”

“G’night, Joshua. Catch you in the morning.”

Jesse turned off the bedside lamp and plunged the room into darkness, which failed to dampen Joshua’s eagerness to discuss the night’s issue further. “What’s the big deal about showering? Is it the nudity thing?”

“What nudity thing?”

“You humans – you freak about it like it was some kinda major catastrophe or something. You know... like a cartoon elephant freaking at the sight of a mouse. You know what I think?”

“It doesn’t matter what you think,” Jesse yawned as he rolled onto his side and covered his head with a pillow. “Besides, it’s late. Now go to sleep.”

“I don’t need sleep.”

“Well, I do.”

“Quite frankly, I think you guys have this thing about distancing yourselves as far as possible from your origins – apes. And even if the creationist theory is true, which it isn’t, Adam and Eve were created naked.” Joshua paused a moment to check the sound of his friend’s loud snores. “You Earthlings are just so weird. And I’m NOT gonna spend the next eight hours listening to THAT racket!”

Joshua rolled off the spare mattress and headed to the kitchen where he turned on the computer. “Maybe I can find someone like me on chat,” he

thought to himself, and proceeded to investigate the various chat channels.

But it soon transpired that most chatters regarded Joshua as a lunatic. “Okay,” one wrote, “if you’re really an alien, where are you from?”

“That’s the problem, I don’t know. I’ve got amnesia.”

“How convenient.”

Joshua was suddenly banned from the science channel by the administrator. However, a few key strokes later, he was back.

“How did you do that?” the chatter asked. “I banned you – permanently!” The chatter tried again to ban ZYX but failed. “Are you a hacker or something?”

“No. Anyway, it was easy.”

“A programmer?”

“Maybe I am, I don’t know. I told you, I’ve got amnesia.”

“You’re not welcome here. Please leave.”

“Hello? This is your unique, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to chat with a being from outer space and you’re knocking it back? And you call *me* a lunatic?”

“Let him stay... at least for a while,” another chatter typed. “Could be interesting.”

“Tell us about yourself, ZYX.”

Joshua proceeded to tell the tale of the past few weeks, minus certain personal information. “And that’s all I can remember. I don’t even know how I got here.”

“You got a pic of yourself?”

“I can turn on the web cam.” Joshua suggested, and that is what he did.

A few moments later, chatter #1 asked the alleged alien to morph into his previous identity as the dog that met Jesse when he fished from the bank of the Manning River. Before he obliged, Joshua explained

that his paws would not be able to type while he was in dog mode. Then he appeared on screen as a Kelpie.

But chatter #1 didn't buy it. "I don't believe it... that's some kind of programming trick. It's pre-recorded video or whatever. Do something to prove you're a dog!"

"He can't type," chatter #2 reminded chatter #1.

"Okay. Raise your paws and bring them together ten times as if you were counting."

ZYX responded accordingly, almost to the satisfaction of the doubters, but not quite.

"Place your paws over your eyes and peek-a-boo five times."

Once again, ZYX obliged, and then returned to his Joshua identity by metamorphosis. "You believe me now?" he typed.

"I dunno what to think! If you're joking, that would be the cruellest joke ever. Honestly, are you for real?"

"Yep."

"This is incredible! Have you been to a TV network? You could make an absolute fortune! You'll be famous!"

"That's not what I want. What I want is to find my proper place."

"Don't be crazy! You owe it to yourself and to everyone on this planet to come clean. As far as I know, you're the first alien to visit Earth that can communicate with us. Once the amnesia is cured, God knows what you'll be able to tell us about what's really 'out there!' Where did you say you are? Somewhere in Australia?"

"I didn't."

"Give me your address and phone number, and stay on line. Listen, dude, this is important. Wow, this

is HOT! I'll be your manager, okay? Trust me. I know about this kinda stuff... I'm in show business and I've got a lotta contacts.”

But chatter #1's excited anticipation of fame and fortune turned sour when he saw ZYX's handle disappear from the screen. “ZYX? Where the hell did you go, man? ZYX? Hey? Come back here, dude!” But his frantic attempt at recalling ZYX was all to no avail. The mystery alien had exited the chat channel.

Joshua spent the next several hours browsing various websites, including Wikipedia and other educational sites. After the chat experience, he realized that what he needed most of all was a friend whom he could trust implicitly to keep his secret. The last thing he wanted was to be put on exhibition like some scientific oddity or circus freak.

During his internet travels, he visited the NASA site and pondered the notion that serious scientists might treat him with more respect. He smiled to himself as he considered the billions of dollars spent by science to discover aliens in distant space when, right here and now, there was a live one sitting at a computer in a Taree kitchen.

“You're up early,” Maggie said as she entered the room. “Would you like poached eggs on toast for breakfast?”

“Good morning, Maggie. Thanks, but I already had breakfast,” Joshua lied.

“Sleep well?”

“Uh... yeah. And you?”

“Like a log. Is Jesse up?”

“No... still sound asleep.”

“That's par for the course,” Maggie laughed as she gathered eggs and bread and then half-filled a large

pan with water. “If World War Three happens he’ll probably sleep through the whole damn thing. So, how’s the plan – the plan you two have cooked up to find your identity?”

“Well, it’s kinda slow to be honest. I’ve been thinking... like, I don’t wanna become a freak or whatever, or have my photo plastered all over the place.”

“What’s the alternative? If people who already know you don’t know you’re here, how will they find you?”

“Yeah, like Moses.”

“Who?”

“Sorry, private joke... but then everyone will know I’m the kid with amnesia. They’ll play jokes, saying they know me when they don’t. I don’t mean to be rude, Maggie – and I know you’re trying to help – but there’s gotta be a better way.”

Without warning, Maggie raised her voice. “JESSE! THOMAS! MICHAEL!” Her words thundered through the old timber house and met the ears of the three sleeping beauties. “BREAKFAST!” Then she continued her conversation with Joshua. “Yes, I don’t doubt there’s a better way, but you and Jesse aren’t experienced in these matters. I strongly suggest you speak to a professional.”

“It’s not that simple, Maggie. I wish it were.”

“Simple is what you make it, Joshua. You can make it simple or you can make it difficult. Trust me; I’m the mother of three boys. If I didn’t know better I’d think I was the mother of three alien monsters.”

“Make that four.”

Chapter 9

Once the boys had left home for school, Joshua decided to take care of the dishes without asking Maggie. He knew very well what she would say. He was right, of course. “What are you doing?” she demanded when she entered the kitchen. “That’s Jesse’s job! I don’t want you spoiling that boy.”

Joshua, with his hands immersed in soapy hot water, turned to answer his host – not quite knowing how to respond – and accidentally sliced his finger on a sharp knife.

“Oh, my God!” Maggie exclaimed when she noticed the cut. “I’ll get a bandage.” By the time she’d opened the box and produced a bandage, she saw that Joshua’s finger was not bleeding. “There’s no blood!” she remarked as she studied the wound. “Nothing... just a clean cut! What’s going on here?”

Joshua ran his finger under the tap, dried it with a paper towel, and offered it to Maggie to attach the bandage. “I don’t understand this at all,” she said as she wrapped the strip around the wound. “No blood at all... not a drop. Joshua?”

“What?”

“What’s the story here?”

“I dunno. Maybe it’s an aberration or something. Anyway, no harm done. I’m fine.”

“What did you mean earlier this morning when you said ‘make that four... four alien monsters?’”

“You think I’m a monster?”

“Of course not, but there’s something weird going on here. You cut your finger and you didn’t bleed. How do you explain that?”

“I don’t – I’m not a doctor.”

“I’ll walk you to the hospital – emergency. I want to make sure you have this finger attended to by a qualified person.”

“You don’t need to walk me, Maggie. I’ll be fine.”

“I insist.”

“I’m not going anywhere near the hospital, Maggie. Don’t ask me to explain why. I am not going, and that’s that.”

“Joshua, you’re living in my house. There’s something you’re not telling me. I think you need to share whatever it is you’re keeping secret.”

Joshua studied the determined expression on Maggie’s face. It was a mix of curiosity, anger, disappointment and a desperate plea. He took a deep breath before answering: “Maggie, you’re right – there’s something I haven’t told you.”

“Does Jessie know?”

“Yes, and Anthony knows as well. But they’re the only two. Would you trust me if I said that it’s better if you don’t know?”

“I need to know, Joshua. I need to know that my three boys are safe. I’m their mother.”

“Maybe I should just disappear.”

“To where? You have amnesia; you don’t know where you belong. Disappearing is not going to solve your predicament, Joshua; it’ll only make it worse.”

“What if I tell you the story – as much as I know – and you decide to ask me to leave anyway?”

“I’m sorry, but I really need to know that my family is not in any sort of danger. Surely you can understand that, Joshua. I don’t want to see you in any more trouble than you’re already in, but my boys are my number one priority.”

Thomas and Michael were the first to arrive home from school. Naturally, they enquired as to the whereabouts of Joshua. "He's out," Maggie replied.

Fifteen minutes later, Jesse arrived home. "Where's Joshua?"

"We need to talk."

Jesse dropped his school bag in his room and then re-emerged. "Has something happened?"

"Yes, it has. I'm not sure how I feel about you, Jesse, but I'm disappointed."

"About what?"

"You didn't tell me everything."

"About what?"

"About your friend."

Jesse needed a little time to collect his thoughts, so he grabbed a carton of milk from the fridge and poured a glass. "You know about Joshua?" he asked. Then he took a sip of milk and seated himself at the kitchen table.

"Yes."

"Where is he now?"

"I have no idea. He disappeared right in front of me... just a few feet from where you are now. One second we were talking and the next he was gone... vanished into thin air."

Jesse said nothing as he carried the glass of milk to his room and slammed the door behind him. Maggie called her son's name a couple of times and even tried to open the bedroom door, but it was locked.

"What's wrong with Jesse?" Thomas asked from the living room, where he watched television.

"He's upset, darling. Don't worry about it... he'll be okay in a little while."

"Is it to do with Joshua?"

"We'll talk about it later, Thomas."

As Maggie spoke, Jesse emerged from his room, carrying his fishing rod and a bucket. “I’m going down to the river,” he announced as he strode down the hall.

“We’re having chicken.”

But the boy ignored his mother and disappeared out the front door.

Jesse had been fishing for about 10 minutes when a well-dressed old man approached and sat on a bench just a few feet away. “I’m afraid your piscatorial endeavors will amount to nothing, young man,” he said. “Too much damn rain lately and the river’s full of fresh water.”

“Why did you tell my mom about who you really are?”

“How did you know it was me?”

“I’m getting used to you, I guess.”

“I cut my finger and it didn’t bleed. Maggie got suspicious and asked a bunch of questions.”

“You shouldn’t have disappeared like that. You freaked her out.”

“Uh, oh, here comes trouble.”

Jesse looked over his shoulder and saw Rocque and Rowles approaching. “Jesse Maguire?” Rowles asked. “I’m Detective Sergeant Rowles and this is Detective Senior Constable Rocque. Your mother phoned... she’s worried about you.”

“I’m okay... just fishing.”

“After all this recent rain? You’ve got Buckley’s of catching anything, mate.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“We know about your friend, Joshua. He has a number of aliases – Warwick Freeman and others. We need to speak to you up at the station.”

“About Joshua? I don’t know any more than you do.”

“Oh? How do you know what we know? We haven’t discussed the matter yet.”

“It’s just that... well, I don’t know anything.”

“Then let’s go to the station and discuss what you don’t know.”

“Harold Spencer Billings the Third,” the old man announced as he handed a business card to Jesse, “at your service Mr Maguire. If you’re going to be interviewed at the police station, you’ll need legal representation, of course.” Then the old man handed a card each to the detectives. “I’m retired now but still a member of the bar.”

An hour later, after the interview at the police station, Jesse returned home – fishless. “I can’t believe you did that, mom,” he grumbled as he took his rod and bucket to his room.

“Did you see Joshua?” Thomas asked.

“No... well, sort of.”

“Is he okay? When is he coming back?”

“I’m not sure. I need to speak to mom.”

“Did you speak to Rocque and Rowles?”

Maggie asked.

“Yes. I’ve been at the cop station for the past hour.”

“Why wasn’t I asked to attend? You’re a minor.”

“My lawyer was there,” Jesse giggled. “You should have seen this guy, mom. He hardly let Rocque and Rowles get a word in edgewise. Hahaha! It was so funny.”

“Lawyer? What lawyer? You don’t know any lawyers!”

“I do now – Harold Spencer Billings the Third. Here’s his card.”

Maggie studied the card and then asked, “Who the hell is he?”

“He was sitting beside me by the river. I just met him. He was there when Rocque and Rowles arrived. Cool coincidence, yeah? Is the chicken ready? I’m starving.”

Chapter 10

Maggie was far from convinced that the sudden and convenient appearance of Harold Spencer Billings the Third was coincidental. “It was Joshua, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you have any idea of the profundity of this situation, Jesse? Of the enormity? Of the world-wide interest in a story like this? This makes Ben Hur look like a nursery rhyme. We have a responsibility...”

“To whom?” Jesse interrupted. “Rocque and Rowles? The international press? Science? Sure, we have a responsibility, mom... we have a responsibility to Joshua. He’s my friend, and you don’t treat friends like curiosities, which is what you’re suggesting.”

“The chicken is almost done. Time to boil the corn cobs. Would you like to take care of that for me, darling? There’s a good lad.”

Jesse half filled a pot with water and placed it on the stove. “There’s something you should know, mom,” he said as he adjusted the temperature of the hotplate. “There was a willy willy at the river. The air was calm when I first got there... dead quiet. Then I saw a small water spout on the river. It grew and came closer to me – a spinning cone – and I heard the voices.”

“You were upset – it was your imagination.”

“No it wasn’t, mom. It was the voices of our ancestors. You know that as well as I do... you were the one who taught me about willy willies and what they mean in Aboriginal culture.”

“I also taught you about wishful thinking.”

“It wasn’t wishful thinking, mom, it was real. They said I should help Joshua. They said he was from a far away place in the Dreaming and that he was lost. They said that I was chosen by the spirits of our

ancestors to help him find his coombah. When he arrived by the river as the old man in a suit, I knew it was him right away.” Jesse placed four corn cobs in the steaming water. “Mom? Joshua needs our help. It’s our duty. He’s not dangerous; there’s no way he’s gonna be a threat to any one of us. He wants to be our friend.”

“He scares me.”

“The spirits of our ancestors told me he’s cool, mom. They’re never wrong.”

“Where is he now?”

“I don’t know. We were walking down Alfred Street not far from the cop shop when he vanished. The last thing he said was, ‘catch you later, mate.’ So, what do you say, mom? If I see him again, can I tell him that it’s cool with you if he comes back?”

“I’ll have to think about it.”

Next morning, at Taree Police Station, Detective Sergeant Rowles phoned the number on Harold Spencer Billings’s business card. “Mr Billings,” he said after he introduced himself, “I’m calling about yesterday afternoon’s interview with Jesse Maguire.”

“Jesse who?”

Rowles related the events of the previous day but failed to jog the lawyer’s memory. “Are you saying that you weren’t present at the interview, Mr Billings?”

“I’m retired! I had friends over for dinner. I rarely work these days, Sergeant.”

“I see. I must have the wrong Billings.”

“I’m the only one in Taree, Sergeant... the other Billings is in Melbourne... a distant cousin.”

As soon as Rowles ended the call, he immediately phoned Maggie Maguire and introduced himself. “We need to speak to your son again, Mrs

Maguire, and we would appreciate your being present.”

“The kids are all at school, Sergeant.”

“We could make it later this afternoon.”

“To be perfectly frank, Sergeant, I’d rather not have Jesse involved in this matter – whatever it is. I know I was the one to contact you in the first place – I was worried and didn’t know what else to do – but I’ve changed my mind. It’s getting all too complicated.”

“How much do you know about it?”

“Enough to keep my kids – and myself – out of it. There’s been no crime committed as far as I know...”

“I’m afraid there has, Mrs Maguire, several cases of impersonation, including impersonating Harold Spencer Billings the Third with intent to defraud. This is a serious matter, Mrs Maguire, and whether your son likes it or not he is involved as a witness.”

“A witness to what, Sergeant? A witness to an alien or whatever it is that can disappear at will? That can vanish without a trace? That cannot be contained within four walls? That cannot be captured or interrogated? What will you do – jail my son instead of the alien. You’re making a fool of yourself, Detective Sergeant Rowles. Now, go away and leave me and my son alone.” And with that, Maggie hung up. A second later, she answered a knock at the front door.

“Joshua?”

“I overheard your phone conversation with Rowles. Well said, Maggie.”

“Go away. Disappear or something. Get out of our lives!”

“Maggie, I need help.”

“Then get help somewhere else. Speak to Rowles. You have nothing to fear. You can disappear if he tries to put you in the cells.”

“You don’t understand, Maggie. Rowles – or any other authority – is not interested in helping me. They’re only interested in solving what they perceive as a crime.”

“But what can we do... Jesse or me? We don’t know anything about helping an alien. We just want to live quiet, uncomplicated lives. Please leave us alone, Joshua. You’ll have to find someone else to help you. Now please leave.”

“Just a few minutes, Maggie, that’s all I need. Can I come inside?”

“Two minutes! Meanwhile, I need a drink – something stiff.” Joshua followed Maggie down the hall to the kitchen where she grabbed a bottle of brandy off the window sill and poured a large glass. She offered Jesse a drink but he declined.

“I want you to call Rowles back and tell him you’ve changed your mind about allowing him to interview Jesse this afternoon after school.”

“Ha! Not likely!”

“And tell him you’ll be present as his mother at the interview.”

“Is that what you wanted to say, Joshua, or whoever or whatever you are? We have nothing more to talk about. Please leave.” Maggie took another swig of brandy. “Now.”

“I’ll go as you.”

“What?”

“I’ll go to the interview as you... as your clone. Rocque and Rowles won’t know the difference; they’ll think I’m Jesse’s mom. Once the interview is over, there’ll be no more reason for Rocque and Rowles to involve Jesse or you. The matter will be finished.”

“It’s a pity you can’t go as both of us,” Maggie guffawed, “Hmmm, this brandy is working wonders. I feel better already.”

“So what do you say?”

“I just had a thought... if Rocque and Rowles ever find out, I’ll be in deep doodoo. I could be accused of being an accessory before, during and after the fact... of aiding and abetting an act of fraud and attempting to mislead the course of justice or whatever it is those wiggid court people go on about.”

“That’s true... IF Rocque and Rowles ever discover the truth. But who’s gonna tell them... you, me, Jesse?”

“Wouldn’t it be a whole lot simpler if you just disappeared?”

“Jesse likes me, and I like him. We’re mates. Is he the type to let his mates down?”

“No, definitely not,” Maggie admitted solemnly. “He’s the first one to offer help when his mates are in trouble.”

“Okay, I take that as a yes. But you’ll need to disappear when I’m ‘representing’ you at the police station.”

“You mean disappear... like you do? No way, Joshua! What if I can’t get back?”

“No, no, no, not like that, Maggie. Relax... I mean, be somewhere else, preferably without a witness. How would you like to spend an hour or so in the ceiling?”

“You HAVE to be joking, Joshua! Eeek! There are spiders up there! I’ve got a better idea.”

Chapter 11

After Maggie and Jesse had taken their turn in the queue at Taree police station reception counter, they were met by Detective Sergeant Rowles who led them to the interview office. “Take a seat,” he said as the group entered the room, which was already occupied by Detective Senior Constable Rocque. “Now, let’s get down to business and discuss this ZYX person... or thing,” Rowles suggested as he walked to the other side of the desk and occupied his chair.

“Could you excuse me a moment?” Maggie asked in an agitated fashion, “I’m terribly nervous and I need to go toilies.”

“Toilies?”

“The ladies.”

Maggie was shown to the toilet by Rocque while Rowles shuffled a few papers and spoke informally to Jesse. “You’re not like the other Aborigines,” he said, “the ones out at Purfleet.”

Jesse ignored the remark.

“We get a lot of trouble from those people, you know... alcohol, drugs, domestic violence, vandalism, break and enters...”

“Why do you think that is, Detective?”

Just then, Rocque returned to the room. “Mrs Maguire said she won’t be long,” he explained before resuming his seat.

“I’m not paid to think about the causes of social problems,” Rowles said in answer to Jesse’s question. “I’m paid to keep the peace and solve crime. But, from what I know about you, young Maguire, you’re a model citizen. Maybe you could tell me why those people at Purfleet are so damn anti social. After all, you’re black.”

“Sorry,” Maggie said as she let herself into the room and took a seat. “I pee a lot when I’m nervous.”

Jesse was stunned. Was this his real mom or a Joshua impersonation? He couldn’t tell the difference, and wondered if something had gone wrong with the planned exchange in the toilet.

Both Jesse and Maggie told the detectives all that they knew about ZYX. After all, there was nothing to hide and they had committed no offence.

“What we need from you,” Rowles said in conclusion to the 45 minute interview, “is to report any sightings of this... person, alien, or whatever it is. Meanwhile, I’ll alert the appropriate authorities to the presence of ZYX in this area.”

“What’s the point?” Jesse asked. “He could be in Madagascar tomorrow.”

“It – ZYX, that is – likes you,” Rowles explained, “and I suspect that it’s formed an attachment to you and your mother. I think it’s highly likely that it will endeavor to stay in touch, which is why it’s important that you keep us informed of any further contact with the alien.”

“Why?” Maggie asked.

“Because we need to detain this... whatever it is.”

“How?”

“I admit, Mrs Maguire, that is a challenge we’re unable to meet at the moment, but we intend to consult with the CSIRO and other scientific organisations such as NASA and SETI in order to resolve that issue.”

“And if you do manage to ‘detain’ this alien, what then?”

“I’m afraid that is confidential police business, Mrs Maguire, and will remain so. I’m sure you appreciate and understand our position.”

“And yet you’re asking my son and me to help you catch ZYX, as if he were a common criminal. He’s done no wrong.”

“He impersonates other people.”

“People legally do that for a living on the telly and make lots of money. I would if I could. Have you seen my Al Jolson impression?”

“What are you saying, Mrs Maguire?” Rowles asked. “Are you suggesting that you are unwilling to cooperate with us?”

Just then a woman knocked on the door of the room and entered. She handed Rowles a note, which he read as the woman departed. “It appears that you’re indeed the real Mrs Maguire. I had someone check your house to see if you were home. We also watched your departure from home and your arrival here. I’m sorry if that offends you, Mrs Maguire, but we can’t take any chances, you know. And now to return to the matter of your cooperation...”

“Aussies don’t dob in their mates,” Jesse interrupted without invitation.

“Mates? ZYX is your mate?”

“Yes.”

“Jesse, you’re young, impressionable and vulnerable. How can you be sure this alien is not a plant by another civilization out there in space that wants to take over this world? How can you be sure that ZYX is not one of thousands of his kind scattered through the world to con their way into the minds and hearts of susceptible people like yourself, and then formulate a plan of action to take over? Can you imagine a clone of the President of the United States making an important speech to his nation that could seriously affect world security? Is that such an impossible scenario?”

“What civilization in its right mind would want to take over this joint?” Maggie laughed. “They’d have to be nuts.”

“It’s a possibility that needs to be taken into account,” Mrs Maguire. “Until we can be certain that this alien is not a threat to the security of this country and others, we need to consider every contingency. For the moment, ZYX is wanted for questioning in relation to the matter of impersonating other people, with suspected criminal intent. Now, do you intend to cooperate with the police or not?”

“I’ll discuss it with my son at home, Detective Sergeant Rowles. I’ll let you know in the morning. Meantime, if you’ll excuse me again, I need to go toilies.”

When Jesse and his mom arrived home, Joshua, Thomas and Michael were already at the front door to greet them. “Joshua’s back!” a delighted Thomas yelled. “Can he stay for dinner, mommy?”

“Yes, darling.” But Maggie was more interested in speaking to Joshua about his time spent with the detectives and what had been said in her absence. “I can tell you, sitting in a toilet cubicle for an hour is NOT fun!”

Once Joshua and Jesse had brought Maggie up to date with what took place at the meeting with Rocque and Rowles, she said, “so they know about Joshua – I mean, about your disguise. What if they see you here or somewhere in town? They’ll know it’s you, and they’ll know that you’re staying here. That will automatically classify us as accomplices.”

“Are you saying I can’t stay here, Maggie?”

“What would you do in my shoes, Joshua?”

“Walk funny.”

“Be serious.”

But, after cracking up at Joshua's joke, Jesse answered the question on his mate's behalf: "It's like you said, mom, they can't catch him, they can't prove anything. How can they charge someone who doesn't exist? And with what? Rocque and Rowles are fulla crap. There is no case. They're just trying to scare us. Anyway, I've got footy training. Keep my dinner hot in the oven. See you!"

Later, at the dinner table, Maggie asked Joshua – who had declined a meal – if he thought his own kind would be searching for him. "Depends," he said, "on whether or not they know I'm missing. I really have no idea, Maggie."

"And what about Rowles comment, about thousands of you guys planted around the world, ready to take over our planet?"

"Trust me, Maggie, that's a load of codswallop. What the hell would we want this place for? No offence... that's just typical cop paranoia. People like Rowles insist on making a biggie out of zippo."

"He had a point, though. You could easily impersonate our Prime Minister and declare war on New Zealand."

Joshua doubled up with laughter. "War is for Neanderthals, Maggie. Sorry, I don't mean to criticize your species, but... really... war is just so puerile. And it really puzzles me why you humans can't see it. It's insane. On the other hand, insanity doesn't recognize itself."

"I suppose there's a lot I don't understand about you, Joshua," Maggie admitted with some embarrassment. "Come to think of it, I guess I've been a bit hasty in my judgement... you know, worrying about the kids and all. But, tell me," she said as she pushed her empty plate toward the center of the table,

“at the police station you were me for an hour. What’s it like to be me?”

“Ask your reflection in the mirror, Maggie. You’ll get the same answer. I was a clone... I looked like you, I acted like you but I wasn’t you. It’s like an illusion. If you smashed the mirror, your reflection would vanish.”

“And what about Joshua, the person I’m seeing now and having a conversation with? Is that you?”

“Yes and no. No, the body you see isn’t me; it’s a tool just like your own body. I’m not talking to your body, Maggie, I’m talking to your brain – your soul, your spirit. It’s the same with me; this body allows me to speak and to communicate with you and others. What you’re hearing is me, the real me, but the body is not the real me. In that respect, human beings and beings like me have a lot in common.”

Chapter 12

When Jesse arrived home from football training, he saw that everyone was in the living room watching Star Wars on television. He paused a moment to watch a particular scene, then went to his room to change. “Your dinner’s in the oven,” Maggie yelled without taking her eyes off the screen.

It was quite late by the time the movie finished. Maggie sent the younger boys off to bed. “But we wanna talk to Joshua!” Thomas pouted.

“You can talk to Joshua tomorrow. Now don’t argue – it’s late so off to bed you go. Pronto!”

Once the boys had gone to their rooms, Joshua asked: “Do the boys know about me?”

“They know something isn’t quite normal,” Maggie answered, “but they’re not sure what it is.”

“How did you explain the trip with Jesse to the police station?”

“I didn’t – I said we were going shopping.”

“It’s a pity you can’t remember what it’s like ‘out there’,” Jesse lamented, then took his empty dinner plate to the kitchen to wash it.

“I can tell you one thing,” Joshua said, and followed his mate, “it’s nothing like that Space Wars movie. I figure if it were, the movie would have triggered my memory.”

“I’ve read that there’s all kinds of evidence of UFOs and aliens visiting Earth. Even the Bible talks about strange objects in the sky and all that stuff.”

“That’s not evidence, Jesse, that’s imagination. There’s a big difference you know. Besides, what makes you think beings like me need a spaceship? Human beings like you need a spaceship, so they figure we do too. Hahaha! Hey, that’s pretty funny. Check me out, man... I’m not physical like you... I

don't need a body. The only reason I got one now is to communicate with you guys, and so that I don't freak you out. Do you remember seeing paintings of Jesus Christ stepping into a Saturn rocket when he rose on the third day? Hahaha! Sometimes you Earthlings can be so hilarious."

"Okay, so when you get back to wherever it is you're from, are you gonna come visit sometimes and tell us what it's like out there?"

"No way, Jose, you guys aren't ready for that yet. The human species is still in its very early stages of evolutionary development. You're like a bunch of little kids in a play pen fooling around with rattles and colored blocks." Joshua placed a hand on his mate's shoulder. "Hey, don't get me wrong... that's not to say you're dumb or anything... I think you're really interesting... it's just that, well, there's a right and wrong time for everything, and you guys just aren't ready for the big stuff."

"How do you know it's big stuff? You've got amnesia... you can't remember a damn thing."

"Call it instinct. I just know, okay?"

Maggie, who had been listening to the conversation, decided to join in. "I think it's only just beginning to dawn on me," she said as she ran her fingers through her long thick black hair, "that we've actually got an alien in this house. I mean like a real one! How spooky is that?"

"Do you know about Socrates?" Joshua asked. "I read about him on the internet. He was accused by the State back in 399b.c. of not believing in the ancient Greek gods. He was tried and found guilty of corrupting Athenian youth, and of religious heresy."

"Like you're corrupting me?"

"Shut up, Jesse. Anyway, he was sentenced and put to death. Socrates understood the difference

between fantasy and reality. He understood that those Greek gods were simply figments of human imagination. Christians suffered a similar fate under ancient Rome and were fed to the lions. History is full of that kind of persecution. Galileo died while under house arrest for daring to disagree with the Catholic hierarchy, which believed that everything in space revolved around the Earth. Nothing's changed, Maggie. Islam still refers to non-believers as infidels that deserve to perish. And that's what I mean about human beings and their infancy in terms of evolution. Nothing personal, guys, but... well, I'm sure you get the picture."

"Are we really that dumb?" Jesse asked.

"Dumb is the wrong word to use, mate. You don't refer to a child of 1 or 2 years as dumb. Intelligence is relative to development."

"You make us sound like monkeys with car keys. That's kinda scary."

"Read the news headlines every day, Jesse. Are you gonna tell me that isn't scary?"

Both boys were preparing for bed when Joshua remembered to ask Jesse about the football training earlier that night.

"Cool... not so many push ups tonight, just lots of running. But it looks like the school dance is off, at least for me. One of the guys there knows Rosie – she's my date for the school formal, and he told me she's got bronchitis or something, so she won't be available."

"So ask another girl."

"They're all taken."

"So, what's a dance? There'll be another one."

"This is the big formal, Joshua. Everyone's gonna be there! It's like the big event, you know? We

all get dressed up in suits and ties and the girls go to a lotta trouble with expensive dresses and stuff like that.”

“Okay, so go by yourself.”

“To the school formal? Yeah, right, Joshua. You’re as bad as my mom – you just don’t understand teens. You can’t go by yourself to the school formal... it just wouldn’t look right.”

“No worries, Jesse... I got an idea.”

“An idea? What kind of idea? Uh, oh... I think I know what you’re gonna suggest, Joshua. Forget it, okay? Just forget it.” Jesse reached for the bedside light and plunged the room into darkness. “Night... see you in the morning.”

“Hey, listen, Jesse, what’s wrong with me going with you to the formal as Rosie?”

“EVERYTHING!”

“Chill out, man. You won’t be able to tell the difference. You couldn’t tell the difference when I was your mom at the police station, right? This will be the same.”

“ABSOLUTELY NOT! It doesn’t matter if you look the same as Rosie, I’LL know it’s you!” Jesse turned the light back on, rolled to the side of his bed and glared at Joshua on the other side of the room.

“It’s the school formal, Joshua. You know what that means? It means it’s a DANCE, and there’s no way in the wide world that I’ll be dancing with YOU!” And with that, Jesse turned the light back off. “Good night.”

“I’m just trying to do you a favor...”

“GOOD NIGHT.”

Next morning, after the boys left for school, ZYX zapped himself to Harrington and morphed into a likeness of Jesse. Rosie’s mother answered the knock at the front door of the large and impressive house.

“Jesse!” she said, surprised, “shouldn’t you be at school today?”

“I heard that Rosie isn’t feeling well, so I thought...”

“How sweet of you! Come on in... but don’t get too close to Rosie or you might catch the flu. I’m sure she’ll be delighted to see you.”

ZYX – as Jesse – was led to Rosie’s bedroom. Her mother was right; Rosie beamed when she saw Jesse and invited him in. “What are you doing here?”

ZYX took his arm from behind his back and produced a bouquet of roses. “I just wanted to wish you a speedy recovery.”

“They’re gorgeous! Thank you so much, Jesse. I should get sick more often,” she laughed, then coughed. She grabbed a handful of tissues from the bedside table and blew her nose. “Speedy recovery? Yeah, right, that’ll be the day. I’m as crook as Rookwood.”

“As what?”

“That’s a saying my dad uses – he got it from my grandad. I’m sorry about the school formal, Jesse – I know how much you were looking forward to it.”

ZYX reached over and placed his hand on Rosie’s forehead. “Ouch!” he joked, “I could fry an egg there. Hey, sorry to leave so soon, Rosie, but I gotta get back to school at least in time for this afternoon’s classes.”

Jesse boarded the waiting bus outside his school for the trip home when his cell phone rang. “Hello?”

“Jesse! I just wanted to thank you again for visiting me this morning. That’s was just so cool of you. And guess what? The bronchitis cleared up! It’s a miracle – even the doctor couldn’t believe it! I feel so

much better now, and I'm sure it was because you cheered me up this morning. Those roses are incredibly beautiful – they're in a vase beside my bed. And the perfume is just awesome! Anyway, the doctor said I'm fine to go to the school formal. How's that? Jesse? Jesse? You're not saying anything? Is everything okay?"

Chapter 13

Jesse stepped off the school bus outside his house, picked his way through the assortment of roller blades, skateboards, shoes, toys and other paraphernalia scattered on the front verandah, stormed down the hall toward the kitchen and demanded to know Joshua's whereabouts.

"He's in the back yard, pruning plants and weeding," Maggie informed her son. "What on earth's got you in such a tizz?"

But Jesse didn't answer. Instead he stepped outside and approached Joshua, who was on his knees pulling weeds. "Who gave you permission to be me? Who said you could visit Rosie? You're interfering in my personal affairs, Joshua, and I don't appreciate it!"

"Is she feeling better now?"

"That's beside the point!"

"Is it? Calm down, Jesse, I did you a favor. You should be grateful. Now you can go to the dance with the real Rosie."

"What's next? How can I trust you to respect my privacy if you start turning yourself into me and getting involved with personal matters?"

"You can trust me because I am your friend, Jesse." Joshua tossed a few loose weeds onto a pile and then stood to face his mate. "You should know that I would never do anything to jeopardize your personal relationships. I saw a way of helping you and Rosie so..."

"How did you do that? I mean, cure the bronchitis?"

"I had a hunch, that's all. I don't know how it happened but I had a feeling it might work."

“There’s a job advertised in the local paper,” Maggie informed Jesse as he returned to the kitchen. “I circled it in pencil.”

Jesse dumped his school bag in his room and returned to check the ad. “No experience necessary,” he said as he scanned the ad. “Must have neat appearance and be willing to learn. I’ll phone them now.” After the call, he told his mother that they had offered him a trial run. “No pay,” he explained, “but it’s a chance to get a job earn some money. Woohoo!”

“What kind of job?”

“Working in a fish ‘n’ chip shop. No time for dinner, mom, they want me there like now. I’ll be back about nine.” Jesse brushed his pearlies, showered, dressed in his best clobber and left.

“Good luck, son,” Maggie yelled after him.

“And Joshua? Can you hear me out there?”

“Yep.”

“That’s enough with the weeds already. Come inside and relax.”

Joshua washed his hands at the sink, and dried them on a paper towel. “No food for me, Maggie... as usual.”

“Thomas and Michael are becoming suspicious.”

“It’s such a waste, making each mouthful disappear. Besides, they’ll probably find out what I am sooner or later... why not sooner?”

“Are you kidding? And don’t forget to issue them with a couple of loud hailer.”

“I think if I explained the situation... you know, how I would be in great danger if too many people knew, they would keep the secret.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that, Joshua. By the way, do you have any ideas yet about contacting your... uh, fellow beings?”

“Detective Sergeant Rowles mentioned SETI, the Search for Extra-terrestrial Intelligence Institute, so I checked them out on the internet earlier today. They use radio frequencies to try to find life in other parts of the universe.”

“Have they found any yet?”

“No.”

“So what makes you think you’ll find wherever it is you come from?”

“Gotta try something, Maggie. Besides, I figure I have my own unique frequency... know what I mean? In my natural state, I am pure energy. Right? So that energy must have its own particular vibration; like some sort of signature. What I need to do is define that vibration or frequency and then figure out a way to beam it into space.”

“Sounds logical; so all you need to do is contact SETI and ask them to help you.”

“Yeah, right. Those guys have been searching for intelligent life out there in space for 40 years or more, and out of the blue an alien walks through the front door? What do you think they’re gonna do... offer me a cup of tea and a cucumber sandwich? All hell will break loose.”

“Can you work a calculator?” the owner of the fish ‘n’ chip shop, Wendy, asked Jesse.

“Yep.”

“Good, then you should be able to operate this till. Just enter the price of the purchase, the amount tendered, and the machine will calculate how much change to give the customer. Got it?”

“Yep.”

“Just be careful to enter the correct amount. Don’t be in a rush. Take it easy until you get used to it. Now tell me a little about yourself.”

“Well, I go to Chatham High, I play footy and basketball, I’m captain of one of the school’s sporting teams...”

“Are you a good student?” Wendy asked as she shook two baskets of chips in the deep fryer, then moved along to check a basket of battered fish fillets that were also cooking.

“Yeah, I do okay. I live with my mom and two younger brothers in Alfred Street, and...” Jesse trailed off after getting the impression that Wendy was too busy to pay attention.

“And?” she said after a pause while she turned two burger patties on the hot plate.

“Well, I guess that’s about it.”

“Are you honest?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll need to be if you’re operating the till.

After a month or two – that’s provided you get the job, of course – you’ll be trained to cook and to wait tables. Are you happy with that?”

“Yeah, that’s heaps cool!”

Jesse arrived home just after 9pm with the news that he thought he passed the trial. “She – that’s Wendy, the lady who owns the shop – said she would contact me next week to let me know if I got the job or not.”

“Did she ask if you were Aboriginal?” Maggie asked.

“No. Why?”

“I just wondered.”

“Because I’m operating the till? She did ask if I’m honest, but I don’t think she’s racist or anything.”

“Did she notice your tongue stud?”

“I guess so.”

“Did she say anything about your eyebrow rings?”

“Mom! What is this?”

“I’m just curious.”

“You’re asking more questions than Wendy did!”

“Okay, okay. Chill. There’s leftover meatloaf in the fridge.”

“I had fish ‘n’ chips on the walk home... free! It was heaps nice.”

“You and your ‘heaps’.”

Next day, Saturday, Jesse had made arrangements to hang with a bunch of his friends. He felt guilty about not inviting Joshua to join him but tried to explain the difficulty involved in accounting for his alien friend. “There’ll be a whole bunch of questions,” he reasoned, “and not enough answers.”

“That’s okay, Jesse, I understand.”

“Do you? Then why does your bottom lip look like it’s been trodden on?”

Thomas and Michael stayed home to play together, ride their bikes and engage in a bit of roughhousing on the front lawn with Joshua until rumbling tummies told them it was lunch time.

“Jaffles,” Maggie announced as the boys entered the kitchen, “with spaghetti and meatballs filling.”

“Yum!” As big as Thomas’s dark brown eyes were – with their extra long, black lashes – they were no match for the size of his tummy. Michael was a much bigger lad even though there were only two years between them. Whereas Michael resembled his father’s looks, Thomas looked much like his mother; a family trait he shared with Jesse.

When the jaffles were served, the younger boys took their lunch to the front verandah where they were joined by Joshua on the old couch. “Hey, listen guys, can I trust you with a really important secret?”

“Sure.”

“This is no ordinary secret, you know; it’s a lot more important than you think. You may never hear or share anything like this secret ever again for as long as you live.”

Both boys stopped chewing. “Really?” they chorused.

“Have you guys ever met an alien?”

“From outer space?” Thomas asked, wide-eyed. “No... not a real one, only those ones in cartoons and movies.”

“What do you think an alien would look like?”

“Kinda like a snail with eyes on sticks, or maybe like an octopus with lots of legs and arms.”

“What if an alien was invisible?”

“Oh! That would be scary because you couldn’t hide, like under the bed!” Michael laughed.

At that moment, Joshua disappeared. *Poof* The boys were astonished – mouths agape – but said nothing for a few seconds. Then Michael mumbled in an unsure voice, “Joshua?” At which time, Joshua reappeared.

“Where did you go?” Thomas demanded.

“How did you do that? You scared me!”

“Don’t be scared, Thomas, nor you Michael. Jesse isn’t scared of me and neither is your mom, so you shouldn’t be either.”

Chapter 14

When Joshua had finished telling his story to the boys, he once again stressed the importance of keeping it secret, “otherwise, the authorities will cause me no end of grief.”

“Wow!” Thomas said with his big, almost-black eyes shining, “a real live alien in our house. That’s awesome! I wish I could tell everyone... that would be so cool. Is it okay if I tell them when you get back home?”

“I guess so, if you want. But you’ll be hounded by the press and Hollywood people forever.”

“Yeah, but I’ll be famous!”

“WE’LL be famous,” Michael insisted.

“Okay,” Thomas reluctantly agreed, “... we.”

Jesse arrived home later that afternoon to learn that Joshua had revealed his secret to the younger boys. “I hope they don’t blab... they’ve got big mouths you know.”

“They promised – scouts honor. Meanwhile, do you have an oscilloscope at school?”

“In the science lab – yeah, why?”

“I need one – and an antenna and an old valve radio.”

“What for?”

“To measure my radio waves.”

“There’s an old bloke who lives on the corner – he’s got a couple of those old valve radios. I saw them in his office.”

“Do you think he would lend you one?”

“I think so, he’s cool. Anyway, I gotta change... there’s a party on tonight at a friend’s house.”

“I wish I could get to know you better.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” Joshua shrugged, “it doesn’t matter. Just thinking aloud.”

“What was that about a party?” Maggie called from the living room. “Are you staying for dinner, Jesse?”

“No, mom... I had a kebab at Triple C with my mates.”

“Boys!”

“What do you mean ‘boys’?” Jesse mimicked as he entered the living room. “What’s wrong with boys?”

“They’re all over the place – eating between meals, then not eating when they should. Totally disorganized – dysfunctional – impulsive air heads. What time will you be home?”

“I’ll sleep over – probably some time tomorrow morning.”

“Have you invited Joshua?”

“No.”

“Why not? I heard what he said just now, about wanting to get to know you better. You’re being selfish, Jesse, and it’s not fair to Joshua.”

“It’s okay, Maggie,” Joshua said in his friend’s defence, “I don’t want to spoil his party. I don’t eat or drink, and I don’t understand all this loud metal music... so I would only be a nuisance. Besides, there’ll inevitably be too many questions from his other friends wanting to know who – or what – I am.”

“I’ll spend all day with you tomorrow,” Jesse offered. “Promise.”

Jesse didn’t say so, but he felt there was little to be gained by befriending the alien and getting too attached. The body Joshua occupied was not his; he was not human. The reality was that he and Joshua shared almost nothing in common. And, sooner or

later, Joshua would rejoin his comrades perhaps billions of light years away and never make contact again. What was the point? “I’ve got a life of my own to lead,” he thought to himself, “with my own kind.”

When Jesse arrived home just after mid morning the next day, he saw Joshua talking to a couple of people on the front verandah. One was an older bloke, and the other a younger guy. Judging by the way they were dressed, he assumed they were missionaries from Jehovah’s Witnesses or Seventh Day Adventists or some such church. “Maggie, Michael and Thomas have gone shopping,” Joshua explained. “They’ll be back about midday.”

“Cool,” Jesse responded, and then declined an invitation by the older guy to join the conversation. “Excuse me but I have things to take care of.”

Once Jesse had left the scene, and gone inside the house, the older man resumed his chat with Joshua. “As I was saying, the reason the world is in such a state of disarray right now is because people have turned their back on God and have ignored His Word.”

“So you’re suggesting that we should all go back to the good old days when everything was just fine and dandy?”

“Have you read the Bible?”

“Yes.”

“...And you will know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

“Too bloody right, mate.”

“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek; and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.”

“Matthew.”

“Am I to understand that you are a believer?”

“No.”

“May I ask why?”

“I’ve read the Bible, that’s why.”

“I’m sorry, but you’re confusing me. How can you read the Bible and not believe?”

“I happen to be in a most fortunate position. You see, I already know the truth.”

“You do? Pray tell, what is it?”

“It’s a long story but I can tell you this much, you’re looking in the wrong places.”

“But the Bible is the Word of God!”

“Which is precisely the problem.”

“Well, it’s been nice to meet you,” the older man said as he glanced at his watch, “but I’m afraid we must be off; we have many more calls to make. Thank you for your time.”

“No worries.”

Jesse emerged from the front door as the missionaries departed. “Well, you obviously pissed off those guys, big time. I overheard what you said. So, what is the truth?”

“Do you believe in the Bible?”

“I guess so, doesn’t everybody? I mean like how else do you explain everything?”

“That’s not a good enough reason, Jesse. You can’t just invent reasons to explain what you don’t understand. You guys have been doing that for countless millennia. Something unusual happens and the witchdoctor tells you it’s a sign from the heavens or whatever. You believe it because 1, you think the witchdoctor knows everything, and 2, you’re too lazy to think it through yourself. What makes you think the witchdoctor knows any more than you do?”

“I wish I hadn’t asked the question in the first place. Let’s drop it.”

“Scaredy cat.”

As the missionaries rounded the corner, the younger man said to his senior, “What was that all about? Why didn’t he tell us straight up that he wasn’t interested instead of wasting our time?”

“Because he’s ignorant, and probably possessed by the devil. He likes to play foolish games. People like him fail to realize that they are victims of human frailty.”

“Sometimes I don’t understand why God doesn’t treat his children equally.”

Joshua followed Jesse to his room. “So how was the party?”

“Cool.”

“Is that it? Cool?”

“Some of the guys got a bit drunk and there were a couple of fights, but it was mostly cool.”

“There’s so much I really don’t understand about human behavior...”

“Not now, okay? I’m not in the mood to get involved in a deep and meaningful convo about the human condition. Are you telling me that all you guys on planet X or whatever it’s called are perfect? Don’t you have wars and stuff? Are there no jails or courts or cops? No churches?”

“I don’t remember but I don’t think so.”

“I gotta go shower.”

Chapter 15

The old man who lived in the house on the corner answered a knock at his front door. "I should have known it was you," he grumbled, "you're the only one who makes so much bloody racket when you knock."

"I like to be heard," Jesse said matter-of-factly. "This is my friend Joshua. We were wondering if it's okay to borrow one of your old valve radios."

The old man opened the door and invited the boys inside. "That's alright, I suppose, as long as you take care of it. They're worth a bit these days you know. By the way, if you're hoping to switch it on and hear something from the 1940s or 50s, you're out of luck. It doesn't work that way."

The boys followed the old man into his office where the radio stood on top of a book case filled with a leather-bound collection of Encyclopaedia Britannica.

"Do you mind if I read those books?" Joshua asked.

"You'll be my age by the time you finish," the old man laughed. "Besides, they're redundant these days with the internet and all. I do most of my research on the internet."

Joshua took one of the volumes from the case and thumbed through the gold-edged pages. "I'd really appreciate reading them... if that's okay with you."

"Sure, you can borrow one volume at a time." Then the old man reached for a glass on his desk and sipped the contents.

"Is that wine?" Joshua asked.

"Cheap plonk, but quaffable."

"Isn't it a bit early to be drinking wine?"

“Seize the moment!” the old man smiled. “I might not be alive by the time the sun is over the bloody yardarm, or whatever that stupid expression is. No, to answer your question, young man, it’s never too early for anything. He who hesitates is lost! Now what do you intend to do with that wireless?”

“It’s an experiment with radio waves,” Jesse volunteered on behalf of his mate. “We need to take it to the school lab.”

“Then take this smaller Phillips, it’s easier to carry.”

Meanwhile, Joshua studied the photographs on the mantle shelf. “Who is this?” he asked. “Your son?”

“He was like a son. That’s Cody, a dear friend who died some years ago in a car accident.”

“And these jars of marbles? Do you play marbles?”

“No... I just like the look of them – the colourful whirls and swirls – and they remind me of my boyhood. It’s a funny thing, you know, boyhood is not something you treasure until you lose it. Jesse helps... we chat most mornings on his way to the school bus. It’s only for a few minutes but it sort of keeps me young, if you know what I mean... in touch with a changing world.”

“Is that what Cody did?”

“Too bloody right he did,” the old man chuckled. “He was a scallywag who continually got up to all sorts of tricks. He had my eyebrows permanently in the stratosphere.”

Jesse took the valve radio home while Joshua remained at the house and read the entire 34 volumes of Encyclopaedia Britannica in about 10 minutes, much to the astonishment of the old man. “You’re playing a joke on me, son, but I’m not that stupid, hahahaha!” He took a volume from the shelf and

opened it. “Okay, smartie pants, volume 6 of the Micropaedia, what’s at the top left corner of page 250?”

“Cultural elements common to the Igorot peoples as a whole include metalworking in iron and brass...”

“Lucky guess,” he said as he took another book. “Top right-hand side, page 325 of volume 15 of the Macropaedia?”

“The bronze curtain wall of Mies van der Rohe’s Seagram Building (1954-58) in New York City proved to be an isolated example.”

“That’s extraordinary,” the old man said as he replaced the books on the shelf. “How on earth did you do that? You must have a photographic memory. Are you now going to tell me that you remember absolutely everything you read in that entire collection?”

“Well... I don’t mean to boast but... yes.”

“Is Jesse aware of your gift?”

“Yes.”

“He’s never mentioned it... or you for that matter. Does he have any idea of how profoundly incredible this is?”

“Well, yes but... we’re mates. I mean, like it’s no biggie.”

“No biggie??? You just read the entire Britannica collection of 34 volumes in 10 minutes and it’s no biggie? I need another drink.” The old man opened the bar fridge and filled his glass. “That set of encyclopaedia, young man, weighs over 70 kilograms, that’s 5 kilograms more than I weigh! No biggie? There something weird going on here – something more than meets the eye. Who are you? What are you?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’m listening.”

“Maybe some other time; I gotta get back to Jesse. Nice to meet you... uh... mister. See you next time.”

Jesse was in his room, playing with the valve radio, when his friend arrived home. “It’s no good,” he said as he twiddled the tuning dial. “I can only get AM stations.”

“FM wasn’t available when this old thing was made,” Joshua explained, then told Jesse about the encyclopaedia episode. “The old bloke started asking lots of questions about who I am.”

“Are you surprised? You need to be more careful about your behavior, Joshua. Reading the entire Britannica in 10 minutes is not exactly normal you know. So what did you tell him?”

“Nothing. I made an excuse and came back here. So what do you plan on doing this afternoon?”

After about 10 or 15 minutes at the skate park, Jesse took Joshua aside for a private word. “Listen, you dickhead, you’re attracting too much attention. That quadruple somersault you did had everyone staring in awe.”

“But I’m having fun!”

Just then, one of the other skaters approached the pair. “Hey, man, that was awesome! Outtasight, dude! Where’d you learn to do that?”

“My family owns a circus. I do trapeze and stuff like that.”

“Can you teach me?”

“Not unless you’ve got 10 years to spare.”

Jesse waited until the disappointed skater wandered off before he spoke. “You told a lie.”

“So sue me.”

During the skate back home, Jesse decided to call into the fish ‘n’ chip shop. “I was just thinking about you,” Wendy said. “Are you available this weekend?”

“You mean I got the job?”

“Friday, Saturday and Sunday.”

“I’m playing footy on Sunday. It’s all arranged.”

“No worries; Friday and Saturday then... 5pm till 9pm. And yes, you got the job.”

As the boys skated the rest of the way home, Joshua asked his friend if he had thought about his future after graduating from school.

“Not really.”

“How about an astronaut?”

“Yeah, right.”

“Has knowing me... knowing that there is intelligent life in outer space made a difference to your attitude?”

“Scratch ‘intelligent’.”

“Be serious.”

“Not really... I mean, I’ve always had an open mind. Maybe there is, maybe there isn’t. I never thought about it all that much.”

“So it doesn’t surprise you?”

“I suppose it did at first but not now... I guess I’m kinda used to you. It’s weird you know, I mean like even Thomas and Michael and mom are used to you now. It’s only the people who don’t really know you that freak... like Rocque and Rowles and Dr Hardy.” Jesse turned to face his friend and saw that the skateboard was devoid of a rider. “STOP THAT! Get back on the board right now, you idiot!”

Joshua obliged. “Sorry, but I was really tempted to do that back at the skate park,” he laughed.

“Imagine all those guys watching a riderless skateboard doing its own thing.”

“You gotta stop drawing attention to yourself. How the hell am I supposed to explain you to other people?”

“Why should you? It’s not your responsibility to explain things to other people. That’s one of the problems with you humans... you think everything needs an explanation. You can’t simply accept things the way they are; and then you get all panicky and start to invent explanations for the sake of having one, whether it’s true or not. You know, like there’s a bolt of lightning and all the villagers freak, and the witchdoctor tells them that the thunder god is mad at them for something or other, so they decide to sacrifice a sheep or whatever. What the hell does the thunder god want with a damn sheep?”

“Things are different now. We’re not that dumb any more.”

“Oh, really? Pull the other leg.”

Chapter 16

“Strange name for a beach,” Joshua remarked as the shirtless and barefoot boys made their way down the sand toward the breakers.

“It’s called Old Bar because the river has two mouths. This is the old one; the newer one is up the coast a ways at Harrington.”

“Is the beach there called New Bar?”

“No.”

“You guys are so inconsistent you know.”

“Just remember what I told you about body surfing and how to catch the waves.”

“It’s not rocket science, Jesse. I think I can manage.”

The day was sunny and warm and the beach well patronized by swimmers and surfers as well as the lazy types who were satisfied to sun bake on the beach.

The boys had body surfed for about 15 minutes when Joshua noticed a swimmer in difficulty outside the SLSA flags. He dove beneath the waves and – despite the distance of about 100 meters – surfaced just a few seconds later beside the distressed swimmer – a teenage girl. He supported her and told her to calm down; that everything would be fine. “Take a deep breath,” he ordered. “I’ll have you back on the beach in no time.”

Joshua delivered the girl to the safety of the sand just in time to greet the surf lifesavers. “How the hell did you get here so fast?” one of them asked but didn’t wait for an answer. He checked the condition of the patient, who had swallowed a little too much water but was otherwise okay, albeit in mild shock.

By then, Jesse had arrived on the scene, breathless. “Is she okay?” he asked. A crowd began to gather. “Joshua? How on earth did you get to her so

fast? You were beside me one minute and then beside the girl the next! That was a hundred meters away! A second later you were both here on the sand! How the hell did you do that?"

"That's not important, Jesse; the important thing is the girl... and, yes, she's okay. She got caught in a rip."

"You know about rips?"

"I know about everything, remember?" the hero smiled cheekily.

On the local television news that night, the lead story was about an anonymous young man who had 'miraculously' saved the life of a young girl in the surf at Old Bar Beach. "We were watching the swimmers as we normally do," the surf lifesaver said in a recorded interview, "when I spotted a girl swimming outside the flags. She was caught in a strong rip. We were about to launch a rescue when I saw one of the swimmers between the flags disappear under the water. At first I thought we had two rescues on our hands, but he resurfaced just a second or two later next to the girl who was about 100 meters away. And then in practically no time they were both safely on the beach."

"Did he say who he was?" the interviewer asked.

"No. We took the girl to the clubhouse for first aid but the guy and his mate had disappeared."

"What did he look like?"

"Sort of Middle-Eastern, tanned, aged about sixteen. His mate was Aboriginal, I think. That kid deserves a bravery medal, if you ask me. I've never seen a rescue anything like it before. He was awesome... and so damn quick!"

The news did not escape the attention of Detective Sergeant Rowles, who phoned Maggie to ask if Jesse and his friend were at Old Bar Beach that day.

“Along with hundreds of others,” she said.

“Was he with ZYX?”

“Jesse has lots of friends.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“That’s the only answer you’re getting, sergeant. My son is 16. What he does socially is his business. He doesn’t need a chaperone.”

“Just remind him not to make it my business. I’ll be in touch, Mrs Maguire.”

After dinner, Jesse checked his cell phone memory and called Anthony to explain tomorrow’s situation at school. “Can you like disappear for a while at lunch break?”

“No worries; just ask Joshua to teach me how.”

“Not like that, you idiot... I mean go for a walk around town or something.”

“Why?”

“Because I want Joshua to be you in the science lab. If he goes as Joshua there’ll be questions. The teachers know he’s not a student there.”

“That’ll cost you ten bucks.”

“Bullshit!”

“So what am I supposed to do in town? Spend my own money? It’ll cost you ten bucks for Donut King. I’ll hang out there for a while. Deal?”

“You’re a bloody crook, Anthony, but... yeah, okay... deal.” Jesse ended the call and turned to Joshua. “Okay, it’s all set. You arrive at school tomorrow at 12:30 as Anthony. I’ll organize the science lab with the science teacher in the morning. We’ll do the radio wave measuring thing and then you split before the real Anthony gets back. Okay?”

“What about the old valve radio?”

“I’ll take it with me on the bus. You wanna help me with my homework? I know it’s late but I haven’t done it yet.”

“That’s cheating.”

“No it’s not! Once you tell me the answers then I’ll know them too! That’s learning... right?”

The boys retired to Jesse’s room for homework duty which took a couple of hours. “I dunno why you insisted on doing it the hard way,” Jesse complained as he returned his books to his school bag. “You could’ve done it in two minutes instead of over two hours. What are you, a masochistic slave-driver or something?”

“You’re human, Jesse. You can’t absorb information the same way I do. You live in this world, not mine, and you have to compete in this world. No short cuts, mate.”

“You wanna play a computer game - Earth Assault? No, on second thought, let’s not.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’ll win.”

“How do you know I’ll win?”

“Because you win at everything! I saw what you did today – rescuing that girl. You can do stuff I can’t. And even if I won, I’d know that you didn’t try... and allowed me to win. So, there’s no point. Right?”

“Are you pissed off with me, Jesse?”

“It’s just that... well, you’re not like me; you’re not human. You can disappear at will, change form, do stuff like you did today... do you know what I’m saying, Joshua? It’s not like we’re mates, at least not like I am with Anthony.”

“We’re not mates?”

“Well, we’re kinda mates, you and me. I mean, I dig you and everything but... it’s just not the same.”

“No... I suppose you’re right. So what do you want me to do, Jesse? You’re the only friend I have here on Earth... I mean real friend.”

“You’re not making it easy, Joshua.”

“Ditto.”

When the lunch-break bell rang at school next day, Jesse made his way to the science lab where Anthony was waiting. “Is that you?” Jesse asked. “The real you? I mean, Joshua?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

Once inside the laboratory, ZYX hooked himself up to the oscilloscope and took a reading of the radio wave, which Jesse noted on paper. Then the boys used the valve radio tuner to receive a signal. At first, it sounded like crackling electronic interference but, as Jesse turned the tuning dial further clockwise, it eventually became a sort of undulating droning sound that emanated from the radio speaker... something akin to a human voice but in a foreign language.

“Jesse? Is that what you said, Joshua? Did you say Jesse?”

The sound that followed was reminiscent of the word ‘yes’.

“How did you do that? You’re not using your lips.”

“Thoughts. I communicate in thoughts, rather like telepathy,” Joshua replied via the radio speaker in a monotone. “I suspect that my ‘people’ communicate that way instead of using physical vibrations carried by the atmosphere.”

“That would mean you guys live in a silent world. How weird!”

“It’s all relative, Jesse. Are you taking notes of the measurements?”

“Yes, yes... I’m not that dumb you know. But I don’t understand how the valve radio can receive your signal. You measure 2.3 gigahertz on the microwave bandwidth and this receiver is on the AM band.”

“I tuned into it by transmitting my thoughts at 958 kilohertz. You know – if the mountain won’t come to Mohammed...”

Chapter 17

After leaving the science lab at school, Joshua elected to return the valve radio to the old bloke who lived in the corner house. “Oh, yes,” he said at the front door, “you’re Jesse’s friend – the one who can read an entire set of Britannica in 10 minutes. I’m Patrick, by the way... Patrick Kelly... Jesse neglected to introduce us... and thanks for returning the radio.”

Joshua stood at the doorway, looking rather awkward, as he waited to be invited inside. “Well, I must get back to work,” Patrick explained after a pregnant pause. “Thanks again.”

“I was hoping maybe we could chat.”

“What about?”

“Jesse tells me you’re a writer... I’ve not met a writer before.”

“There’s absolutely nothing interesting about writers, Joshua. They are people who stare at a computer screen all day and make no noise except for the tapping of a keyboard. The word ‘boring’ springs to mind.”

“It’s interesting to me how you use your fingers to transmit your thoughts to the screen instead of doing it directly.”

“Directly?”

“Yes... you know, like telepathy.”

“Technology has come a long way in my time, young man, but not that far.” The old man stood aside and beckoned the boy to enter the house. “Can I get you something? Tea, coffee...?”

Joshua politely declined the offer, and then followed his host into the office where the old man replaced the radio on the mantle in between the pictures of Cody. He then asked his guest to take a seat.

“So what to you write about?” Joshua continued.

“People.”

“You must understand them.”

“On the contrary, Joshua. That’s why I write about them. I find them endlessly fascinating. Pardon me while I fill my glass. Are you sure you won’t have anything to drink?”

“Yes. I mean, yes I’m sure. I’m interested in people too. By the way, you referred to people as ‘them’. What did you mean by that?”

“I sometimes – no, make that most of the time – feel as though I’m alienated from the human race, as though I’ve been sent here to observe them.”

“By whom?”

“I don’t know... by THEM... beings ‘out there’ somewhere,” Patrick replied as he waved an arm toward the heavens. “It’s rather odd, really... sort of like sitting alone at a table in a restaurant and observing the rest of the patrons as if you weren’t one of them... somehow invisible.”

“I feel like that too.”

“You do? Be careful you don’t end up like me, young fellow... a grumpy old eccentric.” Patrick seated himself in front of his computer, just a few feet from where Joshua sat. “Besides, it doesn’t do any good. I’ve observed human behavior all my life and I still don’t understand it. The entire world is a lunatic asylum and I’m the only sane inmate.”

“You and I have that in common, then.”

“There’s something rather odd about you, Joshua, especially for one so young. But I can’t quite put my finger on it.”

“Do you believe in the existence of aliens?”

“Extra terrestrial intelligence? It’s a possibility, I suppose, but there’s no proof one way or the other.

It's like believing in a supreme being... which I don't."

"You said you feel you were sent by 'THEM' – beings from outer space – to observe human behaviour."

"I meant metaphorically... poetic license and all that rubbish."

"Maybe you could explain a few things to me... things I don't understand. I've read a great deal since I've been here..."

"Since you've... *been here*?"

"Since I've been able to read, I mean... but there's nothing in those books to explain certain idiosyncratic human behavior. For example, if a person happens to be in the company of a dog or a cat or even a small child, that person reacts by touching the animal or child. In that situation, the person automatically becomes very tactile and affectionate. But that same instinct to touch and stroke and to hold does not apply to adult humans when they are in each other's company – with some exceptions such as hugging a friend."

"That's because stroking or hugging an animal or child does not involve sexual overtones. If I were to touch you now – as I might touch a dog – you would immediately feel uncomfortable and threatened. I would have invaded your private space."

"What would make me suspect that your motive had anything to do with sex?"

"Human beings are obsessed with sex. It's as simple as that."

"Does that make sense? If they're obsessed with sex, why do they wear clothes?"

"Go figure."

“What are you saying, Patrick? That people wear clothes because they... oh, I see... out of sight, out of mind.”

“Out of sight, but never out of mind, Joshua. Human genitals are the only organs regulated by bureaucrats. They are not yours to do with as you please. They are given to you by God for a specific purpose; to use them for alternative purpose; a purpose not deemed sacred by the ivory tower nitwits is an abomination. They even tell you that God is omnipresent so that you can't even do as you please in private!”

“Do you really believe that?”

“Of course not. It's a load of old codswallop. Sex is embarrassing; that's what all the fuss is about. It's animalistic. It's undignified. Human beings consider themselves to be above animals and animal behavior, which is why we have the story of Adam and Eve. Then Charles Darwin arrived on the scene and upset the religious applecart... no pun intended. Sex is embarrassing because it is basic animal behaviour, and human beings in general do not want to be associated with that level of conduct.”

“What about you personally?”

“Me? My testosterone is on permanent leave,” Patrick laughed. “And I'm grateful for that. Life is much simpler now. I don't have chemicals telling me what to think. I do my own independent thinking.”

“I don't mean to be offensive, Patrick, but does thinking really make any difference to what actually exists?”

“No... just as it didn't when most people believed the earth was flat. Opinions change nothing. They are just opinions.”

“Then why bother having an opinion?”

“Hahaha! Good question, Joshua. I’m not sure what the answer to your question is. Perhaps opinions exist solely for the entertainment of humans... to keep them amused. If we all agreed on absolutely everything, what would be the point? If the truth were not so elusive, life would be a bore. Agreed?”

“Is that why you write?”

“I write because I can’t help it. I write to entertain myself. Hopefully, by entertaining myself I also entertain others. If I do it’s a bonus.”

“When you express your opinions, do you hope to convince others that you’re right?”

“If I did, I’d be like the Pope or some politician espousing some sort of indisputable doctrine. No, Joshua, if I were to be successful in convincing everybody on this planet that I was right and they were wrong, what then?” The old man giggled, coughed and then took another sip of wine. “Preaching to the converted, my friend, is not my cuppa. That would be far too predictable and boring. No, I much prefer to be the wooden spoon that causes others to at least think beyond their own safe little cocoons.”

“You’re very interesting.”

“If I’m interesting, it’s because I’m interested,” Patrick said with the emphasis on ‘ed’. “And now I must get back to work. It’s been delightful to chat with you, Joshua... you must visit again soon. And by the way,” he added as he peered over the top of his reading glasses, “I’m still immensely curious as to how you read the entire Britannica in just 10 minutes.”

The boys were yet to arrive home from school when Joshua returned, but Maggie was there, making sandwiches in the kitchen. “Where are the scones?” she asked. “Patrick is always cooking something, and often brings it over here for the boys.”

“He was busy writing something, but we had an interesting chat.”

“You managed to get a word in edgewise?”

“Not really,” Joshua laughed. “He did most of the talking. But at least I learned something about you guys... humans, I mean. Do you believe in God?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Patrick says he doesn’t.”

“Do you?”

“How do you spell amnesia?”

“Sorry... I forgot. Well, sometimes I do and sometimes I don’t,” Maggie said, “...believe in God, that is.”

“In other words, you don’t.”

“Put it this way, I wouldn’t be surprised either way.”

“He says humans are obsessed with sex.”

“Let’s not talk about sex.”

“Oops, sorry.”

“I just don’t like talking about it. It’s gross.”

“You gave birth to three boys.”

“That’s not sex. Well, I mean it is and it isn’t. It just happened. It wasn’t like... well, you know, like in movies with all that X rated stuff. We just went to bed and that was it. Nine months later, whammo... a baby.”

“So Patrick is correct.”

“About what?”

“Humans are obsessed with sex, kind of like an obese person who is obsessed with food, and who can’t get enough, or an anorexic person who pukes at the sight of it. But they are both obsessed.”

“Patrick is weird... a nice old bloke but weird.”

Chapter 18

“So much for peace and quiet,” Maggie sighed as the house filled with the pandemonium of three noisy boys back home from school, each of whom had his particular story to tell about his day.

“You wouldn’t know what to do without them,” Joshua laughed during a brief pause in the chaos.

“You’re right you know,” Maggie admitted with a smile, “the boys are my life.”

Jesse looked a little worse for wear. He’d traveled by bus to Bulahdelah to play football for his school team that afternoon. “We won,” he said, as if it were to be expected, then disappeared into his room to dump his school bag.

“Would they have won without you?” Joshua yelled from the kitchen.

Jesse poked his head around the door of his room and grinned: “Of course not.”

“I don’t know how he fits all of his activities into each week,” Maggie said, shaking her head. “Football, basketball, training, homework, school, the job at the fish ‘n’ chip shop... it never ends. Did he tell you he nominated himself as a contender for school captain?”

“Because I’m cool,” the elder son boasted as he entered the kitchen and took one of several sandwiches from a plate on the table. “I’ll always be cool.”

“What does ‘cool’ mean exactly,” Joshua asked.

“It means cool. There’s cool, heaps cool, the coolest, and uncool.”

“Yes, actually, I do know how he fits all his activities into his week,” Maggie reflected while

ignoring her son's dissertation of the word 'cool', "he doesn't do any work around the house."

"I mow the lawn."

"For \$20."

"Yeah, well, a guy's gotta make a buck. I'm 16 now."

"Who pays me?" Maggie asked, and extended her hand, palm side up. "That's a dollar for the sandwich."

"What? You're our mom. Mothers are supposed to look after their kids and not get paid."

"Says who? One dollar please."

"That's not fair! What about Michael and Thomas?"

"They don't get paid to mow the lawn."

Later, as the older boys tossed a basketball around in the backyard, Jesse asked his friend about his plans for making contact with his home planet.

"I gotta figure a way to broadcast my frequency into space. I emailed SETI but they don't broadcast... only receive."

"Try a local radio station."

"No good... power is too low."

"What about those microwave towers on the top of mountains. There's one just down the road at the end of Breakneck Road."

"I thought of that. I phoned Telstra but they haven't responded."

"Maybe they think you're an alien up to no good," Jesse laughed.

"Or maybe they don't know the answer themselves. Humans aren't too bright you know. Actually, I'm thinking about Parkes."

"The radio telescope?"

"Yep. Do you know anyone there?"

“Yeah, right... I know them all... we party every weekend. Of course I don't know anyone there! Who do you think I am? Anyway, you can forget about Parkes... the security there is like Fort Knox. You won't even get past the front door let alone be allowed to interfere with all that technical stuff.”

“Like I said, Jesse, I gotta figure a way. Meantime, that old bloke on the corner is pretty interesting.”

“Patrick? He's an eccentric... harmless but kinda loopy.”

“Why do you say that? Because he's not like your average Joe? Don't underestimate eccentrics, mate. And that's the tenth time you've dropped the ball.”

“You throw it too damn fast.”

“Gotta keep you on your toes, mate.”

Jesse had to attend football training that night but complained of feeling tired following the football game earlier at Bulahdelah. Joshua asked his friend to shake his hand. Then he closed his eyes while Jesse studied the look of concentration on the alien's face and wondered what the hell he was doing. But then, to Jesse's great surprise, he felt a sudden rush of energy. “Did you do that?” he asked his mate.

“Yeah, I just gave you a quick burst. How do you feel now?”

“Awesome! I feel like I could jump over the house!”

Jesse's meal was kept warm in the oven while the rest of the family sat down to dinner. Joshua, as usual, declined any food or drink. “I overheard you mention Parkes,” Maggie said.

“It's just an idea.”

“Will you take Jesse with you?”

“That’s up to him. I could transport myself there in a second but I could also use the company. I like Jesse a lot. I’ll miss him when I... get back to wherever it is I belong. Actually, it’s kinda weird. Since I’ve come to know you guys, I feel – at least somewhat – as though this is where I belong.”

“You’ll probably feel differently when your amnesia is cured.”

“Maybe.”

“You must have family there.”

“That word doesn’t ring a bell, Maggie. I have a feeling that ‘family’ doesn’t apply to wherever I come from.”

“That’s impossible, Joshua... everyone has family.”

“That’s the way you guys make me feel... like family. I mean, you talk about aliens... when I first arrived here on Earth, I thought it was humans who were the aliens. The people at the hospital and then the police... I felt like an escapee from prison. Then I got to know Jesse and you and the boys and it was like I had friends... people who cared about me and wanted to help me. But you know something, Maggie? It’s occurred to me that maybe I’m not lost... maybe I’ve been banished from my own planet for whatever reason... maybe I don’t have amnesia... maybe my memory was removed so that I could never find my way back.”

“No, I don’t believe that for a second, Joshua. You’re too nice a person for that. I’m sure there was some kind of accident and you got lost. That’s all... everything will be just fine and dandy when you figure a way to make contact with your kind... you’ll see.”

“I hope you don’t,” Thomas said with a mouth full of food, which attracted a scowl from his mom.

“Don’t what?” Joshua asked.

“Find your way back.”

Joshua placed his hand on the boy’s head and roughed up his jet black hair. “Thanks, mate. I appreciate that.”

Jesse arrived home, took his meal from the oven and joined the rest of the family watching TV in the living room, where he ate his food off his lap.

“That energy boost wasn’t enough, Joshua,” he explained between mouthfuls. “I’m stuffed.”

“Go talk somewhere else,” Michael complained. “I’m trying to watch TV.” His protest was successful in causing the older boys to retire to the front verandah.

Jesse gazed silently at the stars while his friend busied himself with his meal. “What if they don’t want me back?” Jesse said quietly after a several minutes.

“Who?”

“Them.”

“Your people? What makes you say that?”

“I dunno,” Joshua shrugged, then explained what he had said to Maggie earlier in the evening.

“Well, I guess you’ll have to stay here on Earth.”

“I don’t belong here.”

“Bullshit. Maggie likes you, my brothers like you... and... well, I think you’re pretty cool.”

“Thanks but that’s not the point. Things are not gonna stay the way they are now, Jesse. I won’t change but you guys will. You’ll do all those human things other people do, like get married, have kids, be locked into a career and a mortgage and all that other routine stuff. Do you know how old I am?”

“Same as me.”

“The police DNA tests clocked mine at about 10,000 years.”

“It’s a mistake.”

“I’m not sure how it happened or what the scientific explanation is, but a strand of hair from that body I assumed at the hospital – Warwick Freeman’s – was dated 10,000 years old. Don’t you see, Jesse? I wasn’t meant to be an Earthling like you. Are you listening?”

“Yeah,” Jesse answered softly as his dark brown eyes scanned the heavens. “I hear you.”

Chapter 19

On Thursday afternoon after school, Jesse and Anthony walked to town to be measured for their hire suits, to be worn to the Formal Dance on Friday. The fact that the woman who did the measuring had a mouthful of pins did not prevent her from informing the boys that the suits would be ready for pickup the following afternoon. “What about accessories?” she asked. “A nice tie, white shirt, black shoes...?”

“Got all those, thanks,” Jesse said, then paid the woman.

On the walk home, Anthony reminded his mate that he didn't have any black shoes. “You've only got white ones. Anyway, how come a black kid doesn't have black shoes?”

“I've already got enough melanin,” Jesse laughed. “Anyway, white shoes will look cool.”

“With a black suit? No wonder you guys used to run around naked. You have zippo dress sense. How's it going with Joshua?”

“He's cool... says he's going to Parkes to send his signal into space. He reckons it's his only chance to make contact with his... uh, planet.”

“Are you going?”

“He says he could use the company.”

“I wish I could go,” Anthony lamented. “It would be awesome to go to Parkes and see all that space telescope stuff.”

“Ask Joshua when we get home. I'm sure he won't mind.”

Rosie traveled from Harrington to Taree on the Friday to spend the afternoon with Maggie, putting the final touches to her outfit for the formal dance. “It's gorgeous,” Maggie gushed when she saw the red and

purple dress; a strapless creation that ended just above the knees, and that featured a purple sash wrapped around the girl's midriff, just below the bust. "It's absolutely stunning! Jesse will be so impressed when he gets home from school. He'll be positively bug-eyed."

"I hope so." Rosie said, smiling, then asked Joshua for his opinion.

"Very beautiful, Rosie... I'm sure Jesse will think it's cool."

"Cool?" Maggie complained. "Cool? Cool schmool. That's not the right word for a lovely feminine dress like this one, for God sake. Cool is for skateboards and silly boy things – snails and puppy dog tails. I think Rosie looks absolutely gorgeous."

"True. However, I don't imagine Jesse will use words like 'feminine' and 'gorgeous'," Joshua grinned, "but I understand what you mean. It's a girl thing, right?"

The three boys arrived home just before 4pm. As expected, Jesse's comment when he saw Rosie's dress was that it looked "heaps cool". Thomas was more gentlemanly with his praise – he referred to Rosie as "looking like a princess".

About fifteen minutes later, Jesse – wrapped in a towel – emerged from the bathroom and disappeared into his bedroom. When he finally reappeared, wearing his black suit, white button-up shirt with a dark blue tie, and white shoes, he asked, "has anyone got a carnation? I need one for my lapel."

"It's a dance," Maggie smiled. "You're not getting married. Hmmm... then again..."

"No worries, Patrick will have one. He's driving us to the hall – I asked him this morning on the way to the school bus."

"The hall is only one block away!"

“We wanna be delivered in style, mom. People all dressed up to the nines don’t *walk* to a formal. Sheesh!”

Patrick arrived in his old Holden at the agreed time of 5:50pm, and parked out front. As the beau and belle of the ball walked toward the car, Jesse yelled, “have you got a carnation, Patrick?”

“Carnation? No... but I do have a plastic rose bud that looks quite real. It’s a white one.”

“Plastic? C’mon... you’re joking!”

“It’s in the glove box. Don’t ask me why I keep a plastic white rose in the glove box. Perhaps I’m psychic or something.” Patrick retrieved the rose and handed it to Jesse who agreed – albeit reluctantly – that it looked real enough.

“That’ll do,” the boy said as he fitted the stem into his lapel. “Did you bring your camera?”

Mid morning on Saturday, Jesse, Joshua and Anthony appeared at Patrick’s front door. “Parkes?” the old bloke said. “What the hell do you wanna go there for? It’s miles away in the mid west!” Then he stood aside to allow the boys inside the house. “Make yourselves at home in the office.”

“We were wondering,” Jesse began as he took a seat, “if we could borrow your car. Anthony’s got his driver’s license.”

“Tough Titties? Don’t tell me you want to drive it to Parkes.”

“Only if it’s okay with you.”

“Convince me.” Patrick sat at his computer desk and listened intently to the boys’ explanation of Joshua’s predicament – who and what he is, as far anyone knows – and that he needed to use the Parkes radio telescope to send a signal into space. “I need another drink,” Patrick concluded as he headed toward

the bar fridge, but stopped short. He turned to face Joshua. “You’re an alien? Does that explain how you read and memorized the entire Britannica in just 10 minutes? Well, I’ll be blowed.” He raised his empty glass and studied it at close range. “Is this really happening or is the demon drink causing me to imagine it? Somebody pinch me.”

Jesse obliged. “Yes, Patrick, it’s real,” he assured his old friend. “We’re here in this room, and everything we told you about Joshua is true.”

“In that case, I’ll get another drink. You had me worried there for a moment. Can I get you boys anything?”

“We’re fine,” Jesse answered. “We just need your car.”

“Old Tough Titties runs pretty well,” Anthony remarked as the HQ Holden sped along the Newell Highway. But then something totally unexpected happened. His eyes grew as large as dinner plates. “What the hell is going on here?”

Jesse, who sat alongside Anthony, looked out the passenger window. “We’re flying,” he shouted. “We’re off the ground!”

Joshua, from the back seat, calmly explained the situation. “Chill, guys,” he said, “we’ll get there quicker this way.”

“What if we crash? This thing doesn’t have any wings!”

“Relax... it doesn’t need wings. Never fear, Joshua is here!”

About 20 kilometers north of Parkes, Tough Titties slowly descended from its height of 100 meters onto Telescope Road, and traveled the remainder of the trip in more conventional style to the Parkes Radio

Telescope Visitors Center. “You’ve lost some of your melanin,” Anthony laughed as he observed Jesse’s pale complexion. “It wasn’t that scary, mate. Joshua knows what he’s doing.”

“Yeah, but I don’t,” Jesse complained. “I need to find a loo... fast.”

Inside the visitors center, Jesse and Anthony ordered drinks and snacks at the café, then took their food to a table. Joshua, of course, declined any refreshments. “Okay,” he began, “here’s the plan. You see that door over there? The one that says ‘Staff Only – No Public Access’? I’ll go in there.”

“You’re not staff.”

“They won’t know that. I’ll be invisible. Once I’m inside, I’ll check out all the technical equipment and figure out how to send a signal.”

“What if you stuff up whatever it is they’re doing?”

“I’ll try not to.”

“You might set off an alarm or something! What then?”

“Stop worrying, guys. She’ll be sweet.”

“Yeah, right. I’m getting nervous already.”

“You worry too much, Jesse. Then again, you’re a human. What’s my frequency again?”

“2.3 gigahertz.”

“Cool. I’ll be back soon.” Joshua rose from his chair and headed toward the toilets.

A few minutes later, the staff-only door opened, and a man dressed in a knee-length white coat emerged. The door remained open for a few seconds.

“Hopefully, Joshua used that opportunity to get inside,” Anthony noted. “Jeez, I hope he doesn’t do anything stupid. The last thing we need is this joint swarming with security people.”

“I’m starting to think this whole idea is crazy,” Jesse said. “First a flying Holden and now this. Patrick’s not gonna believe a word of what we tell him when we get back. IF we get back.”

“I’m surprised he believed what we already told him back in Taree. And even more surprised he loaned us his precious Tough Titties.”

“He likes me.”

Chapter 20

The moment the alarm sounded throughout the Observatory, people dining in the café stopped whatever they were doing and glanced in all directions, including at each other, for some kind of explanation. Several men and women dressed in white overalls headed toward the ‘staff only’ door and disappeared inside.

“We better split,” Anthony suggested to Jesse.

At that moment, Joshua rejoined his friends at the table. “That will only make you guys appear guilty,” he said.

“What the hell did you do in there?” Jesse demanded. “You’ve got the whole place in a panic!”

“No biggie... I kind of interrupted their transmission for a few seconds, but it’s cool now – nothing to worry about. Give them another minute or two and everything will be back to normal. And stop looking so damn guilty... you’ll attract attention. Act like everyone else – surprised.”

“It’s okay, folks,” said a man in a white coat as he emerged from the ‘staff only’ door. “Just a slight aberration of a technical nature. Nothing to worry about. Please relax and continue to enjoy yourselves. Our apologies for any unnecessary concern.”

“You see?” Joshua continued, “Unnecessary concern.”

“So what happened? What did you do in there?”

“Well, I checked the equipment and figured out how they transmit a signal into space. So I turned it off and then focused my energy so that my 2.3 GHz would be transmitted instead of the normal signal. I also encoded a message in the signal that my people will understand. I gave it about 10 seconds and then

reinstated the Observatory's original signal. Like I said, no biggie."

"Is 10 seconds enough?"

"Not sure. There's a whole lotta space out there, you know. I'm not even sure I pointed the signal in the right direction. Anyway, it's now wait and see time. If nothing happens in a few weeks or a month, I'll come back to Parkes and try again."

"That would be foolish, Joshua. If they see you a second time they'll put two and two together."

"I'm not that stupid, Jesse. I'll come back as you."

"WHAT? Don't you dare!"

"Chill, mate. Just kidding. Hahaha!"

Once Tough Titties had been safely returned to its Taree garage, the boys called around to the front of the house to thank Patrick. "You have a lot of explaining to do," the old bloke said sternly when he answered the door. "I've had the police here." Then Patrick invited the boys into his office.

"What happened?" Jesse asked as he settled into the old bloke's favorite easy chair.

"They wanted to know where my car was. They received a report from the Civil Aviation Safety Authority whose radar reported an unidentified flying object at low altitude over the central west of New South Wales. An amateur photographer caught the object on his video camera, and guess what?"

"Er... it was an HQ Holden?"

"Exactly! Brown with a white roof! And it just so happens that the license plate begins with TTZ!"

"What did you tell the cops?"

"What could I tell them? I asked them to wait a moment while I poured another drink. Then I told them it had to be a mistake; that my car was not designed to

fly – that it never had and never would. They asked me its whereabouts and I told them I’d loaned the car to a friend – Jesse Maguire. That seemed to ring a bell with one of them.”

“Detective Rowles?”

“Yes, I think that was his name. Anyway, he thanked me for my time and left.”

“Uh oh... another Spanish Inquisition coming up. Rowles knows about Joshua. He obviously figured that the flying Holden was Joshua’s doing. I’m sorry, Patrick... I hope you’re not in any kind of trouble over this.”

“Nothing another drink can’t fix. Actually, TT could end up being famous. Maybe someone will want to make a movie about her! I could be rich! By the way, Joshua, do you think you could do that again... make TT fly?”

“Sure... but I might not be here. I managed to use the Parkes radio telescope to send a signal into space. If...”

“Won’t be here? What do you mean ‘won’t be here’? You can’t do that, my boy. Not now! This is my big chance to be famous! If TT never flies again, I’ll be ruined!”

“No you won’t, Mr Kelly. They can do some pretty nifty things with computer animation these days, so that’s not a problem. All you need to do is prove – just once – that Tough Titties can, in fact, fly.”

“I’ll need witnesses.”

“Has everyone here gone troppo?” Jesse asked. “If the Civil Aviation Safety Authority and the police prove that the offending UFO was actually Tough Titties, they’ll prosecute Patrick and maybe even put him in jail!”

“Jail? For God sake, there’s no wine in jail. Besides, I wasn’t driving... uh, flying. It was Joshua,

and he's a minor. In fact, they can't catch him... he's invisible, or can be. How could CASA or the police possibly prosecute Joshua? There's no way!"

"Maybe they'll prosecute us," Anthony suggested. "I mean, as accomplices."

"Accomplices to what? The boy decides to take a short-cut to Parkes and back. He didn't ask anyone's permission; he just did it off his own bat. How can Rowles accuse any of us of being an accomplice?"

"Rowles will find a way," Jesse insisted. "I don't trust that bloke. He's obsessed with ZYX. If Rowles is the one responsible for catching an alien, he'll be promoted through the police ranks at lightning speed. He could even become the commissioner!"

"Heaven forbid. So what do you suggest we do, Jesse?"

"I suggest we deny everything and leave it up to CASA and the police to prove their case. If Rowles starts talking about an alien and flying Holdens he'll become a laughing stock. His credibility – if he has any – will be out the window. No one is gonna believe his story – or CASA's."

"What about the video cameraman?"

"My guess is the footage is fuzzy and too indistinct to accurately identify TT. Remember, guys, proof needs to be 'beyond doubt', and the onus of the proof is on Rowles."

Joshua excused himself for a minute, then went outside. "Where is he going?" Anthony asked, but any answer that might have been forthcoming was interrupted by the phone ringing. Patrick took the handset. "Hello?"

"It's Detective Sergeant Rowles here, Mr Kelly. Just one more thing: I don't suppose you remember what mileage was on your odometer before Maguire borrowed your car?"

“Mileage? Yes, of course I do. The fuel gauge doesn’t work properly so I write the current mileage down on my fuel receipt when I buy petrol. That way, I know what’s left in the tank.”

“When did you last fill the tank?”

“Just the other day.”

“Have you traveled far since then? I mean, you personally?”

“No... a couple of shopping trips, that’s all... no more than a few kilometres. What’s this all about, Sergeant?”

“Can you remember what the mileage was the last time you bought petrol?”

“Not really. The receipt is in the glove box.”

“Thanks, Mr Kelly, I’ll be there in just a few minutes.”

Patrick replaced the phone and turned to the boys. “You’d better skedaddle,” he suggested, “Rowles is on his way here.”

Jesse and Anthony fled the room and met Joshua at the door. “No time to explain,” Jesse urged, “let’s get outta here!” Within a few seconds, all three boys had disappeared.

Rowles arrived shortly afterward and sought Patrick’s permission to check his car. “I’d also appreciate your not using the vehicle until the forensic people can examine it for evidence; probably some time tomorrow. By the way, have you seen the boys?”

“Boys? Which boys?”

“Those boys.”

“Those boys? Oh, you mean *those* boys? Er... briefly.”

“Do you know where they are?”

“Probably somewhere in Australia. I’ve had a few wines, Sergeant, and er... what was the question again?”

Chapter 21

“Where did you disappear to at Patrick’s place?” Jesse asked his alien mate as they arrived home.

“I made an adjustment to Tough Titties’ odometer. Call it a premonition.”

On the television news that night, the lead story showed amateur footage shot by the cameraman who captured ‘the flying Holden’. “I was filming a couple of circling eagles,” the man explained, “and then all of a sudden this car came into frame. I didn’t know what it was – I thought maybe it was a flying saucer or something like that – a UFO.”

[News presenter continues to camera]:

“Authorities are also investigating an incident at Parkes Radio Telescope that occurred shortly before the ‘flying Holden’ was sighted. The facility’s transmission was interrupted for about ten seconds, triggering an alarm throughout the building. Belinda Banana reports from Parkes...”

[Cut to pre-recorded interview]: “The Parkes Radio Telescope was transmitting a signal into space earlier today when the transmission was interrupted by a mystery fault. Gerry Gelato is chief technician at the site: Mr Gelato, do you have any idea what may have caused the interruption? Is there any suggestion that it has something to do with the flying Holden?”

“It’s a remote possibility, Belinda, but at this stage we’re still investigating the cause of the interruption to transmission. All our equipment seems to be working properly so we’re not sure what exactly the cause was. All we know is that our signal of 1.9 GHz was suddenly changed to 2.3 GHz for about 10 seconds just after 11 am.”

“That was about 15 minutes before the flying Holden was sighted. Is that coincidence, do you think, Mr Gelato?”

“I would be very surprised if the two incidents were unrelated, Belinda. However, I would be even more surprised if the UFO you refer to was a Holden. At the moment everything is still under investigation.”

“What is your personal opinion, Mr Gelato? You’re a technician; an expert who specializes in scientific space research and exploration... do you think these two incidents have something to do with the presence of a UFO; a spaceship; perhaps even an alien visit?”

“Anything is possible, Belinda, but I deal in facts, not speculation. At this stage, we have no proof of an alien presence. Be mindful of Orson Welles’ infamous War of the Worlds broadcast back in 1938 which convinced hundreds of thousands that the earth was being invaded by Mars. We certainly don’t want a repeat of the panic he caused, do we? I suggest we continue our investigations into the facts and forget about speculation.”

“With respect, Mr Gelato, is a flying Holden speculation?”

“We don’t know it was a flying Holden, Belinda. It may have been some sort of atmospheric disturbance which gave the appearance of being a solid object, and which somehow caused interference to our transmission.”

Meanwhile, Rocque and Rowles had secured a copy of the security video from Parkes Observatory and had identified the presence of the three boys at the facility during the time of the transmission interruption. The footage proved conclusively that one of the boys was missing from the café just before the

transmission interference took place. “What I don’t understand, though,” Rowles said as he paced his office floor, “is the mileage on the odometer of Kelly’s car. According to the information Kelly gave me about the reading before Maguire borrowed the car, the Holden traveled sufficient kilometers to have covered the distance – by road – to Parkes and return. If the car had been airborne the odometer would not have registered the correct mileage.”

“Maybe it only flew for a short distance.”

“That doesn’t make sense, Rocque. Why drive when you can fly? In any event, it doesn’t help our case against ZYX.”

“Tomorrow the forensic guys check the Holden, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Then why not take advantage of the opportunity to wind back the odometer?”

“That’s tampering with evidence, Rocque.”

“Yes, it is, Rowles.”

Next day, Jesse traveled to Port Macquarie to play football while Joshua decided to spend a little time with Patrick. “And to what do I owe this honor?” the old bloke asked when he answered the door.

“Jesse is out of town, Maggie is working on a painting, and the boys are riding their bikes at the skate park, so...”

“You thought you’d interrupt my writing.”

“Sorry... if this is not a convenient time...”

“No, no, no, it’s fine. I just like to bitch, that’s all. It’s part of my image these days... a grumpy old man. Come on in.”

“I don’t think you’re grumpy,” Joshua said as he accepted Patrick’s offer to take a seat in his office. “I think you’re interesting and I was hoping you could

perhaps enlighten me about a few things that I don't understand about humans."

"You've read the whole Britannica," Patrick said, before taking his glass to the bar fridge. "You must know everything."

"Facts are not everything."

"Too true." Patrick returned to his computer chair and sat down. "So what is it about humans you don't understand?"

"Pretty much everything," the boy laughed. "Actually, I'm wondering about the constant bickering, the wars, the aggression... even Jesse playing football today... what is it about contests? I don't understand the concept. In order for someone to win, someone needs to lose. Is that fair?"

"Nothing is fair on this Earth, Joshua. Life is a contest... it's a constant battle for survival."

"So why all this talk about peace?"

"That's all it is, Joshua... talk. Peace would ruin everything. Imagine a computer game about peace," the old bloke chuckled, "it would not sell a single copy. Imagine a cops and robbers movie without the robbers. Human beings need enemies, whether those enemies are other people or things – even imaginary things like the devil or evil spirits. Take Rowles for example. He doesn't know you from a bar of soap and yet he believes that you are his enemy."

"But I'm not."

"Don't tell him that, Joshua, or you'll ruin his day. Life on Earth is about contrast. You can't have peace without confrontation. If there were no wars, there would be no word for 'peace'. The concept of peace exists because of its opposite number. If there were no ugliness, there would be no word for 'beauty'. Do you know the story of the two blondes standing on opposite banks of a river? One asks the other, "How

did you get over there?” And other says, “You’re the one who’s over there, I’m over here.” It reminds me of the concept of Heaven. Heaven is supposed to be perfect – no war, no unhappiness, no sin; just perfect peace and contentment. What I want to know is this: how can you have a given situation without something to which it can be compared? An opposite or contrast? How could a man measuring 6 foot two in height be called tall if the entire human race was 6 foot two? What is a mountain without a valley?”

“How can you have a one-sided coin?”

“Exactly. And in Jesse’s case, how can you have a winner without a loser? That, my friend, is why he plays football.”

“I think I understand, Patrick. However, it is a little confusing... for someone like me, that is. I don’t seem to have any sense of competition or need to be a winner, especially at someone else’s expense. I’d rather a win/win situation.”

“There’s no such thing, Joshua.”

Chapter 22

Jesse arrived home from Port Macquarie, looking somewhat worse for wear, with the news that his team had lost the football match. “We were doing really well in the first half but... well, they trashed us 52 to 6.”

“You don’t look too upset about it, darling,” Maggie commented as she prepared a bowl of meatball mix.

“Would it do any good if I did?”

“It’s like us and the whites. They’re here and that’s it. What’s done is done. I think it’s a good thing that Kevin Rudd said sorry in parliament, though. We’ve been waiting for that official apology for a long, long time. Now we’re equals.”

“I wish *we* were equals... Port Macquarie and us, I mean. 52 to 6 is not exactly equal, mom. Those guys are bigger than us and they sent a lot of our guys to the bench with bruises and injuries. Anyway, I’m gonna take a shower.”

“He’s working at the fish ‘n’ chip shop tonight,” Maggie explained to Joshua. “I honestly don’t know where he gets the energy from.”

“Jesse is not like a lot of other teens.”

“Don’t you believe it. He parties with the best of them.” Maggie laughed. “He has heaps of friends.”

“I mean he’s well focused... he’s not easily led... he has a good set of values.”

“He gets that from me. I have nothing personal against the people who live at Purfleet but... well, it’s just that I don’t want other people to think we live there.”

“Why not?”

“I was raised by whites. My adoptive mother was a school teacher – English. I was raised to a

certain standard of behavior in a Christian environment, and that's how I want my kids to grow up. I make sure their school clothes are clean, ironed and tidy. It's important that they look respectable, and to behave respectably. Did Jesse tell you what he's doing after he graduates from high school?"

"No."

"He'll take a year off after graduation and then attend law school at university. He's going to be a lawyer," Maggie beamed. "He's already doing law studies at high school."

"Did you encourage him?"

"No... it's all his own doing; his choice. But you can imagine how proud I am. How many full-blooded Aboriginal mothers can lay claim to having a son who's a lawyer? Okay, so he's not a lawyer yet, but I know he will be. Jesse has a lot of determination... once he sets his mind to something, he sees it through."

"Are you guys talking about me AGAIN?"

Jesse grinned as he entered the kitchen, all dressed up for work – black pants and shoes, spiked black hair and a red and black jacket.

"I was just telling Joshua about what a pain in the butt you are."

"Yeah, right. Anyway, I gotta go – don't wanna be late."

"I'll keep your dinner warm in the oven."

Next morning, the mobile forensic team arrived at Patrick's house, introduced themselves, and then proceeded to the garage to examine Tough Titties. "I don't know what you're expecting to find there," the old bloke grumbled. "Windburn perhaps? A couple of eagles stuck in the radiator grill?"

The team was unaware of Joshua's presence as they went about their forensic business. He had reverted to his invisible status as ZYX. When he noticed one of the men tampering with the odometer, he sent a mild electric shock through the attached wires. "Yowch!" the man yelled. "This bloody thing is alive!"

"Disconnect the battery," his partner suggested. But when the first man took his friend's advice, he suffered another electric shock.

"There's something weird about this car. I'm not touching it. The odometer can stay as it is."

"Let me have a go."

Joshua decided to have some fun. The second man tried to re-adjust the odometer and, to both his and his partner's surprise, he did not suffer an electric shock. "There," he said, pleased with himself, "the odometer now reads just a few kilometres more than what it did when the old man last topped up his fuel tank."

The forensic guys were in for a second surprise. The odometer suddenly wound itself forward and returned to its previous mileage. "How the bloody hell did that happen?" the second man asked. He re-adjusted the odometer a second time but the same thing occurred... it wound itself forward and back to the previous mileage. "This thing is crazy," he concluded in disgust. "It's haunted or something. Come to think of it, that old bloke looks like a bit of a spook anyway."

"What will you tell Rowles?"

"Me? There's two of us here in case you hadn't noticed. I'm not telling him anything. He won't believe it anyway. Let's finish up and get the hell outta here."

Patrick was working at his computer when he heard a voice behind him. “Joshua? Where the hell did you come from?” he asked in astonishment.

“I didn’t want to interrupt you. I kept an eye on the forensic guys to make sure they didn’t do anything illegal during their inspection.”

“Did they object?”

“I was invisible... like I was just before I reappeared behind you. Sorry if I startled you, Patrick.”

“No problem... it’s an excellent excuse to fill my glass again... not that I need one.” The old bloke waddled over to the bar fridge. “And what did they do?”

“Took fingerprints and hair samples... that kind of thing. They tried to tamper with the odometer but I prevented that.”

“What are they trying to prove?” Patrick asked as he resumed his seat. “There’s no secret about your being in Parkes at the radio telescope facility. There’s no law against that!”

“All Rocque and Rowles have is circumstantial evidence. There’s no way they can build a case. Rowles is obsessed with me. He thinks I’m his ticket to fame and fortune.”

“You could be... if he went about it the right way... if he befriended you instead of treating you like a criminal. Mind you, coppers know only two kinds of people; criminals and victims, and sometimes they can’t tell the difference. Let me ask you something, Joshua. Have you thought about remaining here on Earth? You could be a superstar... rich and famous!”

“Let me ask *you* a question, Patrick: have you thought about being like everyone else instead of who you are?”

“Touche. On the other hand, you have amnesia. You’re obviously curious about your past and wherever it is you belong... or came from. But if you could remember your past, perhaps you would not want to return to it.”

“If that turns out to be the case, I could always return here. But first, I must rediscover who I am and where I belong. I could never rest easy without at least knowing that much.”

“Ha! You don’t need to be an alien to search for identity, Joshua. Human beings are constantly searching for the same thing. Little do many of them realize that a sense of identity and of place in life is a matter of attitude, and the confidence to accept oneself warts and all. AND, to make no apologies.”

“Is it really that simple, Patrick? What about people who suffer from delusions about their adequacy?”

The old bloke laughed heartily for a few moments. “I have a feeling, Joshua, that that applies to all of us... or perhaps most. One’s assessment of oneself is rather like the air pressure inside a tire. Too much and it’s over inflated, too little and it’s under inflated. The pressure needs to be just right. When you inflate a tire you have the luxury of a gauge to check that the pressure meets the manufacturer’s recommendation. Haha! Not so with regard to the proper inflation or otherwise of human ego.”

“So how do you know when you have the balance just right?”

“You’re the one who read the entire Britannica in just 10 minutes, Joshua... you tell me.”

Chapter 23

When the forensic results of the examination of Tough Titties were made available to Rocque and Rowles, they determined that one of the two boys who accompanied Jesse Maguire was indeed ZYX.

“It’s not the one called Anthony,” Rowles concluded. “I’ve seen him around town, always cracking jokes and flirting with the girls. So it must be the third one, Joshua, the one of Middle Eastern appearance.”

“Okay, so let’s go pick him up.”

“Pick what up, Rocque? He’ll vanish again. No, we need a plan. We need to find a way to trap this... alien. According to Gerry Gelato, head scientist at Parkes Observatory, whatever interfered with their transmission the other day was some sort of electrical energy that consists of microwaves. Do you have a microwave oven at home Rocque?”

“Of course.”

“When you turn it on, what happens?”

“It activates the microwaves inside the oven. What are you getting at Rowles?”

“Do any of the microwaves escape?”

“No, of course not.” Rocque cocked his head and raise one eyebrow. “Oh, I see! But how do we manage to get ZYX inside a microwave oven?”

“We build one... a big one.”

Dr David Hardy locked the door of his 4WD parked outside Maggie’s house and then proceeded to the verandah where he nimbly picked his way through the pile of skateboards, roller blades and assortment of toys. It was not the easiest of tasks for a man of Hardy’s generous proportions. “Hello?” he called at the door.

A moment later, Maggie appeared. “Oh, doctor Hardy,” she said as she opened the screen door, “thanks so much for coming. Follow me.” Maggie led the doctor to Thomas’s room. “They sent him home from school in a taxi,” she continued. “He has some sort of fever.”

Dr. Hardy presented the young boy with his toothiest, beaming, bedside-manner smile, and then sat on the side of the mattress, which sagged accordingly. “Not feeling the best, today, are we?” he asked as he placed the palm of his hand on the patient’s forehead. “Ouch! We could fry an egg on there! Now open wide and let me have a look inside. Hmmm, I think you might have a few little streptococcus running around in there, my friend. We’ll have to get rid of those now, won’t we?”

“What is it, doctor?” Maggie asked.

“Tonsillitis. Is Thomas allergic to penicillin?”

“No.”

“Good. It’s not a serious case of tonsillitis, Mrs Maguire, but I recommend lots of rest and a full ten day course of antibiotics plus plenty of fluids.”

“Will he be alright?”

“Yes, yes, nothing to worry about.” Dr. Hardy took a few items from his medico bag and handed some of them to Maggie. “That’s enough medication for the time being.” Then he scribbled something on a pad before removing a page. “Take this prescription to the pharmacy tomorrow, and give me a call if you think Thomas’s condition fails to improve. But I’m sure he’ll be okay.”

“G’day, Dr Hardy,” said the voice at the doorway to Thomas’s room. “Nice to see you again.”

“Sorry... do I know you?” the doctor asked as he closed his bag and rose from the bed.

“We’ve met.” Joshua extended his hand which the medico accepted and shook firmly.

“This is Joshua,” Maggie explained. “He’s a guest in our house and a friend of Jesse.”

“My apologies for not remembering when we met,” Dr Hardy smiled. “I promise I won’t be so absent minded next time.”

While the doctor and Maggie discussed Thomas’s condition, Joshua walked over to the bed. “How are you feeling, little mate?”

“Sick.”

“Oh, dear, we can’t have that now, can we? You should be outside playing ball. Let me try something.” Joshua placed his hands on the boy’s forehead for a moment, and then cupped his little friend’s face. “How are you feeling now?”

Thomas peeled back the covers and rolled out of bed. “I’m not sick any more!” he proclaimed with great relief. “I feel awesome!”

Dr Hardy heard the comment and interrupted his conversation with Maggie. “Thomas! Get back into bed immediately... there’s a good boy. You’re very sick and you need proper treatment.” But when the doctor re-examined his patient he was astonished to discover that the redness and swelling at the back of the throat had disappeared. So had the fever. “What on earth is going on here?” he asked himself. “How do you feel, Thomas?”

“Fine, doctor. Joshua did it.”

“Did what?”

“Laid his hands on me... and now I’m not sick any more.”

Dr Hardy turned to face Joshua and looked him straight in the eye. “What did you do?”

“Just like Thomas told you,” Joshua shrugged. “It was nothing special... I simply placed my hands on

his forehead and then cupped his face. I don't mean to interfere with your treatment, Dr Hardy, or question your procedures, but I felt bad about my little mate being so sick. I felt I had to do something."

"You said we met before."

"Yes, at your surgery."

"Joshua!" Maggie interrupted. "I don't think you should say any more."

"Ah, yes, I remember now... you were Gary Kely," the doctor concluded, ignoring Maggie's reprimand. "At least, you *impersonated* Gary Kely. You had no pulse, no heart beat." The doctor turned to face Maggie. "Mrs Maguire, do you have any idea of who you have as a guest in your house? This boy is not who he says he is. He's an impostor!"

"We know who he is, Dr Hardy."

"You don't understand – he is not human."

"We're aware of that, doctor."

"There's a law against harboring a criminal, Mrs Maguire."

"He's not a criminal, doctor."

"Would someone please have the decency to explain to me what is going on here? I understand from police sources that this... whatever he or it is... is wanted for questioning by the authorities."

"I see," Dr Hardy remarked after listening to Joshua's story as told by himself and Maggie at the kitchen table, with regular and eager input from Thomas. "That places me in a rather invidious position as a professional medical practitioner. Joshua – or ZYX – is wanted by the law. On the other hand..."

"On the other hand," Maggie interrupted, "doctors are supposed to show compassion and understanding. Sugar?"

“Half... no milk. And then, of course, there’s Joshua’s ability to heal the sick. That could be an enormous boon for the health and welfare of humanity...”

“Provided you understood it, doctor,” Joshua interjected. “I don’t understand it myself. Besides, it’s occurred to me ever since I’ve been here on this Earth that it’s not my place to interfere with the natural evolution of your species.”

“But you just did.”

“That was an isolated incident, Dr Hardy. Thomas is my friend. Meantime, am I to understand that you won’t report this incident to Rocque and Rowles... or discuss it with your peers?”

Dr Hardy took a sip of tea from his cup, which he then slowly returned to its saucer while he contemplated his predicament. “This is highly irregular.”

“So is my being here.”

“That’s an understatement,” the doctor smiled. “However, it’s not that simple. There are many aspects of this situation to consider.”

“We need an answer now, doctor,” Maggie insisted, “otherwise we’ll worry about what you might decide.”

“Okay.” The doctor then drained his cup and replaced it in the saucer. “I tell you what... I won’t do anything until after I’ve made my decision – whatever that may be – and discussed it with you and Joshua. How about I see you again tomorrow... same time? I’d like to check on Thomas’s progress in any case.”

Chapter 24

Detective Sergeant Rowles was so proud of his plan to catch ZYX – as well as proud of himself – that he decided to tell his wife Cynthia about it when he arrived home from work. “That’s why I married you,” she said as she finished setting the dining table.

“Women like their men to be smart as well as good looking.”

“Thank you, darling. I think we should open a bottle of cab sav to celebrate with dinner. I’ll get the wine glasses.”

“We’re having lamb chops with buttered potatoes and spinach.”

“Oh... well how about a bottle of Italian Chianti?” Rowles took two glasses from the buffet cabinet and placed them on the dining table. “Yes, Cynthia, there’ll be a huge promotion after my successful capture of the alien – I guaranteed it – not to mention all the publicity. We’ll be the toast of the town, my sweet.”

When the meal was served, and the pair seated, Rowles poured two glasses of Chianti. The glasses created a bell-like sound as they touched for the toast. “Here’s to us, Cynthia, and our future.”

“I know you’ll think I’m stupid, darling,” Cynthia said with just a hint of sarcasm, “but what happens once ZYX is captured inside the metal room?”

“Well, the point is, Cynthia, he can’t escape. He’s essentially made up of microwaves. Once he’s locked inside that specially constructed room, there’s no escape!”

“But you can’t see him.”

“That won’t matter, Cynthia.”

“But you won’t know for sure whether or not he’s actually in there.”

“Trust me... I’m sure there’s some sort of scientific measuring device that will reveal his presence inside the room.”

“How will you get him out?”

“Out?”

“Yes, out. You can’t leave him in that room forever; you’ll need to transport him to a court to stand trial, and then, if he’s convicted, move him to some prison or other.”

Rowles lifted his glass to his lips and took a sip. “I hadn’t thought that far ahead.”

“And I’m sure there must be a law against keeping a prisoner in solitary confinement 24 hours a day forever. Even the worst criminals are allowed daily exercise.”

“These are special circumstances, Cynthia.”

“I’m sure you’ll work something out, darling,” she smiled. “Like I said, you’re a very smart man.”

Next morning at Taree police station, Rowles asked Rocque to cancel the renovation work on the special radiation-proof room. “I’ve thought about it,” he said in answer to Rocque’s obvious question, “and I’m now of the opinion that the idea is flawed.”

“Pity,” the senior constable commented. “I thought your idea was pure genius.”

“Cynthia disagrees.”

“Who?”

“Never mind. In any case, it’s back to the drawing board.”

A man with gray hair, pulled back into a pony tail, walked his dog along the banks of the Manning River. His young son, blond in contrast, played on the nearby swings and roundabouts. The man removed the

leash from his dog's collar and sat down on a park bench.

"Nice dog," Joshua said as he knelt down to pet the animal. "What kind is he?"

"Border collie. He was bred to herd sheep but city life has spoiled him. He's never even seen a sheep, except from a can. His name is Sam."

"He's very friendly," Joshua noted. "I wonder if we have dogs where I come from?"

"Where's that?"

"Oh... a place far away. My name is Joshua," the boy said, and offered his hand to the man.

"Edward, but I prefer Eddy. That's my son Jimmy over there on the swing." The pair shook hands. "Take a seat."

"Thanks."

"I haven't seen you around these parts."

"Haven't been here long. I'm staying with friends in Alfred Street, in the old weatherboard house."

"The Aboriginal people?"

"Yeah."

"They're a nice family... I often see them together at the shops. They're... well, sort of different to a lot of the Aborigines around here. So what brings you to Taree?"

"You could say I'm just traveling around. I sort of found myself here in Taree and got friendly with Jesse... he's the elder son. Next thing you know, I'm invited to stay with his folks, which is cool. And what about you?"

"Lived here all my life. Got into the building business, made a bit of money and decided to semi-retire so I could spend quality time with my son. He'll grow up sooner than I know it, so I'm making the most of the opportunity while he's still young. You learn a

lot about kids and dogs, you know, if you spend time with them, and observe them. You could say that I've become a bit of a philosopher."

"Sounds fascinating. So tell me about your philosophies."

"Are you sure you're interested?"

"Try me."

"Well, Sam here, he just accepts everything without question. Sometimes, he'll cock his head and give me a quizzical look but, most of the time, he's happy to go along with whatever's happening. My son Jimmy, on the other hand... he wants to know everything. Questions, questions, questions... he never stops asking me about this or that. And if I don't happen to know the answer to something, we'll go on the internet to check it out together... so it's good for me too because I learn new things."

"Why do you think animals are content just to accept life and the world as it is?"

"That's all they need to know. Humans... well, they have an insatiable appetite for knowledge and that can be a real problem sometimes."

"How's that?"

"They invent answers to whatever it is that puzzles them. You know, one time humans figured the world had to be flat. It was never flat. One time people believed in witches and wizards and evil spirits and God knows what else."

"And what about these days?"

"It still happens, Joshua. Just take a look at what's happening in the Middle East. Sorry... no offence. Are you from there?"

"No. Please continue."

"Why do you think people go to see horror movies? People often can't tell the difference between fantasy and reality. Take young Jimmy over there," the

man said as he nodded in the direction of the swings, “he’s afraid of the dark. What’s there to be afraid of? He fills the darkness with imaginary characters – spooks, aliens, monsters, murderers, you name it... he’s convinced that evil lurks out there in the dark.”

“Have you tried to explain to him that darkness is simply the absence of light?”

“Sure I have but it does no good. His imagination is far too fertile for logic or reason. Look at what happened to Galileo when he tried to convince the establishment of the time that the Earth revolved around the sun. Like I said, people often can’t tell the difference between fantasy and reality. You take Sam here, he’s not superstitious, he doesn’t have an imagination like ours; he knows what’s real and what isn’t. The reason I invited you to sit here on the bench with me for a chat was because Sam said it was okay... not in so many words, of course, but rather in his eyes and the wags of his tail. Dogs are better judges of character than we humans will ever be.”

“Let me see if I’ve got this right: dogs are better judges of character because they rely on instinct rather than imagination?”

“Something like that. They’re not influenced by paranoia like we are. If they decide they don’t like a particular person, it’s for a good and valid reason and not because they think that person is a witch or whatever. Superstition doesn’t enter into the canine equation.”

“Is that why the human species is always in such a mess?”

“You said it.”

“If that’s the case, Eddy, how do you explain why human beings are more intelligent than animals?”

“What makes you think they are?”

Chapter 25

Joshua arrived home just as Dr David Hardy's 4WD pulled up outside the house. They greeted each other and then proceeded inside where they said hello to Maggie. "Thomas is back at school," she explained. "I asked him if he'd like to stay home but he said it was sports day, and he loves sports day. All my boys do."

"You're satisfied that he's back to normal?" the doctor asked as he placed his bag on the floor, and then took a seat at the kitchen table.

"Normal? No boys are normal, doctor, they're all lunatics. However, if you mean healthy, yes, Thomas is back to normal. Tea?"

"Thanks, black and..."

"Half sugar," Maggie smiled.

"I've thought about the Joshua situation..."

"Should I leave the room?" Joshua asked.

"No need, young man, you're welcome to hear what I have to say. Take a seat." The doctor paused as Maggie placed a cup of steaming tea before him.

"Thanks, Maggie," he said, and then continued as he stirred the golden liquid. "As I mentioned yesterday, this is by no means an easy situation to resolve, given my position as a professional medical practitioner. If I, as a respected and responsible member of society, am aware of the existence of an alien within our society, is it my duty to report such a presence rather than withhold that information for personal reasons? That is the question I need to answer."

"I think I need something stronger than tea," Maggie reasoned as she grabbed a can of Bourbon and Cola from the fridge, and then joined her guests at the table.

Dr Hardy carried on with his explanation: “I believe Joshua when he says he means no harm ...that he arrived here on Earth by accident. In other words, Joshua is not party to some sort of imminent alien invasion, in which case, there is no danger to society. However, there remains the issue of his being wanted by the law.”

“The law is an ass,” Maggie intervened.

“It can be, yes, there’s no denying that. The police seizure of Australian photographer Bill Hensen’s artistic works of a naked 13 year old girl – and then having to return them after they were deemed to be works of art rather than pornography – is a perfect example of the law being an ass. By the same token, the fact remains that Joshua is wanted by the law; ass or not. If I have information that may assist the local police in this matter, then it is my duty as a citizen to reveal what I know.”

“And what do you know, doctor?”

“Very little, as it happens, Maggie, probably less than the police know.”

“Which means...?”

“I’ve reached the conclusion that what I know is not worth reporting, and that it would contribute nothing to the facts, of which the police are already aware. As to the incident yesterday with Thomas, and the laying of Joshua’s hands, I don’t see that as being in any way criminal... just the reverse.” Dr Hardy turned to face ZYX. “Joshua, do you mind if I, as a medical professional, ask you a few questions?”

“Shoot, doc.”

“That body you’re – er, occupying. Does it function normally? I mean, does it include all the regular components of a normal human body?”

“No... there’s no blood, no pulse, no digestive system, no bowel... nothing that requires me to eat or breathe.”

“What about... other organs, male organs?”

“Genitals? Haha, no, they’re of no use to me, doctor. Besides, I have no wish to engage in any sort of sexual behavior of the human kind. That’s the last thing I need! I don’t mean to be rude or critical, but from what I’ve read and observed, it’s... well, kind of animalistic... not particularly dignified, if you get my drift. Actually, come to think of it, I’m not surprised that the Virgin Mary was involved in an immaculate conception, at least according to the scriptures. I mean, we can’t have Joseph and Mary getting involved in all that basic business in order to produce the Son of God, can we?”

“The Son of God is the Son of God, not the Son of Joseph,” the doctor stated sternly as if annoyed by Joshua’s blasphemous inference. “The story makes perfect sense to me.”

“But Joseph was Mary’s husband, not God. Doesn’t that defy the sixth commandment – or the seventh, depending on which religion you follow? Thou shall not commit adultery?... not to mention incest.”

“Stop it!” Maggie interrupted. “Let’s change the subject for... heaven’s sake. I don’t want a bolt of lightning suddenly reducing this house to ashes.”

“Do you really believe that could happen?”

Joshua asked.

“I’m not prepared to tempt Fate or take the risk. Let’s quit while we’re ahead.”

Dr Hardy asked the next question: “Joshua, are you male or female?”

“Neither. I’m not exactly sure but I don’t think we – that is, beings like myself – have gender.”

“How do you procreate?”

“Thought... everything is done via thought and telepathy, at least that’s how it is with me. Have you finished your tea?”

“Yes, why?”

All eyes watched the cup and saucer move unaided through the air over to the kitchen sink and then come to rest on the bench.

“I’m afraid to ask what else you can do,” the doctor said, wiping his brow with a paper napkin. “Tell me, if I had decided in favor of reporting you to the authorities, what would you have done to me?”

“Nothing. I have nothing against you, Dr Hardy. In fact, I don’t even have anything against Rocque and Rowles. I don’t have the same feelings – emotions – as humans do. There’s no hate, no need for revenge, no getting even, none of that. If there were... well, let’s not go there.”

“I agree, let’s not go there.” The doctor checked his wrist watch. “I must get back to the medical center. Busy, busy, busy. I hope we can chat again, Joshua. I’m most intrigued to know more about you.”

“Just as I am intrigued to know more about your species, doctor. And thanks for making the decision to keep my situation to yourself.”

“Hi, everyone,” Jesse said as he arrived home from school. “Who’s sick?”

“You,” Maggie smiled.

“Me? I’m fine! Hello, Dr Hardy, is mom okay?”

“She’s fine, Jesse. Everyone’s fine... I was just about to leave, unless you want me to give you a quick prostate check while I’m here. Just stay there for a moment while I get my rubber glove...”

“No, no, no, no, no, no, doctor. Honest... there’s nothing wrong with my prostate... or anything else. Really... I’m fine.”

“Pity, I could do with a little extra practice. Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Then I’ll be off. No rest for the wicked, you know.”

“He’s such a nice man,” Maggie commented as Dr Hardy drove away, “and I’m relieved that he decided not to make Joshua’s predicament any worse that it already is.”

“Did you notice the look on the doctor’s face when you pulled that can of Bourbon and Cola from the fridge?” Joshua asked.

“That’s what doctors do, Joshua... that’s what they call the ‘tut tut’ look when patients admit to bending the rules a little.”

“A little?” Jesse laughed. “Speaking of rules, I’m gonna ask Patrick if it’s okay for me to drive his old Holden.”

“You don’t have a license.”

“But I’ll soon have my learner’s permit,” the boy beamed.

“I’m not sure that Mr Kelly will be too thrilled by that idea, Jesse.”

Jesse and Joshua spent the next hour in the street, tossing a football to each other across the roadway. Nearby, Thomas and Michael wrestled on the grassy nature strip. Thomas was by far the smaller of the two, but nonetheless showed dogged determination – a quality noticed by Joshua. “That little brother of yours doesn’t give up easily,” he called from the far side of the roadway.

“He’s the last born and the smallest,” Jesse called back, “that makes him the feistiest. He’s already been suspended from school twice for fighting.”

“And what about you?”

“All the teachers love me... can’t get enough of me.”

Joshua caught the ball and held it to his chest while he rolled his eyes. “You humans are sooooo weird.”

“Yeah, right! You should talk!”

Chapter 26

When Maggie Maguire answered a knock at the front door, she was surprised to see Detective Sergeant Rowles and Detective Senior Constable Rocque. “Are the boys home?” Rowles asked.

“They’re watching television.”

“May we speak with them for a moment?”

Maggie sighed and opened the screen door.

“Come on in,” she said reluctantly.

“We’ll need you in attendance, Mrs Maguire, if you don’t mind.”

Maggie entered the living room, switched off the TV without asking permission and invited the two detectives to take a seat. “The police are here to see you,” she advised Jesse, Joshua and Anthony. They want me here as well. Thomas, Michael, why don’t you two boys go play outside for a while?”

The youngest siblings were obviously peeved at having to vacate the house at a time when such a deliciously interesting scenario was about to unfold, but obeyed their mother nonetheless.

Once seated, Rowles began: “We thought we would keep this little chat informal – rather than conduct it at the station. However, let’s not beat around the bush. The security video at the Parkes Radio Telescope facility proves that all three of you were present on the morning the facility suffered a transmission failure. More to the point, gentlemen, the video shows that one of you – namely Joshua – was missing from the café table when the facility’s alarm sounded.”

“I was in the toilet.”

“Why did you boys choose that particular day to visit the Parkes facility?”

“Why not? One day is as good as another. It was coincidence.”

“Shortly after the facility resumed normal transmission, an unidentified flying object was sighted over the route between Parkes and Taree. An amateur video photographer captured footage of the UFO, which we have identified as a 1971 Holden HQ, the same car you boys used to travel to and from Parkes.”

“Was the identification 100% positive?”

Maggie asked.

“Well, no, not quite. However, we’re reasonably...”

“How reasonably? Without absolute and positive identification, Sergeant, you can’t be sure it was Mr Kelly’s Holden. Is that correct?”

“That’s why we’re here, Mrs Maguire, Rocque explained. “We want to ask the boys if they know anything about the UFO sighting.”

“What if we do?” Jesse asked.

“Then you’re obliged to inform the authorities.”

“Obliged?” Joshua interrupted on his friend’s behalf. “I don’t know of any law that says a person must report the sighting of a UFO. In any case, people who do report those kinds of sightings are usually labelled crackpots. Think about it. A flying Holden? Seriously, Senior Constable, and you too Sergeant, who in his right mind is going to believe that? Haha!”

Rowles turned his attention to Anthony. “You were driving the car, is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“You’re a licensed driver?”

“Yes.”

“Are you a licensed pilot?”

“No.”

“Did the Holden you were driving ever become airborne?”

“How could it? It doesn’t have a rudder, it doesn’t have elevators, it doesn’t have ailerons or flaps or a propeller or...”

“You haven’t answered my question, Anthony.”

“If I answer in the affirmative, Sergeant, which is obviously what you want me to do, any reasonable person would conclude that I’m an idiot... away with the pixies as it were. Flying Holdens? You might as well ask me if I believe in the tooth fairy. Therefore, I refuse to acknowledge your question. And, if I may say so, it was an absurd and ludicrous question in the first place. If the media got hold of this conversation, they’d question your credibility and mental fitness and, moreover, your suitability as a professional police officer. To put it bluntly, Sergeant, you’d be thrown out of the force.”

Rowles, red-faced and furious, rose from his seat. “You haven’t heard the last of this,” he growled, and then beckoned Rocque to follow him down the hall and out the door.

A minute later, he stormed back down the hall, glared at Joshua and shouted; “Put that police car back down on the ground! NOW!”

It wasn’t until Rocque and Rowles had driven off that everyone in the room burst into hysterical laughter. After the mirth had subsided, apart from a few leftover giggles, Jesse asked Joshua about one of his comments during the police questioning. “You said you were in the toilet when the alarm sounded.”

“So?”

“So you don’t go to the toilet... you never need to.”

“Rocque and Rowles don’t know that. Besides, have you been peeking?”

“Yeah, right... gimme a break, you disgusting moron. By the way, how will you know if your signal reaches your planet?”

“I’m not absolutely sure, but I figure my species will investigate the source of my signal – Parkes Radio Telescope. I encoded my signal with a brief message to let them know where I am, which is right here in Taree.”

“So, basically,” Maggie said, “it’s up to them to find you.”

“Yeah.”

“Will it be a sort of ‘beam me up, Scotty’ thing?”

“Not quite,” Joshua laughed, “but something like that. I expect them to contact me telepathically. Once I know precisely where my planet is – and you need to keep in mind just how impossibly huge space is – I’ll beam myself up – no need for Scotty. They will transmit a signal directly to this house. All I do is follow it back to its source... at least, that’s what I anticipate will happen.”

“How long will that take?” Anthony asked.

“About as long as it took you to ask that question.”

“But nothing is faster than the speed of light!”

“Nothing you know about,” the alien smiled.

“Will you ever come back to visit?” Maggie enquired.

“I can’t answer that. I don’t know. Remember, the physical body you see before you is not me. I really don’t belong here. You guys don’t call us aliens for nothing, you know.”

“But you’ve become a friend... we like you.”

“Yeah!” Thomas and Michael chorused. “And it’s cool to have a friend who’s a *real* alien!”

“Well, we’ll have to wait and see. The human concept of friendship and the forming of attachments is not something I fully understand. I don’t have those feelings. I don’t have blood running through my veins... in fact, I don’t even have veins! I don’t have a heart that beats. In other words, I won’t really know how I feel about coming back here once I’ve returned to my planet... hey, I’m not even sure it *is* a planet!”

“Maybe it’s Heaven,” Thomas suggested, with his big brown eyes full of wonder.

“You could be right, mate. Who knows? You could be right.”

“If it is, then you must know God.”

“Maybe I do. Problem is, Thomas, I have amnesia, and that’s another reason I can’t predict what will happen when I return to wherever it is I came from. There is no future without a past. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I think so. But if you don’t come back to visit,” the little fellow warned, “I’ll make a Joshua doll and stick pins in it.”

“By the way, Anthony,” Maggie interrupted, “that was a most impressive speech you made in answer to Rowles’ question about the car becoming airborne.”

“It wasn’t my speech, Maggie.” Then the lad fixed his gaze on Joshua. “I suspect that *someone* put those words in my mouth.”

“Don’t look at me,” Joshua said as he fluttered his eyelids in mock innocence, “I know nothing!”

Chapter 27

Friday night, as usual, Jesse partied. Then on Saturday, he traveled to Forster to see an old girlfriend. On Sunday, he took time off work at the fish ‘n’ chip shop to play football against the Wingham team. Joshua decided to watch the game at the local school oval.

“That’ll be \$7,” said the man at the gate.

Joshua frisked his pants. “Damn, I forgot to bring my wallet.”

“You gotta pay the entry fee, young fella, otherwise you can’t watch the game.”

“What does it look like?”

“What?”

“The seven dollars... can you show me?”

The man produced a five dollar note and a two dollar coin in the palm of his hand. “That’s what you need, son... seven dollars.”

“Seven? According to my reckoning, there’s \$14 there... two fives and two twos.”

The man gazed at the palm of his hand. “How did the extra five and two get there?”

“Slight of hand... haven’t you ever seen a magician before?”

“I didn’t see you do it! That’s remarkable!”

“Can I go in now?”

“Sure, son, sure. And when you’ve got some spare time, teach me how to do that thing. That was sensational!”

During the game, Joshua noted how loudly the audience shouted various ‘instructions’ to the players. But the players were far too busy to pay attention to the shouts. Besides, many of the ‘instructions’ were conflicting. ‘Maybe the supporters just need to feel as

if they're making a meaningful contribution,' Joshua thought to himself. 'Everyone wants to be a coach.'

Jesse played the wing position. Most of the action, however, centered around the first and second row forwards, the bigger guys. Jesse, by comparison, was much smaller and looked unnervingly vulnerable to injury... like a twig in a cyclone. On the other hand, he had an impressive turn of speed when it was called for... something he would certainly need if any one of those bigger guys was on his tail.

Each time the forwards clashed, often using illegal shoulder tackles, the sound of the impact was alarming. 'I sure hope Jesse stays well clear of that madness,' Joshua muttered. 'What the hell is he doing on a field full of charging rhinoceroses anyway? He must be crazy.'

The temptation for Joshua to intervene in the game by using his alien powers was overwhelming, however he managed to resist. He suspected that Jesse would be furious if he were given an unfair advantage.

Joshua arrived home 10 minutes before his battered and bruised mate. "I can't believe it," Jesse bitched as he marched down the hall toward the bathroom. "I took time off work and we lost! This is the worst day of my life!"

"You played well, though," Joshua called as Jesse was about to close the bathroom door.

"Not well enough! Why didn't you do your alien thing and take the ball away from Wingham?"

"I thought you'd be mad if I interfered."

"I am mad! But yeah, you're right. If you'd interfered I'd be even madder." Jesse closed the bathroom door only to open it again a second later. "...I think."

“He takes his football very seriously,” Maggie laughed. “But then, so do I. Go Newcastle Knights! Did you enjoy the game today?”

“Uh... it was interesting, yes. But I’m not sure I understand what the point is. I mean, just take a look at Jesse... battered and bruised, totally miffed about his team’s loss, and even more miffed about taking time off work and losing his wages.”

“You gotta be in it to win it, Joshua.”

“Is winning so important? Sorry, Maggie, but I apparently lack that competitive instinct you humans have. It seems to me that in order to win, someone has to lose. That’s what I don’t understand. How can you derive any satisfaction from beating the other bloke?”

“How else can you measure your talent or worth?”

Once showered and dressed, Jesse announced that he would visit Patrick to ask the old bloke about teaching him to drive. “You wanna come with me, Joshua, for moral support?”

“What do you expect from me? Some sort of recommendation or character reference? Bottom line, Jesse, is that you can’t drive.”

“Okay, stay here then. I’ll go by myself.”

“Chill, bro. I’ll come.”

Patrick greeted the boys at his front door and invited them inside. “Can I get you something? Tea, coffee, soda?”

“No thanks, Patrick. I was just wondering...”

“...if you could borrow something. I’m a writer, remember, and I can always tell when somebody wants something... especially something for nothing.”

“Oh.”

“Take a seat in my office. So what have you young scallywags been up to today? You both have guilty looks on your faces, which doesn’t surprise me in the least. And forget about the ‘who me?’ look. I’m too old to fall for that one.” Patrick filled his glass from the bar fridge and then returned to his computer chair. “Well?”

“I played football against Wingham,” Jesse explained. “Our team lost. And I took time off work. It hasn’t been a good day, Patrick.”

“I see... so you’re hoping I might cheer you up?”

“Sort of... I was wondering... I mean, well, I’ll have my learner’s permit soon and I thought... I mean, you told me once that you used to be a driving instructor and...”

“You’re wondering how the hell I survived, hahaha! By the skin of my teeth, that’s how. Okay, so you want me to teach you to drive, is that it?”

“I’ll pay for petrol.”

“I’ll need to check with my insurance company... you’re under 25 you know.” The old bloke paused to listen to a noise outside. It was someone singing. “Sounds like Pete... he’s a local eccentric.”

Joshua stepped outside to the front verandah to check, and then rejoined his friends in the office. “He called me ‘Tiger’,” he said. “He was carrying a cup of coffee. When he saw me, he said, ‘How are you going, Tiger?’ What did he mean by that?”

“He calls everyone ‘Tiger’... even me.”

“Why would he be carrying a cup of coffee down the street?”

“Who knows? He’s eccentric... like half the people in this neighborhood. They all make me appear pathetically normal. And, to make it worse, he’s a terrible singer.”

“Pathetically normal?”

“Who the hell wants to be normal? Normal equals boring, Joshua. What would you rather be, normal like us or an alien who can make a Holden fly?”

“Is Jesse normal?”

“No. How could Jesse be normal? One minute he’s pummelling some poor footballer’s head in and the next he’s playing piano. That’s not normal. Neither is playing the didgeridoo. Have you noticed his digits?”

“Digits?”

“His extremities... his fingers and toes. He keeps them neat and tidy. That’s not normal either, especially for a teen who spends half his life running around on muddy football fields. Trust me, Joshua, normal is not a state of being that one should aspire to. Normal schmormal. Have you noticed Jesse’s constant use of the word ‘cool’? Normal is not cool. Cool is anything unusual or different.”

“How can that be? All the teens wear the same kind of clothes and do the same kind of things.”

“The same as each other, yes, but not the same as their parents or other older folks. Provided a teen’s taste in music, clothes and various activities is not the same as the previous generation’s, then it’s cool.”

“But some of Jesse’s clothes are used. He buys them at Vinnie’s op shop.”

Patrick raised his index finger. “Ah! But you see, Joshua, a teen like Jesse who wears a sweater that once belonged to an old man is being different. Therefore he’s being cool.”

“I’m not sure I understand any of this, Patrick.”

“Quite frankly, neither do I, Joshua. I just pretend I do. It makes people think I’m experienced and wise.”

“Are you?”

“Much more of the former than the latter, my boy. Yes, far more of the former,” he laughed. “To quote Oscar Wilde: *The well-bred contradict other people; the wise contradict themselves.*”

Chapter 28

“Patrick confuses me sometimes,” Jesse said as the boys strolled down to the Manning River, just to pass the time. “Now he’s got me wondering what *is* normal.”

“1.7 babies per woman.”

“Don’t be a smartass, Joshua... you know what I mean.”

“Do I? Show me a woman who’s given birth to 1.7 babies. What Patrick is saying is that no two people are exactly alike. There are similarities, sure, but no two people – unless they’re twins – are identical. It’s called being an individual, and if it weren’t for those differences, HBs would be like cloned robots.”

“HBs?”

“Human beings.”

“What about you guys?”

“I’ve got amnesia, remember? But I’d hate to think that I was just one of indistinguishable millions. What worries me is that we don’t have bodies like you guys have. Bodies help to distinguish one HB from another, whereas I’m pure energy. You know? I mean, like how do you tell two light bulbs apart?”

“You make me think that maybe being an HB isn’t so bad after all.”

As the boys arrived at the northern bank of the river, Joshua wondered privately if such a serene and beautiful scene existed on his own planet. “Yeah, you could be right, Jesse. Earth is crazy in a lot of ways – make that a heck of a lot of ways - but it’s also very attractive. There’s so much to admire here. I love the way this river ambles along on its way to the sea, taking its time, no rush. It’s very relaxing to observe, and also very inspiring.”

“I should have brought my rod.”

“You want me to fetch it?”

“No, no... it’s okay. Don’t bother going back to the house.” Suddenly, Jesse’s rod, together with his yellow bucket and bait, appeared at his feet. “Bloody hell! Don’t scare me like that, Joshua!”

“You want me to organize a couple of fish?”

“No... seriously, Joshua, fishing is not about certainty, it’s about skill and a bit of luck. If everything were as easy as you’re able to make it, there’d be no fun – no reward.”

“Is that why you play football?”

“I guess so. What’s the point of a challenge if you already know what the outcome will be?”

Joshua waited until Jesse had baited his hook and cast his line into the water with a ‘plop’, about 30 feet away. “Does Maggie have a boyfriend?”

“No. She has plenty of friends, though.”

“Do you think she’ll ever marry again?”

“Maybe. But for now, her life revolves around us; Thomas, Michael and me.”

“What happens when you guys leave the nest and go your own way?”

“That won’t happen for a while yet.”

“It will eventually.”

“I don’t think mom has ever thought about it. Mom’s not lonely, Joshua. There’s always someone visiting... she has her TAFE classes in art... she loves painting. Why are you asking these questions?”

“I dunno... just wondering. She’s a sweetheart and I suppose I worry a little about what might happen when you guys aren’t around any more.”

“We’ll always be around, Joshua... Aboriginal families are very close. Our families and our land are our roots. We never lose sight of where we belong. Never. It’s in our genes.” Jesse felt a tug on the line, then tightened his grip on the rod as the tip bent

quickly and violently toward the surface of the water.
“I’ve got a bite!”

“What is it?”

“Dunno... could be a flathead! Yes!”

With three good-size fish in the bucket, the boys headed home – just one block away. “Fresh fish for dinner tonight,” Jesse yelled at the front screen door even before he’d entered the hall. Michael and Thomas appeared almost instantly on the scene to inspect the contents of the bucket.

“You can do the gutting and scaling,” Maggie announced when she saw the fish.

“Me?” Jesse complained.

“You heard me.”

“What’s the point of having a mom?”

“Keep that up, young man, and you’ll find out the hard way.”

“You know something?” Joshua said as he watched his mate clean and scale the fish. “I see the TV news with you guys and I can’t believe that all HBs belong to the same species.”

“How do you mean?”

“All the crap that happens... rapes, murders, wars... and that lunatic in Zimbabwe, Mugabe. Why can’t everyone be like you and your brothers and your mom?”

“I’m not sure,” Jesse shrugged.

“I don’t think you’re the only one who’s not sure, Jesse. It seems to me like no HBs have the answer. When I read the Britannica, I couldn’t believe that the same old, same old, has been happening ever since you guys started recording history. When are you going to get tired of the crap?”

“We already are.”

“Then why don’t your leaders do something about it?”

“Hey, I’m 16, right? You’re asking me?”

“You guys need some kinda direction; someone to solve the problems.”

“We have God.”

“Yeah, right. A lotta good he does.”

“Hey, Joshua, there’s a lotta stuff I don’t understand, okay? If adults believe in God then who am I to argue? If you wanna know about stuff like that then you need to ask someone who’s been around a long time, like Patrick, not me.”

“What about your mom?”

“Mom is just as confused as I am.” Jesse washed the cleaned and filleted fish under the cold water tap, then placed them on a couple of paper towels to dry. “I’ll save the heads for the cat next door... unless mom wants to make fish stock.”

“Does it bother you to be confused?”

“I don’t think about it, I just live my life and do the stuff I like to do. You’re an alien, Joshua, so I guess it’s natural for you to be curious about the way things are here on Earth. Most people don’t take it too seriously. I mean, like... they watch the news on TV and then forget about it five minutes later. They have their own lives to live. There’s nothing ordinary people like me can do about wars and stuff anyway. What do you want me to do? Fly over to Iraq or Zimbabwe or somewhere and tell everybody to stop acting like fools? There’s nothing I can do, man. There’s nothing anyone can do. If we could, the world wouldn’t be in such a mess.”

“So you do agree that it’s in a mess?”

“Sure... it’s obvious. But that’s the way it is, Joshua, and like you said that’s the way it’s always

been since Adam was in shorts. You wanna go outside and kick a ball around for a while?”

As the boys kicked a football to and fro across the street, it occurred to Joshua that maybe he could make a contribution to the stability of the Earth’s political and religious differences. But should he interfere? Was it his place to change the course of Earth’s fate? How would his species feel about some foreigner meddling in his own planet’s affairs?

Mrs Walsh heard an almighty bang followed by the sound of breaking glass. When she arrived on the front verandah, she spotted Jesse in her front yard. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she demanded while shaking her fist. “You’ve broken my window! And, what’s more, scared me half to death in the process!”

“I’m so sorry, Mrs Walsh... it was an accident! Honest! I kinda kicked the ball and... well, I guess I kinda kicked it too hard.”

“I should kick your skinny butt with the same force,” the elderly woman threatened, still shaking her fist. “Now, just look at the mess you’ve caused. What do you intend to do about it? And who is that boy with you? Some sort of larrikin? I don’t understand it... You were always such a nice and well-behaved young man, Jesse, and I suspect you’ve been mixing with the wrong crowd, of which I might add, there’s no shortage around here. You should choose your friends more carefully!”

“We’re very sorry, Mrs Walsh,” Joshua apologized after jumping the fence and inspecting the window, “but the damage doesn’t appear to be all that bad. I’m Jesse’s friend, Joshua.”

“Are you deaf? Didn’t you hear the noise? Just look at all that broken... oh. What happened? There was broken glass all over the place a minute ago.”

“Seems fine now, Mrs Walsh... just like new.”

“I don’t understand... I could have sworn... well, I’ll be damned. I’m sorry for my outburst, Jesse, but I thought...”

“No worries, Mrs Walsh. I hope we didn’t startle you.”

Chapter 29

Jesse woke at 6am in time to connect with a bus that would take him and his classmates to Newcastle where they were to attend a Shakespearean play. Joshua didn't need sleep, of course, so he was already at the computer in the kitchen.

"I hate getting up early," Jesse bitched as he searched the fridge for milk.

"Be like me... don't sleep, and then it won't matter."

"You don't know what you're missing, Joshua. Sleep is cool. It repairs the body."

"We don't get bed bugs."

"My bed doesn't have any bugs." Jesse asserted as he poured milk over a bowl of rice bubbles and took at seat at the table.

"Yes it does. I checked."

"You checked my bed? What the hell are you doing checking my bed?"

"I've read stuff... about teens. I just wanted to see for myself."

"What stuff?"

"Never mind. Anyway, your bed has bugs... little guys... microscopic."

"I don't believe you. Anyway, change the sub... you're putting me off my breakfast."

*"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages."*

"What on earth...???" Maggie questioned in surprise when she heard the voice at the front door. "Is that you, Jesse?"

“Act 2, Scene 7,” the young man beamed as he strode down the hall. “Shakespeare, ‘As You Like It’. It was a cool play, mom. I had a seat up in the open balcony; you know, like where all the posh dignitaries sit. It was heaps cool!”

“You should have worn a sweater.”

“As in awesome, mom.”

“I’m amazed that you like Shakespeare,” she commented while preparing vegetables for the evening meal.

“Was anyone hacked to death?” Michael asked. “Was there any blood and guts?”

“There will be if you keep asking dumb questions,” Jesse glared, and then continued more calmly. “We all went to Maccas for breakfast, then went shopping, and then saw the play. We had a wicked day.”

“I’m also surprised that you enjoy Shakespeare,” Joshua commented. “You don’t seem the type.”

“Why not? We did Othello at school.”

“For one thing, it’s olde worldy English, and for another it’s sophisticated... the sort of thing that appeals to academics and - dare I say - nerds.”

“Shakespeare was a popular playwright in his day, Joshua. He appealed to the masses. There’s nothing academic or nerdy about his stuff.”

“But you don’t read, Jesse. Anything longer than a single sentence of one-syllable words and you’re out of there. Besides, you spend half your life ripping the limbs off football players and basketballers.”

“Who says you can’t play sports and also enjoy Shakespeare?”

“Oh yeah? Name one footy star that relaxes and reads Othello or Macbeth.”

“Okay, okay... I admit I can’t bring one to mind at the moment, but...”

“I rest my case.”

“You WHAT?” Patrick asked as he invited the boys into his office. “Shakespeare? I don’t believe it. Tea, coffee...?”

“Just popped in for a moment to see if you checked with your insurance company about me driving Tough Titties.”

“Yes, it’s fine, Jesse. As a learner driver, you don’t affect my insurance. If you happen to demolish half of Taree and run over several people gathered innocently at a bus stop, my excess remains the same as normal. Now tell me about this Shakespeare experience.”

Jesse took a seat and related the story to the old bloke. “And it was a professional company that tours a lot and stages a stack of performances every year. It wasn’t just a bunch of amateur locals.”

“And you actually enjoyed it? More than that, you actually understood it?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“You’re 16, that’s why not. You’re not supposed to be smart enough yet. You’re supposed to be getting your jollies from Hopalong Cassidy.”

“Hopa who?” Jesse laughed. “Things are different these days, Patrick. Young people nowadays are... well, I mean... you know...”

“Not as dumb as they were in my day. Is that what you’re trying to say, Jesse?”

“Sort of. No offence. Heh.”

On the short walk home, Joshua stopped momentarily while his mate kept walking. Then Jesse halted and turned around. “What’s up?”

“Not sure. I thought I felt a signal. It’s very weak, though.”

“Signal? You mean...?”

“Yes.”

“Are you still getting it?”

“No... it faded. Hey, maybe it was my imagination or something.” Joshua caught up with Jessie. “Don’t wanna get too excited about nothing, right?”

“Guess not.” When the pair reached the front verandah of the house, Jesse added: “Are you?”

“What?”

“Excited.”

“Wouldn’t you be if you were me?”

That night, in Jesse’s room, the two friends were in their separate beds. Jesse reached for the bed lamp and switched it off. After a few seconds he broke the silence:

*Sweet, so would I,
Yet I should kill thee with much cherishing.
Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow,
That I shall say good night till it be morrow.*

“You called me sweet.”

“I was quoting Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet.”

“Yeah, but you called me sweet.”

“No I didn’t!”

“I heard you!”

“I DID NOT! It was a quote!”

“Will you miss me when I’m gone?”

“Are you kidding? I’ll have my own room back all to myself again.”

“I think you will... miss me, I mean. I got the feeling you were not too thrilled with the signal I received today.”

“I was surprised, that’s all.”

“I’ll miss you.”

Jesse took a few moments to respond. “Yeah, well, I guess I’m kinda getting used to you... sort of like a wart.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Depends.”

“I visited an Aboriginal web site and read about racism. Some of the people mentioned weren’t full blood. One was only about 10% Aboriginal blood but he considered himself to be Aboriginal even though 90% of him wasn’t.”

“So? If you put a teaspoon of coffee powder into a mug of water what have you got?”

“You’ve got a white father.”

“So I believe.”

“You’ve not met him?”

“No.”

“Does Maggie talk about him?”

“No.”

“Aren’t you curious?”

“Maybe.”

“Have you thought about meeting him?”

“I might be disappointed. *He* might be disappointed. Anyway, what difference would it make? I’m me, and I’ll remain me.”

“Who’s me?”

“Aboriginal.”

“And your father is not. Is that it? You consider yourself to be Aboriginal, which means there’s really no place for a white father?”

“I’d rather not talk about it, Joshua. You wouldn’t understand, anyway... you’re an alien. You don’t know what it’s like to be human.”

“That’s why I’m asking. It’s just that I’ve noticed that you have all kinds of friends from all

kinds of backgrounds and ethnicity. Not all Aborigines are like that.”

“Not all whites are like that.”

“True.”

“My mother was raised by whites... they are my grandparents. I have lots of white friends who are cool. But blood is different. Aboriginal blood is in my veins. Aboriginal blood is in my soul. It doesn't mean I can't mix with all kinds of people, but blood is what I am.”

“What do you mean? Are you talking about tolerance?”

“No. You don't *tolerate* your friends,” Jesse laughed. “I don't *tolerate* my grandparents. It's not about tolerating people, it's about liking them. I like the people I mix with and they like me.”

“And what about me? Do you tolerate me or do you like me?”

“Ask me in the morning when I'm not trying to get some damn sleep!”

Chapter 30

Detective Sergeant Rowles sat at his desk, using his two index fingers to type a report on the computer keyboard. When he looked up at the screen to check his grammar and spelling, he saw a sentence that did not correspond to what he had typed. “What the hell...???” he mumbled to himself.

“What’s the problem?” Detective Senior Constable Rocque asked.

“The computer’s gone crazy.”

“If you’d taken the touch-typing course that I took...”

“Yes, yes, yes, I don’t need a lecture, Rocque, I need a technician to fix this stupid thing.”

Rocque walked behind his boss’ desk and checked the monitor. “What’s ‘*Hello Sergeant*’ doing on the screen?”

“I don’t know. That’s not what I typed.”

“Use the backspace bar to erase it and start again.”

“I tried that. It doesn’t work.”

Then both men watched in awe as more words appeared on the screen as if by magic. *Sorry to interrupt your work, Sergeant, but I thought it might be an idea to chat with you before I leave.*

“What the...???”

It’s me, ZYX.

“Where are you?” Rowles demanded as both men’s eyes darted around the room. Then Rowles grabbed his desk phone and began to punch in a number, but paused when more words appeared on the computer screen.

That won’t do any good, Sergeant – I’m invisible.

“You’re under arrest... I must warn you that anything you say may be taken down and used in evidence against you.”

You’re wasting your time, Sergeant – now do you want a civilized chat or are you going to continue to rant and rave?

“You said you were leaving,” Rocque interrupted. “What did you mean by that?”

It seems that I was successful in making contact with my own kind. I’ve received a few signals – albeit weak signals – but I’m almost certain that my rescue is imminent. It’s only a matter of time.

Rowles stared in disbelief at the words on the screen. “You mean we can expect an invasion? Spaceships? Invisible aliens running amok?”

You watch too many movies, Sergeant. No, nothing like that – we don’t have spaceships. We use radio frequency beams. You won’t even know what happened.

“Why are you telling us this?”

Because I need to explain a few things, and I don’t want you pestering Jesse or his family and friends. They’re not criminals and they’ve committed no offence. Neither have I, for that matter.

“You impersonated people without their consent. You broke the law.”

Your law is for humans, not for beings like myself. The law was not written with aliens in mind, Sergeant. I have broken no law – no law of any consequence, anyway – I needed a body in order to communicate with others on their level – a physical level – and to be seen. The alternative is to be invisible and to communicate like this – via a machine. That’s not an ideal way to establish relationships or to make friends.

“Why aren’t you appearing before us in this room in human form?”

If I did that, Sergeant, you’d freak and go into instant Kojak mode... ring the bells, set off the alarms, call in the troops... you know, all that lunatic Hollywood stuff. ‘Stop thief! What thief? The invisible thief! Invisible? Where is he?’ Should I go on, Sergeant?

“You made your point. But you’re forgetting something, ZYX. You’re on our territory now, on planet Earth, and that means you are bound by our laws. If you’re innocent, as you say you are, then you have nothing to fear by surrendering yourself to the law – namely me – and going through the normal court procedure to present your case and prove your innocence.”

I don’t have to prove a thing, Sergeant. You do. Innocent until proven guilty, is that correct? Besides, I can think of better ways to solve my dilemma than to subject myself to human justice. Open your eyes, Sergeant, and you too, Senior Constable. Look around you. What do you see? Do you see a species that has reached its evolutionary peak? Or do you see a species that is forever bickering, making serious mistakes and repeating those same mistakes in spite of the lessons of history? In other words, gentlemen, do you see a world that is potentially on the brink of annihilation because it’s being run by a bunch of incompetents? Think about it. Would the world be in such dire straits if it were being managed by animals? Those same creatures you insist are beneath you in intelligence and worth? Are you familiar with the word ‘pristine’? Do you understand what pristine means?

“You’re off topic, ZYX. Get to the point.”

The point is simply this: I will not subject myself to your human law. It’s flawed... seriously

flawed. What's more, there's no precedent for a case such as this. It would create turmoil and confusion. Imagine the chaos! Imagine the media frenzy! Imagine the sensationalism! I would become the curiosity to end all curiosities. Scientists would want to conduct experiments, astronomers would drive me insane with incessant questioning, Hollywood would turn me into a monster. No, Sergeant, you can keep your laws and your dumb rules.

Meanwhile, let me stress my main reason for appearing here before you- at least on a screen: if I discover that you have harassed Jesse or his family and friends because of me, I will give you a taste of my own justice.

“Are you threatening us?” Rowles had only just finished asking the question when his desk computer disintegrated into a pile of dust.

“You’ve gone too far ZYX. You’ve just destroyed government property! ZYX? Where the hell are you? I insist that you make yourself visible this minute! ZYX?”

“Rowles,” Rocque said quietly, “if I were you I wouldn’t push ZYX too far. He might do something.”

“Do something? Like what?”

“You saw what happened to the computer. Yes?”

The Sergeant’s beet-red flush slowly drained from his face as he stared at the pile of dust on his desk. After a thoughtful few moments, he said, “I take your point, Rocque. But how are we going to explain this?”

“Explain what, Sergeant?”

“Yes, of course, Senior Constable... explain what? Be a good chap and fetch the vacuum cleaner, will you.”

That weekend, Jesse visited his girlfriend at Harrington and slept over.

“Is it a casual friendship?” Joshua asked Maggie as they walked to the supermarket.

“It started out that way, but I get the impression that it’s more serious now. Jesse spends a lot of time with Yvette at school. She’s a very nice girl.”

“Yvette? What happened to Rosie?”

“They’re still very good friends.”

“But what about his plans to attend university after graduating from high school?”

“When I say serious, I don’t mean a lifetime commitment, Joshua... or a tribe of instant kids. Haha! And, by the way, thanks for coming with me to help carry the bags of shopping.”

“No worries.”

“Do you have a girlfriend back home?”

“I don’t remember – but I don’t think so. I’m not even sure we have different genders like you do... male and female. I mean, I don’t think of myself as one or the other.”

“So you’re saying that you have ambiguous genitalia – you’re hermaphrodite?”

“I don’t have any genitalia, Maggie.”

“No girlfriends, no boyfriends, no sex?”

Joshua began to laugh quite loudly as the pair rode the escalator to the shopping level of the Triple C center. “Sorry, Maggie... it’s just that I was reminded of something... the belief that Islamic suicide bombers have as martyrs – the ascent to Paradise and being given 27 virgins as a reward. Even if it were true, what on earth is a spirit going to do with 27 other spirits with no genitalia? Hahaha! How absurd is that?”

“Is that how it is with you? You’re a spirit?”

“I’m not sure what a spirit is, Maggie... the kind imagined by Earthly religions, that is. I don’t

think they know either. I'm not a spirit or a ghost or anything like that; I'm pure energy with intelligence. It may be that we – my species – assume a physical presence, something like I have at the moment, in order to 'do it', and then return to our normal non-physical state, but I have no recollection of that.”

“I think I'd rather be a human being.”

“That's only because you are one.”

At the checkout, Maggie paid for the groceries and then turned her attention to the trolley. “Where are my things?” she asked Joshua. “The trolley's empty!”

“I sent them home. They're waiting for us on the verandah.”

“You what? Oh... right. Heh. I keep forgetting.” And then, as the pair headed back to the escalator, Maggie said, “I don't suppose...”

In a split second, Maggie and Joshua were standing on the front verandah next to the groceries.

Chapter 31

As Maggie and Joshua carried the groceries to the kitchen to be sorted and stacked away, Joshua asked, “Did you notice who was collecting his order at Donut King?”

“Yes... Dr Hardy.”

“Did you see his order?”

“Yes... not exactly the sort of thing recommended by Weight Watchers. I think the good doctor is quite partial to his din dins.” Maggie opened a cupboard door and then proceeded to place various items inside. “By the way, Jesse tells me you’ve received signals from home.”

“I’m not hundreds about that, but I think they are.”

“We’ll miss you, you know. It’s quite handy having an alien around to organize express delivery of groceries.”

“I’ve enjoyed my stay too, but... well, I wonder sometimes if it’s me you guys like, or what you see as me. I mean, this body I’ve created is not me. It gives you guys something to relate to, and for me to use as a means of communication on a human level, but the real me is invisible... at least to you.”

“Does that matter?”

“Well, kinda... my own species would relate to me as I am without my needing any physical appearance.”

Once all the groceries were put away, Maggie took a beer from the fridge and sat down at the kitchen table. “I think you’re wrong, Joshua,” she said. “The body you’re wearing.... Hahaha! Wearing? Sounds weird, I know, but you know what I mean. Anyway, that body might not be you, but is my body me? I

mean, the real me? Is Jesse's body the real him? Is anyone's body the real them?"

"I'm not following you, Maggie."

"I saw a movie a long time ago called *The Brain*. It was about this laboratory where a woman's brain was in a jar. She started communicating with the resident doctor or scientist or whatever he was, and they formed a relationship. So you see? When you communicate with me, you're communicating with my brain, not my body. My body – anyone's body – is only a place for the brain to dwell, and for transport. The brain is in charge – it tells the body what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. When we communicate with another person – or several – we use speech as well as our body's eyes, hands and facial expressions to enhance our communication but the real communicator is up here," she said, pointing to her skull. "That's where we are... that's where we live. You only have to see someone with Alzheimer's to realize that. And you're the same. Okay, so maybe it's not a pound of gray soup like ours but so what? The basic setup is the same."

"I see. That's not a bad analogy, Maggie. You deserve a gold star. On the other hand, this body is not natural. I created it. It's not really mine."

"I don't think it matters, Joshua. There's a lady who lives in this town who was the victim years ago of a madman who tossed petrol all over her and set her alight. She suffered horrific burns and facial disfiguration that still shows. But she's the same person to talk to. She still has lots of friends, and once you get used to the physical changes to her face, you look beyond those. Your body – the one you created – might not be you, Joshua, but everything you say and do IS you. Are you following me?"

"Yes. And thanks."

“This is what I don’t understand about racism. Racists don’t appreciate the fact that skin color has no bearing on what’s between the ears. Mind you, racists are on both sides... they’re not just white.”

“I’m in the same boat, Maggie. I’m an alien. If everyone in this town knew about me, they’d freak... probably want to destroy me out of fear.”

“Irrational fear.”

“Yeah. And that’s another thing, Maggie. I don’t mean to be critical of all human beings but there are many – way too many – that are still living in the trees and eating bananas. What’s more worrying is that a good deal of them are in positions of power. I’ve read about people like Hitler, Saddam, Milosovic, Mugabe and others and I just can’t believe that people like those are able to manipulate circumstances in order to elevate themselves to such outrageous pinnacles of power. By the time ordinary people realize what is going on, it’s often too late.”

“People are sheep, Joshua.”

“I think you’re right, Maggie. You’ve raised an interesting point, so let me ask you a question: if you were me, would you want to live with a mob of sheep?”

Maggie took a swig of beer and then studied her guest’s face for several seconds. Suddenly, she burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“When white people are introduced to me, and I tell them I’m Aboriginal, they say ‘Oh! You must know so-and-so... they’re Aboriginal’.” Maggie laughed again. “I mean, if I meet a white person I don’t say ‘Oh, you must know so-and-so... they’re white!’” More laughter. “Why do whites think I must know every other Aboriginal person in town?” When Maggie’s laughter subsided, she continued on a more

serious note: “So, you’re saying that you’d rather not live here on Earth with us, is that it? That we’re too dumb?”

“Incompatible, Maggie, incompatible. After all, it was you who said that people are sheep. And you’re right. If the Mugabes of this world can rise to power and then abuse that power to the detriment of their own people, it’s the people who allow it to happen because of apathy. Actually, there was an ancient Chinese emperor who likened a leader who maltreats his subjects to a leader who eats his own flesh. And that is something – to quote Churchill – up with which I cannot put.”

“But we’re not all like that. What about Jesse? I thought you two were becoming pretty good mates.”

“I like Jesse a lot... a helluva lot. I like all of you a lot. But you’re forgetting something... I’m not human.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“Perhaps neither... it’s a matter of perspective, and it’s just the way it is.”

Once the evening meal was ready to eat, Mrs Rowles joined her husband at the dining table. “And how’s it going with the ZYX case?” she asked as she placed a napkin on her lap.

“It’s not. He was in my office this morning and turned my computer into a pile of ash.”

Cynthia almost choked on her first mouthful of food. “He what?”

“He has powers we don’t understand, my dear, and I’m not about to encourage him to use them against me. So I’ve dropped the case.”

“But the capture of this alien was your path to fame and fortune.”

“That was before I realized it could also be my path to ruin... and a cemetery plot.”

“But if this alien is capable of destroying things, including people, shouldn’t the proper authorities be made aware of the danger?”

“ZYX won’t be here much longer, Cynthia. He said he’s received signals from his – other aliens or whatever the hell they are. He warned me that if I pursue this case, and harass the Maguires, he will dispense his own kind of justice.”

“That’s a threat... a serious threat. It’s your duty as a police officer...”

“It’s my duty to stay alive, Cynthia. Or would you rather collect my life insurance?”

“That’s a cruel thing to say.”

“You don’t seem to understand that I’m dealing with a very unusual situation here... make that unique. This person... thing, or whatever it is, is capable of acts that could make Star Wars look like Alice in Wonderland.”

“What does Rocque have to say about it?”

“He agrees with me. He wants to be around long enough to collect his pension too.”

“There’s something I don’t understand about this case: why isn’t ZYX a threat to the Maguires?”

“He’s befriended them.”

“So why don’t you?... befriend ZYX, I mean.”

“Befriend an alien? I’m a police officer, Cynthia. Police officers don’t befriend people per se... unless they are other police officers. And they certainly don’t befriend criminals.”

“So that means the Maguires are harboring a criminal, which also makes them criminals... accessories to a crime. Is that right?”

“Yes. So what are you suggesting? That I send a paddy wagon down to the Maguire house and bundle

the whole lot into the back and take them to the cells. I can see it now... the paddy wagon reduced to a pile of ash, not to mention the entire police station. How would I explain that to headquarters in Sydney?"

"Just tell them the truth."

"The truth? Ha! If I did that, Cynthia, they'd lock me away."

Chapter 32

When Jesse arrived home from his girlfriend's house at Harrington, he found Joshua sitting on a log in the backyard, staring at the diminishing sunset and the gradual appearance of the first of the night stars.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Just thinking about stuff. How did the weekend go?"

"Cool."

"If you want me to be best man at the wedding, you'd better hurry, Jesse."

"More signals?"

"Yep."

Jesse sat on an adjacent log. "Lightning hit a big tree in our backyard a few years ago so we chopped it down and turned it into logs," he explained. "And you can forget about being best man, Joshua. I won't be getting married for a helluva long time yet! I'm only 16 for crying out loud!"

"That makes you about a nano second old compared to me, Jesse."

"But you're a teen like me."

"A 10 thousand year old teen? Hahaha! Don't be fooled by this body. Anyway, mate, friendship has nothing to do with time or distance or where you come from. That much I've learned during my stay here on Earth."

"It's gonna be kinda weird without you here. Not everyone gets to meet an alien."

"Not every alien gets to meet a human."

"What will you tell your species about us when you get back there?"

"Not much... maybe nothing at all. If I did, they might decide to colonize the place. There's a lot wrong with the people here, Jesse... society, I mean.

My species might want to interfere and sort things out for you guys... get rid of war and corruption and greed and all the problems you guys can't solve for yourselves."

"Would that be so bad?"

"I'd like to think that people like you can sort out the mess, Jesse. You're gonna be a lawyer one day, right? If my species came down here and sorted things out, there'd be nothing left for you to do."

"Me? Ha! Thanks for your faith in me, Joshua, but I'm only one person."

"Wrong! There are lots of Jesses out there.

Think about it, mate, wouldn't it be better if you, and those like you, could make a difference to humanity rather than having aliens like me taking control? Sure, we could make it easy for you but... well, like I said, it would be better if you guys sorted it out for yourselves. You once asked if I could do your homework for you. If I had, and you got top marks, how could you take pride in that?"

"Guess so." Jesse agreed thoughtfully, and then reached down to grab a piece of splintered timber, which he snapped in half. "You're right, Joshua. But you're asking a lot of me. I mean, bloody hell, we've been trying to sort out this human mess for thousands of years already, and we haven't even gotten to first base yet."

"Are you gonna let that stop you?"

"It's not as easy as snapping a twig, you know."

"So?"

"Is that why God doesn't interfere?"

"Could be."

Jesse noticed his friend's face begin to glow, as if it were in the path of a flashlight beam. "Joshua?" he asked quietly. "What's happening?" But Joshua

ignored his mate, and faced the night sky, seemingly in some sort of trance. Then the beam of light intensified, and formed a pure white halo around his head.

“Joshua?” Jesse asked a little more loudly. “Joshua? Is it them? Are you leaving now? Joshua? Can you hear me? Joshua? Not now! Don’t leave just yet! Joshua? For God’s sake, I’m not ready for this. I need time! Joshua? Say something, dammit! JOSHUA?”

As the glow of light faded, Joshua blinked a few times and turned to face his friend. “They asked if I wanted to bring you with me.”

“They what? Me? Out there? I couldn’t do that, Joshua. I couldn’t leave my family and friends. Besides...” Jesse paused as he studied the stars.

“Besides what?”

“It’s scary out there, man. Check it out! Billions of light years? No way I’m going out there, no way!”

“And where do you think you are? This is the third rock from the sun, Jesse. It’s also ‘out there’ just like every other star. Anyway, it was scary for me too when I arrived here, you know... at least at first. But then I met you, and I made a friend, so it wasn’t so scary any more.”

“Joshua, listen to me... let me make this crystal clear... Okay? Crystal ... bloody ... clear! I’m not going with you to wherever it is you come from. And that’s final! Anyway, you scared me half to death just now when you had that halo thingy. I didn’t know what the hell was happening. You sure know how to spook the crap out of a guy.”

“You didn’t want me to leave.”

“That’s not what I said, Joshua. I didn’t want you to leave just like that... you know, all of a sudden with no warning. I wasn’t prepared, that’s all. Anyway, what else did they say? When are you leaving?”

“Soon.”

When Patrick heard a knock at his door, he checked his watch. 10pm. “Who the hell...???” The old bloke went to the door and recognized Jesse. “Is something wrong?” he asked.

“Not really, Patrick, I just wanted to chat.”

“It’s ten o’clock! I was about to get ready for bed.”

“Sorry, I’ll come back tomorrow.”

“No, no, no... you’re here now, come on in. Hot chocolate? I’m just about to make some.”

Jesse followed Patrick to the kitchen where the old bloke filled the kettle and plugged it into the power. Then he opened a cupboard and produced a packet of cocoa. “What is it you want to chat about at this time of night?”

“Life.”

“Life? Is that all? Ha! Well, that won’t take long... should be finished in about five minutes.”

“Joshua is leaving. He’s been getting signals from his planet.”

“How many sugars?”

“Two.”

“So what’s the problem? You don’t want Joshua to leave, is that it?”

“I know he needs to get back home but... well, I’ve never lost a friend before. It’s not easy.”

The pair took their hot chocolates into Patrick’s office where they sat down. “Just a splash of brandy,” Patrick said as he opened a flask and poured a couple of nips into his mug. “Helps me sleep better.”

“You lost your friend Cody in that car accident you told me about.”

“Yes.” Patrick studied the photographs on the mantle for a few moments. “I know what you’re going

through, Jesse. Losing a friend – especially a very dear friend – is difficult.”

“So how did you cope with losing Cody?”

“With support from other friends. You have lots of friends, Jesse, as well as a close family.”

“But it’s not the same.”

“No, it’s not the same. No one will replace Joshua. And for him, no one will replace you. I know it’s not easy, Jesse, but there will come a time when you begin to appreciate what Joshua has given you, and which can never be taken away. That’s the way I feel about Cody. He enriched my life beyond measure. But it’s only after the pain of loss has subsided – which might take a while – that you understand and appreciate just how lucky you are to have met someone as special as Cody or, in your case, Joshua. When people leave, or die, they don’t disappear altogether, you know. They leave something of themselves behind as a sort of legacy – a gift – a gift to be treasured for the rest of your life.”

“But it’s not the same.”

“You said that already. No, it’s not the same, but it’s better than nothing. Actually, it’s a helluva lot better than nothing! Try not to think about the loss, Jesse, try to think about the gain. How many people have had the chance to befriend an alien? Tell me, do you consider yourself richer for the experience?”

“I guess so.”

“Guess so? What kind of answer is that?”

There’s no guessing about it, Jesse. You KNOW so. Now listen to me, here’s what I want you to do. When it comes time for Joshua to leave this Earth, I want you to tell him you’ll miss him, but I also want you to thank him for choosing you as his earthly friend. He could have chosen anyone, you know, but he chose you. And that makes you very special. And before you

leave for home tonight, young man, let me tell you something else: the fact that you chose me to confide in – to be your very own personal fossil – makes me feel very special too. And I'd like to thank you very much for that.”

Chapter 33

Pope Benedict's visit to Australia, notably Sydney, had captured media as well as public attention. On World Youth Day, Maggie, her three sons and Joshua, sat in the living room and watched the television news. Four hundred thousand pilgrims, many from overseas, attended mass at Randwick Racecourse.

"How come this old dude can attract so many people?" Thomas asked.

"It's not just the Pope himself," Maggie answered, "he's God's representative on Earth."

"Kinda like the vice president of America visiting Australia?"

Everyone laughed. "Well, sort of, but not quite."

"What's so funny? I don't see why God can't visit Australia himself. Why does he have to send some old guy with a funny hat?"

"God works in mysterious ways," Jesse offered with a wry grin.

"Yeah, you can say that again. Joshua? Does your planet have this kinda thing?"

"I don't remember, Thomas. Maybe it does but I have a feeling it doesn't."

"Oh... Doesn't God know about your planet?"

More laughter. "What really matters," Joshua explained to the little guy, "is that all those people you see on the TV are having a good time. They're happy, and they're not hurting anyone. They are being brought together by a common purpose, which is to love each other as friends and neighbors... there's nothing wrong with that."

"That's a strange thing for you to say," Jesse commented. "You don't believe in God."

“I believe in what I’m seeing on the TV, mate. And it’s a helluva lot better than what I normally see on the TV news. I don’t think it matters what I believe or don’t believe. What matters is that almost half a million people are sharing love. There should be more of it.”

“Anyway,” Maggie commented, “it sure puts the Muslim presence in Australia into perspective.”

“How do you mean?”

“There’s a lot of criticism of Muslims. Some Christians are afraid of Islam taking over the country. Check out the crowd on the screen... I don’t think Christians have anything to worry about. Do you?”

“What about the bad stuff?” Michael asked.

“What about the Pope apologizing for sexual abuse of kids by the clergy?”

“Abuse of any kind is not restricted to clergy,” Joshua answered on the group’s behalf. “Who’s going to apologize for all the murderers, rapists and thieves in prison? Who’s going to apologize for society’s failings? In any case, who represents society? The government? I can’t see the government apologizing for society’s deviates. You know, if some priest takes advantage of a kid and does the wrong thing, it’s not the Pope’s fault, and I’m not sure it’s the church’s fault either. It’s just one of those unfortunate things. Bad people come from all walks of life.”

“You sound like you’re making excuses for sexual predators,” Maggie intervened. “If I thought a predator was taking advantage of my kids, I’d kill the bastard.”

“It’s the wiring, Maggie. If your computer malfunctions, you don’t put it in jail; what good would that do?... you get it fixed. The problem is, nobody knows how to fix the wiring in a human brain.”

“What are you saying, Joshua? That we should forgive people who abuse other people because it’s not their fault? It’s a wiring problem? Ha! That’s absurd.”

“No, Maggie, that’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying that you guys – with all due respect – haven’t quite made it to the top of the evolutionary tree yet. It’s the same deal with the whole planet. Check it out... Earth still suffers from earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, tornados and cyclones, and all manner of other natural disasters. Don’t you see? It’s not perfect, and neither is the human condition. What can you do about it?”

Joshua shrugged in answer to his rhetorical question.

“Not a lot. That’s the way it is.”

“I don’t understand where you’re coming from, Joshua. Are you telling me that Pope Benedict should not have apologized for the sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy?”

“No. I’m just saying that his apology will do about as much good as an apology to the chicken you guys ate for dinner tonight.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“Yes, it is.”

Later, as Jesse slid between the covers of his bed, ready for a night’s sleep, he wished his friend sweet dreams and turned off the bed lamp. “Oh, I forgot,” he remarked in the darkness, “you’re an alien. You probably don’t have dreams.”

“Not like you have. I don’t sleep.”

“It’s kinda spooky, you know... having you here making judgements about us.”

“You’re allowed to judge me too, Jesse.”

“What’s there to judge? You have a body that’s not really yours, you can learn to speak English in seconds, you can read the whole Encyclopaedia

Britannica in 10 minutes, you can make a car fly... I mean like whoa... how am I supposed to judge that?"

"Do I scare you?"

"Yeah... sometimes."

"And you think you don't scare me?"

"Ha! That's a joke. Yeah, right, me scare you?"

How?"

"I don't want to do anything to upset you, Jesse. I'd be unhappy if you didn't like me. When we were talking earlier tonight about the Pope and stuff, I got the feeling Maggie was getting mad at me."

"She'll get over it."

"Were you mad at me too?"

"Kinda. But it's cool now. Joshua? Can you tell me something?"

"Sure."

"What do you really think of humans? Are we that dumb?"

"Is a student dumb because he hasn't finished his course and passed his exams yet?"

"Of all the things you've observed here on Earth, what's the most weird?"

"Well... there are two of everything. Often more than two."

"Like?"

"Male and female, right and wrong, government and opposition, night and day..."

"So?"

"It seems unnecessary. I mean like how can you have two versions of right?" Joshua laughed. "But, you know, humans are forever bickering about which opposing side is right. There can only be one right. Right?"

"Okay, so who's right?"

"Nobody."

"Nobody?"

“Yeah.”

“Hahaha! How do you figure that?”

“Why do voters keep changing their minds about which political party should be in government? If one party was absolutely right, it would always be in government. Yeah? Why is Christianity divided into so many denominations? Why is the Middle East constantly at war? Why doesn't the likeness of Jesus in religious paintings look Jewish?”

Joshua's questions were followed by a prolonged period of silence before Jesse spoke again. “Well,” Jesse began slowly, “it must be because everyone's a little bit right but not totally right. Is that right?”

“Go to the top of the class, mate. Yeah, everyone's a little bit right... that's the way it is. You see, Jesse, no one argues with facts because facts are facts. Facts are indisputable. But religion and politics are not about facts, they're about perceptions, they're about beliefs, they're about ideas, they're about ideologies. No one disputes the sun. The sun exists. The sun is a fact. Are you with me?”

“God exists.”

“If God were a fact, that fact would be indisputable, like the sun and the stars; like you and me.”

“So you're not saying God doesn't exist?”

“Correct.”

“I think I'm more confused than ever.”

“That's a good start, Jesse.”

“Night.”

“Night.”

Chapter 34

Joshua didn't sleep, of course. Instead he read a story on the internet about a woman who was a victim of thalidomide. She had no arms or legs – apart from tiny vestiges of limbs at each corner – and was shaped pretty much like an egg with a head. “How do normal people sleep in bed?” she asked her interviewer. “Where do they put their arms and legs?” As far as she was concerned, legs and arms were extraneous and annoying appendages, rather like stilts; and she couldn't fathom how normal people dealt with them in confined spaces such as bed.

Joshua understood and empathized with her attitude. His adopted human body was a nuisance; a hindrance to his natural freedom as an invisible ball of pure energy.

“You're up early,” Jesse commented as he entered the kitchen and saw his friend at the computer.

“Just got back.”

“Back? From where?”

“All over. I thought I'd check out Earth before I leave.”

“What do you mean by ‘all over’?” Jesse asked sleepily as he studied the contents of the open fridge.

“And how come there's never anything exciting or new in this damn fridge? Same old, same old...”

“Would you like an egg and bacon roll?” And with that, a steaming egg and bacon roll appeared on a plate on the table.

“Is it real?” Jesse asked as he prodded the bread roll with his finger.

“Looks real, feels real, tastes real. But, no, it's not real.”

Jesse paid little attention to what his mate said – rather, he took the egg and bacon roll in both hands

and sampled a bite. “Mmmm,” he said, “this is soooo good! It’s delicious!” It was only after he’d chewed and swallowed the first mouthful of food that Joshua’s earlier comment dawned on him. “What did you say?”

“I said it looks real, feels real and tastes real. But it’s not real... just like my body. You see it, but it’s not really there.”

“What am I eating?”

“My imagination,” the alien laughed. “But so what? If it makes you happy and satisfies your hunger, than don’t complain.”

“This is weird,” Jesse concluded. He examined the food in his hands for a moment, and then decided to take another bite anyway. “Mmmm! You’re right, Joshua... who cares!” Between swallowing that mouthful and taking another bite, he asked: “What was that you said about all over?”

“New York, London, all over Europe, some of the islands, South Africa, Alaska, China... you name it, I was there.”

“You did all that while I was asleep?”

“Sure.”

“Far out, that’s awesome! And what did you think of it all?”

“Interesting. Mind you, I didn’t get to stay in any one place for long. What puzzles me, though, is how you guys can create masterpieces such as Gothic cathedrals and towering cities on the one hand, and then be so destructive and mindless on the other. It doesn’t make sense to me.”

“Nor me. And I’m still hungry.”

“That’s because you haven’t really eaten anything except thin air, Jesse. Maybe you should stick to toast and Vegemite... the real one, that is.”

“Did you visit Disney World?”

“Didn’t have to. I’m there already, and so are you.”

Jesse popped two slices of bread into the toaster, and then placed a tub of butter and a jar of Vegemite on the table. “Did you hear about that Qantas jet on the news? I heard it on the clock radio.”

“The one that landed at Manila’s international airport? Yeah... I was there when it happened... in the air, that is. I thought I might have to lend a hand but the Qantas crew managed to control the situation.”

“You were there?”

“I saw part of the fuselage detach itself at 30 thousand feet.”

“You were at 30 thousand feet?”

“I’m from a place a lot further away than that, Jesse. 30 thousand feet is not even a squillionth of a hair’s breadth. Anyway, I followed the plane down to about 10 thousand and saw that the crew had everything under control.”

Jesse spread his toast with butter and then with Vegemite. “You’re pulling my leg, Joshua. I don’t believe you.”

“I heard one of the passengers tell another passenger during the panic that there was nothing to worry about... that Qantas often organize such tests just to keep the crews on their toes.”

“Hahaha! Yeah, right. Anyway, I still don’t believe you.”

Thomas and Michael emerged from their rooms at the same time, and immediately began to argue about who had arrived at the bathroom first. “Cool it, you guys,” Jesse ordered. “Thomas, you go first.”

“But *I* was here first!” Michael complained. Too late – Thomas had already closed the door behind him. “I’m busting!”

“Then go pee outside.”

“You’re obviously the man of the house,”
Joshua remarked with a grin as Michael disappeared.

“Only when mom’s not here. She bosses all of us around. Nobody argues with mom and gets away with it.”

“Really? She seems like a bit of a softie to me.”

“Don’t you believe it. Hey, listen, Joshua, when it’s time for you to leave, you’re not gonna leave while I’m at school or anything, are you? I mean you’re not just gonna disappear without saying goodbye.”

“The last message I received said that the beam would arrive and remain active for 15 minutes. If I miss it, that’s it.”

“But they could send another one.”

“They’re having a lot of trouble as it is, Jesse. Maybe there won’t be another one.”

“Would that be so bad?”

The alien leaned back in his chair and studied his friend’s Vegemite-stained face for a moment. “You know who you are, Jesse. You know who your mother is, you know who your brothers are, you know who your friends are. You’re Jesse Maguire. But who am I?”

Dr David Hardy explained to the office receptionist that he would be out to lunch for about an hour, and then drove into town where he parked his car on the lower level of Triple C’s parking lot, as far away from other cars as possible.

Upstairs, at the Lebanese take-away restaurant, the doctor collected his order of a triple-whammy kebab and double thickshake, and then, rather than risk being recognized at a dining area table, he took his lunch back to his car. There, he spread some paperwork on the hood and prepared to eat his food.

“Wow, that’s a biggie,” Joshua commented as he approached Dr Hardy. “I’ve never seen a kebab so big. You must be starving.”

“How did you find me here?”

“I’m an alien, remember?”

“I don’t have much time, Joshua... and I have this important paperwork to sort out before I return to the medical center.”

“Just a quickie, Doc. I’ll be returning to my planet pretty soon but, before I do, I thought I’d give you something to remember me by.” And with that, Joshua rested the palm of his hand on the surprised doctor’s forehead. “There you go, simple as that.”

“What was that all about?”

“You now have the power of healing... not as strong as the one I have, mind you, because you’re human, but hopefully enough to make a significant difference.”

“What are you talking about? You mean the laying of hands?”

“Yes. Don’t get me wrong, David, I’m not suggesting you abandon your conventional methods, but if a case gets a bit tricky, give this a shot. Meanwhile, you’d better eat your lunch... it’s getting cold. Unless, of course, you’d like me to warm it up for you.”

“No, no, no, no, no, no... it’ll be fine. Don’t do anything... just stay where you are. But... thanks just the same.”

“No worries, Doc. Just trying to be helpful.”

Chapter 35

Maggie answered the phone. It was Dr Hardy wanting to speak to Joshua.

“Hello?”

“Joshua? Dr Hardy. I just wanted to thank you for what you did today. A patient of mine – a young woman with dermatitis – came to see me. I’ve treated her for some time now but the problem kept persisting. I was about to recommend a specialist, a dermatologist, but I took a chance. Instead, I placed the palm of my hand on her forehead and focused my mind on curing her disease. Naturally, she asked what I was doing, and I told her that I’d seen this sort of healing procedure successfully performed before. I asked her to relax and to concentrate her mind on getting better. Almost immediately, the skin inflammation began to retreat. It was miraculous!”

“Fantastic! I’m really pleased to hear it, Dr Hardy. Go David!”

“There’s something else, Joshua. I’m wondering if you can impart your skill to other medical practitioners. I know you said that you’ll be returning to your own planet shortly, but humanity needs you. Something like this is far too important to...”

The doctor obviously had more to say but Joshua cut him short. “No can do, Doc. I’m sorry... I don’t have a choice. When the time comes, I must leave.”

“But... but how can I share this new skill with my peers... with the medical profession? What can I tell them? How does it work? What is the scientific evaluation?”

“It’s very simple, Doc. You’re a good man and you believe passionately in what you’re doing. When you communicate that faith to your patient, and they

gain the confidence to place all their trust in you, that's the best medicine you can prescribe. But you already knew that, David... I'm not telling you anything new."

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Joshua. What on earth are you talking about?"

"Just think about what I said."

"When are you leaving?"

"I'm not certain... soon. Good luck, Doc, and remember what I said. Bye."

"Bye."

"What was that all about?" Maggie asked as Joshua replaced the phone receiver.

The alien related the story of what took place in the parking lot, and the doctor's success with his dermatitis patient. "But what Dr Hardy doesn't know, Maggie, is that I can't transfer my powers to a human being. It's impossible."

"Then why did you pretend to do it, and how do you explain what happened to his patient with the skin problem?"

"Good question, Maggie," Joshua replied with a Cheshire-cat grin. "What do you think?"

"You're still here," Jesse beamed as he arrived home from school and saw Joshua at the piano. "I thought maybe... well, you know. Hey, I didn't know you could play the piano." Then Jesse noticed the vacuum cleaner headed his way, and stepped aside to allow the whirring machine to pass. "Are you doing that?"

"What?"

"Controlling the vacuum cleaner by remote? That's awesome! I wish I could do stuff like that. It's so cool. Hahaha! Jeez, if I wasn't seeing it with my

own eyes, I wouldn't believe it! So when did you learn to play the piano?"

"Just now. Do you like Chopin?"

"I wish you didn't have to leave."

"You'll have your room all to yourself again.

Your words, not mine."

Jesse watched the vacuum cleaner come to a stop, unplug itself from the wall socket, retract the power cord, and install itself back in its closet.

"Where's mom?"

"Shopping."

"She's gonna miss you too, you know. And so will Michael and Thomas. And you know something else? You know what pisses me off the most, Joshua? I'm gonna get married some day and tell my kids that I met an alien and they're not gonna believe a word I say!"

Joshua removed his hands from the piano keys and rested them on his thighs. "You're gonna tell your kids about me?"

"Maybe I shouldn't – come to think of it."

"I'm touched. I'm really touched, Jesse. This attachment thing you humans have... friendship, love, affection... I think I could get used to that. Frankly, I hope we have the same thing where I come from, but I'm not sure we do. Maybe it's unique to humans. And you know something, Jesse? I suspect that if there's one thing that can save this planet, it's love."

Patrick answered the knock at his front door.

"Joshua," he said. "Where's Jesse?"

"Working at the fish 'n' chip shop. I thought I'd pop over here to say goodbye before I go."

"Pop? Not you too. People are always popping. 'I'll just pop you on hold for a moment', says the telephonist. 'If you pop over to the next aisle...' says

the shop assistant. Pop, pop, pop. Sorry... come on in and pop into my office, hehe. So, what's this business about leaving?"

"I've been getting signals from home," Joshua explained as he took a seat.

"And what does Jesse have to say about this?"

"I think he's gotten kind of attached."

"And you?"

"I'm not sure that I have this attachment thing like humans do. Don't get me wrong, Patrick, I think Jesse is cool. I think you're all cool. But it won't be until I arrive home that I'll know how I feel about leaving... if you can understand what I'm trying to say. This is a whole new experience for me. I'm not even sure that I fully comprehend what attachment really means."

"Yes," the old bloke mumbled as he finished topping up his glass of wine and settled into his computer chair. "One thing I've learned in life is to be very careful about forming attachments. Once someone or something becomes a routine part of your life, it's very difficult to let go. In fact, I'm not sure if there's much of a difference between attachments and addictions."

"Like the wine?"

"Let me put it this way, Joshua, if you're going to form an attachment to someone or something, you'd better be very sure that whatever it is you're attached to will outlast you." Patrick chuckled, and then took a sip. "So when are you leaving?"

"Not sure. Soon."

"Is there any chance you might change your mind?"

"No. If you can imagine what it might be like to be the only human amongst billions of aliens, then you'll understand how it is for me."

“It may sound strange to you, Joshua, but I know exactly how you feel,” the old bloke laughed. “Yes, you don’t need to be an alien to feel alienated. Tell me, will you leave anything behind to be remembered by?”

“Jesse complained that he’ll be unable to tell his kids about me one day because they won’t believe him. So I thought... well, you write books, Patrick, and...”

“I see. In that case, you’d better brief me.”

“I can do better than that. Do you mind if I place my hand on your forehead?”

“You seem a little tense, tonight,” Wendy commented as Jesse finished serving a customer at the fish ‘n’ chip shop. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah... well, sort of. A friend of mine is leaving.”

“Who?”

“You don’t know him. He’s a guy I know.”

“When is he leaving?”

“Well, I’m not sure. Soon, I think. But I don’t know exactly when.”

“Would you like to phone him or something? I can take care of the till for a while.”

“Thanks, Wendy, but it’s okay... it’s kinda hard to explain.”

“Suit yourself, but keep your mind on the job, Jesse. As you know from playing football, leave your personal problems off the field.”

As Wendy left to attend a table of diners, an elderly lady approached Jesse at the till. He recognized her as a customer he’d served about an hour ago. “Hi,” Jesse said. “Is something wrong?”

“No, not at all!” the old lady smiled. “I just wanted to thank you again for a wonderful meal and

such excellent service. Besides, you're such a nice looking boy, I thought I'd come back to check to see if you're really as cute as I thought."

Jesse's face turned instant crimson. "Thanks," he smiled awkwardly. "Anyway, I'm really glad to know that you enjoyed your meal."

"The fish was delicious."

"Fish? I thought you had garlic prawns and fried rice."

"I did? Oh, yes, so I did, heh. Sorry... I'm getting a little forgetful in my old age."

Jesse cocked his head and narrowed his eyebrows. "Is that you, Joshua?"

"Okay, okay, okay... I sensed that you were worried about me leaving so I figured... well, I'm still here in case you were wondering."

Chapter 36

Joshua strolled down to the river where he shed the little old lady body in favor of the one Jesse was more used to. ‘This is such a beautiful place,’ he thought as he observed the moonlit Manning and the scattered streaks of silvery cloud suspended beneath the stars. ‘I wonder what my planet looks like? Surely it can’t be as lovely as this.’

At 9pm, Jesse found his friend waiting at the door of the fish ‘n’ chip shop to walk him home. “I wish you wouldn’t do that,” he said.

“You’re mad at me.”

“No I’m not. Okay, a little. I hate not knowing who you are. When you arrived as that little old lady, you tricked me. I hate being tricked.”

“You won’t have to put up with me for much longer. I got another signal tonight.”

“It’s not like that, Joshua. It’s not a matter of putting up with you... it’s... oh, forget it. Another signal?”

“Yeah,” Joshua answered as the boys headed down Victoria Street toward Martin Bridge.

“So when are they...? I mean, when are you...? When will it happen?”

“You won’t miss me for long, you know.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Human beings have this thing... a sort of inbuilt capacity to adapt to new circumstances. They need to because things here are always changing. It’s a kind of defense mechanism for survival, I suppose.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Joshua grabbed his friend’s shoulders and spun him around so that the pair came to a halt and faced each other. “You won’t miss me forever, Jesse. After a

while, you'll be back to normal. Trust me... that's the way it is with humans."

"Is that also the way it is with aliens?"

"I'll never forget you, Jesse, and you'll never forget me. But that doesn't mean we can't get on with our lives. It doesn't mean we have to spend the rest of our lives depressed or sad. Tell me something, would you prefer not to have met me?"

"No. It's been cool. Well, most of the time," Jesse giggled. "You can be such a tosser sometimes."

"That's the way I feel too... not that you're a tosser. I mean, I didn't wanna be stranded on Earth, but since I was, and I couldn't do anything about it..." The alien paused a moment to collect his thoughts. "What I'm trying to say is that you and your family have made it easier for me. No... it's more than that. You've made it worthwhile. Fact is, Jesse, I'm kinda glad I got stranded here. If I hadn't, well... go figure."

The boys resumed their walk home, however, it took a while before Jesse responded to his friend's comments. "Yeah, me too," he said thoughtfully. "But you still haven't told me when you're leaving."

"Midnight."

"Tonight?"

"Yep."

"That's less than three hours away. Will you ever come back?"

"I don't think so."

"This is so weird, man. Like, this is totally crazy. You get stranded here, you appear to me as a dog, then Anthony, then whoever, and now Joshua, and in the meantime we've become mates – and now you're leaving, like you never existed. I just don't get this scene at all. What the hell is this all about?"

"Think of it as an experience, Jesse... for both of us. You've been in a flying Holden, you've seen a

vacuum cleaner do its own thing, you've tried an imaginary bacon and egg roll..."

"So? Who's gonna believe me? Joshua, I really don't understand why you need to leave. Yeah, yeah, yeah, you gotta find your own identity and rediscover your past and all that bullshit, but..."

"But what? It's like I said before, Jesse, you know who you are. I don't, and I need to find out. You know something? It's kinda tempting to stay. Yes, believe it or not, it *is* tempting. I know that if I stayed, I could solve the world's problems in no time. Too easy! But I don't think that would be such a good idea. Go figure... some alien dude from another planet comes down here to fix what you dickheads – sorry, mate, no offence – can't figure out for yourselves. No, that's not my responsibility, it's for guys like you, Jesse. You're the one who's gotta solve the world's problems. You're the one who's gotta become a lawyer and make people recognize all the dumb stuff that's happening in the world, and how to fix it. You know what I'm saying here? It's your earth, man, and it's up to you – and guys like you – to do something about it."

"You make it sound easy."

"Who said anything about easy? Okay, so I can tell a vacuum cleaner to run around the house and clean it. How long do you think my species has been around? A minute like you guys? Hey, we were around long before you, bro... long, long before you. Jesse? Are you listening to me? I'm over 10,000 of your Earth years old. And you're like 16? Ha! So don't gimme that crap about easy. Nothing worthwhile is easy. But you can do it, Jesse. I know you can. I can feel it in my electromagnetic frequencies. And lemme tell you something else... if I thought you couldn't do it, I might not leave. Yeah, I can see it now... Jesse Maguire JD Esq."

“I’m almost 17 you know.”

“Big deal.”

“You really think I can do it? Like become a lawyer and make a difference?”

“Does a didgeridoo have a hole in it?”

Jesse checked his wrist watch. “I should give you something to remember me by... a gift.”

“Nothing physical, Jesse... I can’t take anything physical with me... not this body, not the clothes, nothing.”

“But... the other day when that halo thing happened, you said they asked if I wanted to come with you.”

“You would have been reduced to pure energy like me, and then reconstituted when you reached my planet... with a few modifications, of course, to suit the environment.”

Jesse checked his watch again. “This is weird. I feel like I should be doing something... you know, like organizing a send off party or whatever.”

“Maggie, Michael, Thomas and you are enough. I don’t need any party or anyone else.”

“You seem pretty relaxed about it.”

“Relaxed? Yeah, right. I’m going back to a home I don’t even remember, Jesse. And you think I’m relaxed about that? No way, Jose. To be honest, I’m scared stiff.”

“Maybe you should change your mind and stay.”

“We both know I can’t do that, Jesse. I don’t belong here. But like I said, it’s been a fantastic experience. I owe you.”

At just a few minutes to midnight, out by the pile of logs in the backyard, Joshua explained that he needed to dispense with his human body in readiness

for the trip home. “The microwave beam will be here soon.” He hugged his friends for the last time. “Good luck,” he said, “good luck to you all, and thanks for befriending me. If it hadn’t been for you guys, I don’t know how I would have coped with being stranded here. And you, Jesse, remember what I said. You can make a big difference to this world. Just believe in yourself and you will. I know you will. Goodbye, and thanks again.”

Joshua’s body vanished, leaving a pile of discarded clothing on the ground. “He’s gone!” Maggie cried, and dabbed her eyes with a tissue.

“No he hasn’t,” Jesse disagreed as he checked his watch. “He’s still here but we can’t see him. It’s not quite midnight yet. Joshua? Can you hear me?”

A few seconds later, the vacuum cleaner arrived at the back door, and then proceeded out into the yard where it joined the rest of the group. “Bye, Joshua,” Jesse said, trying desperately to be brave, “it’s been great to meet you, mate, and I’ll never forget you, I promise.”

A bright narrow beam of light entered the yard and illuminated the pile of logs. The vacuum cleaner motor gave a couple of whirs. Then it fell silent as the beam of light faded into the night sky. Jesse reached down to the ground where he collected the shirt that Joshua had worn just moments ago, and held it to his face.

“Is Jesse crying, mom?” Thomas asked. But his mother remained silent.

August 10, about a week later, was a Sunday. Patrick knocked on the front door of the Maguire house in the morning and waited. A bleary-eyed Maggie eventually answered. “Sorry, Patrick,” she

croaked. “We had a party last night for Jesse’s 17th birthday.”

“Could have fooled me. Is Jesse here?”

“He’s still in bed,” Maggie said as she stood to one side of the hall. “You can wake him. He’ll kill me if I do.”

Patrick walked to the end of the hall and knocked gently on Jesse’s door. There was no answer, so the old bloke peeked inside the room. “Jesse?”

Grunt

“Are you awake?”

Moan

“I have a present for you.” Patrick then entered the room and went quietly to Jesse’s bedside where he waited until the boy had finished stretching and rubbing his eyes. “Sorry to disturb you, mate, but I have something special here. Happy birthday, Jesse.”

Jesse lifted himself up on one elbow, yawned, and then took the package, wrapped in birthday paper. “What is it?” he croaked.

“It’s a book.”

“What’s it about?”

“A friend of yours.”

“A friend of mine? Who?”

“Open it.”

Jesse sat up, leaned back against the bed head and began to unwrap the gift.

“Joshua visited me before he left Earth,” Patrick explained. “He wanted to leave you something to remember him by.”

*** *THE END* ***