



FALLING

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FIRST DRAFT – Circa 1993

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BOOK 1

Above the ranging tides,
Arched o'er by radiant skies,
Nobly the Bridge stands forth,
A triumph in all eyes.

- Roderic Quinn

PROLOGUE

Fear overtook a city one beautiful early summer afternoon in 1998 when the Sydney Harbour Bridge wavered, shook, and went crashing into Sydney Harbour, changing Dale Milling's life forever.

For the better or worse, he was never quite sure until the day he died.

The same was true for the way he always saw fame. He had never decided if it was for the better or worse. It certainly didn't do him any good except a few wild, bloody months in the papers and on the news, and he'd been virtually comatose at the time anyway.

But that had been a long time ago, almost twenty years.

Fame always used to remind him of TV magazine covers. In some oblique way, his mind reacted to the notion of fame by producing indistinct images of old covers with the latest child or animal star. Child stars were always a dime a dozen, and their peak is how we all remember them. Even though we were ten or twenty or fifty years younger *ourselves* then, our mental picture of that person is of the cute, bubbly child in denim dungarees and wide tortoiseshell glasses with its arms lovingly around the neck of an animal on the cover of the TV program. Just like the collective consciousness of Dale Milling was of a young boy in a combat zone-style news photo, blurry and racing, his face a strangled grimace of pain, his body broken and splattered as if in a cartoon.

And child stars had a way of coming back. They invariably discovered and battled drugs and alcohol at early ages and seemed burnt out has-beens before going back on the publicity trail as fresh, confident adults fostering career comebacks.

And when that happens, our first reaction is one of shock. The same dimples might still be there, the same cheesy grin or bright red hair, but on a grown up face.

Because those kids on the covers of the TV bibles are only faces. They're enigmas. They're images captured at the most public point of their life, and preserved forever in the media consciousness. The shock is

created by the confusion as our mental picture struggles with the knowledge that every young face must grow up.

That was the sort of reaction his reappearance would spark in the general public. *Incredible*, they'd all say, *look at him now, he's all grown up, that boy who nearly died that day, whose picture was in the paper*. Just like some has-been child star battling drug addiction in a Hollywood detox ranch, fresh on the publicity trail again, Dale Milling had come back - but instead of appearing again on the cover of *TV Week*, he'd come back to himself.

He was only famous, and only for those few split seconds in history, because of the death of all those hundreds of others. It wasn't the glittering fame of awards nights or superstardom. It was black and vile and sick, as sick as the feeling in his stomach as he had fallen, plunging through metres of air, hard grass and road streaking upwards, incoherent panic screaming in his mind louder than sound from his mouth, the vibrations of crashing concrete and screaming metal still twitching in the soles of his feet.....

The terror was still there, in the dead of night. He wanted to forget, but he'd known then that the world wouldn't let him, and with the public obsession that followed, it was hard not for him to become equally obsessed, with the media coverage and re-coverage. It had been his nightmare, and the rest of the world had fed off it. The trashy weeklies ran articles splashed with blood and rubble of the nightmare and the heartbreak, while the scientific journals and engineering publications went into overdrive with theories and blame. As always, the rationale was drowned out by the sensational. Magazine covers sat side by side in newsagents, one conservative cover asking the question *The Spot Rivet System, Bane of 20th Century Construction?*, and the other demanding and screaming *Heartbroken Mother of Four Tells; "I Watched My Kids Plunge To Death"*.

The world fed off the blood and the fear. The fiction, not the fact. *That* was the other fame.

But obsession itself, he knew, didn't just have one form. And the obsession then hadn't been the shallow craving for food or the touch of a forbidden lover that we all feel, but its dark, silent partner, dread and repulsion, the voice that teases us to look at a bad car smash as we pass in case we can see blood, or maybe a body covered in a sheet. The obsession that makes us relive those moments over and over, horrified but unaware that our obsession stems from gratitude we weren't part of it.

They played it over and over in their minds or on TV to subconsciously remind themselves to fall to their knees in horror and thanks that they weren't part of what came to be known as Horrorfall.

Dale was one of the few survivors to reach the dry ground first, and he was the first one a TV crew got to. When they arrived, he was still on the ground, the ambulance crew had barely pulled up beside the road, and so it was his face, his pain, his fear, the anguish in his tortured eyes and in his wailing voice that became the human face of the event. He was the one on the six o'clock news, his was the face all over a four page spread of the bloodbath in the paper that afternoon.

In a story he read in the paper years later about paparazzi photographers, he learnt that that picture of him had been the biggest media bargaining chip of the year, and had been sold and resold among news agencies around the world within two hours, and for over six million dollars.

And so, like the kid on the TV guide, that's what he became, and that's how he stayed. The Face. The face chosen and hailed by the media (and, in turn, the public) to personify that day and to feed that dark, foul smelling, crawling brother of obsession to the masses.

His face became a symbol of despair, a reminder of the terror. The terror of Friday, October 2nd, 1998.

The day of Horrorfall.

I

On the morning of December 11, 1944, Harry Webb jumped on the 7:53 a.m. Balmain tram in his overalls and work boots, his rigging harness in a duffle bag which he dumped at his feet. He opened up the Sydney Morning Herald and was greeted by a tall, menacing headline - *MALMEDY MASSACRE; The German counterassault at Ardennes reached a bloody peak early yesterday when Nazi Colonel Jochen Peiper and his forces intercepted and took captive a group of U.S. soldiers from the seventh armoured division convoy, heading south. Part of the same division later discovered the bodies of the missing men in a frozen meadow, gunned to death and entombed in the ice.*

Harry shook his head and turned to Li'l Abner. He thanked God for the thousandth time since the mid thirties (when the tension started to build in Europe that would become World War Two) that he had been too young for the last war and too bloody old for this one.

The tram stopped at Circular Quay and Harry jumped out onto Alfred St. Hoisting the duffle bag over his shoulder, he walked off, skirting the edge of the Quay toward The Rocks, where the huge slab of the Bridge's south east pylon rose like a majestic stone temple into the sky. His eyes followed the dull grey arch across the harbour, scanning the criss-crossing beams between the two main arches to the northern end,

where two identical pillars of rock jutted proudly from the grass of Milsons Point.

Harry watched a businessman pass by, looking expectantly at his watch, as if it were the harbinger of high stock prices. Harry chortled to himself under his breath. What a life, stuck in a dark, smoky office, buying and selling and conquering and worrying, having only a stuffy old secretary for company and not out all day watching the pretty ladies go by during his smoko.

Harry sucked a deep mouthful of cool air, smelling faintly of seawater. Hanging from the beams of steel, the cool breeze drifting by, nothing but two hundred and fifty feet of air between him and the blue harbour, *that* was the life.

He mounted the steps that led from Cumberland St to the Bradfield Highway above two at a time, taking the steps easily in his huge frame, a body that was seemingly built for construction work. He had a wide, spanning chest, little or no flab around his middle (thanks to the physical grind of his work, which kept him healthy despite the odd Carlton Draught he downed with Chalky Wilson and the League boys). His hair was an unusual white at forty two years of age, his face heavy set with a generous network of wrinkles. His hands, making the duffle bag look like a bag of feathers, were callused and leathery.

He emerged onto the footpath below the highway. The path was awash with sunlight, pure and lemony, not the sick, jaundiced orange light that the sky of thirty years hence would produce. Steady streams of smoke had started to rise skyward from the factories of Bondi.

He put his head down and began to walk, the North Shore and the days work a few minutes walk away. The ground jostled beneath Harry's feet and he looked up to see the six carriages, their dull red paint devilishly bright in the morning sun, of the 8:22 to Hurstville service. The train rattled by, swallowed by the tunnel and it rumbled on towards Wynyard.

Harry looked along the tracks, remembering the day twelve years ago when they'd lined the tracks with ninety two steam locomotives to prove that the Bridge wouldn't collapse in a seventy thousand tonne pile of rubble.

Harry raised his eyes to the 'office', amidst the beams of the arch near the north west corner of the Bridge. Some rivets had rusted and the secondary tension beam threatened to give way. The Public Works Authority had ordered the repairs to meet with what they called 'public demand'. Now that the city and North Shore were linked, a lot of businesses were setting up on the north side, which would mean more traffic and increased strain on the Bridge.

Harry lowered his eyes again, watching his enormous feet pounding forward, destined to cut the average twenty five minute walk to Harry's usual twenty or less.

There hadn't been too many problems with the structure. Construction and past maintenance had gone smoothly, mostly left unchecked by natural or industrial hinderances. Little did he know, but Harry George Webb, born 1902, father of three, was a cog in the engine of an era that would, within forty or fifty years, be called 'the good old days', when things were built to last. The marvel of construction and engineering carrying him across the water was as tough as the Chevies and Fords and Packards roaring past him on the highway every so often.

But now, because of an oversight, a few braces made from inferior metals and alloys were installed and had to be replaced. And what, he thought as he breathed in a mouthful of sweet harbour air, could be easier than that?

II

The air blowing into the harbour across the surface of the water was usually nothing compared the wind on top of the arch, but that day it was pretty steady, free of the frightening, rocking gusts that whistled through the anchor cables and struts and rattled the window of the supervisors box. The light wind was fresh and pleasant, seeming to smell of all the salt in Port Jackson and all the fruit factories from Bondi North to Watsons Bay.

Harry stood in the six by nine foot box on the intercom handset to his boss, engineering supervisor Wayne Hodge, on the ground. The phone set was mounted on one wall of the wooden shed and a table occupied most of the floor space. The box, three panel walls, a sheet metal roof and floor of hardwood planks, hung suspended from the main inner arch, hung on two steel cables and held steady by an eight inch steel beam. A small walkway led from the edge of the floor to the service ladder, which led to the systematic tangle of intercrossed beams and struts within the four main arches (inner and outer, east and west), where Harry and his team were replacing the rivets and braces.

Harry hefted the tool belt around his waist and studied the plans and prints laid out on the table, neatly tacked down as he spoke into the handset, the transmission crackling with static as the wind steadily buffeted the cord winding around a down beam two hundred and forty feet down to the street.

"We're trying to hook up the winch because we need the industrial drill. There's some number fours that need riveting down and the four inch's are all that'll hold them....." He listened to his boss's preoccupied

voice and said "I dunno, we've got to get it laid down before the wind kicks up or we'll need more weather boards as well.....yeah, and another crate of ten inch 'U' bolts.....well, before lunch.....Ah, mate, tell 'im to piss off." He burst into healthy gales of laughter, signed off and replaced the handset.

The short walkway to the service ladder was a wooden beam about fifteen inches across. Straight down was the sparse lines of traffic far below. Harry stepped out onto the board and reached for the ladder. He hoisted himself onto it, his tool belt jangling against the metal, and tottered up the twenty rungs to the work area where his construction team of three awaited him; John "Jackie" Langley, hammering a bolt midway into a beam, Toby Blackburn, taking measurements and notes, and Terry "Digger" Jamieson (minus three fingers - courtesy of a Japanese land mine in Singapore three months before) using a hand drill to force a two inch hole through a primary strut.

Harry straddled the beam he was working on, and finished tightening the rivet he was fixing in place. He strained against the rivet brace until he was convinced that it held good. If the bloody Bridge ever fell down, he thought to himself, these two pieces will fall still stuck together. He slid the tightening brace into its place on his belt and took out his wrench.

"Blackers," he yelled as he began to loosen the clip holding the beams together, "how long was the tension brace?"

"Eight by eight," the young man called back, consulting his old dog-eared notepad, the leather cover torn and faded, "could do with tightening."

"When do the-" Harry began, but he was interrupted by the jangle of the phone from the supervisors box below.

"Shit." he whispered under his breath, mumbling about just having climbed all the way back up as he threw his leg over the beam and climbed towards the ladder again. He returned to the box and angrily snatched up the phone. "Yeah, what?"

"Harry", came Wayne's voice, "stop work and come down. Bring the other fellas with you."

"What's the matter?" Harry asked, puzzled, "Bad weather?"

"The Union."

III

Harry leant over the edge of the box and peered down at the work station on Alfred St South, near the tip of Milsons point. The work station was a wooden hut beside the road, on the edge of Bradfield Park. People - it looked like they were dressed officially - were disappearing into the

station and re-emerging, and there were at least four cars that Harry didn't recognise parked nearby.

"Righto Wayne," he said into the handset, and replaced it. He walked out onto the walkway to the service ladder until he could see his staff, put his index and little fingers in his mouth, and whistled loudly, piercingly, to get their attention. The three men looked at him curiously, with individual airs of annoyance.

"Stop work and come down, the union's here." he called through his cupped hands, and he didn't have to read the looks on their faces to know what they were thinking.

The union rep, who had shaken Wayne's hand in a stiff, unfriendly and formal way, and who peered out from under the rim of his hat, had introduced himself only as 'Mr Unwin'. While his twenty or thirty accomplices aided a squad of four police (who had driven up in their '42 Ford Mercury with lights flashing) in removing or commandeering tools, charts, materials and equipment, as well as taking the keys to the '31 Hudson work truck, Mr Unwin flatly and emotionlessly explained the situation.

"Sixteen men died falling from the Bridge during construction, Mr Hodge, which is bad, but that was twenty years ago. Techniques and safety were primitive, if not unheard of, and the union was in its developing stages and couldn't guard over its members as well as it can today.

"But safety is a prime concern nowadays, and anyone coming to harm on the job because of flagrant safety laws isn't acceptable."

Wayne's shoulders slumped forward in resignation. Now he understood what this was about. He glanced back at a policeman and a man in a mid brown suit, sweat pasting his yellow shirt to his body and his pencil-pushers hands donned with heavy work gloves, as they struggled to get a ten foot iron strut to their flat backed truck. Mr Unwin began to tell the story over again, but they both knew he didn't have to.

Three weeks before, a twenty year old engineers assistant was inspecting repairs made to storm damage at the south east corner. A single strut had been put in place but not fastened, the crew awaiting the right sized rivets to be shipped from the factory in Newcastle. The young man, ignorant of this fact, had merely left the wooden scaffold planks to take a closer look at some other detail. He'd put his foot on the unfastened strut to balance as he leaned over, and it had simply fallen out from under him. The unfortunate boy had plummeted - howling like an Irish banshee, according to eyewitness statements - to the sea below, his spine snapping in six places when he hit the water.

The union had just about exploded in reaction. 'Safety' had become the buzzword of the industry overnight. Since the accident the union had been lobbying, in the state courts, for new safety laws. And now, that morning, the union had been granted approval. Within half an hour union representatives were traversing the city *en masse* to bring every operative construction team to a halt. Police had been enlisted to aid the union representatives in case of any outbreaks of hostility from workers.

Machines, vehicles, equipment, materials, everything was being removed and gradually impounded. The union called it 'effective lobbyist collateral', construction companies called it 'legal blackmail' (usually with one or more expletives between the two words), but whatever it was called, when the union brought it into effect, you did it.

Mr Unwin began to list the new rules, and Wayne shifted his attention back to the man's cold, mundane voice.

"Special warning signs are to be put in place during and between shifts. New codes of safety dress, equipment and accessories are now in effect. And no more men in dangerous places for long shifts. All lunch and breaks are to be spent on the ground, shifts for dangerous or high work are to be shortened to four hours. No more than one shift fitting the union description of dangerous work per day."

"Oh Christ," Wayne protested, "I can't afford to hire any more men, and this job needs work day and night. If I can only have one team working no more than four hours, the Public Works'll get someone else to do the repairs. This company needs this job."

"I can't help that, mate, I'm just here to tell you what's been decided. The meeting's tomorrow arvo at Leichhardt Town Hall, four o'clock."

Wayne began to speak, stopped, started again, exasperated. "If you impound my equipment, I'll lose all my jobs. Don't you reckon these laws are going to sting all the small businesses first?"

Unwin looked at him steadily. "Meeting's tomorrow. Tell your men to finish what they're doing and clean up. We'll leave someone to take their tools when they get down."

IV

Harry Webb sat astride a wooden plank balanced between two parallel struts, tightening the rivet he was supposed to be replacing. His eyes were slitted and angry, his lips muttered every Welsh expletive he could remember from his grandmother in Toongabbie when he was no more than ten years old.

He'd spend some springs with her and his grandfather. They lived on a modest sized farm with enough cattle and chooks to get them fed

and occasionally bring some money in for repairs or hired help. On Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights, his grandfather would go to the pub after work at the saddlery in Windsor where he put in three days a week, get almost unconsciously drunk, and come home with hatred for all mankind in his heart.

He'd smash plates, put his feet through the thin boards of the late confederate style house (not the confederate house of eighty years in the future, with their enclosed log fires, smooth finished paint and perfectly sawed wood, but the real confederate houses with corrugated iron rooves, no gutters, water tank out the back, and knotholes in the walls big enough for rats to climb through) and beat his wife and grandson to within inches of their lives. There was rarely a weekend when grandad didn't spend at least one night in the shire police shack.

As he'd stagger around the house hurling objects and roaring obscenities, Harry and his Gran would huddle in the kitchen and she would whisper a colourful variety of old Celtic curses, hexes and wishes. Of all that would happen on those terrifying nights, those mystic spells Harry barely understood would stay with him the rest of his life.

The sound of his name broke his concentration and he looked up.

Toby Blackburn was calling and waving. "Can't we even redo these tension clamps?" he said.

Harry shook his head, looking back to the rivet. "All we can do is finish what we're doing and go down. They've taken all the equipment."

"What about these two pressure panels?" came Digger's voice from behind him, "that's what we're here for. If we don't get them on, the whole bloody arch could fall apart."

"When the union are satisfied with our safety equipment, they'll release the equipment and we'll come back up and finish." Harry explained, "It'll be all right until then, it's only two pressure plates."

"Why bloody now?" Digger asked himself as well as Harry, "you'd have to be a bloody drongo to make a mistake like that stupid kid did."

"It wasn't the kid, it's the union." Harry corrected him, speaking contemptuously, "the big construction companies can afford to improve their safety procedures, so they do that and then put pressure on the union to put pressure on the rest of us, knowing fully well we can't afford all that bullshit. And if we can't afford it, we'll all close down, and they'll have less competition."

"But why would the union bow to pressure from the big companies?" Blackburn asked, interested in the argument.

"They probably offered the union higher membership fees or corporate sponsorship. Who knows?"

"That's not very bloody fair." Digger said.

Harry shook his head. "The rich get richer, mate, it's as old as the hills."

And so Harry, Digger, Jackie, and Toby finished tidying up and clamping down their job and climbed onto the platform that the crane on the ground lowered to the train tracks.

After they'd gone, Harry on the tram back to Balmain, his part in the greatest engineering disaster in Australian history over (one he wouldn't even be alive to see), the union brought in their workers, who dismantled and removed the supervisors box and the crane, and took the last of the equipment.

Clarke & Denman Engineering, Refrigeration & Construction, the company Harry, his team, and Wayne Hodge worked for had received reports from all their site bosses by that afternoon that jobs had been halted by the union, their equipment locked away.

The company's three biggest contracts - repairs on an Epping ice cream and confectionery factory, a public housing project in Blakehurst, and the brace repairs to the Sydney Harbour Bridge, were frozen indefinitely.

Clarke & Denman tried to raise the money to purchase the new compulsory safety measures and install them, but with no money coming in from their major projects, they had to lay off thirty workers immediately, with almost no hope of buying the necessary safety equipment.

What little safety measures they could afford to satisfy the union couldn't get enough of their impounded equipment back. Two months after the freeze, the Epping Factory and Government Housing (holding the contract for the Blakehurst housing village) took their contracts elsewhere. A month after that, Clarke & Denman laid off the rest of their staff and appointed a state receiver, filing for bankruptcy.

A year later, still struggling to repay their debts, Clarke & Denman had no choice but to sell their remaining work, including the Harbour Bridge repairs. Clarke & Denman repaid their debts, dissolved the remains of their company and vanished into corporate obscurity, remembered only in the unwritten annals of Australian Business history.

The company that acquired Clarke & Denman's last few contracts, Thomas Ross Engineering, was large enough to consider the Harbour Bridge work a medium sized job.

Had it been as crucial to Thomas Ross as it was to Clarke & Denman, its new managers might have given it and its past progress deeper consideration. But the old Clarke & Denman records and plans were falling apart, yellowed and mouldy after spending a year in a Pyrmont warehouse tied up with twine and packed in an old, soggy fruit box, and a young, wiry haired man named Mason Cooley, Central City

Division Manager at Thomas Ross Engineering Ltd, hadn't gotten to them until quarter past four on a Friday afternoon. His head was light and his concentration and temper short after drinking his whole lunch hour away at the Prince Alfred, and the rain was slashing at his window like water blades from some demonic God in the sky. He only wanted to jump on the 4:51 tram home to Woolloomooloo.

He skimmed the records, plans, letters and notes he thought looked unimportant, and absently surmised that the bad rivets that were midway through being replaced would serve until the next repairs and maintenance review.

The rivets and braces were eventually replaced, in August of 1954, by a team of construction repairmen employed by Thomas Ross. Their team leader hadn't quite the trade calibre of Harry Webb, formerly of Clarke & Denman, who had been supervising the repairs on site. The new on-site supervisor was a short, wheezing man whose mind was planted deep between the thighs of a glorious young prostitute in Surry Hills that he saw every Thursday night. He was, however, knowledgeable enough to direct his team to replace the rivets that originally needed replacing, and the problem was forgotten.

But not everything had been noted down.

A man named Digger Jamieson, with only seven fingers, had been about to fix some pressure and tension plates in place one day ten years before, a job that the builders union had interrupted and had consequently gone unfinished.

Digger Jamieson himself, orphaned and unmarried, was forgotten, dead of a cerebral disorder in 1949, but the plates were still not in place - they'd sat in the Mowbray Road impound of Willoughby Council, unofficial property of the union (until 1945, when Clarke & Denman ceased to exist) and were sold, along with fifty three hundred pounds of other scrap metal.

The pressure plates were half-inch thick slabs of alloy that were riveted in place over the joins in the four main arches. Because of the two that had been removed for the repairs in 1944, three sections of the inner west arch (each ten metres long) were left unjoined, independent of each others grasp and left at the mercy of nature.

Layers of years covered the unfinished and forgotten repairs, and they were left to the will of God. Frightening as it sounded - the Harbour Bridge hanging in pieces by a single thread - it wasn't serious. The metal was strong and Sydney wasn't in a monsoonal wind zone. The only thing that would affect the area would be mother nature, eating into the metal, decaying it like wood, chewing slowly and patiently through, ageing the grandeur monolith as she did the skins and the minds of men and women.

And if any damage were ever done, surely it wouldn't be for at least half a century.....

V

The steady stream of traffic crawled along the Warringah Expressway, stopping and starting intermittently like the muscles along the ribs of some great metallic snake.

Dale leant one arm on the upended bottle, its nozzle pointing down into the water cooler, and sipped the water from the polystyrene cup as he watched the traffic. The freezing water cascaded in a wave into his mouth, and he swallowed it before it could bite and sting into his back teeth, most of the back ones donned with fillings, courtesy of an unsuccessful tooth-brushing career as a child.

He looked back over his shoulder at his colleagues, rushing back and forth, talking on the phone, sitting at computers, or consulting each other with reports or calculations.

Definitely not the job of his dreams, he thought, but a steady income until he at least had an idea what his calling in life was.

After high school, fresh faced (except for an angry red crop of facial acne), Dale Milling was trapped in a common syndrome that almost all his friends suffered. Through childhood and school, dreams were so easy. Life was easy. After all, you had your whole career mapped out, usually in one sentence that began with "I'm gonna be a -".

But throughout high school, attitudes changed. Along with his peers, he grasped a more realistic picture of the real world and how he expected to get along in it, and occupational goals became a little more down to earth.

But at the end of school, things changed again. There were several groups of stereotypical school leavers. If you weren't in the group who left in the tenth year to take up apprenticeships as plumbers or mechanics, you were one of two types.

The first came out of twelfth year and entered straight into tertiary studies. Some of those had definite and realistic goals and who intended to study to help achieve those goals, and some entered of their own accord of that of their parents simply because they didn't know any better. Kids who were quite competent academically, but lacking either the common sense, imagination or courage to accept the change in their lives and not try to stay where they felt safest or smartest.

Dale had been one of the second group of twelfth year leavers, where you were thrust into the outside world with a sheet of cardboard issued by the state government, no idea what to do or even how to do it if

you did have an idea, and every adult you spoke to telling you how lucky you were to have so many options.

A very common move after that was the low wage finance industries, like banking, the place where thousands of Australian children spend a year or so collecting their wits before using it as a springboard to a further prospect.

Others went out, bought a tie and some smart shoes, put on their best shirt and trousers (and might as well have had *school leaver* tattooed across their forehead), and joined a train full of miserable-looking people at an ungodly hour of the morning bound for the big, dark, smoky city, to leave their names at all the employment agencies.

Dale was one of the latter. In February 1997 he began work for seventeen thousand dollars a year as an adding clerk at Amlock Office Products and Systems Ltd, taking measurements from plans of offices and buildings and calculating their available floor space and volumes.

The experience he attained in building plans served him in September 1997 when a vacancy came up through his employment agency at Thomas Ross Engineering, Constructions, Interiors & Design Pty Ltd, a vast national building conglomerate over a century old.

The job had been titled Federal Law & Company Guideline Administrator, or, more commonly, Floorspace Clerk. The department within the company was the Allocation Department, which researched floor or site plans for contracts the company had secured.

The design branch consulted Allocations periodically for simple queries or entire layouts. Their job was to provide reports on the designers plans stating and/or allowing floor space or volume, depending on the many factors that determined or restricted the final construction - federal safety laws, materials available, weight limits, and other construction regulations. To take these factors into account for their outgoing reports, Allocations, in turn, consulted lots of government departments, the Buying and Pricing department, and the Engineering and Metallurgy department.

The vacancy called for someone with basic experience in construction plans, floor space and volume. Its responsibilities were to receive plans after they had gone through the initial records and administrative procedures and confirm or correct the designers plans as physically or financially viable. The job was one of twelve identical positions amongst whom the inflow of work was delegated. Dale started work at Thomas Ross on September 22, 1997 on a starting salary of twenty thousand dollars per year.

Now, he could feel a funny thing building up in him, something he'd never noticed before. When he looked back over his short career path, he realised he had a little history. He had memories.

Geographically, it was a great job. His work area was amongst the design departments clerical area, mostly young kids like him with whom he was friends on a working basis.

A good job, he repeated to himself, but definitely not the one of his dreams. Still in the dying throes of childhood, he still had his starry-eyed aspirations, even if the world had laced them with a heavy dose of reality.

He turned back from the office and looked back out the window, into the sky. That was where he belonged, behind the controls of a 747-400. But how would he get there? The air force? No, the military didn't interest him. He wanted to learn how to take off, fly in a straight line, welcome his passengers, complete his log and his radio checks with his coffee and first class airline food beside him, adjust and reset his myriad of computers, and land, and he was fully prepared to work in a bearable job until he'd saved (or won) the forty six thousand dollars for a commercial license and lessons.

A tiny smile played around his lips as he gazed into and beyond the clouds. That was the present plan. How long the idea of that method remained was another matter. He knew from the most recent years of his life how often the notions and decisions of the young (and still observably unstable) mind were replaced or superseded.

Some sound or another in the office snapped Dale from the trance into which he'd fallen looking out the window. He turned back to the office. Whatever the sound was, it was lost forever now in the beeping of phones, the clack of staplers, and the hearty orchestra of voices.

He turned around and walked back towards his desk, answering with a wave the *oi* which rang out from Anna's direction. She smiled at him, which he appreciated and gladly returned.

He sat down at his desk, one corner of a four-desk work station separated by chest high partitions, and sighed at the sight in front of him.

The monitor of his system terminal was, except for the screen, hidden behind Post-it-notes, which were in turn hidden behind more of the same, most of them with computer codes, access i.d.'s, and reminder notes - a typical example was *call J re 40G OK 4 2Fl g/house*. It could've been a U.S. missile target code, but was actually to remind him to call his main contact at Pricing and Buying, Jill Clayburgh, and check that an amount of \$40,000 was acceptable to charge for a generator housing two floors up).

The total area visible of the grey/blue partitions surrounding his desk was probably two square centimetres. The rest was covered with lists of phone numbers, more reminder notes, internal memos and personal effects. His trademark was a plastic office plaque featuring a man in one corner with his tie and clothes askew, his teeth gritted, his hands over his face with his eyes bulging out in between, and the

enormous voice balloon which heralded in scraggly, stressed writing *SHIT, GET ME OUT OF HERE!!*

The tiny space he always tried to leave for his pencil caddy, corrector fluid, stapler, glue, adhesive tape and notepad was empty save for the caddy, which contained one chewed Bic pen, and a broken paperclip. A thorough search of his desk, under all the papers and files, would've revealed all these items.

And to the front, three items that grasped his immediate, if reluctant, interest. A big, heavy book in tiny print, a chapter of the Federal Government Engineering, Housing & Construction Regulation and By-Law Guide; an open floor plan of a proposed video and audio sales and repairs outlet; and an initial report form.

Remembering where he'd left off, Dale checked the manual, checked the plan with his architectural ruler, and wrote in the report under "Aisle/Thoroughfare Proviso" - *Proposed cabinet/storage fixture in south east corner; federal by-law 322a) para 2.1 - "closed or sealed area consisting of one (1) or less entryways requires; i) non flammable exostructure/anti flammable fittings in endostructure where girth is not greater than 4000mm(l) x 2300mm(w) x 3000mm(h)".* He then quickly revised the report and slammed the by-law guide shut, sliding the report onto his *for verification* tray. And no sooner had he verified it, folded and packed it and thrown it into his *pick up* basket than the phone trilled, jammed indignantly between the terminal screen and the partition, out of the way, demanding immediate attention with its electronic scream.

Dale lifted the receiver to his ear and leant back, propping it between his head and shoulder, enabling himself to pick up and begin to unfold the nearest unmolested paperclip. He clomped his feet against the edge of the desk.

VI

He smiled now, in his sleep, as he remembered. It had been her. That girl, with whom, if things had gone differently, might still be around. Not likely, but maybe. Through the whole thing, she never crossed his mind once. And when it was over and life had died down and the newspapers had found another death or war or disaster, she was gone, a figment of his memory. He remembered one of the last times he ever saw her. It was one of the clearest things in his mind, now that memories were all he had.

There had been a time - had it been her birthday? His? An office party? A family one? Was it even a party? He didn't remember that much, and it didn't matter. All else had drowned, smothered by waves called Years along a long sandy beach called Time.

He only remembered those few precious seconds. She was in blue. It wasn't a ballgown, but nearly. Similar. It had no straps, revealing the skin of her smooth, delicate shoulders, only a top edge that hugged her chest halfway down the welcoming swell of her breasts and dipped down beneath her shoulder blades, below her beautifully smooth back, and a bodice that fitted her, squeezing the inward curve of her waist, showing her healthy round stomach, and a flowing billow of blue like an ocean, that streamed out from the bodice, around the outward radius of her hips, and her legs, from the knees down, their loveliness unhindered by stockings.

And she had turned to him, and her silken caramel hair had spilled like a rainforest brook over her shoulder, and she had pursed her lips to blow him a playful kiss, and she had smiled at him, for *only* him, a dazzling, secret smile that made him truly believe she'd loved him even then, in their early stages, and in his sleep, pangs of sorrow rang out and if he'd been awake, tears would have fallen.

Because they'd been in love.

They both felt they were taking each other down a beautiful, sunlit path into life. And now, she could well have the same memory, or less, or none at all. She was a spear of loss through his heart now, the girl of all his dreams and hopes with her charming, beautiful smile, who could be in the arms of another, probably was, and oh, how she looked in those few seconds. Now.....gone. Forever.

But then, after.....nothing. He had a romantic notion for awhile that she had been heartbroken for him, the way people do that remains unexplained by medical science, but he had grown, and learnt a lot.

One blown kiss and smile, no matter how dear and sweet in a memory didn't mean a lifetime of commitment. It did mean a chance, but whatever they had attained together, that memory, of the fleeting glimpse, was its height.

He now remembered, as he recalled in his sleep, that it was her phone call that day that had unwittingly sealed his fate.

VII

Dale turned the paperclip, now a long sceptre of metal, over in his fingers, the smile on his face and the swelling in his heart rising proportionately.

It had only been the mechanically reintegrated forgery of a voice, but it had pleaded with him to go and visit its owner on his way home. The voice told him it wanted to feel him hold her. It wanted a big, hot goodbye kiss. It whispered that maybe he could come over on the

weekend and they could lock themselves in its room and get up to what they had a few weeks ago - and maybe more. Dale smiled to himself. He would like that, very much.

That cool (but very steamy) Saturday afternoon they had rolled around on her bed together, legs and tongues deliciously entwined, her shirt unbuttoned midway down and pulled down off her shoulders, her breasts heaving through the forbidden and wildly exciting lace of her bra, pushing to get out and into his warm touch; his penis (never touched by female hands) a hot, hard rock crushed indignantly against his stomach. They had been that way for twenty, maybe thirty minutes, both panting with excitement but too nervous to quite go any further, her body an intoxicating and terrifying taboo (Even at 19 he had led an uneventful love life).

And the thumping of footsteps up the stairs, that of her father, had quickly extinguished their ardour. Looking back, he'd never lost a hard-on so fast in his life.

VIII

The sun was warm, spring truly here and summer steamrolling steadily but strongly in. The first streams of peak hour traffic were thickening along Alfred St, Milsons Point. All seemed right with the world.

The street was full of well dressed North Shore school children (in their straw hats, ties and smart blazers, they were a far cry from Dale's public school days, where ratty old sneakers and untucked shirts were more typical), the first few office workers, wearing suits and smart dresses, and smatterings of gulls and pigeons.

Dale emerged from the Burton Street tunnel, his heart full of happiness and anticipation, trying to break through to his lips with a smile.

He started up the stairs to Milsons Point station, her words ringing in his ears. I need to see you, she'd said, I got myself thinking about that Saturday in my bed and I've got myself all horny. Please come in and kiss me goodbye before you go home, she'd pleaded.

He had been tidying up what he could on his desk when she rang. The time had been quarter to four. He'd arranged days ago to leave work early so he had plenty of time to see her before she left work to meet him for their date.

They usually went to the Pizza Hut on George St and to a movie if they went out after work, and while most wouldn't find it a particularly romantic date, it always felt so familiar and sweet to them, bingeing on junk food, making each other laugh, sitting in each others arms through

the movie, falling asleep on each other's shoulders during the train journey back to her place, where he sometimes left his car.

But no sooner had they made their plans when her manager had asked her to cancel her plans and stay at work to do some stupid report or something.

Anyway, that had been no reason for Dale to stay at work longer than he had to, so he supposed he'd go home, jump in the pool and make use of the extra sunshine.

He walked up to the city-bound platform of Milsons Point station, looking at the spiked and blockish towers of the city skyline through the jumble of beams of the Harbour Bridge. Somewhere in there, she was waiting.

IX

Every time he thought it, every time he dreamt it, every detail came back, crashing back in and drowning him like waves smashing sea walls, splintering the feeble barriers his mind tried in vain to make each time to block the memories out.

And as with every disaster, every horror, every few moments that live forever in peoples minds like horrifying caged beasts, there was a string of 'if onlys', a million miles and a lifetime long.

Three people die in a highway smash; if only the driver hadn't been drunk. A lonely sociopath guns down thirteen people in a crowded shopping centre; if only the government had done something about the gun laws sooner.

There was always something to blame. Modern society had perfected the laying of blame as an art form, akin to ballet and classical music. Every step of the way, if you think enough, you can come up with a hundred 'if onlys', that, if they'd been different, could've saved these horrible events from happening. It was a convenient way to regret something, without realising that every single thing we do in life is a potential 'if only'.

And it's only when that correct combination of choices are made that it leads us to that event, the one that makes us pray and wish to Jesus Christ that we can turn back the clock and stop the moments that release a stock, open a floodgate, and let an overdose of 'if onlys' into our lives.

A million times he asked, why can't we change them, God, whoever you are? Why didn't you give man the power to remove those horrible moments from history, or at least the memory of them? Instead, they can ruin lives forever. They can cut life off so cleanly and cruelly.

Like they have mine.

X

"*Attention passengers on platform one,*" a slow, uneducated voice drawled mechanically across the air, "*the three fifty eight service to the city is reported running approximately....*" A communal whisper of groans and sighs and other sounds signifying displeasure issued forth from the waiting commuters, "*....eighteen minutes late.*" Dale winced in irritation and threw a hateful look at the loudspeaker fixed to the edge of the platform building roof.

Some people started to sit down and get settled to wait. A middle aged lady standing beside Dale made a *tch* noise and began to unload the plastic shopping bags in her arms in a circle around her feet, the crispy rustle of the plastic zigging and zagging across the platform.

Dale looked out over the harbour at the city beyond, the dry, warm air stroked its fingers across his face and rumbled in his ears like a tiny summer thunder. The longing in his heart seemed to treble.

A flash of colour caught his eye. It was a cyclist, all decked out in fluoro shirt, bicycle pants and striped helmet, beginning to make his steady way across the cycle path of the Bridge on his racing bike.

A wonderful idea struck Dale full force, like a bubble that expanded in his mind until it felt like it was pressing against the inside of his skull.

Dale had only ever walked across the eastern path of the Harbour Bridge once in his life (the western path, beside the train tracks, was the cycle path). It had been while he was still at school, and he could, on a mental command, recall all the feelings of beauty and wonder from the path and pylon lookout at the south east corner, which offered, in his opinion, one of the cheapest, best, and least known views in the city, possibly all of Sydney.

As far as he knew, the only article of advertisement or promotion for the lookout was a sign mounted on a post in Argyle street, The Rocks, no bigger than a *No Standing* sign. It humbly declared *Pylon Lookout*, along with an arrow and the old D.M.R. symbol (Department of Main Roads, which had become the R.T.A. - Roads and Traffic Authority, years before).

It had been something special. He'd been across the Bridge plenty of times - three times by car during his childhood, and twice a day for the past eleven months by train to get to and from work in North Sydney, but to be really out there was something different. He could remember the harbour wind whining and moaning through the beams and ruffling his hair. There seemed more water in Port Jackson than was, seemingly, in existence, rolling slowly back and forth, cast aside in choppy, tapering shapes behind ferries and pleasure craft.

And each tiny movement or low squeal from the concrete beneath his feet or a beam high above or the heavy struts and braces below the Bradfield Highway, was the crying out from the natural, thousand year process of metallurgical stress. The creaks and moans from the Bridge around him seemed full of the heraldry of power. They possessed an almost supernatural state of determined, uncompromising strength - of a structure that held fiercely as it stood, oblivious to the meagre competition that mankind and nature offered.

That day, it became a modern-day Frankenstein's monster, it's blood and strength given to it by humankind before it turned that strength back on them and they became its terrified helpless victims.

As he mounted the steps to the walkway, Dale's mind came alive with those emotions, years old but as fresh and easy to recall as all the happy events that we take to our graves.

He felt a sense of regret, almost sadness. A young child might receive a gift for Christmas that he dismisses for whatever reason, only to come back to it at a later date and discover all the magic it has to offer.

Or a middle aged, workaholic executive might spend a few hours of sleeplessness in the early morning darkness watching the shape of his wife under the covers beside him, marvelling at how beautiful she still is and how he lost touch with his appreciation of her.

Dale thought the case was the same with the Harbour Bridge. It was the most noticeable object for miles around, bigger and more commanding in shape than the sails of the Opera House or the spindle of Sydney Tower, hundreds of thousands of people worked beside it every day, several thousand crossed it at least twice a day, and yet how many Sydneysiders made a regular and enjoyable trip across of their own free will? Not very many, he bet. Only those whose cars had broken down and had to get across the harbour to a pressing engagement, or people like himself who chose it as a spur of the moment alternative to a crumbling, inadequate and inept rail service.

And he also thought that a few, like him, more or less forced into the situation, discovered the Harbour Bridges little known but ironically accessible magic, like the unappreciative child or the insomniac husband.

Dale reached the top of the stairs and began down the path towards the Bridge, which began to carry the Warringah Expressway/Bradfield Highway (the respective northern and southern names for the road) across Sydney Harbour about one hundred metres further down the path.

He slung his backpack over his left shoulder, full of his personal business and relaxation belongings, the juvenile equivalent of a briefcase.

He had a backpack instead of a briefcase for two reasons - firstly, he couldn't abide the thought of actually having to carry it instead of, like

his navy blue pack with its beige straps and pockets, merely hoist it over his arm. Secondly, what he carried wouldn't justify one.

On an average day it carried a book to read on the train and at lunchtime, which would last him a few months, being the slow, careful reader he was. He also carried his lunch of sandwiches, cold leftovers to warm in the microwave oven at work, fruit, crispbread, or loose change (if he hadn't brought lunch from home) which lurked at the bottom of the bag, secretly and quietly increasing in wealth and power as if to overthrow its incarcerated comrades of paper and food one day.

He began to pass the first pylon, an icon of an ancient temple, and to a bygone age of stonework and masonry.

In the single lane of traffic between the nearest pylon and the path, and in the further six lanes across the highway beyond, a steady stream of traffic of every imaginable description roared constantly by; sedans; station wagons, many adorned with business names and telephone numbers; closed and open backed trucks carrying everything from dirt and coal, food and mail, scaffolding and construction equipment, logs and branches, new cars and furniture; state and private buses; and, on the western edge of the Bridge, a train clanked and rumbled back towards Milsons Point station.

As he walked along, Dale shifted his gaze upwards. He'd been watching the ground far below, which was visible through the joins in the concrete slabs of the walkway.

He looked along the top outer arch, following it to its crest to where the building-trains sat. They were small, flattish, boxlike structure on the tops of the outer arches that he always supposed were some sort of repair or monitoring stations, maybe weather stations. He suspected that most people of the city didn't know what purpose the structures served or whether they were manned at all, and he was one of them.

He'd once heard a story that there were stairwells actually inside the arches to the top, and he knew that there were tiny steps and a rail on the lower parts of the arch - he'd seen them from the train - but how you got up to the building trains or what you did up there was beyond his general and specialised knowledge (building plans were his crust, and special constructions like bridges, water towers and walls or fences were like a foreign language to him).

Train trips had long before ceased being the wonder they were when he was a kid. Before the advent of the suburban megamall, there were certain things you could only, it seemed, do in the city. And when his mother took him into town, it was a magical treat - the train tunnels, the buttery smell of popcorn at the huge city cinemas, the hordes of angry, endless traffic and the ages-old department stores. Even now, on his way to work and roaring through the train tunnels, he would

sometimes feel a flicker of memory from those days and it would all come back to him.

Another thing he always noticed on those enchanted trips from his childhood was that the building-trains were never in the same place twice. Sometimes they were at the crest of the Bridge together, sometimes they had crawled down either side.

Observing this, Dale deduced they were on some sort of track or rail. Hence, they were christened in the Milling family as the building-trains.

As the distance between himself and the pylon increased, the arch gradually grew higher, the enormous rivets (the size of dinner plates) grew smaller until they were hardly visible, and for the next fifteen minutes, his senses became filled with his surroundings, his mental memory bank seemed to close, and his mind seemed to do nothing save for taking in and enjoying.

Everything was set against a background of constant sound - the hum/roar of the traffic going back and forth in a never ending stream. Dale doubted it had been completely empty of cars in any moment of its history since the mid thirties.

There was something new and interesting to look at in every direction; the tiny island of Fort Denison, the navy yards and the Heads to the east, the city in all its glass and concrete, gray and pastel splendour straight ahead, North Sydney behind, where Dale himself worked (and which made a pretty sight when viewed from the city at night. And to the west, Port Jackson stretched away past Balmain and Hunters Hill towards the Parramatta River.

And visible by leaning on tiptoes and leaning your head through the main guard rail (a chest high network of crisscrossing bars) and the wire guard about ten inches above (a sheet of chain link fence with barbed wire along the top), was the water below, where the Tunnel markers were plainly visible - two lines of orange buoys, the Sydney Harbour Tunnel Markers, put in place to indicate the restricted area which passing boats had to coast slowly through.

Leakage inside the tunnel had been the latest problem of the plague-ridden tunnel, blamed on disturbance from passing boats, and while repairs were going on, overhead water traffic had to be kept light and slow.

And above was the arch structure of the Bridge itself, over seventy seven thousand tons of iron. One of Sydney's urban myths was that there was so much metal that made up the arch structure and the highway supports below, repainting began at one end as soon as it was completed at the other.

There was a distinct symmetry, an order that was easy to see at first glance, but then, upon looking closer, the eye and the brain's concept of systematic regularity were assaulted by an incredible array of beams within the arch. They crossed over each other, sprouted from one, cut off by another, absorbed or adhered to another.

Suddenly a fleeting, disturbing thought popped into Dale's head - (sudden movement?)

- amidst his train of thought and was gone just as quickly.

It was an incredible coalescence of order within chaos, and vice versa. It looked like four long arch shapes with 'X' shapes extending between each plane, but, upon closer scrutiny, was much more.

XI

Dale's concentration was abruptly broken by an object from the real world invading his walking trance. He glanced down to see a young blonde man in an olive green business suit and floral tie approaching, his hands swinging purposefully back and forth instead of shoved lazily into his pockets. He glanced at his watch. As he passed, Dale wondered if he was crossing on foot because he'd been held up by another late train.

He looked around, suddenly aware that he was halfway across. He must've spent fifteen minutes walking around falling into fanciful daydreams about water, childhood and metal beams.

He turned his head towards a rumbling, rickety sound, an echo of irritation in his mind as he saw the late 3:58 train he'd avoided in favour of walking. His watch read 4:17. The eight silver carriages were crammed with miserable looking commuters and gleamed dully in the afternoon light. Dale smiled to himself, his annoyance dissolving. Another reason to enjoy the walk. Because one train had collected the number of people that should have joined three separate services, they were all squeezed into it together and the train was more crowded than usual, people's personal space and comfort invaded by government funding inadequacy.

The train trundled past and Dale shook his head. No thanks. He'd rather walk.

Because of some obscure mental connection that existed only in the deepest recesses of his memory, the train brought his thoughts back to the heart-warming rendezvous ahead. And for a moment his desire to be with her was so strong that it almost made him wish he'd waited for the train after all, jammed in with all those people just so he could see her sooner.

His heart began to race at the thought of that erotic afternoon, and he lowered his face to the ground to hide the involuntary smile of lust that

came to his face, fumbling with his underwear through the cotton of his pockets to allow for enough room in the front.

Not that there was anyone to hide from, except himself, that part of him that was her father, tromping up the stairs in his subconscious, the tiny part that scolded him for finding the idea sneaky and wildly exciting.

Still engrossed in his thoughts, he glanced up to the path again, hardly granting mental acknowledgment to the group of people standing before them (a married couple and their three children on a day out in town, by the look of their casual shirts, jeans and camera bags). They were all staring upwards, as if they'd been coming towards him but had been distracted, and they were looking up, behind him, something like trouble or worry in their eyes.

Only the young husband dropped his eyes to Dale's as he passed, shifting from one foot to another as if breaking out of his own hypnosis.

After he passed the group, Dale threw a cursory glance in the same direction, merely out of visual curiosity, his mind still locked in his girlfriend's bedroom. It appeared they were looking at the main arch, back near the north pylons. Dale granted himself a split second to suppose they'd seen a workman or a bird or something, then turned back to continue walking.

The next thing that happened to him was the beginning of the nightmare that was the rest of his life.

Six steps later, there was a noticeable shake on the path, most probably an extraordinarily strong gust. Nevertheless, Dale's hand shot out to grab the top of the guard rail in defence. His heart lurched and jackhammered in his chest for a second. When you're only centimetres from a hundred foot drop, perception of movement can be bloody scary.

Still, had it been the wind? He hadn't felt a gust.

He shrugged inwardly. It was probably high up in the arch.

He had barely lifted his foot to take another step when a heavy metallic thud rang out from behind, which his mind immediately dismissed as loud construction works in North Sydney - heavy building work was loud and very common on both sides of the Harbour.

Next, like a shocking slap across the face, there was a crash. Not just the clang of a heavy crane or the clatter of a pneumatic drill, but the sound of metal, and a large piece, crashing to some hard surface, loud enough to ring out violently over the harbour. As Dale spun around, there were echoes of shouts as several sets of tyres squealing and rasping to a single halt.

Dale looked up and his mouth fell open. A thudding, ringing sounded in his ears, beyond them, and he was engulfed in a wave of unreality, the kind he had when tired as a young child, where the senses merely switch off, you see but can't look, hear but can't listen, the mind in

a world beyond its power to register, as if you were encased in a thick, warm, gluggy cocoon of liquid.

The upper arch on the northern end was falling to pieces.

There was a gap in it now, and his eye caught a litter of metal shards raining towards the ground. Horns blared from the highway, and his eyes fell upon the twisted beam laying across four lanes, cars banking up either side. One small sedan was thrown askew, right side up, its boot and rear bashed downwards, beyond recognition.

Dale's mind danced crazily as he searched the arch for more danger, the path beneath his feet reverberating back and forth from the crash, his knuckles white, his hand still clamped desperately to the rail. Thoughts spun together in a whirlpool in his head, one his voice, the other sweet and mocking

- *Relax, it's only a beam, just one that had rusted rivets, nothing else, nothing -*

- *London Bridge is falling down -*

No! he made his mind shout. It's just one iron beam. A single beam that came loose and damaged a car. That's all! That's all! That's all! Nobody's dead, nobody's hurt, nobody's -

But it wasn't all. As the chaos down the road worsened, the singing in his head trebled and his heart jabbed against the inside of his ribcage and his mind lost itself in uncomprehending terror. More beams and struts came loose in a cobweb and fell through the arch structure, ancient heavy chords of clashing iron exploded outwards across the city.

And as the metal fell and more came loose, more screams and more squealing tyres rang out, he realised (with indescribable feelings that meant *too late* and *loss* shooting back and forth inside his body) that people were going to get killed now. The bashed in boot had been something tangible. For real life, it was enough, enough to be called a **BAD ACCIDENT**, but this wasn't a movie where cars got wrecked and smashed ten to the dozen, and now people were going to die. Dale Milling, his penis only now deflating from his fantasy of being in his girlfriend's bedroom and the sweet white innocence of her cotton briefs, was going to stand there and watch people die.

The downpour of metal rained upon rooves and the road, there were agonised screams and desperate shouts.

A long, thin beam hit a panel van horizontally and its back half was sheared cleanly off in a explosion of glass.

Another, thicker beam, falling at a diagonal angle, hit the roof of a bus, and the windows popped out in a glassburst. The bus lurched violently and toppled onto its side, it's service number and destination *Circular Quay* the only real things left in Dale's mind.

Then the shaking hit. A shriek escaped Dale as he looked up to see, in the already twisted mass of space within the arch, more beams loosening, letting go, knocking each other away. A grand rhythmical opera of heavy iron chorused from the arch, and he could see it, the whole arch structure, with the north pylons as its background, shaking back and forth, waving maniacally in a hundred places, suddenly seeming as thin and fragile as a matchstick model.

His mind protested with a new pathetic thought - 'keep relaxing, it's just a few more beams' all the while realising that if it didn't stop shaking, it was easy for anyone to see that the momentum would shake the whole thing apart. And how would Sydney Harbour look without its great coat hanger? His fear laughed, trying to dismiss itself. But a scrap of logic struggled through, somehow - *don't be an idiot. Do you think this road will stand up with all that falling onto it? And you're still standing here on it!*

And so, with his ears full of screams, crashes (of cars and falling pieces of the Bridge), and the horns of desperate, panicked drivers trying to get away with their lives, Dale turned (completely unaware of dropping his bag), seemingly an act of unimaginable bravado in itself.

The overturned bus was covered with tiny screaming figures when a starlike group of beams twirled around, connected at one end (he would've surmised, had he been coherent, that they were bound with cable), came through the air and hit it.

The beams further smashed the bus, and he watched them, thirty or thirty five feet long and probably weighing eight thousand kilograms, strike the horrified people. With dreadful, frightening fascination, he saw that some of the figures rolled off or fell and didn't get up.

Then the shaking became a bridgequake. With shocking and terrifying clarity, one ridiculous but suddenly realistic thought hit him.

If I don't get off here, I'm going to die.

Dale's panicked hold on the rail far beyond him, he turned towards the city and ran, not realising he kicked his bag violently aside and not sparing a second for a backward glance. The shaking of the path threw him from side to side, but for the most part he was able to stay upright. He began to sob in breath in hitching gasps. He heard deep splashes below and behind, and shut them out. He didn't want to know what they were.

In ten seconds Dale had run a seventh of the length of the entire Bridge, what would normally take four to five minutes. In that time it had gotten worse. The shaking under his feet (it was possible to feel that it was the result of the arch rumbling and shaking) had become a series of thuds and a rumble, more a feeling than a sound, from below - the road and its supports beneath were beginning to break up.

A new sound stopped Dale dead in his tracks, striking horror through him. It was a thick, rocky crumbling. He turned slowly, not wanting to see, expecting a sight far worse than he could imagine and was greeted by a sight far worse than that.

Stone and ages old mortar were falling from the north east pylon. Even from here, he could see jagged cracks creeping along its surface, and a billowing explosion of dust and rock as they reached a volatile join.

A bolt of fear churned, *screamed* through him. The real world was far behind, and he was trapped in this awful fantasy world, a world where the north east pylon of the Sydney Harbour Bridge would fall over and the Bridge would fall into Port Jackson. He felt that, on top of everything else, if he tried to imagine all the people dead by now (*so far*, his mind reeled), he would go insane.

He looked back up at the arch structure, ignorant of his eyes streaming with tears and his top lip caked with dried snot. The rupturing arch seemed to crumple, and the rifts and cracks seared onward, like a sheet of paper, a tear running jaggedly through it towards the crest of the Bridge.

Towards him.

The path lurched downwards below his feet and he was spilled to the ground. He screamed in fear and scrambled up, running for the city with every ounce of strength he could muster, his tie streaming from his collar in the wind like the comical scarf of a WWI flying ace.

An almighty crash erupted into the air. Dale shrieked with all his strength, to try to drown out the noise. The vertical supports, which held the arch up from the road, gave way as one, exploding outwards over the water and across the litter of smashed cars below. The entire northern half of the arch structure came down in pieces, careening off the road, gouging divots of asphalt and concrete, clanging and bonging like the death heraldry of the worlds biggest, gloomiest hanging chimes.

The southern end of the structure stayed intact, barely, letting go of the northern side as it fell, and buckled on its own verticals, but held. If Dale had run back towards the north (like that family he passed a minute before, who would right now be laying smashed under an ocean of steel), he'd be dead right then.

As he gazed in incomprehension at the space in the sky where the arch of the Bridge had stood for sixty years, he saw his own mortality up there with it, and anyone who is able to look at a point in space where their life wouldn't have been remembers it for a long time.

A train roared past Dale towards the north, and he withheld a useless urge to scream 'no' at it. The pieces of the north half came still, the whole arch fallen into a million pieces, punching cars and trucks metres into the road, and sometimes smashing right through, tearing

metal supports from below, further weakening the road and in turn the southern half of the arch, and sending downpours of beams and struts to the already discoloured water below, obliterating pleasure craft and dragging them below the water.

Waves lashed the harbour shore, shook ferries and other boats to their foundations, and above, the Bridge, singing its thunderous chorus of damnation, continued to fall.

A shower of small braces and bars rained to the road beside him, and he felt the first pinch of true belief - even his own death amid this disaster was somehow too surreal and other-worldly to credit, but he could imagine getting seriously hurt very easily. The pieces of metal crashing down around him were big and heavy enough to break a bone, shear open skin, or split open a skull. And Dale realised that he might have literally seconds before one sought him out.

With half the structure gone, the arch was falling apart even faster at the city end, above him.

He watched the train, its brakes now squealing, trundling to a space where an entire chunk had been smashed from the edge, leaving a gaping hole where both train tracks and one lane of the highway had been, but was now a cavity of twisted, broken supports.

He watched with his own disbelieving eyes as the train, going no slower despite the emergency braking measure and doomed to its fate, plummeted off the edge, one carriage after another, like a strand of spaghetti down some giant phantom mouth. The last carriage clipped the opposite edge of the hole and a piece of its roof and the exposed electricals exploded off.

He didn't realise he'd stopped to watch the train until the path took another sickening dive downwards and Dale ran again, beams thundering to the ground around him now, dust choking the air.

Ahead, two cars had collided trying to escape. A splash of dry blood was spilled down the door of one, a navy VW Beetle, and the other, a white Mitsubishi Colt, was overturned. A few metres away lay a pink baby car cradle, its frame buckled and twisted.

In a split second Dale had time to notice that he had passed over the harbour's edge. He was over the tiny lane of George Street's northern end.

A scathing screech of breaking rock told him that the north east pylon was giving way, and the north west one would be next. He glanced behind. Where he'd been, one minute before, watching the family of worried looking -

(My God, they saw this starting, they *saw* it!)

- tourists was nothing but smashed iron on a lurching, groaning surface. A cyclist sped past towards the city on the opposite path, and

beyond him, there was nobody. Between him and Milsons Point he was the only person alive, for all he knew. The thought made him feel horribly alone. He began to run again.

As he watched a falling beam bash a car (and its occupants) from above, there was a rending scream from far above, louder than everything else (Jesus Christ - he thought - people can probably hear this happening as far away as the airport). He didn't dare look up, firstly for fear of losing his balance, and secondly for fear of seeing something plummeting towards him to squash him flat. A second later a huge object fell past on his left. It was one of the building-trains, and the small appendages and aerials on top of it bashed against the wire guard not three feet from him as it went. He heard a crash of metal and water as it hit.

XII

He had run a few feet past the edge of George Street when it happened, the one or two seconds he would never forget. The rest of the falling Bridge had faded in his memory. He still knew what happened, but it was like being born. We all know that we were once expelled screaming from our mothers womb, but how many of us can recall an awful, giant masked face in a white room to greet us, or that a stringently clean antiseptic odour was the first of billions to pierce and christen our tiny nostrils.

He remembered it, but he couldn't feel it.

No, it was the falling that would stay with him forever. Nightmares of the incident were perceived as a knowledge that the Bridge was falling rather than a first hand feeling of it. But, mid-dream, emotion somehow cut in and transported his mind back in time to be there, standing in that nineteen year old's body, as if, while watching TV, one is pulled into the TV by some phantom force to take part.

And he could see the people, hear the fear in their voices as they beckoned him, and he could feel his feet turn and run to them, his smart brown shoes (he had hit the ground so hard, one of them was thrown from his foot by the force of his impact) slamming down on the cement path, cracking apart until it swallowed him and spewed him into the air, humankind's most familiar substance and his most terrifying abyss.

XIII

Dale stopped dead when he saw the building train fall past him, his mind reeling to take it in. And at the oddest moment they could, tears came as his mind raced to try and encompass all the history that must be falling down all around him.

He hurt his neck snapping his head around, towards the path ahead, where he heard cries. Two young, professionally dressed women, a teenaged boy with Dr Marten boots and torn, blotchy jeans, and a middle-aged man donned with a headband, sneakers and white shorts were calling frantically at him. He could only hear snatches of their voices through the thunder of raining iron (he could feel minute spatters raining over himself, now), but as he turned to them they gestured like maniacs for him to go to them. With so much of his mind struggling with the nightmare around him, only a few brain cells realised - they were calling him to safety. Dale turned fully to them and took off.

An excruciating shudder rocked the path, along with an ear splitting bang, like that of a heavy, high powered hand gun. Ahead, the road (and the path beside it) opened up, a wide crack causing pieces of the road to fall.

Dale screamed once, pleading and desperately clutching at thin air, toppling forward from the sudden violent movement, and went into the hole.

He spun a somersault once in midair and seemed to freeze. He had time to notice the underside of the highway a few metres up with its shaking network of supports, the ground far (but not yet frighteningly) below, the buildings of The Rocks and Dawes Point, even the cars banked up around the Quay. And he had a millisecond to realise that there was nothing to hold onto any more, and that he was going to fall.

And then, he did fall.

His mind buzzed and was useless. His bowels and bladder let go, and the ground wasn't still any more. The little lane of George Street was racing, at light speed, up towards him. The strip of black among the green grew larger. He plunged, arms flailing, lurching violently to one side in the most basic, primeval self defence gesture just metres before his right side struck the asphalt.

XIV

It was as if his mind had taken it all in after all, mercifully denying him the experience at the time. He remembered turning to protect his face, closing his eyes and drawing his hands up in reflex, and then every single atom that made up his body jolted painfully. He hit the ground hard enough to feel it move under him.

His head slammed down on his left hand, splintering every bone in it and fracturing his skull, for which he later suffered bruising of the brain tissue and beat 20% odds at having permanent and severe brain damage.

The weight of his body virtually crushed his right arm - he felt the bones in it pulverise the surface tissue and skin. He felt several things in

his chest and abdomen rupture and squirt noxious liquids into his torsal cavity.

He felt crisp snaps in both his back and neck. His ankle and most of his right foot bones shattered, along with his right kneecap. The bone between the two was snapped in eight places. Falling on his hip almost destroyed his pelvis, he felt the entire right side of it smash inside.

He felt almost all his right ribs break cleanly off and then several of his left ones as his left arm came crashing onto his side from the impact.

And inside him wasn't all. With incredible clarity he could remember his left shoe just letting go of his foot (later it was noticed by witnesses to have a split almost all the way from the toe around to the heel. His head smashed the watch on his left wrist to smithereens and split the leather band in two places. The shirt beneath his right shoulder literally blew apart, fibre by fibre. A twenty cent coin in his trouser pocket had a piece gouged out by the dektagonal corner of a fifty cent coin, another corner of the fifty breaking his skin through the cotton of the pocket in an angry strip of red.

Those were the major injuries he remembered having in those split seconds. The others, he either couldn't identify (such as the jagged stub of a broken rib punching a hole through his right lung) or simply didn't have time to consider (including his teeth virtually shredding his tongue as the impact jolted it tearingly between his jaws or the force of the sudden stop sending the nails of his right clenched fist stabbing clean holes, half a centimetre deep, into his palm).

XV

All of Sydney, both sides of the harbour, was a chaotic orchestra of sounds, the screeching and tearing of the arch structure giving way and crashing to the road and sea, the heavy, sluggish crunching of the north east pylon giving up its seventy year hold on the Bradfield Highway and crumbling into the sea and onto Milsons Point. The screech of a thousand sets of brakes throughout Sydney city - both those escaping (and avoiding) the holocaust and those anxious to see the awful, violent spectacle of it, and the screams, screams of the dying and of those driven mad with what they saw.

Before the whole city, the largest centralised metropolis in the southern hemisphere, before over three hundred thousand pairs of horrified eyes, before three hundred and sixty seven cameras and forty nine home video cameras (that were destined to become part of the media circus to plague Dale Milling's life), before a news helicopter full of soon-to-be-famous weathermen, the Sydney Harbour Bridge (right up

there with Big Ben, the Eiffel Tower and the Empire State Building) fell into the sea, the two southern pylons pock-marked but standing, the road, still retaining its grip on them, plunging down from the pylons into the water, an ugly graveyard of steel, concrete and stone littering the water and surrounding land, the ancient stone dust already floating away towards the heads.

And everybody watched, the world watched as it brought about the death of five hundred and eighty three Sydneysiders.

But the sounds fell upon the deaf ears of Dale Milling. He rolled (collapsed) onto his back, further rupturing and straining his injuries in a series of clicks, snaps, dislocations and a network of icy blades of pain throughout his broken body as internal wounds split or opened further, let go, or gave way.

He'd heard but not registered the screams of onlookers considering his horrible fate as he fell, and he still heard them now. His eyes saw vague colours and shapes through pools of tears - both of pain and shock. His breath grated from his lungs in hitching, racing gasps, like a tiny boy on the verge of tears, broken by long, agonised moans and deep sobs that further tore his lungs.

Blood steadily seeped from his nose and mouth, and from other wounds around his body (the back of his right hand, his right thigh, a spot above his pelvis and to the left where a splinter of rib had pierced his skin, and his entire right upper arm beneath the pulverised fragments of his shirt, where his skin had merely burst apart against the ground.

His mouth was awash with blood, spit, and the already stale adrenalin that had surged up his throat. His trousers and the bottom of his shirt were soaked with a sour potion of urine, blood, and an explosion of excrement. His mind was numb with shock and still buzzing uselessly like a stereo turned on at full volume but playing nothing, a violent, shocking sound, and knew only the pain, like hot fireworks throughout his body.

At some time after that, people started to arrive. Snatches of words and phrases floated through the cocoon of disbelief and shock his mind had constructed around him from its last shreds of logical thought.

- is he all right? -
- dead -
- breathing -
- shit himself -
- Christ, call an -
- need help -
- hear me? -
- don't move his -

Vague shadows of figures leant over him. Something smooth was pulled behind his head, his shirt and tie were undone and the cool air breezed across his burning chest, his foot was gently cradled and several sore spots were dabbed with soft cloths. Delicate fingers brushed the hair from his forehead and soothing voices whispered in an incomprehensible language to him.

He didn't remember anything after that. He didn't remember TV cameras rolling and snapping, pointed at him. He didn't remember voices shouting questions at him, like 'What was going through your mind?', and 'Will you be taking action against the State Government?' He didn't remember being bundled into the ambulance and undergoing stringent first aid.

He didn't remember undergoing forty seven operations (including two transplants and twelve grafts, and being administered no less than sixty courses of drugs.

Ironically, right through the initial media coverage and worldwide attention that made his small, agonised face famous, he had been unconscious and/or barely conscious. And when he was awake, alert, and still covered in bandages or plaster, they'd found another war or killing. It was his face that had been Horrorfall, not him. He was old news. The longstanding impact of all the news stories and photographs were unavoidable, and they brought the memories to life, which took up house right there in his dream department, permanent residents.

And Dale didn't remember his father. Three days before Christmas of 1997, with Dale in his last stages of treatment, he died of bone cancer.

When Dale re-entered the world and society, he was lonely, sad, cynical, wheelchair bound for life, and perhaps the worst thing, the opposite of what he had been, haunted by the past, instead of hoping for the future. Haunted by what might have been, the job, flying, the girl. His dreams and hopes had all crashed to the ground with him that day and lay scattered. Haunted by dreams of falling.

Of falling to what might as well have been his death.

BOOK 2

I

Away in the deepest pits of his mind he fell, screaming, and smashed to the ground. He snapped awake, awash with sweat, his reflexes struggling to drag him upright.

His rise to a sitting position was a small battle - retarded by the calculated hydraulic whirr (more a feeling than a sound) of the machine in his back that allowed his shattered spine only controlled movement.

Once upright, back immaculately straight, he looked around his tiny unit, a bedsit flat of a bathroom, kitchen, and a bed/living room, all decked out with the most basic fixtures and fittings as well as decorations.

He considered for the millionth time the small desk and chair set at the opposite end of the room, which contained basically everything he personally owned apart from kitchen and bathroom tools and appliances. A big dining table sat against the adjacent wall - straight opposite the main entrance, its only decoration a ceramic tub of flowers and the small Sanyo tape deck/radio - \$159.99 from Grace Bros electrical - silent on top of it.

The TV cabinet sat silently in the corner between the desk and the kitchen door, and the weeping fig tree, halfway to the ceiling, slept in the special way plants do at night, in absolute stillness, in the corner between the desk and the table.

He turned his head to the right. His neck had long since healed but if he moved his head too suddenly even now he would suffer painful twinges, and looked through the sheer, cheaply embroidered curtains and out the window.

The view from his 'bed window', one of the two wide windows on opposite ends of the rooms length, was mostly blocked by the flats next door, but if you were to stand against the wall and look along the plane of the window, you could see, past next doors block, a line of aspen trees along the edge of the park across the street, and a streetlight that, at night, threw a comforting strip of cool fluorescent white light onto the wall above the small bedside table.

The large window opposite on next doors block was dark and impenetrable, as opaque as a blank wall.

And of course it would be. The young couple who lived there would be fast asleep, perhaps in each others arms, maybe on opposite sides of their bed, their minds unconsciously preparing their bodies for another day, when they'd rise early, dress professionally and leave for work (he'd never dreamed of stickybeaking, it was merely tiny, sparse snatches of their routine which formed their pattern in his mind, which amused itself almost solely on observation nowadays).

No, only people with ancient psychological damage awoke sweating, in terror, in the middle of the night. The small, glowing green digits of the clock radio on the tiny bedside table told him it was 3:43 am. He needn't, however, have bothered looking at the clock. A second worth of deduction would've let him guess the time accurately. The fact that no cars roared past on the main road down the street was one indication, another was a single bright star (whose travels and routine from day to day and year to year had long become familiar) that was visible above the units opposite.

After his long hours, days and years of witnessing and unconsciously recording the heartbeat of the world, he would've guessed between two thirty and four. And at that hour of the day, the exact time didn't matter much anyway.

An angry yellow glare erupted suddenly into the room. His head snapped around to it in reflex, a stabbing thud jarring his neck. He winced and grasped his spine, which sang with pain.

The light next door had gone on. The girl who lived there walked through the room and into the kitchen, only the refrigerator and a small portion of bench top visible. She was absently scratching at her head, her hair a scrawled mess. She wore a pair of bikini briefs only, her white thin body and smallish breasts free for him to see.

Dale didn't try not to look. He looked as every man would, but instead of the racing heat of memory any other man would feel, Dale felt only what his own body told him, and wondered again not what it would be like to touch, kiss and make love to her, but what it would be like to touch, kiss and make love to *any* woman.

Dale spent a lot of years, the time in the wheelchair, feeling impotent and powerless. One of the times the impotence stung the most was at the sight of a beautiful woman or the notion of erotic thoughts. His heart would beat limply, kept well in check by the pacemaker that was removed when his lease of life was given back, his lower body cut off and useless.

But now, proudly, he could almost feel the torrent of blood streaming into the reservoirs of tissue in his penis, feel himself swell and stiffen, the delicate factories of his testicles began to fabricate millions of sperm, each of them carrying his blueprints.

Dale didn't care what anyone said about penises or erections any more, how ridiculous they looked. They were gifts, things he had come to love about himself more than he ever did. Gifts which he'd been given back as surely as the power to walk again. He thought most men didn't realise how wonderful it really was, never having had to go without the feeling of identity and strength of an erection, and thought they were just

evolutionary necessities, sometimes embarrassing, sometimes annoying, always uncontrollable.

But when you cut through all the taboos and hang ups of society, to have the power to produce an erection again, to feel blood coursing through his body, to feel his semen pulse through his penis in sweet spasms of ecstasy again felt wonderful, and he was forever grateful.

The girl walked back through the main room and out of sight, and as the light went out, his unit was plunged into mid morning darkness once again.

He ran a hand through his hair and swung his legs over the rail beside the bed. He leaned forward and grasped the rail, carefully dragging it to bring his weight forward. His feet touching the floor, he stood up, feeling the machines hydraulics whirr steadily inside him again as they guided his spine upright, its brace holding it in one piece and its mechanics rolling in response to muscle pressure.

The metal shafts, wires and computer chip in his back had been a miracle, the thing that had given back his freedom. After the fall of late 1998, when he was approaching twenty, he'd been bound to a wheelchair, the damage to his spinal cord and his broken backbone leaving him a paraplegic.

He spent the next seven years living at home with his mother, the two of them living on disabled dependent and widow's pensions. During those years, their one comfort (apart from each other) was that they had no financial worry.

But Dale could see that he was a burden to his mother. She had enjoyed the life of an average housewife and mother for two decades until confronted with the death of her husband and suddenly becoming a nursemaid to her crippled son.

Dale made a determined effort not to tax his mothers life so much. He prepared meals at every opportunity, tidied whenever possible (it was hard to reach high surfaces and next to impossible to push a vacuum cleaner in a wheelchair), and tried to trundle to the corner shops every now and then.

But even contributing as much as he could, it still took all of her time, care and attention, which was rapidly burning her out. She was growing old and going grey before her time, without vitality or enthusiasm for any task, without whatever passion for life she ever had.

It tore his heart to leave, but he knew if he stayed it would kill her. The freezing cold night of her birthday in 2005, June 23rd, when she turned fifty three (but looked seventy or more) he gave her three birthday presents. One was a ceramic bowl, irises and roses painted on the outside, for her to put potpourri in (she'd been complaining for months about having to use jugs and cereal bowls, the second a tin of Quality Street

chocolates, and the third was a sheet of paper rolled up and tied with a red ribbon. Her freedom.

She had unrolled it that night and began to cry, and Dale had followed. It hurt them both, but they both knew it was the best thing, and that it was the kindest birthday gift he could have given her.

They'd sat together at the kitchen table, the wind shaking the windows in their roller tracks, crying together as she read the paper again and again, and he finally said "You're finished looking after me, Mum."

The paper was the title deed for a disabled persons unit, a twenty minute trip from their house. For five weeks, Dale had been secretly arranging it with the family solicitors, Wilkins Hodgson & Co, and it had been secured. It was subsidised by the Housing Commission and his disabled persons pension paid the remainder of the rent, as well as food, delivered once a week, cleaning and laundry services that collected and changed sheets, towels and clothes, and a private secretary/housekeeper to keep the place and his affairs in order for four hours a day.

All these costs, subsidised or otherwise, left him with a weekly income of \$72.43 a week. Friends and family were generally appalled at this amount. How was he supposed to live on that pittance all his life?

But they didn't know the truth of Dale's life. For the first few months he saved the pension and bought his TV, VCR and tape deck, and after that, he spent very little. He was amazed at how little money it was actually possible to spend.

He could roll down to the shopping village now and then, buy a book or some ingredients to cook something special or get a video, but during the winter months it was often bitter outside, especially with the old pacemaker (it was state of the art medical technology but still wasn't a patch on the infinitely sensitive efficiency of the brain).

And even in the best of weather it was too tiring a trip to make too often. The shopping village lay halfway up a street where the road sloped ever so gently upwards. So gently that a passing car made the trip with a hardly noticeable decrease in engine revs. It was, however, a different matter for a young man in a wheelchair.

So many times he envisioned reaching the top of the hill and his pacemaker short-circuiting from the strain of his pumping arms and the whole contraption, with him in it, clutching his chest and gasping for air and blood, rolling all the way down and into the path of a speeding car. Or his arm muscles simply seizing up, no longer able to keep pumping forward, and the wheelchair rolling back down the path, the wheels shearing skin and tissue from the heels of his hands as he tried in vain to stop his momentum.

So after food and basic entertainment, Christmas and a few other occasions, he had virtually nothing else to spend his money on. Every

now and again he would ask his housekeeper, Julie, to bring a bunch of flowers to brighten the place up, but that was really all.

She came in five days a week, and very occasionally, if there was something more to do, she was more than happy to come in on a Saturday morning at time and a half. Cleaning didn't have to be done absolutely every single day and there was ample security in case he got himself into trouble (emergency buttons in every room at ground and eye level that either put him in contact with or signalled an ambulance or the caretaker, as well as smoke alarms).

So most of the time she was there they talked. Having developed an observant sense of curiosity from years of solitude (there isn't much to grasp the attention someone outside the active circle of society), he asked questions a lot, and mostly they spoke about her, her parents, her night course at university (they still spoke very occasionally - she was twenty five now, had completed her degree in criminal and family law and worked for a small solicitors office in Parramatta), and her no-hoper boyfriend, who was apparently selling drugs and was occasionally in trouble with the police, and who she seemed either too scared or not bothered to get rid of.

They got on well together, chatting comfortably about anything and everything as she arranged his personal affairs and washed, ironed, cleaned or vacuumed.

They'd also become quite close and talked about troubles and problems. She knew him from the media coverage of seven years before when the Harbour Bridge collapsed, and they had spoken about his ordeal then and since in depth, proving very therapeutic for him.

When Julie would leave for the day he would feel a mixture of relief to be able to get on with his own pursuits and rest a bit (talking was exhaustive for so many hours), and regret at not having her company.

She was a great girl, who did her job. Sometimes she came in a rotten mood, as everybody has at sometime, and she wasn't ideal in terms of reliability. She occasionally called in the morning to say she couldn't make it because her boyfriend was in court or jail or kicked out of home and she had to help him out of it. But she was most of what he had.

He had his TV and video, he had an adequate library of books that kept his mind from turning rusty through lack of use, and his Mum visited a few times a week and he would make them both a cup of tea, or some lunch, and they would talk, sometimes about menial things, all the time feeling and appreciating the conscious knowledge of being alive, and being together.

A few times he had tried to write stories or poetry, thinking that could keep his mind and time engaged. He had amusing visions of hundreds of notepads stacked in one corner, full and bursting with literary

prose, poetry, novels and journals, but his every attempt produced only a laughable bunch or corny metaphors and silly romantic imagery. It wasn't that he couldn't express himself, it was just that he had taken after both his parents and was born without a creative bone in his body. And being rendered incapacitated by a long fall wasn't going to change that.

He had a little world of his own and could gradually feel himself rebuilding self esteem and losing his lonely, cold repugnance of the world.

He found himself, under his circumstances, as happy as he could be.

II

Dale walked towards the kitchen to get himself a glass of water. He had woken with that dry, pasty taste everyone has occasionally. The brace, modified since it was fitted, held his back almost pretentiously straight but allowed freer movement now that the mechanical system had been restructured and the control box was balanced a bit more towards speed rather than detail. When his orthopaedic doctor had told him it would never be the same as having his own spine, that was the expectation from the machine. But the technology had improved, and now, Dale couldn't detect any difference from his youth. The brace allowed him to do anything he always had, the only difference being continuously good posture.

He walked toward the sink without turning on the light - he wasn't in the mood for its sudden, piercing glare (next door had been bad enough at this hour) and groped around the draining board for a glass. He filled it in the sink and gulped it straight down, feeling the waxiness in his mouth dissolve.

He scratched absently at his crotch through his flannelette pyjama bottoms and stared out the window above the sink, the view consisting of a billowing redgum tree and snatches of beige brick of the flats next door. His body shuddered, the sudden cool of the midmorning early summer air chilling his naked top half after the warmth of bed.

As he stared, a picture came into his mind. Of a young boy laying wrecked and smashed on the ground, his life abruptly cut off, the picture that had graced a hundred newspapers and TV news reports, the pain on the young face the one tangible evidence the world had that there had been suffering.

Had he suffered, he often wondered nowadays? He was alive, he had lived long enough to see the technology which would pick up his life again. There was suffering, but now he looked back with a clear heart to all those years ago, adrift in time, he realised he'd gotten off easy.

People had been sitting on a bus or in their car, minding their own business, maybe deciding what to have for dinner that night or talking to their wife or husband or lover on the car phone or mentally preparing for the appointment ahead, when a wall of steel had sheared into their car, cleaving them or the person next to them in half, soaking their peaceful, inconsequential lives with their own blood.

Or they had been sitting on a train, reading the paper or a magazine, or chatting to their friend, when there had been a squeal of brakes, a terrifying sensation of the carriage dipping down, then a horrendous crash as the train hit the harbour, water crashing through the windows, cascading into the carriage, people clawing, clambering for air, screaming, packed like fish in a net, in a claustrophobic crush of death, treading each other under the water to keep their heads up, gulping for what was their last doomed breath.

He hadn't been so grateful then. His contempt for the world was black and hateful, for the vulturous nature of people and the media, picking his already ruined remains to shreds, marvelling at his agonised face, dumping him for dead when he failed to catch their interest and sell their papers.

He spent a lot of years with a black cloud in his heart, no self esteem, and what the psychologist had, at the time, called 'self destructive paranoia'. He wrote inane letters to the newspapers, threatening to sue, and the government, demanding compensation and better treatment and concessions for the disabled. He hated the world purely because he suddenly had no other way to accept it. He'd become a hateful, gnarled old man, blaming the state of the world on anything he could.

He hated life, he hated God (he was an atheist then and still now, God was merely a convenient focal point for his contempt), and he hated what both of them had done to him.

But as the years rolled ever onward, his struggle with the futile hatred inside him tired him out and his attitude mellowed. The cynicism had drained his energy. He grew accustomed to his new lifestyle, and spent his early thirties gradually realising what he did have to be thankful for. He had lost a lot in that fall. His future. Now, he was of no use to society, living off it. But he no longer looked on that fact with impotent bitterness.

Especially now. He had been crippled and now he could walk.

Dale reached around to the small of his back and felt the two small cogs, which you could only feel the very edges of by pressing into your back really hard. It was the only part of the brace that he could detect.

It had been five years since it was put in, and he was thirty eight now. At first, it had annoyed him, not so much the feeling as the knowledge that it was there. But now it was so much a part of him he

couldn't even feel it. It had become his backbone. Even the feeling of the mechanics whirring as he bent was something he had to concentrate on consciously to detect. He knew it was the brace that completed the transmission of mental commands to his legs, but he felt as though *he* was in control again, not a series of wires and axles just responding. He could lift his knee, and feel it. His body was whole again.

III

Dale blinked, tipped the half glass of water down the sink, and returned to the living room. Instead of returning to bed, he sat down at the desk, adjacent to the kitchen, and snapped on the bank-style desk lamp, a gift for his eighteenth birthday, with a brass base, fine patterns etched and crafted into it, and a longish, horizontal, emerald coloured shade.

He reached into the bottom drawer and produced a large scrapbook, emblazoned with overlapping square photos of surfers, cyclists, roller skaters, tennis players and fencers.

Whenever Dale dreamed of the episode, he sat in the middle of the night and relived it, through the scrapbook. And by now, he knew what possessed him to sit, shuddering with horror and revulsion, enveloped in painful memories - reaching the end all over again.

In his school years, when he and his friends reached the ages where they all began to get their drivers licenses and first cars, they drove. They drove everywhere, the same way some groups went nightclubbing or to the beach. Sometimes just three or four of them, sometimes as many as fifteen, packed into in convoys of rusty, battered early to mid '80 sedans with torn seats, oceans of empty chip packets and McDonalds wrappers on the floors and cassettes blaring from the cracked, coverless speakers (Dale's private epitome of every teenager's first car).

The best drives took place at night, for the most part. And they had a small repertoire of favourite destinations. Into the city, out to Sydney's easternmost industrial district (along both heads of Botany Bay) and south into the bush, through the Royal National Park, and along the high, lonely coast roads to Wollongong and beyond.

And that's what Dale remembered most. They'd leave the brightly lit suburban roads and go plunging into the bush, speeding down the highways, further and further into the grip of darkness. He'd turn and look out the back window, watching the black road stretching away into the dark bush, the black, still trees and the cold, hard stars glittering fiercely.

He'd tease himself, forcing himself to imagine being lost out here in the pitch black, the freezing cold, fancying awful night creatures or flesh-eating zombies hiding in the trees or appearing in the darkness to run after them.

And as they returned, back onto the southern by-way that would lead them home, more soft drink cans at their feet and the welcome lights of White Anglo Saxon Protestant suburbia burning beside the roads, there would be a feeling that Dale eventually recognised as relief. He'd willingly put himself in death's grasp, on the brink of his own terror and destruction, not for its own sake, but for the relief of returning to safety again.

Years after the fall from the Bridge, he'd told a psychologist the story of the drives, and the feeling of safe return, and the psychologist had understood immediately. He'd told Dale about men who cross dress. In eighty percent of cases, he'd said, men who dress as women have been brought up to be afraid of losing their masculinity, often by fathers who saw emotions as shameful. And so the reason they did it wasn't "being" a woman, he'd said, but the relief of becoming a man again.

He'd explained that it was a strong emotional characteristic in some people, one everyone possessed to a degree.

"The human psyche," he'd said, "wants to put itself within reach of that horror, that unknown, whatever it may be, purely for the reason of returning to find that safety and landing pad still there. Some doctors theorise that it's the mind's reassurance of sanity, that there's a mental base you can come back to somewhere in all the horrors your mind is capable of."

He'd convinced Dale that the same was true of his scrapbook, that he relived the horror and cried for lost chances because the end of the book was his reward - the truth that it really was over, and that he had come out all right. The psychologist had told Dale to do it for as long as it felt necessary, because it was a healthy emotional exercise.

Dale opened the book to the first page. The small article was there, the one he'd never gotten around to sticking in and which just hung around the inside cover. It was a story wedged between two square photos. On the left, the famous photo of him on the ground of George Street after the fall, and on the right, a picture of him just five years ago, standing upright, the brace only four weeks old inside him. The story had been a human interest piece in a small suburban weekly paper, mostly to do with the brace itself. Dale, as always, smiled in amusement at himself a few years ago.

Stuck on the opening pages were the cover and inside cover of an old edition of the Daily Telegraph, Friday, October 2nd, 1998.

His smile disappeared. A single headline heralded *Horrorfall*, and there he was, all seven columns and thirty centimetres of him on the front page of Sydney's major paper, bleeding, broken, crying, half dead, barely in focus and perfect for the whole drama. His fifteen minutes of fame. The picture that was still the way the world remembered him.

It was of his upper half, taken from his left. He was on his back, his teeth bared, his face a grimace of pain, a trail of blood down his left cheek and the very edge of the explosion of blood that had been the right side of his head just visible. His white shirt was dotted with blood, his right hand, smashed almost flat, fingers every which way, lay across his stomach. There was a blurred hand reaching for his head and a black shoe in the top left hand corner.

The caption read ***A city watches in disbelief as the Harbour Bridge crumbles.*** And, inside a grey box across the bottom of the page, ***Full story, pictures pg 2-12.***

The next page was entirely covered with a shaky aerial still that showed the Bridge with half the arch crumbled, the road gashed with holes. He skimmed the main story, knowing it word for word, feeling echoes of contempt for the media as he read the over-indulgent metaphors and tabloid language - *over six hundred people met their doom yesterday...Harbour Bridge trembled and literally crashed into the harbour....Packed afternoon train plunged.....drowned or crushed to death by a rainstorm of falling iron.*

The third page of the report had two main pictures, one of the Bridge intact (caption - ***Before***), and in the opposite corner, the wreckage, after it was all over (caption - ***After: 5pm yesterday***), with a continuation of the story, and on the next was a series of eight photos, all taken from a home video which was shot on the deck of the HMAS *Uluru*, in port near Garden Island at the time, in a step-by-step sequence of the entire incident, plus a guide below.

As he looked into his own agonised face on the front page, the fear gripped him, that feeling, now nineteen years old, of desperation, knowing you're going to go.....straight.....down;

- o god o christ help me i'm in midair and i'm grabbing but there's nothing to hold onto any more o god and i'm going to fall o christ help me i'm going to fall so far o god -

and then (mercifully, he now understood), his mind seemed to overload from the desperate, clutching fear, it thrummed and was gone.

He could only see things streaking past, the ground streaking upwards, feel his limbs flailing, feel himself falling, feeling himself hitting the ground so hard he felt it crack like the desert floor always does underneath Wile E. Coyote, so hard it forced his clothes apart, so hard it felt louder, an explosion of flesh on asphalt, than the entire Bridge put together, so hard that it killed his sanity for those few seconds, clawed his mind away to a state of uselessness, to a state of disconnection so complete he pissed himself and shit himself in a single explosive lapse of instinctive bodily control by the mind. He'd fallen, and on the way down he'd seen death and insanity, and they were the same.

IV

Dale read through the entire book, a bit over halfway full, the articles concerning the various government enquiries, the heartbreak of the victims families, and the often grisly clean up operation (including photos taken by underwater cameras of the peak hour train - packed full of the bloated corpses of the unfortunate commuters, risen to the ceiling by the noxious gases in them, resting at the bottom of the harbour.

Dale sighed deeply as he closed the book and dropped it back into the drawer. He snapped the lamp off and turned to look at the clock mounted between the entrance and kitchen doors to try to see the time, but it's white face and yellow hands were invisible in the darkness. He turned back to the desk and noticed the first cool, salmony band of rose light on the horizon out the window. He estimated the time to be between five and five thirty. He'd been sitting reading and thinking to himself for over an hour and a half.

He walked back to the bed, toppling over the rail and bouncing lightly as he fell onto it, yawning deeply. He could feel the few hours of lost sleep catch up on him already, and he would have to regain them - he had a big day ahead. He had to get a job.

He'd been job hunting for three months so far. Just as the prospect of walking had seemed like a dream, a possibility that existed only in science fiction, the idea that he might one day re-enter the work force was nearly impossible to grasp, until the state government changed that too.

The Australian Labour Party, who had seized power in New South Wales in 1995, had become more and more liberal (following suit with its federal namesake) had become harder on the common man, while the rich filled their pockets with the results.

And so, when 95% of the previously incapacitated population suddenly became consumable manpower, the state government encouraged ex-paraplegics to rejoin the work force. There was a state-wide media campaign to hire ex-paraplegics. There was a famous TV commercial that began with the words *Spot the Difference*, and went on to show two men, side by side, working in a factory, sweat pouring from them, performing the same task at benches in front of them with the same speed. Both men looked solemnly but proudly into the camera and the picture faded out to the words *The man on the left has just spent 25 years in a wheelchair*, fading alternately to the State Labour Party logo and the slogan of the campaign - *They've been given life, let them live it* - with the NSW Ex-Paraplegics Association logo below that).

The aim wasn't only to encourage businesses to hire ex-paraplegics, but to encourage ex-paraplegics to go out and seek employment. To that end, the government adopted a tried and proven strategy.

Disability pensions paid to ex-paraplegics still receiving payments were cut by as much as sixty percent, depending on certain factors (the various factors determined in a study conducted by the Federal Bureau of Statistics and Harrow and Beauchamp Economic Consultants Pty Ltd - one that cost \$12.8 million and that the money saved from the disability cuts would eventually pay off in mid 2021).

The pension cuts were designed to make things just hard enough for ex-paraplegics so that they virtually had to find work to keep their standard of living.

The campaign had been launched in March 2016 and so far it was estimated that 56 - 58 percent of the ex-paraplegic community had rejoined the work force state-wide. Upon gaining employment, the monthly cash pension was cut out completely, but concessions were still available (health plans; financial relief for housekeeping; and superannuation to make up for joining the work force late in life).

Not bothering with agencies, Dale only looked in the paper. Some of the ads had been through agencies, but he didn't go out of his way to register. He'd been unsuccessful so far, whatever that meant. With no family to feed or rent to pay (the flat was fully his, paid off by his fathers inheritance), he had nothing to equate failure to.

His pension had gone from \$273.61 to \$198.20 per week, which didn't break him but had been a shock. It would be nice to make a jump to the thirty five thousand dollars a year state award wage just as quickly. It would mean around \$630 a week before tax.

And it wasn't just the money. The change in lifestyle would be devastating. He'd be out there again, in the world, no longer a little goldfish, gaping in wonder at the world outside the safe haven of its bowl.

He would be mixing with people, cruel and kind, hard and caring, loving, hateful, sad, confused, evil and murdering, He'd be interacting with them instead of just watching them. Deep down, the thought terrified him. It was like his mother dragging him, crying and pleading, into pre-school for the first time, into the darkness outside his own warm, safe place that he'd always known, and now it would happen again.

He had no ability to relate to people, no idea what people were like, and it would be a shock to learn both, a shock that would grab him by the collar, shake him violently, scream into his face and listen to his emotions rattle inside.

After all, he wasn't so impressionable now, like a little child waiting to be filled with knowledge. He was an age and level of maturity that made emotional change a laborious task.

Trying to imagine what the average person on the street was like in day to day life, Dale unknowingly crossed the hazy border and slept.

V

He was woken by a rasping sound the next morning, his mind swimming as he woke. He opened his eyes to see the same desk, table and stereo, the same TV, video and cabinet, the same tree and the same clock (which now read 7:21) all awash with the more familiar light of day, not shrouded by the pale blue-white of night time.

He tried to sit but exhaustion from the previous night came crashing on his head and he just rested, on his elbows, waiting for strength to seep into his limbs.

The rasping noise was the paper being delivered. He could see it shoved halfway under the doorway (the cover often got torn that way, which pissed Dale off no end when it happened - he swore he'd call them and complain whenever it happened).

Dale made his steady way to the door, yawning and scratching, and pulled the paper in. He opened it as he shuffled to the bathroom, relieving himself as he scanned the front page of the St George & Sutherland Shire Leader, January 6th, 2017.

The headline read ***Freeway Upgrade Bill Passed*** and went on to outline the federal caucus' decision to repave and widen the M5 Motorway by sections. The debate had been put on the political backburner since the election, but it had to be addressed some time.

A city the size of Sydney was forever growing, having incorporated Stanwell Tops to the south, Gosford to the north, and almost as far west as Katoomba, and all since the turn of the century, and with a current population of five and a half million, the old expressway (which had remained unchanged since the late nineties) had to be improved to service the outer west effectively.

He cooked and picked at a fried breakfast, obeying the inner voice. He always heard the inner voice. He believed that solitude had allowed it to prosper. It was the one all adults have constantly reminding them to do what's right and sensible, making it a pleasant surprise when we occasionally do what we really want to, especially if it's a little bit rebellious.

He dressed in navy blue trousers, a casual white shirt and his only tie, a wide one which he'd gotten for a birthday (as forgotten to him as

who'd given it to him). It was a cool, relaxed colour, green and blue curls and ribbony shards swathed across it.

At 10:51 the same morning, he boarded a train bound for Town Hall station, tentatively stepping through the doors and grabbing the metal bar in the centre of the vestibule area. The train swallowed him and a few other late starters and jerked roughly as it started off.

Dale jumped, startled, as the train began to move, walking to a seat to avoid the embarrassing stares of a few other people. He sat in the end part of the carriage, reserved for the elderly and disabled, a guideline which was largely ignored. For a moment he had a maddening urge to turn to the young Asian woman beside him and tell her that he used to be disabled, so it was okay. Instead he watched trees, streets, cars, stations, and people flicker by out the long windows opposite.

Everything around him seemed a timid memory. He could feel his belonging to this way of life, years old now, but it was a new experience, all over again.

The trains hadn't changed much. The old silver double storey ones were still in abundance, but now there were a few prototype replacements on the tracks - he recognised them from TV. One of them, he recognised from the last time he was part of the early morning commuter scene. That had been the late 80's of last century. The old coloured CityRail maps on the train walls were still there, only bigger and farther reaching than he remembered. He used to look at these maps to keep him occupied if ever he forgot his book, and the northernmost station in the Sydney system had been the suburb of Cowan in those days. Now, it was Gosford. The Central coast had become Sydney's northernmost locale.

He was sitting on mesh seats, a comfortable surface reputed to be impervious to vandalism. He knew from the ads that the government was fitting all the old trains with them.

By first impressions, State Rail didn't seem to be driving its own road to ruin any more, but it had a long journey yet. The walls were still peppered with graffiti, some vintage from last century, and at a few stops, the train overran its mark and had to trundle slowly back to line up with the platform.

The rest of the trip was uneventful. And only when he stepped out onto platform 5 of Town Hall station did the fear that he had been pressing down come out.

He only had to cross to platform 6, straight across from him, to join a north shore train, and spent a few minutes looking at the board, a list of every station from the city to the Central Coast and red lights beside every station the next train was due to stop at.

His stomach knotted. Wynyard, Milsons Point, North Sydney. He didn't have to try for long to remember what lay between Wynyard and Milsons Point.

An ancient sense of doom, like a cold, steely hand, came up inside him to seize his throat, making him feel horribly alone amongst the tiled platform floor, the colourful billboard ads on the walls of the black tunnel, the constant drone of trains and P.A. announcements.

Milsons Point lay on the southernmost tip of the North Shore. Wynyard was the last stop this side of the harbour. Between them had once lay the majesty of the Old Sydney Harbour Bridge. But it had fallen with equal majesty, all those years ago, and Christ help him he had fallen with it.

But that was over. It was years ago, and the Sydney Harbour Bridge was gone. This time he would be crossing a different road - the Port Jackson Highway, which spanned the harbour across the officially named Macquarie Phillip Bridge (after two colonial Sydney Governors), but commonly termed the New Sydney Harbour Bridge.

VI

The Sydney Harbour tunnel, completed in 1992, over six years before the Harbour Bridge fell, took the brunt of the traffic for nineteen months following the disaster of October 1998.

The Roads and Traffic Authority and the Sydney County Council spent two months planning, designing and consulting with a prestigious army of consultancy firms, architects, local councils and construction companies, and during December 1998, just under five hundred and eighty million dollars worth of contracts were secured to reconnect Milsons and Dawes points.

The office workers of Sydney watched as the southern pylons of the old Bridge, now sixty six years old, were demolished, and the remains of the Bradfield Highway, plunging from the pylons into the water, dismantled and hauled away.

Cranes, vehicles and equipment were moved into place. Banners on the cranes proclaimed to the city that the Bridge, now fully designed, presented to the county council and approved for construction, was a WACE (Wyer Australia Construction & Engineering) project, part of a huge Australian business conglomerate that controlled large portions of national markets via its other branch companies, which included interior design and construction as well as life and general insurance.

And then, from December 1998 until May 1999, workers and machinery toiled. Four new pylons, sharper in design and more modern looking, rose from the grasses where the other ones had stood. Iron

framework grew out from them across the water, holding the new road aloft, bit by bit towards the middle where they would meet, a ghostly reminder and a hauntingly uncanny burlesque of the great arch that had done the same thing in the 1920's.

In October 1999 the first stage had been completed. The Port Jackson Highway was complete and in place, seven lanes of roadway, the north bound train line on the western side, the south bound opposite.

Underneath the road, the new Bridge was identical to its predecessor. The road was held up by two networks of metal, tethered to the inside edges of each pylon, spanning over the water a short distance before meeting the underside of the roadway, holding it aloft.

The pylons themselves were a very modern design, with the emphasis on simplicity, bright colour and simple graphical shapes and designs like arches, circles, boxes etc, in the tradition of the trend that had begun in the late 1980's. They were more attractive on face value than their predecessors, but lacked the charm of early twentieth century workmanship.

The most commonly projected image was of a square rocket, in two main stages of soft orange, separated by sloping strips of tomato red, with a small nose cone on top. The lower stage that reached from the ground to the road housed four iron columns, each ten metres in diameter, at each corner, for support of the main structure. The upper section, reaching from the road to the height of the old pylons, was the same height as the lower, with tall, thin arch windows on each face of the pillar (an homage to the old Bridge, whose pylons sported the same archways in stone).

Perched atop the upper stage was a small pyramidal final stage. On top of that, a cubic framework of a four red square with "X" in the middle, and finally, a smaller orange conical cap at the peak. The colours were supposedly a tribute to Australian indigenous culture, after thousands of years of aboriginal art's influence from the ochres and fires of the Australian outback landscape. The resulting up/down perspective of the pylons was a pleasant orange/red/orange/red, and thus far the public had accepted them.

Between that October and the following May stress tests and reinforcements were taking place below the road, within the road supports and the pylons, and the above-road phases began.

Three steel frames were built up and secured. They were shaped the way a child draws a house - square below, equilateral triangle on top. The tallest one was in the middle of the Bridge, and the other two, shorter, were halfway again to each end. At the apex of each triangle was a roof cone identical (but smaller) to the ones on top of the pylons, a

pyramidal roof on a square framework highlighted by "X's". Three flag poles jutted proudly into the sky from their tips.

The notion of a tall frame in the centre and two shorter one either side, when viewed side on, gave a ghostly but subtle image, appearing as though it were the shadow or skeleton of a great archway. And that was what the design board from the architectural firm had planned (the design board was really a collection of men and women who drank \$8.00 European beer and wore expensive suits and brainstormed dramatic and colourful ideas - no matter what their practical or financial viability - concerning their latest projects, a privilege earned of them by their untarnished university communications and design degrees. They were the people who designed the perfect world before their ideas went through lower management, costs and materials, consultancy and government bodies, where the silver lining was gradually trimmed off).

Part of the press release that went out to the contractors included a paragraph on the idea; *The vast archway shape, given by the heights of the vertical frameworks, is a tribute in honour of the old Sydney Harbour Bridge, and the men who designed what remains even today the strongest, most basic design in the history of construction.* It was a trendy idea that went largely unnoticed.

Then, in the last few months before the opening date, June 12, 2000, the cable supports went up.

Two iron cables were anchored, one on each edge of the road, from the corner between the road and pylons, up to halfway up the first vertical framework, down to the road at a point halfway to the next vertical, up to that vertical, and so on. And at regular points along the length, individual cables stretched from the master cable to the roads edge. If the individual down-cables were another subtle reminder of the old Bridge, nobody commented.

Lastly came the cable car. A pleasant novelty, destined to meet the same fate as similar attractions like Pier One in the early eighties, Darling Harbour in the late eighties, which all enjoyed an initially chaotic but brief period of overwhelming public interest, until the novelty wore off and the mainstream of their business (if, like some, they didn't end up deserted altogether), was a slow but steady stream of tourists.

Two tall steel poles were erected on traffic islands between the pylons at each end, in the centre of the highway. There was a loading/unloading platform in each pylon, accessible by elevators to the street. The cable carried ten cars in total.

The cable cars were brightly painted, one with the logo of the Sydney County Council, another the Australia flag, and the rest the logos of the various sponsors; Thomas National Transport, Coca Cola Corp Australia, Legal and General Ltd, The Aboriginal Arts Council, L B

Armitage Homes, ANZ Bank, Dollen and Whitfield Jewellers, and TCN-9 Sydney.

The cars were glass from the roof down to halfway, giving the most unobstructed view possible on every side, and every car was filled with a recorded voice-over by a TV personality on some history, facts and points of interests about the Bridge and views.

The cable carried the cars from the central support pole into one pylon, across the loading/unloading platform, travelled a half circle and went back to the central support where it began its journey across the Bridge, following the road, the cable anchored at the apexes of each vertical support, repeating the cycle within the other two pylons.

When the Bridge opened for business on June 12, it seemed that every green and gold balloon in the world billowed in a docile explosion into the sky and a million Sydneysiders walked a mass exodus from north to south, the harbour full of pleasure craft and chartered ferries, the sky alive with air force jets and displays, news and army helicopters and light aircraft.

As time passed, the queues and congestion in and around the tunnel eased, and the city started functioning again, its recent tragedy as much a part of national history as the existence of the Bridge itself.

VII

A rush of warm air scooted up the tunnel, ruffling hair, coats, and an old newspaper right along the platform. Dale watched the dark, malevolent front of the train, like the face of a dark demon with its grotesque configuration of dirty white unblinking eyes appear in the tunnel.

He boarded the train with a midmorning mix of late office workers, backpacking tourists and sightseeing or shopping families. Dale smiled, catching himself. Stop being so observant, he scolded, or one day you might see something you don't want to.

He took a seat in the upper level this time, beside a window, and felt the train move off. As the train pierced the darkness again, he turned his face to the window, watching the white fluorescent lights of the tunnel flash intermittently past and thinking about the interview.

He was lost in his own thoughts, fear pushed almost out of his mind, when the blazing light of sunshine exploded into the carriage, jolting his mind back.

Dale pressed his head to the window and looked to the front. Ahead, the train rose out of the underground trench and reached road level. A light fluttery feeling began in Dale's stomach as the train began towards the pylons, cars scooting along beside him on the right.

The fluttering in his stomach became a jumping, the jumping a sudden, thudding jolt. Dale hitched in a sudden breath as quietly as possible to try and suck the sudden pain out of his abdomen, but his stomach began to fold and turn, painfully.

The two south pylons whizzed past and the train launched out across the water. Dale crossed his arms over his stomach, trying to ease it, conscious of the look of discomfort he could feel on his face.

The train seemed achingly slow. He was certain he was going to be sick, but the safety and freedom (from embarrassment and discomfort) of the next station, Milsons Point, seemed mockingly far.

As if to squeeze the pain out, Dale squeezed his eyes tightly shut. What happened nearly made him cry out. It felt as if two red hot clamps were chewing at the back of his eyes, grinding their cruel way through the fleshiness of his optic nerves. He'd never had a migraine, but he knew in a single searing moment that this was one. The pain and the heat stabbed into the back of his head, settling there, throbbing, seeming to shake and jostle the pulpy mass of his brain.

He looked through squinted eyes at his fellow passengers. Nobody seemed to have noticed.

Sick, afraid he would throw up or faint if he moved, he leant his head against the window, panted softly to himself, gazed at nothing, prayed for the stabbing and hammering in his head and stomach to dissolve.

The train finally pulled into Milsons Point station and Dale stumbled out, fighting down bile and vomit, the pounding within his skull cavity beginning to loosen.

He found his way down the stair from the platform to a men's room, the old memories from years ago (the ticket collector, magazine stall, ticket office) unnoticed by him, and emptied the contents of his stomach down a toilet cubicle.

By the time he'd splashed water on his face and taken deep breaths, leaning over the sink, the headache had subsided to a twinge and his stomach was settling, flopping like a dying fish every now and then, weaker and weaker.

As Dale stood up, his lower back, where the motor and mechanics of the brace were housed, screamed out in pain.

It was the first time his back had hurt in nineteen and a half years.

The same afternoon, sometime after one p.m., Dale boarded a ferry from Cremorne bound for Circular Quay, in the city. He tried to think about the interview and his chances of landing the job, but his mind and eyes strayed up to the looming figure of the Bridge, not a hundred percent sure why he was avoiding it. Just nerves, stress, winding down, his adult

side told him, trying to override the terror and unsettledness right down deep in his guts.

VIII

That same afternoon, Dale was due for his monthly checkup with his orthopaedic specialist of nearly twenty years, Barry Paul, the man who fitted Dale with the brace.

During the summer of 1998/1999, while still in hospital recovering from the fall from the Harbour Bridge, Dale had been treated by Dr McGarry, the Milling family's doctor, who had diagnosed and treated the cancer that had rapidly eaten up Roland Milling's bone marrow and killed him only days before his son emerged, broken and battered, back into the world.

Dr McGarry saw Dale through every stage of recovery (the main benefit of his health insurance cover, being treated by the doctor of your choice in a private hospital, ironically did him no service - he knew nothing that was going on around him and might as well have been treated by a total stranger) and when Dale was released from hospital, Dr McGarry referred him to an orthopaedic specialist who he had seen once a month since his release in early 1999.

Dr Barry Paul had, in 14 years of consultation, become a friend to Dale as well as a medical guardian. Dale rarely visited Dr McGarry any more, only for minor, regular complaints such as colds and infections. In the old days, he'd seen him every now and again about problems associated with his disability, such as a cut on his leg that had bled on and off for two days without him knowing (not feeling anything from the waist down was fascinating and dangerous in everyday life).

But once a month Barry Paul would see him and note whatever progress and/or relapses he had made. He was a huge bear of a man, six feet six inches tall. He was large in both frame and girth, broad shouldered and wide around the middle. He didn't have a series of chins, but there was a facial swell that some fat faced people have that took up the otherwise empty space between the chin and collarbones.

He had dark, piercing eyes and a wide but somehow elegant nose, and his cheeks, chin and upper lip were covered by a finely trimmed (making him all the more sinister) beard, as jet black as his thin, slicked back hair was.

He intimidated Dale, who was unconfident, unsure of himself and often frightened of people. It was easy to see life and humanity as frightening from such a position of helplessness, and one's self esteem, a very fragile piece of the human psyche, is shattered.

Dr Paul's voice was neither loud nor harsh, but coming from his enormous head, it seemed to command authority. He often interrupted and Dale was often overspoken, unable to have gotten the words out and left unsatisfied that he had made himself clear.

But, as Dale well knew, things changed. The relationship between the two men settled into a more personal level. The common, doctors office type questions usually kept for filling in time (or awkward silences), became genuine concern and interest. Dale's attitude began to relax. He broke down his defences and allowed himself comfort and trust with Dr Paul.

And by the time the two men considered themselves friends, January of 2012 came, which turned out to be crunch time for them both, and for the thing they shared and called friendship. Any doubts would be erased and the fate of their relationship would be sealed. Because that warm January, Dr Paul had news for Dale.

IX

Dale looked at the blue carbon A4 sheet and the intricate white diagram on it. The diagram was of a long, thin metal vertical with circular clamps at each end, the lower one a little larger. Just above the lower clamp was a join in the vertical, which was interlaced with cogs and gears and a small black box, and halfway to the top was a long, flat box attached to the vertical. There was also a large blow-up of circuit boards and transistor chips, a closer view at what the long, thin flat box contained. It looked like some weird car part or piece of laboratory equipment.

Dale handed the paper back across the desk to Dr Paul, who was smiling anxiously.

"What do you mean, my freedom?" Dale asked. Dr Paul slid the paper back into the manilla folder on his two tiered tray set in the corner of the desk, turned back and clasped his hands on the desk in front of him. Dale shifted to get comfortable.

His propped his foot up against the visitor's chair, where the patient would usually sit. Every time he visited, Dr Paul would put it there to make room for Dale's wheelchair at the end of the desk. It was a ritual as familiar to Dale as the Caramello Koala Dale's baby sitter would leave in his slippers when he was a little kid. It was a habit as ancient as the setting sun, and, while it might look ridiculous to an outsider, it was second nature to Barry and Dale.

"That diagram is of a prototype of a brace designed by a team of orthopaedic specialists from the University of Glasgow about six years ago. Middle of last year, they formed a medical supply company, out of

their own pockets, called MedTech PLC. They licensed the brace to themselves and released the prototype onto the common market. A friend of mine from the AMA told me about it, so I sent for some information."

"So what's it do?" Dale asked. Barry smiled widely.

"Basically, it reconnects your spine." Dale's eye widened the tiniest anxious but timid fraction.

"So I can...."

"Stand." Barry finished, "Walk, sit, bend, run." He put his hands up in a warning gesture, foreseeing any dashed hopes, "Not like you used to. Not so efficiently. The spine has twenty six connections, this has one."

But Dale was only half listening. To stand. To walk. They were concepts he hadn't dreamed of for years. A thought came crashing in. Paraplegia is for life, he'd always believed. Everyone had. Why didn't anyone imagine that one day, during his lifetime, technology would change that?

"What?" Barry said quietly, sensing that he was deep in thought.

"I'm just wondering to myself," Dale answered honestly, "why the fact that I might walk again doesn't seem to register. I don't feel....happy, or saved." Barry shrugged.

"I suppose being told about things that change your life takes time to sink in." Dale nodded, shrugging, a bewildered look on his face, trouble in his eyes as he searched his mind and his heart for a feeling that wasn't there.

Barry took the file off the top tray and put it on the corner of the desk, between them. He opened his second drawer, produced a small notepad and took a green biro from the pencil caddy beside the trays. "While it's hitting you, let me explain it." He drew a long, thin vertical bar on the paper and put a line through it.

"Here's your spine, and here's where it's been broken. Now, the two clamps come custom designed to firmly grasp your individual vertebrae. The rod in between them acts as your backbone, giving the same support to your body that your spine can't any more," As he spoke, he indicated the upper and lower clamps on the blueprint and the long support shaft. The clamps held right below the neck and just above the pelvis, "now, that allows you to stand and keeps you upright but you still can't feel in your legs and you can't control your muscles to move. That's what the wires are for." He traced a path from the upper clamp down the shaft into the attached box, the one full of chips and circuits, speaking as he went.

"Your brain can't send messages to your lower body any more. The spine is like the transmission of a car. You create a command at the wheel, and it's mechanically passed through the system to the wheels on the road. Your brain passes electrical impulses around the body, via the spine, to do the same thing. But once the system's broken, your muscles

can't be commanded, and they just wait forever for a command to come through. This machine conveys the message, bypassing the break."

"Like having a second spine." Dale suggested, quite knowledgeable in the mechanics of the nervous and muscular system (a hobby very much in his own interests).

"Exactly. The electrical impulses from the brain are transmitted as far as the first clamp, where the receptors in the clamps take them into the support shaft wires instead of letting them continue down the spine. The microprocessor in the junction box decides which nerve in the spinal cord was being used and which wire to send the message down. Each major nerve is tapped by the wires, so the command is processed, the appropriate wire used, and the message passed back into the nervous system via the lower clamp.

"So the two halves of your body that are displaced in paraplegia are joined again. Your legs can feel, and your brain regains control of your muscles." He tried to read Dale's face for a reaction, but it was clouded over with concentration. Dale reached out and tapped the diagram of the prototype with his finger.

"So what are all these cogs for?" he asked, indicating the mechanics below the junction box. Barry drew a dotted line that skewed forward from the drawing of the vertical support and a double pointed arrow between the two, indicating allowable movement.

"The mechanical system - the cogs and motor - become your waist. Obviously you can't sit and stand without bending your waist, and your spine can't bend itself any more, so with the message through the system, your muscles react to the commands. But now the vertical has to bend in place of the spine. So the mechanical system reacts to conform to muscle pressure.

"The motor, here," he pointed to the small black box between the cog systems, one of which was on each side, "powers the mechanics and drives the vertical backwards and forwards according to your muscles, and in turn, your brain. The motor also powers the control box. Its got one of those eight hundred year thorium batteries.....So, you can only bend your back at the waist, the rest stays dead straight, but....." he tapped the armrest of the wheelchair with his pen, "....better than spending your life sitting in this."

Dale laughed lightly and nodded agreement but seemed unable to speak further. Fourteen years of sitting, all but unaware of the wilted bags of muscle and bone that were his legs, and he would walk? The notion drummed in his head, thudding like the violent onset of a sudden headache and still he couldn't grasp it.

"If this is a cure for all paraplegics, why hasn't it taken the world by storm?" he asked after a few seconds. Barry settled back.

"I've been on the lookout for this for awhile. There's been passing press interest in this machine, and it's given me a basic picture of what's gone on. These people were scientists, students, not businessmen, and the whole thing - the company and the brace - was very mismanaged. There was a lot of criticism about unnecessary costs. Other scientists said that the wrong materials were being used, that they were unhealthy, overpriced, just not well selected. They were very critical about the idea of tapping the nervous system with a free running electrical system. There was a big scandal that was almost their downfall when the U.K. Medical Association found that the metal used for the mechanical parts in the prototype would corrode from the body fluids and rust into the bloodstream.

"Still, it was an excellent idea, one any medical student could dream up for his exams, but mass medicine is a business, and it has to be managed like one, by businessmen, not kids with good ideas.

"Anyway, as far as I know, they're still fighting for distribution, backing, finance and publicity. It would have been bigger in England than anywhere else. They sent this press release to medical institutions around the world, and that's where my friend from the AMA got it." He picked up the folder and put it in front of Dale, gesturing for him to take a look.

Dale shifted forward, using his arms to pull his weight to the edge of the seat, and leaned towards the desk. He opened the folder and was greeted by a professional looking letter with the words "MedTech PLC" in thin, art deco writing. The business address was in Clydebanks, Scotland. He skimmed the letter quickly, seeing it as an introduction of the company and the brace (*MedTech Abdominal Brace* the letter proclaimed in bold capital letters) and nothing more.

He leafed through several other pages that included the blueprint diagram; another diagram of the electrified circuitry that looked like a grotesquely huge hedge maze, with writing on it so small he couldn't read it; A report on the workings of the various components in the control box in a three page file issued by the British Computer Engineering Association; a similar report on the mechanical workings from the United Kingdom Society of Mechanical Engineers; several pages of notes by MedTech on the company itself, the evolution of the brace, and its functions and advantages. Lastly there was an order form for a complete package on the brace and correspondence with MedTech to arrange purchase.

When Dale looked up, Barry was smiling.

"Well?" he asked. Dale couldn't answer.

Towards the end of February that same year, the weather cooling down unusually early, the blistery humidity of summer gone, chased by the cold miserable rain of autumn as if they were ancient adversaries, Dale called Barry Paul's office.

He had spent a lot of time talking to people, thinking to himself, even though he knew somewhere in his mind that he could never pass up an opportunity like it. He couldn't walk, and now he had the chance to be able to.

He'd seen a documentary on paraplegics once, and had been amazed by a young paraplegic man who was starting a band. He'd said that, given the choice, he wouldn't want to walk again, because the paraplegia had become part of who he was, and he was proud of it.

Dale supposed it just took that kind of person, or maybe it was just circumstances. His life had been full of promise at the time of that fall, and the promises had all smashed to the ground with his body. And so Dale spent a long time being hateful of his new self, a longer time feeling bitter (a feeling that recurred from time to time), and his entire life since knowing that he'd give anything to be able to walk again.

The whole matter was simple. There was no choosing about it. The talking and thinking had only been a process of rationalisation. Not to decide what to do, but to bring it all into perspective, a level he could reach. It helped him realise his fear and bring it to a tangible state.

And who wouldn't be afraid? They would lay him on a table, cleave his back wide open with knives, a clamp a monstrous contraption of jaws and wires inside him. A horrible, alien thing, not the miracle of flesh and blood and their place within the physical world, but the clumsy (in comparison), inept, inefficient workings of mankind's creativity, as vulnerable to error as its human inventors. But he knew he had no choice - his mind didn't offer him one. He'd called Barry at work.

"Barry," he'd said after small talk, "I want the brace, and.....I want you to fit it." Barry had been taken aback. He'd thought all along that Dale would consent to the operation to install the brace, but there were orthopaedic surgeons, brilliant men. As a specialist, he was as qualified to perform the operation (and hundreds of similar orthopaedic surgeries) as any of them, and could obtain permission, but they were trusted surgeons, not desk and office guys. It was like asking your local G.P. to perform laser brain surgery.

They argued for weeks. Barry never got a full picture of Dale's reasons. As far as he could gather it was probably a question of trust.

But late one night, Barry was lounging in his study at home, leaning back lazily in the heavy, dark leather chair he'd gotten for his fortieth birthday, his shirt untucked and askew, his feet propped against the mahogany of the desk, a can of Tooheys Platinum in his hand and

New Zealand pounding Australia at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on the small colour TV in the wall cabinet, he just sat and thought, his mind never latching onto the game but wandering off on its own pursuits.

He thought about Dale, and the operation. And a question popped into his head 'How would I feel?'. And the answer hit him with such suddenness that he jumped, as if hit sharply in the stomach. He looked around the room, trying to find the source of some noise he knew wasn't there, trying to save his own self-embarrassment. He settled back, his eyes pointed at the cricket game, his vision beyond it. A new perspective opened up, like a yawning crevasse during an earthquake in his mind.

He suddenly realised how frightened Dale must be, more so than he realised. And how, if you were that frightened, the thought of a strange man with small, precise hands on \$840,000 a year (and who was regarded as brilliant but couldn't hold a steady conversation) was even more intimidating.

Barry had viewed it as the chance of a lifetime, to have the hands of one of the worlds most celebrated physicians holding your future, but he suddenly saw it from a more personal point of view. The point of view that possesses people to seek health insurance that entitles treatment by their own physicians. It was having a familiar face, being examined by familiar hands.

Some stranger operates on you. If you live, he gets some award for his mantelpiece and enough to pay off his second motorboat. If you die, you're just a slab of expired meat to him - he'll order you wheeled down to the morgue without your face ever crossing his thoughts again and then go for an expensive lunch or a round of golf. To have this man touching your organs with his robotic, impersonal fingers, to put your life in his fragile hands as if he were God himself? People want peace of mind that they are still humans, with chances to live or die, and not resuscitation dummies.

Barry phoned Dale the next morning at home with Rice Bubbles snap, crackle and popping on the kitchen table and bacon sizzling on the stove to tell him he would perform the operation.

Both men experienced the expected delays (conveniently for the same approximate length of time). For Barry, it was the Australian Medical Association. He raised the matter of himself installing the abdominal brace with his consultant at the AMA and a committee hearing was called.

Naturally, the process took time. It was three months before the hearing itself, and when the time arrived, it took four sessions before settlement could be reached.

The hearing was before the regional judicial board of the AMA. It wasn't a court hearing and had none of the formalities of one, but was a conciliatory process, structured similarly to a court hearing, with a view to satisfactory settlement to both parties, being Barry, whose interests lay with the emotional well being of his patient, and the AMA, whose interests were to provide the best possible medical attention and service to the public by the best physicians available.

Barry had no real doubts that he would be granted permission to carry out the operation, but he expected conditions, and got them.

He received the decision of the board by mail, not even noticing the AMA envelope, priority paid, among his office mail as he opened it one dark afternoon in late May, wind slashing at his office window, the black clouds outside pregnant with rain. They were letting him implant the brace, their requirements were an orthopaedic surgeon on hand to assist and a two week surgical refresher course. There was a declaration at the bottom of the letter which he either signed and returned to agree with the conditions, or refused to sign pending an appeal hearing.

The two weeks pay lost because of the refresher course would be irritating, and there was the trouble of hiring a temporary specialist from the AMA "on call" list to look after the practise and tend to his patients while he was away, but he knew the arrangements were the best he would get.

For Dale, the delays were also with the government. Specifically, the Medicare Office.

In his fragile state after the accident, when doctors and surgeons grant a grace period of a number of years allowing anything to go wrong, health insurance was vital. If any further operations or major treatments were necessary, his mother couldn't afford the financial burden of the costs, even with her pensions and the life insurance payout from Dale's father's policy.

So she had sought the best possible private health cover. Medicare paid for eighty five percent of treatment costs pertaining to Dale's disability for life, but as far as operations went, he was at the mercy of the public hospital system, receiving less than adequate attention in overcrowded hospitals by an understaffed force of medical personnel, on years-long waiting lists to even receive treatment.

So he and his mother had sought health insurance that entitled him to enter a private hospital for elective surgery almost immediately (with a delay of only a month or two to allow for administration and equipment requisition) and be treated by his own doctor or specialist.

While the funding administration was carried out, Dale began a rigorous program of exercise and a nutrient rich diet. For the first time in twenty years, the muscles in his legs and lower body were going to

carry his weight and give him permanent mobility once more. They had to learn balance, weight distribution, and harmony with each other all over again.

The AMA granted Barry permission to install the brace on May 29. Dale entered hospital on June 5. At 9:20 am on June 6, Barry, the AMA appointed surgeon and their assisting staff began the implant procedure.

X-rays of Dale's spine had been sent to Scotland and a MedTech design crew had sent back via air courier a wooden packing crate the size of a coffin, housing a sterile plastic balloon (in turn encased in polystyrene) that carried the brace, test equipment, and installation tools. Barry, who had spent two weeks studying the operation, knew them all backwards. Dale's health care company and Medicare had paid their respective percentages of the \$58,417.22 for the equipment.

The clamps, custom designed by MedTech from the X-rays, were fitted and in place by 10:40 am. Assisted by the electrocardiologist, Barry connected the wires with the spinal cord and completed the circuit that would give his friend's body life again. At 8:10 that night, Dale's back was closed and stitched up. Two hours had been spent testing the brace by remote control, the mechanics, the motor, testing its limits and resistance, testing the muscle reactions of the body.

Dale was wheeled into his room in the wards and put to bed, his anaesthetic not due to wear off until the following day, and Barry wrote notes and discussed the day with his team until 1:30 am.

The next morning he made straight for the hospital. His heart leapt in anxiety as he drove there. It was then that he realised that the true test had come and gone. Dale wasn't a patient any more. Barry held something in his heart for the man. He had put himself inside Dale's very flesh and become a living part of him.

He rushed to the correct ward and into the room to see Dale standing - Good God, he was about six feet tall!! - on his own two feet, a young nurse holding his arm to steady his disorientation. The nurse was smiling up at Dale's face. Dale was crying.

In his confusion, Barry's heart lurched sickeningly in his chest. Had the brace failed? Was it painful? Dale looked up at him, his eyes bleary and lost, and took a tentative step forward on his shaking legs.

Barry felt tears well in his own eyes, fought for them to stop, but one spilled into his black beard.

Dale stepped forward again, his back dead straight, his stance groggy and confused, and looked timidly down at his feet. The nurse let him go to Barry and covered her mouth with her hands, tears spilling from her eyes too. Barry grasped Dale's hands and embraced him, the two men standing, laughing and crying in relief, the way men only do when emotion finally overcomes them, for a long, long time.

XI

That had been years ago now, and since then, a bond had been forged between Dale and Barry that had grown more familiar ever since. The brace hadn't posed any problems since installation, and when the new technology became available at around Christmastime 2012, Dale agreed to have the improved parts fitted.

In December 2009, MedTech PLC, its business and financial dealings still plagued by bad management and cost overruns, cancelled its manufacturing contracts, laid off its workers, and filed for bankruptcy. The patent for the device was sold to 3M, a massive worldwide conglomerate based in the United States that manufactured everything from paperclips to hamburger packaging to industrial machinery.

3M (US), with decades of marketing, finance and business experience, publicised and distributed the brace worldwide, reviewing it and re-releasing their own prototype. Ex-paraplegics already fitted with the old MedTech brace were offered the chance to have it modified to conform with the new, better design. New mechanics were fitted, smaller and faster acting, and the junction box, already a year behind in technology, was reprogrammed for increased response within the muscular system and an increased security package against electrical overload.

After 3M took control of the brace, the worldwide heraldry and interest took place - that which should have when MedTech formulated the plan. By June 2015, 95% of paraplegics in the developed world were on their feet. The figure in the third world was 34%, which was largely due to the work of relief and charity organisations.

3M had to secure billions of U.S. dollars worth of manufacturing, delivery, medical and consultancy contracts just to keep up with the demand of the public, absorbing and overtaking many smaller companies along the way to provide the necessary services. The price remained steady for the most part, and the services 3M launched in conjunction with the brace were neverending, including their own insurance cover on the brace and user, warranties, loans and financing, and tax concessions.

The brace assumed its place in the world and replaced the wheelchair, in every way. An ex-paraplegic was as easy to spot as a paraplegic in a wheelchair had always been. They exhibited a careful, robotic movement, and their backs were always impeccably straight. And the average person in the street treated them no differently than if they were in wheelchairs. A tiny bit sorry, but for the most part indifferent, knowing full well that their hearts and minds were fully functional and that they were only members of society (even going a bit overboard with

the personal concessions, as if they wanted the disabled to know that they didn't consider them 'different', which is always amusing and quite cute for the paraplegic man or woman to experience).

And so paraplegia was regarded by society like the bubonic plague - a terrible thing, overcome by the natural evolution of our science and medicine, that took place long ago.

Dale walked through the door of his unit at 2:20 p.m. and immediately flung the tie across the room, not caring where the horrible garish rope-thing landed. Habits formed and broke on a plane below human consciousness and perception, and to get used to something all over again (he'd worn a tie every day for three years? How?) you had to return to square one.

He felt a moments apprehension when it fell behind the TV - fear that he wouldn't be able to find it again when it came to using it, but he let his better nature through and was glad to be rid of it. It'd felt like a noose through the whole job interview, and he'd expected Brian Felding, Personnel Manager of Warren & Cooley Architectural Consultants Ltd, with his wide, toothy, evil grin, to suddenly say 'if you answer incorrectly, you will be hanged by the neck until you are dead.'

Between the time he arrived home and the time he called a taxi to go to the surgery for his monthly checkup he had made a cup of tea, started the ironing, and began to slice the potatoes for dinner. He tried hard to impress his Mum with his cooking and eating habits when she came for tea, but in fact it was quite hard living alone. It seemed more an annoying chore to cook for only yourself when you knew you would settle for a tin of baked beans on a slab of grilled meat. There just wasn't the motivation. Still, maybe when he began to work he'd be hungrier and more bothered.

With the potatoes in a pot of water ready for the stove, and half a pile of ironing gone, Dale climbed into a taxi beside a sweaty Asian man with pale, sickly skin, hair sprouting in scraggly tufts from his nose, and who smelled like Greek food, and was driven the thirty minute trip to Barry's surgery, not quite daring to ask if he could wind down the window.

Barry came out to the reception area of his small waiting room, cleanly decorated with tan floor tiles and chocolate brick walls, adorned with large art nouveau photographs of dolphins and the tail of a whale rising majestically from the water, and picked up Dale's file from the corner of the desk. He smiled at his old friend, waiting in a chair across the room, and leant to instruct Eileen, his secretary of thirteen years, to write an appointment card for Mrs Pollard for February the 24th. Mrs

Pollard emerged from behind Barry and began to discuss Medicare benefits with Eileen and Barry called Dale over.

The put-on politeness and tension that always exists between strangers was absent, and both men were completely at ease. They shook hands heartily and sat down, Barry groaning slightly as he did so. In nineteen years, since his mid thirties, he hadn't gotten any smaller, in height or girth, frame or weight. His hair and beard were still an evil black, but flecked with grey around the edges.

"How've you been?" Dale asked as he helped himself to a jelly bean from the pot at the top of the desk.

"Oh, all right," Barry said, shrugging his bull-like shoulders, "The AMA are looking at the chiropractic article."

"Yeah?" Dale said.

Barry tried to look modest as he nodded, but his pride was evident. "They say it could be printed in an internal orthopaedic journal, but if it's viable they're sending it to a medical and science magazine."

"Wow," Dale said, "you know, my Dad never trusted chiropractors, he said they were witch doctors."

"Well, they were when your Dad was alive. It wasn't a science then. It was only early this century they gave them the title 'doctor' and let them into the R.A.C.G.P. Anyway, it could be an expansion of business. If I can get a chiropractic specialist in we could set up together and have the only complete spinal treatment centre in Sydney."

"Barry's Back Shop." Dale suggested, laughing.

Barry smiled. "There's a long way to go yet. I've only just written the article. Plus, I don't know.....won't be too long I'll be retiring."

"Ah, you've got a few good years."

Barry smiled wider, leaning back to accept the accolade gracefully. "How about you, going all right?"

"Oh well," Dale mumbled, "you know.....had a job interview this morning."

"Yeah?" Barry asked, raising his eyebrows in interest, "how was it?"

Dale shrugged. "He seemed happy. I wouldn't have been impressed with me though. I don't know what these people want to hear. What are you supposed to say?"

Barry shook his head. "I don't know, just answer their questions."

"Yeah, but you've got to appear friendly. I just kept tripping over my own tongue and sounding like a dickhead."

"Don't worry," Barry consoled, "you can't do better than your best. When do you find out?"

"Next week." Dale said, looking hopefully off into the distance for a second before snapping back, "Anyway, we'd better get to it, because I'm having Mum over for dinner tonight."

"All right, say hi to her for me." Dale nodded. Along with him, his mother had been through a lot with Barry. "Okay, tests or progress?" It was an old tradition between the two, where he gave Dale the choice of which he wanted first, the few monitory tests of the brace and his back or the short interview where Barry took notes and asked questions about Dale's past progress. Today Dale opted for the tests.

First was the bend test. Dale had to stand straight and bend his waist in all directions while Barry checked the speed of movement and whether there were any jumps or jolts on the way down (the result of mechanical or electrical fault).

Next Barry checked the positions of the brace, the control box and mechanics on the X-ray bed.

The electrical response test was a reflex test that monitored the speed with which the electrical impulses were transmitted back into the nervous system, and was set up by use of what looked like an oversized set of stereo earphones that were placed on Dale's waist. They were oppositely charged with a current that went from one to the other via the control box of the spine (the strengths and frequencies controlled at the computer by Barry to correspond to certain mental commands). The current triggered a spontaneous reaction inside the control box, which reacted to the sudden external current and caused a nervous twitch anywhere in the body - the same as hitting the knee with a rubber hammer.

And lastly was the circuit timer. Two electrodes were pasted to Dale's temples and attached to the BraceTest terminal, a computer shaped like an old computer-model electronic typewriter, with a number of strange keys and switches and a small VDU. From the computer also came a cable attached to a nylon strap that was sealed around Dale's waist. The strap was full of electro-receptive cells.

Using the computer to input circuit paths and timing functions, and checking the charts that came with the test equipment, Barry would ask Dale to lift his arm or stamp his foot. The electrodes at his head would detect the electrical charge generated at the mental command, and the cells in the waist strap would pick up the same pulse (detectable as a fluctuation outside the normal electric charges that signalled breathing and heartbeat) and therefore the time taken for the brace, control box and mechanics to convey the message could be checked on the graphs and charts.

The test results all turned out normal, and Barry noted them all on his PC patient file.

He then leant back, pen in hand, shifting his bulk into a comfortable position. "All right," he said, "you first."

"Well," Dale began, a whisper of fear in his heart, fear of what had gone wrong that day and what possible barbaric and torturous treatments it would require, "something funny happened to me on the way to the interview - crossing the harbour."

Barry's eyebrows rose, and Dale could almost read his mind, see his thoughts of the newspaper photos of the nineteen year old boy on the ground. "It must be the first time you've crossed the harbour since..." he began. Dale nodded. He'd been to the northern suburbs of Sydney plenty of times, but over the Harbour Bridge was only one way to get there. There were easier routes that skirted Port Jackson around the west.

"What happened?" Barry prompted, his pen and notes forgotten.

"I started to get sick," Dale explained, "really giddy in the stomach. It started out like butterflies. That's what I thought it was, but it got worse. I just knew I was going to throw up, so I just tried to hold it down until I got off the train. Then my head started to ache badly, suddenly, too. I knew I was sweating and pale, so I just sat there waiting for the train to stop. It was like vertigo, I felt like I'd be sick or collapse if I moved."

"All this just while you were going across?"

"As soon as the train reached the Bridge."

"When did it stop?"

"Well, I jumped off at the next stop, that's where the interview was anyway, and ran to the toilet and threw up and my stomach and head seemed to settle down straight away."

"And your back?" Barry asked. Dale sighed.

"As I straightened up from the sink after I'd washed my face, it just.....hurt, right down, in my waist." He indicated the position of the pain, "Like I'd been hit." Barry remained quiet, thinking.

"Do you know what it was?" Dale asked, a little too quickly.

Barry raised his hands in comfort. "It could be anything, Dale. Pinched nerve, electrical surge, maybe just a muscular ache. It might not even be the brace. There's plenty of preliminary tests we can do right now." He stood up, grabbed his stethoscope and walked around behind Dale's chair.

He stuck the electrode plates on the end of the stethoscope to Dale's back and put his hands on Dale's shoulders to hold him back in his seat.

"Okay, lean forward," he said. Dale pressed torso forward, slowly resisting Barry's hold. Through the earpiece, Barry could hear the whirr of the mechanical system, which he ascertained was running perfectly.

"More." he instructed his friend. The whirr rose in tempo and pitch as Dale leant harder. The mechanical system was healthy. The initial test was always an aural one, and if any discrepancy was found, an operation to check the workings was easy.

"Well, it's not the mechanics," Barry said, removing the earpiece and the plates, "the brace itself may have given you a twinge." He reached again for the circuit timer apparatus, rolling the trolley across that the terminal sat on while Dale unbuttoned his shirt, frowning.

"What, you mean an electric shock?"

"Maybe," Barry said as he strapped the nylon receptor sheath around Dale's middle. He didn't attach the head electrodes.

"You could've gotten a small surge somewhere, maybe the train. It might've upset the electrical system and caused the wrong nerves to receive the wrong feeling." He switched the terminal on and began keying in test codes, referring to the manual as he went.

"The voltage is the right amount." he mumbled, tapping in more commands, "everything's in sequence, the right pulses and charges." More tapping of the keys. Suddenly; "Jesus, how often do you use your microwave?"

"Hardly ever." Dale said, frowning.

"Been sitting too close to the TV?" Barry asked casually, with an uneasy edge.

"No, what is it, Barry?"

"This electromagnetic reading." Barry tapped more keys, "The brace has soaked up so much magnetism it's a wonder you're not at home stuck to your fridge door."

XII

It's a common fallacy that night is black, but Dale knew better. Night was a blanket of aquiline blue, that enshrouded the world and gave it a slow, dreamlike quality, extinguishing the colours that belonged in a world of life, activity and sunlight and seeming to send them to some dimensional background, shadows or outlines in the true world of the dark.

Only one reality of the world remained. The shaft of green light, like a diffused laser, that emanated into the dark from the bedside clock radio.

The clock read 4:07 when Dale burst from under the covers, struggling with the clutches of the nightmare, trying to throw the bedclothes off. He was slicked with sweat, breathing in ragged gasps, his eyes fixed to the ceiling, knowing that if he turned to look out the window he would see that white, wrinkled face, split from the rank water,

algae caked along its teeth and hair, fragments of white bloodless flesh flapping, hanging, eaten away by fish.....

He rubbed his face hard, reaching for the lamp and clicking it on. In the sanctity of the light he turned to the window and his heart lurched as if bursting free.

Staring back through the flyscreen, hanging motionless in the night time air outside was a cracked, toothy grin and horrible white orbs, wide eyes staring back at him, two rotted chasms where its nose had been, clutching skeletal hands reaching for the wire to tear it away and breathe its stinking dead breath.

As the folds of midnight fantasy were peeled back and the horrible dead face revealed itself to be only the harmless moon, Dale rubbed his eyes, trying to rub the dream from his memory, safe in his little island of light, his heart thundering.

He'd been on a train, travelling across the old Bridge on one of the old style silver trains of the mid 1990's, but he was himself, not the nineteen year old Dale of the time.

The train had been trundling along at a snails pace when the clanging and crashing had started. The Bridge was falling. People ran, screaming, cars screeched to sudden halts, a rainstorm of broken metal began to crash down around the train.

For the millionth time he watched the bus overturn, the spires from above crash down on the people trying to escape. He saw the train (wasn't he on that track? his mind said in the confusion, in real life where everything has to be possible to happen) plummet one carriage after another into the gaping hole on the edge of the road and tracks.

All the horrors unfolded in front of him, and his train crawled along agonisingly slow, as if the carnage were staged for a movie studio tour ride and he was its only haunted spectator.

He heard the screams and smelt the metal dust and blood.

He looked down at an overturned Mitsubishi Colt, one that was there when it actually happened and, recorded forever onto his memory pattern, replayed its smashed form (the exhaust system hanging askew and the flecks of white paint on the road in a spray surrounding the bashed-in front left hand corner) in each nightmare.

Only now there was something else. A man was crawling from the car. His left leg had been torn off at the knee somehow, the tattered remains of his suit trousers turning red in the river of blood his leg was gushing onto the road. He reached out to drag himself along the street, his fingers bent and dislocated, strips of flesh hanging from his forearms, and looked up at Dale, straight at him and through him with those wide white eyes.

Dale felt punched as those horrid eyes fell upon him, wheezing in a polluted breath. He suddenly saw that this man wasn't sickeningly injured.

He was dead. His face was a sickly pale mask, like fish skin, the skin around his eyes dark, sallow and battered, his eyes dirty white shells that lolled and stared within.

Blood seeped from his nose and mouth in a striking crimson against the dead colourlessness of his face. His teeth were smashed, and above his left ear, skin and hair were blasted outward from a wound. Dale had heard the term 'split open head' a million times and this was it. Something had hit this man hard enough to open his skull.

The man, glaring stupidly up at Dale, made a choked howling noise, and dragged himself onward.

A dead, howling man wanted to get him. He gazed anxiously as the man dragged his cut off leg and bashed in brains out of Dale's line of vision, down beside the train.

He was vaguely aware of people vaulting over the rail on the far side of the Bridge, where the train had gone down, splashing water as they swung their drenched limbs, and shambling towards the train.

- How in God's name -

- over a hundred feet in the air -

People spilled from the upturned bus, those who had lain dead rose up, and they joined an undead exodus toward the side of the train.

Dale felt and heard a shuffling bump on the side of the carriage below him.

Metal beams continued to rain down and cars careened down the highway, overturning or crashing into other cars, the steel vertical supports of the Bridge, or off the edge, ramming clusters of people who arose again, their injuries more horrible.

Dale turned from the window to see that he was alone in the carriage. there was a soft bump beside him, and he turned to look.

Inches away was that dead-white bleeding face, gaping and staring at him like some hungry idiot animal. Dale screamed and scrambled away from the window. The dead man, his hair askew and matted with dried and fresh blood, thumped weakly on the train window and howled wetly again. The sound made Dale's insides turn to water. How the hell could he climb up the side of a train carriage?

There was a smash of glass down the stairs in the vestibule area. They were coming in. More dead, cut and bloody hands beat at the windows, nails tearing and squealing on the dirty glass.

Dale, standing in the aisle now, watched the first corpse shamble into the train, a young professional woman, her knees (probably the same knees her male colleagues ogled as she passed, way down past the hem of

her short skirt) bruised and bleeding, her gelled hair fraying from beneath her headband in wild tufts.

He turned as she made for the stairs and hurled himself through the window of the train opposite the oncoming march of the dead.

Like his most ancient adversary come back to haunt him, the dream ended in the inevitable way. He fell.

He watched the ironworks of the highways underside pass, and was in midair, screaming, plunging, watching the storeys of office blocks streak past, watching the hard black island of the road in a sea of grass surge at an insane rate upward, screaming to his own deaf ears, plunging.....

Dale shrieked aloud. His eyes snapped open, releasing tears of shock. He had fallen almost immediately back to sleep and had the same dream again.

Truly shaken now and badly disoriented, trying to stifle a scream, Dale struggled to rise to a sitting position, his back almost comically erect from the brace, grabbing for sight and sound of the real world to calm himself down, reminding himself it was only a dream, only a dream....

As soon as the mechanics stopped dragging his torso forward and he was fully upright, an arthritic spasm of pain lanced up and down his back, like a burning arrow, and this time he did scream.

XIII

When he walked in the door there was a letter for him, hanging inside the mail slot, trapped by one corner.

Dale pushed the door closed with his foot, his hands laden with plastic shopping bags, and looked at the envelope. Partly hidden under the metal flap of the mail slot, he could read *-rren & Cooley Architectural Consultants and Design (Aust) Pty Ltd* in thin blue Roman print with a yellow shadow effect.

He felt a pinch of anxiety in his stomach. It was either a job offer or a declination. He carried the groceries into the kitchen and heaved them all onto the bench, looking out the window while he timidly felt along his lower spine. Nothing felt different, and it hadn't hurt since it was demagnetised. He sighed in relief.

He'd sat up in bed that morning a few days ago, afraid to move for fear he was damaging the brace or himself, but even more so he didn't feel that stabbing, cruel pain again.

So he'd just sat in bed, sweating lightly in the warm early morning air, until the sun cast its haze over the horizon and rose, and at seven in the morning, he called Barry Paul at home.

An ambulance had come and taken him to hospital, where they performed some primary tests on his respiratory and circulatory systems before referring him to Barry's surgery for spinal tests.

Barry performed every test he had the equipment for. The brace itself was functioning perfectly and showed no sign of damage or system fluctuation. Dale's back and muscles responded well to hot and cold tests, mild electroshock, and strength tests.

The bend test, X-ray picture, reflex and circuit timer tests all showed normal results. It was the magnetism test that had explained Dale's sudden attack.

The abdominal brace was producing an electromagnetic field so strong that it was reacting with all metal objects Dale had been near (an innumerable amount in modern day). The electric field would then cause the nervous system to spasm convulsively, usually triggered off by movement, causing brief but extreme pain.

Barry prescribed pain killers in case it happened often, and contacted the AMA medical test cell at the University of New South Wales to arrange for Dale to be treated with prosthetic magnetism.

An appointment was made for a few days time and Barry sent Dale home with orders to rest and call him immediately if it happened again.

Barry took the rest of the day off and drove to Parramatta, in Sydney's western suburbs, to visit the Australian Medical Association Library and Research Centre.

He stayed until six the same evening reading, taking notes and thinking, and by the time he left, he thought he had a basic picture of the incident.

Due to the commercial success of the abdominal brace, other electrical prosthetics had been created for similar but less serious muscular and skeletal disorders (any neck, shoulder, elbow, knee or ankle damage could now be corrected, even if damaged muscles were involved), some with similar computer circuitry to the 3M spinal brace.

One condition associated with electrical circuits in prosthetic machines was prosthetic electro-magnetisation. Minor complaints were fairly common, but a case as severe as Dale's hadn't been recorded.

The prosthetic device, in reaction to some strong magnetic field, often became magnetised itself, the same way a videotape does if you leave it near a running VCR too long (the most common contributors to the problem were said to be household appliances). The result was the build-up of a magnetic field around the prosthetic device that eventually became strong enough to cause an electric shock to the subject. The stronger the electromagnetic field around the brace became, the higher voltage of shock would result, and the more discomfort would be felt. So

far, the only cases reported were described as no more painful than a pinched nerve.

So, just like a videotape, the prosthetic had to be demagnetised. The patient was laid on a bed, flat on their back, and an irradiation shade, like a huge dentists lamp, was put in place over the position of the prosthetic device, generating a neutralising field (Barry didn't bother with the equations and electrophysics involved, it was the technique he was interested in) that demagnetised the device.

That was all fine and good, but Barry couldn't believe that a spasm as painful as Dale's was the result of an electric field as weak as one generated by a VCR or microwave oven. And the level of magnetisation in his abdominal brace had been incredibly high.

To Barry, that meant one of two things. One was that Dale had some chemical imbalance in his body, some oversupply that caused the severity of the magnetism. That being the case, there was another as yet undiscovered factor in the electrochemical equations of prosthetic magnetism; body chemicals and their effect on the electric field.

The second and more logical (even if unbelievable) answer was that Dale had come into contact with an electric field proportionate to the level of magnetism in the brace. That would mean a magnetic field that no TV or microwave in a common household could produce. As far as Barry could equate, Dale could just as well have flown through the magnetic field orbiting the planet Jupiter.

XIV

Dale tore open the envelope and sat down on the sofa bed, slotting the bedrail underneath the sofa along its runners (after getting up, he hardly ever thought to replace the rail - a heavy steel bar the length of the bed that aided him in rising every morning - until halfway through the day).

It was printed in the same thin Roman print as the envelope, with the company name, address and communication lines in delicate classic typescript underneath. It read;

Dear Mr Milling, Thank you for applying to Warren and Cooley for the position of Assistant Quotations Clerk. It was enjoyable to meet you last week, and I was most impressed - (Dale exercised all his willpower not to peek downwards for some sign of positive affirmation), - not only with your experience in the field of Floor space and Constructions, but with the exemplary conduct of your life since your tragic accident.

I've given your application serious consideration, and am pleased to offer you - Here his heart suddenly glowed with joy at success and

darkened with terror of change - *the position*. *Your starting salary, as we discussed, is \$39,517 per annum, less 9.2% compulsory superannuation, deducted fortnightly from your salary and invested jointly between the trust fund of the Warren and Cooley Nexus Pension Plan and shares of WarrenCo (Aust) Services Co. The starting date is January 23. Please report to quotations reception at 8:45 am. Congratulations, and I look forward to seeing you again.*

It was signed *Yours Sincerely, Brian Felding, Personnel Manager.*

Dale sighed deeply. In relief, fear, apprehension, uncertainty and happiness all at once. He was working. He was part of the world, a cog in the machine, again. Again after all this time.

Quotations clerk was in a small department that was the face and communications of the company. Warren and Cooley weren't architects, they were architectural consultants. Companies with plans to build went to them for advice, reviews of plans and legal architecture matters. Any project or contract undertaken was managed by the consultants, who specialised in certain aspects of architecture like dimensions, support, costs and materials. The consultants gave their results to the quotations department, who put all the factors together and, guided by the pricing manual (the Warren & Cooley Bible, as it was affectionately known), were able to formulate costs and deal directly with the construction companies.

Dale had been appointed to a position that handled the influx of the consultants work that dealt with floor space. His job was to add and measure, check the consultants measurements and provide a report to the central quotations unit on his impression of the costs. The experience at Thomas Ross and (to a lesser degree) Amlock Office Products all those years ago were his foundation.

It was so strange to remember something he hadn't thought of in almost twenty years - the fact that he could *do* something, even if it was measure plans.

Dale spent the remainder of his day excited, happy, doubtful, and scared.

By the time he had unpacked his shopping, read some of the book he was halfway through, called his mother and made dinner, he was for some reason exhausted. It was ten fifty p.m. He dawdled out onto the balcony, ready for bed, and looked around at the dark, empty street, where almost no lights burned in windows. He was overcome with an inane urge to re-pot the gardenia at the end of the verandah. He'd tried to clip it back to keep it small, but he was no bonsai artist and he had a below average knowledge of gardening. It was skew-whiff now, going every which way, and he'd been going to repot it for weeks.

With cool air pressing against his skin, he got the gardening gloves and trowel from the end of the verandah and slipped the gloves on. The old pot, a cracked terracotta apparition, sat inside the new one he'd bought six months ago, a speckled beige plastic pot that would give the roots of the poor thing freedom. A bag of potting mix lay against the rail.

As Dale transferred the fragrant plant, deep into summer bloom, he breathed its aroma along with the cool night air, laced with the richness and fertility of the soil, and sat calmly, on his verandah in the middle of the night. The smells of the flowers' perfume and dirt were memories from his childhood backyard, his mind full of sunshine and laughing, the barbecue and his family, a family that would stay regular.

As a kid, Dale was lucky to have perceived a false notion of normal. His was a nuclear family, his aunts and uncles all paid visits, their lives and children healthy.

But he grew, and observed, and realised that all that was too idyllic, too neat. Too happy to be in this world.

He had grown up a pessimist but that had exhausted all his militant energy. He'd just seen the world now, broken it in, and he knew now that his life as a child had been a lucky and very irregular one.

The truths of this world weren't the stereotypical sweet old granny and grandpa, loving aunts and uncles, cousins you liked to play with, god-like parents. The real truth, as if it had waited for him to grow up before exposing itself to him, was divorce, disease, misery and death.

Divorce, as his aunt and uncle had suffered (Dale's cousin had suffered a nervous breakdown during a long and bitter custody battle).

Disease, which he didn't know until he was seventeen that his grandmother suffered, when he happened past the door of his grandparents outside toilet one day and saw, through the gap in the open door, his grandmother standing inside, bent unceremoniously over and dragging a nappy that was brimming with excrement down her legs, courtesy of a hearty dose of colon cancer.

And death, upon whose circumstances a family friend held her wedding day early in hopes that her father would be there to see it, even if dying of bone cancer. The man had died the same morning of the wedding, and a week later to the day, the liver cancer the mother suffered (which was supposed to be dormant for a further five years) took her too.

And the one which stabbed his heart the deepest, the tragedy of life burning out. Of the flame flickering and dying in the dark.

Seeing his mother, the tower of strength, the matriarch of his world, every boy's first love, a tired, empty shell of a woman, half a lifetime of coping with the death of her husband and the crippling of her son stealing her youth and vitality.

That, Dale had learned, was regular. That was the real way of the world. Death, fear, sadness. You had to build or find love and happiness for yourself.

Thinking about his friends and family and gently tending his plant, Dale felt more relaxed than he had in a long time, and enjoyed those few moments of peace.

XV

He screamed as he fell, clutching at nothing, the hard road, a strip in the grass, surging upwards at dizzying speed.

And his scream was cut off by a strangled cry - shriek as he felt his body crack against the ground.

Dale emitted another shuddering wail as he sprung up in bed, fighting to get upright against the steel hold of the mechanics. Breathing deeply, he turned to rearrange the pillows and straighten the polyester quilt and lay back down in his ever present determination not to let the dream be any more than a nightly inconvenience, no more than a snoring bed mate or a noisy cricket.

He resolved long ago not to let the dreams plague and ruin his life. His psychiatrist had told him that dreams were only a kind of mental refuse, the only way for the subconscious to express its undetectable tensions and stresses. So Dale supposed it was necessary as long as it was going on, and he had only to sacrifice two minutes lost sleep (and lots of sweat) a day.

As he got comfortable again, the new job came into his mind. The anxieties. Would he fit in? Would they see him as normal? Could he do the job at all? Maybe he'd lost all work instincts. Were there work instincts?

He tried to remember, thinking back to the last days of his teenage years. A hundred questions began to stir up in his mind like a drift of autumn leaves blown away in a cold gust. Questions that didn't matter because Dale would never make it to his new job.

The last thing he was aware of was that he had a single thought, out of nowhere, a picture in his mind of the iron and stone of the old Sydney Harbour Bridge. He was also aware that as soon as he thought it, his back began to ache.

Dale slept, the last peaceful sleep of his life.

BOOK 3

I

Looking around, smelling the city, seeing the people, it was the same, all right. The memories flooded back, one after the other, and it was exactly as he remembered it. The train was full of people (by the time the train had left the second station after Dale's, the vestibule and aisles were full of people standing). Businessmen sat stone-faced behind the expanse of the Sydney Morning Herald while women struggled in their heels to stand upright in the aisles beside them (the stiletto was enjoying a brief swaré back into fashion, and the sophisticated woman of Sydney only had to endure her aching calves and meticulously careful walk for a few months this time, hopefully).

People yawned, slept and read, but not a word was spoken except between one or more travellers who knew each other, and an embarrassed tension, everyone fiercely minding their own business, filled the air.

Dale smiled to himself as he sat on Town Hall station, waiting for the next service to Milsons Point (his routine would include a train change - his line went to the Eastern suburbs instead of the north) reflecting on his morning so far. He was like a child in some magical secret grotto or cave, discovering a fantasy land of images and sights and sounds that were familiar because they'd lived in his imagination. He wondered how long it would be before he was as disinterested as most of the other people around him looked.

Midway through his musings, an old silver rattler roared into the station out of the tunnel, cutting off the view to the billboard ads opposite as if swallowing them up.

Dale stepped on and selected a seat by the window (a telltale sign that the train had come from a less populated line) in the top level, at the right hand side of the train (the opposite side you fell from, a voice whispered in his head).

He swallowed hard as the train pulled away, doing up his top button and tie tightly, absently thinking that he'd have to buy a few more. He checked the address in his hip pocket for the fortieth time. *Warren & Cool. 5th fl 31-33 Lavender St Nth Syd. Brian Felding*. Still there, still the same.

The train filled up a lot more at the next station, Wynyard. A woman sat beside Dale and began to read *Cosmopolitan*. Its cover proclaimed that breasts were back, you could find a spring beauty booklet inside, and why some Hollywood leading men are just *awful* in bed.

But Dale didn't notice. He clutched the arm rest, a welcome but long overdue addition to Sydney trains in 2006, his heart thumping, his throat tight, the memory of the last time he crossed the Bridge strong and fearful.

The train burst into the sunlight from the tunnel and climbed towards the Port Jackson Highway towards the pylons. Dale could see the highway stretch across the Bridge far ahead, even see the northbound toll gates at the end.

See, not far to go at all, his mind said calmly.

The pylons passed, nothing else happened. No pain in his back, his head or stomach.

Cars and buses scooted along the road beside him. He looked up and he could see the cable cars, motionless and empty, closed until 10 a.m. each day. He felt his side and hip. No heat or discomfort at all. His heart jackrabbited in fear and anticipation, the way it does when you reach for a light switch in the middle of the night and you just know that a rotted hand, dripping moss and squirming with cemetery worms is going to explode outward and clamp hard on your wrist.

But nothing.

He shook his head slightly to himself, looking around the carriage at the other oblivious passengers. It was just a dream, his mind scolded his thundering heart. Just a silly dream and a sore back. You should be worrying about this job. He sighed and looked back out the window at the traffic, trying to remember what Brian Felding at Warren & Cooley looked like.....

The shard of a metal beam, fully ten feet long, clanged to the road between two lanes of traffic.

No, said the tiniest voice in Dale's mind, one that threatened to scream so loud as to deafen him. His adrenal glands squirted his body with fear, and his heart punched the inside of his ribs, fit to burst.

- where did that come from -
- this Bridge doesn't have -

His mind screamed in logical protest as he craned upwards to see the cable cars and the vertical support-

It was another dream. Oh Christ it had to be. Something big shifted in his mind, his soul, and he was looking up into the great steel framework of the Old Sydney Harbour Bridge. He gasped and sat back in terror, not noticing the woman look up curiously from her article (*What You Always Wanted To Ask About, Er, His Penis*).

When he looked up again, there was the cable car and the blue sky beyond.

"No," he whispered to himself, jerking the tie away from his neck and trying to calm down. He was suddenly aware of miniature rivers of sweat running down from his temples. He held his hand over his sledgehammering heart as if trying to quell it.

He cautiously looked out the window again, his eyes wide in fear. The train passed the first main support of the real Bridge. The same cars

and buses trundled back and forth, the same buildings lay beyond. He'd hallucinated.

He blew out a heavy breath, inflating his cheeks in relief, prompting several questioning (but carefully brief) looks from people near him. The woman looked away, obviously embarrassed by Dale's behaviour, and went back to *He Can Come More Than Once A Night!*

Dale rubbed his eyes roughly and stared back out at the traffic.

A massive iron girder fell from above and hit the roof of a bus coming in the other direction. An explosion of glass erupted outwards and the front of the bus swung upwards. It crashed heavily onto its side and slid crashing and clanging against other cars. Dale's eyes felt eight inches wide. He leaped to his feet and screamed, banging his head on the inward slope of the ceiling.

There was a deadly downpour, a deluge of beams and struts. Cars overturned, careened off the edge and collided. Bodies - torn and bloodied - flew through windshields.

It wasn't like last time, he thought crazily to himself. I had time to run the length of the Bridge. It took time. This is pandemonium. Complete fucking chaos.

Something else. He looked around in panic. The train had stopped. He was trapped in it. He turned to the woman, cowering from behind her penis article, and grabbed desperately at her.

"Can't you see all that?" he screeched pleadingly at her, at all of them. Some of the men were standing and raising their hands to calm him, and somehow much worse.....their hands.

They were holding on.

The train was moving.

He was trapped in a world of ghosts. He looked back out the window, whimpering in panic now. The train had come to rest beside an overturned Mitsubishi Colt, its corner bashed in.

Dale looked up to see a flailing spider of beams, joined at one end, fall through the air and crash onto the bus and the people crawling out. The beams bashed in their heads and tore off their limbs and opened their bodies.

Movement. Below him. Dale put his hands to the window and screamed in naked terror as a head appeared.

The dead man, his leg sheared off, his face pale, bruised and bloodless, crawled out, trailing his own blood and sinews, howled animal-like and looked straight at Dale with his dirty dead eyes.

No, his mind cried, this isn't a dream any more. This isn't a dream it's really happening somehow and this dead man is real and he's coming to get me.....

The dead thing dragged its rotten lips back to reveal its broken teeth. Grinning. Dale shrieked in utter panic, all control lost.

A city-bound train rumbled by on the opposite track. A beam split a gash in the edge of the road, taking the track with it and the whole train just plunged through, the roof of its last carriage torn off as it clipped the edge.

Dale was far beyond all rational thought, so far that it couldn't even occur to him that he was hallucinating, or even mad. All he could think was 'How can this all be happening again?'. And all he knew was that it was real.

Metal rained to the road, hitting vehicles and people. Everything was the same again.

Then his field of vision was blocked. The bloodless, hideous face thrust upwards inches from the window.

Dale cried out, scrambling away, crushing himself against the woman, who was embarrassed because she dropped her magazine and it fell open to a page with the word *PENIS* emblazoned on it.

The dead things eyes widened and his mouth grimaced in a hideous vampire grin as he spotted Dale. He raised his hands

- (*his hands his hands what's holding him up?!?*) -

and thrust them through the window of the carriage, shattering the glass, which showered over Dale, unable to push away.

The dead man suddenly dribbled a ruptured mouthful of blood and began to reach through with jagged, ripped and cold hands.

II

Dr Paul crashed through the doors to the waiting room and reception area, strode past the desk and into the adjacent corridor, his discussion with the hospital administrator and practising director rolling in his mind.

"Barry, cancel your appointments and come over. Bring your test equipment."

"What is it, Rob?"

"It's your patient, Dale Milling. He was just brought in here."

Barry's legs had quivered and let go, he collapsed into his chair, an icy claw crawling up his spine to grab him around the throat. "What happened to him?" He said, stabbing the intercom button beside the phone at the same time.

"He's all right, he's under heavy sedation. Apparently he went hysterical on a train this morning."

"Hysterical?"

"Yes, doctor?" came Eileen's voice over the intercom.

"Hold on Rob-" Barry said, covering the mouthpiece, "-I have to go on an emergency call to the hospital, Eileen, can you cancel all the appointments up until lunchtime, apologise and arrange new times with the patients, then call and arrange for an emergency casual for this afternoon. I'll be back to close up normal time, but if you do all your paperwork early ring me and I'll come and lock up early. I'll take my pager so you won't miss me."

"Okay, Barry."

"Thanks love, I'll see you later.....Bob?"

".....from the thyroid tests - hold on - yeah Barry?"

"What did he do?"

"I don't know, we only have witness statements. There's a policeman here now, on of the ones who took him in. He was out cold, and when we brought him around we just had to sedate him again. He was terrified of something, totally incoherent."

"Shit," Barry whispered, "all right, I'm leaving now. Is he in I.C.?"

"No, Ward 8."

Barry strode into Ward 8. Dr Robert Mendell was standing over the bed against one wall, a young uniformed policeman was sanding by the bay window

that looked out over the lawn, and two nurses were performing various duties in the room.

"Barry," Rob said, turning around. Barry nodded greeting to them all and moved to the bed.

Dale had an oxygen mask strapped to his face and was hooked up to a heart monitor. Barry shook his head in disbelief.

"He'll wake up about tea time." Rob began, "He went off the deep end when he awoke the first time. He started to hyperventilate so we're keeping the mask on him to regulate his airflow. His heart rate's normal, a bit slow because we pumped him pretty full."

"Did he say anything?" Barry asked. Rob looked at the younger of the two nurses, a young girl, a trainee or junior by the look of her - the other looked like a senior nurse or matron.

She shook her head. "He woke up pretty quick and just started to cry out. He coughed up phlegm and a bit of blood and then started to hyperventilate. He wouldn't listen to my voice and he hardly acknowledged that I was there."

"He didn't say a word?" Rob prompted.

"I can't be sure, I wouldn't say it in a statement, but I think I heard 'fall' or 'falling'. He just.....whimpered it."

"Thank you nurse, you can go." Rob said. She left the room. "Does that mean anything to you?" he asked Barry, who shrugged.

"He has trouble with nightmares about the accident." Rob nodded, needing no reminder, "That's all that was, he just had a dream when he passed out."

They both looked down at Dale's troubled, sleeping face. His brow furrowed and twitched in his anaesthetised slumber.

Barry sighed, his tremendous girth expanding outward and issuing a deep, whistling gust. "Is the brace all right?" he asked.

Rob shrugged. "X-rays didn't show anything untoward, that's why I said to bring your equipment."

Barry nodded. "I'll do them a bit later, they're in the car.....what about the eyewitness statements?"

"Yeah," Rob said, pointing at the policeman, "Constable Dalley," he gestured to Barry, "Dr Paul."

"Hi." Barry said, shook the policeman's hand.

"Doctor," the remaining nurse offered, "should we finish our reports?"

"Yes," Rob agreed, "I'll be back before you leave, Barry." And he was gone.

Constable Dalley got two chairs and the men sat on opposite sides of the bed. The policeman had a notepad ready.

"Well arrange for copies of the finished statements to be sent to you in case you need the descriptions for your patient files." He began.

Barry nodded. "Good, thank you."

"Right," the police officer said, following his notes with a pen,

"Mrs Michelle Raymond, of Fort Road, North Glebe was sitting next to Mr Milling in the trains upper deck. According to her he..... quote - became agitated at something outside the train that she wasn't aware of - unquote. He apparently looked up twice, then seemed to calm down a bit. He rubbed his face, then looked back out the window and screamed with fear, hitting his head as he stood up. Still nothing was going on, but he began to stare out the train, evidently watching several disturbing things happen.

"He looked around at everyone else in the train, frightened. He grabbed the lapels of Mrs Raymonds coat, at which point other passengers started forward to assist, and yelled at her, quote: 'Can't you see all that?'

"He turned his attention back outside the carriage and watched more seemingly invisible things, crying, then he seemed to spot something which made him scream again. He watched the window, quote: very anxiously, and then something very close seemed to frighten him. He screamed again and began to push away from the window urgently, pushing Mrs Raymond painfully against the armrest for several seconds. One gentleman leant over the seat in front of Mr Milling to try

to pull him away from Mrs Raymond and commented that it was like trying to wrestle a bear. After several seconds, Mr Milling fainted."

Barry looked at his old friend, his head in his hand, and thought 'What happened to you, old mate?' He looked back at the policeman.

"What about everyone else?"

"Well, on first reading we couldn't find any discrepancy in the story between the statements." Barry nodded.

"And then?"

"Well, they thought he'd died because a stream of blood came from his mouth, but Dr Mendell tells me that the ambulance officers identified that as Mr Milling having bitten the inside of his lip.....Some of the men on the train carried him off when it arrived at Milsons Point. They took him to the station master's office who took their names and numbers and called an ambulance. The ambulance service took all the names from the station master and gave them to us, and we called around to get primary statements."

"I see," Barry nodded, "who have you contacted besides the witnesses?"

"Just his mother, she's coming out here soon. Ah, we assumed he was on his way to work but we have no idea who his employer is."

"It was his first day. Never mind, I'll get my secretary to call them."

"Thanks, doctor. Well, as long as he's all right and didn't do any harm this isn't a police matter. Obviously something in his mind.....snapped. Bearing in mind he's an ex-paraplegic, it could be stress, worrying about the new job, anything. It's a big adjustment in life."

They both stood up and Barry shrugged his bear-like shoulders. "I can't help thinking it's something to do with the brace. He's had complaints about it for awhile."

Constable Dalley looked puzzled. "How could the brace induce hallucinations?"

"Maybe.....the computer box has developed a fault and sent some interfering signal to his brain. Left an imprint on his conscious perception, anything."

The policeman started to tuck his notepad away. "Sounds a little far fetched, but, I hope he'll be okay. Thanks, Doctor Paul, for you time."

"Thanks for waiting for me." Barry answered, and Dalley was gone.

Barry went to the reception desk and called Eileen, telling her what had happened, and to ring Warren & Cooley and let them know. She said that she had called the AMA and a specialist would be arriving at the practice at midday (the Association had a list of specialist in many fields, casuals, permanently on call in case of emergency hospital visits) He

collected his case of test equipment from the car and returned to Dale's ward.

He hooked Dale up to the unit while he was still asleep and manipulated his friend's body for the various bend and stress tests.

Next he strapped the electro-receptor sheath around Dale's middle, hooked it into the BraceTest terminal and switched the machine on. The title screen appeared, which read; BRACETEST 6000 TEST SYSTEM. *Strike a key when ready....* Barry hit a key and was greeted with a menu of several functions, CIRCUIT TIMER, REFLEX TEST, SYSTEM MEASUREMENTS, COMPUTER PAD TEST, and DEFECTS. He would have to wait until that night to test the circuit timer when Dale could move consciously. He selected SYSTEM MEASUREMENTS, reaching across to get the manual and his notebook out of the equipment case, and was met with four new choices; SYSTEM VOLTAGE, SYSTEM DELAY, SYSTEM RESISTANCE, and a directory of some obscure electrical tests of certain areas and function of the brace.

He opened the manual and put it on the food trolley beside the bed, flicking through the system settings. He selected SYSTEM VOLTAGE and was presented with;

COMPUTER/CONTROL BOX BATTERY: 8V

MOTOR: 2V

COMPLETE SYSTEM VOLTAGE (CURRENT): 4.012906V

(PLEASE NOTE FLUCTUATIONS OF *NO MORE* THAN .1V
ALLOWED DUE TO EXTERNAL INFLUENCES AND SELF
ALTERATION WITHIN SYSTEM)

Barry checked the book under *System Parameters* and the standard system voltage was four volts. The book had the same fluctuation warning. He took notes and continued.

Next he referred to the sub-menu and selected SYSTEM RESISTANCE and was told;

COMPUTER/CONTROL BOX FUSE RESISTANCE: 6.9 Ω

MOTOR POWER SURGE RESISTANCE: 1.65 Ω

TOTAL MULTI-CELLULAR RESISTANCE OF SYSTEM: 2.980137 Ω

(PLEASE NOTE THAT SYSTEM FUSES CAN ONLY BE ALTERED
SURGICALLY)

Barry checked the book. The total standard resistance of every fuse and resistor cell (set at strategic points right around the brace, in both

clasps and in the wires in the main shaft) in the system was three ohms (Ω), not to be lower than 1.75 ohms. The brace had been in for five years and the fuses had deteriorated to such a point that the resistance had fallen 0.019863, as he worked out on the calculator pad of the terminal to include in his notes.

He made another calculation. The total resistance, given uniform conditions of degeneration, wouldn't reach 1.75 for another three hundred and fourteen years.

By that time, he thought, all our problems will be behind us.

Barry noted it down, adding that it was a theoretical figure, and remained subject to natural conditions, small surges of power and replacement of fuses - if it was ever necessary. The brace was a highly specialised electrical circuit and was therefore almost surge-proof. But no safety measure was omitted. If the resistors weren't strong enough - or not there at all - and the eight volts that worked the computer shorted and consequently surged, the amperage released would be more than enough to electrocute Dale to death in seconds. The system resistance was checked twelve times a year.

Barry went back to the terminal and returned to the system test sub-menu, choosing, lastly, system delay, and noted as he read;

CLASP 1/RECEPTOR 1 >> TO/FROM COMPUTER TIME:

0.000001846463943 s

CLASP 2/RECEPTOR 2 >> TO/FROM COMPUTER TIME:

0.000004366819336 s

SIGNAL ANALYSIS AND PROCESS DELAY: 0.00003869936838 s

STANDARD NERVOUS DELAY: 0.00000013477839 s

APPROXIMATE COMMAND/RESPONSE DELAY

INCLUDING SYSTEM (CURRENT): 0.00004492613 s

Barry read from the manual : *The average command/response delay in the fully biological system is 0.0000412 s. The total delay of your system (including nervous delay) shouldn't be more than 0.000004 s slower. If so, all the connections and the computer board should be checked (surgically) and rewired if necessary.*

He went back to the calculator pad and calculated the difference between Dale's nervous system (with the brace) and that of a normal spinal system. The brace made the system 0.000003726 seconds slower than a biological spine and was therefore acceptable.

The percentage breakdown (how long each component of the system took) of the entire system, was available to Barry at his prompting;

COMPUTER: 86.14%
WIRING (CLASP 1 >> CONTROL BOX): 4.11%
WIRING (CLASP 2 >> CONTROL BOX): 9.72%
NERVOUS DELAY: 0.03%

Barry noted the figures down. The difference in the two clasps was that the wiring had further to travel down the main shaft to reach the control box in one of them. And while medical and computer science were triumphs of mankind, God still designed the ultimate microprocessor by far - of the hundred thousandth of a second a mental command passed from the brain to the muscle via the brace, only a ten thousandth of that fraction was taken up by the brain and nerves.

Barry exited to the main menu and selected COMPUTER PAD TEST. The computer drew a little drawing of the circuit board and displayed; INTERNAL TEST CIRCUIT SHOWS NO FAULTS IN TRANSISTORS, CHIPS OR CIRCUITS OF COMPUTER BOARD. FOR MORE DETAILED TESTING PLEASE CONSULT THE BRACETEST 6000 MANUAL. IF ANY FAULT SHOWS, THE CIRCUIT BOARD SHOULD BE SURGICALLY REMOVED, TESTED BY A QUALIFIED TECHNICIAN AND REPAIRED OR REPLACED IF NECESSARY.

He noted it down and returned to the main menu to select DEFECTS. Again the computer offered a choice; ELECTRICAL FAULT; MECHANICAL FAULT/JOLTING; COMPUTER FAULT; CONNECTIONS/RELAY FAULT; INSUFFICIENT MUSCULAR/NERVOUS RESPONSE; PROSTHETIC MAGNETISATION; POWER SURGE; EXPIRED BATTERY; LEAKS OR RUPTURES OF SHAFT, CLASPS, CONTROL BOX OR MOTOR; ORGANIC GROWTHS OR BLOCKAGES IN/AROUND SYSTEM.

Barry hadn't a clue what to test or look for until his eyes fell upon PROSTHETIC MAGNETISATION. Feeling like a secret agent looking for the hidden connection, he selected it. After a few seconds of whirring in the terminal, the screen told him

SUBJECT IS SUFFERING PROSTHETIC MAGNETISATION.

Below that, a rough outline of a human body appeared and a vertical bar of light appeared in the torso, from the shoulder region to the navel. CONTINUE.....the screen invited. Barry pressed the space bar and the screen cleared and displayed;

RECOMM. STRENGTH OF ELECTROMAGNETIC FIELD OF PROSTHETIC DEVICE: 8.9V
CURRENT STRENGTH OF ELECTROMAGNETIC FIELD OF PROSTHETIC DEVICE:

The space remained blank, the screen flickered, and the computer whirred and clicked to itself. The computer, with over five hundred kilobytes of calculation capacity, was taking several disturbing seconds to fully measure the strength of the field. The answer presently appeared, shocking and final as a guilty verdict;

58.45V

"Shit," Barry hissed to himself. The word SEVERE began to flash at the bottom of the screen.

Barry turned back to his notebook. *Severe electromagnetism*, he wrote, *like 1st time, both times brought about after crossing harbour bridge.*

An ugly realisation dawned on Barry. The Harbour Bridge. It was a potential danger to Dale and people like him with prosthetic devices. Some unforeseeable engineering matter had become a medical hazard.

He wrote *Assume SHB is generating field strong enough to magnetise brace so severely. Find out what's wrong.* He had no grounding to prove that Dale's body chemistry was intensifying the field, and couldn't think of a chemical imbalance that could create a field so strong.

He could approach the AMA to instigate an inquiry, but the medical profession had no clout against the Sydney County Council. It would make a terrible mess of his career and reputation if he was wrong. It wasn't important enough to take to the police or government directly. You couldn't dismantle a major city thoroughfare for the sake of one man's nervous twinge.

The only option open to Barry as he watched his sleeping friends face and thought, was to look into it himself. And since he had neither the time or energy at his age, he would have to delegate. His secretary was too busy and only a secretary, after all, and it wasn't really a work matter anyway. It seemed a trifle far fetched to him, but he saw no other choice but to consult an investigation agency. Why not? He'd done it before, for reputable and ethical reasons.

He exited to the main menu and exited from the program. DO YOU WANT THE RESULTS COMMITTED TO PATIENT FILE? It asked him, He typed yes, waited until it scrambled to provide a brief report; MILLING, D T, PAT NO 15776EK, 11/01/17, SM(PROG), SR(PROG), SD(PROG), SD%(PROG), CPT(PROG), PM(PROG) END. and switched the terminal off.

The word private investigator had a real Mike Hammer reputation - hat, overcoat, small dirty office and everything else, but there were

discreet and ethical companies of professional detectives as proficient as the police. They were expensive but earned their money well. That, at any rate, would explain the high level of magnetism in the brace.

It still wouldn't tell him why the Harbour Bridge was sending Dale Milling into violent hysterics.

III

Barry returned to his surgery just before lunchtime. He spent half an hour filing his notes on the test results, transferring them from the Bracetest machine to the PC patient record, and punching in additional notes he'd thought of since leaving the hospital.

He then checked all his records of contact addresses, computer listings from invoices, even pieces of loose paper around the office, and before long he had a short list entitled *P.I.'s* on his Panacain jotting pad (a subscription gift that his Panacain representative bought him every year. *Superior surgical and domestic pain killing action - Fast* each page proudly told him).

At first glance he would consider only three. Shelby and Montach Government Enquiry and Investigation Service, a private company subsidised by the federal government that dealt with enquiries into departmental affairs whose mainstream business came not just from individuals or companies but the government itself. Departments within often had queries or suspicions concerning their parliamentary comrades.

In 2008 Shelby and Montach had, commissioned by the Public Spending Authority, exposed a multi million dollar pension fraud that had led to the dismissal of the shadow Education Minister of Victoria.

Barry hadn't ever dealt with Shelby and Montach, but they were supposed to be very ruthless and very invisible in the investigation community when it came to government matters.

Second was Lorraine Valentine Private Investigators, a small team who all had guns at their office and wore trench coats and who, in Barry's opinion, watched too much TV as kids. They were good, a little sloppy, but certainly cheap (they weren't quite established enough to charge exorbitant prices in proportion to an inflated reputation).

They mostly dealt in small criminal cases, divorce evidence and the like. In 2004, when Barry was just 42, he and three colleagues commissioned Lorraine Valentine in their earliest days to stop the introduction of a new surgical technique that they believed had been poorly researched and pushed through the AMA to cover losses the orthopaedic industry suffered because of reformed Medicare levies.

Barry hesitated and scratched the name out. They were a little too 'two-bit' for this.

That left one more name. George Slatten & Bromigal Detective Agency had begun in the mid 1960's. Five Melbourne senior detective had retired together and amassed a force of ten or so young policemen and independent private detectives.

Fifty years later, they had offices in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Perth and London, with just over a hundred clerical staff and consultant investigators.

In June of 2010, a year after he had fitted the abdominal brace into Dale Milling, Barry received a letter from a solicitor. A Mrs McAdams, the stiffy formal letter had said, was suffering severe discomfort following back treatment performed eight months previously by Barry, and was filing a malpractice suit against him, suing for the cost of the treatment plus damages. Barry had been crestfallen with guilt and pity for the woman and had offered to examine her and see if he could pinpoint the problem, also offering to correct it for no fee. He could find no result of his treatment causing the problem, and told Mrs McAdams that her lifestyle was to blame.

Mrs McAdams' solicitors didn't back down, and the malpractice suit was going to put he and his wife, Julia, in debt until their late nineties, so Barry went to George Slatten & Bromigal and a consulting investigator named Michael Alexander proved that the woman's habits since the treatment were at fault.

Barry called to make an appointment at George Slatten at their city centre office (Michael Alexander had retired, the receptionist told him, would Mr Dimitriou be all right? Barry said it was fine, marvelling at the news of Alexander's retirement. He had looked barely forty years old even then, four years back, and he was retired already). The receptionist told him Mr Dimitriou was a senior manager and qualified private investigator and an appointment was made for the coming Friday.

And, when the casual specialist arrived, Barry repeated his promise to Eileen that he'd be back in time for her to leave, bought the morning paper and drove back out to the AMA Research Library. If he could find some connection between prosthetic magnetisation and stress and/or mental disorders, it might shed some light on Dale's behaviour.

IV

When Dale awoke from his sedated sleep at seven o'clock that night, Barry was there by his side, reading. He looked across at Dale anxiously, who groaned and coughed lightly. His eyes flickered open.

"Morning," he whispered heavily to Barry.

"Sleep well?" Barry asked, pressing the buzzer to summon the nurse.

"What time is it?" Dale asked groggily, struggling to sit up.

"It's Wednesday night.....Dale, what do you remember?"

Dale looked at Barry, and only then began to take in his surroundings.

"I'm in hospital."

"Yes," Barry prompted, "do you remember anything?"

"Am I hurt?"

"No, you're fine. You just had an accident on the way to work."

Dale's eyes widened. "What kind of-"

"Dale, you have to tell me what you remember. It's important."

Dale sighed and looked at the foot of the bed, his brow creased in concentration. "I remember.....getting up and getting dressed. I was on the train.....I remember a face, I see....."

"Whose face?" Barry pressed gently.

"Oh, I don't know, I had a nightmare, and today...."

"You saw the same face from your nightmare on the train this morning?"

Dale stared across the room, thinking hard. He shook his head.

"No, no, this morning was.....I had the nightmare days ago...." Barry leaned closer, "I remember this morning, and this face,.....he was dead, Barry....." He shook his head, "Maybe I just had the same dream again."

"All right, but what about today?" Barry asked.

"No, Barry, what happened to me?" Dale demanded.

Barry sighed. "You were on the train and you....passed out." If he told Dale the truth it might bring all the memories crashing back and induce fresh terror, and he'd rather Dale forget altogether than that. At least not until he was fully awake and could discuss it in relative emotional safety.

"What about work?" Dale asked.

"Don't worry, we contacted them. You just fainted, you'll be there in a couple of days, maybe next week."

"If I just fainted, what am I doing in hospital?" he said, more worried. He wasn't stupid.

Barry sighed again. "The truth is I don't know what happened. No one does." He leaned closer, "That's why you have to remember. Now think."

"Didn't anyone see me?" Dale asked in wonder.

Barry held his ground. "Think, Dale. Be quiet for now, just think. You reached the Harbour Bridge."

"Um," Dale began, "I was a bit worried, seeing as how it made me sick last time. Plus the idea has never been too comforting anyway. I remember getting on the train at Town Hall station....."

"Good," Barry encouraged, "one step at a time."

"Then coming out into the sunlight. The train started across....."

"Yeah." Barry said quietly.

"The face.....no, the Bridge. Did I dream it? It fell down again. I looked up, and...-" he looked up fearfully at Barry through drugged eyes, "- the old Bridge was-"

The nurse came through the doors, breaking his concentration. The fragments, held loosely by his weakened memory, went spinning away into the dark.

"Hello, how are you feeling?" she asked chirpily, carrying a tray of food.

"Oh...I feel drunk."

"Here," she said, putting the tray on the food table and taking the paper cup from it, "have some water, your throat'll be dry, and there's an aspirin on the tray in case you have a headache." Then, to Barry, "I'll call Dr Mendell." He nodded and watched her leave.

He turned back to Dale. "Go on." he said.

Dale gulped a mouthful of water. He frowned in thought again, and shook his head. "It's hazy. I'm exhausted."

Dr Rob Mendell arrived at quarter to eight, dressed in casual home wear.

"Feel all right, Dale?" he asked as he strode into the room.

Dale, sitting up now and a lot more alert, said "Yeah, I'm getting a bit of a headache, that's all."

Rob pointed to the dinner tray. "Get that aspirin down you if it worsens." Dale smiled.

"Barry," Rob said in greeting, "have you told him?"

Barry shook his head. "That's your job."

Dale looked at Barry with mock accusation. "You bloody liar." he said.

Barry laughed but was adamant. "You're not here under my care this time. You're not in hospital for your back."

Rob sat down, dragging another chair behind Barry's. "Dale," he began, "this morning on your way to work, you suffered some form of.....hysteria."

"Hysteria." Dale repeated calmly, as if he were tasting the word.

Rob continued. "You became extremely distressed at something outside the train carriage that apparently only you could see. Do you remember what?"

Dale chewed his nail, thinking.

"A face," Barry reminded him, "a dead face."

Dale stared at Barry impassively, waiting for his words to register of hit some mental chord.

He shook his head. "Sorry."

"You fainted and were brought here." Dr Mendell pressed gently, "You woke up in a violently agitated state. We had to sedate you - that's why you're getting a headache. Do you remember what you saw on that train?"

Dale thought again.

"Barry told me you suffer nightmares," Dr Mendell prompted, "did you see something today that you'd previously dreamed of?"

"Oh, it isn't that, doctor," Dale said, stopping momentarily while the doctor said to call him Rob, "I've had those nightmares for years. Anyway, I can't remember if this is the same nightmare and I've had it twice, or if I've had it once and remembered it twice.....I don't even remember what was in it any more." He looked at Barry, shrugging in apology, "I don't remember any face."

Rob thought for a minute, his chin resting on his hand, and said. "Dale, I don't know much about dreams or hallucinations, I'm only administrator and head doctor here, and this could be anything. It could be a release of years of stress and tension that you perceived as visual. Whatever it was, and just in case it's important, I'm going to recommend that you see someone and try to get it into the open. Just once, to try and see what can be achieved."

Dale rubbed his hands on his temples and just for that moment, looked tired, resigned, and sick of life. He looked at Barry. "I thought my days of seeing psychiatrists were over." he said miserably.

"Come on, if there's something worrying you inside," Rob offered, but Dale ignored him.

"Dale," Barry said, offering the advice as a friend, "I was there when you recovered, I watched you go through all those therapies, and what did you learn? These things are walls in your life, and you've just got to climb over and keep on going. If you give up and stop, you'll never be out of it's shadow. Remember Dr Fletcher said that?"

"I can give you the names of some of the top people in the field," Rob said, "I've got some influence, I could get you in fast."

Dale shrugged. "I suppose so."

Rob nodded in approval. "It's purely a precaution."

"Well," Barry said, standing up, "I've got to go. Julia's parents are over from Orange a few days and she's doing us all a special dinner." The mention of Barry's wife reminded Dale that he hadn't seen her in a long time, and he made Barry promise to arrange for them all to have dinner. Barry said a round of goodbyes and left.

Once out in the car, his stomach growling in anticipation of the feast (and knotted with apprehension at his in-laws), Barry was nagged by something else. Another factor in the Harbour Bridge equation. Dale had crossed the Bridge and suffered acute prosthetic magnetisation, for which he would be treated tomorrow upon his release from hospital, and that meant that the Harbour Bridge was affected by an unusually large electromagnetic field, one that was potentially dangerous. That part, he had covered. It was a scientific and engineering matter, and George Slatten would find out what was wrong.

As for Dale's hysterical behaviour, the psychologist would hopefully root that out. That avenue was covered as well.

His search at the AMA research library had been fruitless. As far as records showed, there hadn't been a single case of prosthetic magnetism and mental disorders that were conceivably linked. But that didn't mean it wasn't possible. As far as he could see, the Bridge had magnetised Dale's brace, and whether directly or not, he had suffered frightening hallucinations. Fine, it all worked.

But there was another thing. Humankind's natural aversion to the messy. When just one tiny thing doesn't make sense, it becomes by its nature the most offensive enemy. It was the same frustration the police felt when all their hardest evidence points to the one man with the rock solid alibi.

Barry got into the car and put his case with his notes, equipment and some odds and ends, taking out the morning paper from that day. He turned to the fourth page and read the title of the story halfway down the page, his eyes screwing up in confusion and distaste.

***STRANGE HAPPENINGS ON PEAK HOUR HARBOUR
BRIDGE - SIX WITNESSES.***

V

Rob Mendell's promise hadn't been over-ambitious. He'd arranged an appointment with a psychotherapist for 10:30 a.m. that Friday morning, two days later, three weeks ahead of the usual waiting list for psychology treatment.

The sun was heavy and explosively hot as Dale emerged onto the street from the escalator that led him from the underground platforms of Bondi Junction station.

Summer was well and truly in Sydney. The mid January humidity hung like a moist veil, pasting shirts to backs and making skin clammy and sticky, making tens of thousands wish like never before they were at the beach or by the pool instead of at work.

Dale immediately unbuttoned the cuffs of his white cotton shirt and rolled them to the elbows. He'd pressed his black stone wash jeans and shined his casual black shoes that morning (the only good shoes he owned, among a motley collection of sneakers, old faded split brogues, thongs and massaging sandals that occupied the bottom of his wardrobe and had for years). Together, the white shirt, smart black jeans and black shoes formed the only casual and real going-out outfit he owned or needed to.

He wiped his palms across his jeans, scraping away the greasy film he'd gotten from holding the pole in the vestibule of the train, and looked around.

Bondi was a small, thriving business district, with a few high-rises and a bevy of shopping malls and stores. He could see the building he wanted from where he was standing, the Bondi Capital Tower (*The business headquarters of the eastern suburbs!* The 2003 leasing campaign had promised), a fourteen storey tower of glass with pink and blue framing and edges and a elaborate half dome design nestled in a corner of the cutaway section at the top, an eminent spire on top of that. The colours and design were influenced by the pastel building bandwagon begun in the city in the late 1980's by the city's Ernst & Young, MMI and Coopers & Lybrand buildings.

He looked at the appointment card; **Dr Victoria Holt, F.R.A.C.P.E, B.Sc, Dip Pschlg, Dip Med (NSW), B.Mntl Hlth Med (Syd). 10:30, Friday, January 13, 2017.**

Rob Mendell had scratched his signature at the bottom, since it had come via him.

Dale set off down the street, his stomach a jangle of nerves, not just at the thought of having psychological counselling again, but the thought of what he might remember.

Dr Mendell said he'd gone hysterical. Since Barry had left the hospital on Wednesday night, Dale had racked his brains to remember what had happened to him, and he knew he remembered some of it when he awoke earlier that afternoon, but even those vague pictures were gone.

He'd spent the night under the hospitals care while the sedatives completely wore off and he'd been discharged the following morning. He'd taken a taxi to Barry's surgery, who gave him instructions to go to the University, where he was booked into the medical test cell to have the brace treated for magnetisation (Barry himself would've gone, but was flooded with patients due to the appointments he'd cancelled on Wednesday morning.

Dr Mendell had agreed to Barry's request to give Dale until the end of the week off. Barry's receptionist had called Warren & Cooley and

apologised, telling them that Barry had committed Dale until Sunday to rest and recuperate.

Thursday he'd spent with his mother. She came for lunch and they'd gone to choose new coverings for her lounge suite. She'd been unsure, torn between doing up the old house with the money his Dad's life insurance had left (both his parents had had policies in those days to cover the mortgage), of which there was still several thousand dollars left, or selling up and moving to a smaller house or her own flat.

She'd gotten a bit old for a three bedroom family sized house, and had begun to think she'd be happier somewhere a bit more easily kept. She didn't intend to stay with the old place forever - she wasn't the type to feel her husband still there or hear the splashing of the swimming pool or the laughing or the smell of the Christmas dinners in her mind. Those days were gone, and she accepted that in a second. She was far more practical than she was emotional - always had been.

That night, after she'd left, Dale thought about her, and suddenly recognised in her soul the hard streak of practicality and commonsense from years ago, when his family was a wonderful dream and his mother a tower of iron.

It was the first time in too many years he'd seen that powerful, dynamic woman of then and her tired, withered, burdened self of today as the same person. *She'll always be your Mum* a voice told him, as if stating the obvious, and he'd cried quietly, sitting at the dining room table for hours. Her heart was pumping slower these days, but it carried all the strength of those years. He wanted to call her in gales of happy tears and tell her that he was proud, so very, very proud.

VI

The elevator doors opened and he stepped out into a small, thin hall. A sign opposite told him that Dr Holt's office was to the left, in suite 12.

The waiting room was small and thin. Two other people waited in the wide brown leather lounges that were lined against the wall adjacent to and opposite the reception area. The only other things in the room were the reception desk, opposite to the door Dale had come through, a tall rubber plant in another corner, and a door beside that which presumably led to the psychiatrist's office.

Dale walked across to the desk and was received by a sprite and smiling girl who told him to take a seat. He sat in the first lounge, sinking right down, past the edge of the reception desk, and picked up a July 2013 *GQ* magazine, leafing through it but not paying attention.

His knees shook gently, his stomach felt strangled with apprehension. The waiting room was quiet and tense, the occasional rustle of paper or thump of a rubber stamp or clack of computer keys from behind the reception desk somehow worse, giving the tension an urgent edge.

Victoria Holt, he thought to himself.

What did a Victoria look like? Like an old, fat British monarch. No, she was a professional psychoanalyst. She probably wore a short but sensible skirt, dark stockings, ball-breaker stiletto heels, and a matching blouse and blazer.

Her hair would be violently gelled back from her forehead to a tiny bun at the back, and her hard, stern, bespectacled face would command obedience. She would exude feminine professionalism and confidence. She'd look like a stockbroker or some other yuppie type. Her perfume would be restrictedly pleasant. She'd have nails like talons (painted an acceptable shade). Her hair would be black. Maybe brunette. Her ears would wear small gold loops. No, pearls, small ones. She'd have no distracting jewellery, just a small ring or neck chain. She'd appear ladylike in a businesslike way yet remain personally genderless. She'd -

The office door opened and a woman was ushering a young man out. Dale was taken aback. This was Doctor Victoria Holt. The woman looked in her early thirties. She had wavy caramel brown hair, spilling around her shoulders, peppered with loose flecks of dark blonde. Her face was wide and smiley, friendly and open like a pretty schoolgirl. She wore a long gathered black skirt that just brushed the tops of her ankle high floppy leather boots and a long mint green cashmere jumper, the sleeves pulled above her elbows. Her ears were adorned with large green disc earrings and a long gold chain hung around her neck, bouncing against her abdomen. There was only one word to describe her, a label of convenience that kids in American high school dramas used which Dale despised - cute.

"- so we'll see you next time," she said to the man, and then, to the receptionist, "about eight weeks please, Felicity." The two people waiting had stood to join the young man at the reception desk and Dr Holt took a blue A4 sized card from the desk.

She looked at Dale. "Mr Milling?" she smiled.

"Yes," Dale said, standing up. She smiled wider, gesturing into the office. He walked in and sat at her desk, the office around him a very warming display of clutter, the sort that makes it plain that the room or area is occupied by a woman. Feminine clutter.

A wide window with wooden venetian blinds offered a beautiful view of Bondi below and a stretch across the water to where the city and Harbour Bridge were splashed with hot morning sunlight. Dale found the

side-on view of the Bridge unsettlingly ironic. She closed the door and walked around to her seat. He followed her and couldn't suppress a smile.

"You're not at all what I expected," he said.

"What?" she laughed, "Not fair, psychiatrists are people too."

"I know," Dale hastened to add, put at ease by her receptiveness, "it's just that you have a prejudgment of a certain type of person."

She nodded knowingly. "We all do. You're not quite what I thought an ex-paraplegic would look like." Dale smiled. If, at psychiatrist's school, they taught them to firstly put their patients at ease, this girl was good at it.

Stop being melodramatic, he told himself. It's not a mind game. She's just friendly.

"Well it's nice to meet you," she said, "I've spoken to Dr Mendell, and like he told you, this is just in case. We'll just go slowly and see how it goes, see if there's something there. If after today you don't feel a bit more relaxed about the Harbour Bridge, we'll leave it at that if you like, but it's always best to deal with these sorts of things. So to start with," she put her hand modestly against her chest, "I'm Vicki, don't call me doctor."

Dale nodded. "Dale, then," he agreed.

She smiled and nodded her head once in approval. "Right," she began, looking at the card, "I've got all the details here. The witness reports say that you apparently hallucinated while on board the train and became quite frightened." Dale watched her, fascinated. She was quite personal while retaining a professionally objective air. Her facial expressions as she looked from him to the card were both empathetic and sympathetic.

"Now, from what the nurses could gather from when you first woke up in hospital, you most probably imagined that you saw the Harbour Bridge falling down again. That would explain your.....terror!" She held her hands outwards to emphasise herself, "It was a horrible thing to relive, let alone go through."

She hunched down in her seat and clasped her hands, striking them softly on the table top in emphasis as she spoke. She was very conscious of her body language and wanted to appear expressive but not dominant. Dale thought of his first meeting with Dr Barry Paul and smiled to himself at the contrast.

"Now," Doctor Holt continued (he couldn't bring himself to think of her as Vicki yet), "what I hope for is to somehow get you to remember what you saw on the train on Wednesday morning and, if necessary, come to terms with it. If we can do that it might.....lift the lid of the anxiety you've been feeling about the Bridge all these years, since the accident. Because I think it's this anxiety that's flared up again, in the sense that being on the Bridge has triggered it off. So that's what caused

the incident on Wednesday and,....." she looked back down at the card, "...didn't something else happen?"

"Yes, I got very sick the first time I went for the job interview." Dale told her.

She nodded. "That's right. So today, We'll try a simple relaxation therapy. It's not really hypnotherapy, you're still quite conscious, but it brings you to a relaxed state where you can remember a little easier because those mental barriers are gone. It's the same treatment we try with child abuse victims. They often grow up blocking the memory out and believing something else." She smiled and sat up, "Should we try it?" He nodded, and she added, "If you don't feel ready, we can leave it for now and just talk about the past the way we are now."

"No, It's okay. I feel pretty relaxed anyhow."

"All right," she pushed a button on the phone and said "No interruptions until the end of this session please, Felicity." She switched off the desk lamp and went to the door, locking it and dimming the lights.

"I'll get you to sit over there." she said, gesturing to a chair on the back wall. She drew the Venetian blinds and the sunlight and Bridge were cut out.

The room was darker now, the sharpness and clarity gone, a dream-like half light filling the office. She returned to the desk and pushed a button on the master cassette deck built into the wall and a sound emanated from somewhere, serene and on the edge of hearing.

"I hope to be able to afford a separate office and surgery soon, but for now they're sort of in one." She told him, turning her chair to face him. For a few seconds she scratched notes on the pad in front of her, and Dale gradually felt tension like weights slip down his body into the floor. He didn't bother to say anything in answer to her, his breathing already slower, his limbs light. He seemed to come to rest in a state of completely relaxed consciousness, aware and alert and pleasantly lulled at the same time.

Vicki (*now* it seemed right), leant forward, pen in hand, and said, complete with deep European voice "Tell me about your mother."

VII

By the time half an hour had passed Dale felt better. Satisfied. Almost cleansed. He hadn't remembered the actual content of his hallucinations, but he knew and felt that they were a combination of his experience and the subsequent nightmares of the incident. Dr Holt (Vicki didn't seem so apt now the real world was hooting and wailing and yelling around them again) had an idea that the inner tension that had built up (sometimes stresses build upon themselves without the conscious

mind ever knowing, she'd explained) had sought release, and his anxiety at travelling across the Harbour Bridge had been the subconscious catalyst.

But there was one other thing, his confusion between the nightmare and the hallucinations (and their apparent similarities) intrigued her. If they were the same, she felt that their content had some significance. For example, his reference to a dead face. She wanted to gauge his reactions to the Harbour Bridge first hand. He agreed, bearing in mind that the results might help further.

The AMA often commissioned field study for specialists, administering equipment and replacement doctors in return for the rights to publication and further scrutiny. Vicki could apply to test Dale at the site of the Bridge, where his reactions would be first-hand and not memories, and essentially be "employed" by the AMA to test and research Dale's anxiety. Her work commitments would be delegated to a temporary replacement placed at her office by the AMA. It was like getting a research grant in the form of time and equipment.

In the meantime, she asked Dale if he would mind her driving him to work the following Monday, her day off, in case it happened again. She would carry a sedative kit under her medical license and be within her rights as a physician. He agreed. They exchanged pleasantries and bade each other goodbye. Dale spent the rest of that Friday with his mind a whirlwind of wonder at Doctor Victoria Holt.

As Dale was in a semiconscious state undergoing psychoanalysis in a building in the eastern suburbs, Barry Paul sat in Albert Dimitriou's office at George Slatten and Bromigal's George Street offices in the city.

Mr Dimitriou was a tall man with darkish skin of Israeli descent, but surprisingly Australian characteristics despite his soft eyes and thin moustache. Barry overshadowed him mercilessly. The office was small but the rosewood desk was wide, and contained only a phone, pencil caddy and three tiered office trays. A four drawer filing cabinet sat beside the window. The office (and the consultant) were meticulously clean, like their investigating. It made Barry remember why he'd come.

"The disorder is called prosthetic magnetisation," Barry was telling the investigator, "And if the area of the entire Bridge has, through some planning error or manufacturing fault, built up a magnetic field this strong, then whoever uses a prosthetic device will be afflicted if they come into contact with it. Now, I've come to you because you know the avenues to take and the people to consult. I want you to determine whether the Harbour Bridge is safe for ex-paraplegics and other people with electronic prosthetics."

Dimitriou nodded in understanding.

"Now I'm not sure that's the case," Barry continued, "and that's the embarrassing part about this. There could be other explanations, and I don't really want a lawsuit brought against me by a major council at my stage in life."

"We assure utmost discretion, Doctor Paul." Dimitriou said.

Barry smiled, nodded and said "So, what do you think?"

The smaller man leaned back in his chair and tapped his pen on the desk in front of him, the one he'd held throughout the entire interview. "As you've used our services before, you'll remember our procedures. I'll have to summarise the investigation and present it to my superiors. Whatever their decision, we'll let you know on Monday and follow it up in writing. With our letter of affirmation will be our invoice of consultancy fee and deposit, should we accept the case. At this stage I'd say the case will be assigned to myself, in which case I'll be your contact. All correspondence will be sent by courier where possible or certified mail to ensure confidentiality."

"And the initial paperwork comes in the mail to me?"

"Yes, along with the invoice and letter."

"That's great," Barry said, standing and offering his hand to the investigator, who stood and accepted it, "now I am sorry, but I really have to return to work."

"Thank you, doctor, you'll hear from me tomorrow." Barry turned to go.

"Just before you go," the investigator stopped him. Barry turned back. The man half smiled. "I try to make a point of asking clients this.....what do you think it is? Without being afraid of sounding wild." Barry breathed deeply, looking into space while he thought.

"It looks to me that the government has made the biggest clerical error in the history of the public service. It's happened before. Look at the Harbour Tunnel, the Third Runway at Mascot airport, Olympic Village. They all ended up costing more than they were supposed to and all we heard about afterwards were how the planning reports and findings turned out to be inaccurate or wrong. It wouldn't surprise me if they just used the wrong sort of metal on the Bridge."

"Nothing more?" Dimitriou asked.

Barry shook his head. "No, why?"

The investigator shrugged. "Well, most people would pretend they'd never found anything and try to forget it rather than go up against the government. I just get the feeling there's something personal in it."

Barry nodded. "I'm afraid it's going to hurt people. It's already hurt this friend of mine. He's just getting a few chances in life, and he can't even travel across the Bridge."

Dimitriou frowned in puzzlement. "How come?"

"He was fitted with a computer controlled spinal brace a few years ago, after spending half his life in a wheelchair. Going across the Bridge does something, it.....causes a power surge in the brace, or something."

"And it causes him pain?"

Barry nodded, sighing heavily. "It also doesn't help that he was there when the old Bridge fell. Every time he goes near it, he comes out hysterical with fright."

Albert Dimitriou sat back and tapped his pen thoughtfully on the desk. He sat that way for so long that Barry was getting close to asking him what he was thinking when he looked up. "I.....this isn't very good investigating, I know, but....." he reached behind his chair to the briefcase on the floor and flicked it open, talking over his shoulder, "to be honest, I've been waiting for a call about this. I just never thought it would come from an orthopaedic specialist. I thought we'd hear from Public Works or something."

"About the bridge?" Barry asked.

Albert turned back to Barry and held up the paper from the previous day, already open to the story about the strange happenings on the Bridge.

After Barry left, Albert and his secretary prepared the documentation for the new case. When the file was ready, Albert would submit it to his regional director.

The presentation had to include several avenues of research that should be taken initially. Off the top of his head, Albert scrawled on a piece of paper *engineering, metallurgy, electricity commission, radio - x ray waves, environment dept, rta, state rail*, and, thinking about what Dr Paul had said to him, *post traumatic psychosis*.

VIII

The rest of the week and the weekend passed without incident for all parties concerned, as if God had decided to sit back, open a drink, and not complicate things for a few days, opting instead to amuse himself watching the lives of his children.

Victoria Holt contacted the AMA and put in her request for Unpaid Field Research Leave. They granted her permission before close of business that same Friday and she took her 2005 Holden DeMode hatchback (that would, as her and her father always used to jokingly promise, one day be a 1999 Mercedes 10,000 SL) to the Association's Requisite Equipment Stores in Narrabeen, along Sydney's northern beaches, to sign the necessary forms.

She loaded the equipment case into her boot, the size of a suitcase itself, which contained sedative and administering equipment, a hand held AlphaScan machine to monitor brainwave rhythm, electroshock terminals, a cassette recorder deck and microphone, and pre CAT-scan equipment. She saw the remainder of her patients and stayed late Friday night preparing her research file and organising the equipment.

She rounded off her evening by ordering a pizza at 11:30, pouring herself a gin and tonic from the customised bar in her bottom drawer, and reading an old Silhouette Desire paperback from the same drawer, cradling back in her chair, her skirt hitched up around her thighs, imagining the muscled giant in the story turning her inside out.....

Albert Dimitriou spent the afternoon with his secretary going through the telephone books, business registers, anything that presented avenues of investigation. They prepared the investigation file and Albert worked late to see his regional director, Steve Winterman. If the New Sydney Harbour Bridge was dangerous, it was irresponsible and negligent to wait even two days until the following Monday.

Together, Dimitriou and Winterman decided to accept the case. They prepared memos to notify accounts, records, and other departments, and Dimitriou spent the weekend with two old police force friends cruising to Lord Howe Island for a fishing trip, mentally leading himself through the first stages of the investigation he would perform the following Monday.

Barry Paul spent the weekend worrying. The dinner party was excellent. Julia's parents were tolerable and it was nice to see Brett, Adelaide and Nathan, Julia and Barry's eldest son, daughter-in-law and grandson, whose cerebral palsy was twisting and knotting his fragile young body.

For some reason Julia, a bit saggier and wrinklier at 49 but still sexy to Barry, had been insatiably horny that evening and had ridden him like some animal possessed several times through the night, balancing on his expansive torso, her gasps and stifled cries as she impaled herself on him, telling him how good he was but when the hell was he going to do something about his size before it killed him.

But all weekend the newspaper story nagged him. If Dale had suffered hallucinations at the hands of built up stress that the Harbour Bridge had released, then how was it that other people had reported the same odd happenings. The article had explained *minor vehicle accidents*, *phantoms* and *unexplained clanging noises, like tolling bells*, as perceived by other people.

Did the other people have prosthetics and had suffered the same fate? Did they have years-long anxieties buried deep in their minds that the Harbour Bridge let out? But how could they all see or hear similar

things, and all at the same time? Or, seemingly the only explanation - albeit ridiculous - were the spirits of boarded up houses with darkened windows on hilltops in gloomy nights here, now, in the centre of Australia's most prominent metropolis?

Was the Sydney Harbour Bridge haunted?

Dale Milling, as instructed, rested for the rest of the day and the weekend, all ready for work on Monday. Warren and Cooley had written to say they were sorry for his sudden misfortune, and looked forward to seeing him on Monday. The letter had put his worry to rest.

But his imagination was far from relaxed. It was in a chaos of intrigue about Dr Holt. He couldn't stop thinking about her. She was certainly pretty, beautiful, in fact; open, friendly and pleasant, and she fascinated him. He felt a weird compulsion to see her again. He felt jealous that she was somewhere else, probably talking to someone else, maybe in the arms of a lover. And he felt wildly excited, his stomach twisted with apprehension at the knowledge that she was taking time off work to be with him (correction, he kept telling himself, she doesn't want to be with me, she wants to be with my problem).

When she'd called to arrange Monday morning it had been magic split seconds in time, which he replayed over and over, hearing every accent and inflection of her voice.

And, when he stepped into her reception area at 7:45 that Monday morning, he could hardly keep from smiling. She'd come out and greeted him, wearing a white cotton long sleeved shirt, dark tan houndstooth skirt that stopped just above her knee, dark black stockings and black shoes. Her hair was held back in a ponytail by a clip decorated with a black velvet bow, and her ears were adorned with tiny gold hoops, along with the tiny gold stud she wore through her left ear that Dale had noticed last time. The detail made him feel intimate with her.

They'd waited until the AMA replacement psychiatrist arrived and set off, driving through the early peak hour traffic towards the city.

In the car, Dale constantly pulled his jacket sleeves down, paranoid about the seemingly long expanse of flesh that was visible between the cuff and his wrist. He'd found the old sports jacket in his wardrobe, taken it to the cleaners, and it looked nice with his trousers, shirt and tie, but now he wasn't so sure about the length of the sleeves.

He'd thought about Dr Holt constantly since Friday morning, and continued to watch her as she spoke, directing her hatchback through the uneasily flowing Kings Cross traffic, peeling a stray hair back from her face, absently chewing her nail, tiny things that Dale didn't miss.

"But the sedatives aren't for anyone's safety but yours, I want you to understand." she was saying.

"I do." he agreed. She'd been very concerned with safety. That's why she preferred to drive him to work rather than accompany him on the train. Not only did it eliminate the chance of him hurting someone else, but she could get him off the Bridge fast if necessary.

"But how are you going to administer it if you're driving?" Dale continued, "wouldn't it have been easier by train where you could be ready?"

"That's why you have to tell me immediately, and I mean *immediately*, if you see a single thing you don't like. Then I can stop and get ready with it. It's all ready to inject, I just have to reach over and grab the syringe, but only if you tell me the second something starts to happen."

"Then will you jab me straight away?" he asked.

"Only if you look like you're losing control."

Dale nodded and looked around. The buildings were taller and the area more condensed now. He sighed.

"If you're having doubts, we'll leave it until you're ready." Dr Holt reminded him.

"No,.....I do have doubts but....I want to do it now."

"You'll be fine, Mr Milling. Remember we decided last time was the release of the anxiety, so there's a good chance nothing will happen."

"Thanks, Doctor." he said. Damn it, why can't you call her Victoria?

Before he realised, still trying to summon courage like a schoolboy asking for a date, she was turning off Sydney's main road, George Street (which, when it reached The Rocks area, became the laneway that Dale had fallen to twenty years before) into the side street that would lead them to the Port Jackson Highway.

"Here we go," Dr Holt murmured absently, concentrating on joining the flow of traffic onto the Bridge.

She selected her lane on the highway and stopped at the tollbooth.

Since 2001, a northbound toll booth had been introduced in addition to the southbound booth that had been in force ever since the 1980's. Hence, four tolls were in force to pay for the Bridge, one payment each way two through the harbour tunnel and two across the Bridge.

Dr Holt took a five dollar coin and a fifty cent piece from one of the dashboard pockets and threw them in the basket attached to the side of the booth. The mini traffic light ahead went from red to green, calling them onward.

"How do you feel?" she asked, looking at Dale.

He inhaled deeply and rubbed his stomach. "Just butterflies. I hope the traffic's flowing smoothly."

"Don't worry," she said, reaching for the tape deck. It was bluetacked to the dash board and the mike was stuck down on its 'A' shaped support, facing into the car, "just talk as it comes to you." She set the deck recording as they passed through the south pylons.

Dale looked around anxiously. "Nothing yet." Dr Holt's attention shifted from him, briefly back to the road, and back to him, searching his face for emotion.

She stayed in the lane on the very edge of the Bridge, keeping the car below fifty. They both heard the rumbling of a train approaching behind them.

She reached across and touched his hand, startling him.

"Are you good? Not sick or anything?"

He shook his head. "I just feel.....tense, like something's building up. I think -"

"What?" Vicki asked urgently seeing something (fear? Pain?) flicker across his face.

"My back, my back's just begun to ache. I'm all right. It's just this kind of.....singing pain."

"It's okay," she soothed him, "tell me what you see."

"Just the Bridge, the north," he looked slowly around, and his eyes suddenly grew round with pounding, barely controlled terror. "Oh God, oh God." he said in a low full of a scream wanting release.

Vicki raised her foot from the accelerator across to the brake pedal, her heart lurching along with the car as it lost power, and looked out to where Dale was facing. Just cars and buses.

"What?" she said, her voice urgent again. The train was growing louder.

Dale was breathing urgent, terrified breaths. "Metal. Steel. They're just running over it."

"Did it fall?" she shouted above the roar of the train as it bore down behind them.

He nodded, looking around, his eyes wild, clutching the dash board. "Can't you hear it?" he shrieked. A fleeting memory. Aboard the train the previous week. The eyewitness accounts said he's jumped up and demanded of the passengers in desperation - *Can't you see it?*

"Can't you hear it all clanging and crashing down?" He looked up, petrified now but somehow in control.

Then - "We're there," he screamed, "we're back on the old Bridge. Oh God its falling down!" Vicki looked around. The train screeched along beside them, filling the world with white hot, violent sound, but the traffic flowed smoothly and the sun shone. The Bridge towered immobile around them. The only thing out of place was Dale's apparently unjustified terror.

"The car!!" he shrieked, pointing towards the oncoming lanes. Vicki didn't look.

"Tell me what happened." she said firmly, yelling above the noise.

"Oh fuck an iron beam just smashed that car flat....." he twisted madly in his seat, trying to see everywhere. Vicki was rigidly conscious of the split second she would have to stop, reach over, get the needle from the open case, find a clear path to stab Dale with it, and still have time (and strength) to pump the contents into him before his thrashing broke it completely. She also had to pick her moment, the threshold of his impending hysteria, with no room for error.

"It's raining steel beams." he yelled. The train overtook the car and roared forwards. As it did, Dale pressed his hands to the window and screeched in apoplectic terror.

"The train!!" he screamed, watching it pass harmlessly by, "it's gone, it's fallen through that hole in the tracks!" It was enough. Vicki reached back, slowing down even further, and grabbed the needle from the open case in the back seat. She uncapped it with her teeth and held it ready.

"Can you hear me Dale?" she demanded over the noise of the train. He still stared out his window, spit dribbling down his chin and spraying against the window with every shriek, but made no indication that he'd become violent.

"Dale!" she yelled. He snapped his head towards her, his eyes fear stricken and unrecognising, in a panic, looked back out the window, and this time his scream pierced her.

The beam had hit the roof of the bus and it had crashed onto its side. He'd seen it a hundred times in dreams, from the footpath, from the train.

But never in its path.

It squealed as it slid along the road among the crashing girders, straight towards him. It didn't hit their car, it passed straight through them. More correctly they through it. Things weren't quite visible, hazy and ill defined, as much the terror in his heart as his sense of vision, and the bus was a ghostly, gelatinous membrane, producing a low, sticky fluid sound like a hot methane bubble rising through a muddy swamp as the two worlds coalesced.

There was a dead woman beside him on the train\on the path\in the car. Someone who died in the collapse, her hair tangled with algae and seaweed, her fish coloured skin crinkled with wet cracks from the watery grave. He was alive, running as the path shuddered beneath him, so she was reaching for him. He struck at her.

It was plain that he had snapped this time. It was also obvious he was seeing himself in some sort of collision. Even as she realised with doom that she wouldn't have the time she needed, she prayed she wasn't a threatening part of his fantasy.

As he screamed and tried to scramble backwards, she jammed the brake, barely perceiving the eruption of car horns behind, and reached with the syringe.

She never even saw him strike.

Something rocketed into her temple, clipping her forearm and knocking the needle flying. Her head sang and reeled, she was dimly aware of a rivulet of warmth down her cheek.

The passenger door opened and she saw him stumbling across the front of the car, clutching his head blindly and screaming.....stumbling into the traffic.

"Dale!" she screamed in fear, shoving the door open and gesturing wildly for the traffic to stop. He was long gone, off amongst the cars, which were beeping and swerving.

A long, low horn blared, and Vicki's heart was vomited jarringly into her throat as a regular blue and white Sydney bus careened past her, with no chance of stopping or swerving in time. Its great tires bellowed on the road, its brakes hissing and squealing in hydraulic strain, and it bore down on Dale, mercifully hiding him from Vicki.

A fleshy clang rang out and she watched his body roll out into view, his arm flailing limply and crashing, dead weight, onto the asphalt.

She emitted the most piercing wail she could manage, tears of terror filling her eyes, and ran to his crumpled form on the road. He was on his front, one knee drawn up helplessly, like a sleeping child, a line of blood across his cheek.

People were already gathering around, offering jackets for pillows, giving inane instructions, or watching helplessly. Someone offered Vicki a handkerchief and she held it to her head, blood matted in her hair, running in a stream down her face and neck and into her shirt. She leaned her head resignedly against her hand for support and cried weakly.

IX

Dr Donald Chin-Hsei Lambert tapped in more codes to the PC on the bench, and noted down more readings from the bank of instruments along the inside wall of the van. Albert Dimitriou stood behind him, watching.

The van was a late 20th century Ford, painted black. Down the side, in silver gothic script, was *University of Sydney* and a small coat of arms wreathed in leaves, feathers and ribbons.

It was parked in a street at the bottom of the north shore suburb of Mcmahons's Point, an area where Sydney's North Shore met Sydney Harbour. On the roof was a small dish, several antennae, receptor wands, and other detection equipment, slightly rusted, stained with the overhead passage of countless birds, but in working order.

Dr Chin-Hsei Lambert was an Australian born of Taiwanese descent, the co-managing researcher of the university's metallurgy and engineering department.

The University had been contacted by a private investigation agency at the beginning of the week - they'd been consulted with evidence that the Sydney Harbour Bridge was the source of a dangerously intense electromagnetic field in Sydney Harbour. Mr Dimitriou had met with the Donald and asked his assistance in determining whether the Bridge was indeed overloaded with electromagnification and if so, what error was made during construction to allow it.

So the doctor had requisitioned MARV. MARV, the field research unit - the pride and joy of the University Physics Board, one of the rare displays of generosity on behalf of Government public spending. MARV was seven million dollars worth of computers and other equipment built into a \$65,000 1998 model Ford Carrier. Officially the Mobile Research vehicle, it was predictably named MARV, owing to its *MRV-001* licence plates.

Dr Lambert brushed his hand back through his hair and adjusted his trendy round tortoiseshell glasses.

"It's electromagnetised, all right." he said in perfect English. His face was classic Anglo-oriental, with the purity of line of the Asians but the thin, unobtrusive face of the European races. This pleasant mix was owing to his parentage. His mother was a Kao-Hsuing prostitute, one of whose customers, consequently his father, was an Australian navy man, in port around southeast Asia in the mid 1990's.

"I've taken the readings, but they have to be confirmed at our lab, compared with manuals and equations. I've locked into it's wavelength, so I can set up what's called a Temp-link. The laboratory building's only in the city's outskirts, so I can leave the sensor open and record any fluctuations. If the field is growing or oscillating, knowing why is as important as why it's there in the first place. So far the computer says the range and voltage are constant, but any number of factors in the environment could alter them."

He began tapping the computer keys again, flicking switches on the walls, reading and adjusting gauges and taking notes.

"Please do that if it's important," Albert told him, "what should I do now while you're comparing with your texts. Anything that would speed up your side?"

"If you had original plans from the construction that would help a lot and we wouldn't have to determine the materials and methods used ourselves. I don't know how receptive the council is to that sort of thing, though."

"I'll find out, I suppose." Albert said. He stood up. "I'm off, then, I have to update my records and contact the environment ministry."

"All right," the researcher said, "I'm going to stay and clean up the calculations before I set up the temp-link and shut down." He turned from the keyboard, his hand against his forehead, thinking. "Let's see.....I'll go and check my books, take notes, and then tomorrow morning it'll take a few hours to collate all the readings from the temp-link scan, so I should call you around.....ten." The two shook hands.

"Thanks again," said Albert, "don't forget to log your fuel usage for your service fee." He let himself out.

So it was badly magnetised, he thought to himself, wondering how anyone could have missed it. A severe electromagnetic field around the city's most vital thoroughfare and he'd never heard of it. It could be the biggest governmental cover-up of the post industrial era. On the other hand, it could be quite harmless. After all, what had it affected? It obviously wasn't disrupting trains or traffic, satellite or radio transmissions. Maybe the government did know about it - knew even before the Bridge was built - and didn't bother correcting it.

And now, for some reason, it was disrupting the life of a single man. Just one man. And as long as they didn't know why, the number could increase into tens of thousands.

As he slid in behind the wheel of his 2011 BMW 917e, parked up the street from the university van, he looked up at the Bridge looming beyond the point below, feeling, for the first time, the spark of curiosity that years of experience was supposed to suppress or desensitise. It was the first stirring of interest beyond merely getting the job done, and from now on Albert Dimitriou knew that it would fill his every waking minute.

He drove slowly away, his back to the looming giant and its huge and hidden secret.

X

There are all sorts of freak coincidences of nature. Sometimes incredible, sometimes horrifying.

A young biologist from Cambridge University was on a research expedition in Colombia in 1836. When a midafternoon thunderstorm blew up he felt quite safe in the dark depths of the jungle, the treetops towering hundreds of feet above. At 3:34 pm, a bolt of lightning streaked from the sky, into the jungle canopy, through the maze of high branches,

the mid-level forest growth and extensive vine network and in amongst the cathedral of three metre diameter ground level trunks and dense floor foliage where it hit the biologist in the head, electrocuting him to death. At his subsequent autopsy in Cartahegna, after retrieval of his body, a piece of apple was discovered in his mouth. Unchewed, but made into perfectly baked apple sauce.

In mid 1964, a family in the American midwest all hid in the master bedroom closet when they realised a tornado was heading their way during a violent summer thunderstorm. They reported feeling and hearing what appeared to be "a thousand freight trains passing feet away". When they emerged safe from the closet, the house was rubble around them, their hiding place untouched.

All dressed up for a new day on the job, a middle aged safari guide in Mozambique in spring of 2001 decided to try the new cologne his wife had given him for his birthday, quite proud of its masculine scent. During the day, his tour group was attacked by the adults of a twenty three-strong pride of lions, starved because of drought. The man watched in terror as his tourists were eaten, but the animals refused to go near him.

Dale Milling was struck by a Sydney bus at 8:09 am on Monday, January 16, 2017. Because of the angle of impact and the position of his body, his only injuries were light concussion, lesions to the face and head, and a clean break in his right index finger.

The darkness flickered as the Bridge fell and the dying screamed. Greyness swam in, drowning out the smashed buses and falling beams. Light, white and uncompromising, authoritative, washed the fragments away.

Shapes in the light appeared. Lines gained definition. Shades and objects broke through. Machines, bars, squares of light, curtains, tables.

Dale was staring into a hospital room. It seemed to have coalesced from.....he blinked the sleepiness from his eyes. Whatever he'd been thinking (dreaming?) about was gone.

The view to his left was cut off by the curtain, a pleasantly wavy green antiseptic cloth that reached to the foot of the hospital bed. Just inside the curtain was a table on which sat a glass and a jug full of water, the sort of bulky, tacky design you only see in hospitals or amateur theatre group prop collections.

Beside his head on his right was a tall bank of machinery. A small circular screen and a black plastic circle showed a jumping green spot like the sonar of a fishing trawler, obviously his heartbeat. The rest was a mass of switches and gauges that gave no indication whatsoever to their purpose. The machine was a series of processor decks that, by way of

silver handles down their sides, could be removed or set in place depending on the needs of the patient.

The window, on the right hand wall, was wide and airy, and it was only when Dale's eyes continued adjusting after so long in misuse that he focused on the dark line in front of the sunlight. Right beside the bed, in fact.

He felt a moments anxious shock. The dark line was a metal spine, which was holding up an intravenous food sac. A thin rubber hose twirled down into a receptacle that disappeared into the rubber strap that bound his forearm. Somewhere under there, he tried to reason to himself, is a tube speared into my vein keeping me alive.

He leaned his head back, the exhaustion of oversleep gripping him, against the citadel of pillows behind his half-propped back. Images flew like bugs during dusk, just out of sight but unmistakable. Where had he been? Had he been to his new job yet? Did he really even have a new job? He remembered the interview, and since that, faces. And the Bridge.

Some of the faces became clearer. His mother. Was it tonight she was coming to dinner? Did she know he was in hospital? Did Barry know he was here? God, he thought, *I don't even know where I am.* A claustrophobic fear clutched at his gut. How long have I been here? Was I in an accident? Where's Dr Holt? Was she here too? How -

Dale's heart missed two beats. Dr Holt. She'd been driving him across the Bridge. And.....The Bridge! *It had fallen again!* That's why he was here. And his psychiatrist -

"Oh no." he whimpered, searching, panic stricken, for a nurse call button. He found it on a green panel above his head and jabbed at it, seeing the thick white bandage around his finger a split second too late.

An electrified lance of pain seared down his finger into his arm. He roared through clenched teeth in agony, each thud of his pulse already hammering his finger mercilessly.

"Mr Milling?" came a middle aged male voice.

Dale cut off his cry and said "I want to see my psychologist and I need to see my doctor, Barry Paul. He's an orthopaedic specialist."

On the opposite side of the building, the duty nurse punched a button on the console before him and said into his mike "Your doctors are on their way, Mr Milling." He clicked his fingers at a passing nurse and said "distressed patient in ward 17. Take some sedatives."

He returned to the mike as she ran off, "You're safe in a hospital. Just lay down and be comfortable. I've just called your doctor and I'll be here until he gets to you."

Robert Mendell was in the cafeteria, checking monthly requisitions for equipment and supplies. The government increased levies, the drug and medical supply companies in turn raised their prices, and so the private health care sector was being crippled by costs that were increasingly hard to fund. The 3M Abdominal Reconnection Bracket (formerly the MedTech Abdominal Brace) had been just under \$40,000 to purchase and fit in 2012, just before 3M gained manufacturing and distribution rights. But now, it was almost nonexistent. Everyone who needed one had one.

After the worldwide flurry of the early to mid 2010's got millions of paraplegics back on their feet, 3M (U.S.) found themselves with a product nobody needed any more and billions of dollars of operations to sell it that had almost ground to a halt. In mid 2015, they shed 85% of all assets, services, equipment and staff from the production process.

And even with that expenditure cut, the price of the brace had spiralled, haunted by expensive production that generated no profit. The last AMA report on the brace priced the entire system, fitting and test package at \$120,470 as opposed to the five years previous figure of \$38,000. It was the business equivalent of trying to keep a fire burning when you've run out of logs. Your fire is going to die.

Fair enough, there had been talk in the United States for months of the Health Department buying the rights to the brace to prevent the complete collapse and unavailability of what was, to some, still an essential product. There were still people mortgaging their homes and saving every penny they had to get one. But the point remained that the thing had tripled in five years.

Shaking his head, Rob didn't understand how the world got so far from trading chickens for land, because it was an inexplicable but true fact that costs rose faster than funds. From federal budgets to hamburgers. His daughter Sam, married now, commented to him plenty that she never knew how her Mum had managed when Sam was a kid. Her grocery bill seemed to be rising faster than her husband Chris' salary reviews, she'd say.

His musing was interrupted by the chirrup of his pager. He clipped it off his belt and read the message on the LCD screen - "WARD 17; DALE MILLING". Dr Mendell jumped up and hurried from the cafeteria, leaving the requisitions and paperwork splayed across the lunch table. If Dale had any recollection now he was awake, he could be fragile, ready to shatter anytime.

Barry had been flicking through the paper when he received the call from the hospital. Australia Day rioting had broken out the day before, like it did every year. An aboriginal group protesting in

Melbourne's Bourke Street Mall and gangs of Asian-Australian youths had clashed and ended in all-out brawl. Four houses in the inner city Sydney suburb of Redfern, a renowned aboriginal district, were fire bombed during the night, so far resulting in six deaths and four casualties. And sixteen people were seriously injured in an explosion at an art exhibition of the arrival of the first fleet at the Alice Springs State Museum of History, where a known extremist had been blamed for planting pre-set explosives.

Barry shook his head. What the hell was there to be proud of any more? There were too many differences, in people, in races. Australia stopped being one nation over forty years before, and trying to string it together under one heritage was tearing it apart.

At 4.10 pm Rob Mendell called Barry to say that Dale had woken up. Barry wanted to be there. With his last patient gone at quarter to six, he helped Eileen pack up and close the surgery.

On his way out he packed his briefcase with a newspaper, the brace test manual (the BraceTest 6000 machine was packed in the boot of the car, and Dale's mail, which he'd been collecting at his mothers request.

Barry marched into the ward and found Dale sitting up with a nurse, talking.

"Hello." Dale said, matter-of-factly.

"How do you feel, killer?" Barry smiled.

Dale shrugged. "Would you send Dr Mendell in here please nurse?" Barry asked the girl. She nodded and left.

Barry hauled a chair beside the bed, balancing his briefcase on his knees and popping the locks.

"Your mail." he said, handing Dale the few envelopes, "we called Warren & Cooley again, so don't worry."

"Oh God, work." Dale said, genuinely shocked, "I forgot, they haven't even occurred to me since I woke up. How did they sound?"

"I don't know, Eileen called them. It's not as if it's your fault, Dale.....go on." he gestured to the top letter, from Warren & Cooley. Dale shrugged, tore it open, and began reading.

*"Dear Mr Milling, We were very sorry to hear about your second unfortunate accident but were relieved to hear you were recovering with astounding speed. Your doctor kindly informed us of the news and confirmed that you would be ready to come in next Monday. So, with no hope of further incident, we'll see you after the weekend. Yours Sincerely, Brian Felding.....*Thank God. I didn't think they'd employ me because I was mad."

"You're not mad," Barry corrected, "You hallucinated again. We didn't tell them that anyway. Just that you got hit."

Dale nodded, then looked out the window at the leaves of the gum tree moving slowly in the humid late afternoon breeze, one that did nothing to cool the air, only stir it up, laden with clinging moisture. "Hit by a bus." he sighed. He raised his bandaged finger, regarding it thoughtfully. "I was pretty lucky, I suppose....." He looked up at his old friend, ".....what happened to me Barry?"

Barry leaned his huge bulk forward. "Tell me what you remember." he invited.

"Just the train. That's the only clear memory this time. It happened just like it did all that time ago, like it does in all my dreams, only this time it was right beside me, just rolling into that hole, the last carriage hitting the edge."

"And.....something about being attacked?" Barry urged. He'd been told everything that had happened from Vicki and other eyewitness reports when the hospital first rang, but he wanted it in Dale's words.

Dale only shrugged. "All I remember is someone reaching for me." He said absently.

Barry nodded, as if satisfied. "That's what we thought."

Dale looked worried and said "I hurt her badly, didn't I?"

"No," Barry answered, a beat too quickly, "you cut the side of her head a bit and bruised her temple and some ear cartilage....be grateful, you could've broken her jaw or knocked teeth out."

"And she got out to try to stop me."

"She wasn't hurt. Just bleeding. Anyway, you were off, playing in the traffic." They both smiled.

"When can I see her?" Dale asked.

"I don't know," Barry said, "she got treated in casualty and that was it. Rob will have her number."

"I hope she's not still a mess."

"Oh come on, it's Thursday night and all that happened on Monday morning. She's probably just got a bandaid on it now, if that."

At that point Dr Mendell walked in, greeting both men.

He took a spare chair opposite Barry and checked Dale's chart. "Do you feel a bit more alert?" he asked.

Dale shrugged negatively. "It really pounded me this time, I suppose. Four and a half days I've been out."

"Well, it was a huge burden of stress. Now Dale, there's something else. Something we wanted to tell you together." Dale looked fearfully at Rob, trying to prepare for any impending doom, "We know you remember the train from your hallucination. And we think we can pinpoint the cause. Though why it affected you the way it did is beyond us both, so we hope you can shed some light on it."

"There *was* a train, passing the car as you started to see things. Dr Holt remembers it. As it overtook the car, you apparently saw it fall through a hole in the Bridge."

Dale looked at the wall at the end of the room, thoughtful. "So there really was a train." he said quietly, "I saw it and my mind interfered with my vision. That's all it did to me.....isn't it?" He said, looking from one to the other.

Dr Mendell cleared his throat quietly. "Dale," he continued, "right after the train passed your car, it stopped.....the system had shorted out."

XI

With Dale sleeping the slumber of the emotionally wounded for almost the entire week, Dr Holt returned to assist at her practice on the recommendation of her AMA case worker. When she put it like that, she'd thought 'Assist? At my own business?' It sounded ridiculous but was true.

The replacement psychiatrist was in place indefinitely to run her surgery until her investigation with Dale Milling was over, and he couldn't just be thrown out into the street without work. The practice, run wholly by Dr Holt and her secretary Felicity, was busy enough at the best of times, so Victoria was to take the excess overload and paperwork at the surgery until Dale recovered and her field study with him could continue. She was, in effect, her own hired help.

It was Friday morning when she received word by fax from Rob Mendell that Dale was awake and all right. The fax also contained the report with Dale having forgotten everything but the train from his delusions, and the fate of the real train.

She had to meet her AMA consultant in the Parramatta head office out west in the midmorning, and planned to visit Dale when she returned, before returning to work (to assist an infuriating pig of a man - as she'd discovered him to be - run her own business. The first thing she'd done at the beginning of the week when she discovered what a bastard he was - which was childish when she looked back on it - was clean all her personal things out of her office desk. The bottle of Tanqueray gin, the No Frills tonic water, six Mills & Boons and other dog-eared paperbacks bordering on pornography, and all her photos. She didn't want to give him any fuel to harbour personal as well as professional acknowledgment).

She walked the four blocks to the state headquarters of the Australian Medical Association from the parking spot she eventually found, her head itching this morning. The cut had healed, the bruise had gradually gone from seething purple to tender red, but she was more

concerned for Dale's health and state of mind. The reports said he was unconscious, a mechanism the human mind was known to employ to save its own sense of logic from an unbearable shock.

She never completely believed in God, but if she had, she would've spent the entire past week praying.

Victoria stopped at the bottom of the building and looked up. It was five stories, post new century style, with the darker shades of more comfortable colours like blue, yellow and pink. This one, all with glass panel effect, sported a dark blue strip that surrounded the walls halfway up, arching up to meet at the apex of the triangular gable structure that covered the street side lobby.

On the front of the gable on top of the lobby gallery, below the circle cut out of the panel just below the peak of the gable, was the spiny black and grey AMA triad, an upside down triangle, the top 'A' covering the 'M' like an umbrella. The lower midpoint of the 'M' connected with the apex of the lower 'A', whose arms jutted outside the triangle to resemble (depending on your imagination or - to a larger degree - the reason for your visit), merely a smaller, right-way-up triangle near the bottom, or the fangs of a demon face.

It was ten twenty by the time Victoria was accepted into her ten o'clock appointment with her consultant.

She sat opposite a steely old woman, twisted and bitter like a miserable old spinster, in the second floor office. The room was panelled with dark wood and the furniture matched, varnished wood clerical chairs with burgundy upholstery sat on either side of the desk, and a couch the same colour sat beneath the window to Victorias left.

Victoria kept looking around the office after she sat down, observing that her consultant - Mrs Frances Pilanté - had been hurriedly writing something, presumably some short but urgent notes. So when the woman spoke in her deep and cutting voice, Victoria was startled.

"As I explained to you, Doctor Holt, this is just an opportunity for you to make a routine report." Victoria nodded once. The consultant looked at her head with some concern. "How does your head feel?"

Victoria frowned, touching the bandaid absently. She wasn't entirely comfortable with the way this woman seemed like an authoritative matron instead of a professional superior and advisor. "It's fine," she said, sounding to herself like a scolded child, "just cut and bruised. I just needed the one dressing and I've kept it covered since."

The woman seemed satisfied. "Well then, I got your police statement of the incident and your initial report to us, and my first question is this.....psychologically, what happened to this man?"

Victoria sighed, getting her facts in order. "You know his history. My only theory so far is that he's been harbouring this anxiety ever since

the accident. It's only logical, since he's suffered both attacks while he was back on the Bridge. So the Bridge, or its image, or even the knowledge that he's on it or near it, is obviously the missing factor that dredges this anxiety up and provides a release for it."

"Might it then become exhausted one day?" Mrs Pilanté suggested, logically but not psychologically.

"You can't measure fear or anxiety in years or kilograms, Mrs Pilanté." Vicki explained, it's not a case of it being released in bits here and there until there's none left. It's as much a part of his mentality as knowing how to speak or tie his shoelaces. It won't run out and," she gestured to the reports on the desk, "it's going to get worse each time. Or so we can assume."

"And then he suffers hysteria, and loses control of his actions?"

"Severe hysteria. And worse, I think, than you realise. The bus accident was superficial - just concussion and a broken bone, I heard - but the brain scans and tests showed mental exhaustion. Severe enough so that it knocked him out for nearly five days. No concussion can do that. He lived through a short nightmare, and to hide him from it his own brain closed everything down."

"What about the hallucinations. Why them?" Pilanté asked.

Victoria shrugged. "Just the channel for release of the anxiety. Medical science isn't even close to knowing why anxiety manifests itself in any certain perceptions. It could have been nightmares, it could've been a sudden unexplained phobia, anything."

"So then, how do we cure this anxiety?" the consultant was interested now.

"He's spent twenty years with it without knowing," Victoria explained, "we have to show him it's there, put him in contact with it. It's a bad shock to suddenly discover you've got something like that in your mind so his immediate reaction is revulsion, naturally. Until he comes to accept it as part of his personality we can't relieve it. Maybe coming to terms with it will relieve it anyway. But bringing him to accept it will take therapy."

"Do you have any idea how long?"

"It depends what type of therapy it is." Victoria said, tactfully easing her way past Pilanté's intimidating defences to present her next point. "I'd like to do more field exercises."

Mrs Pilanté's eyes widened. It didn't look as though the statement had hit her in the right place. "You don't mean take him back onto the Bridge?"

"No," Victoria eased, "not onto, just near. Along the footpath down the side." Mrs Pilanté looked negatively thoughtful, so Vicki rattled the rest off fast. "His hallucinations didn't just 'switch on'. The farther onto

the Bridge, the worse they got. It was gradual. On foot, all we have to do is turn around and come back as soon as he sees anything. Don't forget, he was quite calm for some time. The conditions would be ideal. I could lead him through it while he's actually exposed to it all. It would probably be worth months or years of therapy in an office."

The older women considered. "I'll agree to it if this expedition will be fully safeguarded. And I mean that you take all the equipment and sedatives with you."

"Of course." Victoria agreed in an obvious but complying voice. Mrs Pilanté sat back and stared in thought as if deciding whether to let her teenage daughter out on a date, annoying Victoria again.

"I'll give my approval to the committee and call you at your office this afternoon."

"Thank you," Victoria said, checking her watch as she stood, "in fact, I have to be there now."

They said their goodbyes and Victoria left, her mind full of misery at being stuck between a selfish, obnoxious partner (*boss*, she resentfully reminded herself) and an advisor who was motherly and critical to a fault. Between a rock and a hard place. To cheer herself up, Vicki made sure she was satisfactorily late for work by spending a while stuck between a chocolate yeast doughnut and a *You 2000!* magazine.

Dale awoke from his rest the same evening and Dr Holt was standing beside his bed. She smiled at him.

"Hi," he said, happily but weakly, still fatigued.

"Dr Mendell tells me you'll be at work on Monday." she said, "I'm really glad you're not hurt." What was in that tone? Sympathy? Care?

Dale groaned, nodding. His eyes roamed the room, taking it in, re-establishing the world. She looked beautiful. She was wearing a white blouse, short black skirt and houndstooth jacket. He could just see the tops of her black stockinged legs, whispering together as she moved.

He yawned and sat up. "I'm so sorry." he said, looking at her temple.

For the first time, she didn't cover the bandaid defensively, surprising herself. Instead, she smiled. "It's my first battle scar in a while." she said.

Dale laughed, then looked troubled. "I don't remember why I did it." he said, still confused.

"It doesn't matter, Dale," she said, "there's more things we have to worry about than my thick head."

Dale smiled again. "You heard about the train, then?" he asked.

"Yeah, I did." she said, thoughtfully.

"It must mean I wasn't completely cut off. Something outside influenced what I was seeing. But why did it stop?"

"It could be anything. There's people investigating it at the moment, but regardless, we have to work out why it affected you. We have to worry about you right now, not the train. And I've got an idea what we can try next." He looked up at her. ".....What would you say to walking across the footbridge? It's completely safe. I'll have all the equipment, but even then we can just turn around and come back the second you feel uncomfortable."

"I don't know," Dale said in an uneasy voice, "If it'll help."

"Well, we can achieve a lot," she said, "If you're seeing these things, you're open to the fears that produce them, and that means that I can guide you through them, slowly, while they're not upsetting you. Remember we've talked about contacting all the anxiety? This is the perfect opportunity for your conscious mind to rationalise it all. I've got approval, and I think we should do it this weekend. Dr Mendell's already said you'll be out of here by tomorrow. We can do it while your mind's fresh, and we'll also be able to make sure you'll be okay to start work. But.....it's up to you, Dale."

He looked out the window into the darkening sky. She waited patiently, and was more pleasantly surprised that she hoped.

"Vicki," Dale began, not in the least sure what would come out of his mouth, "would you have dinner with me sometime?"

She smiled and blushed, covering her chest with her hand in astonishment, which quickly gave way to relaxed confidence.

"I'd love to, thank you."

"Great." Dale smiled, returning to the window. After a few seconds, he sighed and shrugged. "I suppose it's the best chance we have, then."

"Oh, wonderful." she said, relieved, "Is Sunday okay with you?"

"Sure, should I meet you there?"

"No, no," she insisted, reaching down for her briefcase, "I'll pick you up at your place, it's a lot easier. I'm sorry to leave so soon."

"That's all right," Dale said, "you work too hard."

She smiled and suddenly looked at the floor. She bent down - "Oh, I forgot this." - and came up with a tiny plastic pot full of dirt, sprouting a tiny Begonia plant. "Here." she smiled, putting it on the bench beside the bed, "get well soon."

He thought about her long after she was gone. He'd called her Vicki for the first time. He could hardly believe he'd asked her out. Where in the world would he take her? For those few moments, it became undeniable. She wasn't pretty or smart or friendly. She'd become

beautiful. In the true sense of the word, not attractive, but attractive and fun and fresh and open and mysterious all at once.

He sat up late into the night, letting her potted flower remind him of her, holding the pot, stroking the soft petals.

XII

Driving south from Sydney city, through the inner city and several suburban regions, you reach the Municipality of Hurstville, or the St George region, an area of Sydney heavily populated by migrants, one of the densest populations of what the 1960's dubbed "New Australians". After the suburb of Hurstville itself, Rockdale is the second biggest shire centre.

And throughout the entire second half of the twentieth century, the area had become home to tens of thousand of Greeks, Italians, Lebanese, and Asians, be they trying to find a better life in the legendary blessings of the Lucky Country or escaping the aftermath of the Vietnam or Korean wars (or any number of other political persecutions). Now, in the early twenty first century, Rockdale was still Australia's Muslim and Buddhist centre.

Albert Dimitriou was a second generation Australian. His mother and father met in the southern town of Cooma, his mother's family having fled there to escape the Nazi advance in 1944 when she was just one year old. She had come from a Hungarian Jewish family, and had met his father in 1959 when she was sixteen.

Albert's grandfather was from Israel, and he had been stationed with the armed forces in Tobruk. When talk began of trouble on the horizon, he offered an entire weeks pay to an old man to escort him by camel to the port, where rotten, leaky wooden ketches were shipping damaged goods to a British warship bound for Melbourne, where the equipment was to be repaired.

He made it to the coast and snuck aboard one of the boats, spending two weeks below decks, eating scraps from the rubbish hold, the stench of old gun oil, rotting wood, soppy rags and his own stale excrement his only company besides the sealed crates he slept on. He dived off the ship as it neared the navy destroyer, the H.M.S. King Edward, and swam half a mile through ten degree centigrade water to the ship, stowing away by climbing up the algae-slimed anchor chain.

The craft was covered with servicemen so he didn't need to take any great care moving around. He ate on his own in the ships cafeteria and slept on deck or in a life boat.

He masqueraded as an immigrant arriving to start work in Brisbane, using what English he'd learnt during his service to get by and

paying his train fare with his army wristwatch (thanking his lucky stars that he was attended at the station by a lad who was more interested in the contents of his nostril impaled on his fingernail than anything else).

He boarded the Melbourne to Brisbane express, getting off at Sydney and selecting an inland train (to hide his tracks) that delivered him to a small town called Cooma. The year had been 1942.

Under a false name, he obtained work on a local farm, doing odd jobs all day on the land. It didn't take him long to seduce his employers fifteen year old daughter, who'd been taking his lunch into the fields for him every day.

Albert's father was conceived amongst the hay pile in the farms small supply barn. In March 1942, two months after, when the terrified young girl told her lover she was pregnant, he disappeared one night, travelling further west and out of the Dimitriou family history.

Albert's grandmother, just turned sixteen, died during childbirth just before Christmas, and her parents reared the baby as their own, giving it their Romanian family name of Dimitriou, and Albert after his dead mother's teddy bear, her favourite and only toy.

Albert worked on the farm until he was seventeen, when he began courting the daughter of the Jewish family who owned the tobacco shop. They fell in love, married in November 1960 and moved to Sydney, giving birth to four children. Albert - the last - was born in 1978 and named after his father.

Young Albert left school at sixteen and joined the New South Wales Police Youth Traineeship. He became a constable in the police force in 1996, a detective in 2002, a senior detective in 2007, and then commenced a government funded part time technical college course in Investigation Processes, Systems and Management. The course qualified him to take up private and independent investigations, and he was playing with the idea of going out on his own when an old police force mate pleaded with him to join his company, George Slatten & Bromigal Ltd, one of Australia's most successful investigative services firms. In June 2008, he began on a salary of \$61,922 per year, at thirty years of age.

Nine years later, his moustache was getting greyer and his wife was more interested in her highbrow friends and dinner parties than him. At one of her pretentious dinner parties he'd been introduced to a nervous young man, a bank executive or some bloody thing like that, and later in the evening, had chanced to look out the window into the backyard and had seen the young man sitting naked on the edge of the spa beside the pool, facing away, and Albert's wife in the water with her head moving up and down in the young man's lap. The man's head was staring into the sky in heavenly rapture.

Albert had spent the next few weeks trying to be infuriated but found he didn't give a stuff, she had probably been fucking half of her yuppie clique for years. Not long after, he visited a brothel in Blakehurst and had had the best goddamned screw he'd ever had.

Now, his salary was \$98,407, and his work was his life. Outside that he had a house along the waterfront in the Sutherland Shire suburb of Yowie Bay, decorated by a woman who had once been a beautiful young girl whom he'd met at a police social function, spending half the night getting her drunk and the other screwing her for all he was worth in his patrol car. He had once loved her, but she had fallen in love and married his police uniform, quickly getting bored with the man beneath it.

Living in the Sutherland Shire, which was on the other side of the St George area from the city, where he drove to work every day, he knew all the St George suburbs, Hurstville, Rockdale, Mortdale, Kogarah, San Souci, Brighton and so on, fairly well.

So finding 15 Green Street, Kogarah, was easy. It was one of the thousands of roads that ran off the Princes Highway, the main street from the city that ran through three shires and down to Melbourne.

The street was mostly full of small, compact bungalow style houses of the 1980's, some redone in post new century arch, column or presidential style. Number 15 was a white walled cement house, with the basic design of the main room jutting from the main block, a porch nestled between the adjacent walls. It had forest green window trim, guttering and porch tiles, a strip of dirt with a blossoming midsummer bougainvillea between the house and the lawn and a blue Mitsubishi Archer, early 2010's, in the drive.

Albert pulled in to the kerb outside the house and walked up to the front door, knocking firmly three times. A short, wild haired Indian man answered, glasses pressed indignantly close to his protruding, ape-like and worried looking face, his shirt hanging half untucked, a newspaper tucked beneath his arm.

"Mr Sahid?" Albert enquired.

"Yes." the man said in a cautious Indian accent.

"My name is Albert Dimitriou, I'm working for a private investigations company." He offered his hand, which was accepted weakly, "I'm not going to take up too much of your time, sir, I need to ask you a question in reference to an investigation I'm leading." The man nodded.

Albert took a manila folder from under his arm and opened it, checking a document. "Mr Sahid, are you a train driver working for the State Rail Authority?"

"Yes?"

"Good. Now, it's about the incident last Monday. I want you to understand that no further inditement has been made against you, I know the SRA Safety Commission has already cleared you of negligence. What you tell me, if anything, will merely be to aid an independent organisation. It won't reflect your action during the incident or tarnish your record in any way. Do you understand, Mr Sahid?"

The man, nodding all the time, his eyes growing calmer, nodded again. "Yes."

"Excellent," Albert continued, "now, what I need to know is this. Your statement says the train began to stop and experienced some drag. Is that right?"

"That's right," the man said, using his hands and newspaper to emphasise his words, "I feel something stopping the train, and I think a passenger has used the emergency brake."

"Okay," Albert nodded, noting it in the folder, "Mr Sahid, I've checked with the state rail, and their internal technical test showed that no mechanical component was at fault, it was just a short in the electrical system, caused by a power surge. They said that none of the emergency brakes had been activated. Mr Sahid, what I need to know is this....did you apply the brakes?"

"I was trying to see the outside, you know, the accident. I'd forgot about stopping the train."

"Shouldn't it have then coasted all the way to the next station. If you're sure you never applied the brakes, I mean?" The man looked puzzled, and troubled.

"Mr Sahid, when the commotion was over, did you - before checking the electrical fault - have time to notice that the train was stationarydid the train stop by itself?"

"Yes."

Donald Chin-Hsei Lambert looked up as Dimitriou entered his laboratory/office. He stood to greet the investigator and they both sat.

"So," the scientist asked, "What'd you find out?"

Dimitriou helped himself to a seat and set his briefcase down. "He didn't touch the brake." Lambert leant back thoughtfully. Dimitriou continued. "So whatever stopped the train affected this guy Milling too?"

"It'd have to seem that way," Donald answered, leaning forward to check his papers, "I've collated some data here, but it really only lets us speculate." He looked at the investigator questioningly.

Albert shrugged. "Let's have it."

"Okay, Temp-link reported no random fluctuations. I collected some weather reports and we've had an up and down week as far as barometric pressure and pollution readings. AUSSAT 4's Stormscan

reported several magnitudes of positive and negative charge at sea level for the last 6.92 days. I'll have to keep monitoring to be sure, at least for another week, when they've forecast storms, but I think it's safe to say now that the environment doesn't affect the field.

"That leads us to our first assumption, still yet to be proven; the field, while high in voltage, is very low in terms of density or frequency, one which can't be altered by weather conditions, which move at extremely high frequencies. One particular thing that would produce an electromagnetic field of these particular low frequencies would be certain processed or industrial metals."

"So the electromagnification is because of the construction materials used." Albert translated to himself.

"That's our assumption. The other speculation is this. Even though the Temp-link says the field doesn't fluctuate randomly, it did detect a steady drop."

"So it's demagnetising itself." Albert surmised.

"It could be, but we can't rule out other possibilities. It may be levelling out from a peak we were too late to detect, as if something big had happened and we're witnessing the diminishing echo. The reason I think so is that the computer produced this graph when I gave it the readings taken over the time since we set the temp-link up."

He took a computer print-out and turned it around to show Albert, who took out his reading glasses and leaned closer. The scientist traced the curve with his finger. "See? It's not a steady decline, otherwise the curve would be a straight line. The voltage is shrinking, but to a lesser degree as time passes."

"So, what is this big thing that we've missed, then?" Albert asked, not sure how the speculations were of any benefit.

"Well, because the 'fading out' factor is constant, I was able to feed any old voltage into the computer and see what point in time the Bridge should be magnetised to that level.....theoretically."

"So you know when the peak was?"

"I'm afraid it's impossible to tell when the peak was or what caused it. It could have been any time and any voltage before we started monitoring it."

"Well what good does it do us?" Albert asked, interested instead of dejected.

"Well, I won't bore you with the figures, but I checked the figure for voltage running through the overhead train lines during your average Monday rush hour. Now for the electromagnetic field to short out the train, it would have to be that same voltage at least to override the trains electrical systems. "So, I put that figure through the specs program on the computer and it gave me this point in time," he read from another sheet,

"eight sixteen a.m., Monday, January 23." He picked up another paper and handed it to Albert, "This is the State Rail Authority report you got for me. Read the highlighted line."

Lambert drew his attention to the typing encased in yellow fluorescent pen and Albert read **".....according to the CityRail Central Control room log, the 7:09 a.m. Auburn service stopped at 08hrs, 14'37" 23/01/17 between Wynyard and Milsons Point stations."**

"The difference in time between the two reports is immaterial, obviously." Lambert offered.

"So you know when the voltage reached this point," Albert began, then shook his head, "I'm sorry, but I still don't understand how that helps."

"Bear in mind what I said about the field frequency," the researcher continued, "how we have to assume it's remained unchanged. If it has, that means that the level of voltage was never more than I mentioned before, the voltage needed to short circuit the train. If it had gotten any higher on the same frequency, it could've shorted every train on the line, caused accidents, anything. So that time," he jabbed the CityRail report with his finger, "and that voltage was the peak. The electromagnetic field around the Bridge was enough to short out that train only, and for that instant."

"So then, what about the train, how does it stopping connect with all this." Albert said, feeling stupid.

"The electromagnification was severe enough not only to short the train, but to magnify the tracks. That train would've been like a magnet on a giant fridge. That's why it stopped."

"So there was some electromagnetic surge in the field," Albert surmised aloud. Lambert nodded.

"What's causing it, then?" Albert asked.

"Mr Dimitriou, that's what you're paying me to find out. Right now I don't even have a theory. Electromagnetism can be a dangerous interference on an automated society, and if something's causing massive unexplained surges, God help us all."

XIII

It was coming close to 10:30 in the morning. Albert Dimitriou sat in his home office, as he did a lot of the times he was home, reading the paper, watching TV or making notes on a current case he was working on.

He and Emily had fought again that morning (over how they should have the kitchen retiled! As if he cared less and as if his opinion

would make a shade of difference anyway, for Christ's sake) and so he'd come into his study early, wiping her from his mind and immersing himself in other thoughts. They had long since fallen out of love, it was now a marriage of convenience, and as time went on, he determined to worry less, lest it send him grey and hollow.

Sex had been out of the question for a long time now. It must have been six years since he'd slept with her, except for once when she'd taken him to one of her trendy charity things. They'd both gotten so pissed and he now believed that she only chose him because nobody else there would fuck her. Their sex that night had been unloving, violent and clumsy.

So now, he had an expansive stock of black label Penthouse magazines and occasionally, when he yearned for the real thing and felt in a dangerous mood, he would buy his secretary flowers, take her to lunch and fill them both up with fine wine, then take her to a very beautiful and sumptuous and very discreet hotel around the city for the night. Emily almost never asked where he'd been when he came home the following midmorning.

So thankfully, most days - like today - his wife was no more than the sound of her high heels clicking on the kitchen slate tiles downstairs.

As chance would have it, he was working on the Harbour Bridge case when Dr Chin-Hsei Lambert called. A half written report to Barry Paul was in front of him, a report on the university findings so far, as well as Albert's other avenues of research, which included a city radiation count from the Office of the Environment Minister and the CityRail reports.

The streamlined phone warbled shrilly in its electronic voice.

Dr Lambert sounded urgent and rushed. "You've got to come in, straight away."

"What's wrong?"

"The temp-link indicates there's another surge on the way. It levelled out at 1:21 a.m. today and it's begun to climb again. It's reaching another peak, and bloody fast."

Dale and Doctor Holt reached the top of the stairs and faced north, along the path. Ahead, the Bridge loomed. Behind them, the Port Jackson Highway was swallowed into the toll gates. Below, the steel staircase and handrail crawled its way up from Cumberland Street in The Rocks.

Dale peered at the Bridge and then looked carefully at the ground.

"Anything?" Vicki asked him, hefting the vinyl case of equipment over her arm, the strap over her shoulder.

Dale slowly shook his head. "Just my back." he said, rubbing it.

"It hurts?" she asked in concern.

"Yeah, it feels....." Dale struggled for the right word, "like it's buzzing. Electrified."

"Prosthetic Magnetisation again, maybe." Vicki said.

"Surely I'm not going to get it every time I come on here." Dale groaned.

"Maybe there's some self de-magnetising mechanism they can implant. Can you go on?"

Dale nodded, and they started slowly forward. "Can I carry that for you?" he asked her.

She smiled and shook her head. "I don't think it's a good idea. If you get too upset, you might throw it over the side or something and we'll both be left high and dry." Dale smiled in agreement and they continued.

This time the pain had started as soon as he caught sight of the Bridge, when he first glimpsed it through the buildings of the city, a sleepy ache in the bottom of his back. When he moved, it seemed to inflame the pain just slightly. It was worse this time, heavier, but not sharper. The walk from the parking station had been a nerve-wracking one.

But inwardly he smiled. No amount of back pain could quench his excitement. He'd followed up his request to Vicki of dinner, and had a table booked for two for the Milan Plaza, a street side Italian cafe restaurant that was intimate, informal, and charming. But he had to fulfil his promise to her first.

They began to walk towards the pylons, still ten minutes away. Dale took deep breaths as he walked, forcing his stomach down and trying to relax. Vicki watched him, and instead of asking him if he was all right, only gave a pretty smile. For some reason, it worked better.

"Don't worry." she encouraged softly.

Later, when they emerged beyond the pylons and onto the Bridge and a ten foot iron strut materialised as if out from behind a lace veil, Dale was almost relieved.

The image of the object appeared before his eyes, thirty metres away, halfway between the top of the span and the highway, scratchy like breaking-up TV footage superimposed over a real time film. As it fell into existence it gained clarity and by the time it hit the asphalt it was as real and as heavy as the cars driving along the highway around it.

It crashed to the road with an ear splitting bong and laid across the road. Where cars passed, they went *through* it, the image of the beam (or was it the image of the cars? He was suddenly thrown off kilter in disorientation. He was watching two overlapped films of reality and couldn't tell *which* one was real) became a little paler, a little less real, a little.....*washed away* by the real (or opposite) image.

Dale was almost relieved because the tension had been broken and *something* had happened, but his heart began to jackrabbit and his breath became short and shallow in fear. Vicki noticed the change in him instantly.

"There," he said in an urgent whisper, pointing to where the phantom thing lay splayed across two lanes, traffic continuing unhindered, "that beam just fell."

Dr Holt switched on the hand held cassette recorder and held it between them.

"Do you see anything else?" she said, scanning the road where he had pointed. There was nothing there.

"No, not yet, just that-" he broke off. Vicki looked up into his face. He was looking down the far end.

"Shit, it's doing it just as I remember," he said, terrified now.

"What is?"

"The old Bridge. The arch is falling apart, in great big pieces, just like it did when I was there! Look!" Vicki looked. Nothing.

Dale turned his head.

"Here comes the train." He said, "Can you feel it in your feet?" Vicki turned, trying to keep up with all the things he was seeing. There was no train and no vibration.

"Some of it's raspy, like a bad TV picture, it breaks up and flickers but it's so real. It's like I'm looking at it underwater." He was looking everywhere, frightened, but seemingly in control this time. Vicki unzipped the bag and set it down within reach of where they'd stopped, just the same. He wasn't hysterical. He looked to her like.....a child in a zoo or a dinosaur museum. It was definitely fear, but there was an element of confidence. As if he felt safe this time.

"Dale, can you hear me?" she said. He snapped his head towards her, shrugged and nodded, albeit urgently. She purposefully jabbed at the recorder. He leaned in and said in a steady voice

"I feel all right, um.....things aren't coming at me, you know? I don't feel in danger. I - Oh God." He stopped to look at the far side, north bound train tracks, and clapped his hands to his head in futile desperation.

"Oh God, oh God, the train. I know it's not happening, but God, those people, they're -" he shot out and grabbed her elbow "- look, it's going through the hole. it's falling through. Listen, you'll hear the roof hit the edge....." he winced, shocked, appalled by something Vicki couldn't perceive. ".....shit. Look, the bus!"

The beam hit the roof of the bus, same as always, and the windows exploded outwards like a dying star ejecting its outer layers, but instead

of falling to its side, it careened the other way, towards him, bashing cars out of its way as it slid, crashing into a truck carrying landfill.

The crash was the sound of steel screaming in agony, and the dirt and stones erupted through the crushed carry of the truck. The body of the heavy vehicle was bashed aside and the bus, full of commuters, crashed through the guard rail at the edge of the Bridge, splintered the old iron footpath guard and launched into the air.

He cried 'bus' and was now looking over the edge.

"Dale, look at me." Vicki said firmly, "We've got to start now. Calm down." He turned to her, took a deep breath and nodded.

"Now try and think -"

"I can't hear a word you're saying," he almost shouted, attracting the bewildered gaze of a passing jogger, "the clanging's too loud."

"You're not frightened?" she suggested.

"Well,....." he looked down onto the road. Across the highway was an overturned white Mitsubishi Colt. Leading from it in a lazy river was a red-black trail of blood, sick and stinking. It weaved this way and that and stopped below Dale, where the dead, legless businessman lay, gazed up at him, his white, blood streaked face round and bashed horribly, his eyes hateful, but oddly pleading, not so terrifying as before. The strangled howl that came from the dead mouth was more like the strangled whimper of a dog. The man reached up to Dale but didn't seem to be able to come further.

"They can't get me." he said. Realisation like a wave flooded through him, of his power here, in this world, power he'd never had here before. He was suddenly aware that he had a rock hard erection, "I'm not trapped. They can't hurt me when they know I'm not trapped. I'm safe, as long as I can get away." He turned to Dr Holt, smiling, and screamed.

Vicki was dead.

She was slumped back against the wall of the safety rail. A horrific gash had been cleaved into her crown, and a drying eruption of blood caked her face. Her mouth hung open, a pulse of blood pumping from between her lips, her heart intermittently pushing some rupture up her throat, her eyes dazed and staring. Dead.

Hand covering his mouth, Dale reached to her, tentatively. The metal crashed around him, a small beam lay to one side, one corner pasty with blood and a mucousy substance - Victoria's brains.

He felt the back of her hand, cold, bloodless and clammy, and as he drew his hand back in revulsion, the dead hand snapped around and clamped vice tight around his wrist.

* * * *

As Dr Lambert watched his monitoring equipment, the inkpens drawing graphs of the voltage increase on the paper scrolls went from a steady fluctuation into an explosion of movement, flickering back and forth wildly.

"Shit." the doctor hissed, leaping across the room to the machine as the needles whirled in the air, darkening the rolls of paper from a crisp white to a jagged, terror-stricken black.

* * * *

The wires overhanging the tracks on both sides came alive, loud electrical cracking ringing out, the lines crackling and spitting violent sparks into the air, explosions of sparks showering the road and traffic, miniature bolts of lightning hitting the main supports, their vertical and diagonal support cables and cars.

Motorists screeched to terrified halts, fenders and panels were dented and smashed from panicked impacts.

Four trains along the same line, one as far out as Waverton, three stations and over ten kilometres away, shorted out.

* * * *

Dale was standing at the edge of the path, shaking, his heart thundering, dimly aware that he couldn't be hysterical, he could still see and hear, he was in control. He stood, his arms in an impotent 'X' in front of him, his vision focused somewhere in space, surrounded now by a new chaos.

The old Bridge, the falling beams, the death and horror had flickered twice and gone, fading quickly from his view and earshot in a matter of split seconds, like a TV picture, as he'd described only moments before, that someone had turned off.

But now the sound was real. Of sparks and lightning, of crunching metal and car horns, of shouting. But there was no death here, no futile and petrified sprint to survival that he never made. Only frightened but harmless chaos.

Vicki came towards him, worried. She grasped his arms.

"Dale, what scared you? You lost it for a second. Tell me what you saw."

"It was you, I.....saw....." he looked around. "I want to go, Vicki. I know now that they can't hurt me, but they can still frighten me. Please."

An orchestra of car horns sounded around them, bewildered drivers walking around their cars inspecting damage or arguing with each other, keeping a wary eye on the train lines, which had fallen silent, Vicki hoisted the bag of equipment over her shoulder and took Dale by the arm, leading him back the way they'd come.

"Why do you say they can't hurt you?" she asked as they walked, the cassette recorder still running, therapy still in session.

Dale looked back. "It's like it knows it didn't have me stuck there. When I'm in a car or a train they can come for me, but when I can get away, they know they can't take over me. They don't send my mind over the edge."

Vicki nodded. Maybe that was why he'd been hysterical. His mind, realising it was trapped with these horrors it had conjured up in response to the anxiety, had simply closed its logical self down.

"But they can still frighten me," he smiled humourlessly, "By God, can they. You were dead, you'd been-"

"Ssh, listen." she hissed, halting dead in her tracks, her face in a frown of intense concentration. She looked at him. "Did you hear that? That clang?"

"Falling beams." Dale whispered, trying not to drown out whatever faint noise she was hearing, "they've stopped now."

"No," Vicki said, turning back to the Bridge, "I mean that..." she trailed off, and was just about to open her mouth to dismiss the thought when a fourteen foot curved iron beam, painted ocean grey, the colour of the old Sydney Harbour Bridge, crashed to the road with an ear splitting clang not twenty feet from her.

XIV

It was after five p.m. when Barry Paul's phone rang. He snatched it up after the third ring, frantic after spending all day trying to find someone, anyone!

"Hello?"

"It's Albert Dimitriou, Doctor, George Slatten and Bromigal, I'm sorry to bother you on a Sunday -"

"I heard the news at twelve," Barry interrupted, "I've been trying to get you all day, what happened?"

"The news? About the surge?"

"Surge?" Barry said in confusion, "They just said there was violent electrical activity on the Bridge that led to a train line short and minor traffic accidents."

"I haven't had the chance to check the news yet, I've spent the afternoon with the Metallurgical Physicist from the University. We've

had some disturbing results and I thought it best to let you know straight away. It's more serious than you suspected. I've spoken to my regional director this afternoon, and he agrees that legal action could be involved."

"Legal?" Barry repeated dumbly, wondering if this time he wasn't in over his head, "Against who?"

"The builders, CityRail, we don't know yet. Let me tell you what we've found. I told you about the decline in the strength of the field in our conversation on Friday night. Late last night it levelled out, and we've had the machines running and recording everything. This morning at-" Barry heard papers rustle in the background, "- 10:42, the field strength began to rise sharply. The computers calculated the increase factor, compared to the last increase, as one to twenty three hundred, so the new rise was a five minute incident. Then, at 10:53, there was almost an instantaneous jump in which the field reached fifty eight point four five volts. It remained there for one point two zero seconds, and has been declining at a constant factor ever since then."

"Fifty eight volts." Barry almost whispered.

"That's right, so it isn't only inexplicable and unpredictable, it's dangerous."

"It grows in strength when and apparently to what degree it wants, then." Barry offered.

"Not to the degree it wants, doctor, the degree it's affected. It has to be something. My company is going to approach the Sydney County Council tomorrow and demand the plans for construction, and we're in the process of organising a research team to conduct tests at the site tomorrow. If they find anything untoward, we may have to approach the council or police on the grounds that the Bridge be closed and altered immediately."

"And then what?"

"Well, if it goes that far, then it's out of your hands and mine. It's a matter for the police or the Builders Labourers Federation Judiciary."

"All right, Mr Dimitriou, I won't keep you. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Make it after three and I'll have the whole story."

"Fine, talk to you then."

After the phone call, Barry went back into the study from the lounge room phone and sat at his desk where a book and a notepad were splayed out across the desk in front of him. The book, *The Sydney Harbour Bridge; Past, Present & Future*, he'd borrowed from the local library on Julia's card (he never had the time or the inclination to join a library. All he was interested in was at the AMA library - to which his profession deemed him a member - his book case at home or the newsagency around the corner), and the notepad contained notes he'd made himself, mere musings to try and relate a bit better to the whole

mess. He settled back into his leather chair, feeling the armrests squeeze around his middle, and picked up the notepad.

It had always been as if the site were haunted. In the 1920's, twenty workers died building the old Bridge. After its opening in 1932, an estimated sixty to seventy people had died there by way of murder, suicide, or accident.

Horrorfall of 1998 claimed over six hundred and thirty five people from start to finish. And already, in nineteen years, twenty three people had died there, including the famous March 2003 murder, where a jealous boyfriend took his lover up in the cable car, sexually assaulted her, stabbed her thirty seven times, sexually assaulted her corpse, and threw her body three hundred and sixty feet into Port Jackson below.

Was it worth having a handy north/south thoroughfare just to keep Sydney's infrastructure intact? Not for that girls parents, not for six hundred families, not for the widows and fatherless children struggling through the depression. Not for Dale Milling.

Barry was so immersed in the book an hour later the ringing of the phone hardly registered. Like a man emerging from a dream, he got up to answer it. He would've left it for Julia, but she was visiting her Aunt in Camden.

Too old to run for the phone, he thought, too old and too bloody big. Big bones, like my old dad. Inherited his appetite for saturated fats, too. He almost ran to reach the phone on the table beside the couch, and he was panting as he answered.

"Hello?"

Another breathless voice struggled to be heard.

".....Ba.....Barry." Dale's voice was full of agony.

"Dale?" Barry shouted, afraid. His friend was wheezing from effort

".....can't.....move!"

When Barry arrived at the University medical research and test cell, Dale was locked in a sterile white chamber on a porcelain slab inlaid with a thin plastic mattress. A device shaped like a dentists X-Ray machine was held over his body with a three-staged electronically driven arm. His bowels and bladder unconsciously emptied through the special hole in the porcelain, one of the body's reactions to the electromagnetisation.

Barry went straight to the public phone, dialled Ron Mendell's hospital and got Mendell's home number. Rob didn't know Victoria Holt's home number, but gave Barry the number for her surgery, despite the slim chance that anyone would be there on a Sunday evening. To Barry's relief, an answering machine message gave him the private numbers of some guy (the 'reserve psychologist', the machine called him) and

Victoria herself. There was no answer at her house, and the reserve psychologist had no idea where she would be and didn't care either, judging by his tone.

One of the ironies of life, Dr Victoria Holt was at her sister and brother-in-laws house to borrow shoes for an outing that night with the man who was locked in a cubicle thirty feet from where Barry stood, in a critical condition with prosthetic magnetism.

The St. John's ambulance workers had found Dale lying next to the small table beside the sofa bed, his nervous system completely frozen. His bladder and bowels had involuntarily emptied, a pool of saliva the size of a saucer had soaked into the carpet. He was unconscious, his involuntary functions the only things working. At Barry's suggestion, who was on his car phone to the ambulance officers as he drove to the university, they had tested for prosthetic magnetism, bearing in mind that the average and recommended maximum voltage for the brace was 9.8 volts.

The count had measured 58.45 volts.

They'd put him on an I.V. drip, heart and lung machines, and brought him straight to the demagnetisation unit.

Barry sat in the reception area, a can of Diet Coke from the battered dispenser machine warm on the waiting room table in front of him. What was Dale doing on the Bridge again? More importantly, what in God's name had caused such a severe attack? It could only be the surge that morning, but what had caused that?

"Dr Paul?" the voice startled Barry out of his thoughts. He looked up to the door that led to the laboratories. The doctor who had admitted Dale was gesturing him.

"He's finished." the doctor said. Barry jumped up and hurried through the corridor after the doctor into the small white tiled recovery room, an annexe to the demagnetisation chamber.

Dale was laid out on an aluminium hospital bed which offered a cotton mattress and pillow. The room was semi dark, a common practice used when awakening patients, the fluorescent tubes overhead extinguished and the two small electrical lamps in opposite corners set low.

A male nurse waited beside Dale and stood aside when the doctor entered with Barry following.

"All his functions have returned to normal, and his condition is stable," the doctor was saying, "all that's left is to wake him up." He stopped at the bedside and checked the heart and lung monitors, the bleep of Dale's heartbeat piercing the clinical silence of the room.

"Ah, the oxygen cap and required injection, please nurse." the doctor asked.

Barry leant over Dale and stared into his sleeping face, trying to read the answers he wanted there. He only moved when the doctor excused himself to get at Dale with the equipment.

The doctor placed the small oxygen cap over Dale's nose and mouth and consulted the small LCD display and keypad attached to the hose. He selected two gas flows, opening tiny valves and releasing a hiss of gases into the mask. Dale's eyes flickered, and the heart machine quickened noticeably.

"Now Mr Milling," the doctor said, "I'm going to give you a small injection to bring you back to full consciousness." Then, to his assistant, "Hold his wrist down, please." The nurse held Dale's arm flat on the table and the doctor selected a syringe and uncapped it.

The Bridge had plagued his dreams. It had exhumed its dead at him. A million white corpses bloated with gas bobbed in the water, their skin cracked and peeling away, fish nibbling off slivers of meat, eyes horrified, frozen in death, stared at him, black pupils and purple sockets like cauldrons of noxious rupture in dead flesh.

And now he was in a strange white room. Barry! Barry was there. He tried to murmur something, but his mouth was covered, and there was a cold wind against his lips. One of them was speaking, but.....everything was swimming. The room was dim, shapes were insubstantial, sounds like echoes of memory.

A hand pressed down on his wrist and clamped his arm flat. He tried to pull away, but his arm was a dead weight, singing with the icy pinpricks of a million pins and needles. There was a pulse. No, a beep. He realised it was him. It raised in pitch and frequency, becoming more urgent and afraid.

There was a flash of silver and he was just able to make out a short surgical knife, its blade tapering to a needle point. The man raised it and settled it on Dale's arm, the blade pointing straight down. The beeping rose to a panic, his heart hammered. The man said calmly

"You can't get away any more, Dale."

Dale moaned weakly, his strength seeping back into his limbs, but not fast enough, not.....fast.....enough! The man held the knife, the blade resting on Dale's exposed flesh, and slowly, tortuously, raised his other palm over the handle.

"You opened yourself up, Dale." he intoned.

The heart machine rose to a terrified crescendo, filling the room with a horrific trilling.

"No," Dale managed weakly, struggling to pull his arm away, the vice-like grip pinning it firmly down. The hand raised up, higher, higher, past the man's eyes, which were now horrifyingly white, horrifyingly big

and demonic against the dark room, and a vampire grin had spread across his face.

"It's inside you now Dale," he whispered.

"Barry," Dale pleaded, but his friend stood, a bulk of shadow in the gloom.

The heart machine was a piercing scream. Dale's hand flailed helplessly to lift his arm away. The mans hand flashed down, and the force of the blow was hideous itself.

A lance of fire sheared up and down as the blade stabbed through his arm, halted only by the hilt, which crushed against his skin. A jet of blood shot up and Dale felt the knife chip bone.

Dale screamed, a drawn, agonised screech as the knife twisted and ground the meat of his arm.

The heart machine stopped with a crack and an explosion of sparks.

Dale, screaming in apoplexy, bucked so violently that the syringe snapped neatly halfway down the needle. Blood dribbled steadily from the end.

"Doctor-" Barry began

"Help us!!" the doctor yelled. Barry leaped to the bed side and pinned Dale's shoulders, trying to soothe him. The nurse put all his weight into both his arms to hold Dale's arm still and the doctor plucked the needle out and pressed a sponge cloth to the puncture.

Dale abruptly stopped screaming and looked down at him arm, then bewilderedly at the three men around him.

"Are you all right?" the doctor asked, still panting from the sudden rush of adrenalin, "what happened?"

Dale shook his head.

"I don't remember."

XV

It was close to one a.m. and Barry Paul, having gone to bed early for work the following morning, was having a very sleepless night. Every time he closed his eyes, thoughts like a waterfall filled his mind. So he sat up in bed, staring out the window, where he could see rooves stretching out into the dark and a single streetlight in a nearby street. The stars near the horizon where dimmed by the ghostly pale aura of the city in the distance.

His most disturbing thought was that he'd gotten himself into something he couldn't (no, didn't) want to deal with. He was too busy at work and if anything came of the chiropractic article he'd submitted it'd

double his workload, at least. And he wasn't a medical student any more, he didn't thrive on excitement. He had enough to think about. And he couldn't just drop the whole thing because, for one, Dale was suffering because of it, and secondly because it could be the biggest case of industrial negligence the Australian construction market had ever seen. And he was at its forefront.

He sighed heavily, unwittingly disturbing Julia.

"What's the matter, Barry?" came her soft voice, heavy with fatigue.

He patted her rump. "Nothing babe, sorry."

After the treatment that afternoon, and its subsequent incident, Dale had no memory of coming to the University centre. He remembered Dr Holt dropping him off back home and that's where the pain had started, he'd said. It had settled heavily in his back and grown more icy by the second.

Thinking that the mechanics of the brace had inflicted some muscular strain, as they did from time to time, Dale decided to just go upstairs to his flat and lie down to wait for the ache to dissolve.

By the time he'd reached his door, he was dragging himself along the floor in agony.

His legs had frozen, his back was a pit of burning pain, and his strength was draining. He'd managed to get in and crawl to the phone and dial two numbers. He'd hit the memory call button and then struck for any digit at all, calling Barry's number from the telephone memory, unable to even dial 000, the emergency number.

So the surge of the electromagnetic field had hit the Bridge hard, but it had hit Dale worse.

It was long before Barry slept that night.

Halfway through their third cups of coffee, Dale and Vicki sat quietly talking at their table in the restaurant. Only two other tables were occupied, as it was already twenty to one on a Monday morning (Dale noted this with some disappointment).

The meal had been nice, nothing more than could be expected from a suburban Italian cafe restaurant.

But the night had been magical.

They had gradually edged around the table until their chairs were so close that their shoulders brushed and they gazed deeply at each other, alive with firelight from the candle. Vicki wished there was some Caribbean night club or jazz club nearby where they could dance to some slow, sensual music and she could feel him holding her close and look up into his gentle face. As they held hands above the table, their fingers

clasped together, she could almost feel the warmth of his skin through his white cotton shirt as she pressed her cheek to him.

Dale could hardly keep from smiling the whole night. It was so corny, but they felt like two schoolkids on their first date. She had her leg wrapped around and underneath his, they gripped each others hand like they never wanted to let go, they joked about everything, giggling together, their foreheads pressed together to share it.

Every touch, every word made Dale's heart race. He'd never felt so wonderful. He'd never felt such sugary sweet anticipation and happiness, such a feeling of being so alive. It wasn't just in his mind, it was something he felt *in* him, a big airy bubble in his chest that squeezed against his heart every time Vicki spoke or he looked into her face. It was the most wonderful night he could remember and there was the most saddening, pleading desperation right around the corner for the night never to end, for him to sit holding onto this beautiful woman forever.

They talked and laughed and learned all about each other. Sometimes they just looked at each other and smiled.

Everyone else was a shadow, everything else in the world insubstantial. The only thing that mattered in the world was this lovely woman, her face an island in the dark sea, her eyes smiling across at him, the warm skin of her hand clenched anxiously, hopefully in his.

They were in a world of dreams, in a cold and horrible world where so many things were wrong and just one thing was right, and they shared it.

Dale looked up from a mouthful of coffee to see Vicki looking at him thoughtfully, her head tilted back, her smile only half there. When he looked up she blinked as if broken from a trance and grinned sheepishly.

"It's really funny," she said, reaching across his shoulder and rubbing his back gently, "when you get on so well and you can't believe you didn't see it before."

"Well, you only had a professional interest before." Dale reasoned.

She nodded, sipped her coffee and said "That's the way it's got to stay, too." Vicki tried to discipline herself. But God, it was hopeless. That strong line of his jaw, his healthy face and lips alive with colour. She wanted to lean across and kiss that face all over. Her stomach flipped over like it used to when she was fifteen, at her best friends house after school watching Stacey's big brother Todd dicker with his motorcycle.

A bubble rose through her, raking the inside of her stomach, dragging behind her chest, past her thumping heart, and broke through her face in a smile that she couldn't keep down.

Dale looked back down at the table. "What do you think about today, then? You said you'd have to get your thoughts in order."

"Oh, Dale, I think I just went mad for a second. I don't even remember it properly any more, just parts. I can't see the piece that fell. But..." she frowned determinedly at the table, dragging the memories to the surface, ".....I can see the little shower of asphalt that it kicked up. I can see you, looking at me, asking what was wrong. Then it was just gone when I looked back."

"Well, if that makes you mad, I must be certifiable."

"You're definitely mad," Vicki laughed, leaning forward to him, "taking your psychiatrist out for dinner and making her feel like a teenager again." Dale smiled widely and, inches from his face, she stopped resisting. She leaned further and pressed her lips to his for a few wild seconds, a kiss of lovers and not just friends.

Dale looked sweetly shocked for a second, then sank into a deep sigh of happiness. Vicki put her hand up, stopping herself rather than him, and grasped his arm.

"Listen, we've got to sort this out." Dale nodded. Vicki rubbed her temples, trying to sort the jumble of emotions from each other, trying to pry the fear and confusion of the afternoon away from the magic and wonder of the night.

"If it's some sort of.....neuro-virus that I haven't heard of, I might have just had a twinge." she suggested.

"Contagious emotional disorders, Vicki?" he asked, making it sound as ridiculous as it was and squeezing her hand to remind her that he was there for support.

"No, but depression and paranoia and a lot of those things aren't just breakdown of brain tissue from age or cerebral palsy or MS, we've known for years that they're diseases, viruses no different to flu or AIDS." Dale nodded agreement.

"Yes," he said, "but even so, there's no way we'd have the same perceptions at the same time. Your mind would conjure up its own images."

"True," she sighed.

Dale took a deep breath himself, as if preparing to say something he found difficult to convey. "If you want to know what I think, I may well be flipping my lid, and the reason being that I fell off the Bridge years ago, but I'm not so sure my mind's making it all up."

Vicki frowned, taking both his hands absently. "I don't follow you."

It was several seconds before Dale answered. "Maybe it's really there."

Vicki looked disturbed, offended by a sense of something that was suddenly beyond her grasp. "Really where? It's only there for you, and apparently me."

"They say not everyone can perceive these things."

Vicki raised her eyebrows quizzically. "What, are we both psychic mediums, do you think? If we go out to the Bridge now, will there be lonely figures rattling chains and howling at the moon?"

"It's just got a Hollywood reputation, Vicki, it's never been disproved. It's not a religious fear any more, it's a science in this day and age. I've read about it."

"Oh yeah, but Dale--"

"Look, a piece of iron from a structure that hasn't been there for twenty years fell out of the sky. Don't tell me it was hazy or you don't remember, the point is you saw it. Something's really wrong here, Vicki, maybe it's not you or me.....Come on, you're a scientist. This is unexplained, and there are people that deal with the unexplained." Vicki shrugged and looked unsure.

"Look," he continued, "most of the time it's a creaky floor board or a possum crawling in a roof in these unexplained cases. It may even be a mental virus like you said. But if it is, these people have the time and experience to find out. We've got to try, there's no way you or I can work this out. You can cure me of all this memory triggered anxiety but what if all the rest doesn't go away?" Vicki nodded. It was out of her depth. She admired him for seeing that, in himself as well as her.

Dale saw that he'd worried her and put his arm around her, squeezing her affectionately. "It's nothing to worry about, they don't turn up in robes and chant and sprinkle holy water. They use Geiger counters and seismic charts," he sighed, "I wouldn't know who they are or how to contact one, though."

"Parapsychologists," Vicki said, "I know of a few."

"Colleagues?"

"Not really. They're all sort of fantasists. I think they have to be. Parapsychology is part of the medical curriculum for psychological training. It's not just ghost hunting, it's unexplained psychological phenomena, psychic powers and all that. Ghosts and hauntings are just part of it."

"So what's to worry about?" Dale shrugged.

"I don't know, Dale," she gripped his hand tighter, "it just seems far fetched. Before, I could feel this problem in my hands, but it's just.....getting beyond me. It seems a frightening step to take, bringing ghosts and monsters into all this."

"It doesn't have to be a haunting, Vicki, it's just something we can't explain. Maybe you were right about the neuro-virus and I'm just being a fantasist. Let's not let it spoil tonight." Vicki looked up at him and a warm, furry wave crawled around her body underneath her skin.

Dale smiled and half whispered "Let's talk about it tomorrow." and her stomach flipped over again.

XVI

Llewellyn Price mounted the service stairway on the central arch of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, glancing upwards at the apex fifty feet above, the small box and pyramid shape with the red X's at each face perched at the top of the arch, the Australian flag perched defiantly on top.

He hoisted the case of equipment strapped to his back into a more comfortable position, careful to keep his balance. The entire shaft of the arch, the huge box-and-triangle shape, was barely four feet wide, scarcely enough to keep you safe if you fell with a 17 kilogram pack of electronic apparatus dragging you down.

He lifted the walkie talkie to his mouth and depressed the button.

"All right, I'm on my way up." The device crackled and a voice sounded amid a wave of static.

"Good, how do you feel?"

"I feel like chucking this bloody equipment over the side."

He grasped the short rail running alongside the stairs to help himself up, the only thing between the stairs and the Port Jackson Highway far below.

He had an excellent view in every direction, the city, the north shore, and Cockatoo Island. The sounds of the city rang out, muffled by distance and blown, scattered into the wind. Apart from the gusts his only company was the *whirr* of the cable car and the rattling clank as the cars rolled over the tether beneath the apex of the arch.

Llewellyn hoisted the pack higher onto his back, wiped his brow with his wrist, sweat breaking across his forehead, and put his head down, just putting one foot ahead of the other.

Barry Paul took off his jacket and pitched it onto the bonnet of the station wagon, unbuttoning his sleeves and rolling them up. The harbour wind that whipped the heights of the Bridge didn't reach down here. Today the heat was explosive. Yesterday it had merely been oppressive, heavy and wet and slow in the air, throwing the rhythms of life and the moods of people into a resigned lethargy. But today, the sun seemed intent on blasting Earth. Everything seemed vibrant and alive with white heat.

He turned back to the two men at the rear of the 2004 Holden V10 Wagon, its side proclaiming *McCormick Slater Engineering and Metallurgical Consultants Ltd.* One of them, leaning against the back

doors and mumbling into a walkie talkie, was William Forbeaux, the consultant in charge. The other standing away from the car, gazing upwards, was Albert Dimitriou.

"Can you see him?" Barry asked the investigator, who shook his head. Barry turned to look in the same direction.

The wagon was parked on Alfred Street south, alongside Bradfield Park in Milsons Point. Looking south, they could see the Warringah Freeway curve around to the right and span the harbour across the Bridge. The tall central arch support towered above the water, proudly displaying the national flag (the smaller arches had been through phases of flag flying, celebrating national holidays, sporting and political events, but presently displayed the two standard flags, the Sydney County Council and WACE constructions). Somewhere along the farthest diagonal shaft of the central support an engineer made his way upwards.

The engineer, who Albert and Barry had met when the four men met in Milsons Point for the day's mission, was a short, stocky man called Price, was an on site test officer, under the supervision of on site manager Mr Forbeaux.

George Slatten & Bromigal Investigations had requested a permit from the county council to test and study the engineering of the Bridge. They had also applied pressure to ensure that permission was granted, hinting at legal action. Legally, they had it within their rights to ask for an enquiry and even close the Bridge indefinitely based on the findings of the university alone. It was self defeating to use that right at this point, but it gave them a heavy weapon to wield.

Albert Dimitriou had contacted McCormick Slater and set the date for preliminary testing by use of the Bridges own in-built electrical, metallurgy and engineering test system. He'd informed Barry Paul, who'd opted to take a few hours off work and be there as well. His car was parked across the street, as he couldn't stay there all day and had to return to work.

Only a few hours before, Albert had received a call on his mobile phone from the university. Dr Chin-Hsei Lambert had the construction plans (the culmination of another long bureaucratic tirade) and would make some initial comparisons with his own tests results before sending them to Slatten & Bromigal.

Albert breathed a sigh of content as he stared at the Bridge. Things were running smoothly.

Llewellyn carefully took the pack off and laid it on the step behind him.

He lifted the walkie talkie. "All right, I'm at the maintenance hatch."

"Okay," came Forbeaux's crackling voice, "go straight through when you're ready." Price shook his head. Safety regulations were fair enough, every engineer in place on site had to be in constant voice contact with a partner of solid ground, and every action reported and confirmed, but Forbeaux made it sound like a life threatening military specialist mission.

He turned and undid the pack, producing a heavy canvas flak jacket, like a fireman coat, beige in colour, with *S.C.C. Maintenance* stencilled across the back but barely visible through the grime. He buckled it over his overalls and tool belt and rummaged through the bag for the helmet, a simple construction hard hat, but adorned with ear coverings, like a crash helmet.

The staircase all the way up had been the same shining platinum colour as the support shafts, but ahead were a series of six or seven, painted an alternating yellow and black. There were two runners that went up alongside the stairs and beyond.

Price grasped the handle of the release lever beside his foot, slipped it out of the catch hole and yanked it down. The coloured steps snapped upwards a few inches with a clank, released from whatever clasp held them down, and he shoved them upwards, rolling them away from the hole they popped out of and pushing them along the runners until they locked into place above the hatch.

In the hole, a similar set of stairs descended down to the inner floor of the support shaft a couple of metres down.

He grabbed the pack and started down to the floor where a rectangular panel was painted the same black/yellow warning colours. Barely sparing a glance up the long, gloomy tunnel to the apex of the arch (lit by small maintenance lights, crisscrossed with rivets and struts that held the shaft together), he flicked a catch and slid the panel aside, into the body of the tube.

A gust of cool air billowed in, stirring the musty, stagnant air inside the tube and producing a haunting moan.

His heart thumped wildly for a second. There was nothing between him and the road now, probably seventy metres below. Buses and cars crawled along, the whirr of the cable car runners and traffic from far below drifted into the tube, oblivious to the wide eyed engineer. Thank God he wouldn't be looking down. Not while he was on the maintenance hammock. He squatted on the edge of the hole and felt for it with his foot.

The maintenance hammock was a mesh bed, strung taught in a rectangular frame, that hung by four rods which folded up against the tubular body of the arch. The trick was to hook your foot around one of the four support rods and pull it towards you, and the bars would roll on their axes and the bed would fall the two or so feet away from the arch

and lock into position. Then you had to climb out onto the bed and let it roll down a few metres to the maintenance deck.

That is if you can find the bastard, Llewellyn thought, probing the underside with his foot and trying not to look down. He presently felt one of the support rods and dragged it towards him, away from the shaft. It ground and grated outward. Bloody public service, he mused, probably haven't oiled it.

He slammed the bed into place where the rods were perpendicular to the shaft, kicked it to make sure it was locked, and climbed through the hole to stand on the cable mesh hammock. With the wind whipping him from the knees down, he carefully took the pack off the floor inside the tube and laid it down across his chest as he laid down, jamming his foot against the foot-shaped pads at the end of the hammock to stop himself sliding right off. Consequently, he was laying at an angle identical to the diagonal of the arch, two or three feet away from the huge tubular arch itself.

Well, here you are, he told himself, almost too scared to move, on a mesh sling on the underside of the highest (no - don't say that word) part of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

He reached up for the running lever on one of the support rods near his head and flicked it downwards. The maintenance hammock jolted - sickeningly - and began to roll down the shaft along its tracks, shaking and bumping.

When the hammock came eye level with the maintenance deck a minute later he released the lever and the bed lurched to a terrifying stop. Above were two doors latched in the middle and emblazoned, in bright red, with **WARNING - S.H.B. Maintenance Deck. HIGH VOLTAGE.** He fumbled in his breast pocket for the key they'd obtained from the maintenance and repairs station in the north east pylon and took off the padlock. He opened the bolt and the two doors fell away, revealing a network of switches, sockets, dials, digital and gauge read-outs, and a small keypad with LCD screen.

He sighed, turned his head and could see the north support arch and Cremorne, a northern suburb, beyond. He didn't dare crane his head right around and look.....down.

As he began to unbuckle the equipment pack, Llewellyn reported in.

XVII

"Point four five five, was it?" Forbeaux almost shouted into the walkie talkie.

"Four five nine." it crackled back.

Forbeaux skimmed through a folio sized book laid across the station wagons bonnet as Barry and Albert looked on. He scrawled something in a notepad beside him and said

"Are you sure, the gauge puts the maximum output at point four one."

"Of course I'm bloody sure, the gauge is right here in front of me." Price said persistently, looking at the voltmeter planted on his chest, the cord spiralling from the input socket to the monitor socket on the deck.

He punched a small rubber key at the deck and the LCD told him; 2ND, 3RD, 4TH TERTIARY JUNCTIONS, METALLURGY STRESS. The needle on the voltmeter flicked up to point six four and another metre resting indignantly in his crotch registered 49 p.s.i. stress pressure. Llewellyn opened his mouth to speak and had a fleeting moment of annoyance - (that noise again) - from a squeak of metal above him. As he reported the readings to Forbeaux, he searched the shaft and hammock supports for a cable rubbing or a panel moving in the wind.

"The stress is normal but the voltmeter's reading too high." Forbeaux commented.

"Well, why don't I worry about it when I get down, let's just get on with it." Price replied.

"All right, that's enough of the junctions, let's try magnetism."

"In the joints?" Price asked, fishing for the right equipment in the pack nestled between his feet.

"Whole arch." Price nodded to himself, shoving himself farther up the bed with his feet. A cable of the mesh was slicing right into him beneath his shoulder blades.

He plugged the small hand held magnetic meter into the jack on the maintenance deck and switched it on. It had a small LCD screen and buttons marked *str*, *osc/flu*, and *fld*, which, when selected respectively, told him the strength of electromagnetism in the arch, whether the figure was changing or oscillating, and whether it was producing a field. First, he hit *osc/flu*, and was informed YES.

"The strength is fluctuating." he murmured absently into the walkie talkie. Next he hit strength, blinked twice, and said into the radio "What strength is the field supposed to be?"

There was a pause and Forbeaux's crackling voice said "Average twelve point six one nine volts, to be no more than fifteen point five."

The LCD screen read 47.63305 volts.

Before he said anything else, Price hit *fld*. The magnetic meter jumped in his hand and sparked, and there was a punch of electric shock at his elbows. He dropped the machine, swearing in fright, which tumbled off the bed and hung by its cord in mid air.

Price dragged the machine back up and took the plastic back off it. The wires and chips inside were a cooked pulp of metal and plastic, smoking lightly. Price looked up at the maintenance deck, frightened.

"Mr Forbeaux, my magnetic meter has just been cooked by input overload. It put the strength at over forty volts." He didn't listen to Forbeaux's swearing and exclaiming; he was thinking. The machine had been plugged into the monitor socket to test field strength and size. The strength was calculated by the maintenance deck and transferred to the meter for output, but the size was measured by the Bridges internal systems and transferred to the machine for processing. The circuits were not only overloaded, they were cooked by the intensity of the incoming data.

Which meant that the Bridge was producing a field big enough to destroy a thirty six volt testing machine when it should've been generating a field small enough for a two volt testing machine to calculate.

"The actual physical field size is incalculable with this equipment." he told the men on the ground, "But it's big."

Forbeaux looked at Barry and Albert.

"The field size is dangerously big, by the looks of this. We're going to need air-based test equipment to find out exactly how big, hand held machinery is useless."

"Why?" Albert said.

Forbeaux shrugged. "Well, it's like using a tape measure to find the distance between here and the Moon." Then, back into the walkie talkie, "Llewellyn, test for radiation."

Price punched commands and numbers on the keypad at the maintenance deck. He hadn't brought equipment for radiation testing ('engineers didn't carry Geiger counters as a rule, someone should tell that moron' he thought) and had to run the maintenance decks internal check.

"The deck says that the metallic structure is emanating g-class radiation. All metals deteriorate through radiation, Mr Forbeaux."

"Not by way of gamma radiation, Mr Price." Forbeaux replied with the tone of a smart-arse.

Suddenly that squeak again.

"Shit," he cursed to himself, then, into the walkie talkie, "there's a weird noise up here that I can't place, I'm just going to listen on the steth machine."

"All right, hurry up." Forbeaux said.

"Yeah, yeah, fuck off." Llewellyn mumbled after releasing the transmit button. He dragged out the terminal, like a small typewriter

(similar to the BraceTest 6000 machine), and the headphones. He took the helmet off, balanced it on his knees, and slipped the headphones over his ears. He pulled the connector cable from the back of the terminal, stuck the glue pad on the shaft and stuck the magnetic electrodes either side. There was a small control pad attached to the wires just behind the clamp, the signal manager, and he activated it.

He switched the machine on and punched in a few commands. The screen cleared and the word **monitoring** flashed on and off while electrical and sonar signals were sent into and collected from the arch structure. Presently the words **metallurgy network** appeared, and a rough diagram of the arch structure below, designed by the computer from the readings.

Llewellyn spent a few seconds dividing the picture into sectors and hit a few keys on the small pad on the clamp to commit the picture to its memory. Then he listened, through the phones, to each sector. He executed a command, the appropriate sector of the arch would light up and the screen picture home in on it, and over the phones, low squeaks and thrumming were audible, the ancient creaking and settling, blowing in the wind and reaction to weight shift of the entire structure. He altered the sector and a new series of squeaks and creaks cried to him in their ghostly voices.

He flicked from one sector to another, straining to hear anything he didn't recognise, and suddenly, he did.

Voices.

It was a whisper, coming from a sector halfway up the shaft opposite him.

He jumped with a start and craned around to look at the iron shaft, still silent, the sun shining down, a ferry making its steady way out of the harbour into the Parramatta river, traffic snaking around the Pyrmont dock area. The whispering tapered off and the sound of the creaking resumed. The hairs on the back of Price's neck stood straight, and a violent shudder passed through him.

Puzzled, he frowned, and flicked to the next sector along, and nearly screamed.

A hundred voices this time, wailing in terror.

They drifted in and out of earshot, ebbing and faltering, not quite whole, as if they were snippets clumsily recorded together. The squeals and cries of a million souls in terror of their lives, dying and tortured.

With a wave of relief, Price sighed and felt his body go limp against the mesh of the bed. There was a minute shift in his mind and he heard it for what it was. Stress. Metallurgical stress, not the cries of the tormented and dying, but the thousands of tons of steel and iron fighting,

stretching, holding, resisting only with the screams of protest. God, it was creepy.

He moved from the vertical shaft to the diagonal that led to the apex of the arch. The noises (screams) got worse.

Logically the apex would be the worst affected. He moved the apex sector and tuned in, the computer showing him a digital diagram, a close up of the tip of the triangle.

It was horrible here. Clangs and screeches rang out, the creaking like an old, rusty ship. Long, tortured squeals wailed until his ears hurt. He moved to a lower sector - the one he was in, poised on the maintenance hammock.

After listening to the cacophony of groans, he decided to get some quantitative proof of the trouble.

"Mr Forbeaux," he said into his walkie talkie, "can you give me a total figure for p.s.i. stress on the whole structure."

A few seconds later Forbeaux came back with a figure of 8160 general pounds.

"Why?" he asked, "Anything amiss?"

"I've been listening through the machine, and it seems the cable supports and rigging along the edge of the road are exerting too much stress on the apex. It's concentrated at the apex. I estimate it'll be sixty thousand or more."

"Christ.....check it on the machine."

Llewellyn entered the calculatory function and the monitoring system read and computed a total figure for general metallurgical stress. Before long, the answer appeared.

8156.9 general pounds.

"Well?" Forbeaux said after a few seconds.

"It reads normal." Llewellyn answered him, bewildered, "I-" the squeal from above interrupted his thoughts again, momentarily, "I can't work out what all the noise is."

"What noise?" his supervisor prompted.

"It sounds hellish up here, a real battle. It sounds like the thing's breaking apart."

A chilling wind gripped his body, raking at him through the mesh, his breath caught in his throat, and his scalp tingled and went numb with terror as a sound through the earphones stopped him.

It was fuzzy and unreal but unmistakable, as if travelling through an ether from a beyond world, the sound of a heavy vehicles tyres lowing mournfully as it skidded across some phantom road from hell to Earth.

Then, a crash.....

Exploding glass.....

Metal clanging and crashing as it fell.....

The urgent squeal of the brakes of the ghost of a train.....
And screaming. Not engineering fault of metallic quaking this time. People screaming. Running. And dying.

A single squeal screeched at him, searing into his head, shattering his eardrums, and the bolt holding the support rod to its runner to the left of his head snapped.

The maintenance hammock lurched down at one corner and Llewellyn Price screamed in abject terror, unable to hear himself. His hand clamped around the other support desperately to halt his slide down the mesh, and he ignored the equipment as it fell off him. The earphones stayed on his head and jolted painfully when the plug was wrenched from the socket on the machine as it fell, along with the pack, walkie talkie, and voltmeter. The stress meter and burnt-out magnetic meter dangled, tethered to the maintenance deck by cords strong enough to hold them.

Llewellyn didn't feel the blood seeping from his ears, or hear the crash of the pack and machines as they hit the street and traffic far below. He just held on, screaming and screaming for something, anything, to save him.

To save him from the old Sydney Harbour Bridge as it fell.

"Price, I repeat, describe the noise to me....." Forbeaux released the switch, looked at the other two men and shrugged.

"He must have turned it off."

"Why would he?" Barry asked.

"I want to go up there, in case he's in trouble." Albert said, as much an order as a statement. Forbeaux shook his head as they all climbed into the station wagon.

"The stupid dickhead probably dropped it."

The maintenance hammock hung precariously. Instead of being on an incline, his weight made Price hang at the corner to the left of his head. His ears rang painfully, his eyes streamed with tears. The sides of his head were a mess, smeared with blood. He'd looked at his blood streaked hand and said to himself

- God my eardrums broken oh good Christ it blew out my eardrum it *deafened* me! -

Slowly and carefully, terrified of the tiniest movement, he reached for the running lever and pushed it back towards the entryway into the shaft. It vibrated and ground in his hand and the hammock jolted sickeningly without moving. He snatched his hand away as terror, black and hateful, blossomed in his chest and throat. The motor of the bed wasn't working.

He was trapped out here!

He cried out, tears blinding him, and screamed, gripping the hammock until his knuckles were deathly white.

He covered his face with his hand, trying to drag himself away, to anywhere but there, hanging, a hundred and eighty feet above -

Llewellyn's eye fell upon the bolt that held the other support rod in place. He blinked. And again, truly mad now, surely.

It was undoing.

The bolt was slowly turning, sliding farther out of the bolt hole that now held the head of the hammock up.

"No." he whispered to his own deaf ears. He reached for the tool belt under his flak jacket and grappled for his shifter.

The bolt would've been applied with an industrial drilling system and probably welded in place afterward. And here it was, turning smoothly, halfway out.

His fear forgotten in a sudden crushing desperate need to survive, he wrenched the shifter free, he grabbed the corner support and dragged himself up, his feet scrambling on the mesh, reaching for the bolt. His foot slipped on the wire cable and he fell back into the hammock, watching the fate of his doom sealed before his eyes as the bolt tinkled neatly and unconcerned from the bars and the rectangular frame of the maintenance hammock burst from beneath him.

Llewellyn Price watched the shaft a few feet above him, and his mind screamed at him that there was nothing to hold onto, nothing to grab onto save his life.

Nothing to stop him falling.

The shaft was there, and then it began to streak away.

Albert and Forbeaux ran along the footpath, Barry dragging his bulk behind them, panting and drenched with sweat, the van abandoned in the sudden, inexplicable but ominous traffic jam leading in both directions.

"He just dropped his walkie talkie, that's all," Forbeaux whispered to himself, "It hit somebody's car, that's all."

They'd gotten onto the highway where traffic was already at a complete stop. They'd waited, worrying, for ten minutes, before police and ambulance crews ran past, unable to get their vehicles onto the Bridge. Forbeaux had jumped out in panic to run after the emergency workers, leaving Albert and Barry no choice to follow.

People were milling around in increasing numbers, several running from their cars also, until blue and white police tape sealed a small area off. The three men pushed their way through the crowds and a policeman at the barrier cautioned them.

"Stay back, everybody, please."

Forbeaux strained to see around the policeman at the ambulance attendants crowding around in a cluster. Scattered around were the obliterated remains of machinery and a split-open duffle bag. On the ground, half covered by a sheet and also obliterated, was Price.

"Constable," Forbeaux grabbed the police officer's arm, "that man is my employee, we're on a site test!" The police officer raised his hand.

"We'll inform his family and employer and approach you for a statement, sir, but right now all you can do is keep back-"

"Is he alive?" Albert demanded.

"I don't know anything about his condition." said the man, and moved quickly on, urging people back.

Before long, the ambulancemen covered Llewellyn Price's body with the sheet.

Barry left Forbeaux crying tears of shock at the barrier and drew Albert away, looking pale and disbelieving himself.

"Jesus Christ, what happened to him?" The investigator murmured.

Barry craned his neck upwards, the small hanging maintenance hammock invisible to him. "Something bad," he said, "I don't know what it's got to do with the electromagnetism or the radiation, but I can't believe he just fell."

"No way," Albert said quietly but without a trace of doubt, "I'm going to have police forensic squads crawling all over this Bridge by lunchtime." He breathed deeply. Barry squeezed his shoulder.

"This isn't your fault or mine, Albert."

"It's somebody's, Doctor Paul, something is badly wrong here, badly wrong with this Bridge. And this poor bastard died because of it."

BOOK 4

I

Lord was really the correct name for Sir Reginald Peters, born 1957, a very rich and very successful businessman. He'd worked his way up from stock room boy of a local department store to entrepreneur in just nine years. By the turn of the century, four marriages and several visits to drug treatment clinics behind him, Mr Peters was one of Australia's most prolific business venturers.

What little media did exist about him dubbed him The Phantom. He had a reputation for drifting through industries and companies and planting investments and return packages that, long after he was gone, continued to clock up big figures in his name. When he retired in 2010 (for tax purposes, he physically spent no less time overseeing his multi million dollar ventures), he had ninety three percent controlling interest in the Sure-Buy supermarket and Morsens Department store chains, plus directorial and managerial interests in a major Perth brewing company, Sydney's Star City Casino complex, Melbourne's Crown Casino complex, the Mining-2000 Kakadu scheme, and supported (both morally and financially) the Liberal National Party Coalition, whose association with the supermarket magnate had been controversial many times.

Mr Peters was said to have an influential contact everywhere it mattered. He had good friends on the Australian RSL Board of Directors, Federal Ministers circles, the business community, and his picture adorned the wall of the Rose Bay Masonic Lodge alongside several former Prime Ministers, present cabinet ministers and recent business high-flyers.

In mid 1969, young Reggie Hacker had barely been out of school a month, having left halfway through tenth year. He'd been appointed as an assistant stock room boy at Morsens Furnishing and Bedding, Kingsgrove, and hadn't been there more than three weeks before initiating his first ever business transaction.

He'd unloaded a truckload of StudyLine desk settings off at the dock, dragged them one by one to the stock shelves and had become disturbed by what seemed like someone having trouble breathing in the next aisle.

Seventeen year old Reggie interrupted Mrs Harris, the withered, matronly office typist, on her knees, and fat, bald, wheezing old Mr Whitley, the store manager, his expansive pants around his ankles, his penis planted firmly in Mrs Harris' mouth.

Five days later, after a short note to Mr Whiteley, Reggie was the Assistant Buying Manager, Furnishings. Within a year, he was the Sydney Region Trainee Manager. Mr Whitley had suffered irritable

bowel syndrome and several episodes of myocardial infarction and spent his retirement in hospice care, an exhausted wreck.

Thirty two year old Reginald, his first marriage to model Gabriella Hacker and son Timothy over and behind him, was ambitious and ruthless in business. His contacts in politics, the senior sector of the Catholic Church and the NSW Police Service gave him an extensive and trusted associateship in organised crime. When a former colleague on the board of Morsens Holdings Ltd told Reginald about his plans to overtake and expand a flagging department store chain and chip a new niche into the market (Reginald's self claimed business territory), a gang of six men in dark clothes burst into the young man's home two nights later, raped and bashed his wife, drove him to a dark back street in Dural, in Sydney's west, shot him through the head and buried him beside a creek where the leeches and earthworms were soon to strip his body to an unidentifiable state.

Forty nine year old Mr Peters, one of the ten richest men in the country, a knighthood of the almost defunct order of Commonwealth Knights just four years away, was as fierce in his personal pursuits as in his business dealings.

His penchant for hiring secretaries no older than twenty three (usually slim and full-busted) was well known in business circles, and he'd gone through almost a dozen young women with stars in their young eyes of the riches and perks of being the right hand of one of Australia's most prominent businessmen.

Sir Reginald's Human Resources policies hadn't been without controversy. The first incident happened in 2004. A complaint was filed against him by a 22 year old Parramatta woman involving alleged sexual harassment. When questioned, four other women aged between seventeen and twenty six testified, in formal police statements, in agreement.

Each girl or young woman reported of being hired and instantly charmed by Sir Reginald's fatherly demeanour, which lulled each lady into a false sense of security (each girl reported his manner as being easy going, caring and protective). After a period of several weeks, he would use a promise of showing his appreciation to each girl for their hard work by taking them to a very opulent lunch.

Each woman testified being driven with Sir Reginald in his company limousine from the restaurant to the same five star Sydney hotel, whereupon Sir Reginald would ask the girl for sex. None of the women testified to agreeing to his request initially but all admitted to agreeing after being threatened with their job. Two of the four women had, when pressed further by police interviewers, reluctantly and fearfully admitted that Sir Reginald had threatened not only their jobs but hinted at their personal safety.

High profile State Prosecutor Christine Seal called for Sir Reginald's arrest and subsequent trial for sexual assault. It was to be a long and bloody court battle to convince the high court and the general public that making a girl agree to sex by threatening to kill her did not constitute consent.

During the trial, Sir Reginald was counselled by friends in his grief. Among them were Justice Graeme Yearlly, who oversaw the State Magistrate appointed to the pre-trial assessment of Sir Reginald's case, and Arthur John Ingram, the magnate with over ninety billion dollars worth of media interests in Australia and overseas (interests in which Sir Reginald had investments of over \$3 billion).

The case never reached trial and there was no media coverage of the incident.

Three months later, one of the young women interviewed by police in connection with the pending trial was abducted in the carpark of Blacktown train station. Two days passed before she was found, unconscious in a Macquarie Fields recycling yard, naked, physically and sexually assaulted.

When questioned, the girl refused to admit (against the beliefs of a police psychologist) any memory of her ordeal.

Once again, no media coverage surrounded the event.

The bubble almost burst in May of 2010.

A young gardening attendant had visited Sir Reginald's Sydney office to tend the hired plants. On the same day, she made a complaint to police, claiming that she harassed by Sir Reginald, who had asked her to check a tree in his office. He had allegedly locked the office door and offered the girl money if he could see her breasts and touch her bottom. When she refused, Mr Peters-Hacker allegedly leant her over his desk by force and indecently assaulted her.

The court case was dragging, neither party prepared to change their statement, until, after a series of late night phone calls to the girls home, she abruptly changed her testimony, changed her name and left New South Wales.

It hadn't been the only legal wrangle Reginald Peters had been in. After his brief divorce case in 1989, Reginald had had his ex wife Gabriella and their two and a half year old son Timothy thrown out of his house.

Gabriella Hacker fought her ex-husband with fierce determination. She struggled with a job in a clothing boutique, living in a Housing Commission house in Arncliffe, south of the city, which had peeling walls and no heating, paying legal expenses and sending her child to school.

Despite the closed doors, the lack of access and negotiation, the discouragement, the secret threats against her life, she fought on, and in 1998, the year that nineteen year old Dale Milling fell in the wreck of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the High Court ordered Reginald Peters to pay \$1.1 million compensation and alimony back pay plus thirty eight thousand dollars a year for the rest of his working life. Sir Reginald didn't appeal the court ruling, as many thought he would and Gabriella Hacker never heard from him again.

Gabriella began to invest. She invested in stringent private education for her son, therapy for herself, to encourage the re-growth of what all the fighting with Reginald Peters had worn away.

When Timothy Hacker left school in the year 2004, Gabriella, at only 42 years old, retired moved to Queensland's Gold Coast and began to organise her riches into working charities.

Timothy would probably have gone with his mother and had a lifetime guarantee of a safe, well paying job helping with her charities and eventually taking over, had he not developed the same drive his father had. He realised his dream early and sought it with a terrible, arrogant, and ambitious ferocity that made his mother shake her head in wonder at the similarity. Tim reminded her of her husband in the days when she had been young and beautiful when her rich, ruthless and handsome knight in shining armour had come to whisk her off her feet.

Timothy's budding primary school interest in science had developed into a fully fledged obsession with psychology, parapsychology, and physiopsychology. When he left school he attended the University of Sydney for six years and attained a masters degree in psychological studies.

In 2010, nine weeks after graduating from university, Tim was appointed to the psychological research board at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation in the Canberra office of the NCNU (New Canberra National University), built to commemorate the turn of the century.

For the next three years Tim studied the workings and disorders of the human brain, explained and unexplained. The unexplained included parapsychology, or, in its literal sense, psychological phenomena that was unexplained or 'beyond' normal mental procedures. Ghosts, psychic phenomena, hauntings and psychosis soon became Tim's passion. And in the year 2013, two things happened that changed the course of his life.

His mother Gabriella was struck down with cancer of the bowel and colon. She entered hospital to fight a battle that, in time, she would lose. Because of his financial security, Tim left work to be with her. He sat at her bedside for months watching her deteriorate before she

convinced him to go back to work. Sitting watching her die was a waste of his life and his education.

Tim returned to Sydney with time, money, experience, and little else. He considered another university job, and could just about have walked into the board of any university psychological studies unit, but he felt the pangs of working for an employer, having to study what you were told, giving up your results for someone else's benefit, suffering lack of funds and outdated equipment. He had come so far in life and learned so much about his craft, and the thought of working for himself scared him, but was it worth giving that up for security when security meant working in the government scientific study sector for the rest of his life? He didn't want to lay on his death bed with any regrets.

He returned to the NCNU and proposed his own business, based in Sydney, supported by the university by unlimited use of their equipment and developing technologies and offering them exclusive rights to his studies and reports.

And so, in early 2013, Tim Hacker became a freelance consulting parapsychologist. On January 21st, he opened the doors of his Birchgrove office.

II

And now, in the late January of 2017, the office didn't look altogether different. Tim Hacker, B.Sc., B.Med, Dip.Med(NSW), Dip.Mth.(Syd), B.Mntl.Hlth., Dip.PS(NSW), Dip.PrS.(CAN), was a rare breed. Unlike most hardworking, innovative and progressive people, he was organised. Very occasionally he hired a temp from his employment agency for secretarial duties, and only when his work load was really swamped (and, working in profession affiliation with a Government body, the workload was 85% paperwork and red tape).

But for the most part, he never let things build up. He always seemed to keep his desk clear. He tried never to start one thing without having finished another. When something was done it was filed away. Apart from the stack of manila folders on one corner of the book case or the mail, as yet unattended, in the *IN* tray, the office was meticulously neat, from the crystal clear, smearless glass doors adorned with **Dr Timothy J Peters-Hacker, Consulting Psychologist/Parapsychologist** to the *NO SMOKING PLEASE* signs to his Diplomas, Doctorates and Degrees, framed and arranged on the wall adjacent to the desk.

The cool blue walls and comfortable but powerful looking furniture exuded an air of professionalism, an atmosphere that was intended. Tim hadn't wanted to do business in a laboratory or a white coat. His lab was at his Rozelle home and needn't have been anywhere

near the office. The office was merely for administration and consultation by clients. Anything he needed to know from the lab he called up in the office on the PC, which was connected by modem to the bigger computer in the lab, one which he'd had designed and installed at a cost of sixty eight thousand dollars and which constantly monitored and had access to all his dealings and findings, experiments and practical studies. The office computer merely had a few business applications such as word processing, spreadsheets and database facilities.

He wanted to look like a professional investigator instead of a ghost hunter, so he wore a suit to the office and received his customers with coffee and discussion as to their problems with disturbances or psychological phenomena. If he wasn't there, an answering machine gave his home number if he was studying at home or his mobile number if he was out in the field.

He often had people who were surprised at the professionalism of his operation, expecting boiling beakers and little men in lab coats, running to and fro amid piles of papers and ominous machinery. Parapsychology, after all, was a science, not a business. But, as he pointed out, there was a service to be provided in getting to the bottom of hauntings or hallucinations, yet not many people had the money to set themselves up in what was almost exclusively a research science.

Tim Hacker himself, thirty one years old now, sat behind the meticulously neat desk in the meticulously neat office, trying to compile a report of the mornings work while his exhausted mind wandered away to his bedroom, where he planned to spend the rest of the day sleeping. His clean lined, boyish and handsome face looked haggard, his black hair listless despite the glob of hair gel he'd dragged through it to lift it up for his impending appointment.

It had started with a phone call that had seemed like days ago but was only at four thirty that same morning.

The previous night, a Mr Waylan Pakesh, thirty nine years old, immigrant from civil war-torn Pakistan after the turn of the century, part time accounts payable clerk at the Australian Taxation Office, Guildford, spirit healer, psychic and medium, self proclaimed spiritual ruler and lord of humanity, had held a seance at his dual occupancy house in Fairfield for his followers, like he did late every Monday night.

At one fifty two the following morning, Tuesday, the tenants sharing the bungalow in the other flat called Fairfield police to complain about the commotion next door.

At 2:03 a.m., with a car on its way to the scene, the tenants again called the station to report that there had been shots fired. The tenants were advised to quickly vacate the house.

Four more cars were called to the scene and by the time they all converged on the house, Fairfield Police had received eighteen different complaints from around the street of unexplained noises and phenomena such as flashing lights, peculiar smells of burning oil and rubber, objects in the sky and screams.

The police were warned not to come into the house by a middle aged man assumed to be Mr Pakesh, and with no knowledge of the others present at the seance or their whereabouts, the siege was kept under observation and treated with extreme caution.

The police negotiator was there at 3:20 a.m. and a criminal psychologist at 3:40 a.m. They worked together to try and gauge the character of the perpetrator and try to see what would weaken his resolve.

Every police man and woman present, and even some onlookers (barricaded off way down the other end of the street) witnessed a series of phenomena that were later described as 'incredible' and 'eerie'.

At that hour of the morning, digging up past employment and any criminal records wasn't easy, and it was quarter past four when word was received that Mr Pakesh was a practising psychic. It provided a connection with the unusual happenings.

Sydney's only respected consultant in the field was called, and just after dawn, Dr Timothy Hacker arrived with a plethora of equipment.

The house was a dingy pre-century style, the paint peeling from the stained fibro, weeds overgrowing the spiky buffalo grass, the wooden slats of the patio peeling back and splitting.

Council street barricades had been set up along the kerb and police, ambulance and SES emergency & rescue vehicles had been parked hastily all over the street wherever they could find space. Spotlights standing at the barricades or on top of the police cars stabbed at the peaceful pinkish hue of dawn, their harsh light illuminating the dirty front of the house and unkempt lawn, making it seem like some haunted no mans land.

The house was quiet. The man hadn't been heard from since 3:06 am, two hours before, and the strange phenomena were intermittent, sparse, and irregular. The policeman in charge, a senior detective Gaunt, made Tim put on a crash helmet and bullet proof undervest and accompanied him to the front line.

Tim put on his industrial camcorder (connecting a sensitive microphone and recording at high speed), radiation and magnetic counters, and made some preliminary notes.

The police maintained that they had called the Electricity Commission to have power to the house cut at 2:47 a.m. The Electricity Commission were adamant that they had done so, according to their computers, at 2:56, and that there was no circuit fault in the area, but still

the lights in the house stayed on. A technician from the Commission arrived at the house at 3:19 a.m, climbed the power pole just down the road, and snipped the wires with insulated cutters at the telephone pole.

And still, when Dr Hacker arrived, they dangled from the eaves of the roof to the ground, snaking across the grass, and there was no other power source accessible, except for an auxiliary power source inside the house, which would be easily detected from outside and no evidence of one had been found. Even Tim's small magnetic finder would've indicated the presence of one and hadn't.

But every light in the house still burned.

An acrid smell, like plastic on fire, hung in the air, and seemed to exude from the house in waves. As Tim noted, such an odour was supposed to accompany ectoplasmic activity, such as spirit mediums producing ectoplasm residue or materialisations in trances. As he described the smell in his notes, he equated it to a case he'd read about in a case books.

In Germany in 1931, a small village on the banks of The Mossel River called Lutzendorff basked in the spring sun one Sunday. Most of the townsfolk, in church at the time, gradually became aware of a terrible smell that seemed to permeate the buildings. A party of twenty men set out through the vineyards to investigate, as the smell appeared to be coming from up river. The general expectation was that some farmers grape store had caught fire, or a blaze had started in the forest.

Hours later, the horrible smell overpowering them, they came upon the small abandoned medieval fortress of Dunzfahr Castle, long reputed to be haunted.

The men stumbled through the ancient parapet and within the crumbling walls, the smell became a vibrating thing, alive and assaulting. Several men keeled over, sick. Those who stood, their eyes running, to see what the explanation was, were horrified.

The inner walls of the castle, according to one legend, were covered with what appeared to be "the wedding veil of some daemon goddess, putrid and pungent and flung this way and that, clinging like a vampire lovers kiss to the revolting place".

A scientific account reported that the walls of the building, with not an inch left bare, were covered, dripping and oozing with a thick mucousy substance, whitish and stringy like a mixture of mucous and semen. After the finding was reported to the district police and on through various channels, it was eventually investigated by the Nazi party National Science Foundation, who tested a sample of the gunk and found it to be ectoplasm.

They brought Pakesh down around eight in the morning. It seemed fast and simple, but Tim had never been shot at, and never wanted to be again.

He'd been squatting beside the barricades, adjusting equipment, taking notes and taking readings with his new pride and joy - the Infa-red Field Meter. It was a very skilled piece of detection equipment, over eighteen thousand dollars worth.

It was shaped like a megaphone only a bit bigger. The wide dish at the end detected heat, infa-red, electromagnetic and radiation energy, which was measured in the dish, the figures passed through a microprocessor, and projected onto a six by ten inch liquid crystal screen at the operators end, in the form of a colour coded picture of the energy field the machine was tuned to detect. A control pad covered the left face of the machines body, a battery receptacle its right. A pair of headphones could be plugged into a socket where the field energy, once monitored, was also converted into an audible frequency and the observer could 'hear' any oscillation or discrepancies in the consistency of the field.

It was Tim's new toy, he'd bought it six weeks before and it was the only tool in the world that allowed anyone to see and hear fields of energy.

He knelt on the ground, amid his camera and equipment, pointing the IF meter at the house, his eyes transfixed on the screen, which showed the black silhouette of the house and the waxing and waning rainbow of the radiation field, his ears full of crackles and roars, like waves against a shore, the simulated song of the field. Hooked up to the machine, on the ground, was a ticker tape machine with rolling scrolls of paper, black nibs of ink scratching across them with every recording of the field.

His pockets were full of used film, all taken of the house and surrounding areas. He taken perhaps 200 photos so far, just a smattering of the number he would take when it was all over. His clip board folder was stuffed full of scraps of papers covered in diagrams, descriptions and accounts of events.

He was exercising the first commandment of scientific research. Observe. The key was too record every single detail, no matter how apparently insignificant, take notes, then spend hours sifting through it all for information.

The sun was up and the air was getting more humid. Sweat was gathering beneath the vest and pooling across Tim's forehead. He flicked the machine detection setting back to the electromagnetic field. The digital reading beneath the picture jumped to four figures, the picture on the screen exploded into a vibrant, leaping prominence of colours around

the tiny house, and the scroller jumped into tumultuous action, the ink stabbing wild scrawls onto the paper.

A burst of glass from ahead made Tim start in shock. A huge white object was falling towards the porch amid a shower of glass from the obliterated front bay window. It crashed down onto the warped floorboards, its frame buckling and shuddering. A scattering of objects flew from it as it rolled off the porch, crashing over onto the grass. Only when the police erupted into activity behind him did Tim focus on the things strewn across the lawn, a split milk bottle, plastic food containers, ceramic dishes, jars and bottles.

It was a refrigerator, over four hundred pounds in weight, and it had been hurled out of the front window.

Tim was dimly aware of the police marksmen around him swinging their rifles towards the house before he was knocked roughly down. A knee was planted in his back and a hand clapped down over the helmet, holding his head down. There was a flash behind the window, a muffled pop, and a splinter burst from the barricade to Tim's left.

Suddenly his face felt wide, an easy target, and horribly exposed. The hand held his head hard, facing the house, and he was too terrified to open his mouth to ask the person on top of him to let him turn his head away.

The IF meter continued, oblivious to the sudden tension. The liquid crystal showed an enormous electromagnetic field, vibrating, pulsating, orbiting the house, and the needles of ink were colouring angry gashes across the scrolling tapes.

More shots rang out, punching the panels of police cars, trees across the street, the asphalt of the road. Tim squeezed his eyes shut and tried to press his ears against the inside of the helmet. He was frozen.

Nobody moved until five minutes later when Pakesh calmly came out his front door. Nervous and halted warnings were called to him as he stepped onto the grass. He calmly raised the gun to waist level, producing stern cries to stop and drop the gun, and fired twice.

The first shot punched a hole in a emergency truck front end panel, the second hit the small electromagnetic meter (Tim had neither the time nor inclination to be glad it wasn't the IF meter) on its stand just feet from where Tim lay. There was a tinkle of glass, almost dainty, and the crash of the machine as it toppled over onto the road was somehow much worse. Tim's heart skipped two beats and a violent shudder shook his body. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut as gunfire broke around him, the hollow pops of service revolvers and the hideous cracks of the SWAT rifles.

When he opened his eyes again the man was laying peacefully across his lawn, flowers of red blossoming across his chest and abdomen.

The senior detective dragged Tim indignantly to his feet and shoved him back into the crowds of police where he was guided, in a daze, away from the house and into a police car.

He sat in the back of the car for half an hour before an officer joined him for a statement. He waited outside the house, walking around impatiently, packing up equipment, loading cameras and waiting. It was twenty past ten before the police finished their search for evidence in the house and only then was Tim allowed in. Inside, the police had taken the five surviving cult members away for questioning and removed the bodies of the remaining seven members of Pakesh's following, the victims of ritual-style stabbings and sexual assault. Otherwise, the house was extensively photographed, fingerprint thermographed and left as it was for the computer forensic people.

He reset all his recorders, cameras and monitors at the kerb (he contemptuously threw the electromagnetic field into the boot of his restored 1980's Peugeot 205 - it had a neat hole through the front face and would cost up to a thousand dollars to repair), and collected his other equipment, a hand held camcorder, camera with 1:800 zoom lens, twenty rolls of high and normal speed film (ready to load into two cameras), and a small tape recorder into which he could speak his notes.

With all his equipment running, monitoring and recording every square centimetre of the property, Tim took 1700 photographs, four hours of film, and filled two ninety minute tapes with spoken notes.

When checking back over his findings, he would discover that the phenomena had stopped at exactly 8:06'32" a.m., the second the psychic was gunned down. The only clue as to why the power had still been on were echoes of electrical currents traversing the wiring of the house despite still being disconnected from the mains, jolting infrequently as whatever had prompted them slowly died out.

The refrigerator wasn't the only misplaced object. Doors of cupboards had been torn neatly from their hinges, chairs were overturned, paint was stained and sappy.

And the oddest thing. Upon discovering the first example, a jar of vaseline in the bathroom, Tim went in search of consistencies, which he found in a tin of automotive grease in the garage in the back of the house, a block of frying grease in the back of the kitchen pantry, and a motley collection of scented lip balm sticks in the bedside drawer. They all showed signs of the same phenomenon he'd found in the tub of vaseline, which was cracked, old, and contained as much pubic hair as it did grease.

All the household oils and greases were cooked.

Victoria Holt didn't know Sydney's Balmain area at all well. She lived and worked in the eastern suburbs and her personal and professional life never took her further west than the city.

Consequently, she finished her mornings work at the practice and called a taxi, giving the thin, unenthusiastic far-eastern driver the address and leaving him to it.

Birch Hill Road Professional Centre was a small, modest business block of two floors divided into suites, with a small open courtyard of grass, benches, and a tiny palm garden within the small rectangular building.

She climbed the stairs to the top floor and found suite 13, a glass door heralding the presence of a man to whom, merely by her visit, she was admitting that this time she just wasn't good enough.

She'd felt a grip on Dale's problem. He was a stable but emotional man with a single crushing paranoid fear. Now she was frightened as well. Frightened because it seemed now that Dale's fear wasn't all a product of his own psyche. The thing Dale sensed was wrong was real, and having seen it petrify him so badly, she was terrified to discover what it was. She still had Dale's fear to work through, but what caused it was too big for her. She was envious of this Doctor Hacker for having the capability to dabble where she couldn't, and grateful that he had the courage. She sure as hell didn't.

Doctor Hacker received her warmly and before long they were sitting in the lounge suite in the corner of the office, drinking coffee, Tim taking the odd note from Vicki's account of the Harbour Bridge saga.

He was a forthright man and knew all the jargon of customer relations lingo but made the discussion very relaxed and informal. Before long he asked the question she had been expecting, but which still startled her.

"Dr Holt, you seem like a very open minded lady, so I want to ask you, as a woman in pursuit of scientific truth.....do you believe we're dealing with a haunting?"

Vicki sipped her coffee and thought. She opened her mouth several times to speak. They both smiled to ease the tension. "Doctor I.....I'm too scared to admit that I do. I suppose it depends on your definition."

"Tell me yours." he prompted.

"Well," she breathed deeply, "only what I learnt during my degree. The manifestation of people or events from the past into the physical world.....ghosts."

"Yes," Tim agreed, "only the term 'ghost' is a very broad term that can encompass any of these manifestations. The classic ghost, of a lady in white walking through walls and moaning, we call an 'apparition'. But

you were right. In my profession, a haunting can be a recurrence or appearance of a person or event which manifests itself in the physical world by the emission spectrum so they can appear as electromagnetic fields, images to our eyes, anything along the frequency band. Of course, ninety percent of the time, hauntings are cracked water pipes, creaking floorboards, or a tree scratching a window."

"It could be anything on the Bridge, then?"

"Almost certainly will be."

The hope in Vicki's voice dwindled away as she saw, in her mind's eye, that iron girder crash to the ground.

"But even if I saw it, Doctor Hacker? It was unmistakable."

"Well, you know better than I do how the human mind is capable of incredible things. Our consciousness is at the mercy of what the brain wants us to perceive. And under certain stresses, who knows what your mind could've subjected you to?"

Vicki nodded, then laughed. "I hope it's that simple.....what steps can we take if it isn't?"

"Depends completely on the case at hand. There's no pattern to these instances, they behave differently in every case."

Vicki interrupted the second half of Tim's sentence with an exhausted yawn. She covered her mouth and laughed in apology. Tim smiled. "Oh God, sorry," she explained, "I've been up all night. This has got me so worried."

"Don't let it get to you. You have your patient to care for, he's far more important." Tim said.

She nodded. "It's just frustrating. Supposing it is true, why would it happen?"

Tim shrugged and sipped his coffee. "Psychics will tell you that hauntings occur at the scenes of unhappiness or sudden accidents or deaths because the spirits can't let go and pass over to the next world."

"What do you say?" Vicki asked.

"I think that's the old and romantic way of explaining what we don't understand. I'm a strong believer in God, and I think that when you die you go to heaven or hell and you don't hang around trying to avenge your death or losing your way to the next life. As far as the field of psychology has theorised, hauntings are recurrences of events or results of events that appear to us. The past has happened and can't return, but it's as if certain things are recorded somehow in history and replayed over some great cosmic radio whenever and in whatever form they want."

"But why do they keep recurring?" Vicki asked.

Tim smiled. "We're no closer to knowing that than when we were painting pentagrams on the floor and burning incense."

It was quarter past three when Vicki returned to work for the afternoon. She said hello to Felicity, her receptionist, gave a cursory nod to the AMA psychiatrist (The Pig, she called him when he wasn't around) and walked down the hall to the temporary office she'd set up for herself in one of the small empty utility rooms.

It had an old school bench, plastic party chair, dented filing cabinet and most of the desk space was taken up with notes, diagnoses and essays on Dale's case. His next consultation was at five the following afternoon and she had to clear some of it up before then. One huge box containing notes, tapes, and her own assessments of the field exercises, when she'd accompanied Dale out onto the Bridge, was shoved behind the small plastic rubbish bin beside the desk, and beside her feet, under the desk, was a waxed cardboard box emblazoned with *Northern Farms Peaches Australia*, which contained half a bottle of Tanqueray gin, two bottles of Schweppes Indian tonic water, and seven of her dog-eared paperbacks.

There was also a prehistoric Technicol-7000 telephone answering machine hooked up to the battered olive green telephone, its number dial yellow and cracking with age, the rubber fraying away from the wires. She switched it on as she sat down. Dale's voice sent an icy trickle of fear down her spine.

"Vicki, something happened. All day I've been.....seeing things. I'm not sure. I'm just terrified. I can't stay at home, I've arranged to stay at my mothers. I'm just calling to see if I can change the appointment to tonight. You said you didn't have any bookings after four today. I can't explain what's happened, I'm not even sure myself. Please call me at home."

V

It started early in the morning at Dale's local convenience store. He was dressed for work, his first day (again!) and was looking forward to ham and salad sandwiches for lunch. He'd been very annoyed to discover that there wasn't a single tomato at his flat, and, realising that he had twenty or so minutes to spare, he strode right down to the shops to get some.

Once the automatic doors of the convenience store buzzed closed behind him, he shivered, a cold finger of ice tracing down his back and settling just above his buttocks. It felt cold. There was just him, and the bored looking cashier, reading a magazine whose cover proclaimed *Tits! Tits! Tits!*. Dale started toward the opposite corner where the fruit stand was.

It began with a loaf of bread. As he passed the shelf, it fell to the floor. Dale brushed it off as he replaced it, giving a split seconds thought to the rushed shopper who'd left it in a precarious spot hours before.

Next, while standing at the fruit stand, there was a flicker of movement beside and he felt a movement of air behind him, as if someone had passed close. He spun around in shock, but nobody was there.

Panting from the sudden fright, Dale dropped a fourth and last tomato into the plastic bag. It hit the others with a heavy squelch. He lifted the bag to look, and now the tomatoes seemed sick, yellow and bruised. The ones arranged on the tray were fine. Dale shook his head in wonder. They must all be overripe. Disgusted, he dropped the bag on the tray of fruit and strode out.

When he got outside, he realised that his back had begun to hurt. A low, subtle throb.

The supermarket was a kilometre or so along, and the buses were very regular both ways at that time of the morning, so he decided that he'd have more than enough time to get what he wanted and be off to work in time.

The bus stop was just up the road, and a bus was just pulling in, bound for the shopping centre. Dale broke into a run to reach it, fumbling in his chest pocket and producing a two dollar coin.

When Dale's eyes fell upon the bus, he stopped dead, gasping in fright.

The convenience store and the supermarket were on the Grand Parade, the main road that runs along the beach front through Brighton-Le-Sands and Ramsgate in Sydney's South. The bus should've been the 478 Dolls Point service. The destination display read *Wynyard-272*. Dale had seen it a million times in dreams, and once in reality as it was smashed during the Horrorfall of 1998.

His heart beating so hard it thudded in his ears, Dale looked closely at the bus. The windows were blown out, the side bashed in, filthy blue smoke belched from the back, and the driver leered down at him, his sodden flesh peeling back from a grin, worms crawling through his torn and dripping uniform.

Dale jammed the balls of his fists into his eyes and rubbed hard. When he looked again, the 478 Dolls Point bus, its windows shiny in the sun, pulled out into the traffic and grumbled past. He ran his fingers through his hair, watched it pass him as he caught his breath, and started to hurry towards the supermarket.

"Hello, Barry Paul."

"Dr Paul, its Victoria Holt speaking, Dale's psychiatrist."

Barry pushed the patient file aside. "Oh hi. What can I do for you, doctor?" he asked, half turning his attention to the PC so he could update the hard drive file. He was way behind on his paperwork because of the accident on the Bridge. He'd had to give statements, work things out with George Slatten and Bromigal as to what action should be taken, and keep up with his appointments. He'd also gone no further with his article that had been published or his plans for expansion. He'd been thinking of hiring a temp to help him tend his patients or catch up on his paperwork (maybe both, the way that bloody Harbour Bridge drama was unfolding).

"It's Dale," Dr Holt began, "He left a message on my answering machine sounding very distressed. I tried him at home but since he wasn't there I thought there might be a chance he'd seen you today."

"No," Barry said, worried, "I haven't spoken to him since he was released from hospital on Friday. Did he sound hysterical?"

"Not at all, just upset. I'm due to see him tomorrow. But he said he wanted to come in today. There's been a new development in his fear of the Bridge."

"Not the construction man who died yesterday?"

"Died?" Vicki asked, stupefied.

Barry breathed deeply. She hadn't heard, obviously. "I hired a construction consultancy to test some of the works. After all the trouble with prosthetic magnetism, I've spent the last fortnight trying to find what's wrong."

"My Lord." Vicki whispered.

"It could've been anybody. I was just there overseeing things. Myself and an investigator."

"The police, you mean?"

"No, I hired an investigation agency. They've been tracing around and.....well, Dr Holt, at this point I'm saying this in complete confidence, but.....something is badly wrong with the Bridge. Dangerously wrong."

"He fell." came Vicki's voice.

"Dale?"

"No, the worker, he fell.....didn't he?"

"Yes, he did."

When Vicki spoke again, it disturbed him. She said in a small voice "Just like Dale." and then, "Dr Paul, we have some things to talk about."

In the supermarket it started again. The feeling, the cold. But it felt safer. Here and there were mothers with children, old aged couples, all going about their business, getting their shopping done extra early, taking advantage of the twenty four hour opening time.

Trying to ignore his aching back, Dale made his way toward the fruit aisle. He was halfway there when he heard footsteps, squeaky like sneakers, just inches behind him.

He looked casually around, not wanting to startle some absent minded, sneaker clad shopper, just in time to see, from the corner of his eye, a shape duck out of sight

- (someone ducking into the next aisle) -

He retraced his steps and looked up the empty aisle.

Just rows and rows of food.

Beyond the end of the aisle was the supermarket butchery, empty except for chopping boards, benches, and sides of beef and pork hanging on meat hooks. In the glass panel through which the butcher's area was visible Dale could see a reflection, dim, far and a bit distorted, of his own silhouette, the light from the sun behind him outside.

And something else.

In a split second, Dale focussed on a long, thin, gaunt figure with scraggly hair behind him in the glass, swinging a long object, an axe or hammer, right for Dale's head.

He shrieked and spun around, hurling himself away to crash into the shelves of food. He slid to the floor, his eyes wide, his hand covering his chest, the other warding off the phantom.

The aisle was empty.

Dale scrambled to his feet and began to back into the aisle, keeping his eyes fixed to the spot he'd just been standing.

A packet of spaghetti burst from the shelf opposite and hit his shoulder. Dale jumped with fright, oblivious to the flicker of the fluorescent ceiling lights and the distant 'pings' as every cash register drawer at the front of the store opened as one.

Then the optical tricks stopped, and the nightmare began. A moan sounded from the next aisle. A horrible, sub-human howl. Something big crashed against the other side. Something huge, and it crashed hard.

Bottles and tins toppled off. The whole frame of the shelves, all along the aisle, jolted heavily. From a wave of unreality, a thousand tortured wails of pain sounded, crashing in like waves. A stack of tins of tomato soup (*Rosella Tomato Soup. New! More Flavour!* was the shred of reality that kept Dale sane) crashed out, one hitting Dale's hip painfully, and a cut and bloody arm shot out, reaching desperately. Another, lower down, green and decomposed, and, amid an awful chorus of screams and wails, hundreds of hands shattered the displays and reached for where Dale cowered. From both sides they grappled for him, pale, bleeding, strips of flesh hanging, some only bones. The ends of the aisle stretched further than he could see and all along, hands, dead, cold, grasped at the air for him.

There was a heavy squeal as the shelves moved, raking slowly across the floor towards the centre of the aisle, where Dale kneeled, helpless. The demon with a million arms shoved at the supermarket shelves, crashing and pushing them together, shaking packets of food off, bending the frames. The hands reached closer, grabbing madly at the air as if they could smell Dale's blood racing through his veins and the impending feast drove them into a frenzy. The shelves loomed, grew higher, bent in at the top, the hands reached, inches away.

There was a clang. The shelves stopped, crashing against an invisible barrier, the arms reaching with bloodlust, their sweet prize millimetres from their grasp.

It was as if there were an enormous sheet of glass on each side of him, invulnerable to the onslaught, allowing the hands to come within a hairs breadth but not reach him. He could smell the cemetery dirt, see the torn ligaments.

In terrified desperation of his own, Dale put one hand on his forehead, one on his forehead, and screamed.

There was a crash as the world shattered. Bottles and tins exploded, the arms blew apart in eruptions of blood and bones or were severed as the rifts in Dale's world closed on them. The lights went out above as the fluorescent tubes exploded. Everywhere was flying glass, metal, food and blood. Dale knelt amid the maelstrom, collapsing in on himself, his mind relinquishing the power that assailed him in a fury.

Mrs Chalmers told Craig to put the bubblegum back on the shelf at the checkout and no, he couldn't have it, when the lights flickered and the till drawers all along the checkouts tinged and opened. The checkout girls all closed their drawers and shared amused and bewildered looks amongst the few shoppers. Mrs Chalmers' checkout operator (*Hi! I'm Jill*, the badge said) shrugged and continued to run the groceries over the barcode scanner.

Craig reached for the Milky Way bar instead and Mrs Chalmers reached out to slap him when there was an agonised scream from the other end of the store. Mrs Chalmers gasped. It sounded like a man hurt.

At that moment, there was an explosion of sparks from the till, and the cash drawer thundered outwards, cracking violently against Jill's elbow. The top of the register popped open and the receipt roll catapulted out like a streamer thrown at a party. Jill, her elbow badly fractured, fell off her stool. The illuminated signs on top of the posts beside every checkout which read the lane number exploded, plastic shattering across the air. And all over the store, several of the fluorescent tube ceiling lights popped like gunshots and shattered across the ground.

The scream stopped and the crying people cowered in fear beside smoking cash registers.

VI

Vicki sat at the table, her head resting on her hand, tapping the pager with her fingers.

"That won't make it go off." came Barry's voice above her. She looked up and smiled as he put his beer and her double Bloody Maria on the table, sitting down heavily.

"Thanks, Doctor Paul." she said, slipping the pager back into her handbag.

"If you're starting with a double Tequila you'd better call me Barry straight away." he told her. She smiled again.

She'd gone home to change and they'd chosen a quiet bar near Vicki's office, dark and relaxed, dimly lit with warm mahogany tables and rough floorboards. Vicki leant forward even more, feeling like she could fall asleep.

"You look a bit exhausted," Barry said, "how do you feel?"

Vicki nearly stopped herself speaking, scolding herself for her unladylike behaviour, but right now she felt less like a lady and more like a little girl lost, and besides, it was hard not to like this great big man, like a big teddy bear (was it her taste in men - jolly, protective father figures?), and it was hard not to trust him. "I feel like getting really pissed." she drawled. Barry laughed heartily, an accepting laugh, a sympathetic one, for which she was grateful to him.

"But I can't" she continued, sitting up, "not until I find Dale. Or until he shows up." she checked her watch. Four Twenty. Fifty minutes until their appointment. She hoped.

"So what was your news?" Barry said, interrupting her thoughts.

She sighed. "On Dale's suggestion, I've hired a parapsychologist."

"What?" Barry said, "a ghostbuster?"

She nodded, smiling, silently conceding that it was as ridiculous as it sounded. If she could be bothered and wasn't so tired right then, she believed she would've gone to the public phone across the cocktail lounge, called Tim Hacker, and fired him before she lost her mind. If she could be bothered, and if the image of that iron beam crashing to the road would just leave her mind. "Barry, I'm so frightened, last time I went onto the Bridge with Dale, I saw it too."

Barry leant forwards, shifting his enormous body in a gesture that seemed to say he cared. For the wildest split second Vicki imagined making love to him, balancing on his wide chest. He wasn't altogether a good looking man, not the good looking you'd make love to as a young

woman when glamour and soap-opera good looks are all you'd settle for, but the good looking you find in a real Australian man, pushing sixty, probably married, the kind you could make love to because you know he'd care.

"And since I saw that scientist this afternoon, I've spent the whole day worrying, and I feel like if I don't talk to Dale soon, I'll go mad. Here's me thinking he's the one with the problem. He's lived with this successfully for twenty years!"

"What did you see?" Barry asked.

"A piece of the Bridge," she explained, "the old Bridge, like Dale always sees when he's there." She smiled to herself and shrugged, "A piece of a ghost." Barry didn't seem to be able to think what to say, but the look on his face said it all. The look on his face told her it wasn't wrong to imagine rooting a fat married man you've known for half a day.

"What've you found?" she asked.

"Just bad works. Electromagnetism, radiation, metallurgical stress, incorrect materials. As far as I know it's just a case of corporate negligence. My investigation agency's been in contact with the police. There's no explanation as to why the construction is faulty yet, and the forensic squad found that the consultant engineer died because of faulty equipment."

"He was up on the Bridge?" she asked.

"He was on a maintenance platform below the centre arch," Barry nodded, "and they said it hadn't been fastened. They found the screw on the road below that had given way, and it wasn't stripped or warped, so apparently it'd just fallen out, maybe before he got up there."

"What's going to happen then?" Vicki asked.

"There's talk in the grapevine of closing it down altogether, conducting a full federal enquiry."

Vicki gasped and put her hands on her face, shook her head. "My God, my head doesn't seem big enough to deal with all this."

"Just let me worry about it." Barry said, "You concentrate on Dale, he's the real victim here, and he needs you more than ever to guide him through it. Tell me what else the parapsychologist said."

Vicki sighed, recollecting. "He wants to go out onto the Bridge with Dale. He said if it's a real paranormal incident, Dale could be the catalyst or conductor for the manifestations."

"Do you think that's a good idea? Every time he goes there it seems to take everything back to square one."

"Well, as his psychiatrist I can stop him going until I'm confident he can handle it, and I'm hoping to make a breakthrough tomorr-" she looked at her watch, "tonight. He's trying. And he's really making

progress. Under relaxation or hypnotherapy, he opens up to it a little, and when he recognises it and accepts it as part of him, it'll quell the fear."

"So it's not a matter of getting rid of it, just seeing it."

"Yeah, especially with people like Dale. I'm sure you've seen this, Barry, knowing him as long as you have, but he's not a strong man. He isn't comfortable with his emotions. He may have had the sort of father who condemned any display of feelings. He's timid and doesn't want to fight the world. His personality isn't strong enough to deal with this alone....." she looked around and leaned closer to Barry, ".....of course, this is all confidential."

Barry raised his beer and tapped her cocktail with it. "In confidence amongst us who fight for a common goal." he said.

Vicki smiled, looked at her watch again, and confided to Barry "I think he's a bit of a spunk, too."

VII

Finally she had him with her, and he was safe. Vicki looked up at Dale from her writing, sitting across the office reading a *Mind & Soul Journal* magazine. She smiled again, letting the feeling of relief wash through her, the dull heaviness of her heart melting away.

They were alone in the office. Dale had arrived just as Felicity was packing up to leave. The Pig was long gone, and they had the evening to themselves.

Vicki was writing preliminary notes of their session, what she hoped to accomplish about the Bridge and the incident Dale had suffered at the supermarket earlier that day, and they were talking absently as she wrote and Dale read.

Dale himself was half convinced he'd dreamt the whole thing. The sound of real screams had broken through the chorus of ghostly voices, there was a violent crack of perception and suddenly he was kneeling in a very ordered and everyday supermarket aisle with his hands over his head.

Except that cans and packets of food and groceries had exploded everywhere. He'd dawdled out, past the distraught shoppers and litter of broken lights and cash registers, stopping to help several people to their feet and exchanging bewildered words with them, and walked towards home, the terrible images haunting him. Almost overcome with terror, he'd called Vicki's office from a public phone and gotten a taxi to his mothers house where he'd spent the whole day before going to her surgery.

Vicki presently finished her notes, locked the office door, put on the edge-of-hearing cassette on, and switched off the overhead lights,

leaving the dim desk lamp on, just throwing a warm glow into the room, enough so that objects were defined but the harsh sharp edges of the real world were taken away.

Instead of leaving the blinds closed, she opened the wooden slats to reveal the sparkling splendour of the city, harbour, Bridge and north shore, the myriad of lights and neon company names reflected in Port Jackson.

"Why are you opening them?" Dale asked.

"Just a theory. If you can see outside it'll take away some of the claustrophobia that you seem to suffer in our office sessions. Does it feel nicer?" He shrugged, looking at the pillars and cables of the Bridge, face on. His adversary.

Vicki stepped in front of him and leant down.

"How about this then?" she whispered, and planted a slow, warm kiss on his lips. Dale felt the slivers of fear that pierced his spine like jagged icicles melt away in her warmth, and as she pulled back and their lips parted with a tiny smack, his body was left glowing.

He settled back as she pulled her chair around to face him.

"All right, tell me how you feel, generally."

There was a pause before Dale said "Light."

Vicki looked up at him from her notes.

He smiled. "I know, but that's the only way I can describe it. I feel like a weight's been thrown off me. Life seems a bit brighter. I don't feel like there's something pulling me down."

"You've felt downtrodden?"

"Not really, not like life was treating me badly, but as if I've had some sort of lethargy that's gone."

"When did it all happen?"

"It was this morning, when I saw all those things when I went shopping. I didn't remember what I saw for a while, or what happened, but the next thing I remember I was walking out. It all came back to me soon after, and I've spent the rest of the day since being frightened of it, but I've also felt new, all the same, cleansed of something dirty."

"This is a feeling you've only just identified with now, because you've been afraid the rest of the day?" She suggested.

He shrugged. "I suppose so."

"So then, how long did you feel this weighed down sensation?"

"Only a few days. Since I was in hospital last."

"That's when we walked onto the Bridge." Vicki reminded him. He nodded agreement. Vicki wrote notes for a minute while Dale watched her, un-hearing the chimes of the cassette, feeling the dark seep into him, drawing his guard down, opening his mind.

"All right Dale, tell me what you've seen and what you're frightened of."

Now, without the masculine and social mental barriers, images and memories flooded his mind. His dreams and visions came to him easily, at his command and under his control. But they were detached. He wasn't at their mercy, living inside them. They were simple memories, electrical impulses in his brain and nothing more.

"Hey," he said suddenly, "my back doesn't hurt."

"Does it usually?"

"Ever since the first time I crossed the Bridge, when it made me sick, it's been hurting on and off, whenever I have a nightmare or remember something. Except now."

"Why?" she prompted him, "does it have to do with you feeling lighter?"

A jigsaw puzzle of images in Dale's mind floated into place.

"My God, this morning, that's it, I felt it leave me!"

"What left you?" Vicki asked. She hadn't intended to record this session, but now she leaned back and activated the desk recorder. It looked like a train of thought was coming that might be irretrievable.

"The feeling of heaviness.....they'd been after me. I saw one in a window and they tried to get me in the aisle of the supermarket. But they couldn't. They got so close, but something stopped them. My God,.....it was me, stopping them, without even knowing. They actually couldn't physically reach me. And when I realised that, I threw them out." Memories crashed in his head. One made the next make sense.

"Slow down just a bit, Dale," Vicki said calmly, "who was after you?"

"The same thing that wanted to get me on the Bridge." He focused on her eyes. He was here, with her, not rambling in his own world. What he was telling her wasn't snatches of emotional refuse. He was telling her his story, "Remember when we walked out there? They knew they couldn't get me because I wasn't trapped there. So I wasn't scared of them."

"But you suffered severe prosthetic magnetism."

"That's right, they couldn't get me on the Bridge, so they came inside me. I felt them come inside when I reached for you when I thought you were dead. You grabbed me, and they got in. The magnetism was only my body's reaction."

"But it still didn't get you?"

"No, because I saw it, I recognised it, and I forced it out."

"How?"

"I didn't let it into my mind. I didn't let it see I was scared of it. It only knows how to frighten me with what I see in my dreams, what I saw the day I fell, so before it could only do it on the Bridge."

"And if it'd gotten into your mind?"

"It could've taken over it, taken all the bad things, and killed me. But I realised as it was attacking me, trying to get me in the shopping centre, and I concentrated and pushed it. Hard."

"You're saying you were possessed, Dale?" Vicki asked, careful not to let a trace of sarcasm into her voice.

He looked squarely at her. "Yes." She was writing *persecution* in her notes as he spoke, "It came into my body but when it tried to reach my mind, I was ready to block it off." He sat back, seemingly exhausted.

Vicki smiled. "Do you want a break?" she asked.

He nodded. "Could you give me the reception keys? I better go to the men's room."

After Dale left, Vicki began to make some spoken notes on the desk recorder. "He seems.....convinced that it's an outside force at work that he's conquered. It's my opinion that if there is anything else involved, which Dr Hacker will locate, it's only produced further emotional reaction in him.

"The important thing at this stage is that he remembered the chain of events, and regardless of whether it's a product of the Bridge or his emotions, his mind has overcome the initial helplessness and he retains control when faced with his memories. I don't believe he's afraid of it any more.

"But there may still be some emotional reaction. He can bring the fear to the surface and recognise it, but it still may attack him.

"I think it's been a real breakthrough. Even though it's still there, he's overcome it. The real therapy seems to have come from himself during his hallucinations of today. He remained in control and found the strength to fight it, so now he believes he is the more powerful of the two.

"The therapy is over. What remains is to see, on a field exercise, whether the Bridge itself is still a symbol of fear for him and if it can still bring about the destructive feelings and reactions in him." She paused for a minute, staring through the blinds at the Bridge, surrounded on both sides by twinkling lights.

"I'm a bit worried about his failure to realise that this experience is a product of his imagination. He seems adamant that he's been attacked by supernatural powers. Or that they are at work." Ouch, she thought as her mind's eye saw the iron crashing to the road in front of her, that's too close to the bone.

She stopped the recorder as she heard the keys jangle in the lock, Dale's footsteps across the reception area, and she smiled as she came in and sat.

"How does it feel?" she asked him.

"Very free. I couldn't have done it without you. You gave me the strength to fight it.....I know you're still not happy."

"What about?" she asked guiltily.

"You think I'm bonkers because I think I've been seeing ghosts."

"I've just told my recorder I think you've found peace with it." she said to him. Dale just smiled at her, and she couldn't stop from smiling back. "All right, I am worried."

"Vick," he said, reaching for her hand, "I don't care what it was, not right now. Whether it was ghosts or imagination haunting me, I've just fought it and won. If it's emotional stress, I've seen it as part of my mind, just like you say. I've accepted it, and in doing that I've beaten it. What matters is that we did it." Dale leaned in and put his hand softly on her cheek.

"We did it together."

Vicki's heart began to pound in anticipation as she took Dale's shirt and pulled him to her, kissing him hotly, moaning, losing herself in his warmth, probing his mouth with her tongue.

Dale broke her kiss gently and whispered "What about your professional interest?"

But Vicki wasn't joking. "I need you." she pleaded.

VIII

The lights shimmered on the water, the lazy traffic drifted back and forth, the hot breeze whistled through the cables and the Australia flag watched impassive over the majesty of the harbour.

Vicki sat on the edge of the desk, its contents scattered on the floor, which Dale stood before her. Her thin floral cotton skirt was hitched up above her knees, her shoes were off, and her legs were hooked around Dale, raking at his legs and buttocks through his cotton pants, his hands crushed her to him, feeling the smoothness of her back beneath her jacket. Their lips were locked lovingly together. Vicki licked his lips and bit at his chin. He buried his head beneath her hair and sucked and bit her neck. Vicki panted, squeezing his body against her until her breathing was almost cut off, still never close enough. Dale tentatively pushed her jacket over her shoulders and pushed the straps of the camisole down, peeling it down to her waist. Her breasts were tantalising beneath the flowery white cotton bra, and he touched them nervously, almost fearfully, the first time he had ever held the body of a woman in lust.

Vicki struggled with his belt and trousers, their lips still pressed deliciously together, unhooked her legs from him and she pushed them down, and gripped him hotly. Dale was terrified and madly aroused. He ran his hands up Vicki's thighs to her waist where he pulled her underwear from beneath her, stepped back, and slid them down her thighs onto the floor. He ran his fingers up her waist to her back where he unclipped her bra, sliding it off her. Vicki unbuttoned his shirt and buried herself against his smooth chest, moaning as she guided the man she thought she loved inside her. They both breathed long sighs of satisfaction.

Dale put one hand beneath her skirt and cradled her smooth and warm bottom, losing himself in the feeling of supporting her body, squeezing her flesh as he thrust into the sweetest heat inches away. With his other hand he held her back, holding her to him, delighting in her taste, exploring her teeth and mouth, biting her ears, looking at her breasts, sweat beading across them, falling up and down with each movement of their rhythm. He breathed in her ear between gasps

"I never.....thought this would happen to me."

She put her arms around his neck, felt the heat of him inside, raking back and forth, buried her hands in his hair. "Oh God," she whispered, her voice punctuated by tiny gasps of ecstasy at his every thrust, "I'm glad it is."

Vicki leant behind her on the desk, arching her back, pushing her chest out, swimming in perspiration and passion. She splayed her legs around him and pressed her heels into the small of his back. Dale gripped her waist, pulling her body back and forth onto him. His breath quickened and he began to groan as he exhaled. Vicki looked down at his strong, flat stomach, and Dale threw his head back, pressing himself into her and clutching at her desperately.

Vicki smiled, her top teeth clenching her bottom lip, as she watched his eyes spring open in shock and his whole body twitch violently. He wailed, trying to push himself further into her, and trailed off, his chest rising and falling with heavy breaths.

Still smiling, Vicki leant forward, feeling his thundering heartbeat inside her, and kissed and blew on his neck, whispering to him that she thought she had fallen in love with him, while the lights of the city twinkled outside, smoothly illumination their bodies as they had come together.

IX

Tim Hacker searched along the tape until he found where the ink pens had burst into life. The time at the side of the scroll was, he

calculated, seven forty eight a.m. He noted it in the note book and checked his chronology, a rough list of the notable events during the ordeal that he'd compiled from several equipment readings, as well as the video of the entire incident.

According to the chronology, the refrigerator had been thrown through the window at 7:47'38" a.m. The ticker tape had a red line running down the centre, drawn by the master monitor operator. When the IF meter was tuned to a certain emission perception, the tape scroller switched to the corresponding ink pen colour to indicate the sort of phenomena it was recording at the time.

In the IF meter operators manual supplement, he looked up the section on the tape scrolling deck; red ink indicated an electromagnetic reading.

Tim thumped his desk in relief and leaned back. One tiny breakthrough in the entire mess, but he'd done it. He noted it down among his theories and conclusions, which already filled half an exercise book (he liked to brainstorm on paper before committing all the important data to the computer file).

The police forensic squad said that there was apparently no evidence of the fridge having gotten to the front window from the kitchen, which was at the back of the duplex. Upon questioning, none of the hostages/followers who weren't sacrificed during the siege recalled a six foot kitchen appliance standing in the living room. And even if the number of people still alive at the time of the appearance of the fridge were pushing it, it would only have landed on the porch. But the videotape had shown the truth. The refrigerator had been *thrown*. Catapulted, hard enough to bounce off the porch and land on the lawn.

All that aside, there was the question of how the refrigerator actually got out of the kitchen, six and a half metres away. This fact fascinated Tim even more than its flight through the window. There were no marks on the kitchen floor, no sign of the fridge touching the linoleum anywhere but where it had stood. And the carpet from the kitchen to the main window showed no signs of blemish, other than years of general wear.

The object, one hundred and seventy two kilograms in weight, had left the ground at one end of the house and contacted it next on the front porch, a trip of nine metres.

But now, an explosion of electromagnetic activity the second the refrigerator appeared. To a parapsychologist, it meant something. Electromagnetic activity, in ninety nine percent of reported cases, accompanied poltergeist activity. Psychics would say it was telekinesis, but it didn't really matter yet.

A supernatural force had been at work in that house and had been strong enough to lift and throw a four hundred and thirty one pound object. Whether Pakesh brought about this supernatural force was yet to be explained.

The police would be talking to friends and relatives, trying to put together a psychological profile of the man, but even at the end of such a drawn out saga of interviews they rarely had a very clear picture. Tim had copies of a doctors report and employers statement, but they told him little. Pakesh was a regular man, he been among the five or six thousand influx of Pakistani refugees after the turn of the century, gotten a job in a government department and had been there ever since - no complaints from either party.

As for the doctors report, he had no history of domestic violence or mental conditions, and his only recent medical activity was an operation on an injured shoulder in 2014 and a mild sexually transmitted disease in March 2017.

Having reached an important conclusion, Tim felt like rewarding himself. He poured himself a 1997 Chivas Regal and thawed half a kilogram of King Tiger prawns for lunch and let his thoughts wander for half an hour.

Staring out the dining room window, a litter of prawn heads and shells across the sheet of newspaper and a half full glass of scotch before him, the Dale Milling case occurred to him.

He felt sorry for this guy Milling. He'd been an outcast of society for twenty years, a burden to the taxpayers - not that he was a dole bludger or anything, Tim was sure, but he wondered what people with disabilities that extreme had to look forward to. Did it shatter their dreams? Or only make them more determined? Tim supposed it depended on the person, and from the character assessment Dr Holt had given him, Dale Milling seemed like the quiet, sensitive type who took what the world gave him and, maybe, regretted it. No sooner had this poor man had the operation that had given him his freedom and worth than he was deemed nearly certifiable.

And as for the case itself, Tim had no idea. Normally he had a few theories before he even began field study, but paranormal phenomena on the Sydney Harbour Bridge? A house was full of hidden culprits, ducts, squeaky roof beams, animals in the roof spaces, flooded foundations. Even when the case was legitimate, poltergeist activity was centred around homes of the young - adolescent children - where (as theory had it) growing "life forces" and energies were attractive.

After his initial tests, there would be lots of research into the history. If some everyday explanation was found, then Dale Milling was

cracked, and bad. But if every result pointed to the paranormal, there was a lot more to uncover about an eighty two year old engineering site than a suburban house.

This case, whichever way he looked at it, was going to become the biggest.

The following day, Wednesday, February 1st, was one of disappointment for many.

A legal saga, one that would change the face of the city forever, was to have its opening chapter.

The morning distribution of mail in the Sydney County Council Public Works and Maintenance department included a short, stern letter from a large city solicitor, Darby, Hillman and Assoc. (Aust) Pty Ltd, that informed the government body that they represented McCormick Slater Engineering & Metallurgical Consultants Ltd, and also that, based on police findings and a report from the aforementioned McCormick Slater Engineering & Metallurgical Consultants Ltd (herein referred to as "McCormick Slater"), they believed that the Public Works and Maintenance Dept was guilty of severe negligence that led to the death of Mr L. G. Price, and finally that they were compiling a lawsuit with which to appeal to the High Court of Australia against the Sydney County Council.

Albert Dimitriou was in a meeting when he was interrupted by a telephone call. He was meeting with Steve Winterman, his Regional Investigative Director; Justin Hoyle, a legal consultant; Joanne Parkes, the Managing Director; and Dennis Humberstone, a junior investigator who was thoroughly trained in government enquiry and who was in attendance as an advisor of government practices. There was also a secretary present taking notes when asked.

The group of investigators were together to formulate their case to present to the Federal Justice Commission, the NSW Police Force and the construction conglomerate who created the Bridge from conception to ribbon cutting, WACE Construction Co. The case would also be used in support of McCormick Slater who were suing the Sydney County Council that very morning.

The meeting was secure, the doors locked, each person sworn (and signed) to confidentiality. If the Sydney Harbour Bridge was closed, there was more than blocked traffic at stake. If the incident reached the press and was made public, it could bring about the downfall of the nations mightiest construction body, the disgrace of the state government, and destroy all faith in public safety altogether, an issue that was seriously questioned after the disaster of 1998 and which the public had begun to only tentatively trust in recent years.

"The police had proved beyond doubt that, originally, it was the fault of the builder." Hoyle told the meeting, "I've seen their report, and it's fairly condemning."

"Their fault that the man died or that the construction is dangerously magnetised?" Joanne Parkes, a tall, powerful and slender woman, wanted to know.

"No, just that he died." Hoyle replied, reaching into a folder and producing a sheet of paper from which he read, "'the maintenance hammock (Model GONIA) servicing the Eastern Diagonal/Centre Arch test pad, designed and constructed in accordance with the design of the centre arch and meeting all hazardous repair laws, was found by (a) the NSW Police Forensic Squad and (b) McCormick Slater Consulting (upon later inspection) to be unsatisfactorily fastened in the method commanded by its design.' In other words, McCormick Slater checked it after the police and they agreed, the bed just hadn't been done up properly."

"Shouldn't Price have checked it?" Parkes suggested, "In court they could challenge us with that."

Hoyle shook his head. "Only if he thought he had reason to. Even so, it was the responsibility of the Public Works department to make sure their equipment was up to standard. He wasn't there to check the test equipment, he was there to use it."

Parkes nodded, but she was frowning. "Yeah,.....I'm still not happy with it, though. It's like buying a really crappy car without test driving it and then realising it doesn't have any brakes. They could still say that if he was going to be working in a dangerous position he should've made his own checks. I mean, we have the stronger position, but they could still cut us down some. I'd like you to formulate an unshakeable argument for us there."

"Sure." Hoyle agreed as he put the paper away.

"Thanks," Parkes said to him, then, to everybody, "Now, this business of magnetism. Is that the fault of the builder?"

There was a pause before Humberstone answered. He ate government cases for breakfast, had ruined several large companies during his short career, and some said he'd have Winterman's or even Parkes' job one day. "Only initially, Joanne. See, their biggest problem is red tape. In building the Harbour Bridge, they would've gone through several consultancies and community groups about the materials to use, methods to use, safety laws, noise control - there's actually a company in this city whose sole purpose is to advise on noise reduction during large construction."

"You're kidding." Winterman laughed.

"No, I'm serious. Its all a big P.R. thing. Construction companies can say they used environmentally friendly methods, all that bullshit."

Anyway, the point is that from start to finish, probably ten or twelve bodies were involved with whatever is going wrong here. In a construction job this big, there would've been no less than four independent checks, and they probably still have one every year. It's not just the builders who are to blame. Whatever is causing this severe magnetism is getting past everyone."

"Ten or twelve companies." Parkes thought aloud.

Humberstone nodded. "And we'd have to investigate all of them."

"How did this magnetism come to light?" Parkes asked, looking around and focusing on Albert when she remembered it was his case in the beginning, "a medical problem, or something?"

Albert nodded. "An orthopaedic specialist came to me about a patient of his, who has a prosthetic abdominal brace, one of those spinal reconnection ones, with the microchip. The electromagnetic field was affecting the brace, and, in turn, the man's nervous system. We know of no other reported cases so it could be field strength, frequency, any number of things."

"So tell me what effects this field could have?" Parkes asked him.

"My main contact so far has been a university lecturer and researcher. He's been monitoring the field constantly since Sunday, but it hasn't been telling him much." Albert took a piece of paper from a file in front of him.

"His theories are based on what he's learned so far. Under the most threat is the rail system, which could suffer shorts, surges, anything, and one day the result could be a train accident or a mass electrocution. It could also interfere with close range telecommunications, satellite and TV transmission, even knock out the electrical systems of cars, again resulting in accidents-" The secretary's phone rang. She answered quietly and said

"Mr Dimitriou, it's a Doctor Lambert."

Albert stood. "That's him now. Could you put it through to the phone over in the annexe, Jennifer?" he said, walking into the small ante-room of the boardroom that had a desk, phone and bar. He answered the phone when it rang. "Doctor?" he said.

"Mr Dimitriou," said the scientist's shaken voice, "you have to come right now. Something's happened."

Disappointment was a drop in the ocean in Dale Milling's day, but it was there.

He and Vicki had laid in her office until two twenty in the morning, naked, in each others arms, kissing warmly, talking, drinking gin, sometimes just looking at each other. If falling in love was akin to a spark of passion, his heart felt like an inferno.

Eventually she'd won the battle with herself not to lose herself in his eyes forever, and had dropped him home in the cool morning darkness just after 3 a.m., the world asleep around them. She wanted some sleep before she began updating, theorising, and documenting his case at work.

Their goodnight kiss had lasted ten minutes. They leaned against the passenger side door of her car, necking and panting like two guilty teenagers, and Dale had reluctantly watched her drive off before trudging wearily upstairs, getting undressed and falling into bed.

Dawn was just painting the horizon when he snapped awake two and a half hours later, bathed in sweat, his nightmare vivid and horrific in his mind.

He spent the morning doing his housework and his disappointment came at quarter to eleven in the mail.

As soon as he recognised the envelope from Warren and Cooley, he felt a basketball of lead punch his stomach.

His job! He was supposed to have gone yesterday, and had been on his way, but had gone to the store to get some tomatoes for his lunch when the ordeal of terror had begun and Warren and Cooley hadn't entered his mind since.

The letter was short and final.

Dear Mr Milling, bearing in mind your recent misfortunes we felt it necessary to review your application of employment. In doing so we hastened to obtain several doctors reports from various practitioners of your own and in our consulting capacity (as you consented in signing the application form), and we have come to the conclusion that the position we offer wouldn't be practical or beneficial to someone of your health. However, please accept our apologies and best wishes for the future, and thank you for your interest in Warren and G Architectural Consultants.

Dale banged his fist on the table in frustrated, impotent fury, half expecting to feel the arm rests of the wheelchair beneath him again. Tears swelled in his eyes and he felt a black weight settle in his chest. He was crying. Goddamn fucking well crying! A man of thirty eight and he was crying like a stupid kid. Instead of feeling enraged at their audacity, he felt beaten, stripped and flogged. He gripped the edge of the table, searching for rage, trying to dig up the rotten corpse of the rage he had felt so long ago for so many years, his knuckles turning white, fighting, kicking and screaming at the tears, vile as a weeping pustule to him, but they came.

"The temp-link's been broken." was Dr Lambert's only response to Albert's greeting and apology at being late as he entered the researchers laboratory/office in the Engineering and Metallurgy dept of the university. It was five minutes to six in the evening.

It couldn't accurately be called an office. It was a corner, a square among many others. The desk backed up against the filing cupboards of whoever occupied the next square. Dimitriou had once realised that he didn't even know what colour the desktop was, it was so crammed with files, half dismembered equipment, papers and reports, stationery, notes, reminders, empty soft drink tins and sandwich wrappers, shopping bags full of wire and cable, and a tabletop electric fan.

One edge of the square was taken up by a bench upon which sat huge beaten up units of machinery, covered in sockets, gauges and switches, sonar pulse screens and printers that vomited reams of paper onto the floor. Some of the machines looked more at home in an auto mechanics workshop, covered in greasy hand prints, with rough, misspelled Ezy-Labels stuck here and there, but they were an orchestra of sporadic motion, gauge needles flickering suddenly, metallic clunks emanating from circuitry or switches within or lights blinking.

The rest of the space was filled with piles of boxes, full of torn manila folders or small machines and parts, and another desk with a personal computer barely visible beneath manuals, instruction books, and a half eaten pizza.

Lambert's face was shocked, his hair ragged.

"Broken?" Dimitriou echoed dumbly, "By what?"

"Albert, I've got no idea."

Before long both men were sitting at the main desk and had somehow found space. Lambert was searching along a ticker tape.

"Here," he said, stabbing the strip of paper with his finger, "1416 hours today." Dimitriou inspected the paper, the time delay in tens of seconds printed along the bottom, and between 1416'30" and 1416'40" the straight line just stopped.

"So you've got no ideas?" Albert asked.

"Well, I know what broke the link, but not what caused the thing that broke it."

"What was it?"

"Another E.M. surge."

"So you saw it build before you got cut off?" Albert asked him, prompting a shrug from the scientist.

"Well, for some reason there was a one second delay between the peak of the surge and the knockout of the equipment. It was all recorded

on thermograph, electromagnetic and infra-red. There was no build-up, it was like a lightning bolt."

"But why a delay?" Albert said, "Was it just the distance? A lightning bolt wouldn't take as long as one second to reach from the north end of the Bridge to the street where the van was parked."

"I checked it," Lambert explained, "the knockout was instantaneous, and," he searched for a sheet of paper and read from it, ".....point eight one nine nine seconds after the peak of the event. The duration of the increase to the peak was point zero zero four seconds."

Dimitriou thought for a second, then offered "Well, whatever the problem is altered so your machinery couldn't detect it after the time the readings stopped. Maybe it does change frequency." But he frowned as Lambert shook his head.

"You don't understand, Albert, look at the tape." He held up the tape, a master record which verified that every component of the temp-link was monitoring, a thick black line of ink. There, then not there. Albert shrugged.

"The tape stopped, Mr Dimitriou. Our machinery didn't lose contact.....it was shut down."

"Shut down?" Albert repeated, feeling like a fool having to repeat everything to understand it properly, "Are you saying that this surge was powerful enough to knock out your machinery from over a kilometre away? What about radios? Cars? Trains - again?"

The scientist could only look at him. "There's no such thing as selective electromagnetic interference, Mr Dimitriou. A field surge can't target or discriminate. It isn't the law of physics. Unless....."

"What?" Dimitriou prompted.

"It's targeted by a controlled source. I think we have to examine the possibility that some person or party is behind this."

"My client's patient couldn't possibly have any corporate enemies, doctor, he doesn't even work," Albert said, "besides, they'd have to know the precise distance, frequency and wattage of your equipment to knock it out, and only you know that." Lambert nodded.

"True..... but believe it or not, we have bigger problems. There's never been visual contact before. But infra-red caught something in the act. Something that explains the delay, I think, but.....I don't know what it is."

The three young students protested as Dr Lambert and the guy in the suit apologised and made their way to the TV cabinet. It contained a high speed video playback deck and was, as the sign read, **STRICTLY FOR RESEARCH USE**. It presently showed a very young and extraordinarily large breasted woman paying careful attention to a mouth

and cleavageful of the oscillating waist region of her unseen, groaning lover.

The picture disappeared into electronic snow as Donald ejected the tape (*101 Facial Cumshots* the tape proclaimed in pink, airbrush-style writing).

The protests trailed off as the students dispersed and Dr Lambert inserted and ran the tape.

Part of the temp-link package had been visual surveillance, which was an all-weather camera upon the roof of MARV the research van. The van had been parked in the same position in North Sydney's Lavender Street every day.

The picture that appeared was of the Bridge, the Port Jackson freeway veering lazily into the picture from the left, through the northern toll gates and across the Bridge. Two counters in each bottom corner counted the eight digit camera time and the twenty four hour time.

Dr Lambert activated the fast scroll and hours flicked by like seconds. The shadow of the Bridge rolled across the water below, tiny zips on the water marked the path of ferries, the traffic appeared as endless strings of colour.

With the time at 1416'23", Dr Lambert released the tape to play at normal rate.

"Now watch, it's kind of fast."

The seconds ticked by. Albert shuddered violently, feeling an icy hand slip beneath the skin of his lower back and grasp his spine. The room seemed insubstantial, the Bridge on the TV too real, too full of demons.

When a burst of white exploded suddenly around the Bridge, Albert jumped. "What was that?" he asked. Microseconds after the burst of light, the picture had disappeared, replaced by fuzz.

"That was it." Lambert told him.

Albert looked at the scientist. "What, an explosion of light and nobody saw it? No complaints?"

Lambert stood up and began searching around the area, searching for something as he kept talking. "Nobody saw it because it wasn't really light. The infra-red sensors monitor the emission and transpose it onto the film. But as for complaints....." he found what he was looking for and, picked up the newspaper and held it open to page two, pointing to the half page story entitled **MAYHEM - ELECTRICAL TROUBLE ON BRIDGE**. Albert turned from the paper. He didn't have to read on.

"Can you play this slower?" he asked, "There might be a pattern in the emissions, oscillations or something."

"Oh, I've already looked," the researcher said dismissingly, "a student and I. Nothing special."

"Well can I see it?" Dimitriou insisted.

Dr Lambert sighed. "You don't really need to. I mean, we couldn't deduce anything so it wouldn't do you any good."

"Well, I'd like to please." Albert said, a little harshly.

"Mr Dimitriou, you don't want to watch it."

"Doctor," Albert said loudly, any negotiation gone from his voice, "I'd like to see the tape, please."

"My student wanted to," Lambert said angrily through his teeth, "and she ended up screaming and running out!"

Dimitriou watched him and said quietly. "Play the bloody tape, Donald." Donald stared at him, unable to argue. He turned back to the video deck.

He rewound a few seconds and set the tape running in micro-motion. Frames flicked by, so fast in real time that nothing on the screen moved. The Bridge exploded in a gigantic spark of clean, pure lightning.

A shape emerged.

A face.

With a long, crinkled snout, cracked and torn lips peeled back from broken and screaming teeth.

A wild tousel of matted, ripped hair.

Bleeding eyes, black as hatred and deep as hell.

Dimitriou gasped. Horror cascaded through him.

The demon floated, flew, separated by tendrils from the eruption of filthy light and grew as it raced, in a silent scream of madness. Long, sharp and arthritic claws opened either side of the face and both men flinched back as the hounds face engulfed the camera, which jolted visibly, the image of the Bridge shaking wildly, and was cut off, leaving a screen of fuzz.

The duration of the travel of the hell-face was one second.

XI

Colours and images swam before Dale's eyes. The Bridge was a tangible shape, and as he turned his head he saw the arches passing in front of his field of vision, fuzzy bands of colour on a black background, and from them came transmissions, emanations, audible in the earphones as waves of static.

"Anything?" came Dr Hacker's voice behind him. Doctors, he thought, I'm hanging around too many doctors. My life right now is one doctor after another.

Although his psychiatrist he didn't mind seeing at all.

They'd seen each other again the previous night and called each other several times through the day. Dale had gone to a shop front florist

and paid \$55 for two roses in a plastic tube to send to Vicki's office, passing a flower stand ten minutes later with bunches of roses for \$12, free delivery anywhere in the metropolitan area. Nonetheless, he understood how the term 'falling' in love came to be. Every second that ticked by, he fell further under her spell. Falling through clouds and pockets of sweet warm air.

He couldn't decide if he saw her as his doctor, who'd become his lover, or his lover who just happened to be his doctor.

But last night it hadn't mattered. He'd been a bit embarrassed by the size and state of his flat - it suddenly seemed like a disabled person's unit like he'd been so used to. He was sure she'd be used to a significantly more opulent lifestyle. She'd only laughed and said she didn't care about his place, as long as he was there and the bed was springy.

Despite her obvious power, maturity and influence, she just seemed like some impressionable young girl who had lost all sight of the world through her infatuation with him. There wasn't a shred of judgement in her, and it reminded him why he had been so comfortable with her from the start.

They'd stood in the middle of the floor kissing feverishly while they undressed each other, and climbed into the thin single bed, where he'd laid above her naked body, his arms lovingly around her shoulders, and he'd watched her face, eyes closed, open mouthed, as she fumbled to grip the window sill on one side, the safety bar on the other.

And she'd dragged his face to hers, kissing him and biting him urgently, as if she wanted to consume him, locking her lips and tongue to his and rolling her head erotically, not at all how he imagined a professional woman - a doctor! - would kiss, whispering in his ear that she wanted to watch him come.

And they'd lain together for hours afterward, the remains of the dinner strewn across the dining table, snuggling close, kissing slowly, playfully biting each other, crushing themselves together, never close enough.

He was suddenly aware that his heart was beating, crashing against the inside of his ribs, and he couldn't help grinning to himself. Did falling in love increase blood sugar levels?

"Dale?" came Dr Hacker's voice from behind him.

"Sorry," he apologised, wondering how long he'd been daydreaming, "No, nothing yet."

"Keep watching. And listen for something other than static." Tim said, kneeling beside him and adjusting a dial on the terminal.

It was a small device the size of a lap-top computer, and Tim was monitoring and recording what Dale was detecting on its switchboard.

The terminal was hooked up to the small power transformer unit, which produced a series of wires.

Some were hooked up to a set of stereo headphones over Dale's head, other were plugged into the front of an optic unit, a big, wraparound machine that covered Dale's eyes like a pair of oversized sunglasses. The front of the unit was covered with sensors and detectors. They drew an infra-red picture of what Dale was looking at and made it visual. The effect was that of a virtual reality display.

The traffic roared past them, oblivious, a vein in the heart beat and blood line of the city, with no regard for the two men who stood just near the southbound toll gates, cameras and machine set up around them. They merely looked like a pair of surveyors.

Tim's wristwatch beeped. He looked at the time and reached across to the IF meter, consulting the control panel and changing the meter to detect another field. The pattern being drawn by the ink pens along the ticker tapes changed shape and colour. He also moved the camcorder to point at the next sector of the Bridge along before turning his attention back to Dale.

Dale watched the iron arches and the road, immobile. Nothing else. Occasional there were bursts of light from an accelerating car or a passing pedestrian, like prominences from the surface of the sun.

Suddenly there was something else. Out of place. And it was several seconds before he could see it. With every car that passed, there was the sound of it passing him, from outside, beyond the head set, and the association between the distance in his view and the apparent distance of the sound.

But now a heavy block shape approached. A bus.

There was no sound.

"Can you hear that bus?" He asked Tim, pointing to it, seeing the green smudge of light that was his arm. Both men realised the seriousness at once.

"There's no bus there, Dale," Tim said hurriedly. He put the terminal in Dale's hands and said "Keep talking."

The IF meter, set up nearby, was tuned to Alpha radiation, showing a picture of the Bridge, glowing with a faint yellow hue. Tim hurriedly flicked it back to infra-red. There was a maniacal scratching from below as the ink pens went crazy on the ticker tapes. The Bridge appeared in the same fuzzy colours that it seemed through Dale's optical unit. And unmistakable was the looming shape of the bus, coming down the road and only now beginning to veer across in front of them. Tim leaned aside and looked desperately through the viewfinder of the camcorder to no avail, greeted only with the sight of the midday city traffic going orderly back and forth.

"Christ, it's going to hit!" Dale said urgently, and Tim looked back at the LCD screen on the IF meter in time to see the blurry image of the bus lurch across the median strip and plough into an oncoming vehicle right ahead of them.

A lightning bolt of crushing fear froze Tim's limbs. The smashed car, spinning out of control, was careening roof over tyres towards them. His last movement was to draw impotently back and watch the real Bridge, still and threatless.

Dale shrieked and clapped his hands over the optic sensor.

In split seconds, Dale's back snapped violently upright - he yelped in pain and collapsed: the newly repaired electromagnetic field detector produced an eruption of sparks and fell over backwards, crackling violently, to smash onto the footpath: and most horrible of all, Tim felt a numbing coldness flood past - no - *through* him, permeating his bones, like a spray of icy water inside his body.

On the LCD screen, the image of the bus crashed through the guard rail and disappeared out of the picture.

Tim's legs gave way dully and he collapsed onto his behind. The ink pens (after scribbling almost solid blocks of black ink) were jolting with violent pulses of energy. Tim reached across to Dale, who was sitting up, blinking in bewilderment.

"What happened to you?" he asked, gripping Dale's arm. Dale looked dumbly at him for long seconds and shrugged.

"I felt like I got speared or something, right down in my back.....it's gone now, but it really hurt."

Tim stood, looking around at his equipment and at the place where the ghostly crash had happened.

"Something serious happened here, Dale. We've got to find out if it just happened or if-" he looked down at Dale, "-it's a direct attack on you."

XII

Dale stood in the corner of the cable car platform in the south west pylon. He stared in trepidation past the metal rail at the end of the queuing area to the cable system. It was an enormous upturned bottle shape of dull grey metal, blasted with age and wind. Through its head was a two foot thick axle, and on each end was an enormous iron wheel, turning steadily in opposite directions, like monster wagon wheels on a giant phantom carriage, big enough to crush the world.

The cable rumbled ominously as it came in through the archway that led out onto the Bridge. It clanked and shook, passing over stabilising bars and transfer plates to the new line that brought the cars

over the nearest wheel and trundling slowly around the floor for access. They spun around, passed over the opposite wheel where they rejoined the main cable and went scooting out into space.

Opposite Dale, on the same back wall, was a chamber built into the corner of the platform, halfway up to the ceiling. A line of opaquely black windows gazed down onto the platform, and painted underneath them was the Cable Car logo, a comic-book Bridge with a cable car, full to bursting with happy looking native Australian animals, crossing it. Bold blue script along the bottom read **WELCOME TO THE SYDNEY HARBOUR BRIDGE CABLE CAR - PLEASE TAKE CARE.**

"Come on, then." Came Tim's voice as he walked up to Dale, handing him the bright red ticket, emblazoned with the same logo, *Admit One*, and perforated at the end, attached to the receipt for \$12.

Tim looked like a tourist from hell as they walked through the metal guide rails to the loading area. He had the camcorder and camera bag slung over his shoulder, he held the IF meter on its fold-in tripod in one hand, carried the optic unit terminal and scroller tape machine in their cases in the other, and had the optic unit, secured in its PVC zip-up bag, hooked over his elbow.

Dale took the optic unit and IF meter off him as they stepped out onto the platform. Tim smiled a brief thanks as he tried to readjust his equipment. Once they boarded the car, they would only have the ten minutes of the round trip to take their readings and gauge Dale's reaction. Tim had to monitor and adjust all the equipment, take notes, and watch for anything unusual as well. He patted his breast pocket, checking that the tiny audio recorder deck was in there.

A man in a blue polo shirt (the Cable Car logo stitched on the front), white trousers, shoes and cap, approached and mumbled for them to wait here, please, his hands up, watching for the approach of the next car.

Dale looked out through the arch. He could see the cable passing through the first arch of the Bridge outside. That seemed high enough, but then it climbed even more, higher than he could see, towards the middle arch. A car had been leaving as they had arrived, it drifted across the platform, was suddenly dragged quickly towards the archway as it transferred to the running cable, and floated off, the ground disappearing, nothing between it and.....

Dale swallowed as their car came through the archway, jolting the buffer guides as it came in and transferring to the slower loading cable. The cable car guide walked towards it and opened the door, putting his hand out to motion them in. Dale saw the bright ad on the side of the car, for Dollen & Whitfield Jewellers, as he got in. The guide slammed the door shut and Tim and Dale sat on opposite sides of the car.

"Lucky this is a weekday," Tim commented as he started to peel off the equipment and lay it next to him, "we'd be waiting forever to get one on our own."

Dale felt the car wheel around the corner, then the other, and shake terrifyingly as it passed over the gigantic drive wheel. He stared in fear at the archway as it crawled closer, and gasped when the car shook with the jolt of the cable transfer.

The car raced towards the hole, and sailed out.

"Oh Shit." Dale whispered to himself. He saw the sheer face of the pylon fall away and below him was nothing but cars and trucks, tiny plastic toys on a plastic highway. Beyond that, already over two hundred feet below, was the harbour. His stomach plunged as the car raced upwards, the angle of its travel more vertical than horizontal, towards the apex of its first tether.

"You all right?" Tim asked, looking at Dale with concern as he opened, adjusted, set running, tightened, switched on, put down and started recording.

Dale nodded, taking a deep breath. Tim activated the camcorder and audio recorder and left them together on the seat at the far end of the car, setting the camcorder to still picture, where self editing electronics would produce a clear, movement free picture when it was played back. Dale nodded, transfixed with fear at the splendour of the harbour oh, so far below. Music came over the speaker in the ceiling, and a bright, smiling game show host voice came on, one they both knew.

"Welcome to the Sydney Harbour Bridge Cable Car, the first of its kind in our beautiful city and harnessing advanced design techniques and limitless safety precautions to ensure your visit to Sydney is one you'll remember. So relax, sit back, and enjoy the splendour of wonderful Sydney.

"If you look briefly back at our point of exit, you can see the south east pylon. When the Bridge was designed back before the turn of the century, the architects wanted a symbol of growth and hope for the future, and so created -"

The voice went on, providing a backdrop that Dale could only interpret as welcome, normal, modern-day-life, where ghosts didn't roam city thoroughfares and technology didn't awaken man's most primitive fears. He took a deep breath and sighed, trying to make himself relax, like the TV celebrity had told him to.

"How's your back?" Tim said, sitting back down, looking intermittently from Dale to the car around him to the equipment, "Does it hurt?" Dale shook his head.

"Do you feel anything?" Tim continued.

Dale looked out at the city around him, the car climbing to be among its highest peaks. "Just shit scared." he smiled. Tim laughed.

The car jolted, a rumble from the roof. Dale almost screamed. His hand shot out to the pillar between the windows that ran the entire way around the car.

"It's all right," Tim said, raising his hand to calm Dale, "it's just the first arch."

The shuddering stopped and the car seemed to level out a tiny bit. Dale saw the enormous triangle of the southern arch race past and fall out of sight below.

It felt like flying. He just wished it wouldn't go so damn high. How about a nicer one, which went underneath, just above the water or something?

"- and if you look down towards the East, you can see the tiny colonial prison island Fort Denison, a stronghold for British convicts during the early stages of Australia's European occupation. Beyond that lies Garden Island, the Sydney docking yards of the Royal Australian Navy-"

Tim looked down at the display on the end of the IF meter. There was a green splodge, Dale, in the centre of the picture, fuzzing and stretching as he looked around. Tim turned the machine up towards the roof, where the mechanical system would be. The picture turned into a dancing green smear. There was so much electromagnetism among those mechanisms, he realised, that they would be useless to detect with the machine tuned to that field.

He reached down and switched it to infra-red.

The picture disappeared altogether, leaving the occasional spark and flash as heat was produced. He turned the machine back to Dale and looked out the window, waiting for something to happen, for some reading to prove out of the ordinary.

The inkpens on the scrolling tapes wavered every now and then, tiny bursts of electronic static from the car, no doubt. Tim picked up the optic unit and handed it to Dale. "Put this on and tell me everything you see, I want a running commentary."

As Dale slid the machine over his head, Tim worked at the terminal, switching from one field of detection to another.

"- the office towers of North Sydney should be clearly in sight towards the front of the car, a thriving business district in its own right, made possible by the drafting board designers and stone masons of a bygone era who crafted the first Sydney Harbour Bridge -"

"All I can see is the city," Dale said, "things going back and forth, things on the water. It's all one colour and I can't tell what they are."

"Anything weird in here?" Tim asked as he bent down to readjust the terminal.

The car rumbled around them as it raced through the sky, drowning out every other noise inside, apart from their voices. Normally the machinery could be heard whirring, clicking or humming, and so when the inkpens burst into life across the scrolling tape, neither man noticed.

Tim looked at the machine on his lap, flicking switches and turning dials. Dale faced towards Tim, at the city beyond him, searching in the LCD for something he didn't like.

"- the IDI Tower was conceived in 2005, halted by building laws and planning covenants until 2011, when construction began on the seven storeys-

The window behind Dale bulged in, the glass moving like liquid as a shape pressed from behind. Silently, the shape moulded into a head. The glass lips sneered backwards from the glass teeth, dirty and crooked, the glass eyes wild and evil. The demon behind the real world snarled silently at Tim, and turned its head to Dale, inches away. Tim, working still at the terminal, didn't see it. Dale, staring straight ahead through the tunnelled vision of the optic sensor, couldn't see the devil beside him, hidden behind the fabric of his world.

Until the hairs on his nape sprung up.

Dale slowly turned his head. Colours swam and began buzzing, flying like tendrils of flesh from somewhere off the screen. A shape formed.

He was looking into a leering, laughing skull.

Tim jumped to his feet as he heard Dale scream. Dale was leaping up as well, tearing the optic unit from his head and falling towards Tim, letting the unit clatter to the ground. Dale fell on his behind, staring in horror at the windows above the seat.

"What-" Tim began, moving towards Dale. The car began to shake as it passed below the centre apex of the Bridge and there was a bang from outside. The car lurched, jolting wildly forwards as it stopped. Tim was sent flying over Dale, crashing to the floor. Equipment clattered over or fell, rolling across the floor as the car swung. The voice-over stopped.

Dale hung on to the centre pole, his eyes wide with terror, the sensation of the swinging carriage sickening in his stomach as he imagined all those metres between the car and the road below.

The swinging gradually stopped. Tim crawled over to Dale, bending down and helping him up to lean against the seat, sitting across the floor.

"Hey," Tim began, feeling Dale's neck for a pulse. He looked up into his face. Dale was staring over Tim's shoulder, slowly shaking his head, fear on his face a frozen mask.

Tim looked over his shoulder, and standing at the end of the car was a demon.

A brown creature.

A monster. A gargoyle.

Its head bobbed as it looked at the two men and the car around it. Was it a hallucination? Did its edges swim and blur in vision, or was it as clear as the days they were born? Sparse black hair dripped sodden water, pattering onto the plastic-linoleum floor of the car. The thing chortled and growled, a deep, guttural throbbing that seemed to fill the car.

Tim fell backwards, his legs useless, his jaw slack.

The animal slashed outwards at the air, its claws leaving trails of black glitterdust in their wakes. Its head distended obscenely in a heartbeat and seemed all mouth as it bent down inches from Dale's face, bellowing and screaming, its mouth big enough now to devour Dale's head. He was showered with poison saliva, its putrid breath ruffling his hair. Dale closed his eyes against it, disbelieving.

The thing sent its arm plunging up into the roof, the white plastic of the inner layer seeming to suck and stick to the arm, the glued edges of the wall of Dale and Tim's world as it was pierced. The black face rolled, snarling and showing its teeth, dripping a grey mucous, and the arm came tearing back down, producing a crack of sparks. The roof panel caved in, exposing the now seared and twisted remains of the mechanical system, and the car lurched downward several agonising feet, spilling at one end.

The thing bellowed, turned and flung itself at the end of the carriage behind it, disappearing in the explosion of glass and metal that rang out and smashed the entire end wall away, showering debris into the air outside.

A piercing wind screeched into and throughout the car, whipping Dale and Tim mercilessly. The car pitched downwards at the smashed end, sending Dale sliding towards the gaping hole.

He shrieked and struck out at the edge of the seat, digging his nails into the material, barely gaining hold, so close to the edge that he looked down to see the road and the cars (like bugs, now) far, so far below. The distance loomed at him, suddenly feeling like he was in midair, plunging towards an open grass area and a strip of hard asphalt running through it, falling and flailing helplessly until he hit the ground hard enough to hear himself splatter. Oh Christ, he prayed, please, if I live now, I know this will haunt me for the rest of my life in dreams.

Hanging, too terrified to move in case he broke his already fragile (and slipping) grip, on the teetering edge of the swinging car, screaming for his life, Dale knew he would never sleep again.

Tim could see the sort of hold Dale had where he had stopped. He had jammed his shoulders against the edges of the seats, reaching over his shoulder and clutching desperately at the seats edge. His feet were clamped hard on the floor of the car, trying to keep him from slipping. Tim knew if he didn't drag Dale back now, he would die.

He slid down to the centre of the car and grabbed the pole, holding fast with one hand and reaching with the other.

"Dale," he said calmly, "grab my hand." Dale's head snapped around at the sound of Tim's voice. He carefully let go with one hand and reached back, their fingers barely brushing.

There was a loud scuff as Dale's left foot lost its grip and slipped across the floor. Surpassing his own endurance, Tim grimaced, reaching just those last.....few.....millimetres. He snatched Dale's hand and dragged with all his might.

Dale let go of the seats and grabbed at Tim with both hands, looking pleadingly at him. His body slid half out of the car, his legs dangling, kicking and struggling to push himself in. He screamed as he felt the cold wind whip his lower half.

"Don't, Tim," he pleaded, his eyes like saucers, "please don't let me fall."

Tim yelled in pain as he dragged Dale towards him. He felt Dale's hand grappling for his shirt lapels and then his belt, and he pushed Dale over the top of him until he could reach the rail, which he wrapped both arms around. Tim collapsed back to the floor, panting from the effort. He heard Dale hitching in terrified breaths that were gradually easing.

Something shrieked from above and the car dipped down even more, the equipment and cases rolling or sliding out in a shower of debris. Tim looked at the ceiling, to the panel that had been torn open from the netherworld.

"We've got to get to the roof." he said, "We can climb the support and get down the shafts of the arch."

"Outside?" Dale repeated in toneless fear, "How will we get down?"

"I studied every inch of this Bridge for my preparations to this case, Dale," Tim reminded him, standing up at the crazy angle of the floor and beginning to inch his way up the pole to the ceiling panel, where the smoking innards of the motor were, "there are maintenance stairways inside the diagonal shafts and ladders right down to the street in the vertical shaft."

The idea of climbing by ladder all the way to the Port Jackson Highway from the apex of the central support made Dale's bones tingle. The thought of going outside, even sticking his head up through that roof

made his skin crawl. But he knew, with some shred of reason, that this cable car was going to -

He made his mind close off to any possibility, except getting out.

Tim grasped the pole, hefted himself into the air and bashed at the motor housing panel with his feet. On the third kick, the housing and all the innards burst outwards from the force of his kick, clattering down the roof and falling past the hole at the end.

Tim stuck his head through. There was only the bolt and cable-tie system that joined the support shaft to the cable a few feet above, covered with a small metal half-hood.

He looked back into the car to tell Dale to stand so he could help him to the roof when his eyes fell upon the camcorder, audio unit and IF meter sitting perched on the seat where he'd left them.

Every piece of information connected with this incredible ordeal would be recorded on those pieces of machinery.

Stopping or returning to save them could mean both their lives.

"All right," he said, "reach back to the seat and throw the stuff up to me." Dale looked at the equipment on the seat and started to climb the floor (it was getting close to forty five degrees now) towards the equipment. He grasped the camcorder by the strap and carefully hoisted it up to Tim, who hooked it securely over his shoulder, ejecting the tape and buttoning it in his breast pocket.

Dale put the audio unit in his pants pocket and threw up the IF meter, which Tim strapped over the other shoulder. There was a crack beside him and something shot past, gouging a track across his cheek. The car lurched downwards another few terrifying degrees. Dale yelled. The thing had been a bolt, Tim realised. Whatever was doing this was untying the system of steel that held the car up, tortuously, step by step.

"All right, come on." he said, reaching down to Dale, not daring tell him about the bolt. Dale started along the pole, grasped Tim's hand, and dragged himself through the hole until they were both sitting on the roof, holding on by use of various panel and levers.

"We have to slowly stand and reach the underside of the shaft." Tim yelled over the wind swirling around them. Above them, encasing the shaft, was the steel framework with the pyramidical nose-cone and the Australian flag flapping in the wind above. Dale followed the shaft down it's diagonal travel until his eyes fell on a black and yellow panel with the words **ENTRY - MAINTENANCE ACCESS** in red. It was about five metres down the shaft, and the only way to reach it was to climb - forty five degrees upside down - along the ladder to the door. His heart plunged and he closed his eyes, gulping.

I am sitting, for Gods sake, on top of a smashed cable car ride which is about to fall from under me, with the southern hemisphere's

biggest English-speaking city buzzing and breathing with life all around me.

I am going to die here.

"Let's go. Stand carefully." Tim said, steadily getting to his knees and reaching along the thin support shaft of the car, "I want us both off this." He stood his full height and reached up to the ladder, dragging himself up and hooking his legs over the rungs, fully and terrifyingly aware now that there was *nothing* under him.

Dale reached up the support and grasped a rung firmly with both hands. Not more than a second later there was a *plink* below him and the car was gone, his feet dangling. He screamed in fear, hanging by his already sweat-slicked hands, watching the car fall away below.

It fell in a kind of dreamy, drifting slow motion, and when it hit the cross-shaft of the arch, the base of the giant triangle, and there was a chorus of exploding glass and rending metal as it wrapped around the shaft, sending a waterfall of deadly glass and panels falling to the road. It broke in two and kept falling, in pieces, dwindling away as it fell.

Dale saw it erupt in a million pieces across the hard road far below, only metres from where cars had been passing, and heard the sound of the crash and the blare of horns and screeching tyres drift up to him.

He desperately swung himself upwards and hooked both knees over another rung, pressing his forehead to the cold metal and wiping his hands across his shirt before holding again.

"Dale," Tim's voice came screaming from below, over the wind, "it's all right. You're safe. Start to come down towards me. Follow me and I'll let us into the maintenance stairs.....Dale?"

"I'm all right." he shouted as strongly as he could, taking several deep breaths before feeling tentatively for the next rung down, trying not to think of the tremendous distance below him.

Tim stared straight up at the bronze steel of the shaft, driving all his concentration into putting one foot down to the next rung of the service ladder. He only hoped Dale could pull it together too. If he unravelled anywhere through this ordeal (or entire parapsychological study) it would be here.

"You all right?" Tim shouted.

"Yeah." Dale yelled back. He felt below for the next rung, and barely felt his other foot slip from its hold. He shrieked as he swung outwards, his arms jolting painfully, struggling to kick his legs back up to the rungs. Jesus Christ, his mind screamed, you were holding on by one single metal bar then. For God's sake be careful.

He hooked his feet over the rung and panted, his heart a freight train through his chest, pressing his face against the cold rungs again, squeezing his eyes closed.

"Tim," he said, having to force the words from himself, "I don't think I can go on."

"Of course you can," the scientist lied from below, "look, I'm at the door already." Tim looked up from the maintenance door, still three metres below him, to Dale. He was hugging the rungs of the upside down ladder, his face a grimace of terror, his eyes closed.

Come on, Timmy, he told himself, move it. Get that door open now, because that's the only thing that'll unfreeze him.

Tim climbed down faster, his feet slipping, his hands sweaty and barely holding on, until the yellow and black warning stripes appeared above him.

He searched frantically around the edges for the control panel. It was a red square down the opposite end of the panel with a bright yellow lever, marked with 'open/close'. Tim shoved it downward with his foot. The panel jolted and rose up a few inches into the shaft.

Unlike the fully manual maintenance door on the northern arch that had been a piece of the undoing of Llewelyn Price, the maintenance access on the centre arch of the Bridge worked automatically.

The access panel slowly began to roll upwards inside the shaft. Tim realised with a lightning bolt of fear what was happening. The panel, with the section of the ladder, would retract up the shaft while it peeled him off it to fall to his death.

The maintenance bed! That was were you opened the panel from, not hanging like a fly onto the panel itself. The same kind of mesh hammock that poor idiot had fallen off a few days ago. He cursed his own stupidity. If nobody suspected something was wrong here before, Tim mused in terror, they will now. Mine is going to be the second death in almost as many days.

"Oh no." he whispered to himself, letting go with his legs and trying to climb, hand over hand, down the ladder as it disappeared above him so he could grab hold of the inside of the entrance.

The panel dragged him closer to the lip of the hole, wailing and pleading to climb faster (although when he got to the end of the section of ladder on the entry panel he had no further plan).

His wrist was trapped for an awful second as the rung he was grasping slid behind the outside of the shaft. He reached out wildly, knowing he was millimetres away from a broken wrist or a long, lonely plummet to the asphalt, grabbing the inside of the hole and letting the panel go as it disappeared. He dangled, swinging wildly, from the hatch as he kicked and dragged himself up inside, turning around and sticking his head back through to see Dale inching towards him, only a few meters away.

"Come on." Tim whispered a silent encouragement. When Dale's foot was within reach, he reached out and encircled the ankle.

"I've got you." he yelled, "just climb down a bit further and I can pull you in." Dale inched further down until they both realised that he wouldn't be able to get in from the angle of his climb.

"Dale," Tim said, as encouragingly as he could, "you've got to let go. You're going to have to let me drag you up."

Dale's stomach flipped over and over again. Hang upside down at this height while his only hold was someone gripping his ankle? That was worse even than holding a single rung of the ladder.

"No way Tim." he said, "I'll make it in." He climbed down a few more precious inches, trying to bend his knee back the wrong way to grip the inside of the hole while Tim pulled him in.

"Dale, let go, you're not going to make it this way. You'll slip."

And then, he did slip.

He felt his body swing downwards until he was staring at the road below him, and it was clear enough to begin streaking up towards him while he kicked his limbs helplessly. His heart seemed to swell and fall into his throat. All he could feel was the roaring wind, trying to pluck him from the shaft, and the vice-like grip around his ankle.

Tim strained to pull Dale up, wrapping his arm around Dale's knees, grabbing his belt, his collar, and dragging his frozen body inside.

Dale's eyes were closed, his face ashen white.

"Dale." Tim said, rolling him over as he pulled the lever down and the entrance panel began to grumble back into place. He felt for Dale's pulse. It was there, intermittent and weak. After hanging upside down from a height of two hundred feet, Tim expected to feel Dale's heart crashing in his chest like a battering ram. Unless.....

Unless he was on the verge of cardiac arrest.

The panel clanked back into the place and the sunlight from outside was cut off. Tim and Dale sat inside the arch.

Tim blocked Dale's nose, his face cold and drained of blood, and sealed Dale's mouth with his, blowing steadily, lowering his ear to Dale's mouth, watching his chest. He pressed his mouth to Dale's again and blew in a long stream.

"Come on, Dale."

A low rumble came from down the tunnel. At the top end, a few metres above, it bent and disappeared, on its way down the opposite diagonal. But behind them, past the tiny service staircase that led up through the other hatch to the shaft outside, the tunnel stabbed down into darkness, a long, skinny shaft of shadows, barely lit by tiny service lamps every ten metres or so. The growl echoed up and down the shaft, not from any train or car of metal fatigue, it was the snarling from the dripping

jaws of some animal. A gigantic animal, lumbering towards them up the shaft.

Tim tried to ignore the skin crawling up and down his back and returned to Dale, blowing more air into his mouth. There was a bark from behind him, low down and ominous. Tim spun around in terror. The shaft behind him was filled with drifting tendrils of light, dirty and yellow. They dissolved and moulded into cackling faces, faces of the dead and dying, of skulls and hounds and demons, drifting and climbing steadily towards him.

"Holy shit." he hissed, raising the IF meter at them and switching it on to record and display.

He almost fainted.

The LCD screen showed perfectly clear outlines of people. Limping, crawling, dragging themselves through a tunnel from hell, filthy water dribbling down its slimy, mossy walls, reaching out, calling, their faces peeled and bloody, limbs smashed, wounds pumping blood.

Holy Christ, it was the most vivid paranormal activity he had ever seen. *Anyone* had ever seen! He was sitting with an unconscious man watching a haunting. One on a major scale.

Hauntings, he made himself remember, happen around places where a certain thing happened in the past. Events are somehow recorded on a great universal video machine and played back every now and again in the real world, a picture superimposed on our plane of existence. They aren't usually centred around the living, and they almost never influence or overcome the laws of physics as we know them.

Except that a greasy brown dragon just tried to throw you out of a moving cable car, something reminded him. And now, there was an enormous wild beast roaring as it crawled up a two metre tunnel towards you and legions of the undead were crawling out of hell only a few metres away.

He willed himself to remember what he'd learned. He'd seen hauntings before. He'd recorded old pianos moving by themselves and floorboards creaking in abandoned houses, he'd even captured ghostly figures moving between rooms from high intensity ultraviolet camera. He knew they didn't attack, they didn't seek. They weren't really there. They were re-runs of history. They were damned scary, but they didn't attack people.

But now they were. These dead men and women were yowling through broken heads, coming up to get him.

Panting in fear, he hooked his arm under Dale's armpits and across his chest and dragged him to the stairs, struggling to pull him up.

He shoved his back against the top hatch, feeling it spring open, letting sunlight and wind roar in. He laid Dale on the stairs and looked tentatively back down the shaft, searching for whatever was there.

Nothing. Tim sighed and pulled himself back up.

He screamed. Dale was dead.

Wounds had been opened all over his body, blood splattered on the shaft stairs underneath him. The left side of his head was caved in, his arm was split and hanging by a twine of skin, his purple tongue lolled, his mouth and eyes steadily exhumed black oily blood.

Tim turned away and heard an obscene belch surge out of his throat as he vomited the contents of his stomach across the stairs, feeling wave after wave of nausea pass over him, each one prompting his stomach to squeeze painfully, heaving more up his burning throat.

Behind him, the corpse of Dale Milling sat up, hissed through its open mouth and blade sharp teeth, and clapped a smashed hand on Tim's shoulder.

Tim spun around, slipping on the stairs and falling in his own vomit, feeling it squelch through his hand and under the seat of his pants.

Dale sat up, panting lightly, alive and in one piece. He looked at Tim in alarm. "What happened." he said, "How did we get out here?"

Tim let his head fall to his knee, panting. He sighed, looking down the shaft. It extended down at least forty metres until it became the vertical shaft that held the whole arch up. There was a thin set of stairs down to there, and a maintenance ladder to the road, a climb of another forty metres.

"Who wants to go first?" Tim asked Dale. Dale shrugged and stood up, looking nervously down the shaft. He started down. Tim stopped him by putting his hand on Dale's chest and said deliberately

"Don't let go of the hand rail for anything." Dale looked down at the four foot rail running down the left hand side of the stairs, nodded and started slowly down. Tim stood up, cursing the stinking stain on his pants and wiping the puke off his hand on the edge of step, scraping half digested chunks from between his fingers. He hefted the equipment over his shoulders (Damned lucky that shit was all insured) and started down after Dale.

The stairs were small and tricky to manipulate. Dale turned around to tell Tim so, and his legs nearly gave way.

He was walking across a grey metal surface, not the bronze-steel of the new Bridge, but the oceany grey of the old one.

Turning back to the front in shock, he saw that he was less than two feet from the edge of the upper eastern arch.

The same arch, the same crisscross framework inside the main arch, the same vertical supports, the old black Bradfield Highway instead

of the new light grey concrete of the Port Jackson Highway. His ears tingled and hairs stood up and down in a wave from the top of his buttocks to the top of his head. He felt his fists clench and stood, fixed to the spot, fighting the terror and the urge to scream

- the urge to run to the edge and hurl yourself off this abomination, this corpse -

Tim was nowhere to be found. Only the sounds of traffic below and construction clanging out from somewhere in North Sydney could be heard.

The city's the same, he thought, *the city of today, not of nineteen years ago when the Bridge fell down!* There was the IDI tower nestled inside Farm Cove, the access Bridge spanning the water for two hundred metres from the Botanical Gardens, Circular Quay railway station and the Cahill expressway were buried underground as they had been for ten years, the glass rooves of the Quay sparkling in the sun, and the forty storey ABB house at the bottom of North Sydney.

And yet here is the *old* Bridge. Proof already that it is a hallucination.

Dale reached down and ran his fingers across the rough grey iron, knowing he was really, somewhere, feeling smooth, sleek, sun-heated steel. He stood up, drawing his hand away in revulsion, and waiting patiently for the vision to stop.

They've got me up here, he thought to himself, they know they have. But how do I get down?

There was a crash from his right, towards the north. Dale clapped his hands over his ears and clenched his teeth, tears springing to his eyes in determination, to drive whatever had him out.

Beams had fallen loose from inside the arch and were falling, crashing as they went, through the system of struts and falling to the road. The arch shook underneath him, spilling him from his feet. He struggled to a kneeling position. The arch was shaking, beams falling loose, the arch tearing itself in two. Dale screamed out, all thought of hallucination or haunting ripped from his mind.

The Bridge was falling, and somehow he had gotten trapped *standing on top of it*.

His gaze was drawn downward. To a tiny figure running along the path, a man running for his life. A young man, wearing a white long sleeved shirt, sleeves rolled up, beige pants and tan shoes, his tie flapping in the wind over his shoulder as he ran for his life. He turned to look back up towards Dale, who jolted as if struck.

It was him! He was watching himself as he ran that fateful stretch.

"Stop!" he screamed to the boy, knowing what awaited him at the end. The arch clanged, throwing him in the air for a second. He looked

back. Pieces of metal were blowing up and flying in shards into the air, in a cyclone blast towards him, the arch splitting in two in their wake, only twenty or fifteen metres behind now. But not just falling apart and plummeting to the ground. *Exploding*, as if explosives were going off in a series along the arches, sending fragments flying outwards. Dale stood, despite the shaking, found his footing, and ran.

XIV

A metal scream tore the air from above, ringing out all over the city, a sound bigger than the city itself, and the building-train plummeted past, its short crane spinning wildly. Dale didn't listen for the crash as it erupted across the water, but something froze him. His soles scraped along the gravel-doused concrete of the path. Tears sprang into his eyes as he heard the first call.

A twinge broke out in his neck, he turned his head so hard. Four people, two yuppie girls, a jogger and a skinhead kid were screaming, pleading with him to run.

The path upended, throwing him forward. He saw the hole open as the path split into smithereens and toppled into it, tearing his fingers trying to stop himself.

The iron of the below-road supports were all around him, and he felt warm air lifting from below. He felt for a second he could reach out and grasp them, but could only freeze. He was terribly conscious for a split second of having his arms and legs upturned like a skydiver would. And boy, was he going to go for a dive now.

He looked once at the tiny strip of road, George Street, way down there on the grass, and then it seemed to call him, and he started to plummet, levels of buildings a blur racing past, the first treetops, the stone pillars of the Bridge pylons, the road grew, and grew, he felt an explosion of warmth inside his pants, he felt his screaming voice, high, like a child's, burning his throat, he twisted midair as the road bore up on him and heard a sound like meat on a chopping board when he hit. He felt bones snap and organs split throughout his body, and he was there, watching himself as he rolled over, blood beginning to pump through his lips, onto his back, his hands flailing weakly, hitching moaning breaths in and out of his lungs, his leg drawing involuntarily up and then kicking out again, as if still trying to take the step that would've saved him.

"Dale, for Christs sake, please wake up!" Tim said, slapping his cheek lightly. Dale's eyes snapped open and he sprang up to a sitting position, feeling the protest as the mechanics of the brace fought indignantly to meet the demands of his muscles. He was panting heavily,

a dribble of spit falling from his mouth. Tim grabbed his shoulders and said quietly

"What happened to you? Where did you go?" Dale looked around himself. They were on the staircase, on top of the steel-bronze diagonal of the Macquarie Phillip Bridge.

"I fell again,....." he said, his voice cracking, "I was there on that day it happened, and I fell again. I knew I was going to, I could see myself, but I couldn't stop. I had to get to safety." Tim looked into Dale's face. He had it together now, but something had given him a scare.

As he helped Dale up, he had an odd thought, of the nightmare of experimentation, testing and reasoning that would uncover what they'd both witnessed in the last twenty minutes. They started down the staircase together.

Tim's mind reeled. It was the clearest and most succinct display of supernatural occurrences he had ever witnessed, or read about. He knew every crackpot ghost story, poltergeist intrusion, haunting, psychic power, telekinetic ability and outright unexplained haunting ever documented. None were as blatant or as outright dangerous as this. Trying to stay objective, it looked painfully like Dale Milling had been singled out from beyond. Hopefully the tapes and IF readings would give him something big.

Parapsychology was a science, as its rational beginnings. Instead of blessing a room or praying to a bleeding picture of Christ or a crying statue of the Virgin Mary, parapsychologists recorded, watched and attempted to explain rationally, the same way mankind once tried to explain the pinpoints of light in the sky when the sun finished its days journey. But the problem facing the study of parapsychology was the lack of subject matter. The stars came out every night, giving man half his life to work them out. Ninety nine percent of paranormal activity was household noises, imagination or hoax, and those that defied explanation were seldom clear or reliable enough to analyse with any certainty.

The events he had just witnessed, and their subsequent analysis, could provide information to finally explain mankind oldest fear, return from the dead.

Dale was climbing carefully over the edge of the diagonal now, looking straight at Tim so he wouldn't look down the sheer tubular face of the shaft as it plunged thirty seven metres down. For the first time, Tim tried to imagine what all this was doing to the poor guy.

What cost knowledge? The wilful destruction of one man's sanity? It was the oldest question facing science. What did we have to pay for our learning? In order to test vaccines, did we have to breed puppies in two foot cages and watch them slowly die of rabies or AIDS? To produce shampoo that wouldn't burn your little boy or girls eyes, did we have to

put a rabbit in a clamp and lock its lids open, applying the soap until the animal was painfully blinded?

To find out what a ghost is, Tim thought, watching as Dale fearfully began to descend, do I have to watch you die? You fell off this Bridge, that was bad enough, that's enough for anyone to live with, now we're prodding you with recorders and counselling and brain scans and dragging you back out here to open your mind to horrors so bad they coalesced and became real!

There! There was the key to the entire case. If hauntings were truly pictures captured on film for eternal playback, what trigger played them selectively? Why did I see everything he did in that cable car? Why did I hear that monster that was crawling up the pipe? Why did it take him off on a magical mystery tour to when he was nineteen for it to all happen again? What was it Dr Holt had reported? She had stood oblivious throughout the whole thing, and saw one single beam crash to the road when it was all over.

And another thing, even more disturbing than everything else he had come up against so far. Hauntings, if they truly were replays of history, were no more effective than a film showing in a cinema. The actors aren't really there, behind the screen, playing it over and over for a new audience. It's been done, it's happened, and been recorded for playback. At the height of some catastrophe or crisis, that was how hauntings happened.

But parapsychology itself had no scientific evidence why hauntings resurrect certain events, but large scale suffering, death or injustice seemed to be the forerunner. Tim had travelled to a quarry in Staffordshire, England, only three years ago to investigate a ghost haunting the site.

Apparently a middle aged worker had been digging when a mud wall collapsed on top of him, smothering him to death. Every evening at seven fourteen, there emerged the same scream of terror that his co-workers heard on the night. Tim had set up his equipment at the edges of the quarry, every grain of dirt and breath of wind under scrutiny, and at 19:13'44"93 hours, a sudden gurgling shriek pierced the night, clear as a bell, from the middle of the quarry, where the remains of the mud wall had crumbled into dust. Tim had recorded the sound over and over, every night on the dot, but never uncovered any visual evidence. The recording, stringently analysed at the Middlesex University department of Audio Engineering, was proven to be a genuine human voice with no evidence of reproduction. Tim closed the investigation with a status of Singular Apparitional Haunting.

But he was damned if he had just witnessed an apparitional haunting. The movie had come to life. A beast had attacked them with

plain intent to harm, and again they had been what Tim could only describe as physically threatened by the presence that approached through the shaft. They'd been stalked, by ghosts.

Good Lord, he said to himself as he hefted himself over the top rungs of the ladder and tried not to look down, I have learnt things today that could destroy everything this science has built up. Parapsychology could be the key to unlocking the door to other times, other dimensions, where people the same as us coexist in the same physical space and suffer enough to use their energy to break through.

His mind reeled, but he closed it off. He was still hundreds of feet in their air with a hallucinatory ex-paraplegic. Leave the analysis to later Timothy, when you can close yourself in the lab with a few tinnies and not worry about the swaying ladder you're holding onto and the terrifying drop below.

"How're you going down there?" he called down to Dale, looking down past his shoulder, feeling a sudden wave of nausea when he saw just *how* high up they were. Dale was staring straight ahead, at the bronze coloured shaft as he made his painfully careful way down.

He glanced up. "Fine."

"Just keep looking straight ahead," Tim said encouragingly, trying to keep the wavering out of his voice, "put one foot down and then the other and before you know it you'll-"

A hammering sound cut him off. From above. Too quiet for Dale to hear above the wind, almost too quiet for him to hear. Tim moved to the edge of the ladder and leaned outwards to where he could just peek around the edge of the tubular arch, holding on by one hand and one foot, his heart leaping into his throat. He searched around the arch above him, where the great diagonals met in the middle. His eyes came slowly down the shaft towards him, and he stopped dead.

"Holy God." he whispered urgently, reaching carefully for the IF meter over his shoulder. He slid the strap down his arm, hugging the ladder like some protective lover, and raised it to his face, switching it on with his teeth and flicking the E.M. field.

The maintenance panel, where they had crawled into the shaft after their first frightening climb downwards, hanging upside down like monkeys, was opening, and closing, and opening again. Tim squinted at the panel, trying to see anything that could tell him something. The yellow and black stripes of the panel just rolled back into the shaft with a clap, then rolled back again. Something was up there opening and closing the hatch.

Through the wonder of witnessing the paranormal, reason broke through. He had to see if it was electrical or manual. If the lever to open the panel wasn't moving, it was in the electrical system and could be a

short after all the electromagnetic activity. If the handle was moving, the panel was being manipulated outside the system of the Bridge itself.

Tim hooked the IF meter over his shoulder and reached for the camcorder over the other, switching it on with his tongue and zooming hurriedly in on the panel.

Something wiry crawled underneath the skin of the back of Tim's neck. The lever was moving, some phantom hand dragging it back and forth. Up close, he could see it wasn't in perfect sequence as an electrical fault would be, producing intermittent bursts at regular intervals.

He exclaimed under his breath and leaned back into the middle of the ladder to reach for the tape in his breast pocket, and a slimy brown claw closed around the camcorder inches from his face. The air seemed to distend and stretch, the world took on a fuzzy, dim quality. A vile smell assailed his nostrils.

Tim turned into the open mouth of the cable car monster, its teeth bloody and chipped. Tim didn't feel an involuntary burst of urine. The thing snarled like a big friendly dog giving a patient warning. He didn't even have the mental capacity left over and above his terror to realise that it was floating in midair.

(What *species* is it? If it utilises our laws of physics and chemical biology it must be the genus of some animal!)

The thing slid the camcorder off Tim's hand and closed its fist around it. The camera exploded in a thousand shards of plastic and metal, pieces showering and embedding in Tim's face and neck.

He yelped in pain and rubbed at his face, trying to scrape away the hundreds of tiny barbs he could feel in him.

He looked back towards the thing in fear. Gone.

Tim looked down to see small black and silver shapes falling away from him, spinning over and over in the wind, clattering against the shaft amid a litter of tiny plastic rain, the remains of the camcorder.

BOOK 5

I

Dr Barry Paul heard the seven thirty news that Friday morning, the 3rd, driving south across Captain Cook Bridge on his way to work. He'd been so immersed in work the previous day he hadn't even had time to think, trying to catch up with all the paperwork he had building up from a week of participating in a field investigation that subsequently led to a death and a string of police interviews and statements. Fortunately, there weren't many rescheduled appointments for the day. He'd managed to delay most of them until after the weekend.

The news told him about the Ukraine diplomat whose Air Force jet had been shot down on its way to Moscow for peace talks in the Kremlin. An agreement for a cease fire had been formulated, and the man was hailed throughout the world as a hero for the onset of democracy. He had been on his way to discuss terms and negotiate with the Russian President. The militant remnants of the KGB and several radical Communist groups had already been blamed, and the peacekeepers mourned, knowing that there was little hope now for Ukraine of independence from the poverty of the Russian state.

That was the top story around the world, and so being, it pushed the top local story down a slot. When Barry heard it, he cursed under his breath. This bloody thing had gotten too big.

"And in local news, the Sydney Harbour Bridge was closed to all rail and road traffic from midnight last night to undergo stringent safety testing throughout the day. The Bridge is scheduled to re-open at midnight tonight, examiners from the Public Works Dept and independents hoping to rush the investigation through to avoid two days of the sort of chaos the Sydney County Council is expecting this morning."

"The investigation comes after a carriage from the Bridge cable car system apparently broke loose from the cable and its moorings, damaging several cars as it fell to the highway below. Nobody was injured, but Mr Oliver Carlden, presiding chairman of Darby, Hillman and Associates solicitors, warns that we were only lucky....."

An old, educated male voice came on: *"It was very fortunate that this accident did not occur during peak hour, and more importantly, that the carriage was empty. There were tourists and Bridge commuters in three of the other cars at the time, and it could've been one of them that fell....."*

"Mr Carlden," the newsreader continued, "whose legal firm only this week instigated an injunction on the Bridge following the death of an engineer testing the works on Monday, has said in his official statement that he believed the County Council to be 'solely responsible for unsafe practises, materials and test procedures used during and since"

construction, and therefore chief perpetrators in the grossest case of corporate negligence this country has ever seen.' The statement has been issued to police, the Sydney County Council, and WACE Construction Co, who designed and built the Bridge during the late 1990's.

"State transit is running extra hydrofoils and ferries to all points across the harbour, and motorists are advised to use caution and be patient using the Harbour Tunnel."

Barry had felt a thud inside his head that grew louder with each word of the news story. The thud of conflicting emotions. The first, undeniably, was relief. The fact that the Bridge had closed down seemed to make tangible the fact that he had no part in the whole mess any more. Whereas before, he had been the one to uncover the plague of radiation and metallurgy trouble. It had grown in his head until he thought it would burst.

But now, after two days of grilling interviews and statements by police and solicitors, he seemed to have been acquitted of something. Involvement, maybe, or maybe blame - at unearthing Australia's most disastrous building job, in a time when Sydney had more important things to worry about. The media were too gleefully reporting the escalating temperatures that were causing residents and crops in the far west to suffer drought and heat exhaustion, and the city council was too short of money as it still tried to fill the gaps in the city economy recession had created.

Barry wondered what sort of situation Albert Dimitriou faced. Between all the statements and analyses, he hadn't had time to catch up with the investigator since the tragedy of the workers death the Wednesday before.

If Barry knew anything about investigation politics, he supposed Albert had been put through the same stringent cross examination, every ounce of information extracted from him, and the police force and state courts had taken his bosses and some high priced consulting firms behind closed doors while Albert was given a handshake, a thank you, and re-assigned to spying on a wife basher or a secretary who was doing more than making tea and taking letters.

Barry doubted that an investigator in a medium sized private company would have much more clout than a suburban orthopaedic specialist when the situation became *this* serious.

Still, he wasn't out of it all completely, he thought with a smirk. I still hold an ace. If I'm the beach comber, Dale is the metal detector. The sudden thought of Dale made his grin disappear. He couldn't imagine what all this was doing to his friend. And he didn't agree with all these doctors and psychiatrists poking and prodding and testing his every

reaction. They'd even taken him onto the Bridge, and more than once he'd come out hurt.

Barry did genuinely like Dr Holt, and she'd spoken very highly of this Dr Hacker and his abilities, but Dale was a settled and timid man, not some sample of a rare chemical. Personally, Barry thought that all the discovery in the world was worth sacrificing for one man's peace. He was like a piece of red cloth, and they were dangling him in front of enraged phantom bull to see how it charged.

In his capacity as Dale's medical guardian, Barry could contest all their experiments, especially ones that affected his spinal system. But he wasn't Dale's father, and anyway, he would be able to ask Dale himself what he thought of the whole thing when he saw him at ten o'clock this morning.

Hard as it was to believe, it had been a month since Dale's last checkup, and Barry hadn't had enough time to catch up with his old friend since then.

* * * *

Dr Donald Chin-Hsei Lambert pulled MARV into a parking spot in Crescent Street, McMahons Point, just under a hundred metres across the water from Milsons Point. The road rolled lazily down the hill towards the shore where it veered abruptly off to the left around the point, giving an unobstructed view of the Harbour Bridge, at a perfect forty five degree angle.

Dr Lambert sat looking at the Bridge for several moments, his hand frozen on the buckle of the seat belt. As if he'd seen something moving. He smiled, shook his head, unclipped the belt and climbed over the seat.

* * * *

Barry came out of the surgery murmuring to a doddering old woman who was holding her elbow. He helped her to the reception desk, said something to Eileen, and called Dale over.

The two shook hands as they went inside the surgery, exchanging greetings.

"You've been a busy boy." Dale said. "I heard about all the statements you had to give to the police. Vicki said that you and your investigation agency both got raked over the coals." They sat down.

Barry hefted one tree-trunk leg over the other and leaned back. He shrugged. "Yeah, well, I'm not the only one. I hear you're running around with ghost hunters nowadays."

Dale laughed. "That was my idea. It gave Vicki a pretty bad scare to see the same things I did.....It opened up a real can of worms. If I'm really hallucinating, it made me wonder why other people see flashes of what I do. I knew if she could see it then it wasn't me, and I knew there were people that deal with that sort of thing, so she went out to this guy in Balmain. Nice bloke. Not what you'd think."

Barry smiled. "'Vicki'?" he repeated, "That's very intimate after a couple of short weeks, isn't it? Or has she been analysing more than your mind?"

Dale tried hard to shrug and looked disinterested, smiled and looked around the room before returning his eyes to Barry, who was grinning like a schoolboy. Dale couldn't help laughing. "Well, even if my back's stuffed, I found out there's one organ that works perfectly."

Barry bellowed like an ox, punching Dale's shoulder good naturedly. "You old bastard," he laughed, "and I thought you were an introvert! Getting into your psychologists pants and you haven't even known the girl a month." Dale only smiled. Barry shook his head. "I was half your age when I met Julia and it took me ten months to get her into bed with me."

"I know, she spent the rest of the time climbing." Dale said.

"Hey!" Barry warned, raising his finger, ".....so, have you tested your new function many times?"

"Mind your business," Dale laughed, shifting in embarrassment, "bloody pervert."

Barry's body jolted as he laughed and opened the patient file in front of him. He looked up again momentarily and said "How does it feel?"

Dale took a deep breath and said "Like I've just woken up. It feels really good."

"Well, I've got something to make you feel even better." Barry said, turning the file around so Dale could see it. The heading page was entitled **THE 3M SPINAL RECONNECTION BRACKET - SELF DE-MAGNETISATION APPLICATION**

"It's for people who suffer prosthetic magnetism," Barry said, "if you end up working in the city you might need something like this. In fact, you probably need it regardless of where you work. Some research has shown that people who never have a single complaint and then become exposed to a magnetic or electrical source that causes it just get it over and over, like it's been tuned in."

Dale looked up. He couldn't understand the rest. The file showed some drawings of peoples backs, the brace, and lots of notes on *The Procedure*. "Is that what happened to me?" he asked.

Barry shrugged. "Well, it's a possibility. Even so," he said, tapping the page in front of Dale, "this operation has a one hundred percent implant success rate, and a ninety percent result rate."

"Operation," Dale smiled, shaking his head, "I knew it."

"Dale, look," Barry said, leafing through the file until he came to a blueprint of an electronic gadget, an imaginary hole cut in it, exposing wires, boards, switches and transistors, "it's a small box no bigger than a matchbox. It's fixed onto the control box, wired into the microprocessor, and runs off the computer battery. You don't even know it's there. The operation to put it in is easier than an appendectomy. They just open you up and slap it on."

Dale sighed, trying to make head or tail of the picture. "And it demagnetises me."

"Yeah, it has the microprocessor measure the magnetism of the system, which would correspond with any outside influence. Any magnetism it picks up outside the normal rate is counteracted. The smaller microprocessor, in the demagnetiser, has the battery produce a field to balance it out. Equal and opposite, or negative when it's positive, or something. Anyway, this box monitors any magnetism and can fix it way before it becomes critical."

Dale sighed again and sat back, thinking, reminding himself that some god had promised him long ago that they would never cleave his back with knives again. The god was a liar, but it was still a god.

* * * *

Inside MARV was like the control room of a small space shuttle. It had more machinery in it than in the cockpit of a Boeing 767-700. The length of the control cell was a wholly encased reinforced steel chamber - almost a fuselage - fitted securely into the shape of the van. It had no windows, and only one door leading into the cab at the front. The cell was the length of the entire carry cab of the van, almost five metres long, and as wide as the van was across. There was a bench down the left hand side with a swivel office chair clamped into place against one leg of the bench. Donald undid the clamp and slid the chair across the floor.

MARV was really two machines. One was a series of shafts, gears and fuel chambers, pretty much what you'd find in any early century family van.

The second machine was inside the control cell. It was a listening and watching machine. There was no form of radiation or naturally produced emanation of waves known to mankind that it could not detect. If the Waiuku nuclear medicine facility south of Auckland melted down right now, MARV would know in three seconds. If the United States

launched a nuclear weapon against Iceland, MARV would know in five and a half seconds.

The walls were taken up with panels, each panel a function control centre. Together, they created a myriad of lights, LCD and digital read-outs, needle gauges, scrolls of paper that recorded everything, switches, independent test and monitor panels, keypads, keyboards, computer monitors, and camera displays. The bench was covered with printers, more keyboards, terminals of computer screens, closed circuit TV or infra-red network monitors, and two separate personal computers, independent of the rest of the system. They held word processors for taking notes, spreadsheets for making calculations and producing graphs, and other calculation and speculation functions programmed by Donald and his department. Even the ceiling was covered in test fixtures and equipment, adjustment dials to the equipment on the roof, and the radio and communications equipment.

Everything was on line and beeping or whirring its own living music. Donald put his personal stereo on the bench and tuned it into his favourite FM station. He checked read-outs, switched on more machinery and the PCs until MARV's main drive system and all her appendage arms were gauging, monitoring, or awaiting instruction.

A quick request on the system manager computer told him that MARV was sapping battery power at a rate of knots. If he used the equipment at a regular pace, he would have to recharge in forty point seven nine four zero three hours.

The temp-link had been a much cheaper affair. It was one of the computers near the back end of the bench. If effectively turned everything on outside but sent it all by high density radio to the lab at the university instead of directly down into all the sorting equipment in the van. It was like a big laptop computer - you could do all your work at the scene. In this case, the laptop was a bit more state of the art than the main computer back at the office. MARV was more like a starfighter.

Donald reached up to the ceiling and activated the communication deck. He opened a phone line through a satellite link and dialled Albert Dimitriou's work number on the keypad, unsnapping the receiver out of its receptacle and pulling it down to his ear. The receptionist told him that Mr Dimitriou was in conference and could be reached on his mobile number.

When Donald got through to Albert, he was in a meeting with Darby Hillman solicitors. He spoke to the investigator walking around the cab checking the instruments, the four metre cord snaking back into the communication deck, where the retractor fed the line tautly out.

The investigator had left the building and was standing in Liverpool street in the city to talk to Donald. He'd started smoking again, he said.

"I'm in another bloody meeting with Darby Hillman about the litigation against the council. I don't see how they'll ever get the Bridge re-opened, let alone in one day."

"I suppose it's a pretty drawn process." Donald said.

"Oh, red tape, consultancies, reports, investigations, forensic evidence. It won't even go to court until September."

"Well at least you're still in it."

"I'm still part of the investigation," Albert continued, "I mean, the administration and the lawsuit support has been taken completely over by the top, but I'm still the official investigator in the field. There's just no time to do it, though. I was kept in meetings and advisory committees until eleven last night, and again from seven this morning. I haven't even had time to find out about the tests on the cable car."

"Well, I'll be monitoring properly from the van for a few hours this morning. I'm over the north shore, so I'll be watching like a hawk. If I hear a peep out of place, I'll reach you there."

"Yeah, all right. But won't we hear that from the forensic squad on the Bridge today?"

"Well, I don't know exactly what they're looking for. I don't think they would either. I might get something electrical, they could miss anything. They're probably only out there with finger-print kits."

Albert chuckled. "I'll go, Donald. Talk to you later."

* * * *

"It's not as if it's a question of money, Dale." Barry said. And he was right. His private health insurance covered every discrepancy with the brace and its functions for the rest of his life, including surgery associated with the brace. Even 3M, the company that owned and sold the brace, still had financial assistance services available for updates and necessary adjustments to the brace, including all environmental influences, of which this was definitely one.

"I know," Dale said, "I don't really have any reason to not have it, Barry. I'm just.....scared. I'm scared to have to have another operation. I'm nearly forty, you know. The flesh gets a bit set in its ways, can't take as much beating."

"You poor old bugger," Barry said, "so you'll have it? Come on, it might save you a lot of bother. Let's be honest, it might save you a lot of pain."

Dale nodded. "I wouldn't have anyone but you implant it."

"Okay." Barry agreed.

Dale shrugged. "Book us in then."

"Well, it's classed as emergency surgery. Under your health cover I can probably get us into the private hospital after the weekend, there's a few spare beds there right now. I'll call Bob Mendell and slot us in. I can get the time off from here, and you're not doing anything."

No, Dale wanted to say, please not so soon. Please don't cut me up in three days, Barry. But he knew the quicker the machine was in and forgotten the better, so he let the emotion go and slide away like water down a funnel with resignation.

"You'll be fine," Barry said, "no different than when you had your tonsils out. In fact, next to this a tonsillectomy is like a heart bypass." Dale nodded agreement.

"Good," Barry continued, and turned to the computer on the desk, calling up Dale's file, "now,.....tests or progress?"

II

It started with a tiny bleep from the calibration computer, the system that could configure and monitor every function in the van with relative user friendliness.

Donald was setting pulse parameters for the magnetic bursts he would send emanating from the transmitter (the amount of resistance told the computers how much of a magnetic buffer the Bridge already had in place).

He rolled across the clear linoplast floor to the calibration computer terminal and folded the keyboard out of the bench, by use of two metal arms that gripped each end of the pad. He tilted it towards him and requested the user enquiry menu, and selected Multi-Monitor. The screen cleared and left him with a title bar across the top and a cursor blinking ominously on its own on a clear screen. Donald requested a down-load of the system manager. The computer counted the systems and listed all eight thousand computers, receptors, transmission devices, readings, functions and test media in the unit, scrolling through them at lightning pace.

When the list was done, Donald requested the .4 delay internal check. A top view picture of the van appeared, the laboratory cell and all its systems red in it's carry cab. A blue light appeared at one corner and began to trace a zigzagging pattern back and forth, tracing lines that represented wires, circuits, all the paths that represented functions of the unit. The blue line raced around the roof of the van and the picture rolled on its side to show the van side on, where the light whizzed at lightning pace around the side.

At the bottom of the screen, flicking over at over seventy per second, were codes and sequences for the functions the computer was checking. For a split second every now and then, the picture would freeze, a blip would sound, and a message would flash on in the Sys/Error box in the corner of the screen (almost too fast to be read, the computer picked up every slightly eroded wire, every misaligned transmission field, even the markings of countless birds on the roof, which fell under the category of "Environmental/External Obstruction").

The faults the check picked up were immaterial to the workings of the cell, but the computer was trained to be supersensitive and not miss a thing. The computer would warn maintenance about them long before test crews deemed them in need of repairs.

Eventually the tiny blue icon stopped at the forward end of the cell, right behind the cab of the van, near the roof. The computer beeped and the message read **Valve Sys{temp}**.

Donald squinted at the computer in confusion. Now what?

He tapped at the keys, asking the computer to run the target test that regulated the valve and transmission systems. A smaller white blip raced back and forth across the van, from every valve to every transmitter to every joint, stopping on the same valve, the Sys/Error box now reading **Front.Lft Coolant Valve,{79degC/Hi}**. He asked for a schematic diagram of the valve system, and the computer panned in even more, cutting holes in the tube and showing him the pipe inside and the regulation, outflow and warning systems.

A square closed around the edge of the screen and blinked on and off, smaller each time, until it embodied the forward end of the valve tube. The view panned in even more, and the computer simulated an electrical fault in the steel flap that opened the valve to let the coolant through. It wasn't working, and the valve was overheating from the build up. The area turned red.

Without all four valves allowing coolant through to the main transmitters, especially with the work out he was about to give it, it could start a fire. Donald sat biting his nail for a minute. What a time for this to happen. Why didn't the IndyCheck system, the boot-up test that the whole unit ran as it was brought on-line, find it first, before Donald switched everything on?

He logged out and rolled across the control terminal, selecting Support Systems, then Transmitter. He inputted the codes to isolate and close down the faulty valve, and run the coolant through the other valves.

Everything running smoothly, Donald went back to setting the pulse parameters.

* * * *

Dale was sitting beside Barry's computer desk, the electro-receptor sheath strapped around his waist. A series of wires came from the back panel of the sheath and twirled around into the back of the BraceTest 6000 machine. Barry had the machine on the computer table and the manual beside it.

"Okay, lean forwards." he said. As Dale leaned slowly forward and sat up straight again. A figure on the screen flickered, changing thousands of times a second, reading muscular resistance to the motor.

"I'm going to increase by fifty percent, Dale." he muttered, exiting to the menu and selecting Resistance Test Parameters and was greeted with a screen full of readings and figures. He keyed down to Motor Response Resistance and altered the number to = **50%**.

"Okay, again." he said, watching Dale as he strained to fight against the motor of the brace to lean his upper body forward. The muscular response cycle was temporarily reversed for the test, so whichever way Dale moved his muscles, the motor would provide a faulty command to the microprocessor that the brain wanted to go the other way, and it monitored Dale's strength against the motor. Strength of the back had to be watched carefully and kept from becoming too great for the motor to counteract (The mechanics could only take so much sudden movement, certainly not as much as the average human spine performed, and had to be kept in check).

Barry reset the parameters of the resistance and switched the motor back to it's normal settings of response.

"All right, again-"

Dale leaned forwards and suddenly gasped a hissing breath of pain, jolting backwards and clapping against the wall behind him, his back arched painfully, his tendons standing out.

* * * *

Across the floor from Donald, the User/Receiver Interface bleeped and an entry appeared on the screen; **E.M. Surge/"; 00027.34000 V.**

On the terminal displaying the real-time camera image and infra-red superimposed over it, a ripple passed over the picture, as if a wave had passed.

And on the scroll tape of the primary recording panel, where a few square centimetres of white paper rolled passed a glass window, unrolled to be printed on, rolled up for further study, the steady line suddenly jolted, drawing a stabbing scrawl that tapered slowly off.

Two pin printers began their scattering language, producing a few lines of records and readings.

* * * *

Albert Dimitriou was listening to a senior solicitor from Darby Hillman recite an entire section of the Building & Construction Act, 1902, when his mobile phone went off again. He was relieved beyond belief to excuse himself from the meeting and walk out into the reception area of Darby Hillman's Town Hall offices. He smiled at the receptionist and leaned against the wall between the lift doors to answer the phone.

"Hello, Albert Dimitriou."

"Mr Dimitriou."

"Donald, anything?"

"Yeah, I just picked up a surge. A big one, and a fast one. It's gone already, even the magnetic echo."

"How big?" Donald asked, his voice falling to a near whisper.

"Twenty seven volts. Far too much for a spontaneous environmental surge."

"Well, what happened? Didn't anything happen on the Bridge?"

"I thought of that, so I tuned the CB to the nearest police band, which was the forensic team on the Bridge. I can see a few of them at the apex of the centre arch on the real-time camera, but they weren't saying anything to each other. I kept getting interference from a police car reporting in from Milsons Point, but as far as I gathered they didn't see or feel a thing."

"What about their instruments?"

"If they'd had voltmeters or Magnetic equipment they would've picked it up. Typical police research funding. They've probably got torch and a fingerprint duster between them.....hey, leave it off the record that I listened in on them, won't you?"

"Yeah, of course. So anything since?"

"Now I'm picking up radiation, building ever so slowly. My SpecuGraph gave me a danger level of seven minutes."

"What sort of danger?"

"The police investigators out there will start throwing up and losing fingernails."

"Holy Christ," Albert whispered, "we have to get them off!"

"I can't get through to them on CB, and I can't drive up to the barricades because you aren't allowed to start the van until five minutes after you switch off when the circuits of the cell are secure for driving."

Albert covered his mouth piece and turned to the receptionist, "Call 000," he told her astounded expression, "tell them to get the forensic people off the Bridge, tell them George Slatten's investigation contractor has picked up dangerous amounts of radiation."

"George,-" she began nervously.

"Do it now," he yelled, making the poor girl jump, for which he felt a pang of sympathy, "George Slatten." He returned to the mobile. "Donald, leave the line open. Tell me as soon as things start to happen, and I'll hold on."

"All right."

* * * *

Donald reached up to the communications panel on the ceiling, the retractor sucking the cord back into the ceiling, and slotted the receiver back into its receptacle, snapping it into place. Instead of cutting the line, he switched it to speaker and could hear Albert breathing through the quadraphonic stereo speakers at each corner of the ceiling, punctuated by the occasional cough or muffled, urgent conversation with someone in the background.

He rolled the chair back to the master panel and consulted the computer. The radiation was rising, steadily. The figure sat at six minutes, thirty four seconds. They would never get the police down off the arch and the Bridge in time. There would be some very sick policemen up there. Maybe even some dead ones.

What if it doesn't stop, a tiny voice jeered, what if it keeps pumping more and more radiation. Infect and sicken the whole city? The whole country? Maybe in putting just the right (or wrong) configuration of metals together in certain forms, mankind had unwittingly discovered a formula to generate erratically produced and susceptibly infinite gamma radiation?

How about the whole world?

Donald sighed and ran some specs through the computer, then ran an image scan. The transmitters, through sonar and laser, were able to put together a diagram of the Bridge and put it on the screen, rough, but not bad for a two second electronic artist. Donald used the infa-red mouse to eliminate the cars parked across the Bridge and a ferry travelling underneath, and a few electromagnetic smudges in the background that were buildings, and was left with a moving, drifting and readjusting line simulation of the Bridge structure.

Displ.} Area./Field of source** he told the computer. After a few more seconds, and loud whirring from the two foot tall crate-shaped databank that housed the main processor at the rear of the van, heavy red bars appeared around the three arch structures. He opened another window and requested an update on the radiation count to see if the time limit had changed. It hadn't. Six minutes and counting.

* * * *

Barry held Dale's forearm and pressed his fingers into the flesh of his lower back, still sitting in the chair, still with the sheath wrapped around him.

"You sure," he asked Dale, "the same pain as before?"

"Yes, like a hot iron went into my skin. It was really burning hot as well as painful."

"Well, pulled muscles give you the same sensation as high temperatures if they're bad enough. Can you stand?" Dale shuffled forward on the seat and ever so carefully started to push himself upwards. He slowly stood to his full height, Barry still holding his wrist and elbow for support. Dale was panting from the shock and had broken into a sweat, but shrugged carefully.

"Nothing."

* * * *

A low buzz from behind Donald sounded. He left the master panel and rolled across the floor to the audio-visual panel.

"Donald?" came Albert's voice over the speakers.

"Yeah, you're on speaker."

"What was that?"

"Just seeing," the metallurgist murmured, switching on the external microphone. It was hardly ever used, it was useless unless the van was monitoring right next to the subject and there was almost no environmental noise. The visual terminal was on real time and showed a steady camera view of the Bridge. He flicked the image to 10,000 frames per second and backed up the tape a little. The camera outside would still record every second of the view for later scrutiny, so he was safe to use the monitor for playback.

The image flicked slowly by, and there was a yellow flash, like an explosion of light, from the centre of the picture.

A burst of infra-red light.

* * * *

Dale stood bolt upright, his shoulders tearing back, throwing his head back. He emitted a gurgled shriek and a foam of saliva burst from between his lips, showering himself, Barry, and the wall.

"Dale!" Barry yelled. The door to the waiting room was flung open and Eileen gasped.

"Call an ambulance!" Barry shouted at her. She left the door ajar and ran back to the reception desk, hitting a pile of papers on the corner with her hip and spilling them across the floor. The two or three other patients waiting stared into the surgery in fear.

Dale lurched again, making a pinched throaty scream, and a flow of spit gushed from his mouth. He moaned, clutching wildly.

* * * *

The next burst of light was so sudden it made Donald jump with fright, and it was bright enough, even on the monitor, to hurt his eyes. This time the colour swam around in a shaft of light that streaked through space towards the van. An eruption of energy, like the shock wave of a nuclear blast. As the light engulfed the view, there was a soft thud in the body of the van and it rocked horribly on its wheels.

* * * *

This time it was as if a battering ram had bashed Dale between the shoulder blades. Barry heard the crack of flesh as *something* hit, way down in Dale's back, and his chest was driven outwards with such sudden force that it knocked him forward several feet. An eruption of spit came from Dale's mouth, and when it showered the wall, Barry saw that it had flecks of blood in it.

Dale toppled to his knees and grasped his head, wailing in agony.

"Make it stop!" he pleaded anyone,

"Pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeaaaaase!!"

"Eileen!" he screamed, "go to the dispense cabinet and get a syringe of 40 cc's of strong sedative and 25 cc's of Tricetyl pain killer. Now! Now!"

Eileen ran through the surgery and through the other door to the back room. Barry stayed, holding onto Dale, trying to calm him, feeling for the pulse under his friends neck. It was jackhammering.

* * * *

"Jesus!" Donald cried out, "Something hit me."

"Something what?" Albert yelled. There was a creak at the end of the van, and a small squeal. Donald almost fainted.

The latch on the door to the cab was closing.

By itself.

Donald jumped out of the chair, hearing it clap against the opposite bench, and grabbed the latch.

It was stuck fast, like the lock on a farm house that has stood abandoned for generations, rusty and unyielding.

* * * *

"Did you call the police?" Albert asked the receptionist. She nodded meekly. He went back to the phone and almost yelled into it for Donald to answer him

"Doctor, what's wrong? What am I hearing?"

* * * *

The machinery had started bleeping and buzzing and humming almost all at once as it started to detect and process the sudden activity outside. Donald walked across to the master panel, shaking his head desperately, and his eyes were drawn to the radiation count and delay. The timer was counting down the last few seconds, and a word appeared in red capital letters - **CRITICAL**.

* * * *

Sergeant Maher hung from a climber's cable-suspension system from the apex of the centre arch of the Harbour Bridge. He dangled about five feet below it, reaching across and tinkering with the mangled bolt and clamp mechanism that had broken to let the cable car fall.

Sergeant Maher didn't feel the radiation waves suddenly wash through his brain, he didn't feel his ability to stop himself, but he dropped the pen-light he was holding as he felt his bowels and bladder both empty explosively. He felt his stomach flip, stretch, and send a river of vomit streaming and spraying through his lips and fingers. He felt his skin turn red and blister all over so that it began to peel off him. He flipped over backwards, in a non-coherent daze, and the clamps around his waist held the cable so that he was hanging largely upside down, a steady stream of vomit dribbling from his mouth, his pants emptying down his back, his breath in intermittent wheezes.

* * * *

Donald was pounding on the latch with the edge of his hand, his hair falling in his eyes, his teeth clenched. It wouldn't budge.

A printer across the van started working. It printed slowly, the print-head meticulously and noisily buzzing across the page. Donald looked slowly over his shoulder and walked fearfully to the printer. It was

the report panel printer, for printing reports on the running of the receptors outside. But the print-head slid slowly back and forth, drawing a long, lazy arch.

* * * *

Dale's eyes snapped open and he stared at the screen of the BraceTest 6000 machine. Barry's eyes followed his gaze, and both men froze. The screen had cleared and was drawing a meticulous drawing, slowly, line by line, of two long, low arches, crisscrossed in between with 'x's'. Beams of iron and steel.

* * * *

The printer on MARV's report panel spat the picture out another line, and two blocks were forming at each end.

* * * *

Two tall arch windows appeared in the blocks at each end of the arch on the screen of the BraceTest Machine.

* * * *

The printer traced a long, thick, heavy horizontal line, a road, across the paper.

* * * *

In the University of Sydney Research van and in Barry Paul's surgery, twenty three kilometres apart, both machines produced identical pictures.

Pictures of the Old Sydney Harbour Bridge.

* * * *

The paper exploded from the printer, sending a ghoulish New Years Eve streamer of heavy white paper across the van to crash against the opposite wall.

* * * *

A bang and spark came from the BraceTest machine, and the screen went blank.

* * * *

As his fellow officers stretched desperately down to save him, Sergeant Maher's cable snapped from its hold under the apex with a crack of sparks, and his numbed body plummeted serenely and silently to the ground.

In his weakened structural state from the radiation and resultant skin decomposition, Sergeant Maher was spread across four lanes of the Highway when he hit the ground.

III

Donald looked from one end of the van to the other. The latch had absolutely frozen shut at one end, and the other end was only the back wall of the cell. On the other side of the back wall (which was covered with more machinery) was the maintenance panel for the cell, accessible through the back doors of the van.

He sat down slowly, rolling across to the master panel and calling up the system reconfiguration menu. He commanded the computer to isolate and disconnect the report panel, in case the damage corrupted any other systems or worse, started a fire with him trapped inside.

Donald's eye fell back upon the real time camera image and he almost screamed.

There was the old Bridge, clear as day, right there spanning the harbour. He stretched across to the real time image control board and switched the superimposed image from infra-red to electromagnetic. Immediately the Bridge was enshrouded with a shimmering mist of blue light, lancing off in all directions, occasionally towards the van (prompting frenzied activity on the recording apparatus - scroll tapes and video images of all detectable emanations). A bolt of lightning blue sheared through the air and engulfed the camera, rocking the van again.

It's energy, Donald's mind protested, it's *light*. How can it have the kinetic energy to move a two ton vehicle?

Only if it has one thing, another voice answered him. If it has *mass* or *momentum*. And only a few energy sources known to man have those. Solar or Atmospheric wind, or the heavy metals that were produced in the core of the sun according to $E=mc^2$.

Equations and formulae raced through the physicists brain inside Donald's mind, while the rest of him watched the rainbow of electromagnetism and wondered what the hell to do.

He knew from the motions of the rocking van that it hadn't been the strike of some body of mass. It had been as if some horrific wind had blown past. The weather panel showed almost no wind, and in the opposite direction.

It had to be a force as yet undetected. An electromagnetic force that gave out incredible amounts of energy, in short bursts, like a pulsar in deep space.

Whatever it was, Donald had proven, it was the emanation of some sort of energy that behaved according to the laws of waves and frequency, in that it only affected one environment on the spectrum. On this occasion it had unleashed its energy in the physical dimension. Could it then turn its attentions to other worlds of physics? Could it destroy or alter time? Create vacuums? He had read about packets of anti-matter that fell into the Earth's atmosphere, where they could behave in the ways of deep space physics, not Earth's surface physics. Had one magnetically attracted to the largest antenna near it's landing point?

If all that were true, he reminded himself with dread, how the hell did it choose to lock you in the back of your own van?

His thoughts were cut off by a horrible baying just outside the van. It was the sound of an enormous creature howling angrily. Something bashed into the side of the van. Hard. Several lights blinked and computer screens flickered. Donald screamed.

* * * *

Even the receptionist heard the blood curdling scream over the mobile phone, and before it was over, Albert had stabbed the elevator button and jumped into the lift, cursing at the long trip to the car park, his heart beating thunderously with fear.

* * * *

Another crash came, accompanied by the muffled snarling of some immense beast. The force of the blow felt big enough to be an elephant. Donald toppled from the chair and fell on his behind on the floor, his tape deck clattering to the hard clear floor beside him, the radio snapping off. He reached up and grasped the edge of the bench, fighting to pull himself along to the audio visual panel.

He knelt up, gripping the bench, and activated the external microphone.

The screeching roar from outside came blasting into the cabin over the speakers. A deep guttural snarling and filthy dripping breath. Desperately Donald reached for the camera control knob and began to

slowly twist it around, panning the camera around to where the object had rammed the van.

On the monitor, the view of the road slid smoothly by, buildings and houses, until Donald was looking in the opposite direction.

Another roar sounded, full of rage and hunger, and the weight crashed into the other side of the van, making it rock like a toy on its shocks.

The monitor cleared for a brief second and there was the Old Harbour Bridge again.

(But the camera's facing the other direction, he protested dumbly)

Beams had begun to crash to the ground and the arch structure was falling apart.

The crystal laser matrix printer in the corner on the Research & Library Files panel began to print copy after copy of a blurred, insubstantial picture of a face, it's eyes wild, its hair torn, its clawed fingers reaching.

* * * *

Albert turned out from the car park of AdSteam Tower, George Street, the tyres of the BMW squealing on the asphalt. He tromped on the accelerator and ran one light, just barely red, but had no choice but to stop behind a bus at the next, the arches of the Bridge visible straight ahead. Over the carphone speaker he could hear the bellowing of some gigantic creature that made the hairs on his neck stand on end.

* * * *

Donald switched the superimposed picture to ultraviolet. From the shimmering curtain of light around the Bridge (still falling and splitting - he could actually *hear* the clanging and crashing from outside), shapes emerged.

Donald felt a punch in his gut as he realised what they were.

Eyes.

Phantom eyes of a demon's face as it turned towards the van. A gaping mouth opened, tendons of old, fused flesh and skin stretching and tearing over it. It twirled and began to come toward the van, growing in size and becoming more distinct.

The eyes became stabbing and angry, the snout of a lion appeared on its face, and now he could see craggy sharp teeth, so skewed and big that they filled the entire cavity of the mouth.

A sound came over the external microphone. A growl, deep, deep in an ancient dead throat. Except that the noise was far off. And huge.

It's a monster, Donald's mind screeched at him, and it's floating across the harbour right now, coming to get you, locked in this van.

A burst of light in the shape of the palm of a heavy, gigantic hand with torn nails appeared in front of the face and disjointed from the body of light, stretching onward.

The fingers flexed in anticipation, the thing scowled an evil grin/leer, and as the hand raced over the edge of the water, up the street (oh lord it's over thirty feet long)

and bore down on the van, the fingers began to curl around.

Something immense crashed into the van (not something, a fucking *ghost*), the crash on the metal ringing out, the van lurching so that Donald, as he fell and hit his head on the floor, actually felt it move, felt the tyres rasp on the road as the van slid a few terrifying feet.

* * * *

Dale's eyes widened and he grabbed Barry's arm by the sleeve of his shirt. Barry looked around wildly in fear. Dale was hitching in a breath to scream when the window to the surgery exploded inwards, showering the room with glass, making both men cry in pain as it hit them. A howling wind came into the room, spiralling round and round, kicking up reams of loose paper, knocking things off shelves, while Dale and Barry cowered against the wall.

The wind gradually died down as Eileen came bursting into the room.

"Barry, for God's sake," she was saying, looking around in horror.

"Look." Dale said fearfully, pointing at the screen of the BraceTest machine. Barry raced across the room, leaned down, and stared at the screen, Dale and Eileen watching over his shoulders.

The screen showed a moving picture, a cartoon of fuzzy, indistinct green computer generated lines, of a long, heavy box shaped vehicle sitting by itself. And above, the enormous face of a demon, with a dripping snout and a mouth full of gaping teeth, that prodded and shook the vehicle as it rocked back and forth.

Barry became aware of a tiny sound near his feet. It was the set of headphones, plugged into the machine.

Barry told himself that if he put them on he would never sleep peacefully again. Never sleep again. He will have heard a message from hell. He told himself again and again as he reached slowly down for the headphones, picked them up, and slid them over his ears.

The sound was wavy, as if happening behind glass, or underwater, as unreal as the picture on the screen. But it was unmistakable. The animal was crawling, screeching with glee as it picked and shoved the

vehicle. Barry saw the enormous hand raise into a fist, a white blob of light, and come crashing down onto the roof of the object.

From an even further realm, he heard the mirror image of a crash, a solid object on a surface of metal.

* * * *

Donald used the visual display panel to swing the camera upwards, into the sky. He saw an ocean of filthy yellow/grey light, like the underside of a violent thundercloud lit up by a weak sunset, and one half of the things terrible face and blinking, searching eye. He zoomed as far out as he could, but now the thing appeared to be only twenty or thirty feet from the roof, and he couldn't get a full picture.

Is there really a drifting ghost, a graveyard mist out there attacking me? he thought.

The dribbling snarl over the crispness of the stereo speakers rose to a frenzied shriek, like the screaming bellow of a dinosaur, and the hand appeared, rolled into a fist. It rocketed down towards the camera, and Donald covered his ears as the crash came, as if a boulder had hit the roof from a tall cliff. The van sprung up and down on its shocks after the impact.

* * * *

Albert swung into the outside lane and sped around a bus, inching his way across the wrong side of the road to clear it.

"Donald, for God's sake answer me. Is everything all right?" he yelled. The scientist didn't answer him. Albert raced through another orange light and spun the car to the left, to the high city road that led to the Bridge. The BMW's tyres squealed again around the corner.

* * * *

He heard cries. Voices screaming out. From outside. He swung the camera back down to the street and screamed, reeling back from the monitor.

The street was full of people. They were reaching, clawing at the air, crying out, walking towards the van, an exodus, the first few only bare metres away.

They were climbing over the wall on the harbour's edge, splashing water as they came, and shambling up the street.

They were all dead.

Their skin was green with waterlogged decay, some had old wounds gashed open on them, their rotting clothes dripped salt water and harbour filth onto the asphalt.

Albert ran to the front of the van, unhooked the fire extinguisher from beside the cell door, and began bashing at the latch with it, denting the door, but not budging the latch one bit.

He dropped the extinguisher and backed staggering into the cell, tears of terror streaking his cheeks, looking desperately around for an escape or weapon.

A high pitched beep came from the correlation panel. Donald turned to the screen, holding himself upright against another blow from outside. He heard the axles of the van creak beneath him.

The beeping was coming from the computer. He staggered across to it and leaned on the bench. The usual menu for correlating and inter-relating data was gone, only a plain blue screen, blank, except for the words - **Donald**. And, a few lines down, **You are Going To Die**.

Donald swallowed hard. He cleared his throat and looked up at the communications panel.

"Mr Dimitriou, please call the police here straight away."

* * * *

"Albert?" came Donald's voice over the phone, pleading with the investigator. But Albert couldn't hear. He was outside the idling car, at the barricade across the highway at the south toll gates, arguing with police guards.

"I commissioned the test vehicle for the investigation. Look," he continued, running back to the car and opening the door, fishing desperately through the glove box, "here's my business card, call my work and ask them. He's parked on McMahons Point right now and he's in great danger. He detected the radiation and has picked up more dangerous readings. I have to get to him."

"Look, one of the forensic team has been badly hurt, and I can't-"

"On the Bridge?" Albert asked in fear, looking up, "how badly hurt?" The policeman unclipped his walkie talkie as Albert ran back to the barricade. The officer put his arms up to console Albert, who resumed pacing back and forth, running his hands through his dark hair.

"I'll send a man from the other guard down to him."

"It's an emergency, please hurry." Albert said desperately and a little fiercely.

"North point," the officer said into his microphone, "investigate a late 1990's Ford Envoy Van, Crescent Street McMahons's Point. Use caution."

"Tell them to hurry." Albert said.

"Sir, there's an officer injured on this Bridge, I can hardly spare the men as it is. They'll be as fast as they can." He turned towards the North end of the Bridge and both men watched as one of the cars down the far end, barely visible, switched on its flashing lights and cruised away. Albert sighed loudly, rubbed his face and ran his hand over his head, and began pacing again, oblivious to the pleading voice in his car.

* * * *

Barry reached down to the wall and wrenched the plug of the BraceTest machine from the socket. The picture flickered momentarily.....and remained.

"Oh God." Dale whispered. Eileen only whimpered. Barry stared at the electrical plug of the machine and back to the screen, the demonic tormentor still there, the picture tube still firing, the processor still devising the images, the machine still working, with no power to run it.

* * * *

As the first sodden corpses outside reached the van, they howled like wounded animals (achingly clear over the sound system that now seemed, to Donald, just a bit too clear for his liking) and began to beat weakly on the panels outside.

Mute with terror, Donald fought to hold onto some tiny shred of his sense of reason. He fitfully walked to the audio visual panel and called up the scan program on the computer, typing **Set camera#(Primary) to real/time:,\\{Scan @360°00'00".- SpoolRecord^@200,000 frames x 0.0.** The view on the monitor slowly began panning across the ground, turning a slow circle around the van, recording the bedlam at two thousand frames every second.

Something hard hit the outside wall, making him jump up. There was a rending, tearing squeal of metal across the van outside. Donald wiped his brow and returned to the correlation computer.

Donald.

You are Going To Die.

It was a very expensive and elaborate hoax. Yes, he thought with relief, that's what it was. Someone was tapping his systems and transmitting a very clever video of holograms (or maybe a bunch of seven hundred idiots dressed up as zombies) to his camera transmission. And they were ramming the van with trucks, and the weight of a crane, and isolating the external microphone to broadcast their own soundtrack, and

now they had broken into his computer network, erased his correlation programs and installed a single modem-conversation function.

But the more Donald thought, the more elaborate and unlikely the hoax would have to be. It was a beautifully tempting idea. He couldn't really see outside the van, after all, and was at the mercy of what his computers told him.

Except that Albert had disproved everything.

Donald had fallen silent when he heard the investigators words over the speaker of the car phone - "On the Bridge?" he'd said, "How badly hurt?"

It wasn't an affront at Donald or his studies. It was the Bridge. Or something horrible that had taken possession of it.

He sighed and typed at the computer

WHAT ARE YOU?

The screen went blank and suddenly the cell erupted in activity. Figures and equations began flashing and scrolling down every computers screen, and the printers came alive, every dot matrix, inkjet, the crystal laser, in-built and PC commanded, even the scroll tapes began spewing out rolls of paper. Donald picked up the end of a continuous stream from the ThermaGraph printer. It was covered, line after line, in mathematical and physics equations, numbers, short reasoning in formal english, formulae and other scientific jargon, without a space in between, until the cell was filled with the smell of fresh ink and the acidy smell of overworked electrical equipment.

It was telling Donald what it was.

His eyes were drawn back to the real time display. It was stopped panning the crowd of death around, as he had instructed, but instead was fixed on the Bridge, the *real* Bridge. The pounding on the walls of the van had stopped, and the street was empty. The low warning buzz sounded again.

He waded his way through the streams of paper launching across the van like a giant ticker-tape parade, cutting himself painfully on the edges, and sat in front of the audio visual panel, watching the screen.

He was almost relieved that now there was only a burst of white (superimposed from ultraviolet) light that rocketed towards the camera on a wave of air. The van was buffeted steadily as if in a heavy wind, but something else caught his eye. He panned right in and focused on the north end of the Bridge. Something was spinning, a large object - A car! A police car, on its roof, was spinning around on the street, men running away from it, until it ground to a halt on its bonnet.

"Shit." Donald whispered.

When he panned out again he was startled to see a train crossing from the south.

"Oh God no." he breathed. The Bridge was closed. What colossal mistake would have let a train onto the Bridge, when there was so much danger of radiation and an electromagnetic storm!

Donald looked closer. The train wasn't really there. He could see, upon close inspection, that the picture of the train was interfering, overlapping the real time display. He could faintly see the silhouette of the old, dead Bridge behind the real view, the corpse of its arch spanning the harbour proudly.

The train plunged through the road, fell lazily towards the water, and Donald gasped as it sent a plume of water into the air when it hit, nose first. The whole train crashed, one carriage after the other, into the water and bobbed desperately for a few seconds before the first carriage dipped below the water and dragged each one after it.

Another flash of light, and he could see cars going back and forth. Ghosts of cars. As one, they stopped, their tyres sending tiny plumes of smoke, and several backed up, crashing into others. Pandemonium covered the Bridge like a blanket. Cars were bashing into each other to get away, reversing over running people, or suddenly being driven down on the road, invisible but heavy objects falling onto them.

The view on the screen flickered, turned to snow, and a new one appeared.

Donald screamed at the top of his lungs, and lurched backwards, cracking his head against a gauge jutting from the wall and sending a rivulet of blood down the back of his head, into his neck.

The camera showed the centre arch, of the new Bridge - from its apex, where the diagonal stretched away and suddenly plummeted down to the street.

But it wasn't the apparent teleportation that washed away all Donald's reasoning. The van was creaking. It was rocking. It was moving. It was *balanced*, on top of the centre arch.

There was a bang and the van started to lurch down the shaft of the diagonal, its front grill crashing against the steps as it bumped and banged down.

Things were dislodged, fell from their places. Donald could only wrap his arms around the leg of the bench under the master panel and scream for help as he watched the end of the diagonal draw near.

The van bounced off the edge and he was sickened as he was lifted into the air, along with papers, pens and stationery, the chair, and they rolled in midair, his stomach flipping, moaning incoherently as he felt the van roll over and over in the air as it fell. He caught a quick glimpse of the water racing upwards and fainted.

* * * *

The policeman beside Albert depressed the transmit switch on his communicator again.

"North Point, report in. What's the situation?....." Nothing, not even static. He shrugged, turning to Albert.

"He hasn't just switched off. We've lost contact. Christ, I've got too many men in danger to be sending an officer off to check your van -" he started off towards the rest of his command, mumbling.

Albert ran back to the car and slammed the door. He slipped it into drive and tromped on the accelerator. The policeman dropped the walkie talkie and drew his gun, putting his hands up for Albert to stop.

Albert sent the car careening through the toll gates. This wasn't Hollywood, a New South Wales uniformed police officer fired his or her gun an average of twice in an entire career, and never at an unarmed civilian.

Albert brought the car up to eighty, knowing that the officers at the other end would be well alerted to his approach.

Suddenly there was an eruption of heat and wind from above. The car was buffeted, thrust forward hard enough for the tyres to shriek, and Albert had to fight to regain control. Through the temporary shelters set up in the middle of the highway, he could see a police vehicle at the far end blown off its wheels and sent crashing away until it was left spinning on its back.

Albert tried to skirt the shelter at the far left, and was thankful that it seemed to be fibreglass as the front panel smashed the entire edge of the shelter to smithereens in a shower of plastic shards.

* * * *

The itching across Dale's back had now become a brand of fire. The BraceTest machine had ended its legacy of TV terror. Barry was searching all over the machine. He had it plugged back in and it was running and testing normally on all fronts. Eileen, her make-up smeared, tear tracks on her face, tried to bring some semblance of order to the room, picking up the potted plant stand, hanging the picture back on the wall, putting books and manuals back on the cabinet shelves.

Dale inhaled a hissing breath as he sat down. The shirt on his back rubbed at the soreness viciously. Barry groaned as he stood up to his full height and came across to Dale, who was carefully untucking his shirt.

"What have you got?" Barry asked. Dale turned his back towards Barry and rolled his shirt slowly up, tensing in pain more than once.

Barry swore under his breath.

Across Dale's back, over his shoulder blades and down to the top of his belt, were three long red welts, rising like blisters on the skin, boiling pus underneath. They traced a jagged question mark across Dale's skin.

"What is it?" Dale asked, "it's only just come up." Barry shook his head.

"Some sort of scratch wound." he muttered. "Eileen, would you get me a bowl of water, a sterile flannel cloth, and bring Dermacream and dressing.

"What kind of scratch?" Dale asked as Eileen left for the back room. Barry didn't think he could answer.

It was a claw mark.

* * * *

Albert never made it to Donald and the van. The police successfully blocked his car at the north end with a hastily set up roadblock of police vehicles, and as he leaped from the car, several officers started forward to intercept him.

He was easily detained, trying to calm himself and explain all over about himself and the investigation and Donald Chin-Hsei Lambert's part in it. He let them put him in the back of one of the car, under guard, but he pleaded with them to have their officers check the van.

* * * *

Two officers stood away, covering the van front and back, while the other two crept up to the van's doors tested them softly. They were unlocked. The older officer cautiously opened the passenger side door and climbed into the cab. His colleague joined him from the drivers side and they turned to face the small steel door built into the back wall of the cab, just large enough for a man to climb through. The older officer pushed the door experimentally. It swung open a fraction, so he put his hand on the door and slowly pushed it open all the way in.

This was a research van, and they had expected a few computers and a TV monitor. Inside was a small ante-room that looked like NASA mission control. Only after the holocaust. Paper and rubbish was strewn everywhere. The keyboard of a PC dangled limply off the bench by its cord. The smell of fried circuits, ink and the slight tang of electrical smoke filled the silent air, the machines silent and dark, except for the fluorescent bar overhead.

In the centre of the floor was a young Asian man, laying awkwardly across the clear plastic fibre floor, a small pool of blood collecting on the floor around his head.

IV

The Como Hotel was close to Barry's place, and only a stone's throw over the Georges River for Albert, so the two agreed to meet there for a drink to catch up on news. A drink became several, several became something to eat, something to eat became two phone calls to respective wives and dinner, and dinner had become the icing on the cake of the entire night.

Now it was almost nine thirty, and the two men sat with a cheese platter between them and a glass of port each (flanked by more than one empty glass).

Albert was beyond tipsy but quite coherent and still in complete control of his faculties. He was an athletic man and could almost feel his liver charging through it all. But he also knew that his liver wouldn't last forever. He'd put it through a hell of a time over the past few years, spending nights in his study with a case of Crown Lager for company instead of that bitch of a wife ("....you're out fucking your secretary, are you?" had been her only reaction to his phone call. He almost said yes, found he couldn't be bothered, grappled for a comment of his own about her many lovers, didn't bother with that either, and said goodbye not caring what she thought or did).

And Barry, well, it took more than a few drinks to knock a man of his size sideways.

Both men wanted to get drunk tonight, like no other night, regardless of Albert's BMW or Barry's LTD-2 Fairlane sitting patiently in the car park outside.

"I swear to God, it was a picture of a great big.....dragon, picking and poking at this truck below it." Barry was explaining, "The only sound from the head phones was a whooshing sound, like wind, but every time this thing hit the car, I could hear a crash, like it was a long way away, through a storm, but I could just pick it up."

"Did it go?" Albert asked, enthralled, taking a large swig of his port. Barry turned to fully face the investigator.

"I pulled the plug out of the wall and the bloody thing.....kept.....going. It flickered, but it stayed there."

Albert stared at the table, feeling like he was camping with his friends in the Blue Mountains as a kid and they'd started telling ghost stories that were just a bit too real. And he wanted to go home.

"Then what?" he said quietly.

Barry sipped his own glass, reached for a rolled up slice of Edam, and shrugged. "That was when Dale noticed the pain in his back."

"The brace again?" Albert asked.

Barry shook his head. "No, *on* his back. He sat down and started to take his shirt off, that's how much it was hurting him." He took a bite from the cheese and leaned back in his chair. "Something had been at him. They were jagged, scratchy, like a wild animal had scratched him. Three distinct lines, running right across his back. They just rose up and started to boil. They started to weep pus and all we could do was cool them and dress them. Four hours later they were gone."

"I hope you took a picture." Albert pleaded. Barry nodded.

"Plenty, don't worry. The photos are fine."

Both men stopped to eat and drink for a few minutes. Albert considered a wedge of camembert on a water cracker and said "Negligent driving. Of every law I must have violated, they booked me for negligent driving."

"And gave you the night in the slammer." Barry smirked. Albert nodded.

"What did your wife say?" Barry asked.

The investigator shrugged. "Not the first time I've spent the night away. I don't remember if I told her the truth. Might have made something up.....six hundred dollars worth of culpable driving fines to pay off as well, mind you."

"Won't your boss pay?" Barry asked.

"Not when I don't operate inside the law." Albert said disdainfully.

Barry sighed in sympathy. "What possessed you to drive across anyway?"

"As soon as the guy at my end sent someone from the other end to go and check on the van, he lost contact. I didn't know what to think. Panicked, I suppose. I don't know now if I sped off to get to the van to help Donald-"

"Now he's the.....scientist." Barry interrupted.

"That's right. Or if I wanted to see a street full of flashing lights and giant monsters."

"But you never made it." Barry said.

"And I wish I'd never seen it." Albert began, "They let me call the university at six this morning before I got out to tell them I was going to be there for the service and check, and after they let me out at seven thirty, I went straight to work to get changed and then straight to the university. They'd left the van locked up until lunchtime Friday, still in McMahons' Point, and at one in the afternoon the police scoured it from top to bottom for clues. Bear in mind that at that point it was a case of assault to them, Donald was laying on the floor with his head split open.

"Anyway, the police finished with it at seven o'clock last night. At eleven last night they finished testing Donald in hospital and they called his parents in Palm Beach with the results. The doctors said that the wound was the result of a fall and not an attack, but he had received some terrible shock that would wipe him out for a few days.

"So this morning, I was already at the uni when they brought the van in. It was really amazing, they had a crane in their main store, one of those big ones that goes along a track on the ceiling. The roof lifted away in two panels, and they pulled out the entire test unit out of the back.

"They checked everything. And I mean everything. They watched every second of video, read every printout, they even had the master computer produce a record of every command and function that the cell carried out for the entire time. You should have seen it. I took about fifteen minutes to print out, it ended up on a roll of computer paper as round as a dinner plate.

"So using that, and matching it up with the recordings and readings and the times they were all taken, they put together a complete sequential scenario of everything that happened and when. That man didn't hit one key in that van without them being able to find out."

"So what was decided?" Barry prompted. Albert shrugged.

"Well, nothing - so far. They spent all day getting everything together and collating all the findings. Even so, they can't do much until Donald wakes up in hospital. Donald's been working on it all along, and it'll take his opinions to decide what really happened. Anyway, I didn't stay long after that. They said it'd take hours for technicians to check the wiring and all the guts of the machines, so I just went back to work to catch up on all my paperwork."

"Get it all done?" Barry asked.

Albert smiled and sipped his port. "The pile was a bit daunting. We went to lunch with some of the solicitors instead. My poor secretary spent the rest of the day organising it into manageable quantities so it doesn't look like such a big job."

"You make your secretary come in one weekends?" Barry asked.

Albert shook his head. "Sometimes if there's a big case going on, all the secretaries and assistants have the option of coming in. They get triple time and a half, or some bloody thing. She's making more than I am right now."

Barry laughed good heartedly, and for the first time Albert felt a real kinship with the man, and suddenly became aware of the calming and therapeutic influence he provided.

"So what did you see at the University?" Barry continued.

Albert felt the smile on his face disappear, his brief good countenance carried away by the wind. He cleared his throat and shifted in his chair.

"They.....showed me the video taken as everything was suddenly shut down." And as he looked into the candle flame on the table, the images came into his mind again, spilling over a waterfall and collecting in a pool where they kicked and screamed, rotten, in the water, for him to see.

The scientists had begun the tape. Doctor Gardener - it had been - a tall man with an English accent. He'd said that they'd just watch a few minutes to see if they could pick up anything visual that explained the electromagnetic activity.

The small group, Dr Gardener, Albert, and three junior researchers, had been standing in the small office at the back of the University's main store, under a single dirty fluorescent light, and were watching the tape on the dusty old TV, an ancient top loading VCR perched on top of it. Outside the small makeshift room (the office was built in one of those portable office block fixtures) were the sounds of the other scientists and technicians taking panels off the inside and outside of the test cell, forklifts scooting back and forth under the heavy industrial lamps, a delivery truck idling at the far end.

But when the fuzzy picture came on, they might as well have been a million miles away from the bustle of society.

They were looking up into an amateur style video of a swirling, ghostly light, that coalesced into a demonic face, snarling with glee, filling the picture so fully that they could only see one vengeful eye and filthy snout. It drifted, floated, shook, expelling tendrils of smoky light, and a huge paw had opened and come crashing down towards the picture. The sound hadn't been edited onto the film yet so there was no sound, but they could almost feel the crash as the picture thumped and shook wildly, the view of the monster in the sky shaking back and forth.

Dr Gardener jumped and gasped, a younger female researcher covered her mouth with her hands. Albert put his hands in his trouser pockets to stop them shaking.

The camera panned slowly downward, the apexes of the Bridge arches becoming visible, then the highway, and finally settling on the road.

The street was full of people. Shambling, limping, reaching.
Dead.

Their faces were full of death, wide eyed, shocked at suddenly walking again. From the end of the street and the park beyond, they climbed over the harbour wall, splashing polluted water from their ragged torn clothes and forming a hideous exodus towards the van.

The first of them reached the van, disappeared under the picture and out of view below the camera, but they began to pile up, reaching across each other, trying to climb over each other.

The camera shook softly from hundreds of blows from below. Every time one hit, each person viewing the video could only cringe at the notion of those slimy, bloodless hands beating desperately to get in.

How in the name of Christ he held it together, I don't know, Albert thought. He felt himself transported into the van, those foul zombie figures outside swimming from the harbour floor to get him, to strangle him with their cold wrinkled hands.

The camera jolted and began panning. Slowly tracing the view across the corpses of the men and women who died nineteen years before.

"I think he realised." Albert said quietly, "And wanted to record it properly." He realised he hadn't said it at all, but that it had just been an incoherent croak of terror in his throat. One of the researchers turned and left the office hurriedly, banging his shoulder on the door in his haste to leave. Nobody else noticed.

The picture suddenly shook - wildly. Albert jumped with shock. The van shook back and forth on it's shocks until it was still.

The picture flickered and disappeared in a burst of static snow, and reappeared stationery, on the Bridge once again. There was a burst of light, yellow, like an special effect from a movie of an explosion, superimposed over the real image. The camera suddenly panned in on the north end of the highway. It shook and raced inwards, focusing eventually on a white car, on its roof, spinning frantically while figures scurried back and forth in fear, avoiding the vehicle.

The picture panned back out to encompass the whole Bridge, in a single dizzying movement, as if the camera had been launched back through space to the van at the speed of light.

A train crossed. It raced out towards the centre of the Bridge. An old one.

A flickering light appeared, *behind* the picture. A phantom light of a long, lazy arch. Drifting and shimmering, it was barely visible.

The image of the train trembled, as if a ripple of air had passed like a wave in front of it, and solidified, seeming to break *through* something to reach the real world.

It crashed through the tracks, punching the beams below the road aside, snapping them like twigs, so horrific that the small band of viewers imagined they could hear the clonging of metal.

The train hit the water, sending a spray into the air as each carriage crashed down behind it. By the time the eighth carriage had hit the surface, they had begun to exhaust explosions of bubbles, churning the surface, as they sank. For several nightmare seconds people were visible

bashing against the windows desperately before the water inside engulfed them and dragged them back in.

Tiny pinpricks of light began racing back and forth along the highway, coming together, rolling over and launching into the air to crash back down.

The picture flickered again, and reappeared.

One of the researchers swore under his breath, and Dr Gardener gasped again. Albert's eyes felt as large as saucers, and his heart thundered against his ribs.

The van was perched on top of the Bridge, at the apex of the centre arch, balanced on the shaft where Albert knew was a service stairway. Right on the other side of that very shaft, Llewellyn Price had fallen to a grisly death. The camera rolled uneasily from side to side, and there was a jolt and it started to roll and crash down the shaft, towards the vertical. In his mind, Albert could see a giant van rolling down the shaft of the Harbour Bridge, even though he knew it had never left Crescent Street, McMahons's Point.

He saw himself inside, thrown around like a rag doll, bones snapped, limbs dislocated, watching the view of the shaft roll away underneath and feeling the van plummet, rolling slowly over and over, the cell filled with falling objects, until there would be one final ear shattering jolt. And maybe the camera happened to be pointing at the water as the van hit.....

The picture had disappeared, static had filled the screen. The video had captured the last living moments of the van's test cell. As the technicians had discovered but which hadn't been reported to Albert yet, every wire in the machine had short circuited, and every independent computer arm of the system, from the master recorder down, had been erased.

MARV was in two parts, one a van with now-useless shocks, the other several million dollars worth of empty computers.

Albert blinked, realised that he had been staring into the candle. He also realised that, despite not remembering doing or saying a single thing for the past five minutes (except reliving the awe and terror of the ordeal), he had related the whole story to Barry. He looked up across the table at Barry's pinched expression and sighed heavily.

"And that's what happened."

"And they haven't theorised anything at all?"

"Well, they're scientists. They were bursting with theories. Speculation, really, but as I said, only Donald can really connect everything." Barry nodded and leaned back, reaching up into the air to stretch his back and arms, groaning softly as he did so. To Albert he looked like a circus elephant trying to stand up tall on a tiny stand.

Barry yawned deeply, moved his chair back a bit, and leant forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "What about the van, then?" he asked.

Albert sighed. "Jesus, the bloody van.....After they took the test cell out, the tow truck took it to the dealer for a service. Pollack Ford, it was, in Petersham. They finished about four yesterday afternoon. And you know it's like trying to deal with government services. The University got the results of the service at about four thirty and when I called to find out what happened they wouldn't tell me. I had to go through a different department, spent half an hour arguing with some Tongan woman that they already had my credentials and I had legal access to the results, and even after I spoke to the supervisor of the department I had to pay thirty five dollars disclosure fee."

"And you'd just walked in and watched the whole thing a few hours before?" Barry asked.

Albert gestured agreement and shook his head. "They're all the bloody same, I don't know how anything's gotten done through this whole thing. Anyway, I still didn't get anything until ten o'clock this morning, and I had to go and copy the file myself. And that's after going to the records department in Ultimo, then they told me it'd be in accounts payable down the road, and they said it'd be back at the store with the van and the test cell."

Barry shook his head in sympathy. The legacy of ineptitude of government departments dated well back into the twentieth century and there was still no end in sight. Every now and again some services got a healthy injection of competition, like the phone services in the early 90s and the postal service in the 2010's, but for over sixty years the train systems, tertiary education, social security and customs services (to name a few) had degraded and crumbled beyond national shame.

"Still," Albert said, sitting up straight and shaking off the memory of specialised departmental efficiency, "I got the results.....And after watching the video and looking at the other tests, I wish I hadn't."

"Why?" Barry asked, glancing around for a waitress to bring them more port.

"Something's really wrong there, Barry," Albert said, tones of fear in his voice, "Obviously it's gone way beyond construction problems. I'm starting to think this big injunction that's going to fill the papers for the next month is completely groundless. That van is stuffed. Nothing the Bridge could produce from faulty materials nineteen years ago could cause what I saw in that report."

"Albert, I've told you about my patient,-"

"Yes gentlemen?" came a voice. Both men looked up and there was the one of the waitresses with her tray. Barry gave her fifteen dollars and said "Two more please."

The girl smiled, nodded and left. Albert and Barry watched her go, Barry craning his neck to see her slender bottom teasing them from the confines of the tight black miniskirt. He turned back to Albert, the investigator shaking his head in amazement.

"Few years between her and us, mate." he smiled.

"Only if you feel them, son," Barry confided, "I reckon I could show a nineteen year old arse like that a few things." They both laughed the way men do after a lewd joke or sexist comment. They way men do because they have to be men.

Because Barry couldn't say what a treasure it was to have Julia after all these years and for her to love him and be attracted to him despite his size, because Albert couldn't say what a miserable home life he had with a woman that meant nothing except a facade for society, how filthy and humiliated he felt having to pull himself off to *Penthouse* centrefolds like a fourteen year old locked in the bathroom when he was almost thirty nine years old and married, how sad he felt every time he and his secretary checked out of a motel because it felt so wonderful to hold a woman in your arms.

They laughed they way men do, especially Australian men, especially middle aged men, and especially businessmen. Both men harboured very secret preferences (as did eighty nine percent of professional men) of working with women. They were entranced and inspired by the honesty.

"His name's Dale, I've told you about him." Barry continued. Albert nodded, draining his glass. "Last week he and his psychiatrist decided to see a parapsychologist." Albert froze, then swallowed hard. It might have been Barry's imagination, but he seemed to shudder.

"This patient of mine is convinced that the Harbour Bridge is haunted."

"Barry, you didn't tell me any of this when you came to me."

"Christ, Albert, what would you have said if I'd come into your office telling you to organise an exorcist? The only idea I had was that the construction was dangerous." Albert nodded, conceding. Barry went on. "I didn't want anything to do with it. I've even thought about forbidding them from including him in any more experiments. Since this started, he's been hit by a bus, been in shock, nearly died more than once. That's in four weeks.....but I realised today that the only reason I wanted it stopped was because I was too bloody frightened that he might be right. An injunction for construction flagrancy is big, but it's normal.

It's.....worldly. It can be written down on paper in Town Hall and followed by political scientists. Try to imagine a *haunting!*"

Neither spoke again until the drinks arrived, and again they watched the waitress move off, their eyes tracing every inch of her bottom and legs and thinking what they would do if they could get their hands on them.

"Anyway, the van." Barry said.

"Yeah," Albert agreed, blinking and coming back to the situation at hand, "well, they ran a complete check, top to bottom, and did a full service. The shocks were almost gone. I thought it was just that they were too old and hadn't been checked, you know what government spending's like. But the mechanics said that the van had been subject to rough going, bad enough to wear the shock absorbers down to nothing."

"How would that happen?" Barry asked.

"Either a very rough road, or.....severe rocking. Twenty minutes of a vehicle that heavy rocking from side to side was enough to wear brand new shocks right down. So the scientist trapped in the van wasn't hallucinating.....and I don't know if your patient is hallucinating."

"Something really was shaking it from side to side." Barry thought out loud, taking a sip of port and swilling it in his mouth so it burned a little.

"Something bloody big," Albert agreed, "big enough to move a two ton piece of equipment. And that doesn't include the machinery inside the cell. The whole lot weighs about three and a half. It drives like a bus, you should see it. When they picked it up, it was laying away from the kerb, too much so to be bad parking. There were scrapings of rubber marking the path of the wheels anyway. Something had hit it hard enough to shift it on the road. They said that nothing short of a collision with a train or a charging rhino could do that."

"What else happened?" Barry said, terrified and fascinated.

"Dents. Body and panel damage. The wheels needed realigning, the thing had taken such a beating."

"From the people all over the street? Surely they were hallucinations. Nobody could organise a hoax like that."

"No, these were dents. On the roof, On the panelling, hard enough to chip the paint.

"So whatever shook it-"

"Barry, it wasn't shaken.....it was *hit*. By something huge."

"Well, what about all the people in the street? Didn't you say they hammered the side and tried to get in?"

"That's right, and I don't want to tell you what they found, because I had nightmares about it all night last night. I haven't had nightmares

since I was fifteen, Barry." Silence, and then Albert told him anyway. I'll be bugged if I'm carrying the whole burden, big guy.

"They found traces of dried green matter on the walls. There was none on the roof, and none around the very top of the van. Some dickhead junior mechanic apparently peeled a bit off and tasted it, or something. They said it smelt of salt, and tasted of salt water.

"It was seaweed. Seaweed from people who had swum from the bottom of the harbour and climbed up the street, and bashed their fists against the van."

Barry stared into his drink.

"I know how it feels, Barry. I've spent my life in an environment of logic and truth. This insults my sense of knowledge, everything I've learned. But it's irrefutable. And I've got worse." Barry looked up, and took a bigger swig of port. Please, he prayed to a God he had never believed in, please let me get stoned, blind drunk, and stay like it until the sun comes up.

"The best news I can give you is that the transmission and spark plug cables were absolutely fried. They were melted so bad they'd fused to the insides of the rubber insulation hoses. Every drop of oil, in the brakes, gears, engine and the water in the battery, had cooked and evaporated away.

"And in the top of the van, behind the cab, there's a small transmission and valve system that distributes the coolant to the mechanical workings of the test cell. It runs from the engine coolant.

"One of the valves was blocked as soon as Donald brought the cell on line. It was overheating. He ran a test and saw it straight away. When he realised what it was, he isolated it, closed it down, and ran the coolant through the other valves. The master computer report told us that.

"But when the mechanics went to check the valve - obviously they had a list of things to check from the University - it was still overheated. And it had been shut off five hours before. The van wasn't even working any more, and this valve was too hot for them to touch.

"They checked every piece of machinery around the valve, and they were all okay. They thought it might be coolant stuck in the jammed valve, so they took it out, cleaned it out thoroughly, and left it for twenty minutes to cool down, which it did.

They put it back in, and five minutes later.....it was red hot again." Barry only stared.

"They took it out and replaced it." He stared at Barry. "I'll give you one guess." Barry opened his mouth to say 'it overheated as well', but closed it again. Albert only nodded. Barry shifted himself in his chair again. He glanced at his watch. It was quarter to twelve. He rubbed his face roughly and said

"Something tells me that's not all."

Albert shrugged. "Where do you want me to start? Two of the mechanics had a fight because one of them put the car in gear so it wouldn't roll off the ramps, you know those little backyard ones you drive up on so you can get underneath? It rolled off and nearly ran over this apprentice. When they checked it, it had been put into neutral, and he accused one of the other guys there, who swears up and down he didn't do it.

"Also, they all said that the temperature in the back of the van, especially when they were checking the valve, felt about fifteen degrees.....But the very last thing the report mentioned was the scratch."

"What scratch?" Barry asked tonelessly, his heart already thumping. Albert patted his pockets, searching, and withdrew an old folded envelope from his inside coat pocket. He took a pen from the breast pocket of his shirt and passed them across.

"Draw the marks you saw on your patient's back." he said. Barry thought for a minute, and drew the three lines as best as he could remember on the back of the paper, below the flap. He gave it to Albert, who stared hard at it for several seconds. He looked up at Barry and cleared his throat.

"There were three marks across the duco on the back door panel. The mechanics said they were made by a sharp implement. They suggested screwdrivers, but with all the other considerations, the rest of us immediately thought of a claw mark."

He held up the envelope. "It's almost identical to this."

The following morning, Sunday, Albert received a call from Dr Gardener from the University. Albert saw it as the perfect opportunity to complain about the level of communication within the ranks of the University and TAFE department, and his lack of satisfactory service in trying to reach the results of the service, and was passionately doing so until Dr Gardener excused himself for interrupting and told Albert what he himself had just learnt.

The thirty two year old mechanic from Pollack Ford who had removed, reinstalled, and replaced the valve with the recurring temperature problem had returned home that afternoon to his twenty nine year old wife, two year old girl and three month old boy.

At four seventeen a.m. on Sunday morning, he died instantly in bed from an embolism in the brain.

It had been Dale that called Tim first. He had opened his eyes in a very familiar room, the recovery room in the AMA test cell, where he had undergone treatment for prosthetic magnetisation. Barry had been with him when he awoke and they had talked at length about what had happened. Dale remembered it all, as if it had happened only two minutes before.

It was six hours later, at four in the afternoon, Friday, February 3. At the same time, Donald Chin-Hsei Lambert was in St George hospital undergoing tests, and Albert Dimitriou was in jail for the night, something he thought they did with the old drunk in tiny outback towns when he kicked over one signpost too many.

They talked quietly, calmly. Dale couldn't feel the crushing weight of the terror, but he remembered it clearly. As he explained, it was something as real as the office around them (even if invisible), something that hit him full force between the shoulderblades, hard enough so that he felt his spine forced outwards and bash into his stomach, forcing bile and spit up his throat and across the room.

Sitting and talking to Barry, Dale slowly realised the link between the onslaught they had suffered and the other horrors that had plagued him. At his suggestion, they listened to the four thirty news on the radio, and sat in stunned silence while the announcer told them about the young forensic officer who had fallen to his death from the centre apex of the Harbour Bridge, shortly after a barrage of deadly radiation from the metal that left the rest of the team untouched.

Barry had a horrible sinking weight in his chest as he called George Slatten & Bromigal. After a deluge of questions from Steve Winterman, the regional director of the firm, Barry was finally told that Albert was in jail in Sydney's Park Street police station.

Barry called the police station and was told that Albert was allowed to receive calls, but only briefly.

Albert and Barry hurriedly related their stories, and it didn't take Albert Einstein to realise that the events were linked. The coinciding time was enough. They agreed to meet the following night in Como for a drink after Albert was released in the morning.

When Barry returned to Dale's bedside and told him that there had been more supernatural activity on the Bridge, and that this time a young University researcher was in hospital, Dale was convinced. Barry tried to argue, but found himself without grounds. Dale called Tim Hacker and told him what he knew.

The first thing Tim did was approach the police. He had a fairly tight knit connection with them, since they were almost always involved

with investigations that passed on to him (especially the recent Waylan Pakesh case) and requested his own investigation.

Several years before, when Tim realised that he would be consulting police files quite often to research his cases, he approached a solicitor for advice and took a proposed contract to the NSW Police records section. After a series of interviews conducted by phone and meetings in the administration offices in the city, Tim was awarded status of unlimited access to open and closed police files, unless of special circumstances assigned by the chief investigating officer.

He had secured his link and was on good terms with Daniella, a sweet and lovely young receptionist at Police Headquarters in Goulburn Street, Surry Hills, whom he contacted for whatever he needed. She faxed him copies of statements, photographs, dictated reports to him, and after visiting the office to pick up documents or packages a few times, Tim had asked her out.

They had had dinner in a restaurant in Beverley Hills and had gone back to her flat in Bankstown where they had drunk coffee, listened to romantic records until two thirty in the morning, and made love on one of her dining room chairs so vigorously that the backrest had cracked.

They'd seen each other several times since then on an irregular basis, and both thoroughly enjoyed each other's company. The previous year, Daniella had become engaged to a junior detective sergeant at the headquarters, but she and Tim still went out every now and again, strictly as friends. Tim missed their long distance love affair. It had been so cool and fresh but exciting. She had been the first girl he had been sexually involved with since high school, when he entered the eleven year hiatus of all-work-and-no-play, and he had relished the relaxation of seeing a good friend every now and again, enjoying her company, even becoming lovers for a few sweet hours every couple of weeks, and still not have to give up his life, any more than she should have to (or wanted to) give up hers.

Daniella had sounded pleased to hear from Tim, and had told him everything from the case file, from the radiation poisoning on the Bridge to the University van that suffered some sort of attack from an unknown electrical source.

She had called him back within the hour. The senior detective in charge of the Bridge safety (and subsequent accident) investigation had given approval for Tim to conduct his own search and tests of the van. However, the police would be searching it for evidence until late evening and then were legally obliged to turn the van over to the University for testing by their technicians.

Tim contacted the University and obtained permission to have the van to himself after they'd completed their investigation. Upon advice

from the police force, they agreed to disclose all the information they had to Tim.

The van was being transported to the University the following morning, Saturday. At the same time, Albert Dimitriou was walking into the sunshine on Park Street in his dust-stained and smelly suit, his pockets full of traffic offences, where he made straight for the offices of George Slatten & Bromigal. He showered and changed into the clothes he always kept at the office and went straight to the university.

Later that morning, after viewing the nightmare on film that Donald had endured in real life, and watching some of the testing, Albert left to return to Slatten & Bromigal, and not long after, Tim arrived with his arsenal of equipment.

For the rest of that day, until the University Store closed at three thirty p.m., he took readings and collected his information.

He returned home and made himself check phone messages at the office, have a shower and get into some clean clothes, and make a late lunch. He was itching to get into the information, run it all through the computers, test the samples, and read the reams (& rolls) of paper which, as he would find out, would provide him with his answer in plain and simple English.

But he was too disciplined to jump straight into it. He knew he would be a lot more open and clear headed with a nice meal, a clean body and clothes, and ten minutes of routine to wind himself down. He'd had a day of crawling through open panels and counting wires, scraping carpet, folding paper, taking photographs, video, IF meter readings, copying videotape, taking verbal and written notes, cross referencing, reading, comparing, thinking, hooking up, disconnecting, and recording.

But it was the Sun Herald the next morning, Sunday, that brought it home to Tim. He'd come a long way last night with the calculations and observations, but before he'd begun this morning he'd made himself walk to the shop and get the newspaper and sit quietly with a cup of tea.

The story hadn't broken all yesterday because the Bridge was clouded with secrecy following the accident. The police cordoned off both ends with armed guards, and police helicopters patrolled the harbour and city skies for any media or thrill seekers.

The only thing that had reached the papers yesterday were blurry photos taken by people lining the shores or using telephoto lenses from buildings. All they showed were the Bridge, with the highway covered with makeshift shelters, canvas tents, medical facilities, and police, ambulance, government and fire vehicles everywhere.

Anything the papers or TV news had to say about it was speculation. Of course there were protests, and Tim agreed there should

be. People were frightened (fuelled naturally by all the rumours). Another accident occurred in their city - in their *home*, and twenty four hours was far too long to keep something of this magnitude covered up under bureaucratic secrecy. It was 21st century Australia, not 1960's Russia.

The Police Department had issued a statement late on Saturday night telling the public everything. A police officer had died during testing because of a sudden burst of radiation "from some external source", and more forensic scientists, this time fully prepared, were scouring the Bridge for the fault. They were using state of the art detection and eradication equipment and would 'clean' the entire area. The police commissioner was confident that the Bridge would be open for business as usual no later than Tuesday.

The entire statement was all government jargon that didn't fool anyone. They didn't know what happened, and wished it would go away.

The cover caption of the Herald; **UNSAFE**, gave Tim a creepy icicle of déjà vu. Below, a picture of the Bridge, and along the bottom of the page, *Police Officer Death During Safety Tests. Full Story & Pictures P 2,3,5, Editorial P 20.*

Three forensic officers had been rigged up at the arch, way up in the centre where Dale and Tim had been only two days before. A sudden, inexplicable burst of radiation had emanated from the Bridge. Resulting tracer tests by police forensic and science divisions had pinpointed the emanation area as being the apex of the centre arch, the figurehead of the entire structure.

There had been a small team around the area, including a young forensic officer rigged up with a simple abseiling cable system from the apex of the arch, dangling a few metres down as he tested the faulty connection that had let go of the cable car on Thursday.

(There was a short paragraph praising fate that the accident had happened on a weekday and the cable car was empty, but Tim knew better. The memory gave him icy chills up his spine. He still wasn't sleeping quite right, haunted by images of the distance below his feet and what would've happened if he hadn't held on so tight).

There had been an inexplicable burst of radiation (*similar to the Chernobyl disaster of the late 1980's* the newspaper had said with hallmark accuracy and integrity) that had apparently only affected the man closest to the apex. He suffered severe radiation poisoning, immediate and irreparable.

Instead of being able to hang on as he dangled from his tether, his own dead weight caused the rigging to undo and the man fell to his death on the ground, mercifully without any knowledge (or feeling).

One of the effects of radiation is molecular disintegration. In simple terms, the young policeman's body simply wouldn't have been as

strongly held in one piece. He'd most probably begun to fuse with his clothes, and when he hit the ground, he would have been no more than a splattered puddle of liquefied flesh and bone.

So now Tim sat at his desk at the office, working meticulously on his PC. He was only wearing a pair of old board shorts and had an ancient blue striped business shirt hanging, open, from him, one which was long overdue for the Long Walk to St Vincent De Paul. Still, he had mused while putting it on, what better to wear for a Saturday morning at home, changing the course of world history, as the heat came rolling through the study window like waves from down the street. The seven o'clock news had said that the temperature was already twenty eight and expected to reach thirty four before lunchtime. The beaches were filling up fast; the carpark at Bondi Beach was already turning people away.

The string of blistering weather was supposed to last until Wednesday or Thursday. Low pressure fronts were charging across the Nullarbor plain and leaving dust storms in their wake. On Thursday evening they would stir the steaming air over the coast and produce rain and electrical storms.

The Bureau of Meteorology said that, following the low pressure fronts from the west, north easterly winds were heading down from the northern deserts, bringing even more boiling temperatures.

There would be no release from the sky for Sydney this summer. It lay at the bottom of a steaming cauldron in a soup of gases, pressures and temperatures, and God was giving it a good stir with His lightning-rod ladle.

But the weather didn't interest Tim. This morning, he had cracked the biggest truth facing mankind, and now, he was documenting his findings, a process which helped theorise, design, and study further. What he was working on was a document that would change the science of parapsychology forever.

He was correlating data that, together, had proven the existence of ghosts.

It had been a hard thing to grasp. He'd had to refer to several great and scientific works (as well as hundreds of obscure ones), from Einstein's theory of relativity and Newton's theorems of gravity to modern works on the supernatural, including findings and theories by an occultist, exorcist and specialist in supernatural phenomena (in its religious implications), father Gerard O'Malley, and Lloyd Auerbach, one of the fathers of parapsychology, from the U.S.

And even now he had to grapple to keep the threads together. In the scientific world, the idea that A equals B was disappointingly misleading. It wasn't as easy as being able to say that the souls of the

dead walk the Earth. It was about electromagnetic resonance, the dimension of time, wave frequency and mass displacement. And it wasn't even as glamorous as the walking dead either, it was the influence of the physical world by something outside that world harnessing the laws that governed it, and turning them to its purpose.

And, like all scientific discoveries, the entire truth didn't emerge in one swift shout of "Eureka!". Tim had no idea if the thing was human, where it resided, or what its purpose was.

He only knew he had checked hundreds of documented cases, found common factors, and before long, had been able to predict the outcome of those cases. He had also identified eighty percent of them, even the most enthralling, as hoaxes.

The "tape recorder" theory of the paranormal hadn't been superseded. On the contrary, it was the basis for his findings. At certain times along the time line, an event occurred in our world. It produced an outflow of electromagnetism strong enough to connect the physical world to a field of electromagnetic energy in the next (whether it was Heaven or Hell or the Omega Dimension didn't matter one way or another - he happily left that to the psychics and mystics). A sort of chronological "black hole" was opened between two places, maybe times, even people, surrounding the event and it's subsequent field of electromagnetism, extracting the energy from the electromagnetic dimension (he detested using the word dimension - it conjured up too many images of 1950's sci-fi movies) and manifesting itself in the form it had been produced - light, sound, whatever.

Not only did it open the doors to the replaying of the event, it created a channel for whatever energy the source created and chose to manifest here. Poltergeists consistently centred around modern, steady households, particularly those with young pre-pubescent children. The reason was that the pituitary gland has begun to fire in earnest, overshadowing the normal electrical pulses of the brain with colossal power surges of hormone increase, rapid rate growth, and particularly sexual awakening and falling in love, which, as the strongest emotions in most thirteen year old's lives, produced the most electrical power. They become human conductors.

Lightning can't discharge until the charge overcomes the resistance by air and water for the trip, as every meteorologist knows. And the heavily resistant path from the electromagnetic dimension to the physical world became easy with the electrical powerhouses of young developing brains.

And the manifestations, be they poltergeists or apparitions (or simply a room where flowers consistently die for no apparent reason, even when carefully tended) weren't restricted to the physical locale of

the event. They had struck out, so far, up to twenty three kilometres away.

The key was the human brain and the power it was capable of. When the Sydney Harbour Bridge collapsed, there were seven hundred people involved, and that didn't include the thousands of terrified spectators. The stronger the activity in the brain - what we perceive as emotions - the more electricity is produced. And, in an environment where the surrounding matter was almost seventy percent metal (mostly framework in the buildings and the Bridge itself), the entire city became a giant electromagnetic conductor, buzzing with energy, produced by a billion volts of human fear.

The energy produced was undetectable at the time, being only potential energy instead of active energy. But the total was more than enough to provide a channel of transfer (portal, fantasy writers would call it) for the electromagnetic dimension, leaving a cleave in the world that could at any time unleash an outpouring of energy in the form of emissions, anywhere from light to infra-red to ultraviolet to radio waves to gamma radiation.

And as for perception, why Dale Milling alone seemed to see more than anyone else was a matter of interpretation. It appeared that the manifestations could be detected by all and sundry, in any form to any number of people, all at once. But that was also at the mercy of the energy emerging. Out of twenty people, one might see a small unidentified shape high in the stratosphere at night, but if a giant star ship drifted only hundreds of feet above the ground in a crowded street at midday, it becomes difficult for the output to be hidden.

But it had still consistently manifested in forms specifically intended to invoke fear. As far as Tim had concluded, it was the fear that produced the electrical energy that again provided a conductor and Earthly magnet, creating an endless loop of entry points where the energy could keep its strength. It was a physical law, after all, that energy cannot be destroyed but merely changes forms, the same as running water selects the easiest path down a mountain. In other words, the corny old axiom was true. It knows what scares you, and feeds off your fear.

But there was one thing that irritated Tim. Something that didn't fit in with this one case. Why, out of everyone, was Dale's vision so keen? Tim's own equations said so - because he was the most terrified of the Bridge. After what he went through in the fall, he really *was* the catalyst, he was the conductor, because more than anyone else, his brain was alive with fears, lightning bolts of mental electricity, and all in response to being back at the site again.

But why did Dale alone seem to be the intended recipient for the torrent of energy flow? Tim thought of Waylan Pakesh, the Turkish

psychic who had died in a hail of bullets. The paranormal activity had been incredible surrounding the man. The movement of the refrigerator had remained unsolved, although Tim had studied it from every conceivable angle and had concluded telekinesis, only now he viewed telekinesis as the ultimate paranormal phenomena, being able to control the flow of energy from the electromagnetic dimension.

Pakesh hadn't been suffering any anxiety or psychological trauma. But regardless of the apparent differences between the psychic and Dale Milling, there had to be something to link the two. Something, in each case, was attractive to the energy like a lightning rod to a thunderbolt.

Of course, he had to expect some fame from being the first man in history to prove how and why the supernatural worked. He would avoid it all he could, though. He wanted only to enrich his field, not line his shelves with gaudy trophies and awards.

He would release the findings through the university as his contract allowed, but would still attract some starry eyed students from university circles. But he couldn't complain. If it wasn't for the university, none of this rush of euphoric discovery would have happened.

It was the University of Sydney Physics and Metallurgy Department research van that had provided the answers. After police forensic had combed the van from top to bottom, Tim was allowed to search and study it for evidence of the attack from beyond. He gained access on a technicality, being that whatever phenomena had occurred inside and surrounding the van had been obviously connected with the Bridge, which fell within the jurisdiction of his research.

The young doctor who had been trapped in the maelstrom was still in hospital, two days later, recovering from concussion and memory loss. He still had no idea what he'd been through (Donald Chin-Hsei Lambert was sleeping the sleep of the mentally assaulted and would be until the following Wednesday afternoon).

Tim had procured hundreds of reports taken directly from readings, measurements, recordings, and findings from the study that the computers on the van continued to monitor throughout the ordeal. He had videotape copies of the camera recordings, and more fascinating than anything else had been, reams of printing of equations, mathematics and physics that, after exhaustive research and interpretation that had led to a hangover-like state that morning, had laid it all out for Tim to put together, step by step.

It gave formulae to prove the existence of another plane of electromagnetic energy, it provided equations of light speed relativity and quantum mechanics to show that the two worlds could be linked, they outlined processes in the human brain that provided the magnets for

energy, and reasoned how that energy could manifest itself in any form, within the known laws of physics.

Tim secretly knew it did one more thing. This wasn't electromagnetic energy, or electricity, or infra-red light. It was the answer, in plain English, to the question 'Do ghosts exist?'.

Because the source of paranormal phenomena was one of intelligence.

Secretly, Tim felt with excitement and dread like none he had ever felt, that he hadn't only proven the existence of ghosts.

He felt that he had proven the existence of God.

VI

Lincoln Place, Edgecliff, was a long, leafy street that should have been called an avenue. It was full of two storey houses, a lot of them tudor style, with second floor galleries hanging over well tended gardens where huge bougainvillea and wisteria bushes sprawled along the fronts of the houses.

Many had short fences or walls along the front of the properties, and many simply had natural barriers of hedge, far reaching conifers, or rose bushes, high enough so that only the second storeys were visible.

It was a pretty but less pretentious area of the Eastern Suburbs. The elite and rich lived in the Bay suburbs along the northern edge like Double Bay and Rose Bay, but even Edgecliff had a tiny upper class street, a stone's throw from Edgecliff road, the main road that led down to Bondi Junction, and New South Head Road, which connected Sydney Harbour's South Head with the city.

Lincoln Place was almost the equivalent of the bay suburbs. Most of the driveways were filled with Mercedes', Volvos and Statesmans, the houses shutting away the sleeping doctors, solicitors and business consultants who owned them.

Number seventeen wasn't the best or worst house in the street. It was one of the tudor style houses, a symmetrical building with double front doors of heavy oak, set back in a small entry alcove from the front of the building.

Wide polished wood-framed windows were set either side of the door and ran nearly to each edge of the house. The garage was set apart from the rest of the house, at the very end of the yard, the approach leading alongside the house and yard into the single tiny replica of the house in front of it, including the tudor panelling and decorated gable.

The approach to the garage was a light brown brick driveway, and a narrow garden filled with ankle-high flowering plants ran the length of the house beside it.

The second floor had three gable windows jutting from the front of the roof where it started to slant upwards, with light curtains tied into the edges of each one.

At one end of the roof, among the wide tan tiles, a small squat chimney sprouted, and a tiny weathervane sat at the opposite end, one the owner of the house thought ugly as sin but never got around to having removed.

The front of the garden was lined with chest high bushes of flowers of every kind and colour, sprouting happily and creating a blaze of pretty colours and clouds of bees.

Behind the flowers there was a large area of neatly trimmed grass that stopped at a slate tile path running in front of the house and out-cropping doorway. The boundary of the property was only a few inches from the edge of the house, and between the house wall and the wooden paling fence were tall bushes of gardenia that came into the yard and skirted the property to the front wall of bushes.

The day was lovely. The expansive leafy trees along the street provided a canopy from the scalding heat of the sun, and shattered the sunlight into a thousand tiny beams that fell through the leaves and showered the ground like shining coins fallen from the pocket of some great celestial god.

The quiet was permeated only by the occasional car engine as the very infrequent traffic rolled past, or kids riding past on bikes or skateboards and shouting excitedly.

And on the lawn of number seventeen, a three pronged garden sprinkler wheeled lazily around, half-heartedly throwing streams of water around a small circle at one end of the grass.

Inside was a small foyer area which branched off in either direction, with the stairs directly ahead. The dining, living and entertaining areas were all adjoined on the ground floor, at the left hand side of the house, and combined, they ran the depth of the building.

At the far left corner, a large dark bookcase ran adjacent to the sliding back door into the yard. The long glass doors had soft white net curtains drawn across them, letting a filtered and sultry light into the room.

The dining suite beside the bookcase was also dark. The chairs were high and thickly built, the table was sturdy, its legs wide and roundly carved, the tabletop almost six inches thick. The table had taken six men to move in through the back door.

The vase of dried flowers that usually sat in the very centre of the table was shoved to one end, and laying across the table was Vicki Holt, who had lived at number seventeen Lincoln Place for four years.

Vicki was wearing a forest green garter belt and matching stockings, her best Gossard set which she usually associated with a specific dress that hung upstairs in her wardrobe, one that had grown quite tight around the stomach for her. She loved the dress and had been heartbroken that everyday pantyhose had produced a horrible bump beneath the fabric, until she thought of buying a garter belt - which was not only invisible but held her tummy in.

She'd never seen the garter belt as a tool of eroticism before. But now Dale was standing over her, the muscles across his back rippling beneath his skin, leaning his torso across her naked top half, his face buried deliciously between her breasts, sucking and chewing at her.

Vicki's legs were hooked around Dale's waist and she picked up his rhythm, using her heels to drag his buttocks towards her, into her.

She reached up to drag her hair away from her neck so it was splayed out above her head, and returned her hands to the soft exploration of his back.

Last night she had told herself that she didn't want him to stay. She felt the tiniest bit threatened by the speed of their affair. Of course it was just sex so far - most adult relationships were for awhile, weren't they?

Of course they weren't, a voice kept telling her. There were no adult relationships. There was no adult way to fall in love with a man. It didn't care if it turned your career upside down, didn't care if it stopped you eating, stopped you sleeping, made your heartbeat quicken in a euphoria of anticipation.

It didn't even care about sex.

Dale had come to her house for dinner the previous night, and at around ten o'clock, when he began to comment that he should leave, her heart sank. The thought of him leaving for his flat while she stayed in her big comfortable house alone was unbearable.

Falling in love didn't even care if you felt like a slut inviting a man into your bed the first time he visited your house. It just made you realise that it would mean a lovely pair of arms around you, sweet, soft breath in your hair, and warm set of lips to wish you goodnight against the back of your bare shoulder. Vicki realised she hadn't been cold, physically cold, since a week ago, the Sunday they had first gone out. Falling in love kept you perpetually warm.

She didn't even know if she wanted to make love. She supposed that it was part of the whole deal - expected, in a way. Wasn't it weird not to?

Dale had nervously and excitedly accepted her offer, and as she waited in bed for him in her prettiest short nightie (instead of her daggy, stretched Nike T-shirt and underpants), he used the bathroom and came out in a pair of flannelette pyjama bottoms (in an almost comic stroke of

fate, she kept them in the spare bedroom for when her dad came visiting from Shoalhaven and stayed).

He had climbed into bed smelling of aftershave, also kept in the bathroom for her father, sweet minty toothpaste breath and shower-cleanliness.

Vicki had no underwear on under her nightie in readiness for Dale, but he'd just slid in beside her, held her close, and they'd talked quietly in the dark until four thirty in the morning, never once presuming, when they fell asleep closely entwined, waking at nine a.m.

Which had led them downstairs. Vicki had woken up, and the beautiful sunlight streaming into the bedroom and the gorgeous man beside her made her feel *alive*, bursting with energy, and awakening the desire that had been so sweetly forsaken last night.

Listening to Dale's slow breathing, watching his dark brown hair, she had pulled the nightie up above her navel and touched herself as softly as she could manage, clutching her own waist, daydreaming while the warm air teased the net curtains and her skin.

She'd changed into the garter belt, stockings and the briefs that matched, and teased Dale as she'd woken him, telling him she was going downstairs to make him some breakfast.

Not long after, he had followed her into the kitchen and helped her as best as he could, seemingly a shadow of his former timid self as he stole every opportunity to brush and squeeze her waist above the lace of the garter belt, kiss her slowly against the side of her neck, or pinch and rub her bottom playfully.

They played the game for half an hour while Vicki cooked and Dale helped by getting things from the fridge and cupboards, until one of his kisses became slower and serious.

Vicki was standing at the sink scraping the frypan when Dale brushed the hair of her nape aside and kissed her softly below the ear, working his way around the front. Vicki closed her eyes and couldn't keep her neck still, her head bobbed at his every touch, her muscles melted. She felt his hands rub her stomach and squeeze her breasts, and he turned her slowly around, pulling the panties from her. He followed them down her legs, planting burning kisses down her neck, chest navel and across her stomach and pubic mound. Vicki buried her hands in his hair and leaned her head back, lost in heaven as his hands gripped her around the tops of her legs.

She sensed his apprehension, ever-present in his personality, and led him by the hand to the dining area, laying back on the dining room table, shoving the dried flowers away, and drawing her inside him.

At first it was a long, lazy boat ride across a sunset-lit ocean, sweet, deep, long and slow. She had lain, her eyes closed, feeling his

weight on top of her, relishing the feel of his skin against her arms more than anything else.

But now, Dale became more insistent. His weight crashed hotly down on her and his breathing became a series of ecstatic groans. Vicki opened her eyes and watched him, planting her lips to his, reaching around and squeezing his buttocks as hard as she could as he came.

VII

They lay together, panting, fresh sweat glistening on them, kissing softly.

"I have to tell you now," Dale said, "I was terrified when you asked me to stay."

"Why?" Vicki smiled. She was astounded. Before, in the kitchen, when they were playing a wonderful game of tease and sexual build-up that almost made her explode, he had seemed a strong, mature man in control of what he wanted. Now, the lost boy was back, with his tiny space in the world that neither affected nor was affected by it. It was as if the jubilant jet of semen inside her had carried all his self esteem.

"I didn't know what to do. I thought you were only asking me because you felt sorry for me having such a long way to go home."

"Then I wouldn't have invited you into my bed with me, stupid." she laughed, "it's not the only bed here."

"I know. When it came to it I realised that it meant we would probably have sex last night, together. It petrified me, the thought of doing it with you in your own house. I thought you'd think I was strange not to make a pass at you, but it just seemed nicer talking and watching the moonlight." Vicki nodded. Had the moon even been out last night? She asked herself. If it was, you spent the whole night looking into his eyes, you stupid lovesick bitch.

"I think so too." she said, "I spent all night calling myself a trollop and a whore, and it just made me feel all raunchy and snuggly." she laughed. She kissed him softly again. "It was beautiful..." she said, ".....this morning. Everything happened perfectly. I couldn't be more excited about giving my bed and myself to a man."

"Are you really mine?" he said.

She looked around the room in thought and couldn't help a smile breaking across her face as she nodded. Her smile disappeared. "But I hate to think what a puddle of come is doing to my polished Iceland Pine table."

Dale swore as he stepped back and helped her down. Vicki's hips and legs felt broken, and she walked a few steps as if she was stuck in permanent horse-riding position.

She disappeared into the downstairs bathroom as he walked into the kitchen, where the food was in the oven, being kept hot. He took the oven mitt from the bench and removed the tray, serving the egg, bacon and fried mushroom onto the two plates.

Vicki came back still wearing only the stockings, belt and panties, and Dale stared at her as she crossed the room, concentrating on something in her hands.

He watched those beautiful legs, the very same he had held tight only moments before, that slender stomach and delectable breasts, and felt another wave of emotion surge up. In moments he could have stood, grabbed her, laid her across the bench and done it all again. And suddenly, far from his usual self, he found that he wouldn't have felt apprehensive about doing just that, only guided. Of course he couldn't just jump up and mount her before the poor girl knew what hit her, but any other time, Dale felt like hiding from the world, like retreating to his little flat and letting life happen around it, tending his plants on the verandah, calling his Mum.

But with her in his arms this morning, and right now, something overcame him. Something only in her presence. Something that fed him a strength he needed, one that he wanted more of. One that, when he was full of it, would give him the power to conquer the world.

For the first time in his life, Dale Milling had become connected to another soul, a stranger's soul, exciting and disorienting. It was deeper than sex, deeper than staying the night. It was the infallible bond of human friendship. Of love.

"This is my Dad." Vicki said, handing him the object. It was a picture frame, and showed Vicki, a few years before, with a wispy, wind blown hairstyle, and a jolly, smiling and thin man with a tiny white crop of hair and eyes slitted in laughter.

"He looks happy." Dale said. Vicki nodded and joined him at the table, picking up her fork.

"He's always smiling. As long as I can remember. Except that his hearing's really going now, and he's got liver trouble." Dale winced in sympathy, but Vicki only smiled. "Partial to Fosters Original."

Dale nodded, looking into the photo again and chomping a mouthful of juicy mushrooms. "Your Mum not with you?" he said.

"She died years ago. I hardly remember her. I don't think I was even at school."

Dale was stung dully. "Same with my Dad. Except I was almost twenty."

"Twenty?" she began, making the connection.

Dale nodded. "While I was in hospital."

"Oh baby." she said, not realising the pet name.".....but I know you and your mother get along famously."

"Yeah, well, she was really all that was in my life for the first eight or nine years since the f-fall." Vicki heard him stammer slightly saying the word. She listened to the word as his psychiatrist. It was a huge brick in his mind, one that couldn't be smashed away, one that, no matter if he beat this thing with the Bridge, would always be there. Then, she replayed it in her mind as his lover, sitting almost naked across from him. It hurt.

"I know," Vicki agreed, "it was one of the first things I noticed. A lot of very young boys never quite let go of the love of their mother and it transforms as the years go by into deep and trusted friendship. Especially in families where the mother is the disciplinarian, teacher, nurse and everything else. In our day, our dads were out earning the money, so most mothers become the family leader.

"That's what I remember," Dale agreed, "I always subconsciously see my Mum as being right.....still do, I suppose." He smiled, staring into his breakfast. "She was always there. You always went to her to ask for pocket money or to go out playing. It doesn't mean I loved my Dad any less, he just.....didn't seem to be there so much. I remember thinking after.....everything that she was all I had. I didn't even have my own legs. I remember those days were always really frightening, and she was always there to.....keep the darkness out."

"I know...." Vicki said, reaching for his hand, "....I know how much she means to you. Don't you ever dream that I'd try to take you away from her. I think you're just building up a degree of emotional strength, and she has been the whole basis for it. If you felt her threatened, it would destroy it." Dale nodded slowly.

Vicki laughed. "Listen to me, I sound like we're in session, and we've just had sex all over my best table." Dale laughed as he looked up at the graceful curve of her neck, her beautiful face, the welcoming swell of her breasts, the creaminess of her skin, and the strip of emerald around her waist that teased and tantalised him with promise. He felt the ferocity, the masculine in his nature that the world had scraped and worn down, awaken after its steady growth.

He reached for her hand. "How about we have sex all over your best chair?"

Vicki stood up and sauntered to him, gesturing to the front of the house. "The best one's the leather recliner near the TV," she whispered, straddling his lap and guiding his hands to the small of her back where he eased them inside her briefs, "this one's fine."

Dr Donald Chin-Hsei Lambert was dying.

His condition deteriorated over the weekend, and on Monday they called his parents in Palm Beach, his employer, the University of New South Wales, and his contracted employer, George Slatten & Bromigal. Albert Dimitriou wasn't at the office to receive the message when it was phoned in from Dr Yates at St George Hospital. He was locked in the boardroom with Joanne Parkes; Steve Winterman, Regional Director; Sir Edmund Clancy, Chairman of the Board of InvestCo Holdings Australia Ltd, the holding company that owned and controlled George Slatten; and Narelle Newings, Chief Executive Officer of the InvestCo Ltd Standing Investigation Committee.

Albert had feared the worst calling the meeting and delivering it. Business was the most conservative concern in the world, always had been, and while most people would listen with baited breath at what Albert had had to report (which most of those present did), no company that dealt in logic wanted to hear about the illogical, the irrational, and the unexplained. Even if it was the only answer. Which it had been.

"I know I sound like a fool saying all this," he had said, "but I believe that the evidence is unarguable, and I intend to include these findings and conclusions in my investigation file."

"You bloody won't if you ever want to work in investigations in this country again." The fat, balding Sir Clancy had growled. Joanne Parkes had interfered and stood up for Albert, but not one soul in the room, including Albert, had wanted to hear that the Harbour Bridge was haunted.

It was a real world, a tangible and controlled one. We like to believe that the world is as explainable and logical as the society we have created for ourselves. Governments and companies set the practices and knowledge in motion that we all know and embrace as our lives. At some juncture, centuries or millennia back, mankind had begun to create systems based on what he had learnt only by proof, not which were based on design or possibility, which he possessed in much more abundance. And now, in the early twenty first century, the world was a place that baulked and even kicked viciously back at anything beyond explanation. And the real shame of it to philosophers, dreamers and artists was that there was an abundance of unexplained in the world.

But businessmen weren't interested in the unexplained. It threatened everything they stood for.

Albert may have thought all of this in a split second of frustration, except that all he could think was that he had been right, he had sounded like a fool. Because the groundwork for the way logic and business were bound had been laid long before he was born, and he was a product of it.

He had put it in terms as attractive as he could conjure up - "electrical and radiation disturbances controlled by a source beyond our normal scope". As he felt his resolve slipping and his audience hardening with scepticism, he even hinted at covert activity by the defence forces, testing of some new chemical mind altering drug weapon.

Before he called the meeting off, Sir Clancy told Albert stiffly that his business ventures were supporting the injunction against the Sydney County Council, and that if he circulated them stories of ghosts and goblins, he would be forced from the industry a disgrace, and would make damn sure that he took Albert with him. The little speech by the short fat bastard made Albert's blood boil, and for a second he understood. It didn't matter what you said or did wrong. It was your reputation that made you. After a certain point, you didn't have to produce results, only a name, that gave you access and acceptance into the high circles of business elite, no matter how much of an old bald prick you were.

Joanne Parkes had called Albert into her office later on when the board members and consultants had left. She opened two stubbies, smiled encouragingly at him and told him she understood how he felt.

"I know how solid your evidence is, Albert," she said, seating her tall, willowy but ironically powerful frame across from him, "and I know what you think of Clancy, we all do, but what he said really is right. I can't let you put this stuff in the file."

For a second Albert saw in his mind a man that he'd known from the police force, a senior detective who had been prosecuting on a homicide case and had been stripped of his honours and career after suppressing evidence. A young prostitute was one of the witnesses and had seen the argument between the victim and his killer, both customers of hers. The accused was an innocent third party that was seen in her work premises at the time. The senior detective, married with four children, was also a regular customer of the young lady and didn't call her to the witness stand of the federal court for that reason. Her testimony was never heard, the wrong man was convicted and sentenced and would still be in prison if the young woman hadn't come forward herself and named the detective.

"I've never had to lie in an investigation before, Joanne," Albert said, "your life can be wrecked by that sort of thing."

"I don't want you to lie, Albert, but.....you have to understand what it's like for me. Yourself too. What would honestly happen if we publish a report with findings of the supernatural? Our business would spiral downwards to nothing. All the respect we've built up because of quality investigators like you would be up to shit. I'm really talking about our jobs, as much as anything else. I know it's not fair after the work

you've done towards this, but you can't include this in your report as anything other than electrical and radiation disturbances. If you want to look at it one way, that's all it is, really."

"But if you look at it the right way," Albert argued, "it provides the answer. God, don't you feel it in your water, Joanne? Everything points to it."

Joanne sighed heavily and took a long swig of her beer.

"Albert, I have people I know can help. A lot of big people in this city owe us both favours, you know what's it's like in this business."

Albert nodded. Investigators were specialists in suppressing publicity, and when some influential person in the community seriously wants publicity about something suppressed, their cheque for services is only a down payment. The real payment was their career or fortune, their marriage or soul.

"I can have this brought out in the open. I can get it published in magazines, scientific journals. We don't have to do it through this company. I know the story is fascinating, God, I'm as fascinated as anyone. We all love stories of ghosts and hauntings. There's a huge lid to be blown off here, and it may be up to you and me to do it."

"Are you asking me to sell out to the *New Weekly* or *Woman's Day*?" Albert asked.

Joanne laughed. "No.....I'm asking you to do two jobs. I want you to work for this company like you have been, do your investigations, file your reports, leave out anything fantastic. Whatever you find that is fantastic, keep separate. Open a file on your PC at home. You can email it to me. But keep me informed. I've got enough contacts to make this the biggest thing since the Bridge fell down. Proof of the supernatural. I can also take all the responsibility off our shoulders. We'll keep investigating, Clancy and the board will be none the wiser. She paused thoughtfully. "I do feel it, Albert. It's got to be done. But this company doesn't operate for truth and justice. It operates to make lots of money.....it's a shame so many of us get so far in life before we realise that."

She looked dreamily out the window for a second, and in her powerful woman's stance was the ghost of a little girl. "Maybe that's why we have mid-life crises. We realise when we hit this age what the world is really like. My husband realised that, saw there was no real truth or honesty, realised that it's all one big process of stabbing each other in the back. I know it's why he had his mid life crisis. He suddenly discovered the only honesty was in the way we feel about each other, so while I was working thirteen hours a day here he was at home in bed with our housekeeper."

"Oh shit." Albert whispered sympathetically.

Joanne smiled. "It happens.....there must have been a million nights when he rang me here at eight or nine to tell me he was sick of flogging his log like some pimply faced teenager instead of having me home and fucking me senseless every night."

Albert hurt, just for a second, and hoped he didn't wince with the pain.

"It was my fault." she said, "I left him and married George, Slatten and Bromigal.....the ridiculous part is, I used to lay across this desk and wish I was at home being fucked all night." They both laughed and drank some more.

"I used to have a thirteen inch pearl-embedded vibrator in my bottom drawer." she confided in a low voice. Albert nearly spat beer across the room as he burst out laughing. Joanne laughed too, watching him. She waited until he had control of himself and reached across the table with her bottle.

"Here, a toast," she said, and Albert touched his beer to hers with a small *plink*, "we'll investigate like we're paid to, and find out what the bloody hell's going on."

Albert returned to his desk after leaving Joanne's office. He called the State Environment Minister's office to see if the report was finished that he was waiting on. A woman with a revolting and thick Indian accent gave him the run-around and eventually told him that no, the report hadn't been done, the research department was closed for lunch and were holding all the outgoing corporate reports to be issued. She promised to have someone call him back and tell him what stage the report was at.

He hung up the phone in annoyance. He was sick of having to deal with government departments. By the time he extracted all the information he needed the bloody Bridge will have fallen down again from age.

For a few minutes he sat, tapping his pen on his desk, thinking. His train of thought was interrupted by his secretary bringing him some letters to be signed, and a call from his wife, short and hateful, telling him that the house insurance bill had arrived and that he better bring home some sort of quarterly bonus to pay it with instead of spending it all on hookers and booze (there would be a bonus soon, one which he kept in a separate bank account from all their joint accounts - there was no way he was letting her get her hands on it). He said that it was his business what he spent it on and asked her why she didn't go out and get a job to pay some of it herself. She told him to fuck off and hung up on him.

His thoughts returned to InvestCo. He tried to adjust his thinking to what *they* saw instead of what he felt. They wanted professional. They wanted reputable. The snobbery of business covered all the world.

For the first time in quite awhile, Albert thought of Barry. It had been a patient of his who had bought this entire thing to light. And what else had Barry said since? That he had seen a psychiatrist, who in turn had been to see a parapsychologist.

Albert tapped the desk a couple more times and opened the file in front of him, consulting a page and dialling a number on the phone. A woman answered with the word 'surgery' and Albert asked for Barry.

"Good morning." Barry said as he came on the line.

"No," Albert corrected, "it's shithouse. But it's looking better. Barry, you've got to do something for me."

"Yeah, what?" Barry asked.

"I've got to get in contact with the parapsychologist your patient is seeing."

"Okay, I'll call Dale and get his number for you. Why?"

"Just a bit of weight for my findings. I want to hire him."

"Well he's already working on it," Barry said, "in fact, he's taken Dale through a few things I don't quite agree with."

"Oh, I realise that, but I want access to his findings as well. Sort of a contracted consultant, if you like. You said that he was the best in the field."

"Well, the best out of a lot of wackos. He's the only one who doesn't hold seances or call himself Madame Griselda."

Albert laughed. "Sounds good enough. Listen, I had an idea. Now that this has happened, I want an absolutely comprehensive report and test. I want every piece of machinery available on that Bridge. I want TV cameras set up on buildings, everything. We'll have the University van there, but I can get my hands on other equipment as well. I've got some pull where I am. My Managing Director can have the solicitors order a thorough test, in accordance with the injunction, and they can provide every piece of detection equipment there is. My university man, your parapsychologist, and me."

"What are you hoping to find that the records off the van didn't show?" Barry asked.

"I just want a team of professionals there. So far we've all been there in dribs and drabs and found out different things. We can pool everything together, look at it from every perspective, legal, emotional, psychological and physical.....I'd also like you to come."

"Me?" Barry asked, "what for?"

"Legal reasons. You're the one who first consulted me. This might be in the hands of solicitors and councils but the investigation still belongs to you and me. If you had consulted me to spy on your wife I'd be legally liable to show you the pictures of her in bed with the milkman. You have to be made aware of what's going on. Also, I'd like you there

because you're medically responsible for your patient, as I understand it. I want you there as his overseer, if you like."

"What, you want him there as well?"

"Yeah, of course. There won't be any danger, Barry, these will be controlled experiments."

"Albert, he's undergoing surgery as we speak. I don't know if he'll be in any shape to go anywhere for a week or so." Barry said, knowing he was lying but trying to discourage Albert, "anyway, do you know what caused the cable car to fall down?"

"Yes, you've told me - What kind of surgery?"

"He's having a self-demagnetising implant fitted to the brace. He won't suffer prosthetic magnetism any more."

"Is that a complex operation?"

"No, not really. They just open him up and clip it on."

"It'll probably take a few days to get this organised. He'll only need a day to rest, won't he?"

"What about stitches and anaesthetic? They tell patients to stay away from excitement for a week after any surgery, the traces of anaesthetic can retard adrenalin and heart rate and cause heart failure."

"Barry, I'm not going to have him crawling over the arches and climbing up in cables cars. I just want him there because from the very beginning he seems to have been the catalyst for all this activity. I also want his reactions and influences watched and recorded."

"Well what can I do? I'm only an orthopaedic specialist. I can tell you why he's got a sore back, that's all."

Albert sighed. "What about his psychiatrist, then?" he suggested.

"Yeah, why not." Barry said, his voice heavy with sarcasm, "Let's invite his old Mum so she can cook us scones and put the kettle on. I've got an old blanket and picnic basket, we'll be right. I'll bring my wife-"

"Come on, Barry, I'm serious. We need manpower to find out what's going on out there. We're all trying to work out the same thing from different sides, if we attack it all together we'll save weeks.....maybe a few lives, too. It'll just take me two days to organise the university van when my consultant gets out of hospital, and get some equipment commandeered by the solicitors." He glanced up as his secretary entered the room, knocking softly. She looked worried. Albert asked Barry to hold the line and covered the receiver.

"What's wrong?" he asked. She held out a telephone message slip.

"This came in before." Albert took it from her and read it.

From: Dr Rebecca Yates. To: Al. No: 9597 3442. Message: Emergency. D Lambert has contr. a gastric virus. Not exp to live past wk/end.

Albert looked up at Jillian. Her hands were clasped at her mouth, her eyes wide.

"I think you better call the hospital." she said.

Albert only stared.

IX

Dale's blood was boiling. It was an emotion he hadn't felt so purely in a long time. And one he'd never associated with the Harbour Bridge before.

He didn't know whether it was some obscure workings of his own consciousness punishing him or some force from a nether world doing all this to him, but now it was unarguable that another force was at work. Of all the people involved trying to unravel the mystery, the highest ranks of governments, the legal community, Australia's best parapsychologist, his own doctor, even his lover, Dale cared the least what was causing it. All he knew was that it had erupted with fury. And if it was some giant invisible animal or god, it had gone too far.

It had savagely attacked the poor young university lecturer in the test van as well as Dale himself in Barry's surgery. Barry had called at around noon to say that he had heard from his investigation agency, and the young man had been hit with a murderous stomach virus that was dehydrating him faster than doctors could rehydrate him. They thought he would be dead on Thursday or Friday. The virus had been lightning fast and inexplicable.

By now Dale had spoken to Tim and listened to his theories and the field of parapsychology in general to know that it wasn't inexplicable. The demons that had attacked Barry, Dale, and the researcher had awakened some cell or another that resided in the man's genetic structure that created the outburst and takeover of the virus.

It suddenly occurred to Dale that any of them could die at any time. The human body carries cells that hold dormant strains of cancer, influenza, HIV, Parkinson's disease, and cerebral palsy, and any one could be awoken and sent on the warpath by an intelligent force.

Maybe Dale had been wrong about God all his life. Maybe He did exist and maybe He was malicious, hateful and frightening.

But there was something else that even Tim Hacker didn't understand. The same power that had shattered Donald Lambert had only done so because it couldn't reach Dale. Couldn't reach him, or wanted him to come to it.

At 8:00 p.m., Dale rubbed the prescribed salve on his stitches from that morning's operation and changed into jeans, sneakers and a long sleeved shirt, which he buttoned up as he went through the door of the

flat, leaving it untucked. There was ten dollars stuffed into the pocket of the jeans and a picture of the New Sydney Harbour Bridge in his head. Only it didn't look like a Bridge. It looked like an altar. The kind you remembered out of Hammer horror movies and 15th century Gregorian monasteries. The kind they sacrifice people at.

He walked towards the taxi rank. Only it didn't feel like walking. It was striding.

It was 9:20 p.m. as Dale passed the Regent Hotel in Sydney's George Street. He passed the occasional late night executive or early week party-goer. Jackson's Bar & Restaurant opposite was pumping with music and energy.

A city with the life and size of Sydney never ceased to throb with vitality. The life never left it. The buildings and streets were always full of promise of power, vibrant with energy. The huge neon signs on the top of the office towers were built and designed as advertisements, but they joined to form a way of life, a might and potency. One of a beautiful skyline and a dynamic young nation. It wasn't just what Sydney looked like that made it Earth's most beautiful city, it was what the lights and the streets and the towers and varied blend of architecture promised.

And the few people that were around were testimony to the vitality. They laughed, talked, held hands, hurried to and fro, sauntered absently, checked their watches, men with their ties askew, women with their finely done hair dishevelled. Each with a secret, a life, and a destination.

Another tall and purposeful ex-paraplegic in jeans, a long sleeved shirt untucked and flapping in the wind and old sneakers made no difference or consequence.

But this man knew of the festering death in amongst the life.

From where Dale walked, he could see the street curve to the right, towards the ocean liner terminal beside Sydney Cove, past the Hyatt Hotel. Further down, the road divided, and the new turn-off was Hickson Road. Dawes Point was split into an eastern and western half, by the highway and Bridge going overhead. Both George Street and Hickson Road curved around under the highway and into the western half of the point.

Hickson Road followed the very edge of the water closely, skirting the edge of Dawes Point all the way around. George Street cut across the Point further back from the water, and the expanse of grass between them was the Dawes Point Park. It was on the lesser part of George Street, years before, that Dale had fallen, only metres away from safety.

Dale made his way down George Street, past the Hickson Road turn-off until he was underneath the great highway that spanned the water to Milsons Point. From George Street you could leave the road and walk

further up the point to reach the stairway that gave access to the northern end of The Rocks (mostly residential and pubs). The stairway was built on the front of the wall that created the support for the weight of the highway overhead.

As a little boy, on the few visits Dale had made to this very spot, the wall and stairway had been the same charming masonry stone that the pylons had been.

After the fall of 1995 the stonework of the old Bridge had been cleared completely away. The new support was a sheer wall of concrete, and around the outside were panels of plastic-formica, covered with a pattern of grey, black and white flecks.

The new staircase was well lit (nothing underneath the Bridge was lit up in the old days), all metal, supported by thick metal supports that rose from the ground, the hand rail thin and metallic, the stairs roughly textured metal blocks, the entire structure of the staircase black and grey.

The staircase was essentially one structure, on three supports, the main landing riveted to the back wall with a single thick cable between the two, holding them together. The entire staircase was held and bound with thick cabling and wires. It gave a spindly impression that was intended.

The Rocks was a historical area of Sydney - the first real European civilisation in Australia, and the design of the staircase gave an impression of that era, of a huge First Fleet ship creaking and groaning into Sydney Harbour, its mast and rope system echoed in the cables and wires. And the stark, modern colour and configuration of the construction gave the structure a sharp and modern feel. The effect was the joining of old and new.

Dale stopped at the first landing and turned to the Bridge. Below him, the grass of Dawes Point Park spread across the ground in a fan, stopping at Hickson Road.

And above, as huge and awesome as a demigod created by man that, once created, could not be destroyed by even him, was the Port Jackson Highway. It had been different in the old days. Underneath it, the metallic struts, beams and support shafts had been a maze, ten metres thick, of criss-crosses, joins, gaps, metallic groans, creaks and squeals.

Now, the support network of metal underneath the roadway was no more than a few seemingly infinite lines of steel, fastened in place at regular intervals by struts on the main body, each mammoth panel of roadway carried on the back of a series of even more mammoth X's of solid metal, eight in all, spanning, linking arms between the northern and southern points of the harbour, frightening just because of their size.

The road was like another sky above Dale, huge, black, silent but violently intense, seeming to dare him. His fury at the innocence of the

university scientist being struck down returned and he took the dare. He stood defiantly. The Bridge thrummed around with the sound of cars passing overhead. The hairs on the back of Dale's neck stood up.

Behind him, the rivet holding the cable to the wall began to slowly, silently unscrew.

He watched the grass below, the road above, felt the cold hatred of the thing around him. Exactly what he was waiting for he didn't know. But this was where the thing lived that was killing Donald Lambert, and he knew he had to stand up to it. Radiographers and Infarometers might tell them what it was, but it had to be stopped. Tim said that it was Dale that was what provided it with its bridge to this Earth.

The only thing supernatural about Dale was himself. He suddenly looked around and discovered he had gotten on a taxi and a train at nine o'clock at night for no reason but to come to the Sydney Harbour Bridge. On top of that he was recovering from an operation. But he felt something else. It was the same feeling of surety that gripped him in Vicki's presence. It was a feeling of control.

All his usual timidity left him and he was an iron pillar. It drove him past what he knew and he found himself in places he'd never dared to go. The other day it had been on an expensive and beautiful dining room chair in Edgecliff, his hands wrapped around the bottom of a beautiful, successful professional woman, lifting it up and down onto himself. Tonight it was to the place of the root of all his fear, standing in the terrifying dark, challenging it, spanning right above his head where it could reach down and smother him to death.

There was a crack behind him and the metal floor of the landing moved beneath him, suddenly, shockingly. He toppled against the rail and looked wildly back at the wall. The cable had come out of its surface mooring and had torn through the formica panel, shredding it for several feet to the next mooring.

Dale turned and scrambled for the next flight, separate from the landing and the rest of the structure, which curved around the wall to the pathway that led into The Rocks. There was a heavy *plunk* and the cable whipped free. The stairway leaned crazily as it fell away from the wall. Dale hung onto the rail for dear life as it fell, a fifteen foot stairwell and landing of solid steel, and split seconds before it hit the ground, he vaulted over the handrail and threw himself clear.

The staircase structure slammed with a clang to the ground, shaking dust and kicking up showers of dirt. The crash rang out across the park and water. Dale slammed to the ground on his left shoulder and rolled across the grass, onto his back, his breath heaving in terror. He scrambled to his feet, watching the fallen structure and testing his back to make sure he hadn't misaligned anything.

He looked up at the Bridge above him. The staircase had been sitting in the same position for over fifteen years since the Bridge was built, and by way of an amazing coincidence, the very night Dale had been all but called by destiny to it, it had fallen over with him on it. Amazing coincidence, or irrefutable proof that he was catalyst, victim and target of the paranormal.

Or perhaps he was getting somewhere he shouldn't be. Maybe his epoch of glorious strength was a hated and feared adversary. Dale did the closest thing to praying for guidance, and turned, brushing himself off, towards George Street and The Rocks, towards the access stairs that would lead him onto the Bridge itself, just as the first curious and terrified people came running.

X

The pylon loomed before him, the bright orange and red dulled by night. The walls were lit up by powerful floodlights, but only with half the vibrancy that the sunlight brought out in them. During the day they gleamed proudly. Now, they seemed to be sleeping.....or dead.

Dale walked quickly and purposefully along the path beside the highway on the Eastern edge of the Bridge. He'd hurried from the wreck of the stairway back down George Street into The Rocks, where he'd sought the higher roads that led him to Cumberland Street, where another staircase led him to the Port Jackson Highway. And now, he felt sure that the pylon was where he would meet and challenge whatever was killing Sydney.

He passed the edge of the pylon and came to the fifteen metre long red iron gates to the entry area.

The pylon at street level was hollowed out for the entry area, which included, on the far right wall, the elevator to the cable car platform, an information and tourist desk alongside that, and, in the rest of the area from the centre to the far left, a maintenance area, closed off by a steel wall and door marked as such.

Dale came to where the gates joined and were secured together with a long metal latch and a chain and padlock. He stood, watching the dark entry area, wondering what to do next.

The hairs on Dale's neck began to spring up and the skin all over his body crawled horribly as there was a snap from the chain and the padlock fell to the concrete path, open. The chain fell loose, clinking against the bars of the fence. His breathing increased, the only external signs of the battle inside him between his terrified urge to flee and the steely resolve he'd felt since leaving his flat.

The latch squeaked, the tiniest bit in the dark, and slid slowly back, emitting tiny squeals of metal on metal, until it was all the way back and the gates were secured only by the loose chain.

Dale's arm seemed to weigh a ton as he reached out for the chain. His hand fell into the shadow caused by the edge of the entry area. The chain was going to be red hot, he just *knew* it. Or it was going to strike out of the dark and grasp his wrist, binding him at the gates while a huge snarling beast came lumbering down from inside the pylon, out of the sanctity of its darkness to collect its sacrifice tied to the gate.

Dale squared his jaw and stared into the dark, defying and daring it, gripped the chain tightly and contemptuously pulled it from between the bars, dropping it to the ground.

He breathed deeply and pushed the gate open enough to squeeze through. The darkness in the entry was almost complete, the first few feet illuminated slightly by the city lights outside, the rest of the area dark shadows and indistinct shapes. He reached the centre of the area and looked slowly around, recognising the display boards to his left, the information desk ahead and the blank wall to his right.

As he stood watching the dark, Dale suddenly realised that he had to be the one to make the next move. He didn't understand the malevolent force that had reached through space to undo the padlock on the gates, and he might never understand it, but he knew that he had been accepted, almost invited. It had let him into its territory. To defy it, he had to be the intruder. He had to force it back. He imagined himself holding a great sword and striking his invisible enemy, forcing it back, breaking its advantage.

He walked carefully but strongly to the right hand wall, stopped, and watched it, willing, challenging.

When the elevator door opened and a flood of light spilled out, he still jumped with fright, but knew in an instant that he had somehow caused it.

He had a brief flash of all the other fantastic and terrifying things that had happened to him over the past month. During all of them, there was one thing that reminded him of his weakness and inadequacy. His back had hurt each time, enough to cripple him beyond action or defence. But thanks to the implant of that morning (something he gave no thought to at the present time regarding his orders to keep his back rested and as still as possible) any magnetic activity present bounced off him.

Dale walked forward and stood in the centre of the lift, and the doors slid closed. He felt the slight lurch and the lift started to rise. The memory of his trip here last week with Tim told him the elevator trip was about five to ten seconds.

Five seconds passed, then ten, then thirty, then a minute. Dale stared at the buttons on the panel. The light had stopped at **Cable Car Platform** long ago and the lift was still rising. He looked back at the crack between the doors, forcing his fear down.

The lift stopped and the doors opened slowly, revealing stars, the lights of an aeroplane far off, and the skyline of the city, straight down.

Dale didn't scream, but he threw himself against the back of the lift in terror. A gale blew into the elevator, whipping his untucked shirt, stinging his eyes.

Through the open doors he could see the southern tip of the Bridge below, the city beyond, and Sydney sprawling beyond that.

Almost a thousand feet below him.

He was still in the elevator shaft, within the confines of where the elevator shaft would be (had it reached this far up), he could tell by where he was in relation to the edge of the Bridge and the city, but this elevator wasn't bound by material physics. He could have gone the other way and ended up in hell.

Dale heard the wind whipping through the heavy elevator cables, heard them clanking together. He tried not to imagine what they were moored to above him. Probably nothing.

His mind raced. He'd been trapped, but he knew he had to win this round. Maybe he was really hanging in a ghost elevator high above the city, but he had to go next. If he cowered at the back of the lift and prayed for the doors to close, the lift would crush him.....or drop. Intruder. He told himself. Be the intruder. Where is the only place this elevator could go, *really*?

Dale slid down the wall until he was sitting and started to inch forward, probing with his feet. The wind tore at his shoes as his feet passed beyond the doors. He felt them pass into freezing space.

But he knew he couldn't feel for it or test it. The cable car platform was there, he had to step out onto it.

He squirmed forward until he was sitting on the very edge of the lift, the wind buffeting him, and his heart leapt into his throat when he looked down to see the Bridge and pylon far below past his feet, the city full of sharp needles like Sydney Tower and the Bridge pylons, reaching up to skewer him as he fell.

He gripped the walls of the lift on both sides, raised his foot up into the air and brought it slamming down to the floor of the cable car platform.

He leapt up and looked around the darkened platform, the gift shop silent beside him, the great hydraulics and cable drive system like a giant, ancient and dormant engine of the gods.

The elevator doors closed behind him, cutting off the light. Dale looked up, past the roof, imagining the sky high above, lit up with a misty light from the city. Had he really been hanging in the air way up there?

He felt a surge of triumph as he thought it. It didn't matter. He'd won. He'd stepped out of it's nightmare and reached enemy ground.

He walked past the gift shop and through the queuing area, onto the platform. The enormous wheels of the cable drive system were huge shadows in the dark. Towards the arch doorway was one of the cars of the cable system, dark and empty. He felt a moments fear. They were tools that he couldn't control. It could use them against him.

The tiny spark of realisation had passed through Dale's conscious mind and before he thought another thing there was a clang from the far corner of the room and a whistle of mechanics that rose in pitch, some huge machine starting up. The big drive wheels jolted, gave deep, lowing metallic squeals, and began to turn, slower at first, then increasing in speed so that the huge curved spokes became a blur and the air being whipped by the fanning blades was plainly audible.

There were more snaps and clunks from the ceiling. Fluorescent lights burst into life inside the cable car and it shook, lurched forwards, and sailed out into the night. Everywhere was the humming of the cable systems.

Dale shuddered. Had it heard him think? Was he handing it weapons every time he was afraid? In desperation, he moved towards the great wheels until he could feel the air moving around them. He felt that to have walked anywhere but forward, he would forfeit his edge.

The control booth was a pitch black panel halfway up the wall in the corner opposite. On the floor below was a door. Dale glanced past the wheels just in time to see the door close. Someone

- something -

had been in here with him.

One of the cars sailed silently in through the archway, it's lights off, and rolled onto the loading cable. It drifted across the pitch black platform and didn't slow down.

Not letting himself think, Dale ran towards the door opposite. He skirted the barricades that kept commuters well back from the drive system and didn't see the cable car scooting towards him.

He felt an explosion of force as there was a thump as the car knocked him off his feet and sent him flying across the platform.

Dale stood, clutching his arm, and ignored the car as it swung around to travel back out. He ran across the platform and threw the door open.

Inside was a thin stairwell that led up to a landing above. He put his foot to the first step and froze when a bellow rang out from above

him, what sounded like two or three flights up. The same bellow that Tim Hacker had heard sitting inside the shaft of the arch, of a huge lumbering beast with a putrid mouth full of bloody teeth, green sea slime dripping off its gore-matted hair.

Dale closed his mind off to the image and took the stairs three at a time, up to the first landing and around the corner to the adjacent flight of steps.

The stairs were obviously going to trail around the inside walls of the pylon to wherever they ended up, so he didn't have much chance of catching up to whatever he was chasing. And every now and then he shook his head to himself in wonder that he was chasing ghosts up a staircase on the Harbour Bridge at nine o'clock at night.

And, more importantly, that he was chasing and not running. The bellow came again, angry, violated, plainly a last ditch effort to frighten off the less committed. Dale realised that he was passing the landing where the monster must have been when he heard it at the bottom. It wasn't real, he said in jubilation to himself, it's a noise, only a voice. He put on a burst of speed.

He ran up more than ten flights and must have circled the inside of the pylon three times over when he reached a door at the last landing. He burst through it onto another platform, one he realised was in the higher section of the Bridge. The room was pyramid shaped, only the ceiling was flat, about half the area of the floor.

The slanted walls were covered with dark screens covered with pictures, photos, diagrams and information that were obviously backed with fluorescent light when in use. From across the floor in the opposite corner came the slam of a heavy door that made Dale jump. He took off, dodging between display boards covered with more pictures and information, architects sketches and designs on both Bridges, new and old.

In the centre of the room Dale ran around an enormous glass case which encased a model of the Bridge. He hurried through the other side of the maze of display stands, knocking one over with a crash in his haste, and wrenched open the door that had just closed.

It turned a tight corner to face the way he had come in and there was a tiny access stairway - more a ladder than anything - that hugged the sloped wall. Dale mounted the steps and started up. It was obviously a maintenance access, not open to the public. It was lit by tiny lights that illuminated the shaft for several feet, and only dully. He had a tiny space between the stairs and the wall to climb up. It was obviously leading to the lookout at the very top level, normally accessible by the same elevator that led from the street to the cable car platform (it also led to the two upper levels).

The stairway looked to be about thirty feet tall. He climbed as fast as he could in the small space, aware that if he slipped, the stairs wouldn't offer very much to grab hold of. He would slide all the way back, a lot worse for wear than last time. He glanced back down. He had already come fifteen or so feet.

When he looked back up, Dale froze. At the very top of the stairway was a small square of light. Through it he could see the pale city light outside. It was the exit that would lead onto the uppermost lookout platform.

Suddenly the light was cut off. He saw the small hatchway swing closed and the tiny stairwell was filled with a tumultuous crash. Dale swore, punched the wall with his fist and started up again, faster than last time.

As he climbed he felt a tingling in the air, the smell of fear, maybe the heat of impending battle, maybe the culmination of all the terror.

The lights dimmed even more for a few seconds until he could hardly see, then flickered off altogether. Dale grappled in the darkness but kept on going forward.

He heard the clomping of something huge moving around above. Every few steps now, he reached above to feel for the exit door. Before long, he was met with a cold metal surface. Dale willed all his strength into his arm and pushed with all his might.

As the door crept up an inch, he thought he saw something huge right beside it. Huge and shaggy. An absolutely vile stench wafted into the long stairwell chamber. Something massive stamped down on the door, slamming it shut, jolting Dale's arm painfully downwards.

He shouted as he felt his feet slip from the steps. As he fell, his face bashing against the edges of the tiny steps, he grabbed desperately for a grip. He lurched to a stop, his hands clutching the stairs, his feet kicking to get hold.

He laid against the stairs, panting, his arm (which already felt broken from the collision with the cable car) singing in pain, feeling blood seep from his nose, his lip, and over one eye. He wiped his face, looked up through the darkness to where the door was and started up again.

"Leave me alone." he whispered, mumbling, "and leave everybody else alone.....leave that doctor alone, stop killing people....."

He reached up and felt for the door, felt the cold metal, and braced his shoulder against it, leaning over to put all his force behind it. The air became electric.

".....and don't threaten me!"

Dale burst through the floor, thrusting the hatch aside before him to clang loudly against the bright red metal floor. he looked around the

platform, this one smaller than the others, only thirty feet across. The big red 'X's' sat at each face of the platform, supporting the pyramid nose cone above.

He climbed out through the hatch and closed it behind him, pulling the heavy door over and letting it drop into the iron floor, a square of yellow and black stripes and a bright white **WARNING-OPENS OUTWARDS**, amid the expanse of red iron.

Dale crossed to the edge. The wall was chest high and from there rose the big red X's that held up the nose cone. The city looked beautiful from so high up. He was up higher than some of the buildings, almost like flying through them.

He turned back in to face the platform. There was no higher he could go, no higher anyone could. And the platform was empty. The \$4 telephoto binoculars hung on their pedestals, unused and uninterested.

He had chased.....whatever haunted him all the way to the top, to the pinnacle, the castle tower of its domain, and it had fled before him. Dale was filled with an excitement and sense of victory and strength that he fancied he could throw himself over the edge and fly. It was the first time in twenty years he hadn't been afraid of heights.

He had won.

What he didn't know was that he had also let down his guard. He looked at the city again and breathed deep in peace. His watch said nine seventeen, time to go home, wash the stinging from his face and have a bath.

When he turned back towards the hatch he kicked something that had been sitting at his feet, which hadn't been there before.

Dale's chest heaved an involuntary gasp of revulsion, he grasped his head and screamed in abject terror, falling back onto his behind and scrambling away until his back clapped against the wall.

He sat and cried softly to himself, knowing he would be trapped on the lookout of the south east pylon all night.

Sitting in the middle of the platform, seeming almost to grin smugly at him was his old grey and navy backpack, which he'd been carrying on his walk across the harbour on October 2nd, 1998. The one that he'd dropped as he ran from the falling Bridge, and that had fallen with it.

The bag was split and streaked with dried blood.

XI

At 9:19 p.m., as the records would later show, the night duty nurse at nurse station four of St George Private Hospital, servicing Wards 4-12, saw the nurse call button light up in ward seven. He casually checked the

name, which turned out to be some Chinese guy, as he left the desk and walked over there.

Donald sat up in bed, not knowing where he was, what he was doing there or what was wrong with him. It was obvious he was in a hospital, but he'd been dreaming for days about falling and monsters. His stomach heaved as if a giant hand was crushing him around the middle, squeezing everything up, and he leaned forward on his knees as an eruption of vomit surged upwards. His throat opened and his mouth yawned until the distended jaw hurt him, and a flood came up with a belching noise.

Donald crouched there, breathing heavily, his stomach rolling painfully, his throat burning, when another flood came. He almost screamed at the agony of his throat convulsing so badly, and more orange liquid burned out of his mouth and into his nostrils. Saliva dribbled steadily into the pile on the bed.

The door to the private ward opened and the nurse, a tall blonde man had his mouth open to chatter amiably. But his mouth snapped shut when he saw Donald kneeling on the bed, tears of pain streaming from his red eyes, a putrid puddle of vomit streaked down his arms and all across the bed.

The nurse swore as he ran for the young man. Donald felt another surge in his stomach, and as the nurse took him off the bed and began to half drag him to the sink in the corner of the room, another stream came up, cutting off his breath, spraying this time from his lips as he tried to cry out through it. It showered the floor and the nurse's arm under Donald's arms.

The nurse turned the cold water on hard and said "Here, just rinse." Donald splashed some water across his face and took some into his mouth.

"Just rinse," the nurse said, "swirl it around, gargle some, don't swallow it, just rinse." He left Donald standing at the sink, his breath making his body heave, and ran to the end of the bed to check the patient's chart. Acute gastric virus. He'd been told about this poor bastard. He was supposed to be dead by the weekend.

The violent throwing up was a good sign. Some defence had been triggered and was trying to expel the virus. The nurse pressed the emergency call button on the tiny unit strapped to his uniform and returned to Donald's side, putting an arm around his shoulders.

He led the young man to a chair and instructed the junior reception nurse to change the bed and contact the specialist at home. Donald steadily regained his senses and control of his stomach, and the specialist arrived at the hospital at nine fifty.

The preliminary tests showed no signs of the virus. With regaining consciousness, there had been an increase in heart rate and neuro-cellular activity, which triggered a surge in white cell production. As a further precaution, the stomach had spontaneously expelled its contents, including every drop of gastric acid and the virus as well.

By midnight Donald had colour in his face and showed no signs of being in danger. As fast as the killer virus arrived, it had gone. His doctors determined to keep him in for one more day for observation, and release him on Wednesday after secondary tests.

Tim Hacker spent Monday night in Wilberforce, north east of Richmond, on a property near the end of McKinnon's Road.

The property was once the home and land of Mr and Mrs Ronald and Faye Siller, but now it was owned by a Redfern Produce firm, used for farming. The old house had been demolished and a feed and equipment shed erected in its place.

It was one of the old associate professors that tipped him. After working so hard on Sunday and sleeping soundly on the biggest discovery in the history of parapsychology, and the biggest in the history of all of physics since the Theory of Relativity, Tim checked in with the NCNU in Canberra, as he did every few days for news of recent developments in old cases, new cases, new phenomena or rumours around the traps. Since he was semi-contracted and financed by them, and had legal access to any of his findings, he made sure he kept up to date with what they could offer as well.

In a property west of Sydney, a man was supposed to be haunting the area, which was where he lived when he died. The property hadn't been owned by him or his next of kin since his wife sold it a year after his death.

There were hundreds of crackpot stories of hauntings every year that Tim heard, and he could usually brush off the more ridiculous ones pretty much straight away. But something made this one different, and grasped his interest as well.

Chris, the NCNU Associate Professor of Psychology and Psychological Disorders, had said that apparently this old man hadn't died anywhere near home, but disturbances had been occurring all over his property nevertheless.

Tim listened to the phenomena that had been reported and they all sounded typical of a haunting site. The patch of ground where the man used to park his 1982 Holden Commodore absolutely refused to sprout grass no matter how carefully it was tended.

The cattle on the property had been afflicted with a stomach virus that affected their food breakdown processes. Thirty percent of the herd had died of starvation and more were becoming sick.

Also, neighbours and passers by reported sounds of car accidents and other odd noises, like enormous buildings collapsing. The Commodore, old and rusty, covered with dents and with paint peeling, one headlight smashed, was said to have been spotted charging across the grass at night encased in a milky white mist, only to disappear.

"It was obviously the car he died in, then?" Tim asked Chris.

"Yeah, but what do you think of this? He died right there in the city, and yet the disturbances are recorded all the way out at his property, and the property is commercial land nowadays. On top of all that, he died almost twenty years ago, and all these phenomena have been reported in the last four and a half weeks."

Tim's mind clicked over. Car accidents. Buildings collapsing. Twenty

years ago. His skin crawled in anticipation, fascination and fear.

"Chris, how did he die?"

"Would you believe he had driven to Sydney for an Agricultural trade fair at the Sydney showground. Apparently he was only buying, not shipping, so he took his car. On the way back, he was one of the people who got trapped on the Harbour Bridge when it collapsed."

All Monday, Tim had spent setting up his equipment in the equipment shed on the property and around the property itself. He was accompanied by other independent researchers who'd heard about the phenomena and obtained permission to conduct their own studies, and students that he'd invited, people he knew from the Universities around Sydney. In between setting up, he used his mobile phone to obtain permission from the property's owners, Jonathan Wright & Sons Smallgoods, to have the carcass of one of the dead cows for testing, which they kept in quarantine conditions along with seventy others pending further tests.

He also lined up a veterinarian he knew from other cases, organising for him to come and run some quick tests on a few of the live animals. It proved to be an expensive exercise, the vet having to in turn hire a handler to bring one of the herd into the pen so it could be tested.

When the sun set each member of Tim's small advisory team settled into their spaces, instructed by him, to be ready for something to happen. No corner of the property wasn't being monitored by man, woman or machine.

They sat alone in the February heat until after midnight, the stars shining brightly in the warm, unpolluted sky, untarnished by the smoke or light of the city - or even Parramatta, which was closer.

Tim yawned, his jaw creaking. He was flicking through a copy of *Nexus* magazine, whose establishment-paranoia amused him with its overtones of New World Order fear of the evils of communism and capitalism, but fascinated him with its concise facts and unarguable evidence that we were all puppets with our governments and corporations at the end of the strings.

He felt a pang of urgency in his bladder and stood slowly, stretching his back, carefully stepping over the armoury of equipment around him (all powered by a heavy thirty six volt battery) and taking his bottle of warm pineapple juice with him.

He walked slowly up the slope where he was sitting in a flat patch of dry old grass, towards the ridge at the top. Over the ridge was the fence that marked the edge of the property, and there was a small gully about fifty feet across, beyond where the land became government owned.

Tim reached the top and walked down the other side to the fence, undoing his zip and sighing with relief as he urinated against the fencepost. He became aware of a figure approaching from his left.

"G'day," the man said as he approached.

Tim returned his greeting but apologised in embarrassment, zipping himself up.

The man laughed. "Don't worry about me, son, I've done it before. It's a fair walk back to the shed."

"Yeah," Tim agreed, ".....seen anything yet?" The man shook his head. He was older, maybe in his sixties, but robust and fit looking, with black denim jeans, heavy farm boots and a white and red checked flannelette shirt. Tim smiled inwardly. They never looked like parapsychologists, himself included. People often assumed from Tim's boyish features and approachable manner that he was in sales. They would think that this man was a farmer.

The older man shook his head. "Nup, nothing around here to see tonight. Good idea comin' around to have a look, though."

"Well, that's right," Tim said, "if the reports have been right."

"Yeah, the reports." The man repeated, looking out across the gully. "You seen much yourself?" he asked.

Tim shook his head. "No, but I've got a few helpers around, I'm hoping they'll pick something up. They couldn't wait to get up here, they're all from Canberra and never been in the field before." The man looked at him, making Tim feel as if he should explain himself.

"I sort of work for the NCNU.....Tim." he said, offering his hand.

The man shook it and said "G'day, Tim." He didn't offer his name, but he'd had better drinking arrangements than Tim. Instead of hot pineapple juice, he had an esky somewhere. His hand was wet and cold from a stubby.

Tim opened his mouth to ask where the older man was from, whether he was an independent investigator, but his gaze was drawn to the front. He dropped his bottle of pineapple juice and didn't feel it hit his foot.

"Holy Christ!" he shouted.

Spanning the gully, lighting up the stream below, and surrounded by a drifting ethereal light, was a perfect image of the Old Sydney Harbour Bridge, no more than twenty feet high.

"Jesus." Tim whispered, almost spat.

The other man stared and said "Isn't that amazing. That's what people have been seeing around here for the past month."

"I've got to go and get my camera....." Tim spluttered as he started up the hill, "and call my students. God, we're going to have to get all the equipment over here before it goes." He looked down at the man. "Don't go anywhere, make sure it doesn't disappear. Call me if there's any fading of the image."

The man gave him a warm smile. "Don't worry, Tim, I'm not going anywhere." He returned his gaze towards the phantom Bridge.

As Tim climbed over the ridge he felt agony at having to tear his gaze away. Ghost lights flew in streamers around the image. And from vision alone he could tell that it was a legitimate apparition. It was giving off light and heat. It wasn't an electromagnetic image. It wasn't a blur. It was a real object, each criss-cross, the grand main arch, the pylons, all made from ectoplasmic emanation. Solid light.

He scrambled down the hill and grabbed the mobile phone, calling the network extension to his nearest team member.

She answered straight away with a hopeful voice. "Hello?"

"Natalie, grab every package of blank tape you have, bring the Electrograph and come straight to the gully at the south fence. Past the dam."

"Okay, I'm on my-" Tim cut her off and dialled another number, grabbing the camcorder from the grass and fumbling to switch it on. He repeated his shouted orders to the next student, a bit further out.

He lifted the camcorder to his shoulder and crested the ridge, starting down the other side, the ghost Bridge shimmering a hundred feet away over the creek gully.

"Did it change brightness or -" he began, but the man in the flannelette shirt had gone. Tim huffed in annoyance. "Useless old prick, I

told you to stay." he whispered as he ran down the rise to the fence and began to climb over.

The shape of the Bridge remained steadfast and definite, the only movement those of the shimmering curtain and pinpricks of light like little angels that blanketed the image in swathes. Tim was half convinced that if he could get close enough he could touch the metal.

He zoomed right in on the Bridge, hoping to see images of cars and objects moving back and forth on the road, but the image was too bright.

He heard shouts of glee and amazement as people started to come over the ridge behind him. They'd all had to set up as part of the same phone network, all the independents, every team, and more than half of them would've had equipment to tap the lines in case someone found something they decided to keep between their team. It would only take as long as the time to run from the other end of the property for all forty five observers to arrive.

Tim's team members began to arrive presently and busied themselves to setting up the equipment at his direction, permeated by gasps of amazement and exclamations of disbelief.

The image of the Bridge remained for another two hours, until exactly three fourteen in the morning, at which time it began to fade, disappearing altogether at three seventeen.

As his students were changing film and resetting in case something else happened, Tim went in search of the man who had deserted him. He intended to pay him a few thoughts of professionalism, scientific responsibility and teamwork.

Up until every parapsychologist or two bit ghost hunter left for their original positions around the property, Tim was sure he had talked to everyone, and nobody remembered seeing a man with the description he had offered. He must have been just some fanatic who came after everyone else, or all on his own.

He sent his team on their way with instructions to keep their eyes wide open. Almost as soon as he sat down in his patch of grass, the eastern horizon heralded the beginning of a brand new Tuesday. He had spent so long reorganising himself and his equipment he hadn't noticed.

When the sun touched the sky he called in his team and told them to meet him at the shed at the front of the property.

Lots of people were milling around the shed when Tim arrived on foot, packing up 4 wheel drives, talking, eating, comparing notes and readings. The sun was well and truly up now (the walk from the southern fence had taken half an hour, weighed down by all the equipment).

The other people in his group from the NCNU were already there, Tim having taken the outermost post on the property. They talked

excitedly about the ghostly image of the Bridge that had been visited upon them the night before as they helped Tim pack up the equipment.

From here he intended to send them all back to their motels or relatives houses where they were staying, get a McDonalds breakfast on the way through Blacktown (just under halfway on the one and a half hour trip back to his house at Rozelle), fall into the shower and then fall into bed for about seven weeks.

He would collate and study every recording made, apply it to his theories and therefore have irrefutable practical proof to go with his formulae and previous findings that ghosts and the world of the paranormal were as real as they'd seemed in drive in movies the previous century.

From there, he'd officially contact the university with his findings, and they would have one hundred percent legal and scientific control of its applications and ramifications. The NCNU department of Psychology would be the scientific team that shook the world with proof of the supernatural, not Dr Timothy Hacker, and that suited him fine.

As he looked around at some of the young men and women assisting him, it occurred to him that they would be celebrities, top scientists in their field, respected and revered throughout the world and history. It made him feel a little bit jealous, but he was shaking off the last of his boyhood dreams of fame and fortune. He only wanted science.

He came across two of the students, Kathy, a girl who belonged on the cover of *Penthouse* magazine instead of researching science (and had the right attributes for it, as many of the male students had discovered to their delight - or so Tim had heard), and Warren, an undergraduate notorious for his meticulous approach and lack of emotion.

"Hey," Warren said as Tim passed, "too bad we didn't get a look at Mr Siller streaking around in his Commodore. I had all the photos from the police forensic archives ready the whole time." He held the folder up for Tim to see.

"Doctor Hacker, what's the matter?" Kathy said, gripping his arm. Tim looked stupidly at her and looked back at the photo, his knees turning to water.

The picture was of a sandy haired man with a bad gash down one cheek and another across his forehead, Ronald Francis James Siller, deceased 1998 in the fall of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

As Tim fainted, he realised that dead men don't drink stubbies of beer. The man who had shaken Tim's hand had been cold from being dead. The hand had been wet because he had spent twenty years rotting on the floor of Sydney Harbour, behind the wheel of a second hand Holden Commodore.

BOOK 6

Every minute of the Tuesday sunlight had been filled with research, tireless study and testing (according to the NSW Police Forensic Bureau), but the Bridge was still closed.

February had come and the heat was reaching an explosive peak that, according to the weather service, was supposed to break mid-week and bring electrical storms, only to clear the path for another onslaught of heat.

Press releases from the Police Department said that the situation on the Bridge was running smoothly. White vans and federal vehicles had been driving on and off the Bridge continually since its closure, among the canvas shelters and makeshift caravan offices. The government vehicles were the only ones allowed access, while the Harbour Tunnel was jammed solid with the overflow.

But the traffic chaos beneath the harbour was a world away from the slowly revolving haven of The Summit Restaurant. The diners were almost all businessmen or women, dressed smartly. A string orchestra drifted through the restaurant speakers, adding elegance to the crisp white tablecloths, fine wine glasses and china, bunches of tall gladioli and irises on the tables and lush green palms around the floor. Waiters hurried to and fro with plates and bottles, but did nothing to shatter the peace.

Albert Dimitriou rubbed the back of his neck as he looked out the window, across the outermost circle of tables that had window seats. The top of the Qantas Tower was drifting past, to be followed by the National Australia Bank Centre, Regent Hotel and, presently, the Bridge and harbour. The restaurant had been at the top of Australia Square for decades and provided one of the best views in the city.

Albert's morning had been hectic. He had been assigned the job of obtaining all test material on the Bridge since its completion. That included every report, every instruction manual, every corporate and public committee finding, every regular maintenance breakdown, every damage and erosion report, literature on all test equipment and every company consulted and contracted to work on, repair or test the workings.

Somewhere, he'd even come across the name of the graphic design studio and screen presser who had created the fibrex screen pictures for the side of the cable cars.

And his day was far from over. He'd been arguing and sorting his way through a mountain of governmental red tape and also nursed a frayed concentration span, brought on by the discovery and carrying the knowledge of Donald's miraculous overnight recovery, which he'd learned calling the hospital before work. He'd also placed a few discreet

calls to Barry Paul, who agreed to set everybody up for the trip to the Harbour Bridge on Thursday night, the decided time.

The Bridge was scheduled to re-open before Wednesday peak hour, but Sydneysiders were taking that as seriously as they had the deadlines for the Harbour Tunnel extensions and the completion (and perfect functionality) of Homebush Olympic Village. Barry and Albert had decided that they were safe until Friday morning at the very least, probably the weekend.

Joanne had seen what a rotten morning Albert was having, especially with the pressure of their secret coalition, and he jumped at the chance when she suggested they have a nice relaxing lunch.

"I know how you feel." she said across the table, taking a sip of her wine, "The board's been on my back all morning."

"Have they?" Albert asked, raising his eyebrows.

"They're terrified we're going to go public with this haunting business, or at least include it in our case. The chairman has taken away almost all my authority. Since we're providing ninety five percent of the evidence for their injunction, we're almost affiliated, and I'm to report to Mr Craig Fulworth, senior director of Darby Hillman. I'm not to collate and publish the investigation without his approval and I'm to adhere to his instructions."

"Is that what they said?" Albert asked.

She laughed and looked out the window, drinking more wine. "Almost word for word." she looked back at Albert and leaned back as the waiter put a plate of steaming filét mignon and baby vegetables in front of her. She thanked the young man and returned her attention to Albert. ".....I really think we stirred up a shit storm with talk of the paranormal.....you might have put our careers back five or ten years each."

Albert nodded and looked into his grilled sole. He knew Joanne enough to know that she hadn't said it to extract an apology and didn't expect one. "Yeah, I stuffed it.....should have known better after this long in the business world."

She nodded and popped a young corn into her mouth. "I haven't answered to anyone since I was Australasia Region Director. I haven't been investigating for twenty one years to take orders from some pussy solicitor who can't look you in the eye when he talks to you."

"You can't blame him for that, Joanne," Albert said, "you're a disarming woman. You didn't get where you are by investigative talent. I've watched you break men lots of times."

She smiled at the compliment. "Yeah, I'm a bitch, but I still didn't grow broad shoulders for this."

Albert nodded, feeling himself sinking into a deeper hole and saw his Managing Director falling down above him.

"I know." he said in resignation.

At four in the afternoon, Joanne and Albert were both called to a board meeting in the trustee's offices in Spring Street. Neither spoke very much on their way in Joanne's 2015 Lexus Emperor. They just listened to the classical music that filled the car from the CD player. Joanne looked at Albert several times, knowing that this was his first corporate trial, as she had come to know them, and she knew how scary it was. She tried to offer some words of encouragement, but couldn't. The truth was, this time she was scared as well.

By four thirty they were sitting in a huge, lavish meeting room with a long black oblong table. Black paper flowers adorned pedestals built against the walls and the art prints that hung around the grey and black walls were waves and streaks of deep purple and forest green. The light came from above a huge white slab that hung down several feet from the ceiling.

Albert and Joanne were seated halfway down the table. Opposite them was Edmund Clancy. Narelle Newings sat to his right, and an old man in an uncharacteristically old fashioned suit sat at his left, both glancing between Albert, Joanne and the table.

Sir Edmund Clancy did the only speaking from the whole group, and got directly to the point. "InvestCo has successfully driven George Slatten & Bromigal to the top of its field in the time since we attained the holding share. It is a position it has enjoyed and celebrated but also maintained through quality and perceptive investigating.

"In the competitive market, large scale investigation is a changing business as technologies and methods evolve, especially regarding large construction such as the flagrancy discovered surrounding the Harbour Bridge. A company like George Slatten & Bromigal can be easily knocked from its pinnacle.

"We have to constantly live up to our name and reputation. We are an established member of the corporate community, and it is an establishment deep seated in traditional thinking, perceptive logic, and the organisation and accrual skills of our employees. To suggest something as fantastic as paranormal activity is not only laughable, but potentially destructive to the proud name George Slatten & Bromigal has built up."

Albert and Joanne glanced at each other, understanding and fear between them.

"It is my responsibility to make sure the interests of InvestCo are managed with an unquestioned degree of honesty, loyalty and above all,

teamwork." Clancy continued, "I was fully prepared to listen to your apparent findings and your perceived reasoning behind them, Mr Dimitriou, but I tried to make you understand that they were not the information you use when you are taking on the nations largest construction company and council in the high court.

"I don't believe I deceived or misled you. As chairman, I made my intentions perfectly clear. I will not have, professionally or otherwise, talk of hauntings. But yourself and Ms Parkes blatantly acted against my instructions and conspired to carry on the investigation as you saw fit, and to further your theories of this supernatural activity."

Albert and Joanne looked at each other again, in disbelief. How in the name of hell did they find out? Between them, they thought of ten traitors straight off. Their secretaries, the receptionist, typists, anyone.

Not that it mattered. Not now it was too late for either of them.

"Subsequently, I called a meeting of the board of trustees and it has been determined that your self-interested tangent was pursued on company time, using company equipment, information and resources. Furthermore it was carried out against the traditions and ideals of this company, those of teamwork, loyalty, honesty, and the constant effort to uphold our reputation."

Both Albert and Joanne felt weights of lead fall in their stomachs. He saw Joanne's head fall forward out of the corner of his eye, and he glanced at her to see her running her tongue across her top lip, her face screwed up as if in pain. She was fighting tears gallantly but pointlessly. He reached a few inches and squeezed her hand.

"It has been decided that you are both to be terminated from the employ of InvestCo and your positions at George Slatten & Bromigal. You are to clear all your personal belongings and transfer all information on your cases and respective duties to temporary replacements deemed by us. You will forfeit any information you hold at your homes, and I needn't remind you that you are both legally forbidden by your original employment contract to pursue or attempt to publish any findings confidential to your former employers. You will be contacted by your administration manager regarding settlement of your salaries and superannuation."

Albert hardly heard the last few sentences, and he could barely feel himself leave the room and return to his office to pack. He was numb, his tongue frozen, his knees unable to stop shaking, fear and disbelief sawing like a dull rusty knife through his nerves.

Dale slept in late on Tuesday after staying in bed all day Monday. He didn't wake up until ten thirty. He had gotten up at six to empty his bladder, watching the overcast sky for a few minutes before returning to bed, and, as always, the lighter block of sleep during the sleep-in produced a continuous stream of vivid dreams that he would spend the rest of the day remembering.

He didn't dream of falling off the Bridge. He dreamt about being in Barry's surgery and reading *BRW* magazine at Barry's desk, instead of in the waiting room (all the while nodding and listening to Barry talk to him and conduct his tests), and leaving the surgery, which, although it was definitely Barry's surgery, was in the street of his childhood home. He walked down the street to his house where there was an old blue sedan which he had never seen or owned, climbed up on the bonnet, warm from the sun, and began to sing an old Belinda Carlisle song at the top of his voice.

In another, he was driving along the tollway south out of Sydney that led to Waterfall, Wollongong, Nowra, and eventually Melbourne. The tollway extended all the way to Nowra nowadays, but when Dale was a boy it had only gone as far as Helensburgh, less than a third the distance, and became the Princes Highway to Wollongong.

And in the dream it was the old tollway, that only went a few kilometres before becoming the old, twisted highway. He was driving down the road (with whom he didn't know or remember - the vehicle seemed huge and the feeling in the dream was that there was a lot of people that he knew and a happy atmosphere filled the car). And all along the edges of the tollway, where the rocky banks led up to the ridges either side of the three lanes and the median area, were scattered the rusty wrecks of old cars, on fire, twisted and smashed.

All Dale could do was tell the others that it was important for them to stop and retrieve articles from every wrecked car so that the bodies of the owners could be identified.

But the last dream was the clearest. It was the last dream because it was the one that woke him up, and when it did he didn't dare go to sleep again.

In it he was walking through a cemetery surrounded by forest, and a light misty rain was falling. The forest and grass of the cemetery were lush and clean, softly vibrant in the rain. It was cold, and he was wearing a heavy rain coat with a great round hood. He remembered with great clarity the droplets that had collected around the rim of the hood, bulged heavily, and dripped to the ground. The rain had fallen in a mist onto his face, cool and light, which didn't feel unpleasant.

Dale had come to a large old cracked tombstone, slanted with age, its heavy corner sinking into the soft earth. It read

DALE MILLING. MAY 1979 - FEBRUARY 2017.

In front of the grave was the old backpack, the blue and grey one, split open, the black zipper hanging, its teeth shredded and the stitching torn. From the bag spilled an old banana, white and green from disease and age, a package of red and white mush wrapped in cellophane, what had once been a tomato sandwich, torn shreds of soggy paper and a warped, sodden hardcover book. Steady trails of blood seeped onto the ground from the bag and splattered the nineteen year old contents.

Dale cried out as he jumped up in bed, fighting the mechanics of the brace to reach a sitting position to ward off the demons of his nightmare.

He glanced down at the floor, rubbing his brow, and screamed again at what lay there.

He had sat in the pylon lookout until he was yawning from fatigue, watching the mouldy bag in the centre of the platform. Only when he was too tired not to be convinced that it wasn't going to move did he grab it in revulsion and carry it back down as he retraced his steps down the pylon to the ground. He didn't meet with any further supernatural activity after the appearance of the bag. The electric anticipation was gone from the air (or maybe his mind). He even had to search for emergency stairs from the cable car platform to the street because no amount of wishing would summon the elevator to open and carry him down as it had brought him up. The ghost had left.

He put the back pack in an old dirty plastic shopping bag that he took from a gutter and carried it all the way home on the train and taxi to his flat.

He had put the bag under the kitchen bench out of his sight and gone to bed after a long shower and wash, and that's where he had left it.

Now, the bag was sitting three feet from the bed, still secured in the old shopping bag.

The phone at Tim's place rang at quarter to eleven on Tuesday morning. Not the phone out the back in the home office, but the house phone in the dining room.

Tim ran from the office and snatched the phone up, wiping sweat from his brow.

"Hello?"

"Tim, it's Dale." came a commanding voice. It made Tim start. He hesitated. The voice was definitely Dale's, but it possessed an edge this time. A surety that couldn't be denied, even listening to those few words.

"Hi." Tim said, "Wait until you hear what happened to me last night. I heard a rumour about this property out west, and I decided to investigate - there was a really close connection with the Bridge -"

"Tim, sorry," Dale interrupted him, "but.....it's in my house."

Tim stopped and licked his lips, settling down on the lounge. "What is, Dale?"

Dale laughed a little bit, humourlessly. "You don't have to test me this time, Tim, I'm not mad. It's real, I saw it last night, and I brought it home with me."

"What did you take home?" Tim *had* been testing him, using a calm voice the same way you would with someone on the verge of hysteria or madness. Dale had sensed it and when he told Tim he wasn't mad, Tim believed him. The voice on the other end of the phone was as far from mad as Tim had ever heard. And dealing in a branch of psychology, he'd heard some mad voices.

"My old bag." Dale continued, "I found it on Sunday night. When the Bridge fell I had a blue and grey backpack with me. As soon as I realised the Bridge was falling down I dropped it and ran. I've probably thought about it twice in nineteen years, if that. But last night when I went out there, there was my old bag, like it had been sitting somewhere for nineteen years waiting for me to turn up."

"When you went out where?" Tim asked, although he knew and didn't want to say it himself.

"I went out to the Bridge again Tim, by myself. I know it goes against what everybody thinks is safe, but it had to be done. It felt right. There is something there, we both know that. However much we want things to be normal and explainable we both know it's there."

Tim thought about a ghostly replica of the Bridge made of light spanning a tiny gully in far western Sydney. He thought about shaking hands and talking with a dead man who roamed his old home. Yes, it was real. Always the one in control, the investigator, the scientist and reasoner, Tim was lost and he suddenly felt like Dale would be the one guiding him this time.

"If you don't believe me, call the University and ask them how that researcher is that they put in hospital. It attacked him, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember the attack but it was concussion that put him in hospital, wasn't it?"

"No." Dale said evenly, "They couldn't revive him because he'd contracted a stomach virus and they said he'd be dead by this weekend. It was a strange time to contract a gastric condition, wasn't it? Just at the same time when monsters are flying through the air and attacking your car. We've seen what it's done, Tim. I'm starting to think that it's everybody denying it and trying to explain it that keeps it going. Until we

admit it, it'll keep happening and we'll look for some other explanation until someone else gets killed." Neither man spoke for several seconds.

"I know." Tim offered, sighing, "I didn't want to believe it and it's my living. But.....the other day, when I went through the readings and videos from that research van, I knew. It showed me how it worked. It undid the bolts on that maintenance bed when that workman died the other week. It killed that policeman the other day. It's a force that can manifest itself. I know where from, but I don't know what it is or how to deal with it."

"That's right, and I climbed up the Bridge pylon after it, and it ran from me. As it ran from me, it let go of that man in hospital. I heard from my doctor this morning that he's fine." The strength in the voice drained away a little. "I brought the bag home, anyway, and shoved it in the kitchen. I couldn't bring myself to get out of bed all yesterday. When I woke up this morning it had travelled from the kitchen to here next to my bed."

Somebody broke in, Tim wanted to say, your block of flats tilted inexplicably through the night in an earthquake and the bag slid into the main room.

But he couldn't. His tongue was frozen for a few horrid seconds. Telekinesis? Or a poltergeist? He already knew that Dale almost certainly wasn't telekinetic. From the answers to the mystery sent to a printer in the research van from somewhere beyond, there had been material that had explained all about the mechanics of human paranormal powers.

Telekinetics were very loud and outspoken people, often entertainers or salesmen, owing to the chemical balance of the ambitious and "show off" centres of the brain. Furthermore, telekinetics were over ninety five percent women, all of whom produced enzymes almost exclusive to the female reproductive system that provided a chemical necessary to awaken certain dormant chambers of the cerebral cortex. Because of the chemical balance created, the most reliable telekinetics and clairvoyants alive were pregnant women.

So Dale's house had been intruded upon by a poltergeist. Tim told him so. "It must be an extraordinarily strong presence," he said, "you're the oldest case of a poltergeist intrusion I've ever heard of. They happen around children or teenagers because they give off the energy necessary for a poltergeist to exist. Whatever particular electrical activity that is, you must be alive with it."

"But I've had this demagnetiser implanted." Dale protested.

"That's magnetism, not electricity. You're a walking antenna for this, Dale, you always have been. You may even be what let it all happen."

Dale was silent, and Tim paused as well. He hadn't meant to tell Dale what he'd discovered yet, maybe never. He could feel from the silence over the phone that it had stabbed Dale. He suddenly felt awful.

".....I'm sorry, but I found out on Sunday along with everything else..... There's this thing called the tape recorder theory. Bad things like disasters or murders are places and times of extreme emotion and in turn a mass of cerebral electricity. It's enough to create a channel between the physical world and the electromagnetic one, where the event is recorded and played back on our world from time to time, sometimes regularly, sometimes not.

"When the Bridge fell down, thousands of people were terrified for their lives and that much mental and emotional activity was like an electromagnetic magnet. But it had to lay dormant for a long time, obeying the laws of physics, playing the sequence over and over again. Maybe it's always been there, but now that you've been able to pick it up before anyone else it's been given boundless access to us and our physical laws. So it can manifest itself in radio waves, gamma radiation, visible light, microwaves, anything. It's the electrical activity that you provided that gave it free reign. The Bridge let it inside, and you let it through. I'm sorry. If it hadn't been you, it would have been something else.....Dale, ghosts exist. I've proven it, and it's as easy as one two three."

"It's not very often you hear that you're responsible -"

"No, you're not," Tim cut him off, "you're just an antenna. I don't know why it attacks, I don't know why it wants to kill and hurt, I don't even know what it is, but you were the obvious and easy target after what happened all that time ago when the Bridge fell. It was the fear in your mind that produced the electromagnetism to bring it to life and let it through from the other side."

Neither man spoke, both lost in his own thoughts for several seconds, until Tim finally said quietly "You'd better bring the bag over so I can test it." Tim said.

After they had both hung up, Tim and Dale both sat in their lounge rooms contemplating. Tim looked at the sky outside. It had been an ordered world, for so long, and God had set everything in motion with one flash of light, letting the enormous wheels of His universe turn in the eternal cycle of His children. He loved them each and completely, and Tim didn't understand why He had allowed this to happen, at a juncture when mankind had learned how to destroy himself but hadn't learned how not to.

Tim had papers, he had theories, he had evidence, he had proof. He had it written down in the language of mathematics in plain computer

printing, that there was an intelligent and supreme existence of life in a place where mankind had never been, and which could be breached from the other side at will by its creator.

It was a place that was supposed to remain the only world where man couldn't reach. When the ashes and dust of Dale Milling and Tim Hacker were rotten into the Earth and mankind had travelled to other galaxies and through black holes and perhaps across time and faster than light, there was one universe that had only one gate not accessible by any rocket, from which there was never any return, a journey that every human being alive would make.

But in his supreme and infinite thirst for knowledge and the lust for power and control that plagued him, mankind had been shown a way to that place. A place where the destruction of all the world could be rained down on him.

All romantic metaphors and spiritual ramblings aside, Tim could see the channel that led to the supreme intelligence. He had felt His hand and seen His dreadful legacy, and now he found himself standing, his eyes wide with terror, down a dark tunnel towards the gates of the House of Jesus Christ and God.

Dale sat in his unit, all the curtains and blinds drawn, in as much darkness as he could muster. He sat against his bed on the floor, staring across the floor. He had taken the sharpest knife he had from the kitchen drawer and sat for the last hour with it pressed against his wrist, ready to saw into his veins and cut off the way for any more death.

He knew Tim hadn't meant to tell him about his discovery, but Dale surmised the whole truth. Whether or not he was responsible or it was his fault, he knew it was his body or soul or the electricity or his cerebrum or whatever Tim had found out.

All the strength, all the victory left him, and the bag stayed where it was under the sink where he'd put it, in another, newer plastic bag. He knew it wouldn't move again - it had done its job. It had won. Whatever malignant spirit it had carried had dragged it from the pit of hell amid an ocean full of smashed metal and asphalt and thrown it through the hole in Dale's world. Now, it was just an old, split and salt-encrusted bag full of nineteen year old food and paper, with nothing whatsoever supernatural in it.

His strength had faded and he had felt it flicker and die, and now he didn't think he'd get it back. It had grown because of Vicki and he'd welcomed it, relishing it as a new gift that could carry him through the rest of his life when he may be responsible for more than his tiny flat and crippled body.

But as soon as the bag had appeared he had felt it strike back and when he found out the truth from Tim his strength had died like the flame of a candle in the face of something far too strong for him. He had felt it leave him like a love lost.

Like a beautiful young girl in a blue dress and the dreams where her lovely blown kiss and smile so full of promise had taunted and tortured him, haunting more than ghosts ever could, with what might have been. It left him stripped and vulnerable.

For the first time, everything he had built up for nineteen years fell away in a minute, and he was empty, full of rage, full of hatred and fear, full of loss, and all he could feel was an empty cavity where it had all been ripped out of him.

He saw the first droplets of blood when the phone rang, shrill, but dulled, on the edge of perception. He answered it, his voice thin and colourless, and a voice he didn't recognise began to talk.

It was a doctor from Sutherland hospital, and he wanted Dale to go right over. Dale said that he couldn't make it that easily and asked what the matter was, trying to think half-heartedly who lived around the area. Only Barry. And.....

- no o god almighty no o god o god o god o god anything but..... -

The doctor said that his mother had been brought in an hour previously after suffering a single and crippling stroke. The same time that Dale and Tim had been talking and Dale had felt his strength crumble and die.

Dale asked the man again what the matter was, not believing but knowing, his heart spinning away, the world falling away opposite, all life whirling into a single numbing whirlwind of cold.

The doctor said he was very sorry, that they'd fought to revive Dale's mother, but that she had passed away at eleven thirty six that morning.

Dale slit his wrists, bled slowly for the next seventeen hours, and followed his mother at seven minutes past four the following morning. He used the last of his strength to know that he couldn't let her go alone.

III

The recession that lasted throughout the late 1980's and early 1990's was the most notorious period of unemployment and lack of opportunity in Australia's history. Some industries had never recovered, some were still dragging themselves back to life, and it had been the single most influential turning point in world and economical history.

Countries had crumbled, governments had fallen, and Australia had ceased to be the lucky country.

The term Utopia had been applied to Australia for a great deal of its history. According to legend, Utopia was a huge island land in the southern oceans, full of relaxed and fun-loving people, resources, opportunity, and an idyllic climate that the majority of the world's population - in the far Northern Hemisphere - could only dream of.

Australia's early British colonists believed they'd found the Utopia of mythology, and the only differences through most of recorded history were that Utopia was more of an atoll, with an enormous inland lake (many of the early Europeans ignored the aboriginals' warnings about the deserts and died trying to find it) and the fact that Utopians mostly drank a kind of barley wine rather than beer.

But in the late twentieth century, all the other similarities between Australia and Utopia ran out. International travel, international media, and the explosion of technologies like the Internet had bought Australia into the trade and industry era, and so when the world rocked on the brink of financial and social ruin, Australia had no choice but to follow suit.

In the 1980's, Australia had been as gutted as the rest of the world by disaster within an enclosed economic system. In the early twenty first century, Australians were more concerned with unemployment, a society of crime and drugs, 95% foreign ownership and big business than they were with thongs, the beach, towelling hats, or putting shrimps on the barbie.

Unemployment because of a bad economy hurt, but if you stood back and developed a hard heart and stopped seeing all the children that didn't know what Christmas was or marriages that broke up over the lack of money to realise young dreams, unemployment was only a number rising along with inflation, consumer indexes and interest rates. It was a consequence of the world order now. It was a necessary legacy that western humankind had created systems called economies that had become the financial ruin and the death of so many. It was the price of order and control.

But unemployment because of spite, revenge, or vendetta was only a personal thing. You didn't really become part of a social statistic. You were a poor bastard who crossed your boss, stepped wrong, or just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

This entire string of thoughts passed through Albert Dimitriou's mind as he stared through the fluffy froth of his large and very expensive beer.

"Bunch of pricks." he muttered again. Beside him, Joanne Parkes sat nursing a Kir Royale. Her fourth.

They'd both met at George Slatten & Bromigal's reception, where the usually jovial and friendly receptionist looked at her desk, embarrassed, pretending to do something else and not notice them, and walked down George Street to the Hilton Hotel.

The Marble Bar provided a comfortable atmosphere for miserable executives to get rolling drunk with dignity. Albert and Joanne weren't the first ashen-faced professionals to drown their sorrows amid the Redwood beams and tables, burgundy leather upholstery and framed shots of the Australian sports stars of the 2000 Games around the walls.

The soft amber light and delicate piano music drifting from the stereo speakers lent the Olympic Bar an elegant and relaxed edge. Albert had heard that Sydney's elite escort agencies often worked out of places like this, with hotel rooms right up the elevator. He supposed it was probably true and that the management of the Hilton Hotel chain would deny it hotly if it ever came to the surface. But if he knew business, the director of most five star Sydney hotels and the city's most expensive brothels would have more than one handshake agreement.

But that was a night trade. Right now, he saw only well tailored yuppies, board member types and elegantly dressed women.

They'd come in, sat down and ordered, then Albert had felt Joanne's head on his shoulder and felt her body shaking as she cried softly. He'd put his arm around her and held her hand, dismissing the bartenders enquiring look when they were served.

But now they were three quarters drunk and the indignity was being washed away to reveal the intelligence underneath, even if it was marred somewhat by alcohol.

"It's easy to think it's your fault. But don't worry,....." Joanne said, sipping her drink and breaking her gaze at herself in the mirror on the back wall, "I've seen this happen before. We're scapegoats, Albert. That report we were going to do would have been hanging around like a piece of rotten meat for them. Cutting us off, they could chuck anything else out the door they wanted. I've seen it happen, it doesn't matter how long you work somewhere, you just have to take one wrong step. All that crap about loyalty? How loyal was it, what they did to us? They wouldn't know loyalty if someone drove it up their arse. There's no friends in business. It's a whole stinking pit of people fighting to get each others' money. We're luckier to be out of it."

"I know," Albert sighed, drinking his beer, ".....it bloody stings, though."

Joanne patted his hand roughly. "It does, you're right."

They both sat drinking and watching the bottles lined up at the back of the bar for a few more minutes.

"I suppose I can tell you this now. Won't matter to my job any more." Joanne said.

Albert got comfortable and looked at her. "This isn't you, Al. It's me. It's been coming for a long time. I'm just so used to keeping it a secret I haven't thought to tell you.....This company is losing a lot of money. And I mean a lot. They've been taking big jobs, too big, like this Harbour Bridge thing. They take too long to get resolved, especially government ones, which are most of what we deal with anyway." Neither Albert or Joanne noticed her use of 'we' pertaining to the company they had just been sacked from. "Anyway, our operating costs were piling up and the jobs were too big to bring in any regular money. We'd get a big cash pay-out in the end but by that time we were too much in debt to move on to the next one and get out of the rut. Accounts said we ran at an operating loss of seventy million dollars last financial year." Albert gaped in amazement. Joanne nodded dramatically, "It was because we only had four major cases throughout the year. The fees from them were forecast and budgeted for, but nobody realised how much damage it would do taking the money in four major drops instead of having it spaced out over the year."

"What about investments?" Albert said.

Joanna snorted. "Putting a few dollars in the odd term deposit doesn't pay any bills. We'd run for months making thirty thousand dollars a week in fees and investments and spending ninety thousand on operations. By the time the twenty million came through from the job, we were twenty million in debt."

She took another long drink and continued. "Anyway, no company sees that. The board didn't admit its mistake and change the policy to take only decent paying viable cases, it decided to cut costs. And the first thing employers look at when they cut costs is their employees. They cut out coffee breaks, they stop having Christmas parties, they cut out salary overheads, and they retrench. What happens then is that the work there is gets done by less qualified people and takes longer, and the cycle repeats.

"They've been trying to reshuffle the top ranks for over a year, and I knew I was in trouble. They couldn't just chuck me out into the street like a filing clerk. They needed something to pin on me." She looked at Albert, smiling.

"And my investigation was it." Albert said, more depressed by the minute.

"It was only a bullet, Al. They've been holding the gun to my head for months. If it hadn't been this, it'd be the time I had a cigarette in the ladies because I was too desperate to go downstairs and the smoke alarm went off."

Albert tried to choke back a laugh, but when Joanne smiled they both broke up. "The story goes that you tore it off the ceiling and trod on it until you broke it." He giggled, bursting into a braying chorus of laughter.

She joined him. "One of the bloody nineteen year old schedule clerks came in and found me with my lipstick smeared and my pantyhose around my ankles."

Albert threw his head back and choked with laughter at the thought.

Three hours later, as the moon rose over the Opera House and the city twinkled in the night below the window of suite 615 in the Sydney Hilton, Albert lay in the centre of the king sized bed, propped on his elbows, watching Joanne Parkes as she balanced her hands across his chest and teased him, tightly and slowly easing him in and out of her. Sweat plastered them both despite the discreet air conditioning vents around the room whirring almost silently.

Albert cupped her breasts and squeezed them lightly, relishing the warmth of a woman's body again. Someone he felt *really* in contact with. Joanne reached up and held his hands to her, squeezing her breasts with him. She gave him a lovely smile, cocking her head to one side.

It was the best part of the sex.

Later, they lay together under the single sheet, Albert's arm around Joanne's shoulder, hers across his stomach, rubbing lightly.

Albert reached across to the bedside table for the scotch that sat there, filled with ice. He sipped it and offered it to Joanne, who shook her head.

"I always knew you had your eyes on me." she said.

He reached down to grab her bottom and said "Who couldn't with an arse like this.....We could stay here all week if we wanted. Don't have to go to work any more."

"Yeah, I might take a holiday." she said. "See if I can get into hospitality. Buy a hotel up the Whitsundays. What are you going to do?"

Albert shrugged. "Don't know. I'm a bit old to go back to the police force. Don't think I can stand the corporate world any more. I might get a divorce and move to Jamaica, live off some island virgin." He smiled.

Joanne smiled, but it disappeared from her lips. "What's your wife going to say?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know. She might throw a tantrum and never come back. She might say 'who cares' and never mention it. I think she knows I've done it before. She's probably at home in my bed with some bloke right now, her knees behind her ears where they usually are."

"I didn't mean here with me, I meant about work."

He shrugged again. "Probably the same reaction."

Joanne nodded and let her head fall back to his shoulder. She reached down and started to rub the inside of his thigh, parting his legs a little.

God, he thought, alcohol is sexual petrol for middle aged women. When they were eighteen, it made them throw up, when they were forty, it loosened their tongues *and* their legs.

Albert was full of four beers of ridiculous German alcohol content. He was amazed he'd gotten it up the first time. But as that warm hand tickled at his lower stomach, he felt himself stir.

"Joanne," he began, "I think I'd like to keep our case going. I know people who are getting right into it by now, who need help, like that doctor who first came to see me - I told you he's hired a parapsychologist. I want to know what comes of it all, and I just want you to know that I'm going to keep investigating it as usual. I'll have more time, at the very least."

"Great," she agreed, "at least it'll keep you busy. You might uncover something that'll make the board of InvestCo eat their words and vanish in disgrace."

"Do you want to help me? Will you still have those contacts you mentioned?"

She shrugged. "I suppose so. They're friends from old jobs, mostly. I don't know how directly I can help, but I'll still do what I can."

"Well, our next expedition is for a whole group of people to go onto the Bridge on Thursday night. We're going to get as many professional opinions as we can. There's going to be the original back patient, the doctor, the parapsychologist the psychiatrist, myself and the university researcher."

"How are you going to get onto the Bridge anyway, when it's open?" she asked.

"They'll never re-open it on Wednesday night." Albert told her, "The testing's not even half finished. I just about had it in black and white back at work that they'll still be working up until the weekend. They'll give the usual every-sacrifice-for-public-safety crap to the news."

"How will you keep everything under watch?" she asked.

"Just vantage points. The pylons and the walking paths. We'll keep in contact with walkie talkies and mobile phones and have all the equipment set up to detect anything."

"Where are you going to get it all?" she asked.

"Well, it was going to be George Slatten & Bromigal and Darby Hillman, but I don't think I'll have access to the warehouse any more. That's why I was hoping you could talk to your contacts. We need

anything we can get." Joanne stared out the window for several seconds and nodded slowly.

"I'm sure I'll know people from colleges and private labs. We must have used a thousand scientists for forensic work. They'll have every piece of detection equipment you've heard of."

Albert breathed heavily in relief. "Wonderful. I'd feel like a proper dickhead turning up with my old camcorder and a couple of cordless phones."

Joanne laughed and began stroking his stomach again, tracing circles further down until she closed her hand around him and made him gasp.

"What was in those drinks?" he said as she rolled on top of him.

"Love Potion No. 9" Joanne whispered, biting his neck.

"Ring room service and get a six pack." he joked, and then it felt wonderful again, a feeling of closeness with another person that no money could buy and no corporation could ever take away.

IV

The phone rang out so Barry tried again, like he had been doing ever since he got in to work that morning. Forty rings, and then the standard engaged signal. He replaced the receiver and pushed the intercom button to reception.

"Yes Barry?" came Eileen's voice.

"Eileen, would you keep trying Dale Milling's number for me, every half hour or so?"

"Yes, of course." she said, and the line went silent. Barry looked out the window for a few seconds, through the tiny copse of cocus palm trees to the offices opposite his in the small office complex. He wondered if the solicitors and G.P.s across from him had the same troubles. All vanity aside, he bet they didn't.

He read the paper again, his brow furrowed with worry, and felt another stab of sorrow, feeling tears try to spring to his eyes again. He sighed heavily and didn't want to read, but he didn't want to believe it, and would've given anything for it not to be there, for himself to have misread it. But it was still there, and no matter how many times he wiped his eyes to make his vision clearer, he knew he'd made no mistake.

He'd heard of people who read the obituary columns as they got older to see who they were outliving and what everyone else was dying of. He didn't think he did it himself, not yet, but if he did, his excuse was that he knew a lot of old people around the area whom he'd treated and not seen for years and read out of curiosity.

But today he wished he'd never read a paper in his life. The obituary was simple, and he wouldn't have expected anything else.

In loving memory of Janice Mary Milling. Born 11/12/57, died 8/2/17. Wife of Roland (dec), mother of Dale, daughter of Lillian & William, sister of Elaine. Rest In Peace.

He stared out the window again, and squeezed his eyes closed - hard, forcing the tears from them, as if the salty water in his eyes was the sorrow itself and he was exhausting it down his cheeks. He hadn't known Dale's mother very well, had met her the first few times Dale had been to see him all that time ago, and on the odd occasion since.

And the sadness wasn't only for himself. Dale was at the most dangerous emotional time of his life (since the accident), and a loss like it would be more than enough to drive him hysterical, insane or dead. Barry looked at the floor, scolding himself. He was trying to put Dale and his situation in medical terms, as if that would make it easier to accept. He just didn't want to admit to himself that he loved the man and would begin to watch him fall apart helplessly.

At four o'clock in the afternoon, Barry couldn't wait any more. He packed up his things and left the office (he was also grateful that it was an office day, the one afternoon a week he put aside for paperwork and study instead of usual patient consultations), driving straight to Dale's house.

Barry pulled up outside Dale's block of flats in Chuter Street, Ramsgate. He walked up the front path, peppered on either side with small begonia plants, and stopped at the door, searching for Dale's number on the security buzzer beside the door. He pushed it, then again, then again, for longer.

Barry's heart sank. Dale could be anywhere. He slowly turned, punching his thigh lightly in frustration, and turned to leave.

Barry stopped halfway down the path, as he cast a last glance over his shoulder. He looked again. Something felt strangely wrong to Barry. He turned fully to face the window, concentration on his face.

One thing he had come to know about Dale was his routine. For years, it was really all Dale had to talk about, and he did, in the special way that mostly old people do, when seemingly mundane events in their lives become markers for the passage of time. That's how it had become with Dale, and Barry used to smile as Dale would tell him about what he'd had for dinner that week, what videos he'd rented, what time he was getting up.

One of things Dale had always been particular about were the blinds. He *never* closed the blinds during the day. Never. He couldn't stand living like a vampire, he said, with the sun shining outside and

every blind in the house cutting it off like a dusty coffin. He felt it cleared away the proverbial cobwebs, gave life a bit more colour, the breezes blowing away dust and the light chasing away the seclusion of his lifestyle.

And he rarely closed the blinds at night either, for the same reason, so his subconscious mind didn't forget that there was a world outside happening around him (buzzing with light from street lights and passing headlights, the moon and stars casting curtains of pale light across the carpet) and that he wasn't alone.

Barry rubbed his chin, scratching his beard. The long blind across the long main window was pulled all the way down.

Even if Dale had pulled the blinds down the previous night, he hadn't been there all day to roll them up. Hadn't been there, or.....couldn't.

Barry strode back to the intercom and stabbed the button of Dale's flat number for several seconds. He was met with silence, even after three rings. He could even hear the buzzer up on the third floor, right back from where it hung beside the kitchen window of the unit.

Barry swore under his breath. He pressed another number, waited, then tried another. An old female voice, heavily laced with an Asian accent, responded half heartedly.

"Aah, could you just buzz me in, I've left my security key upstairs." Barry said. There was a pause and the door buzzed deeply. Barry pushed it and let himself into the stairwell, lifting his weight up the stairs as quick as he could, cursing Dale for the hundredth time for living on the top floor. He turned the corner at the last landing and down the short hall to Dale's door, number 39.

Barry banged on the door loudly with his fist.

"Dale?" he said. He tried the handle. Locked.

"Dale!" this time he shouted. A voice told him to stop being so stupid. He obviously wasn't here, left in a hurry for something and forgot the blinds. You just knew a few of his quirks. You didn't know the man's whole life. Maybe he and his psychiatrist were humping on the windowsill all night and had gone out for a late lunch.

There was no reason to worry, and any other time, Barry wouldn't have. But things were so frightening in life now, with the Bridge, the deaths, even Dale himself. Barry had spent the last three weeks expecting and seeing the worst. There was no reason to be worried, but he was, and couldn't think of a reason for it.

He finally found a phone booth down the road outside the supermarket that lay on the corner adjacent to the beachfront road through Ramsgate.

Eileen was still at the surgery finishing her paperwork, thank God. Barry had her look up Dale's home address on the original paper files (none of the unnecessary information was kept in the computer files), which would tell him the name of Dale's real estate agent.

Ten minutes later he was on the phone to Bill Seagrove, senior property consultant at Martins Seagrove Real Estate in Hurstville. "I understand that," Barry was saying, "but I don't have time to let your bureaucracy stop me from reaching my patient. Call the AMA while your workman is on his way here, they can vouch that I'm registered with them. I have to get into that flat."

"It's just not the way we usually do it, doctor, that's all. We need written approval from the nominated next of kin to enter the premises."

"His next of kin was his mother, and she died yesterday. That's why I have to get inside. The patient is highly unstable and it is my medical opinion that he could endanger himself in reaction to the loss. Now if there's no way can have the door keys sent down here straight away I'm going to have to break in."

"I can't be responsible for legal action taken against you if you do that, Doctor."

"And you could be an accessory to manslaughter by refusing." He hadn't mentioned that Dale was in any way emotionally connected, just that he was a patient in danger. He also hadn't told the real estate agent that he was only a spine doctor and didn't know how he'd explain his apparently psychiatric diagnosis if the man challenged him. He heard the agent sigh loudly over the phone.

"I must have a staff member with you at all times while you enter the premises." he said.

"I don't care if you send the Rental Bond Board, just send me the key.....now." There was a tinkling in the background and muffled voices.

"All right, doctor, it's on it's way. Remember, no -"

Barry hung up and started to walk back to the flats, swearing at the man under his breath, out of earshot of a group of shopping-day pensioners.

The staff member turned out to be what looked like the office trainee, a girl about nineteen with long and wild hair and the same short skirt and tight jacket that probably got her the job laying across her boss's desk.

She introduced herself and gestured for Barry to follow and he was immediately sorry for his prejudgment. She was helpful and seemed to sense the urgency of the situation. He just felt frustrated with the whole world at that moment.

He followed the girl up the stairs to the last landing and down the corridor. She leaned over the door and produced a key ring that must have housed thirty keys from her tan briefcase. They jingled, tauntingly slowly, as she tried each one, and after an eternity, sweat collecting in Barry's palms, one slid into the lock.

"Here we go." the girl said to herself in a satisfied voice. She opened the door and they both stepped through.

It was dark, and the first thing to hit them was the smell. It was a metal, cloying smell, like old expired car batteries. Barry saw a dark patch on the worn carpet and followed it with his eyes across to where Dale sat propped against the bed, his eyes dazed and open, the black-handled steak knife on the carpet beside him, his wrist an ugly, open wound, torn and gashed.

Behind Barry, the girl clapped her hands to her face and screamed.

He grabbed her arms and shouted into her face "Call an ambulance!", shoving her in the direction of the phone. He ran to Dale and crashed onto his knees beside his friend, feeling bile and terror come up in his throat. The first shock had been a hammerpunch between his eyes and Barry still reeled from it. It occurred to him in split seconds the amount of time it would take to establish Dale's non-presence in his life, now that he was dead, and in that same split second he felt tired at the thought.

He dabbed his fingers in the pool around Dale. It was barely damp. Mostly it was dry crust sunk into the carpet. An old, caked river of it spread from the mutilation of Dale's wrist, across his hands, and onto the floor. Barry looked up into his face. The eyes stared into space, somewhere a long way off, as if the body were staring at the retreating soul, the skin was white and dead.

Barry cried out, something inside him snapping, and dragged Dale's inert body forward into his arms, his enormous body shaking with grief, not hearing the girl across the room faint as she tried to ring 000, not hearing the traffic passing on the street below, not heeding anything except the jagged, frayed end of a line of energy that had been a man he loved that had been hacked and chopped to a bloody halt.

He felt the same skin that he'd helped heal, that he'd felt as they tested all the mechanics of the brace a thousand times, the same cold palm that he'd shook when they first met all those years ago, not realising how intricately their lives would be entwined. But mostly Barry felt a pain in his chest that wasn't cardiac failure or heart murmur or indigestion. It was loss, and it stabbed him like a spear, on fire and dripping with Dale's blood.

He had sent the real estate girl away and sat, his arms around Dale, his enormous body shaking as he cried, pleaded for his friend to come back. He felt shame, fear, hatred for himself for not realising, after Dale had shown such a wonderful newfound strength in himself. Mostly he hated himself for a sick, dark corner of his mind where love and friendship never belonged, a part that had once controlled humankind and made him murder his neighbour for food and his brother for land.

Because no matter how much Dale meant to him, the sickest dredges of Barry knew that with Dale dead, maybe all this business on the Bridge would end. He made himself say the words in his head and revelled in the guilt like a pig in shit because it was the only thing he could feel apart from the numbing anguish; I'm glad you're dead because I'm getting old and fat and lazy and I just want to retire and screw my wife for a living instead of getting mixed up in all this trouble.

I'm glad you're dead because I'm frightened of you.

He crushed Dale tighter to himself and sobbed, felling absolutely putrid, not deserving to have had a friend like the dead thing in his arms, and knowing he never would have again.

He took the torch magnetised to the fridge door and shined it in Dale's eyes. His skin was greying and cold, no air moved from his mouth, and his pupils didn't react.

The ambulance arrived twelve minutes after the phone call, and Barry went downstairs as the St. Johns workers carried Dale's covered body on a stretcher down the stairs, to the amazement of horrified tenants and onlookers on the street that included the real estate girl, her hair even wilder, her make-up smeared and running with tears down her face. Barry handed her the keys and thanked her. She stammered and asked if the man was still alive. Barry shook his head matter-of-factly and told her no, he wasn't.

He watched the ambulance drive away, its lights off, and climbed into his own car, not really caring where he drove even if it was in the direction of home, the traffic and roads multiplying fourfold through the steady river of tears, his chest a hollow, his heart gone, the way it only can be when we lose someone, hoping it wouldn't be years before it grew back and thinking that he had nowhere to go and nothing more to live for.

V

The phone rang as Emily was screaming " - even hold onto a fucking job. If you think I'm working you've got something else coming." The phone stopped her, briefly. "I'll get it." she spat, turning her back on Albert and making for the kitchen.

"You won't touch it," he yelled back at her, "It's for me, I'll get it in the study."

Before she could say another word he turned away and started up the stairs. He didn't really know that it was for him, but it was worth it to get away from her screeching voice.

Since coming home, Albert had nearly gone insane. Even after these few hours. Work was his haven of peace, that was why he worked such long hours. Now, he was stuck at home, with her, all day and night. Knowing that he had only one place of belonging (and knowing that he had to share it with *her*) was devastating.

Everything had snapped the previous night, Tuesday (Christ, he would say to himself when he realised, it's only been *one day*, and it feels like three weeks).

He had gone to bed early and been thinking about the bed he'd shared with Joanne Parkes in the Hilton Hotel, wishing she was with him instead of the twenty year old girl in January *Penthouse* and a cold, empty bed.

Emily had had an appointment with some banker or salesman for her Rotary Club work and had dressed in a short black dress, choker and black high heeled shoes. She had looked so beautiful as she applied her make-up in the bedroom mirror as Albert watched her, and he wanted to tell her how much he felt he loved her right then, but he supposed it was the indignity of a man with his identity and position of power stripped from him, an indignity that fucking a beautiful woman always seemed to dismiss for men.

But he knew she would tell him to go to hell and he'd finish up in bed with a Pet of the Month in one hand and himself in the other, which was no place for a successful married man, and would grind the dignity he had left into the dust. If he was really lucky, he'd become impotent (with a picture of a girl in a magazine, for God's sake - it had happened) or catch a glimpse of himself in the mirrored wardrobe doors, an old balding unemployed man married to a cold bitch who hated him, wanking his dick guiltily like a teenager.

The erection he'd had stirring at the sight of his wife's legs went limp at the thought. Maybe he should dial up a call girl. But he had no idea what time Emily would be back. One indignity he couldn't deal with (and which his wife would stab him with as hard as she could) would be for her to discover him, old, balding and unemployed, in her bed with some beautiful young girl that all three would know felt nothing except the knowledge of the money in her purse.

Anyway, she had come home, at about eleven. He'd heard a car pull up outside about fifteen minutes earlier and supposed it had been the people across the road.

But she had climbed the stairs, her hair tousled, her legs shaky, peeled off the dress and fallen into bed beside him. The first thing Albert had smelled had been a strong, heady scent of musky sweat, both feminine and masculine.

He'd woken her up and told her what a filthy slut she was. She ignored him and rolled back over. When he had grabbed her she'd punched him in the jaw. He told her he wanted a divorce, now that he wasn't working he could push it through. The mention of him not working had started her off, and it had been constant ever since.

He snatched up the phone as he sat down, and all his hatred and self loathing had whirled away down a funnel as the voice over the phone broke through the mists.

"I called your work, nobody really told me what happened, until I spoke to that guy Steve Winterman." Albert couldn't speak for a second.

"Donald?" he asked. He had called the hospital several times, even since the sacking, with the same answer - I'm sorry, but we're doing everything we can. Dusting off a slab for him downstairs, they meant.

"Yeah," the doctor laughed, "I got out this morning. They told me I was lucky to be alive, and that I should have a holiday. So I drove up to my parents place in Narrabeen and sent the morning on the beach.....I've been trying to reach you for ages.....I'm really sorry, Albert. What happened?"

"How in the hell did you.....-?" Albert cut in, ignoring Donald.

"It was apparently just in time. Something triggered all the defences and I woke up in the middle of the night and threw it all up, virus and all. It wasn't the virus that was the real problem, it was because I couldn't get rid of it and it was just going to take over."

"Don't you remember anything?" Albert asked him.

The researcher sighed. "No, just.....all negative, but I don't remember any details. Have you found anything out?"

Albert laughed. "Have we hell! You should see the shit we picked up from your trip. You and the van copped a bashing, Donald."

"We're going to review all that this afternoon, I'm back at work today."

"Listen, Donald.....We're going back."

"Where?"

"The Bridge.....tomorrow night. I nearly cancelled it because I thought you weren't going to make it. But everything's set up, so I really couldn't. The doctor I've told you about, the one who first came to me, was in his surgery with the patient while you were out at the Bridge the other day. We spent all Saturday night going over everything. The same things that happened to you happened to them. All their readings, their

machinery, all showed evidence of some huge.....animal or force that was attacking you at the same time. There were three lines were the ducos of the research van, scratched right through the paint and everything. I got a fax copy from the university."

"God." Donald whispered.

"At the same time that was happening, this guy had an identical scratch across his back, they came up angry red welts and luckily the doctor took photos. The day before I got sacked I sent them both to a photography design studio where they can touch up magazine pictures, and they scaled them together and found out that they were exactly the same. Exactly." There was a pause as Albert let the news sink in.

"How far away is the surgery, Albert?" Donald asked.

"Miranda."

"Ssshit." Donald whispered. Neither man spoke for a few seconds, Donald's mind ticking over desperately, Albert waiting for an idea or opinion.

"What do you think?" he finally asked.

"I've got to meet this patient." Donald said determinedly, "That's near where you live, isn't it? It's a forty minute drive from the city. If the force of the activity that attacked me was strong enough to reach that far.....it must be nearly thirty kilometres in a straight line, it would have shorted out every electrical substation and transformer, every rail line, every TV and radio transmission, every phone line."

"So.....what if it hasn't?" Albert said tentatively.

"It has to be selective." Donald said. "It's got either a controlled source, or else this man has something very special that attracts it." Albert nodded slowly to himself.

"What equipment have you got?" Donald asked.

"Well, my old boss has organised for all the equipment. She and I are paying for it all. You wouldn't believe it, but we got in under a technicality. She fought tooth and nail yesterday to get it together in time, but under the Public Works Maintenance legislation clauses a private company can be invited to conduct their own research at the same site, as long as their findings are made available to the government. They're just underfunded, they know that, so they let someone else in who has the resources and manpower to do their work for them. They file the whole thing under the Freedom of Information act to make it look good.

"Anyway, they've been there since six this morning setting it all up. We've got infra-red cameras at eight points, access to all the internal test systems, high sensory microphones around the site, industrial voltmeters and electrograph meters, plus all the communications equipment. The Bridge is going to be closed to traffic throughout today and tomorrow

while the Public Works clean up and leave, and through until midnight tomorrow night, so we've got from about seven o'clock until then."

"Who's going to be there?"

"Everybody. My old boss is going to be on the phone from her house and have her modem ready to transfer any information we need. I'll be there, and so will the patient. His orthopaedic doctor and his psychologist will be there to watch him, emotionally and physically, since he seems to be the target for all this. They're also going to bring a parapsychologist they've been seeing, who's bringing a lot of specialised equipment as well. I believe he's on the Bridge right now setting up with my people. And apparently we have to have a representative from the Public Works or RTA or someone on site. But I'm hoping that our equipment and findings will be over his head and he'll keep out of the way."

"Okay," Donald said, his voice full of thought and planning, "this is just what we need, actually, an entire picture. I can requisition the van and bring all the equipment I can in it. I'll need you in it with me. I'll have to bring a junior from the uni but I could do with you assisting me in the van since you know the whole case history."

"Okay." Albert agreed.

"The only thing is....." Donald sounded doubtful.

"What?"

"I don't know if you'll think it's a good idea. I called your old work before, like I said. This guy - Steve, his name was - came on and explained what happened. He also said that I wasn't to be in any professional contact with you with regards to the Harbour Bridge case. He said that if I saw you they'd take legal action against us both. A fax came later on saying the same thing."

"What did you tell him?"

"Nothing. He didn't really give me the chance. But I just wanted to tell you in case you decided it wasn't worth the risk." Albert sighed.

"I don't care about them any more. How can they find out anyway? If you'll have me, I'll be there."

"I never cared about your company, Albert. I'm exercising professional curiosity, and you just happen to be my most important informant, regardless of where you work. I hope you will be there, because I'll need you."

"You can rely on me, then. Just one thing....."

"Yes?" Donald asked as Albert's mind was filled with images of a huge beast made of light drifting across the harbour air, with the researcher trapped inside.

"Do you have a gun in that research van?"

Tim was standing beside a canvas tent in the middle of the Port Jackson freeway when the mobile phone in his bag rang. He was sniffing and running his hands through his hair. He'd been up for four hours, and it was only nine thirty. At the apex of the northern arch, he could faintly see two men tinkering with tools and objects, tethered by strong cables.

Tim had gotten out of bed as the cool orange sunlight was painting the dawn in streaks and the magpies were waking to canoodle their lovely song. He gulped down a litre of orange juice from the carton as he pulled on faded, almost white jeans, a long sleeved white shirt with black stripes that still hung loose and untucked, and his old high top Reeboks over bare feet.

He had so much equipment to get together that it would never fit in the car. He went down to the back garage, as the blue daybreak and starry night struggled silently overhead, and peeled the car cover off the sparkling red 2010 Holden Ute. Beneath the tarpaulin across the carry tray was the equipment frame that he'd had custom designed and fitted to hold the equipment.

It was no good just throwing delicate thousand dollar machinery in the back of a utility, so he had the frame built especially with snap locks on the bars, little pockets and pouches along the inside walls of the tray and polystyrene pads to buffer the machinery, and so every piece of equipment he owned had a snug compartment or slot so that they suffered negligible transport damage. He would always reset and adjust the equipment whenever he set it up in the field anyway.

And he had arrived along with the men and women from the other team, set up by the investigators. Their equipment would pick up anything, since it was general detection apparatus, but Tim's machinery was specialised, and would provide the umbrella for paranormal detection, sorting the pigeons and winds and wild goose chases from the real terrors - if they showed up.

Upon agreement from the investigators who were setting the whole thing up (he'd spoken to the lady on the phone, a Ms Parkes - very nice woman), he was going to bring his equipment on line with the rest of the stuff, and so be hooked into a site-wide detection network that every user point would have access to. Nothing would escape their notice.

And since he had developed a recent dislike of heights, Tim was relieved that the responsibility of hooking his own sensors up had therefore been taken off his shoulders.

He fished through the old nylon Tiger bag and extended the aerial of the phone, answering in a loud voice over the midmorning hum of the city.

"Hello, Tim Hacker."

"Mr Hacker," came a voice he didn't know (he had been expecting a worker around the site with a question), "I understand you're a parapsychologist?"

"That's right," Tim answered, hurriedly collecting his bag and moving away from the canvas wall, where a heavy council truck was approaching to pass by. He smiled apologetically at the driver.

"Mr Hacker, my name's Steven Winterman, I represent George Slatten & Bromigal, a city investigative firm. I hope I'm not bothering you, but I'm calling with a small proposition." Tim frowned. He'd never heard of the man or the company. He hoped he wasn't being investigated, maybe he.....

His heart plunged, then yawned up into his throat. The cable car. They'd identified him and Dale from a security camera video or something.

"What can I do for you?" he said carefully.

"We're working in conjunction with Darby Hillman and Associates, providing them with evidence to support their injunction against the council for the problems experienced on the Harbour Bridge during the last couple of weeks. Recently it's become obvious to our investigators that there may be more than metallurgy faults at work. Some people have mentioned paranormal activity," the man laughed, "but I don't know if I agree.....Anyway, we need a specialist in your area of research, and you're the most respected man in that area in Sydney."

"Thank you." Tim said.

"Not at all," Steven Winterman continued, "I'd like you to work for us, Mr Hacker, on a consulting basis. Your findings would be invaluable to us and we could reach some agreement that would be beneficial to everyone involved."

"Oh, well I'm grateful for your call, Mr Winterman," Tim explained, "but as a matter of fact I'm already investigating the trouble on the Harbour Bridge, under the employment of another party."

There was a slight pause, a beat too long, and the man replied in an even, interested voice.

"Oh, found anything?"

"Quite a few things." Tim smiled. Another pause.

"Mr Hacker, I'd like to leave our offer open. May I ask who you're working for?" Tim paused. Why did he want to know that? It was difficult for a moment. He couldn't be outright rude.

"Just, ah.....a professional lady....in the area."

"And how much for, Mr Hacker?" Too direct. Too challenging. He was laying something down on the table and willing to go past the boundaries of mere rudeness. Tim tried to hold onto his politeness, despite the other man.

"Well I can't disclose that, I'm sorry."

"Oh, I understand." the man replied apologetically, "but we really need a man like you, doctor, and whatever your present employer is paying you, I'll meet and exceed it, handsomely."

It threw Tim off and he stammered a second. "Well, it's not really that easy sir, to just change employers, it's like.....I have access to certain information and feedback that I couldn't get anywhere else. It's like you moving offices."

"Well, I do understand, but I just want you to know that the offer stands. If you like, come on in and talk to us." He repeated his name and that of the company, "we're very open to negotiation. Triple your current price, if you wish."

They said their goodbyes and hung up. Tim chuckled to himself and returned the phone to his bag with no intention of remembering the man or the company. The power of money didn't determine his workload or pick his employers any more. It never had. The money his mother had fought for would be more than enough to take care of Tim for the rest of his life.

Dr Holt had been explicit about what she wanted, but had been almost apologetic as she tried her best to justify how little she could pay him. She was in her own practice and had home decorations she was committed to paying off, and since it was far easier to settle his fees from her own pocket, she couldn't offer him very much.

Tim had accepted the case because of the possibilities for discovery, and had never accepted a case or switched his consultant capacity to another party for financial gain.

As the name 'George Slatten & Bromigal' whirled away into his mind in a thousand fragments and snippets of information and reminders, he walked off through the Sydney County Council canvas shelters and government vehicles.

He was on the brink of discovery. And tomorrow night, when nothing would escape his detection, he would have visual evidence to fortify his proof. Only a twinge of fear nestled amid the science clutter and theories, fear of what they faced and what might happen. He said a small prayer in his mind.

VI

Julia rushed out at Barry from the living room as he went into the house, her face streaked with tears, her eyes wide with fear. She crashed into his arms. The sight of her grief made something in him break again, and a flood of tears came. His body shook and he hitched in heavy, jarring breaths.

"Oh God, baby, I don't know what to do." It didn't occur to either of them how the other knew. Eileen had become worried at the surgery and, whilst trying to track down Barry, after dialling Dale's number, and the number of his estate agent, which Barry had been looking for, had been told what had happened. She had called Julia straight away.

But none of that mattered. Dale was dead, and all the tears in the world weren't going to bring him back.

"What am I going to do?" he wailed pitifully.

"Barry," Julia sniffed, looking up at him, "the hospital called. Sutherland. You have to go there straight away, as soon as you got home, they said."

Barry drove slowly to Sutherland Private Hospital, the hospital Dale's mother was in. Maybe now they'd be together again, laying side by side in drawers in the morgue freezer, the little tags tied around their toes labelled *cerebral* and *suicide*.

He drove well under the speed limit, wishing he would never arrive. He knew the procedure. Dale had no other next of kin and Barry was being called in to identify the body. He didn't think he could look into his friends dead eyes again, the rough gashes across his wrists, the grey, freezing skin.

Once, during his medical training, he'd been unfortunate enough during a class to see a corpse after being pumped too full of embalming fluid. The grey pussy solution had oozed from the nostrils and anus of the poor man and dribbled to the floor in a very undignified way. Barry didn't think he could stand seeing Dale like that.

He did arrive, eventually, trying in vain to dry his eyes as he crossed the carpark and went through the doors to the main reception area. A steely old nurse pointed him in the right direction, oblivious to his distress.

He took the elevator to the third floor and reported to the eastern reception area to give his name and title to the attending nurse, who asked him to wait. He turned to stare out over the Kingsway below while he waited, all the way across three shires to the city on the horizon. The attendant returned soon after with an older man in a doctors coat.

"Dr McAlpine." the older man said, removing his glasses and smiling sympathetically, extending his hand to Barry, huddled on the spindly plastic seat. After sitting there for ten minutes, Barry looked like a man who hadn't slept in days. He looked up at the doctor with bleary eyes, through tear-rimmed vision. He accepted the other doctors hand and introduced himself with a mumble.

The doctor gestured for him to follow. He made small talk on the way down the corridor, sparse and unimportant. They stopped outside a

ward, a large one, the green door cracked, the paint flaky, and the doctor turned to Barry.

"I know there's nothing that will prepare you for this, Doctor Paul, but there was a further development."

The doctor pushed the door and it swung open.

Barry felt his knees buckle, shake and almost collapse. He thought he wet himself.

When someone close dies, the first and strongest feeling, from which the grief is born, is the irrefutable sense of loss. We know that we're going to cry and scream and plead and pray and fight, but they're gone forever. We know we may take months or years to heal from the part of us wrenched free. But more than anything, we know the crushing and inescapable weight, a soporific one, that we have lost forever.

Death is the final barrier, it always has been. And there was no doubt in Barry's mind, professional or personal, that Dale was dead. His pupils hadn't dilated, he hadn't breathed for at least fifteen minutes. You didn't even need to be a doctor to see that his skin was dry and cold, grey and lifeless. And his eyes were gone. The spongy bulbs of tissue were still nestled in the skull, of course, but the *true* eyes, the sparkle, the *life*, was gone. Dale had been dead.

From across the room, Dale's inert body was healthy and pink, blood and oxygen coursing through it, two tubes in his nose and one in his arm, his shirt open, electrodes attached to his chest, his eyes flickering.

Alive.

Alive.

He *had* died. And been dead for hours.

Now he lived again.

Barry stared, and muttered "Oh my Jesus Christ."

Dale was alive.

VII

The phone hadn't stopped ringing all morning. Workmen wanting to know if they could forklift this, tie these together, researchers checking positions of equipment, the computer guy with glitches and questions, the Public Works representative (that would be there that night) on Tim's back every time there was a noise or vibration he didn't like.

Now it did again. Tim had left the bag in one of the makeshift offices (one of the Public Works test people had told him five times to get it out - they'd finished and were packing all their stuff up ready to leave at six o'clock, and if he didn't want to have to track the bag down through the ranks and storage areas of the Sydney County Council, he'd better

come and get rid of the damn thing) and carried the phone with him, clipped to his belt. Now it rang again.

"Oh shit." he hissed, tearing it viciously from the belt.

"Yes." he said in a demanding, I'm-busy-so-don't-shit-me voice.

"Tim." came Dale's voice.

"Hey, how are you. You're coming tonight, I hear?"

"Yeah," Dale said, "I just found out about it."

"What, just now? Didn't your doctor tell you about it? I would have, but I found out last night and I've been here since six this morning setting up. They're keeping the Bridge closed until midnight tonight, accessible only by us. You should see the equipment we've got out here."

"Really?" Dale said, although Tim couldn't be sure which part it was in response to. It would be funny to hear the Sydney Harbour Bridge had been closed only for you.

"Who told you?" Tim asked.

"Barry. He's here with me now."

"Are you at his surgery?" Tim asked. Dale paused.

"I'm in hospital, Tim. Where are you?"

"What?.....On the Bridge. What are you doing in hospital?"

"Ah, Tim.....you're.....you're talking to a dead man." he laughed half heartedly. Tim froze. He remembered the handshake of an old farmer out on that property. He spoke, he walked, he was wet with seawater. He had been dead for nineteen years. Dale's words stabbed fear through Tim. He heard Dale sniff, then sob.

"Dale?"

"My mother died, Tim. She had a stroke yesterday." His voice cracked, and he fought to keep control. Tim's fear melted away to sorrow, at the sound of the grief in Dale's voice.

"I couldn't keep looking around and seeing everything that was around me, because it all reminded me that she wasn't there any more. I sat up all afternoon after I spoke to you, and when it got dark I slit my wrists. I had to go with her. She.....she was my Mum." Dale broke down.

There was a muffled scratching, and a pause. Tim was hardly aware. He only stared, out across the water, a chord in his own heart struck, painfully. Dale sniffled and came back on the line, fighting for control.

"They say I clinically died last night at four in the morning. This morning Barry came around and found me. I was declared dead when they picked me up, but when they brought me in they apparently detected a faint pulse, and everything came back."

"What do you remember?" Tim asked.

"Nothing. Like being asleep. I think I regained full consciousness once, at about nine o'clock, it felt like, because I woke up and was really hot. I couldn't really feel myself, only that I was hot and uncomfortable. Then I suppose I lapsed into it again.....I lost twenty litres of blood."

Tim still stared. His theories, the information the van had given him, were all there, he had written it out. He had seen the equations for the existence of terrible gods, but this was first hand witness to them, this was staring right into their horrifying faces which would drive any human mad.

In desperate seconds that he wished would never have elapsed, his mind put each piece together, and he was too terrified to admit the truth. Dale had died. Clinically dead is the passage of minutes without breath or heartbeat. But the brain cannot survive without blood, no human body can lose twenty litres and still carry enough oxygen to keep the brain alive, and once the brain is dead, what was once a person with a soul is a dead slab of rotting meat.

But now, Tim knew otherwise. Every equation he had pointed to it. It was scientific truth, and it was too terrible a truth for man to contemplate. Dale had died, and he had been brought back to life. And only one force in the universe could make that happen, one that had made it happen - once, in the course of human history.

Tim handed his supervisory post over to one of the men setting up the equipment and ran for Dawes Point, where the ute was parked in The Rocks.

Dale hung the phone up and leant back in his bed, careful not to dislodge the hose in his arm that was feeding him blood and food. He looked at Barry, who looked half dead himself with fatigue and mental assault. He still stared at Dale in disbelief and hadn't said very much.

Dale stared at the ceiling and saw his mother in his mind. As a younger woman, not the grated, frail woman she had become, but the heroine, the first love, the protector and the wise, the icon, shining across the world, who knew and saw all. The pillar of strength, who had been as gentle as a butterfly. She had given him everything, even unwittingly. Not even owing to the fact that she had carried him as closely for nine months as two people can be, but that she was a different person to him and had given up so much.

He felt tears well, a river of sorrow in his chest and over his cheeks. He thought he felt Barry's hand.

He had always been so proud of her strength. If he ever forgot her face or her voice, she would always be an object of strength to him. He would always be proud of her and he had never really told her. He hadn't told her because it wasn't a thing you just say, like you think that person

is going to die next week or something. It was only really something you wanted to say, always meant to, and realised you should have when it was too late.

Tim sat at the desk in his office, the only light burning was his desk lamp. The vertical blinds across the window and the glass doors of the office were drawn. A few papers were strewn across the desktop, and the PC whirred as it scrolled information for him. The modem was in constant electronic chatter with the computer system at home, where all the findings and information was stored, so everything he had to know was at his fingertips.

He leaned to one side and jotted something down every now and again, his mind clicking over faster than the computer, the huge warm bubble of exhilaration that was scientific discovery rising through him.

This was the real truth about everything humankind had always fought to learn.

Ancient Greeks birthed modern thinking and turned their philosophies to the greatest mysteries without full success. Every powerful race or people at their peak had some branch, if not their entirety, dedicated to the questions of life, why we come, where we go.

The Romans saw the answers in their gods; the saxons of post-Roman England held sacred rites beseeching enormous animal gods of the night sky; the French of medieval times structured a religious system centred almost completely around the notions and study of death and the unexplained; even the Nazi party was reputed to have entire task forces assigned to the occult with possible weapons development and military supremacy during the 1930's, as if one of Hitler's political policies was to forge a bargain with Satan.

But when the question had first been asked, there would be an eons long wait for the answer. And only nature would provide it, as soon as humankind had the tools to read the mathematical code of nature. In the early twenty first century, in a room in a house in a colonial civilisation which hadn't even existed in those times, death appeared as words on a lighted screen on a sort of machine with a million brains that those ancient thinkers hadn't even dreamed about.

Tim picked up the phone and called the hospital.

Barry left, his mind reeling, his eyes puffy, on Dale's insistence. Tonight was crucial to everyone involved, and everyone needed to be at their most alert. Barry had left, exhausted beyond physical and mental endurance, with full intentions of going home, opening about four six packs of Fosters Gold and spend the rest of the day sleeping off his drunkenness and disbelief, ready for tonight.

The nurse joked with Dale when she brought a mobile phone to him so he could receive the urgent call that had come through. If he was in a public hospital, she said, she'd have to wheel him out to the payphone in the street in a wheelchair. Every floor had a mobile telephone service for the convenience of patients and doctors.

"Dale, it's Tim." came Tim's excited voice.

"Hi." Dale said, "how are things going out there?"

"I'm at home. I have to tell you something. I know what happened to you.....You were dead, Dale. I called the hospital and I had them fax me the reports. I hope you don't mind, but I needed an exact account of what happened. I told them I was a friend of yours and also employed to monitor your health. I produced the papers Dr Holt and I exchanged. The report was from the coroners office. You'd been laying in your flat for almost twenty eight hours. They put the time of death at 4.00 a.m. You were found by Dr Paul at almost five the following afternoon."

"I know all that, Tim, they told me everything when I woke up. I felt,.....like I'd woken after a long sleep, that was all. Almost,..I don't know."

"Do you feel a little bit tired? Drained out?"

"Not any more. I did this morning."

"I thought you would," Tim agreed, "you were rotting. Did you say you feel better now?"

"Yeah," Dale said dubiously, the previous remark hanging ominously, "what do you mean 'rotting'."

"Dale, when we die, there is an exact instantaneous moment when our brain expires and we are really dead. As soon as that happens, your blood stops flowing, so tissues begin to break down, bones begin to dry out, moisture begins to evaporate, your brain cells begin to die off. Did you feel a bit sluggish and slow when you first woke up yesterday?"

"Yeah, like I was drunk." Dale said, fascinated and horrified.

"Dale, your body had started to rot because you had died, a textbook brain death. You were actually decomposing. You came back, and whatever brought you back obviously triggered cellular regeneration. When you first woke up, you felt a bit slow, a bit heavy, because you had started to decay and your cells and body couldn't process or function as fast as normal. As time passed, they regenerated, that's why you feel back to normal now."

"See, we're all energy, I've told you about the things I've been able to theorise from the information in that van. There's only four forces in the universe, the strong and weak atomic forces, gravity, and the electromagnetic force. The whole universe is just a field of energy, and matter is only a manifestation of that energy into atomic structure."

Dale was shaking his head, lost. "I don't completely follow." he said.

"Okay," Tim said patiently, "The energy we consume in food produces reproductive cells that create organisms out of nothing at all. We come from cells in our mother and fathers bodies. Those cells are produced from organs that are sustained by food. Food is indirectly or directly produced by photosynthesis which produces vegetables or sustains meat. Vegetation is sustained by light from the sun, which is produced by an output of energy in its core.

"Do you understand? We come from physically nothing, wherever you look along the chain. All that there is comes from the energy produced in stars, so energy is the fundamental building block of the universe.

"When we die, all it is is a transfer of energy. The energy sheds its physical structure and it changes to another form. Whatever that other form is, we see as the afterlife, whatever it may be. Whatever force is at work here has the power to reach and activate all fields within the energetical universe. Time is a singular field, despite our perception of it being a continuous stream, so it produced your old bag and manifested it where its purpose was fulfilled. And it also has the power to control the transfer of energy from one field to the next."

"Jesus, Tim, I did art and geography, not physics, and that was twenty years ago. Aren't there any terms you can put this in for me?" The scientist sighed, in thought rather than annoyance.

"All right, look. Imagine energy is produced in pieces. A piece of energy is produced in the sun, and travels all the way down the path I just described to you, okay?" Dale hummed agreement. "Physicists have known for years that energy cannot be undone or destroyed. Where there is no active energy, there is potential energy adding up to the same total energy of a system."

"I remember that." Dale said, "kinetic energy and potential energy."

"That's right. So that piece of energy that was produced in the sun had to come from somewhere, right? And when you die.....again, and properly this time, where will it go?" Dale paused.

"Well, you know I don't believe in God. I suppose whatever the afterlife is."

"That's only a matter of man's emotional perception and belief, its really immaterial here. But assuming you're right, the afterlife is only the next state of energy. But the question is, what commands the transfer to that state, and what *is* that state? Maybe it's physical, like the world we know. Maybe you're just an electrical current. Or maybe-

"Wait," Dale said, "I thought that dead organic matter decayed into the ground and mulched the dirt for regrowth. So wouldn't the energy be in a cycle, through different ratios of potential and active?"

Tim agreed. "Yes, that's what we all thought for centuries. But the sun is producing output continually, in more volumes than we ever need. If what you said was the case, it would have given out a single burst of energy and that would have done the solar system forever in a continuous cycle. But it didn't work out like that. Millions of people declared that they could feel the presence of the entity that created us. They felt human characteristics, a will and heart, and gave it a name according to a bunch of old books. You can see it in any suburban church any Sunday morning.

"Also, if that's the case, why isn't your energy being transferred into the roots of a eucalypt in Sutherland Cemetery as we speak? Because it was going somewhere else, taking on its next form. But something outside stopped it, took it, and transferred it back. And brought you back from the grave."

VIII

The day became gradually hotter and cloudless until about 5.00 p.m., while the thousands of commuters were streaming out of the city, dreaming about the backyard swimming pool, the barbecue, or the weekend, only a day away.

Lines of wispy cirrus clouds, the type so high up they were normally visible only from space, drifted steadily across from the west, cutting the sunlight into bright ribbons that shimmered across the city and harbour.

The sun was bowing down and turning a dirty orange through the cloud of smog reaching up from the horizon when thicker grey cumulus clouds sailed towards the city. They were followed by a billowing tower that engulfed each horizon, black and angry. A light rain began, washing away the heat and dust, and at six fifty, the first rolling rumble of thunder sounded in the clouds above.

"Shithouse bloody weather." Barry cursed at the black clouds outside. "you wait for days for a cool snap and when you've got something really important to do, it bloody rains."

Albert stepped up to him, clapping him on the shoulder. "It doesn't matter, Barry, the equipment is all waterproof, and we can screen out the rain and thunder easily with the sensors and recorders." Barry nodded and turned back into the shelter.

It was the last canvas SCC shelter left on the Bridge, what the team had dubbed their centre of operations. It was perched on the edge of the highway (the floor of the shelter was the cold black asphalt and white

lines of the road) at the southern end of the Bridge, just metres from where Dale Milling had fallen through the old Bridge. It was seven by ten metres, more than enough for the base. Along the walls of the dirty canvas were several long tables, and a generator in the corner.

The tables were littered with pens and pencils, notepaper, blueprints of the Bridge, diagrams, mobile telephone units, two personal computers, a laser printer, and a bevy of recording and video equipment, some belonging to Tim Hacker, some belonging to the Sydney County Council tradesman who oversaw the proceedings, the rest hired in case it was needed. On a whiteboard in the corner were notes and pictures that were constantly updated by Donald Chin-Hsei Lambert's assistant, a young man from the University. He ran back and forth as he was instructed like the old chalkies at the stock exchange, rubbing out, redrawing, recording, calculating and watching.

Donald sat at one computer, the other was empty. Print-outs were coming through almost continually. On the edge of the table was Albert's laptop, full of all the information about the case he and Joanne Parkes had gained so far.

Joanne sat in the study of her Castle Hill home, one of the phone lines open to the modem of her computer and another to her speakerphone so she and everyone else could talk at once. Anything extra that was needed was wired to Albert's laptop by her, and she was also linked with the data at the University, the modem link set up by Donald.

Donald had a telephonist's headset over his ears, the microphone bulb at his mouth. He gave instructions almost continually. The equipment was in full swing, on line, and waiting. The official monitoring didn't start until seven thirty, and not everybody was there yet, but the sooner they were listening, the sooner they'd be ready.

"Northwest point five," he said, receiving a message from the sensor across the northern end of the Bridge, clicking his fingers and pointing at the assistant at the whiteboard, "electrical anomaly. Ten volt surge." he clicked his fingers across the keyboard and figures flashed by. Albert and Barry looked on, wondering what the hell use they would be in such a high tech operation.

"Wait!" Donald said, glancing at the assistant. He typed more. He accessed the network in a separate window and hooked into the parapsychology equipment. "Oscillation." he called to the assistant, who began to alter and mark the diagram of the Bridge on the whiteboard and speak into the hand held recorder. Donald swore softly. "Twenty volts, one fifty range." He turned to the master communications panel, like the compact disc deck of a stereo system, and accessed the communications line to Tim. "Dr Hacker, do you see that?"

* * * *

Past the pylons, on the stretch of highway that led into North Sydney from the Bridge, Tim Hacker stood in the middle of the road. He again wore the white and black striped shirt, same faded jeans, same cracked belt and high top sneakers, with a heavy navy raincoat over the top, the wide hood pulled over his head, making him look like some funky new age druid performing a mystical thunderstorm rite.

The sky was getting darker from the storm, and lightning flashed intermittently, the rain coming down steadily now, not nearly a downpour but a lot heavier than drizzle now. It had just gone seven.

Tim heard Dr Lambert's voice crackle under the coat through the walkie talkie affixed to his belt and unclipped it.

"Nothing visual." he yelled above the hiss of the rain. He tucked the communicator inside the hood and held it to his ear.

"Try infa-red and electromagnetic." the scientist said. Tim hoisted the IF unit off his back, the tripod not attached (he expected a lot of movement), and consulted the control pad on its side. He adjusted several dials, flicked a few switches and pushed several buttons until the tiny digitals told him the machine was tuned to infa-red reception, maximum frequency, oscillating wavelength. He lifted the megaphone deck to his eyes and flicked on the LCD display. Only a white sheet, the rain. Tim tuned it out using the control pad again, and could only see the beams of the Bridge in simulated light.

"Nothing on Infa-red," he said, switching to electromagnetism. He dug through his inside pockets and fished out the stereo earphones. He pushed them into his ears and plugged them in.

The sound nearly deafened him. It was like stereo feedback, only a hiss instead of a squeal. He swore in pain as he tore them loose. The rain upon the metal would be producing extraordinary electromagnetic fields, and the sound interpreted by the computer chip would be an electromagnetic scream. He desensitised the input and cut out the rain.

The columns of the arch structures were there, and top edge of the cable support system were visible.

And, like a whirlpool, a circular field of energy was orbiting the twelve foot wide beam in a stream of bright light. Only simulated again, but the energy was real.

He reached for the walkie talkie again. "I've got an electromagnetic reading. Localised around a certain.....I don't know, it might be one panel of metal, might be an internal test panel, I can't tell from here."

He pulled the strap of the IF unit over his shoulder and unholstered his binoculars from his belt (he had one eyepiece jammed in the holster of a toy gun holster that he'd found at the back of his wardrobe - a toy left

over from a visit from his nephew Josh. The binoculars fit there perfectly and were instantly accessible, the scientists six-shooter).

He raised the glasses to his eyes and squinted through the sheet of rain, wishing the binoculars could blot it out like the IF meter had while reading for infa-red. Far up at the nearest arch structure, on the diagonal that met its other in the middle, was a spark of light, like a workman with a blowtorch working up there.

"Electrical disturbance, way up on the western diagonal of the northern arch."

"*Wait,*" came Lambert's voice, as Tim took the camera strap off his shoulder and began zooming in to take pictures, "*I'll pan in.*"

* * * *

Back in the shelter, Donald consulted the master video monitor. He scrolled through the cameras until he found the NA1, the short name they had found themselves adopting for the camera (it was short for north arch camera number 1) on the apex of the arch. Numbers two and three were set where the diagonals became the verticals, and there were also eleven cameras in the SL series, for street level. The placing of the visual cameras were so well known by the technical team, only numbers were necessary to identify them.

Donald panned in, the camera giving a view along the diagonal of the shaft, until a light was visible through the rain. He accessed the camera controls on the computer and selected the focus control, selecting the light and not the rain as the focal point.

Halfway down the shaft of the diagonal was a shower of sparks, then another, one after the other, almost regular. The shelter became a burst of activity. Donald raced to the computer and began to type record commands for all the equipment. He programmed to measure delay between, frequency and output of the sparks. He rolled across the floor to the other computer and accessed the in-built test system, the one Llewellyn Price of McCormick Slater had died trying use. He ordered a circuit test. The points of report scrolled down the screen, triggered by the test command racing through the electrical system of the Bridge and reporting in at commanding points.

The program stopped at a point in the western diagonal of the north arch, which the computer called #707/"MDV-Quad. It reported;

Electrical Fault: The cursor blinked patiently and wrote across the screen; **Electromagnetic short - 34 V.**

There was a bleep from the computer deck to Donald's right. He glanced at it, thrown off for a second.

"What now?" he asked nobody in particular. He opened another window on the PC and turned the main southern sensor towards the south, away from the shelter and back towards the city. A short report scrolled down the screen for him.

"Jeremy," he called to the student at the white board, "what's coming from the south?" The younger man dropped his marker and ran to the other computer, switching the computer deck to new frequencies and swinging SL5 towards the south.

Down the roadway, a ball of light appeared, shimmering through the rain swept picture. Yellow, shimmering light. No, there were two of them, like two angry eyes on some giant thing advancing down at the shelter.

"Clear that picture." Donald said to the student sternly, desperately, "it's emitting electromagnetism, it's emitting heat. It's something real, or very strong." He called up a new function of the cameras outside and measured the distance/time displacement. The computer flashed the answer at him.

"It's approaching at sixty nine kilometres an hour." Donald said. Albert started to stand. Barry stared dully. What was attacking them?

"Jeremy," Donald warned, get a fix on the thing, or else we're-" he cut off his own sentence.

"I can't clear the picture," Jeremy said. He read out the distance deemed by the camera between the approaching thing and the shelter. Now the lights had split apart and looked even more like wide, mad eyes. The object left a shower of rainwater across the road in it's wake.

Barry heard the engine first, and as Jeremy was calling out the last few agonising metres, headlights washed across the outside of the canvas shelter. The small hatch pulled up beside the shelter and a figure got out each side.

The atmosphere in the shelter dropped from adrenal frenzy and it was almost as if the air itself breathed a long sigh of relief.

"Okay, come on," Donald said, "easy mistake, unforeseen - let's forget it and keep working." Jeremy scowled in distaste at the car outside and returned to his post at the board.

Barry recognised Victoria Holt as she waited for Dale to run around from the other side of the car. They grabbed each others hand and ran into the shelter, peeling off raincoats and shaking water out of their hair.

"Sorry," Dr Holt glanced at all the unfamiliar faces apologetically, "the weather held us up." Dale ran his hand through his hair and waved at Barry as he threw the raincoats over the back of a rolling office chair.

"Albert," Barry began, gesturing to Vicki and Dale, "Dr Victoria Holt and Dale Milling." Vicki shook Albert's hand enthusiastically.

"Nice to meet you," she said, "I feel like we know each other." Albert and Dale shook hands, and Barry gestured to Donald, who smiled up from the screen for a minute.

"Hi!" he said cheerfully, an edge of concentration in his voice, "forgive me, I'll introduce myself properly in a second." Vicki dismissed his apology with a wave.

"What's going on?" Dale whispered, leaning into Barry.

The doctor shrugged. "Disturbance. We're not sure what. Dr Hacker is out at the other end watching it." Dale glanced at Vicki, who widened her eyes to his unasked question. Barry pointed at the assistant at the whiteboard, who waved, and the city council worker.

"That's Jeremy at the board, and Mr Slavin is here in a governmental capacity." the SCC tradesman came forward and introduced himself to Vicki and Dale, and resumed his observations.

"You can get Dr Hacker on the phone if you like," Barry continued, showing them both to chairs and crossing to the end of the row of tables where an electric urn was set up, "all the phone and walkie talkie networks are set up."

He took two polystyrene cups from a pile and spooned coffee into them, filling them with boiling water from the dented drum of the urn. He passed them to Vicki and Dale and sat next to them, Albert beside him. Dale gestured to the urn.

"You thought of everything."

Barry smiled. "Might be a long night." The four sat, feeling like unnecessary ornaments, not sure what to say, with nothing in common except the horrors unfolding around them.

* * * *

Eruptions of light filled the IF meter's LCD screen. Tim hadn't taken the record mechanism off, and he was wiring the pictures straight to the computer at the home lab via the small battery pack that sent facsimiles of all the information he gathered. Even if the IF meter was destroyed, the information would be safe.

"You getting the same readings I am?" he said into the walkie talkie. The rain had increased and was almost too heavy to see through. The city lights at the opposite end of the Bridge were dimmed, the tiny light that had been visible to Tim at the point of the disturbance was gone, hidden behind sheets of falling water. The sky lit up from horizon to horizon with lightning, and Donald's answer was drowned out as the thunder boomed, shaking the ground underneath Tim's feet.

"Say it again?" he yelled into the communicator.

"I'm getting a steady level of activity. The voltage oscillated and settled where it is, as if it's reached some point of equilibrium."

"What's the number?" Tim asked. The sky towards the Eastern suburbs was ignited by another sheet of lightning.

"Fifty eight point four five."

* * * *

Suddenly Albert looked up.

"Donald," he said to the scientist, standing up, "that figure you just said. I remember it. It was the peak voltage the day we first detected a short. Remember?"

The scientist frowned at Albert as he approached the computer bench. "Sorry, no, I've remembered so many numbers during all this." Albert chewed his nail, pointed decidedly at the air and crossed to one of the phones.

He picked up the receiver. "Joanne?"

"Yeah, baby?" came Parkes' voice through the shelter over the speaker.

"Can you.....I don't know, enter a number and look for cross references?"

The sound of Joanne's fingers tapping on the keys was audible. *"I can't see why not."*

"How does she do it?" Albert asked Donald.

"Ah, set your parameters, Ms Parkes," Donald said, his voice picked up by the external receiver, "Just search this month, Fifty to sixty volts. If you can, get times, dates and figures."

"All right."

As they listened to the typing over the speaker and in the shelter, Dale looked at Vicki. "Hey, the battery of the car!"

"What about it?" she whispered back, afraid that there were geniuses at work and the slightest noise would throw them off, like trapeze artists, "it was just a short. You saw the battery gauge."

"Doesn't it have the power redirection, I thought the TV ads used to say that all new Holdens were fitted with it?"

"Yeah, but it takes a while to locate the short."

Dale started to stand. "Right when the Bridge comes into view, Vicki? And for fifteen minutes?"

Vicki stood up with him. "What, you think the Bridge reached through the city and shorted out just our car, out of every car on the streets?"

"Not the Bridge," he said, turning to Donald and Albert.

"Doctor, what's the machine you can connect to something to see if there's a magnetic charge?"

The young Asian scientist glanced up and gestured to the end of the bench to a pile of equipment. "A voltmeter. It's the one in the red case."

Dale turned and picked out the machine, like a car stereo dangling two wires and clips, encased in a red vinyl pouch. Barry stood to join him on the way out, and Vicki followed. Dale strode out into the rain.

The sky was black with full night outside now. All three were immediately soaked to the skin by the rain.

"Can you pop the bonnet?" Dale yelled to Vicki above the roar of the rain outside. She ran to the drivers side door and reached in. Lightning silhouetted the buildings of the city, almost invisible in the gloom, and a clap of thunder boomed out across the harbour.

The bonnet of Vicki's hatch clicked and Dale pulled it up, propping it open. He put the voltmeter on the air filter and switched it on.

"What's happening?" Barry yelled behind him.

"We broke down." Dale explained. "Right when I saw the Bridge, the car shorted, and the power redirect system took too long. That's why we were late."

"But what will this prove?" Vicki yelled, joining the two men. Dale looked at her but only shrugged. His shoulders said 'just a feeling'.

* * * *

"Here it comes." came Joanne's voice. The modem blinked, and lines of text appeared on the screen, coming out on the printer at the same time.

0816'43" 23012017 58.45V

"The twenty third, when was that?" Albert said.

"Ms Parkes," Donald said, "can you open another file and match up these times to events from the case file?"

"Okay." Joanne said, her voice full of static from the storm. A flash from outside lit up the canvas, and after a few seconds a steady rumble sounded. The second entry appeared;

1141'56" 02012017 58.45V

Dale attached the electrodes of the voltmeter to the car battery and waited. The needle flickered and wavered, trying to find the steady state that would be the charge.

* * * *

"The first date is a Monday," Joanne read aloud from the case file, "report of a hallucination by Mr Milling, accompanied by Dr Holt. Violent electrical disturbances on the Bridge were reported by the department of transport, monitored by Dr Lambert."

Albert looked up to ask Dale if that was when he walked or drove across the Bridge but he, the psychiatrist and Barry were outside in the pouring rain, clustered around a car.

"Look at the figures, Albert," Donald said, diverting his attention, "they're constant for two as yet unconnected events."

"So there's some sort of minimum voltage before any of this paranormal activity can go on?" Albert said.

"It looks that way." Donald agreed. The third date came through, the printer now producing corresponding records from the case files at Joanne's prompting from her study. Another window on the PC screen scrolled the records as well.

0922'12" 03012017 58.45V

"The third," Donald said, "that was last Friday when I was trapped in the research van."

"The second time goes with a report from Dr Hacker when he and Dale were trapped in the cable car and had to climb down the arch." Joanne relayed.

"Can you open another file and access the entire reading for that event, please?" Donald called to the phone, "Don't worry about the figures, just tell me if the voltage rose or fell. Do me a graph with your spreadsheet."

"Will do."

"What's this all about?" asked Mr Slavin.

"In a minute." Albert said, holding his hand up to the approaching man, who looked over Donald's other shoulder at the computer screen.

* * * *

"Everybody," Tim said into his communicator, "I've got an increase." The rain thundered down now, filling the gutters at either side of the highway with rivers. The south sky lit up again, illuminating the buildings along the harbours edge, giving them the ominous appearance of huge grey monsters perched in wait. Tim couldn't help his gaze being drawn past the arches of the Bridge to the huge hulking shapes, made

alien by the storm. He shuddered and went back to the rising numbers in a digital read-out on the hand held electrometer.

"The electromagnetic voltage at the point of disturbance is rising fast." he reported. "It's passed a hundred volts and is accelerating in value. I can't see it any more, can you cut through the rain with the camera?"

* * * *

"We'll try." Donald said. He gestured to the video unit and said "Al, call up NA1, try to fix on the shaft of that arch." Albert crossed to the video unit and monitor and sat down, toying with the selector and remote controls.

Joanne's voice cut through the torrent of the rain. *"The third chronicle relates to the disturbances recorded on board the University Mobile Research Van."*

* * * *

The needle of the voltmeter wavered almost to a stop, then flickered again, jolted by some influence or another.

"Come on," Barry urged the two, "we're getting soaked. They can test the battery later."

"No, I'm sure this was caused by whatever's going on up there-" Dale gestured to the northern arch, almost invisible in the gloom. A sheet of lightning behind silhouetted the arch for a split second, an immense black shape, braving the lashing rain.

* * * *

"Here comes the last one." Joanne said, *"when Mr Milling climbed the pylon alone."* The modem flickered. On the screen appeared

2209'34" 06022017

The cursor blinked at the end of the line, and the figure, dug out of the wiring and chips of the computers brain, appeared.

58.45V

* * * *

The needle flickered once more and stopped. The digital read-out below gave the final reading;

0058. 4500 Volts

The car battery gave off an explosion of sparks, the voltmeter popping loudly and clattering into the engine bay of the car. Dale shrieked and was thrown back a few steps.

* * * *

The point on the shaft that had been invisible suddenly erupted in light. An explosion of sparks showered into the rainy night, and Tim thought he could hear exploding glass and metal.

* * * *

Camera NA1 focused on the point along the shaft just as a dirty yellow light came racing along the shaft. In it, Albert saw a pair of filthy bleeding eyes, wild with demonic glee, and a hand that opened steadily as it raced towards the camera, engulfing the picture and crashing into the camera (it seemed to Albert as if the beast was going to come crashing out of the screen).

Albert yelped in terror and fell backwards, his chair crashing to the ground. He had seen that face once, when the temp-link in MARV had been broken by the same flash of energy, a flash that disguised this hideous apparition.

Lightning lit the sky like day and thunder roared.

IX

As the thunder trailed off, a long, low snarl, wet with snot and pus of some huge beast as big as the north shore, echoed back and forth across the harbour, in rage and hunger.

Everybody froze in dread.

The demon call was loud enough to be heard as far away as the airport, maybe further. It was as if Sydney were suddenly a Lego town in some child's imagination, and a savage dog was lumbering towards the toy city centre.

Tim spun around in shock as the sound engulfed him and reverberated back and forth along the harbour. He was showered by a blast of noxious air, full of the stinking breath and guts of some horrific

giant animal. He saw the rain blown aside in its path and felt the awful heat of it.

Lightning sparkled violently behind him, and he felt all the nerves on his scalp clench and crawl. Hidden behind the curtain of rain, its outline indistinct, its features vague, was a lumbering, quadruped animal, beyond huge. Beyond enormous. It stood as high as the clouds itself. It was lifting a kilometre wide paw for a step forward, and Tim supposed that its back feet were just leaving Chatswood.

Tiny glowing eyes had glimmered down. It had been as big as the whole city and north besides. A snarling mouth had caught and reflected the flash of lightning. It had been covered with a great pelt. Maybe all those things had been plainly visible, or maybe it had been a trick of the lightning on low cloud, firing his imagination.

Maybe it was an illusion conjured up.

By the ghosts.

"Holy Christ." he muttered. If he moved, would the great creature hiding just behind the misty rain see him? He turned his head slowly left, to where the Holden Ute was parked half on the footpath on the Western edge.

* * * *

As the colossal voice rolled across the harbour, the street lights on the Bridge went out, in a long stream from the north end towards the other.

The city and North Sydney lights didn't permeate the rain, and the Bridge was left a ship floating in a stormy sea. The only lights were the powerful spotlights (there were seven of them around the Bridge structure and on the road), but in the present conditions, they amounted to a few points of weak white light.

* * * *

The foul wind ruffled the walls of the canvas shelter and Vicki, Barry and Dale turned, slack jawed, as one, to the sound as the echo trailed off.

"What in the living fuck was that noise?" Barry said loudly, trying to reaffirm his voice.

"Maybe we should get back inside," Vicki began.

"Tim." Dale said, "He's still at the other end."

"It was the wind." Barry said with desperate firmness. Dale looked at him. "Well if we're witnessing a haunting, it was only a bloody sound."

Barry said, feeling challenged and silly for his fear, "You heard how big the thing was. It's a trick."

* * * *

"What the hell was that noise?" Joanne said from her study in Castle Hill, nearly twenty one and a half kilometres away.

Albert was standing near the canvas wall of the shelter, staring in terror at the video monitor. Donald was sitting back in his chair in a similar frozen reaction. Mr Slavin stood back from Donald, rubbing his arm where Donald's shoulder had hit it as he leapt back in shock.

"You heard it?" Donald asked.

"I thought it was thunder over the phone, then I heard it here."

Donald leaned back in to the computer and his fingers began racing over the keys. "We don't know, but keep the information coming. See if you can put together a graph of voltage of the Bridge system from the time of the first temp link until now. I don't know if the spreadsheet already has one."

"Won't take long." she said.

"Albert," Donald said, "get Tim back on the communicator, make sure he's all right. Joanne, can you get on the phone to the Sydney Electricity emergency line, find out how much is blacked out and whether they can tell you why?"

Albert made for the communicator beside Donald and said "It's here, isn't it? That's what caused the blackout."

"Not necessarily," Donald shook his head, his fingers a blur over the keyboard. Outside, thunder boomed loudly, shaking the ground beneath them, "all our equipment still works, it would've shorted us out as well."

"Unless it wants to leave us on line." Albert said. Donald glanced at him and shrugged. Slavin, the SCC man, stared in fear.

"Dr Hacker, can you hear me?" Albert said into the walkie talkie. He looked out into the rain at Barry, Vicki and Dale. He gestured wildly for them to come back inside."

"Yeah, I've got you," came Tim's voice. Another flicker of light, crash of thunder, *"You got an idea what that was?"*

"No, what did you see?"

"There was an explosion at the point of disturbance on the shaft over closer to you guys, electrical. I heard that.....thing, the lights went out after it, one after the other, all the way along to your end. I can't see a thing. Hold on....." there was a bump and scratch, a pause, *".....my voltmeter isn't telling me anything. I'm too close, it can't get hold of the*

entire signal. I've got the sensitivity down all the way. You should be able to get a figure. Let me check electromagnetic.....Oh my Christ."

* * * *

"*What's the matter?*" the communicator squawked. But Tim couldn't answer. Ignoring the electromagnetic noise that was the rain, the IF meter drew a perfect picture of the arches of the Bridge and city beyond, even with its receptor cup filling with rainwater. Tim looked beyond the LCD screen at the rain - he couldn't even see the Bridge any more, just tiny pinpoints of light from the spotlights. He went back to the display.

Wheeling and floating around the shafts and cables were a thousand lights, points of light that drifted like fairies in flight. Smoky tendrils of light wisped from them in their wake. They circled mischievously, floated serenely, coasted lazily. Thousands.

Desperately Tim grappled for the earphones in his inside pocket. He plugged them in and jammed them into his ears.

A hundred thousand chorusing voices sang the sweetest melody, the Bridge looked like the gates of heaven, the lights angels welcoming tired travellers to the afterlife. Tim's ears were filled with beautiful and haunting melodies, not quite the whistling of a ghostly wind, not quite the choir of individual voices, but the lights danced and their voice reached him, planting a deep longing and an ancient terror in his guts.

Was he watching the souls and hearing the angelsong of the victims of the Bridge collapse, trapped as they had been for twenty years at the site? Did he really believe that these objects were electromagnetic enigma, a piece of the physical world influenced by a force in the universal make-up of energy?

If it was only plain physics, why was it so human? Why was the music filling him with loving melancholy? Why did Dale Milling see twisted bodies and crumpled cars, haunted forever by blood and demons? Where was there a connection with the force at work and the reactions and knowledge of collective human consciousness?

Lightning flashed beyond the LCD display, and left a white flare across it that dissipated slowly, electricity still alive in the air for several second following the strike. The lights were racing around now, falling, collecting. Moving.

Towards Tim.

He felt a sledgehammer blow of fear in his stomach, like he had inside the shaft when those same lights had sought him. It was daytime then, and Dale was with him. It was a harmless scientific observation back then, and he had simply crawled out of the shaft.

Here it was night, black and cold, rain pouring down, lightning dancing, the Bridge an island in an infinite dark, and he was alone. He looked into the rain and stared in wonder. Somewhere, right there where he could see, were invisible objects - apparitions - *ghosts*, floating through the rain. Did they get wet? Could he see the rain splashing from their invisible heads?

Tim looked back into the LCD and saw the foremost light coalesce into a figure with outstretched arms and staring eyes, which he could see from even this distance.

Tim shoved the walkie talkie away, grappled on the ground for his equipment and ran for the ute. He dug through every pocket he had for the keys, finally tore them from his back jeans pocket, and turned again to look through the IF meter.

Now, hundreds of human and indistinct figures walked or floated along the road. He could see the zombie features on the first one, less than ten metres from him.

In terror he watched the spot in the real, dark and raining world where that spectres footsteps would be tromping through the rain. There was a ghost, for God's sake, right there, walking right towards me!

He jumped in the ute, locked both doors, and threw the equipment carelessly onto the seat beside him. He had to get back to the canvas shelter. To check their readings, and to get away from.....

There was a weak thump on the window beside him. Tim screamed and looked out into the empty highway, a wet phantom hand print moving across the window.

*(now it's standing right outside my fucking damn **window**).*

He jammed the key into the ignition of the ute and pumped the accelerator, the motor roaring to life. He planted his foot flat and wrestled the wheel hard to his right. The ute spun around and as he levelled out to face the opposite direction - back towards the shelter - he picked up speed, the tyres slipping on the wet asphalt, and went speeding back towards the Bridge.

A flash of lightning from above lit up the road, and he could see objects moving towards and around him. Yellow, indistinct shapes began to flash past, leaving dazzling trails of stardust, until they had fully formed and suddenly he was driving head-on through a stream of oncoming traffic.

Tim wailed in fear and tried desperately to avoid the cars. His windscreen was filled with the glare of high-beam lights and there was the howl of a horn, old, pasty and sick, the real car sleeping rusted on the floor of the harbour, Tim now understood.

He turned the wheel hard to the right to avoid the car rushing at him, but the Ute wouldn't hold the rain-slicked road and the rear tyres spun outwards so Tim slid sideways, straight into the oncoming vehicle.

This time the thunder was inside the car. There was an incredible clang of metal and the sound of showering glass. He felt the Ute rise into the air and crash back down again. He was flung forward and butted the wheel with the fleshy lower half of his nose, producing a dribble of blood that he didn't notice.

The equipment in the frame in the back tray erupted in a shower into the air and landed smashing in a litter across the road. The Ute rocked backwards and forwards on its hinges and was still.

Tim raised his head and looked around. Lightning struck, the rain hammered the roof and windscreen, but the Bridge was empty, except for him, and the remains of his reserve equipment (the camcorder, IF meter, and camera were all beside him for easy access, and apparently undamaged) strewn around the utility. The engine had stopped.

Tim turned the key. The motor turned over but wouldn't start. He reached for the IF meter and searched the Bridge around him. The phantom lights were still there, dancing now up in the uppermost regions of arch structures. He panned the road slowly until he settled on a bright glob of light, pulsating and showering smaller sprays of light, far off in the direction he'd come.

He dropped the IF meter and stared into the gloom. Presently two lights emerged from the rain and dark. He heard an unmistakable sound, a heavy, lowing engine. A sheet of lightning lit up the road, and he could easily see the silhouette of a Sydney bus roaring towards him.

Tim's first thought was to wonder what the hell a bus was doing running at this hour. After that came a string of things - Why was it crossing at this late hour? Why was it crossing the Bridge when it was closed (and still cordoned off at each end by Sydney County Council barriers)?, and finally, why was it heading straight towards him?

He knew buses didn't run this late. Only spirits.

"Shit." he muttered, turning the key again. The ute coughed and turned weakly over, as if it was losing power by the minute. He punched the steering wheel and grabbed every piece of equipment from beside himself as he could carry.

He kicked the door open and ran across the highway to the path at the edge of the Bridge, keeping low and hopefully in the dark.

The night sky seemed to open into the day hiding behind as the entire sky directly overhead lit up again. Tim watched the bus growing larger, edging from side to side, clearly seeking the van.

The thunder was an explosion in the sky as he squatted on one knee, held the IF meter to his eyes and balanced his elbow on his knee.

He panned along the road, following the progress of the bus as it roared onward, its engine an angry, low grumble.

"*What's happening up there?*" came Dr Lambert's voice over the communicator, "*We're picking up a new signal along the road, stronger now.*" Tim didn't answer and barely heard the scientist instruct the others in the shelter to monitor camera views and direct information to sensors.

The bus was slicing through the few centimetres of water flowing down the road, throwing plumes of spray aside before it. It converged on the ute, and Tim felt a faint burst of heat as it hit.

The crash he expected didn't come (the bus would have forced the ute halfway along to the pylons at the speed it was travelling). The bus travelled *through* the van, its image faltering and losing colour where the image overlapped the ute. The sound was a hissing slurp, like two wet adhesive surfaces being dragged past each other. The bus barrelled onward, leaving the ute rocking a few times after it.

His eyes wide, Tim dug into his jacket and produced the walkie talkie.

"There's an electromagnetic.....entity travelling in your direction. It's a bus, but it passed through my ute with some discharge of heat."

* * * *

"We can see it," Donald replied, leaning over to the video monitor, "there was a massive burst of electrical energy at the point where your truck is stopped." On the monitor, CA1, the camera at the apex of the central arch, was swinging on its north/south axis to follow the bus on the road below. The long white roof was barely visible through the rain, but it passed underneath the apex, no more than fifteen seconds from them.

"It's up near the centre, we've got time to get out." Albert said, turning towards the entry to the shelter, rain water in a fan across the asphalt in from the door where it had blown in. Lightning flashed outside again.

Barry turned to the door and leaned out, his heart nearly stopping as the thunder roared and the bus raced for the shelter, a split second from impact, its dirty lights weak in the gloom.

"Shit!" Barry screamed, throwing himself out, slamming against the door of Vicki's hatchback and pressing against it, his face away.

Albert, Donald, Slavin, Dale, Vicki and Jeremy all felt the heat and saw the wall of the shelter billow inward. The huge front of a vehicle burst through, the shower of moisture as the two worlds dragged wetly at each other almost deafening.

Each person felt, along with the sense of the hot, awful wind blowing *through* them, an uncontrollable spasm up and down their

spines, of revulsion and physiological shock, their cells invaded with electric force. A tiny shower of warm water sprayed the air and those close enough.

The looming object passed and several fell to their knees. Donald had been gripping the edge of the bench in terror, sickened at the feeling. He began entering commands to get a trail and possible reconstruction of what had just assailed them

"It was only halfway across!" Albert said, panting, "it just jumped across space!" A crash of thunder shook the shelter.

"I know." Donald said, "Joanne, we just experienced a very heavy surge of energy. Can you please download everything from the master file to your machine in case we lose it." Barry came in, dazed but unassaulted, out of the way of the things path.

"Any result?" came Tim's voice over the walkie talkie.

"Result?" Slavin exclaimed, "Christ almighty.....Look doctor," he said to Donald, "I'm beginning to worry about our safety. I am here to make sure no unsafe practices are undertaken and supervise if necessary. What's going on?"

"I'm sorry," Donald said, "I can't guarantee anybody's safety here. A couple of people have already died under similar circumstances as you know." Slavin watched Donald go back to work, rubbed his chin and produced a mobile phone, calling his site office.

"Dr Hacker," Donald said, "can you make it back here in your ute? I think it's time we went out as a group to observe first hand."

"I'm just getting in now," Tim said, the sound of the ute door slamming over a burst of static. Thunder lowed ominously towards the west.

"No, my battery's sapped. It'll take about fifteen or twenty minutes to walk back."

"Ah, maybe we'll come and pick you up in the research van, and scan on the way back to the shelter." Donald suggested, "Stay there, we'll be up in about five minutes.

In the corner, Slavin was talking to his supervisor-on-duty in the George & Bathurst Street night office.

"Adam, it's Reggie Slavin, mate. I'm out at the Bridge with the test team.....yeah.....well, you might as well sign the order to close the bloody thing for the next six months. I wouldn't allow any traffic across after what I just saw.....no, there was some burst of....." he covered the mouthpiece and looked at Donald, "Doctor, what was it?" Donald only shrugged, his fingers still at the keyboard.

"We don't know what," Slavin continued, "but it was a burst of heat and a bit of water, like an electric shock through your whole

body.....well, that's my assessment, and to be honest I'm not comfortable here. I've seen enough."

Dale had his arm around Vicki, as they sat together on the fold up chairs. She was breathing deeply and pale. "I felt the thing pass right through me," she said, "like it was a wind and my skin just didn't stop it." she was saying.

"I wonder how it got here so fast?" Dale said.

Vicki shrugged. "Every time I see something new, it makes me feel more like we're all puppets on strings, or little bugs being tormented until we get squashed."

"The voltage is back to normal," Donald announced to everybody, "four point nine volts throughout the system. Whatever it was has passed."

Slavin was still talking into his phone. "All right, I'll see you in half an hour, bye." And, to Donald, "That's good, because I'm leaving now while it seems safe. Ah, I need a lift to the barriers, remember, it's written into the agreement."

Albert looked at the man. "I don't think there's really the time or manpower, Mr Slavin."

"*Albert, let him,*" came Joanne's voice, accompanied by the rustling of papers, evidently the agreement between the Council and the University (Donald had signed for the university and everyone else had been named as independent advisors), "*if we don't they can commandeer our findings and impound our equipment.*"

Vicki sat back. "I'll drive you." she said. She looked at Dale and Barry, either side of her, "I've got to get out of here for a minute and breathe a bit of normal air. I feel like I'm going to faint." She stood and followed Slavin out into the rain, blowing a small kiss at Dale.

"Okay," Donald said, standing up and reaching for his great big raincoat, "we'd better go, Albert. Jeremy, you know all the equipment. Be ready to record and observe. We might need information in a split second."

"I'll be here." the young man said, coming forward.

"Wait here until we pick up Dr Hacker," Donald told Barry and Dale, "we'll place you outside then."

Albert grabbed his rain coat and his carry case and shook hands with Barry and Dale.

"Good luck." Barry told him, watching him and Albert leave into the storm.

They could see Vicki's tail lights disappear into the gloom as they made their way towards MARV, which was parked right alongside the shelter.

"I'm glad we got rid of that arsehole." Albert yelled over the downpour. Donald smiled, nodding. He opened the door of the cab and they both climbed in, shaking rain off their faces and hands.

Donald started the van up and the heavy, thrumming engine started up instantly. Albert was immediately aware of a feeling of being locked safely inside a spaceship, a myriad of technology and equipment locked in an impervious mobile shell. He felt safe. He put the carry case on the seat between them.

Donald pulled away from the shelter and started slowly down the highway towards the northern end. He reached for the carphone on the dashboard of the van and dialled a number, leaving the phone hung up and on speaker.

"Hello?" said Jeremy from the shelter

"Jeremy, it's Donald."

"Yes, Doctor?" the assistant replied.

"Could you recalibrate the sensors for me? I need all primary electrical receptors tuned up eight thousand amps, redirect the secondary ones in series after the primary ones to act as overload reserves. I need the resistors strengthened at all points by about.....seventy percent. Hold on." He took the communicator from his coat and contacted Tim at the north end. "Dr Hacker, are you reading infra-red?" There was a pause.

"My IF meter shows traces of infra-red, ultraviolet and radiation, all three types."

Donald returned to the phone. "Jeremy, increase radiation receptor sensitivity in wavelength and frequency. And before we start, I need a complete energy level for the entire system, including all fields detected. We can track the energy as it becomes active, but I need to know the corresponding potential at all times."

"Dr Lambert," came Tim's voice over the communicator on the dashboard, *"according to my study, there's a degree of molecular construction at any point of cohesion between the two fields."*

"What?" Albert said to himself.

"Where our world meets the other, at a point of interference, a chemical reaction takes place, a fusion between elemental particles in both fields. In this field, the most prevalent substance is oxygen. And fields of electromagnetic energy cause high activity among hydrogen atoms."

"When the two fields cross, like they did when an electromagnetic entity crossed the same point as my truck and the shelter-"

"Wait," Donald said, "by 'point', do you mean physical space?"

"Are we talking about that bus?" Albert said. Donald nodded.

"No, there's no word for it," Tim continued, "When I say 'place', I mean when two things occur at the same where, how, why, what and when. When that happens, there is a fusion of the hydrogen and oxygen molecules because of the heat energy generated in the breach of the displacement between the two fields."

"Hey," Albert interrupted, "remember I'm only an unemployed investigator."

"When an electromagnetic object breaks through the wall between an electromagnetic field and this one, heat is produced from friction."

Tim said. Albert nodded in understanding, waiting for the parapsychologist to continue.

"So the heat produced causes one oxygen molecule to pick up two hydrogen molecules." Donald said, in amazement.

"Exactly," Tim said, "so if I'm right, there would have been a spray of warm water. How much, I'm not sure."

"My God, there was!" Albert said, "I remember thinking it was rain water, but it was from inside there with us!"

"Think about the conditions it was produced under," Tim said, "it would have been the purest water in the city for about a hundredth of a second."

* * * *

Vicki brought the hatchback up against the Council barriers, the old yellow paint chipped and peeling off and not at all reflective in the rain. Only the high beam of her headlights had picked them out, and only when the car was ten feet from them.

She turned the wheel and parked parallel to the barriers, putting the car in neutral.

Slavin glanced thanks at her and said "When will I receive your report?"

Vicki shrugged. "That's not up to me. You'll have to contact the university." The man was dubious, she could tell by his sudden cold demeanour, but he apparently decided that a half hearted referral to the university for his results was fine if he got off the Bridge alive. He opened the car door and climbed out into the rain. A flash of lightning lit up the silhouette of the city across from the car, and the slamming door cut off the crash of thunder.

She watched the councilman run between two of the barriers, his jacket over his head, and off into the rain.

* * * *

The road was covered in a tiny river of water inches deep, especially here at the southern end where the Highway dipped down on its descent into the city. Slavin ran as fast as he could, and trying to hold on to his footing, it wasn't more than a trot. Another flash of lightning lit up the rain and the lake across the road and the accompanying crash of thunder was so loud that he almost jumped out his skin with fright. His foot slid across the wet road, sending a plume of water, and in his effort to throw his weight forward so his feet didn't slide out from beneath him, he overbalanced and crashed face first to the ground, crying out, feeling the water soak his front through to his skin.

Slavin struggled to his feet and didn't see the black humanoid shadow, like a cloud of light - only that it was inky blackness - rise behind him, horns and spines jutting from everywhere on its form, reaching into the air with knife pincer appendages. Slavin felt the heat from the apparition and slowly began to turn around.

* * * *

Vicki put the car into first gear, shuddering. Whoever Slavin was, he was at least another person, and she was alone now. She looked nervously over her shoulder into the back seats. She shuddered again, violently, as she thought of the space on the floor where anything could be laying.

Her bottom and upper legs prickled and itched with heat from the drenching of the rain, and she could feel tendrils of hair pasted to her forehead. Luckily she had only worn old pleated cream pants, flat open toed black shoes and a black T shirt. Not that she had been thinking of her eight hundred dollar Giorvino cocktail dress, but she had a feeling that whatever she wore would be ruined before tonight was over.

Vicki pressed the accelerator and the car promptly died. There was a dull clatter at the back and she gasped in terror, tromping on the brake and staring in fear out the rear windscreen.

Only the barriers. She had rolled back on them. Vicki breathed deeply and turned back to the front, twisting the ignition key again and again.

Lightning flashed again. Vicki looked out into the Bridge in front of her, or where it would be. All she could see were sheets of rainwater.

* * * *

"There's a massive electromagnetic reading behind us." Jeremy said over the carphone in the van, "back where that doctor went to drop that council guy off." Donald was listening intently.

He grabbed the cordless receiver of the phone up, and gestured at the wheel to Albert. "Take over." he said, pulling to a stop and putting the van in neutral so they could change positions.

* * * *

Lightning flickered dully again. Vicki swore under her breath as the thunder crashed from above her, feeling her heart rate leap up a few notches. She turned the ignition of the DeMode again, producing only a tired whirr from the motor.

She licked her lips and looked around. She could never make it back to the shelter in this weather on foot. She couldn't even see the bridge through the rain, except for when lightning lit up its outline like the hulk of some deserted ship coming across the water of a lonely ocean, and so the thought of sitting here alone made her want to cry.

She tried not to think about it, grinding the Holden's engine, willing it to catch, not letting the possibility of being stuck out here into her mind.

Two enormous objects crashed to the road either side, thirty feet out from the car, making the road shudder and groan.

Vicki's heart leaped sickeningly into her throat. She decided then and there to get out and bolt after Slavin, but her hands were clamped involuntarily around the steering wheel.

The objects were like huge tree trunks, four feet wide, gnarled, weather beaten, except that they ended with enormous two-clawed feet.

A massive head, crocodilian but shaped like that of a Jabiru or some other marsh bird, came racing from the sky at Vicki. It was part of a gargantuan beast, and the trunks either side were its legs.

Vicki screamed like she was dying, not the high, shrill movie star scream she managed when there was a spider in the clean laundry, but a harsh, broken plea for her life.

The things head was thirty feet long, with a long beak/snout of old cracked lips, oozing filthy mucouses, and black, rotting teeth. The things eyes were all white, an old stained white, like rotten cream. It lifted its head and cried out, its call a deafening roar, more moan than snarl, that must have been audible all over the city and North. Vicki felt her eardrums and the whole car around her shake from the enormity of the sound. She wondered absently if Joanne had heard that one.

All Vicki could see of the leviathan was its enormous tree trunk legs and its head, stretching down on an ancient trunk of a neck.

Whatever body the thing comprised was hidden by the downpour, but it must have been twice as high as the Bridge itself.

The enormous head swayed back and forth over the car, seeking Vicki out. Water ran in a waterfall off the thing's snout, mixed with a pus-like ooze and traces of red. She could see the archaic skin of the monster, like an elephant or dinosaur, chips of flesh gone, wrinkles and old caked skin running with the rainwater. The thing nudged the bonnet of the hatch with its snout, water collecting on the windscreen blown off in a spray by a gust of its breath.

Vicki was still screaming, trying to cover her head but unable to tear her eyes away from the abomination. It lifted its jaws and roared again, drowning out Vicki's voice but making her scream all the more hoarsely.

The animal seemed to raise its head in thought, its massive heavy beak swaying from side to side. Vicki made herself let go of her head and grabbed the door handle, kicking the door open and moving to jump out. A huge, knotted thing rushed at her from the dark. She shrieked and threw herself back. The thing hit the door and it slammed closed, hitting her ankle, which sung out with pain. The window had cracked from the impact and was ready to shatter. Vicki looked up from where she crouched on the passenger seat. The thing was looking angrily down at her, showing her the claw with its huge knuckle which had bashed in her car door.

* * * *

As Albert settled into the drivers seat, Donald unhooked the latch to the research cell behind the seats and jumped through into the steel floor of the corridor that ran between the two banks of machinery. He left the door to the cab open, hooking it back with the other latch inside, and began flicking on lights and bringing machinery on line with the phone jammed between his ear and shoulder.

"Don't go above thirty, Albert." he called through the door, and - back to the phone - "can you localise it?"

"No," came Jeremy's voice, *"It's covering an incredible area. The block is over a hundred feet high, it's concentrated in three main shafts, but -"* The rest of the sentence was drowned out by a high, malignant boom of thunder.

Albert slowed the van right down until they were almost crawling, no more than ten or twelve kilometres per hour. He looked in the side rear view mirror into the rain behind him. A hundred feet high, the student in the shelter had said. It sounded like the whole bloody southern archway was on fire. Maybe it was - maybe the disturbances had started an

electrical fire, the kind that no amount of water can put out. No, not the Bridge itself. There was no way an electrical fire could start anywhere from Milsons Point to Wynyard Station without them knowing.

Albert looked ahead again. The central arch was just passing, and Dr Hacker wouldn't be far away. He hoped they got to the poor bastard before anything else did. He thought of the scientist out there in the pitch dark, the storm, the city gone behind a curtain of impenetrable rain, the familiar Bridge now a teeming horde of unknown hidden terrors. Albert shuddered.

* * * *

Tim was almost constantly scanning the highway ahead and behind with the IF meter. If anything was coming, he would be ready this time. He tried not to admit to himself that he was just as ready as last time and would still be just as helpless this time. He was armed only with detection equipment, which hadn't saved anyone so far.

But he fought to remain logical. There was a stigma with hauntings and paranormal activity. It is instilled in us as children in folklore, popular culture, and general society. It was all supposed to be scary. But the truth was, the only reason for that was humankind's fear of what they couldn't understand and therefore control. And the only thing like that left on Earth was the paranormal.

But with the exception of being shot at by a psychic medium just weeks ago - the first time he had ever felt his life in danger - Tim had never felt physically threatened by the paranormal. Because it just wasn't the way it worked. It was unexplained, not terrible. One in every thousand cases involved physical assault of a human being, and none that Tim had ever studied.

But this was different. A force was at work at this place that was malicious and threatening. It had caused harm and death, and it seemed devoted to the old movie/comic book adage of being 'scary'. In a textbook case, Tim had surmised that the more emotion (electrical energy) produced, the more fuel the force had to come through. But there was a purpose here.

Fear, being the extreme emotion that it is, produced enough electrical energy in the collective cerebral cortex of humanity to provide this force free rein into and out of this world.

"Who the fuck are you?" he whispered into the dark, even though he believed he knew. He'd had daydreams when he was a young man, praying in bed, that Jesus Christ would come and visit him, the way people sometimes claimed to have visions. He would be an awesome presence, descending on a chariot of gold heralded by angels. And Tim

would open his arms, bow his head and cry softly at the touch of his Creator.

But Tim didn't have open arms now, oh no. Now he was just a man terrified beyond his wits and he felt that if Jesus Christ was behind all this and appeared to him now, he would run for his life.

But he fought, kicking and screaming in his mind, to hold it together. He knew it was only fear. It was a part of the human psyche far deeper set than his love for the unexplained, but he couldn't let it sway him from his purpose. To study. Maybe to make contact.

He hefted the IF meter to his eyes and flicked off the LCD saver, the switch that kept the machine running and receiving but switched off the display to save the liquid crystal overheating. He lifted the walkie talkie to his mouth.

"How far away are you guys?" he asked, trying to keep the nervousness out of his voice.

"About halfway," came Albert's reply, *"can't you see our lights yet?"*

Tim squinted into the rain, shielding the constant stream that ran into his eyes. "Can't see a thing."

"I'll flash my high beams," Albert said, *"how about now?"*

Deep into the cover of rain, the air ahead exhumed a yellow hue that lit up the rain like a tiny pocket of dawn sky on the road. It shimmered and glittered, tendrils glowing and spiralling.

"Yeah, I can see you." Tim said, "Put your foot down a bit, will you?"

"The equipment's on. We can't go more than a snail's pace. Can you see us on your infa-red?" Tim flicked the receptor to infa-red and looked at the display. The screen was all blue, with the tiniest red spot at the centre.

"I think I can see one of the spark plugs firing in your forward cylinder." Tim replied, "You can turn your high beams off now."

There was a pause, and Albert said.

"They're off. I only flicked them on for a second."

Tim let the IF meter drop from his eyes. The hue remained, behind the screen of rainwater. Lightning flashed way out toward the west, breaking through the clouds with static blue fingers. The light brightened, and he realised that it *was* a pocket of light, tens of metres around, and now it was racing forwards. It lit up the rain in a huge wave. It rolled down the highway, Tim stepping unconsciously backwards, the IF meter still pointed absently at the advancing blaze.

The light drifted past, accompanied by a burst of hot wind and a hollow roar, like wind streaming into a thin tunnel or filtering through a

gap between high buildings. All at once it was gone. The IF meter was bleeping madly.

Tim raised it to his eyes and gasped, almost dropping the machine in fear.

Way down at the other end of the Bridge, clearly visible on the electromagnetic spectrum, was a huge shape, of several spindly and long parts, waving and moving slowly. Tim tapped at the controls on the side panel and called up the image of the Bridge from memory. The computer correlated the data from the picture and matched it to the current reading so that Tim had an accurate picture, from the correct angle, of the Bridge, invisible behind the rain.

The southernmost arch had disappeared. In its place was the gigantic mad thing.

He shrieked into his walkie talkie and started to run forwards, in a panic. "Holy God, the south arch is gone," he yelled, "there's some incredible thing at the other end, it's huge. The arch has turned into a giant living thing!"

Another light exploded out from the gloom of the rain, and Tim screamed and covered his head.

The research van skidded wetly to a halt inches from Tim, the IF meter fell slackly to his side.

Lightning flickered overhead.

XI

Vicki could feel her lip shaking, tears of terror brimming on her eyes. The monster's enormous head was swaying slowly back and forth, stupidly scanning the road, the car, and her. Every now and then it would raise the front of its muzzle and bellow. The last few times, the shape of the thing had changed. As it had thrown its head back, its eyes had deformed, moved around its head to positions either side of its cavernous jaw, in obscene optical pockets like those on the head of a crocodile.

The fist of the giant thing raced out of the darkness and rain above and slammed into the road, the knuckles punching a depression into the asphalt, splinters of the road showering into the air in clouds of dust. Vicki whimpered, searching desperately around the dashboard of the car for escape. One thought kept torturing her, almost shameful in its clarity. One of her pet hates was the token bimbo leading lady in movies who sat like a stunned mullet waiting for the hero to get her out of a scrape. Vicki would watch and think 'What a silly bitch, if it was me, I'd.....'

And now here she was, her mind a blank, in the most terrifying scrape ever. Her only thought was that Dale would rescue her (even though she knew in the real world he'd turn to jelly with her, maybe faster). And she was so scared she didn't even care how many women would see her and laugh and say 'Silly bitch.....'

Her eyes fell upon the illuminated green panel of the carphone in the darkness near the gear shift lever. She had reached for it twice, and each time the monster had looked straight at her, a grimace of rage had clouded its eyes and snarl, and it had reached down with its snout inches from the car and bellowed horribly at her, brushing and knocking the bonnet of the car.

Both times Vicki had snapped the phone back in place and thrust herself back in the seat in fear. It was worth it sitting here all night, soaking wet and freezing cold, with that behemoth standing over her, as long as it was never that close to her again. She wasn't sure if she had wet herself like a little girl, she knew she was crying and shaking uncontrollably, and she fought for rationality, adulthood, and sanity. She told herself that the beast was only electrical radiation, it wasn't real.

Except that blood and snot had left obscene, steaming tracks down her windscreen and there was a hole the size of an inflatable pool in the road ahead of her.

Lightning flashed wildly overhead and the fright culminated in a burst of adrenalin. She tore the phone from its mounting and dialled *1*, knowing it would lead her to somewhere in the network that had been set up between the communication lines.

The huge beast lowered its head at her at such a speed that she thought it would crush her (it was the size of a *bus!!*). It opened its mouth and a low scream of anger came in a blast upon the car. A huge, filthy mass of flesh, lined with pulsing veins and old, caked mucous, fell like a lump of dead meat from its mouth and slammed against the windscreen, sliding off to spatter to the road like a body bag. Vicki lost the power of speech for several seconds after Barry, in the shelter, answered her.

The Crane-thing lifted its head in surprise

- (*Holy living God Holy Christ it **heard** the voice over the phone*) -

and moved to gaze into the side of the car. Its body, somewhere hidden in the dark, bounced quickly twice, the mouth emanating two grunts.

When Vicki found her voice, it was almost a scream. "Barry, Oh God help me! This thing's got me trapped, this huge thing, and it's not letting me out, help me I'm trapped-"

* * * *

"Vicki? Stop, tell me what's happening, one word at a time, love." Barry said. Dale stood bolt upright and stared in worry at Barry. Vicki's voice was full of terror, not the damsel-in-distress fear of old films, but the terror of a person in danger for her life or sanity. He could hear it, even though she had started to talk in a hoarse whisper, like she wanted to scream but couldn't.

* * * *

"Fucking hell." she whispered, as the huge head came wavering back to hover over the bonnet and gape at her. "Barry, there's a huge monster here, bigger than the Bridge. It's got me trapped in my car. Please -" then tears came thick and strong, "- please help me."

* * * *

Barry looked at Dale and said into the phone "Keep the line open, I'll leave this phone on. We're on our way. We'll bring my car, and we'll be there in a few seconds. Don't move, and don't do anything to aggravate it."

"But Barry, it isn't real is it? None of it is!" Barry thought of the last report from Tim Hacker. The south arch had disappeared off the face of the earth, instead was a series of huge shapes in some insane dance.

"Vicki, we can't assume anything, so just be careful." He put the phone in his pocket and looked back at Dale, "She's in trouble. Grab your coat." He started towards the door, and Dale followed, taking his rain coat from the back of a chair. On his way to the door he glanced at one of the computer screens along the wall where Jeremy was talking to Donald and Albert, via the communications headset which he had donned.

On the screen was the photograph of Dale and his mum. Dale was seventeen, smiling widely, his mother a lovely smiling woman in her early forties. They were sitting on the grass in the backyard. He didn't even remember what they were doing when the picture was taken now, but the picture was in every photo album in the family and on Dale's dresser at home. It had always embodied his mother to Dale, her happiness, her hold on life, her strength, his hero. Behind the two, between the deck chairs in the background on the lawn, was the small brick post and plaque that held his mother's ashes in Sutherland cemetery.

Dale felt a spear plunge through his heart, and his eyes welled with tears for his fallen mother. He sobbed once, and stepped up to the computer, Barry and Jeremy watching curiously.

"Leave her out of your shit." he said, and raised his foot. He rammed it into the screen of the computer, catapulting the monitor off the

desk where it smashed to the ground, crashing as it rolled over. The CPU snapped with a flash of sparks. Before the monitor had hit the ground, Jeremy was running at him. Barry came forward also.

Jeremy hit Dale full force in the front, knocking him down.

"Fucking stupid idiot!" the student yelled down at Dale, kicking at his arm, "what are you trying to do?"

Barry reached Jeremy and pulled him back. "Leave him alone." he commanded the young man.

"The fuck I will," Jeremy snarled, still looking balefully at Dale as he dragged himself up, "you know how much that was worth?" Outside, lightning flickered above, for long seconds. Barry pushed Jeremy back towards the whiteboard and helped Dale up, helping him to the door of the shelter. Thunder rocketed overhead, deafening and terrifying.

Jeremy was spitting over the headset. "Doctor Lambert? That arsehole just kicked the PC off the bench.....no, it wasn't the hook up master.....no, but he kicked the bloody thing right off the bench."

* * * *

Tim looked across at Donald from where he sat on the bench in the research cell of the van.

"He's had hallucinations plenty of times. Most of the time here. Probably thought he saw something."

"Maybe he's better off outside where he can't damage the equipment." Albert yelled back from the cab. Donald nodded absently in agreement, reaching up to the communications panel and snapping the receiver out. He dialled a number, clicked the receiver back into place, and pressed the speaker receive button.

"Yes?" came Joanne's voice.

"Ms Parkes," Donald began, "we're going to start a complete sensory sweep, from here back to the shelter. We've recovered as much equipment from Dr Hacker's ute as we could, but have the insurance documents ready."

Tim smiled.

"Would you download a master record of every point of radiation of infra-red, electromagnetic, every kind of emission we've seen. Have the computer plot all points, times, strengths and frequencies, and then send it to the reserve files of the mainframe in the shelter and here in the van. Then I need you to access the mainframe yourself and run a comparison and correlation program which can tell us what and where to expect things or points of strength." There was a crash of thunder and he stopped while it dwindled away. "And set all the cameras panning three hundred

and sixty degrees for me. Open the focus parameters as high as you can so they catch and focus on everything."

"Okay," came Joanne's voice over the speaker, *"I'm pulling up the master record. I'll just expand it to assimilate all the current data."*

"Great." Donald said.

"Where's your viewing port, doctor?" Tim said, taking the IF meter from the bench and pulling a *Microcom* PC driver from his pocket, a radio device with a tiny keyboard and LCD screen like a tiny pocket PC that couldn't run functions but could generate them at networked equipment within the vicinity.

Donald gestured to the far wall, near the back. "Slide the extinguisher panel back and its in the corner. You may want more scope for your things, though." Tim made his way to the back of the van to the yellow and black striped panel, a small extinguisher mounted on it, and slid it back to reveal a window that ran from the side to the corner and across the back a little way.

"What's happening out there?" Joanne's voice sounded from the speaker in the corner, the sound of her fingers rattling on the keys in the background.

"We're not sure yet. Molecular decomposition of the southern arch, as far as we can tell." Donald answered her.

"Doctor," came Jeremy's voice, *"what should I do about this bloody computer?"*

"Forget it, just use the master." Donald replied to the other voice, without missing a beat. His eyes blazed with concentration. The whole time he jabbed incessantly at buttons and adjusted dials.

Tim crossed the cell toward the cab behind him, saying. "Too small, you're right. I'm going to have to sit on the roof." Donald glanced at him and nodded.

Tim climbed into the cab beside Albert and said

"I'm going to scan from outside. Don't make any sudden turns." Albert nodded, watching the parapsychologist open the door of the van, letting a shower of rain blow in, and disappear into the downpour, pushing the door closed behind him with a slam.

Tim reached around to the small service ladder right behind the door and climbed up to the roof. He sat between the edge of the roof and the equipment area that housed all the receptors, antennae and radio dishes, giving about nine inches of space. He shuffled backwards until he was halfway along the van. He sat with one leg tucked under him and the other dangling against the van wall, taking all the equipment from his pockets and around his neck and laying them out before him, hooking the binoculars and camera over his neck.

He activated his Palm and activated the light, lighting up the LCD screen from inside with a small yellow glow. He had to bring all his eyes and ears around the Bridge into focus, and reporting to him the minute anything happened. He lifted the IF meter and began to search.

* * * *

Vicki leaned towards the steering wheel and looked up fearfully. The gigantic creature was looking behind her, towards the city, its head far above.

So far above that she had the notion of leaping from the passenger side door and doing a mad bolt for the shelter. The thing was so high up it would never reach her before she had fled between its feet.

Then she saw in her mind the lightning pace the head had been at her, baying horribly, when she went for the phone. For a second she let her mind slip, letting go of her fear and imagining a mini fantasy of being outside the car with that head so close. Vicki cut the image off, shuddering until her teeth chattered. No way. She dried her eyes and looked around desperately for an escape. Lightning flashed, illuminating the torrent of rain.

* * * *

"Jeremy," Barry began into his terminal of the car phone network, "Can you to get a picture of whatever's down this end. A visual picture, so we can at least know what to expect?" Beside him, Dale was concentrating on the dark and rain ahead. He blinked at a bright flash of lightning.

"Vicki, are you there?....." Barry said, switching channels. No answer.

Dale plucked the phone off its mounting and said "Vicki? Can you hear us?"

Scratching. Thudding. Static. Then, Vicki's voice coalescing from out of the noise. "*- know how I'll escape.*"

"What?" Dale said.

"*I said I don't know how I'll escape.*" She shrieked in fear and there was a thud. Both men fell silent.

"*It's starting to knock the car around. I'm too terrified to get out.*"

There was another loud bang, and Vicki screamed, the scream trailing off to a series of petrified sobs. "*No*", they both heard her plead. Barry pressed the accelerator harder. He honked the horn and flashed the high beams, praying that whatever was down there would be somehow influenced by the effect. How he had no idea, and he felt pretty stupid.

But the next time, Vicki's cry was one of pain. *"Oh God, it's bashed the roof in!"* she pleaded, *"my head's bleeding. Please don't let it get me, Dale."*

Dale felt a block of tightness in his throat.

"Dale!" she cried desperately, *"If I don't get out, please don't forget me. It was really lovely."* Dale tried to croak 'I love you', but his throat was frozen.

"I won't forget you." Another scream, *"Oh God."* the word 'God' drawn out in a wail of agony, *"Please don't let me die!"*

* * * *

SC1 was there, in the right place. Jeremy frowned. It wasn't physiologically possible, if the southern arch had disappeared. Of course, the southern arch was still there, but spectres of the site had falsely represented matter to the perceptions of the viewers.

Jeremy sent the camera panning around, and down, until.....
Nothing below or beside.

The arch was gone.

The camera and its mounting were floating in midair.

He panned towards the city and shrieked as the camera came to rest on the huge face of a beast like a brolga, with an ancient skin of rotten scales, and a grimace full of teeth the size of cars. A fist, the width of a caravan, came racing at the camera.

* * * *

The camera exploded in an eruption of electrical sparks as the great fist of the giant struck it. It's mighty head swivelled to look back at the car below it, and the figure shrieking within. Lightning flashed over its head.

* * * *

Tim locked onto the emanation and the thermograph gave him a picture of the outline of the greatest beast, a hundred feet tall, with tree trunks for legs, the head of some monster phantom bird, and a long pod body, standing at the far end of the Bridge, assailing some focal object below it. He called up sensors on his Palm and set them to work.

* * * *

The creature looked at the road below it as another vehicle came to a shuddering halt, sending a plume of spray into the air. Two figures leapt out. One stood and stared dumbly up at its huge demigod face. The other ran to the half crushed vehicle and stared up as it fought to gain access.

The creature recognised the second figure. It's assailant. Not the individual apparition that was the creature itself, but the physiology that constrained its master force. It had contended and lost to only this opposing energy, until it had sufficient leeway to plant its final strike in the form of the blue and grey backpack. It had attained its energetical superiority, but the strength of the obstructive force had been incredible.

Now, defences needed to be rallied.

Barry and Dale watched as the monster let out an almighty bellow into the sky, and it was suddenly thrust backwards, with a deafening *Zzzzzip* sound. When lightning flashed again, it revealed the southern arch, so huge and unyielding it felt ridiculous to believe that it hadn't been there a second ago.

Lightning flashed above and a roar of thunder pealed across the sky.

* * * *

The monitor reported every camera panning, but the views and other sensory equipment controlled by the master PC in the shelter registered nothing. Except a malfunction in camera SC1.

* * * *

The object on the IF meter disappeared and all electromagnetic outflow from the structure read normal. Tim's Palm confirmed no adverse readings on any of his equipment.

* * * *

On all the scopes in the research van, the Bridge fell silent, physically and energetically. The bleep from the master system signalled that Joanne had collated and downloaded the files from the records. No similarities to current readings were detected.

* * * *

Rain poured down, lightning flickered above, thunder rolled across the city. The rain had become like a steam train in the air, forever passing. The run-off in the highway neither lowered nor heightened, due

to spillage from either end and through the drainage grates along each edge. The Bridge was invisible and silent in the rainy night.

XII

Dale carefully carried Vicki from the passenger seat of the car, pressing his handkerchief to her temple where the side of her head had been hit. She weakly put her arms around him and he kissed her gratefully, knowing he couldn't have lived if he wouldn't have been able to hold her ever again. She kissed him softly back, burying her face against his neck, letting him cradle her, and looked up to where the thing had been.

"Just an illusion." Dale said hopefully. Vicki looked back at her hatch, its drivers side window shattered, its roof bashed almost all the way in, leaning sickly towards one corner.

He helped her back to Barry's Ford LTD station wagon and sat in the back with her, the two of them whispering their fears at losing each other. Barry steered the car back through the rain.

* * * *

MARV rolled slowly along the road, the engine purring smoothly. There was almost no movement inside the research cell because of the shock absorbers fitted to the wheels.

The shocks had been developed by the CSIRO. Instead of the simple greased-spring system that had been used in automotive engineering for close to a century, the CSIRO Division for the Application of Industrial Plastics had produced a rod of polymer rubber that could take shock in individual cells of the material, instead of a force being transferred through the material like normal rubber.

The result was a cushioned drive and little to no internal movement, previously unavoidable as a vehicle moved over an uneven ground, regardless of the level of cushioning. The problem was that they hadn't found a way to start producing the shocks at less than three hundred dollars each. The University of New South Wales and the Australia Army had been the only purchasers.

Donald sat at the rolling chair, looking at the monitor in front of him. He typed a command; **GX49-2 mast.sys.\>res: sweep/1.**

At his direction, the receptors of the van conducted an extended sweep of the area, committing its every power for several seconds to opening the receptors as far as they would receive in intensity and sensitivity for a few seconds while they swept a circle around the van in search for anything out of place. The receptors, so sensitive during

extension sweep, were able to detect the electromagnetic charge emitted in the air from the flapping of a butterfly's wings over four hundred metres away. Thankfully, a self-commanding editor screened most natural electromagnetic noise out.

This time, Donald had pre-programmed the master editor to search only for readings and scenarios so far investigated and recorded.

The sweep finished and Donald crossed to the Receptor Master panel. He adjusted a dial and punched in a new set of numbers on a keypad beneath a white rectangle marked **Wavelength**. The digital read-out flashed and changed. He took the walkie talkie off the bench.

"How does it look?" he asked.

"Like the middle of the Harbour Bridge on a rainy night," Tim said from the roof, *"and bugger all else."*

Donald crossed back to the chair and dug up the files Joanne had sent them. He scrolled through until he found several dates, highlighted them with the cursor, and ran a comparison program between them and the events of the evening.

He opened another window and accessed the transmitter panel, bringing it on line. Across the cell, the transmitter panel lit up, needles flicking across gauges, digital read-outs revealing red numbers, cursors blinking on LCD's. Donald rolled across to the panel and considered the array.

"Albert," he said through the hatch into the cab, "I think I might be able to rally some defensive measures."

"Bit bloody late now, isn't it?" the former investigator asked.

"No, I just had the idea. We can harness the transmitter and link it to the receptors. Any emanations we detect we can store. There's a radioelectric cell to harness electromagnetism, a isotope core for radiation, all sorts of special containment areas that can take in and harness most things we can detect."

"Are you talking about catching one of these apparitions."

"No, I mean we can monitor a burst of electromagnetism, interpret it, and there's a sort of cache that can take it in and hold it indefinitely. It's a wet cell battery, I think, but I know it can be done."

Albert thought of the markings and warnings around the grey outside of the van. **DANGER - HIGH VOLTAGE** one had said, and **CAUTION, RADIATION. DO NOT DISENGAGE EXCEPT UNDER LABORATORY CONDITIONS.**

"What, so we can shoot at them, in a way?"

"Well, we can send out powerful bursts of emission. I can't guarantee it will affect anything, but if it works we'll be free to study them and hold back any danger."

"Well, remember what you're doing. Write it down somewhere for next time. Didn't you know how to do that already?" Albert yelled over his shoulder.

Donald crossed back to another computer, opening a new window and calling up the transmitter program files. "You learn something every time you climb in here. This van is like a bag of lego. You remodel it how you need it. There's endless potential. You just need a bit of scientific creativity."

Albert thought about it, looking out at the rain as the van crept through it. He saw himself, racing through the dark, ghosts and goblins attacking from every side while Donald, in the back, acted as gunner, zapping them all with high tech weapons. He felt safer. He was probably way off track with what Donald was describing, but he felt safer.

* * * *

"I can't imagine it, but I know how it made me feel hearing you scream for help like that," Dale was saying, his hand cradled in Vicki's, his other nursing a steaming cup of coffee. It had been half an hour since they had come back to the shelter, which they had spent recuperating and listening to Tim, Donald and Albert recalibrate the van for closer scrutiny. They intended to travel back and forth until they calculated or discovered something. Vicki hoped that her, Dale, and Barry would be excused from paranormal studies class early.

Barry and Vicki sat either side of Dale, Jeremy manned the white board and equipment across the room, glaring balefully at Dale. "I just felt it sort of pull back. I didn't feel any pain this time." Dale said, glancing at Barry, "Must be the de-magnetiser.....I don't remember it looking at me. Actually, I don't even know really what I was looking at, because I only glanced up at the thing and don't remember seeing it any more. I remember.....just a feeling, of a force, hidden somewhere very near us all. Something that could easily break all the way through. Tim says that it creates an endless series of exit and entry points for itself the more energy is produced," Vicki offered, "whether it's cars passing across, or us being so scared at what we've seen. Even by being here, we're helping it through."

Barry leant back. "Why now? Why has it blown up now?"

Dale just shook his head. He was suddenly overcome with a feeling he'd had before. Something, some huge connection that was the entirety of this whole incident, something nobody else had thought of yet. Tim had proved what they were, all right, but Dale couldn't get rid of the feeling that Tim's explanation just wasn't enough.

How this thing got here was the answer to the whole enigma. He looked up into Vicki's eyes. She smiled warmly at him, encouragingly. He looked at Barry, who looked bewildered but felt to Dale like a huge guardian angel. The two people either side were here for *him*. Donald, Albert, Joanne Parkes, Jeremy, even Tim this time weren't interested in Dale, only the terrors he had first seen.

- *(God, is that it? Is that the answer. It's rising like a bubble through me, it's on the tip of my tongue -*

- the fragments spinning away into the dark) -

But Barry and Vicki were here in medical capacities because Dale was *their* patient. It sounded a bit too official, but it felt good. He loved them both, grasped Barry's huge bear's shoulder, and squeezed it and Vicki's hand gratefully.

* * * *

"No," Tim said into the walkie talkie as he scanned the rain with his eyes, "according to these findings, psychosis would be a perfect target. A psychopath is a lot more emotional than you or I."

"*Why's that?*" Donald asked from below, busy at the computers and transmitter panel. He was re-routing the system directions and opening the parameters of the containment systems to deflect readings and transmissions received through the monitors and into the various containers.

It had taken a lot of internal research to work out how he was going to manage the new system and integrate it with the existing programs, almost half an hour, and so Albert had stopped the van and switched off the ignition, waiting in the front while Donald toyed with the equipment behind him and Dr Hacker kept watch above.

The rain had been heavy and ceaseless, and all Albert could do was stare out at the lightning, count in his mind until the thunder (an old trick his father taught him as a child), and listen to the drill of the rain, muffled by the soundproofing in the roof but still *ssshhhhhhing* on the highway outside. He glanced at his watch. It was quarter past eight. They had just under four hours to finish and take their equipment away. Although, from the impression the poor silly prick from the SCC had given, Albert doubted that the Bridge would re-open for a long time.

It would be the end of public confidence, which had never completely recovered after the tragedy of 1998. It would take until the Bridge Centenary celebrations in the 2030's for the world to forget this.

Donald worked studiously, as always, focused and objective. He had to redirect the outflow modules from laboratory hook-ups like cables and pipes (where the transmitted energy would ordinarily be extracted in

a laboratory) and organise for it to be directed outward through the transmitter terminals (the receptor terminals would become, for split seconds, new transmitter terminals, through which the energy could be expelled), which would result in a controlled output of energy in whatever form was required.

"Because reality is distorted or completely removed in psychotics," Tim explained, "their imagination is their driving consciousness. And the imagination is a lot more colourful and emotional than real life, so they produce a lot of electrical activity in the brain. Incredible amounts while they're killing, raping, or whatever they're doing during the high point of their psychosis."

Donald nodded thoughtfully. Tim had gained an incredible insight into the mechanics of the mind during his life. And from the information in the van after its recovery.

He punched in a few commands on the computer, and leaned back. He looked up at Albert in the drivers seat and called out

"I'm going to run a test. Start up and let's go. Be ready for anything." Albert waved and started the van, which thrummed powerfully. He set the van moving at a crawl. Lightning erupted overhead.

"Was that it?" Albert said, "bloody impressive!" Donald laughed, grateful for the joke, which broke the tension. A crash of thunder sounded above and echoed back and forth across the sky.

"Doctor," he said into the walkie talkie, "I'm going to run a quick test of the rewired transmission command."

"Weapons system." Albert corrected.

Donald rolled across to the video monitor and called up an external picture. The camera showed only a plaque of rain. Donald activated the floodlight and pointed it off the side by the remote control stick in the visual aid panel beside the monitor.

"Creep over towards the gutter." he instructed Albert. Gradually the cables of the support system between each arch came into view. Donald rolled back to the transmission panel and produced an electromagnetic charge from the cache. He returned to the video monitor and called up the new pointer he had installed with the small graphics program on the PC (a tiny white cross).

He had generated it to become a focal point for a command executed from the transmission master program. He rolled to the master panel and directed the charge through the new route to the transmission system, then returned to the monitor. He used the mouse to select a single cable, and returned to the transmission panel to prime and release the charge.

On pressing *Enter*, a crack and a shower of sparks exploded from a point on the cable, dissipating into the night.

Back on the monitor, a red spot had appeared on the cable where the sparks had been, another image generated by Donald to give the focal point of the charge.

"It worked!" Albert said.

"Not quite yet." Donald said, rolling back to the computer and calling up a receptor program. He ran a comparison survey on the instructions he had given the computer and the point of focus of the charge. The computer placed the theoretical charge and the real charge outside in latitude, longitude and altitude, and gave an error of 0.0005 millimetres.

Donald smiled "It works." He stood and reached up to the communication panel, switching on the link to the shelter.

"Jeremy, the first test of our new transmission function works - almost perfectly." He waited, smiling with excitement and a little pride.

There was no answer over the speaker. Donald looked up at the panel. The system status light was on, indicating no faults.

".....Jeremy?"

Still nothing.

The excitement dissolved to leave a low throb of anxiety.

"Albert, can you raise them on the car phone? He paused as he watched Albert key in the network code for the shelter; *1*. The phone didn't ring.

Donald reached up to switch the connection.

"Ms Parkes?" he asked hopefully.

"*Yes Doctor?*" came Joanne's voice. Donald breathed a sigh of relief.

"Can you get hold of the shelter? We've got communication problems."

"*Just a second.*"

Albert glanced back in to the cell, wondering what it could be. He reached into the bag and took out his own walkie talkie, as yet unused, and called for Tim.

"Are you getting a reading from the other end, Dr Hacker?"

* * * *

Tim raised the IF meter and scanned the opposite end of the Bridge. He sensed that they were just passing the northern arch, but still couldn't see it through the rain. Lightning flickered over the east.

The IF meter showed a heavy reading, but of nothing. Only noise. Tim consulted the control panel and enhanced the reception, drowning

out the feedback as much as he could. There was no reading from more than two hundred metres away. Approximately half way across.

"I don't know. I'm reading a block." he answered Albert. He tuned the picture more, and switched through the emission spectrum, the LCD giving him views of radioactive, infra-red, ultraviolet, visible light, radio and microwave emissions. He switched back to radio and took the headphones from his inside pocket, plugging them in.

Voices. Music. From the snatches he could hear properly, it sounded like every radio station on the band being played at once. He went back to the control panel and panned backwards, calling up the picture of the Bridge again, and gasped at what he saw.

Amid the red shafts and cables of the Bridge, halfway along, was an enormous thin block, a sheet of energy. From the clarity of the sound transfer to the IF meter he knew it was radio waves. It spanned the width of the highway and as high as the apex of the centre arch.

There was a huge block of radio waves, cutting off all mobile communication between the two parties.

XIII

"Yeah, I can get them all right." Joanne said, *"do you want me to run a report on the telecommunication link?"*

"Yes, please, if you could -" Donald began, but the communicator on the bench cut him off. It was Tim's voice.

"Donald, get ready to use that new transmission of energy. There's a brick wall of radio waves sitting halfway along the Bridge, I'll bet it's what's cut off our communications." Donald sat at the terminal, running through the procedure again, the transmission panel, the video, the master panel, back to the video, back to the transmission panel. When he got the chance through the week he would have the maintenance engineers fit software and a single user point that allowed him to complete the whole function from one place.

Donald hit *Enter*.

* * * *

A million sparks of red light erupted around a huge oblong of space, hundreds of metres farther along, as big as the Bridge, their positions on a two dimensional plane revealing the enormous radio block. The flash was accompanied by a high voiced metal buzzing, and both were gone as quickly as they had appeared.

Tim heard Donald over the communicator *"Shit, that didn't work, it only seemed to aggravate it. There's still no communications."*

Tim looked down from where the gigantic eruption of light had been to the equipment around him, reaching for the wave receiver. The machine would tell him the wavelength of the energy source and he would know for sure if it was radio waves.

He glanced up and blinked. There was a figure in the rain ahead. Walking in the same direction as the van. The figure was dressed in black jeans and a forest green raincoat, the hood pulled over his head. It was Dale!

Tim hadn't known what had become of Vicki at the other end, only assumed she was all right since he hadn't heard anything from Donald or Joanne Parkes. Dale would have had plenty of time to walk this far in thirty or so minutes.

Tim felt a twinge of fear. Now that communications had been broken, they didn't know the fate of those in the shelter. Maybe there had been another attack, and Dale had run all the way here for help.

Tim slid across to the service ladder and climbed down.

"I'm just going to check something." he said in his communicator.

Instead of calling below to have Donald radio Joanne and find out for sure where Dale was, he ran off into the rain.

* * * *

"Where the hell's he going?" Albert asked himself, watching Tim run off into the rain ahead. He took up the walkie talkie.

"Hey," he said sternly, "what are you doing?"

"*Dale's up here.*" came the muffled reply, "*the others might be in trouble. Better check.*" Albert frowned in worry as he spoke into the communicator again.

"We just heard that they're all right." he said. Tim didn't answer. Albert's sigh was full of concern as he reached down a dialled 2 on the carphone.

"*Yeah, Al?*" came Joanne's voice from Castle Hill.

"Ah, can you raise the shelter again Jo, make sure they're all there?" he said.

"Anything for you, baby." she said. Albert smiled. Maybe he'd get off his arse, push this divorce through as hard as he could, and go up north with Joanne.

When it was over.

He sat for a few seconds, hearing Joanne's voice in the background, speaking over another line to the shelter.

"*Yes, they're all there.*" Albert felt a sinking in his stomach. Who, then, was Tim out there chasing? He spluttered a thank you into the

communicator and reached across for the door, grabbing his carrybag, putting the van into neutral and applying the handbrake.

Behind him, the door to the cell slammed shut. He jumped with fright, swearing.

"Sorry if I'm making too much noise!" he said, annoyed with Donald to be so blunt. He pushed the door of the van open, letting in a torrent of rain, and jumped out onto the road, slamming the door closed with his knee and following Tim's direction.

* * * *

Donald, from the opposite end of the cell, also jumped at the slamming of the cell door.

"Jesus," he yelled, "if you want it closed just ask me."

* * * *

Vicki had her hands wrapped tightly around the polystyrene cup, the steam from her coffee warming her chin. Occasionally she blew onto it, sending a small plume of steam up into her face. The damp warmth was wonderful. Another shiver rocked her. It could have been from her soaking clothes, freezing despite the picnic rug from Barry's car boot thrown over her shoulders, or it could have been the horrifying image eating away at her brain like a disease, of a thing she couldn't really remember now, but which had been just so *enormous*.

She brushed her wet, stringy hair out of her eyes and looked across at the others. The young university student, Dale and Barry were crowded around the computer, the one Dale hadn't kicked from the bench.

Was Dale as drawn or pale as she was? She couldn't tell, found she was too exhausted to care right now, maybe too beaten down to love him at all tonight, and just hung her head, letting the steam from the cup bathe her face soothingly, trying to focus everything on it, trying to forget her frozen feet, the uncomfortable chair beneath her, the blackness of fear inside eating her.

"No," Jeremy was saying, "I can't access any databanks on the van. there's some total radio block."

"Can't you change frequency?" Barry suggested.

The student shook his head. "I've got the computer scanning all frequencies for the van's radio signature. It's like we're an air traffic controller and a plane's just disappeared into the air." Barry stood up straight and looked around, from the computer to Dale to Vicki, hunched over in the corner, resigned to her fate. Christ, he thought, shouldn't have brought her.

He rubbed his face, wiping sweat from his beard, and said "Just because we can't hear them doesn't mean they're not there. We'll take my car and go and look for them. They can't have gone anywhere."

Dale and Jeremy both glanced at each other and fought for reasons why that wasn't a good idea, going out there in the pitch black of a storm in the pouring rain with monsters and demons roaming the Bridge like it was some fourteenth century Romanian Castle. They both wondered where Barry got his confidence. Maybe his size.

Jeremy began to speak, mostly to himself. "There must be something we can do-" He was cut off by a low, ancient creaking far above, audible even over the thundering rain, of metal and cables shrieking in huge, ancient protest. Everyone in the shelter looked up until the groaning trailed off into the rain. Lightning lit the outer wall of the canvas a sheen of ghostly blue.

"And when we find them," Barry continued, "I think we should all get off."

Dale nodded, his eyes settling on Vicki. She was scanning the ceiling of the shelter, and looked down at him. "I'd like you to go." he said. She smiled and nodded without argument. Yes, her eyes said, I'd bloody well like to go.

"I can't leave this equipment." Jeremy said apologetically, looking at all three, "I can't take you. Sorry, Dr Holt."

Barry looked at the street outside, rain lashing the asphalt.

"There's only my car anyway. Albert parked down in The Rocks, and we won't get very far in Vicki's." He took his keys out of his back trouser pocket, looking at Vicki. "I could drop you at the barriers first." he said, "It's only a short walk to the stairs down to Cumberland Street."

Vicki shuddered, violently. "No thanks," she said, smiling weakly, "I'd sooner wait here and all leave together than go back there on my own."

"I'd rather you got somewhere safe now." Dale said to her.

"Dale, you're just driving up the other end, telling them to get off, and coming straight back. We'll be fine until you get back."

Dale looked at Barry, pained, who shrugged, turning to Jeremy.

"You'd better start packing all this up." Barry said.

"What about the study? I don't know why we have to leave, nobody's been hurt." the student said.

Barry shrugged. "Don't, then." He gestured to Dale, who kissed the top of Vicki's head as he passed. She smiled gratefully and watched the two men approach the door flap.

"Wait." Jeremy shouted. Dale and Barry spun around. He was staring intently at the computer screen. Vicki joined them as they rushed

back to the bench. The screen was clear, except for a single line across the top, the cursor blinking a few lines down. It read;

nemesis.....stop.....opposing energy.

At the same time, a single sheet came from the printer, a copy of the words on the screen falling into the document tray.

"What the hell's this?" Barry asked. Jeremy shook his head, Vicki stared.

Dale was scratching his chin, a nervous reaction, his eyes wide with fear and wonder. "Maybe it's trying to....." the others looked at him, and he was suddenly fearful of looking foolish, but finished, ".....talk to us."

Jeremy leaned into the keyboard and typed

who are you?

The computer light flickered and there appeared;

who?.....no thing or life

what are you? Jeremy typed.

$3Sx\ 3/p100+79\{xy\sim/(9x6/0.000031^2)-lt@[.040\%xnth"]\#10^{\wedge}/Q\}/pR^3$

Everyone stared at the screen, trying to make head or tail of the information. Jeremy, overflowing with centuries worth of scholarly discovery in mathematics and physics, looked at each part separately, tapping the screen with his pen.

"It's amazing," he said, "it's a legitimate mathematical equation. It uses standard figures and symbols. See Pi r squared at the end? That pertains to volume or space.....LT, that's Latin - Locus Tempus, time and space."

"So what does it all tell you?" Barry asked.

Jeremy shrugged. "It's telling us what it is." he said. "We're speaking to it. We're in contact with.....whatever Dr Hacker says it is."

"Ghosts." Vicki said rhetorically. Nobody corrected her.

"Ask what it wants." Dale suggested. Jeremy returned to the keyboard.

what do you want?

cancel opposing energy Jeremy frowned.

what is the opposing energy? he typed.

nemesis. opposing energy from vibrant circle. c-h2ox2

Only Barry seemed to have it together. He crossed to the phone on the other end of the bench and picked it up.

"Joanne?" he said, "Can you access the library? See if you can find a reference to a 'vibrant circle'.....thanks." He put the receiver down and transferred the line to the speaker at the ceiling. They could hear Joanne mumble to herself and work at her own computer as she initiated searches through the library provided by Tim and Donald. The library was a set of seven compact discs of every supernatural and paranormal instance, event and reference there was, a service offered to scientific bodies by the archiving division of the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

"What's the number at the end?" Vicki asked.

"That's the mathematical formula for organic life," Jeremy explained, "the 'C' is for carbon, 'H2O' for water, and multiplied by two is the socio-mathematical symbol for reproduction, or cell regeneration. It's obviously telling us that this opposing energy is some living thing."

"I hope you're recording all this." Barry said.

"Yeah, I set up all the modems to transfer anything immediately to Ms Parkes' house."

"Here," came Joanne's voice, "the Vibrant Circle is a term used by early spiritualists of Sumerian times. It means the physical world. They believed that the universe was made up of different fields of energy, some physical, some electrical, some magnetic, some just time. Things like thunderstorms and diseases were supposed to be where the fields all crossed over."

"They may not have been too far off." Dale muttered.

Jeremy returned to the computer again.

can you specify opposing force? human? he typed.

Blink. Flicker. Then, in a wave of figures down the screen;

31051979

159751973

38762ram

2387955273

42338

O+

5892800021359917

84654
3170832177652085
0295798114

And on they went, figures and numbers, seemingly without cause or effect, until Dale stiffened. "Holy God," he said. He reached for the printer, tearing the last page from the document tray. "This is me!" he shouted with wonder and fear, "The first one's my birth date, then my tax file number,.....oh shit, then my library card number.....blood group, my bloody credit card number, my phone number!"

"Wait!" Jeremy said, "that tells us something." Dale ignored him, mortal terror on his face, shaking his head at the page in disbelief. Jeremy continued to himself. "It uses numbers and mathematics to identify things of our world. That means there's no real link, by way of language or understanding. This is the only way it can make us know what it means."

"Why couldn't it just write my name?" Dale said.

"The word 'Dale' doesn't mean a thing to it." Jeremy said, "All these numbers, exclusive to only your life, give us both the reference it's trying to establish." He scratched his head and went back to the keyboard.

where are lambert, hacker and dimitriou?

[illegible]

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XIV

Tim finally glimpsed Dale through the rain ahead. He called out, but his voice was drowned out by the rain. He lurched onwards, the heavy equipment and soaking coat weighing him down. He would collapse before long, from exhaustion, or simply trip over.

He finally caught up to Dale, clapping him on the shoulder.

The thing turned around and Tim screamed. It's skin was bleeding and cracked, the skin around its mouth horribly stretched and overgrown with huge fangs the length of fingers. It's eyes hidden by the shroud of its cloak but burning a filthy white colour. Tim started to scramble backwards but the things arm shot out and gripped the side of his neck.

* * * *

As Dale and Barry rushed out of the shelter for Barry's car, Vicki and Jeremy stayed near the computer, the tasks at hand keeping their minds off the looming fear.

None of them had noticed, above the noise of the rain, tiny squeaks as the tiny screws on the lid of the coffee urn had been turning around and dropping out onto the ground.

* * * *

Albert heard the scream through the rain and his heart plunged. He reached, fumbling into the carry bag, and produced the dull grey police revolver that he'd kept at home for years, unused.

A figure became visible through the rain beside him. He glanced up and shouted in fearful surprise as the corpse, dead for years, shuffled towards him, reaching. In even more horror, he realised it was Dale!

No, he made his mind say, it's only a trick. Just ignore it and keep going. He went to side step the thing, but it lunged and grabbed him, moaning gleefully with its putrid breath in Albert's face. He pulled the carry bag from under his arm and swung it into the corpses stomach. The thing reeled backwards and Albert used the sudden advantage to swing the bag at its head, causing the head to flop aside dully, the neck snapping with the sound of a fresh vegetable. Albert used the bag to shove the things chest and watched as it crashed to the ground.

Lightning flashed out to sea, illuminating the silhouettes of dozens of figures around him, converging. A black pall of terror came crashing down in the rain. Albert stopped, looked back for the van in case he could still make it, but made himself realise that his conscience would kill him if he left Tim out here.

* * * *

Tim was flung on the ground, hard. He thudded to the road and felt the rainwater cascade over him like a little surf. A foot came down on the back of his head and pushed it flat to the road, his nose ground against the asphalt underneath the water. He struggled to rise up for breath, but his thrashing and struggles were useless.

* * * *

Albert raised the gun (he hadn't fired one in seven years) and aimed carefully. He called out at the figure standing over the helpless Tim, and

the face turned to him, grinning in evil delight. Albert faltered, and felt his knees turn to water. He thought he might fall over.

It was the same apparition, the smashed and corrupted spectre of Dale whose neck Albert had just snapped and who had been sent plunging through the rain. And now it was here.

(No, a trick)

The blast of the revolver was like a cannon, and fire spewed out of the nozzle. The huge figure standing on top of the hunched, inert body on the ground lurched backwards and crashed to the road, sending a plume of water.

Albert ran forward and dragged Tim to his feet, coughing and spluttering. The parapsychologist had been beaten, his face and neck cut, bruised and bleeding. Albert struggled to keep Tim upright, his arm wrapped around the scientists chest, and staggered back towards the van. He glanced up at where the corpse had fallen to the road.

Nothing.

* * * *

Donald did another sweep with the external camera. He'd switched on the floodlights around the perimeter of the van's roof, and they threw sinister fans of lights out and down towards the road, like a space ship about to execute a lift-off.

The camera showed him nothing new. Just shafts of light and teeming rain. No sign of Tim or Albert, no radio contact with either one or the shelter. He stood up and walked towards the cell door. Out in the cabin there would be a torch in the glove box and an extra rain coat folded up behind the seats. He didn't want to start up the van, not with the new 'weapon' system not properly calibrated (one small vibration could send the fixtures and sensors way off - the system wouldn't be secure until they could increase the connector differentials in a laboratory). He'd have to go out in the rain himself to look for both men.

Donald gripped the latch of the cell door and pushed.

It was stuck fast. He was trapped in the cell.

Like he had been another time.

"Oh no." Donald said quietly. He shoved his shoulder against the door. No way would his force break the bolt of the latch. And the bolt was stuck in the hole as if soldered in place.

He backed slowly away from the cell door, suddenly aware of a loud pattering on the outside of the van, hundreds of hands seeking entrance. A feeling like vomiting came up in Donald's throat, and he turned back to the monitor. His mouth dropped open and his eyes grew in insane terror.

* * * *

The lights in the shelter flickered and died.

"Oh God." Vicki whispered. Everything was black, except for the walls of the canvas, which glowed a deep, suffuse blue, silhouetting the objects around the shelter.

"It's all right, we've got a torch." Jeremy said. He rose and started fumbling across the desk in front of her. Lightning outside turned the canvas bright blue, and thunder crashed.

"Wait, look." Vicki said, grabbing the university student by the shoulder. He stopped.

On the computer screen, the cursor blinked rapidly, their conversation with whatever it had been still there.

"No," Jeremy said, "no way. Everything's on the same generator." he walked past Vicki and went to the generator.

"If I switch it on and off, it might reset everything and make it work." There was a long pause. Vicki stared at the screen, the cursor still blinking, like a pulsar in the eternal dark of deep space. Lightning flickered dully.

"Well?" Vicki said.

"What do you mean?" Jeremy asked her, brushing past, "I turned the generator off and disconnected the mains."

* * * *

There seemed hundreds, dead shuffling figures crowding around the van. Donald was running back and forth like a madman, zapping another with a blast of radiation or electromagnetic charge. Sometimes their heads would erupt in showers of sparks, sometimes they just fell.

From out of the gloom came a flashing of light. Intermittently. There was a dull roar from outside. The creatures before him fell, turned to their new assailant.

It was Albert! With Tim behind him! Albert was firing a gun at the things, trying to clear a path as best as he could. If only Donald could get out there to help them, or at least get to the cabin to open the door for them!

* * * *

Barry pressed his foot further onto the accelerator and the LTD whined, racing forward as fast as he dared in the rain.

* * * *

"Let me go on the roof again!" Tim shouted, wiping his still bleeding cuts, "I can use my communicator to try and get through to the shelter!"

"Don't you think that van has adequate communications?" Albert yelled, helping Tim back towards where the van sat amidst the rain like a ocean tanker in a North Sea hurricane.

"No, I just mean if the van's the problem!" Tim yelled. He felt a rotten hand close over his shoulder, and screamed as he spun around. Albert spun Tim around so they were both facing their attacker. This time, only the rain on his face kept him from collapsing.

Dale's other hand reached up for Tim's face, and Tim almost wet himself before he saw the pistol appear beside his head. He saw a flash as the gun exploded, almost blowing his eardrum out. The distended head of the thing blew apart.

"I shot you!" Albert screamed, shooting it in the chest and stomach and blown apart remains of the head, "I fuckin' *killed* you!!!"

He dragged Tim roughly off again, reminding him suddenly of the gruff police officer who had hauled him away from the Pakesh house when the shooting began. Tim felt then like he had no control of his own legs from fear, and he didn't think he did now. All he could focus on, all that was keeping him sane, was Albert's arm clutching roughly across his chest.

"I thought they weren't real!" Albert yelled.

"They're as real as the matter they manifest!" Tim answered him. Albert dragged him away, towards an indistinct island of lights, barely visible through the rain.

Albert looked around through the downpour, his heart a drum-roll in his chest, cold needles prickling down his neck and back in horrified anticipation at when Dale's dead splattered face would emerge from the rain next.

* * * *

Donald turned around and there was a tall, black, grinning humanoid thing, standing, dripping oil onto the floor of the van. Its dead lips worked into a snarl and a grimace of joy, and it reached through the roof. For a second Donald's mind reeled. He couldn't tell if it was the hand of the thing that was real, and the ceiling of the van some insubstantial thing like an old cine-film, or the other way around.

The thing drew its hand back into the cab, its talons curled around a black rubber pipe. The thing jerked downward and the pipe split

violently into two halves, letting out a belching burst of black dust. The thing darkened until the background began to burst through its image and it was gone. The pipe remained, dangling in two halves, spewing invisible gas into the sealed research cell.

* * * *

"Still nothing," Dale said, "we should be able to see the lights of the van by now, surely." Barry bit his lip in anxiety as the needle touched 65 kmh.

* * * *

"Donald!" Albert called, pounding on the side of the van. He swore loudly and ran to the side door, past the ladder where Tim had already scrambled up and was peering over the side while he scrambled with his equipment.

Albert raised the gun, paused for a deep breath, and shot the window out of the van door. He reached in and unlocked it, dragged himself in and slammed it behind him. He reached around to push on the cell door. Damn Donald! Why the hell would he lock it? He pounded on the door.

"Donald! Open the fucking door!" he almost screamed. "We've got to go!" He raised the gun again, this time at the small square of rivets marking the latch on the other side. He squeezed his finger around the trigger, tighter.....

There was a crash behind him, and he spun around in shock. The other window, the drivers side had been bashed in, and the even more smashed, obliterated face of their attacker leered in, still smoking from the last gunshot wound that had opened a long vertical split down its face.

Albert raised the gun at it and fired. The gunshot was like a detonation inside the small cab of the van, and he fired again and again, the smoke from the weapon obscuring his vision. As long as he couldn't see the thing, he didn't care. The gun roared and sparkled in the cab until he knew he was down to his last few bullets, and Albert threw it down and turned to the ignition, starting the van with a roar.

He bashed on the ceiling and yelled "Hang on!", and pushed the accelerator heavily to the floor, picking up speed.

* * * *

Donald had been frozen to the spot with terror. He had been standing face to face with a monster, a.....ghost! The thing had breathed

through a vile snout and stared through evil porcine eyes and reached through solid metal!

He dropped into the controllers seat oblivious to Albert banging on the door. He sent a bug scout through all the fuel and gas line systems for a report of the break, and the computer test system faithfully told him;

Break: Helium Sulphide dehydr. gas line, section 90#MMQ/left rear quadrant/extr. cell panel.

Donald closed his eyes and swallowed. The dehydrator gas - it was taken through a total of fifty metres of tubing throughout the structure of the van, especially around the research cell's exterior block. It's purpose was to promote evaporation in case of humidity, so that no moisture could collect near the cell and damage delicate computer circuitry. It was a colourless, horrendous smelling gas, not poisonous.

But forty times more flammable than petrol fumes.

He jumped out of the seat and turned towards the cell door - he'd tear it away with his fingernails if he had to - and froze.

The black, grinning gargoyle was standing just inside the cell door, staring at him.

Around him, the van came to life and lurched forward.

* * * *

Tim glanced up at the road ahead from his work as a lance of lightning seared across the sky overhead, seeming to race right over the top of the Bridge. It illuminated the air and rain around brightly, and through the glare, Tim's heart lurched as he saw a dark shape racing, only a matter of metres before them, split seconds away from impact. From the front of the shape, two glaring lights burned.

The car raced down the centre of the road.

Straight towards the van.

Tim hardly had time to throw himself forward and grab hold of an antenna and the rim of metal around the roof.

* * * *

Barry was almost doing eighty, and if he hadn't let up as they passed the centre arch, he and Dale would have ploughed straight into the research van. When Dale screamed a warning, the van was already on top of them. Barry swerved hard to the right, the car sliding through the water, as the van loomed in front and passed to their left.

* * * *

Albert's mind moved like the lightning above when he saw the piercing glare of the car headlights approaching. Instead of jabbing for the brake, he flattened the accelerator to the floor and swerved as hard to the left as he dared, dubious in the notion that his increase in speed would take him out of the way quicker.

He felt the van rise sickeningly on one side, and knew, *felt* in his sense of balance, that one more inch with the steering wheel would tip it over. The other car passed desperately close, in the inches, and before Albert could react, the van jolted violently and had lurched up onto the thin footpath at the edge. The metal of the front panel squealed as it hit the guard rail of the walkway, and Albert steered violently back to the right, pitching back on to the road.

* * * *

Tim felt his arms being dragged from their sockets as the van swung to one side, and after a bone-jarring jolt beneath him, he was thrown from the roof, feeling his fingernails torn from their grip.

He grappled wildly as he saw footpath sail under him, and he reached for the tall, vertical shadow ahead.

There was a clang and a crack of flesh as Tim hit the streetlight, and he wrapped his arms around it. In a moment's doomed panic, he felt the streetlight waver, crack, and tumble, spilling him over the edge, Sydney Harbour a hundred and seventy feet below him.

Tim screamed and screamed, feeling his body fall, his hands gripped tightly, uselessly around the tall pole of the street light. There was a jolt and his body's own weight snapped him painfully downwards. He glanced upwards. The lamp had tumbled over the edge, but the cables coming up through its base were still rooted to the road and the entire pole and light hung from the stretched cables.

Hardly daring, but deathly curiosity overcoming him, Tim looked past his feet, past the rain falling into a dark chasm, at the water of the Harbour far below him. If he fell, every bone in his body would snap when he hit the water, way, way down there. You'd have time to say the first line of the Lord's Prayer falling down there, by *Christ* that's how far it was. He wondered if this was how Dale had felt, all those years ago.

He'd somehow slid to the top (bottom, in this position) of the pole, where there was a horizontal arm reaching out to hold the lamp at the end, and was hanging on with both hands wrapped around the horizontal.

He tried desperately to drag himself up so he could get his arms over the horizontal crossbar, but his coat felt like it weighed a ton, and his hands were slipping.

There was a lurch and the streetlight fell, sickeningly, for several seconds, the Bridge racing away overhead. He could see tiny yellow explosions in the metalworks under the road, where the cable was snapping loose of its moorings from their weight of the light with him on it. By the time Tim came to a jarring halt again, the Bridge was way too far up to reach by climbing. Looking below, however, that was still much, much too far to fall.

XV

Vicki poked her head out into the rain again, looking off down the Bridge. Lightning erupted across the sky, making her wince with fear. She retreated back into the darkened shelter.

"No, it's everything," Jeremy said, "the phone lines, everything has been cut. Except that." he pointed at the computer.

"Well, I think we should walk." Vicki said decisively, "Leave the shelter and try to make it to the stairs down to The Rocks. They're not that far. It's only the weather that'll be holding us up."

Jeremy just stared at her. "Just the weather?" he said sarcastically, "the bloody weather has been the least of our worries so far."

"Well, I'd rather get off this Bridge." she said.

"What about Dr Paul's car?" he said, "They're coming back."

"That plan was based on this shelter still being a safe place." she told him. "You stay if you like." She headed for a chair and picked up the raincoat from the back rest, glancing at him one more time and stepping out into the rain.

Jeremy returned, through the darkness, to the computer. A bright flash of lightning lit the way for him briefly, and he was seated at the computer again, the cursor still blinking, a new message now across the screen;

jemmy Jeremy felt a pang of fear and pain in his chest. Only one person called him Jemmy. Or had.

"Dad?" he said, tears forming, looking at the screen.

you must know what this thing is now, jem. you must know you're in contact with beyond. that's where i am, jemmy, waiting for you.

"Daddy?" Jeremy cried, letting a burst of tears free, his heart full of sorrow but bursting with joy. Joy at his father's spirit in him, sorrow for the day years before when they discovered his dad's body, dressed in his mum's pink garter and stockings, the bathroom splattered with blood where he sliced off his own penis and then cut his own throat.

"Daddy....." Jeremy repeated.

i can't hear you, baby. you can't talk to me. just type it down here. write your name for me. tell me you love me. go on, jemmy, just type, "i love you dad"

Jeremy slowly reached for the keyboard with his fingers. Across the shelter from the computer table, the coffee urn turned a slow circle, turning so that the spout faced Jeremy. The collapsible legs of the table it was on suddenly crashed out from under it, and the table dipped down, sending the urn clanging to the floor. Boiling water showered Jeremy and the generator, and as his finger touched the keyboard, the generator sparked and all the equipment came alive.

As the boiling water broke pustules across Jeremy's screaming face, his hair stood on end and his fingers fused with the plastic of the computer keys. Blue showers of sparks crackled from the equipment and Jeremy's eyes grew and popped in showers of fluid from his skull. His tongue distended and grew yellow, exploding in his mouth and throat. His body jerked spasmodically in the agony of electrocution.

* * * *

Vicki was only metres away from the shelter, fighting to get both arms into the sleeves of the coat, when she heard the crack from inside. She spun back to the shelter to see a tiny thunderstorm erupting inside, little lightning lighting up the canvas walls.

She screamed "Jeremeeeee!" and started to run back, but in a burst of heat, a ball of orange flame erupted through the wall and roof. The explosion sent her flying, crashing to the ground where she felt her shoulder crack, and sliding along the road, sending a plume of water before her.

She came to rest on her back, staring up into the storm, panting in fear, her shoulder on fire with pain, clutching her arm and out of strength. Lightning flashed, reaching through the boiling clouds like bony fingers to probe the sky for victims, and rain splattered on her face.

* * * *

Donald was thrown against the bank of control panels on the wall as the van veered suddenly. There was a violent pitch underneath, as if the van had run over a gutter, and he was thrown across to the other side, hitting his head on the edge of the workbench and crumpling to the floor.

He fought to regain his feet, holding a hand to his bleeding head, his eyes firmly and fearfully locked onto the black goblin at the cell door.

He wanted to scream to Albert to break the door in, but he didn't dare move or make a sound. The black thing dribbled a long string of snot

down itself and onto the floor and advanced a step. Donald took two terrified steps back, shaking his head, pleading silently.

The black thing stepped forward further, forcing Donald back until he came up against the back wall of the cell. The thing lumbered forward, reaching with its bony arm for Donald's face. He turned his face away but could smell the stench of rotten, sodden flesh drawing nearer. The thing opened its mouth and let out a long, drawn hiss, its jaws stretching impossibly wide. Its claws were inches away from Donald's lips when there was a crash from the other end of the cell.

Donald jumped in fright and looked over the thing's shoulder. Albert was driving with his other hand, looking into the cell. He shouted in disgust and terror and the van swerved as he lost control to reach in with his revolver. The creature hadn't turned away from Donald, but only grinned.

"No!" Donald screamed, "There's gas!!"

* * * *

Barry brought the car into a tight circle and skidded around to follow the retreating research van, just coming off the short gutter to crash back to the road. Both he and Dale were panting with relief, adrenalin already turning sour in their mouths and blood.

A flicker of lightning to the south lit up the road as the van steered roughly onto its original course, its brakelights flickering on briefly.

* * * *

Albert had realised after he recovered the van that the car had been someone from the shelter, looking for him. He began to tread on the brake when there was a loud crash behind. He spun around, reaching with his revolver, his foot coming off the brake. The cell door had been flung open, and Donald was standing at the far end, pinning himself against the wall, a river of blood coming from underneath his hair and down his head. And standing right in front of him.....

Albert felt his limbs go limp and quiver like jelly, except for his hand, which he raised and steadied, the gun pointed at the back of the thing's head. If it turned to look at him he knew he would faint. Maybe drop dead of fright. He heard Donald scream something but the words were drowned out by the cannonblast of the gun in the close confines of the cell.

In confusion, he saw Donald lurch violently, a spray of blood erupting from his chest. The bullet had travelled *right through* that horrendous black beast.

It was Albert's last thought.

* * * *

Barry and Dale screamed in shock as the van became a piercing white vortex of light. Jets of fire consumed it, the roar shaking the Bridge to its foundations, an orange ball of flame rising into the air. The force of the explosion rocked Barry's car back and forth and the heat made it stall, and Dale and Barry watched as MARV veered slowly to the right, a cyclone of fire blazing into the air, mounted the opposite kerb, and bashed portions of the guard rail away, careening off into space.

* * * *

Tim heard a roar like thunder and felt the bar shake in his hands, heard the squeal of the Bridge rocking far above. A blinding light appeared across from him, on the opposite side and further along, and fell towards the water. It was a large, heavy shape, and fire was streaming from it, making it look like a falling comet. He felt a wave of numbness grip him, starting in a wash from the top of his head down, as he realised that it was the university research van.

The van rolled over and over, hitting the water with a crash, still streaming a blazing pyre of flame until it sank.

* * * *

Had any of the instruments and sensors, still tuned in, been monitored at the time, they would've shown a decrease in the total electromagnetic charge for the Bridge as an electrical system. Decreasing slowly from 58.45V.

BOOK 7

I

As Barry drove, he fought tooth and nail to keep his mind on the road ahead, but could only remember a few snatches of consciousness during the whole journey. He had left his surgery at about four and he was suddenly cruising slowly down into Yowie Bay, a long, exclusive suburb of Sydney's south, set on one of the many peninsulas of Port Hacking, a southern inlet along Sydney's coast. The peninsula of Yowie Bay lay between Yowie Bay itself, to the east, and Gymea Bay to the West. It looked south across the Port Hacking River over the Royal National Park, and was dotted with valuable properties, tiny marinas and boatsheds along the waterline.

Although the central region of the peninsula was populated with families of average wealth, the outermost waterfront properties betrayed the means of their occupants, gunmetal grey trailers carrying speed boats or pleasure cruisers on their backs, expensive European cars in carports and on lawns and back paths leading down to boathouses. They were occupied by a lot of doctors, solicitors, and local business people, but not very many lawmen. Only one that Barry knew of had been home to an ex police officer.

Albert had worked hard to make his way up to where he was, landing a detective's rank in the police and then joining one of Australia's elite government watchdog agencies. Barry didn't know much about Albert's background, but he'd had the impression that Albert had been a battler. Something had been in his dark foreign eyes, something that told you he'd been there. And won.

Albert's house was like an urban fortress. Everything was wide, looming, and impressive; its frame and fixtures were laced with the friendly all-Australian look done to death by major builders in the 1990's, but its impenetrable girth gave them a sinister air, like a daunting spider's parlour into which Barry felt like a fly being invited.

When he knocked on the door of the double storey late 20th century lodge, with its wide bay windows and entry alcove girt by tall columns that reached to the eaves under the roof, he was greeted by the thing that Albert had battled the most.

Emily Dimitriou half-heartedly asked Barry in. She had a cigarette in one hand, her eyes were red and puffy, and her hair was a scrawled mess. Make-up was smeared on one side of her face. Barry envisioned long hours laying against a pillow, smelling of her husband's aftershave or maybe their lovemaking, crying forlornly.

He peeled off his suit coat as he walked in, immediately set on edge by the floor. The entry that ran straight through into the kitchen and dining area were covered with dark blue tiles, a deep blue that gave the

illusion of walking on solid diamond. Barry tried, unconsciously, not to tread heavily and shatter the peace of this shattered household. He sat very carefully at her invitation, leaning forward so he didn't appear too comfortable. He didn't want to appear intrusive here. He felt so unbelonging.

Albert's wife sat on the long white lounge opposite, curling her feet under her. Her legs were clad in colourful tights, a long cream T shirt over the top. She took a long, resigned drag on her cigarette and retrieved a short glass from the coffee table, sipping. From the expensive stereo in a large entertainment unit across the room, solemn piano music drifted from under a huge picture of a wide, lonely beach,

"I can't tell you how sorry I am," Barry said quietly, "he'd become a friend to me after what we'd been through."

She nodded, shrugging. "Yeah, he may have mentioned you a few times."

"Is there anything at all I can do, Mrs Dimitriou?"

She began to shake her head, stopped, began to speak, stopped, then squeaked "I don't think so, doctor. Everything's been arranged by his parents."

"Have they been in contact very much?" Barry said.

She shook her head. "No, I won't talk to them. They're a pair of interfering kikes. They never could stop interfering. She's an old bitch who forever told him that I wasn't good enough for him, my cooking wasn't good enough, I wasn't sleeping with him enough, all that sort of crap. I think she was half Italian or something. He came from that area."

Barry nodded sympathetically, in case she expected it. He was as shocked at the realisation that Albert was Jewish as anything else.

"I picked the wrong type." she smiled humourlessly, "A wog and a kike."

For the next half hour, their conversation was hushed and permeated with long, sorrowful silences which Barry found uncomfortable. All he could do was stare into the solid diamond ocean floor and listen to the mournful cry of the piano. The lady was very unfriendly, very bitter, and he found it very hard to try to support or understand. He was embarrassed to be there, obviously an intrusion on her grief, and felt unwelcome encased within her wide-doored, diamond-floored citadel.

"Mrs Dimitriou," he finally said, taking an advantage of a break in the discussion, "the case Albert was working on has become critical. There's been closure orders, lawsuits, malpractice suits, investigations, rumours and demands flying around every government department and involved company all day."

"They ought to just tear it down and start again." she said absently, reaching forward to tilt the paper, sitting on the coffee table, in her direction. Barry knew the headline and front page off by heart already;

HORRORFALL 2? FOUR DEAD. The story had read; *Four members of an eight-man research team died late last night while conducting specialised, council-appointed investigations into the recent electrical problems on the Harbour Bridge. The names of the four have not been released by police, but include two university researchers, an independent investigator, and a city council worker overseeing the operation.*

Electromagnetic surges and electrical faults resulted in the deaths, as well as the destruction of two vehicles and over four million dollars worth of sensitive computer and testing equipment. So far, police forensic units have blamed Sydney's freak late evening rainstorm which lashed the city with twenty nine centimetres of rain, the entire monthly average.

The Bridge, which was due to reopen to traffic this morning, remains closed and tightly cordoned off at both ends while police and scientists search every inch for clues to the deaths. The surviving team members have been questioned and no evidence of negligence has been found. The Sydney County Council, along with the RTA, is urging motorists to be patient and careful using the already overworked Harbour Tunnel.

Barry waited until she flung the paper back down and continued. "Mrs Dimitriou, Albert and myself were working on the case in a sort of conjunctional agreement, and our findings have been a lot more than you've heard in the news."

She looked at him. "Is it dangerous?" she said with only a smattering of interest.

He paused and breathed deeply. "It's haunted....." She chortled a quick snort, disbelief and fatigue in her eyes. ".....we've been in consultation with parapsychologists, psychologists, electrical and metallurgy engineers." Barry continued, "We've seen and heard things ourselves that we can't explain. It isn't what you think, it's a purely scientific matter." He looked at his feet, "To be honest I still don't know what it is and I don't really want to. I opened a can of worms, that's all."

"That's why he got sacked, isn't it?" she said dryly. Barry nodded. The woman's lip shuddered and her eyes brimmed with tears. She gasped in a haggard breath, putting her hand over her eyes.

"Even after he got the sack, I was still seeing other men. While he was here, in the house, I went out and went on having my affairs. I know he had his as well, but.....instead of affairs, I wish to God we'd both tried. You don't know what you have until you lose it, do you?"

Barry shook his head. "No, you don't, do you?" he said quietly, thinking first of Dale, then his heart full of a sudden rush of panic and worry for Julia.

Emily stared at the stereo, where the piano sang its sweet but tragic song. "Just one more chance would be lovely," she smiled, "I think we'd go away for the weekend, maybe away on holidays. All the energy we exerted outside our marriage, all his passion for work, we could turn it all inwards, into each other, couldn't we? He gave me a lot. He provided for me. Now that he's dead, I've suddenly realised that I owe him a lot more than I ever gave him. I wonder why hatred moves in such a downward spiral?"

Barry nodded, witnessing the human ability (and mastery) to take things for granted - usually what we claimed we loved the most. It was a family failing that Adam and Eve passed down to everyone else. We all wake up one day and see what we really have, but we wait until it's too late. Some of us are lucky and survive heart attacks and strokes instead of simply dropping dead or losing our spouses. A couple of thousand were blessed with the Leukemia vaccine in 2004. But not all of us are that lucky. Not all of us get a second chance.

"They say he didn't feel a thing," she said, "the explosion incinerated the whole van. They haven't worked out why the hell he was firing a gun in that small space, with a gas leak.....I'll never know. That's the worst, isn't it, not knowing?"

Barry nodded again, tears welling up, seeming to come up his throat. "But," he began, his voice cracking, "he saved my life. I was too late seeing the van, and he swerved to avoid my car."

"Are you going to tell me he was swerving to avoid ghosts or monsters?" Emily asked.

"Well, that's something we'll never know," Barry answered.

She shuddered, setting her drink down and wiping her eyes, as if she had only just become aware that he was there. "What can I do for you, doctor?" she said, staring at him, "I'm exhausted, and I have arrangements to make with the funeral home."

"I'm sorry," Barry said, feeling about an inch high, "I just came for his records, whatever he was keeping on the subject, notes, computer disks, if it's all right me taking them. I'll return them, of course, after I've copied them all."

She dismissed the idea with a wave of her cigarette. "What the hell do I want with them? Keep them all. I wouldn't have a clue what he was working on anyway. I was too busy avoiding the bastard." Barry tried not to look at her the wrong way, and she noticed. "He *was* a bastard, doctor, he married me, and then divorced me and married his bloody job. I don't know why I'm so sad. I don't even know him as well as you probably do."

Barry started to reach for his coat and speak when the woman screeched and threw herself to her knees, pressing her face against the coffee table. Barry rushed to her, gripping her shoulders, pleading with her.

"Who killed him?" she screamed. "What killed my husband? He doesn't know I loved him! Oh Christ, please just give me one more chance. Why did he leave me? He screwed every woman in this town and left me!"

Barry was crying as he led the woman upstairs and laid her down on her bed, pounding the pillows weakly, fighting with no strength.

He left her and went to Albert's study, which she'd already indicated.

The desk had a very late model personal computer and a set of three tiered trays. Piles of manilla folders and books were stacked neatly at each corner. Barry tried his hardest not to think about Albert as he switched the computer on and found his way through the menus and directories to a file called *Bridge Crap*. The first thing Barry wanted was to find something, anything, that Albert may have theorised that everyone else had missed, maybe even Tim Hacker.

He used the graphics program to call up a diagram of the Bridge with the point of each recorded disturbance so far. The cross section lit up like a Christmas tree. Next he tried a graph of electromagnetic activity, recorded continuously for the last few weeks. There had been a few wild fluctuations up until last night (the date and time were listed along the bottom of the picture, and he could use the mouse to click and drag the chronology along) when the readings went all over the place, sometimes within seconds of each other. At 11:13 p.m., the graph stopped, with the small report *TempLink prov: MARV1 error., nil reading*.

Barry scrolled back through the graph to several points of maximum disturbance. He accessed the word processor, where there was a chronology, kept and maintained by Albert, of the events. Some records, including events occurring on January 20, January 26, January 30, and a few others were marked for attention and labelled as times when Dale was predominant in the events of the case. In one instance, a train had stopped inexplicably. In another, a cable car came loose and fell. Barry looked up the reference number Albert had allocated and read the short message;

In each case, Dale Milling has been active or passively present. In most cases, he was taken onto the bridge for purposes of surveillance - of his emotional condition rather than the bridge itself. At each time the electromagnetic charge associated reached a peak, often enough to cause

damage or at least be disruptive. The logical assumption is that Milling is causing, unwittingly or otherwise, these disturbances.

Therefore, there must be some major facet of his personality or physiology that sets him apart from anyone else, or at least most people. He is socially inept, having spent his early years of adulthood under care, and has a weak, timid approach and countenance with life.

But mere psychological disadvantages can't be the only reason. The burden of his memory of falling from the Bridge and his resultant paraplegia are all that set him far removed from normal people. When time and funds permit (see Joanne or Steve), he should undergo a thorough medical to determine abnormal cell structure or growth, overdeveloped (over-electrified) cerebral cortex, and every other physiological test there is. Something makes him different now.

Barry tapped his chin as he stared at a spot on the wall just behind the computer. He had the feeling Albert was right. At the time, Albert had no way of knowing, but now that Tim had proven that the cerebral electricity of highly charged emotions provided power for these phenomena, it was evident. Dale was a quiet-natured and frightened person. His fear and trepidation of the enormity of life thrust upon him at such a late age was only the beginning. He had to walk around plagued by the memory of falling from the Bridge years ago (he still dreamed it every night of his life).

According to Tim's new theories, Dale was a walking power station for paranormal energy.

Tim stepped from the shower and made his way through the steam to the towel rail. He'd had the shower as hot as he could stand and his skin was bright red from the scalding water. The room was thick with steam and the bathroom track lights above cast an eerie shaft of light down through the mist like a ghost light through a choking fog.

Like search lights stabbing down at him through thundering rain.

He suddenly shuddered. The enveloping warmth and the bright light in the room were all that separated his mind from now and.....last night.

He'd been soaking wet then too, looking up, screaming for help at the top of his exhausted lungs, the pelting rain lashing his face, his limbs and skin frozen. The metal of the street light had been rough instead of slick, and he had been able to keep hold of it. The equipment slung over his shoulders had made his neck and back ache like hell, and after a few minutes he hadn't been able to feel his hands, and wasn't even sure if he was holding on consciously or if they were just clamped in position.

He'd only looked down into the swirling storm-lashed water far below a few more times and had almost let go each time, just so he didn't have to be in such a terrifying high place. The desire to hang on was weakening under the fear of being stuck there.

He hadn't counted the minutes, and it was a frozen eternity later that lights pierced down through the slashing rain, the way the bathroom track lights sliced through the billowing clouds of steam right now.

The lights had been jerky and moved roughly, sweeping over him and across the air around, until he had seen shapes moving far above. Thin strips of lights fell towards him and blew in the wind, until he realised they were rope, and the dark shapes were the figures of men falling towards him, sliding down the ropes.

Arms grappled for his belt, shirt, his waist and arms, until a large canvas strap was secured underneath his arms and he heard the voices of the police rescue workers telling him he had to let go now, he was safe and had to just let go.....

They'd had to pry his fingers loose and he screamed in hysteria as he dropped several more metres until the strap snapped him to a stop. The police were yelling into walkie talkies and Tim felt himself start to rise through the air, the streetlight passing by, being dragged through thirty metres of air.

They dragged him over the guard rail at the top and laid him on a rolling ambulance bed. As he was rolled towards a waiting ambulance, Tim noticed what seemed to be hundreds of police and emergency vehicles around the highway, men and women running back and forth. He thought he saw Barry and Dale, but was shut in the ambulance and sedated.

The following morning, today, he had awoken in Sydney Hospital and been visited by two uniformed detectives who had grilled him about every detail of the previous night, almost to the point of outright rudeness. He told them what he could remember and was released from hospital.

Vicki, her arm in a sling and recovering from her own sedative, had met him as he waited in the lobby of the hospital. Her bubbly good looks had disappeared and she looked like a reanimated corpse. Her hair was lank and pasted to her head with grease, her eyes were puffy and black, and she seemed to wince in pain as she smiled at the sight of him.

The police delivered Barry and Dale soon after, having undergone their own questioning, and the four stood outside Sydney Hospital not knowing what to say. It wasn't as if Albert had to get back to work early to report the night to his bosses, or Donald had taken the van back to the university to correlate the data. They were still floating in a van on the

bottom of the harbour, only several hundred metres from where the four were now standing.

Vicki and Dale took a taxi back to Vicki's house at Edgecliff, and Barry collected his own car from the police impound to return home. Tim had caught a train to Stanmore and a bus that dropped him at the corner store near his house. His ute had been taken by the police as evidence.

It was at about eleven in the morning as he walked home, the weather back to its previous state of searing heat and blue, cloudless sky, but in his heart he had been freezing. He had come home and gone straight into the shower.

Later on, the empty Chivas Regal bottle beside him, he worked on the computer, out the back in the lab. He was scouring the equations and notes from the entire case, desperately searching for something.

Up until last night, the situation had been normal, or in this case, paranormal. Even in the paranormal there was a state of normality. Paranormal phenomena were always unexplained, always fascinating, sometimes spooky, seldom assaultive, and almost never harmful. Having worked in the field, Tim knew like nobody else that *real* paranormal happenings weren't about werewolves and zombies and murderous intent.

Until last night. Chains of events had occurred, apparitions had appeared and assumed the manifestation of matter and behaved with plain intent to harm. Jesus wept, four people were dead because of it.

Tim happened upon a file that he had started weeks ago and abandoned as new evidence had become clear to him. It was a short essay on Dale and his apparent relationship with the Bridge.

Reading through the text, Tim again began to wonder what Dale had to do with the Bridge. He had started it, obviously, and been the catalyst and doorway for its entry to the physical world, but why? What did he have that nobody else did? He wasn't the only survivor of the Bridge disaster all those years ago, so the energy potential of his fear wasn't it. Other people's lives had been changed horribly because of the tragedy, so that wasn't it.

He had been the centre of media attention at the time. That blurred photo of a tortured young boy laying on the asphalt, his face a mask of agony, had graced every newspaper and news story and become the human face of the catastrophe. Could it be something so incredible and ridiculous as that - the fact that he became the personification of the horror, and so a supernatural force picked him years later to be its liberator on Earth?

But Tim couldn't believe that any universal being would be so shallow as to pick someone for a purpose just because they'd been in the papers. Perhaps it was the knowledge of his own sick fame and his subsequent fear of that fame (coupled with the memory of the event) that

made Dale's mind keener and more filled with energy for the phenomena to manifest through.

But Tim wasn't comfortable with that explanation either. Maybe it was his human sense of grandeur, but he believed there was some colossal difference to Dale Milling that brought out such a colossal difference in the physical world.

Tim returned to the article. He thought about the episodes since he'd finished writing it. Each time Dale had come into any sort of contact with the Bridge, it had gotten worse, from a sore stomach to four people dead. Something that he held in his mind grew each time he went there. Of course, he'd become more afraid after the events of the previous visit, and therefore the level of activity would increase. But why violence, why death?

II

"What is it about Dale's mind," Vicki said quietly, her mini tape deck running in front of her, "that makes him the target or motivation for these happenings? As a psychiatrist, I have to look for mental or emotional connections, and I have to believe that either his mind or emotions are the result of some external event, or if his mind is the power behind them." She paused, her eyes fixed to a spot out the window, across the Friday night lights of Bondi district below her office, across the shimmering water to the city and Bridge in the distance.

She glanced down at the desk, noticing the edge of the inlaid leather desktop, running her finger along it for a second and smiling to herself. Where the wood of the desk met the inlay was a tiny step that created a sharp edge. She had never noticed it before, until the first time she and Dale (she and any patient) had made love. The step had been right underneath her bottom that night as she stretched back across the desk and was annoying. It was only the delicious feel of being wrapped around him that had stopped her from interrupting to shift forward.

"I'm just going to read a couple of passages from Dr Wessington's *The Emotive Influence*," she continued, "These outline how it is reported that emotions and other powers and functions of the human brain can influence the physical world;

'.....eminent and respected British physicist and philosopher Dr Edmund Lexington Samuel travelled to Haiti and the Carribean in 1839 and found, like others before him, that the supposed supernatural powers of the voodoo cult were imagined by occultists in drug and alcohol crazed orgies. Fascinated by the legend of raising the dead to work on farms, he travelled far inland, away from Port-au-Prince. His three day journey

along a dirt road led to a small village where the elder of the village told him about a farm on the mountain plateau above where an old Earth Mother practised the art of raising the dead with herbs and spells. He travelled up the mountain with the help of a guide, a further two days of solid climbing, and came across the plains of the plateau. The old woman lived in a stonework shack and the doctor arranged, through the guide, to witness the exhumation of a zombie.

The old woman's source of labour was a small disused and run down graveyard towards the back of the plain, against the mountain and in heavy forest. Dr. Samuel reported that "we entered the small encirclement of European-style tomb markers and graves, marked by crucifix's and angels, whereupon the woman began to prepare for her ceremony by the placement and arrangement of several objects such as herbs, feathers and other talismans. She threw herself into her task with unalloyed enthusiasm and I felt the ground quake. I was lucky not to let my fear take hold and flee, for before my eyes a living corpse climbed from the ground, clawing its way out, half decomposed and rancid in smell, standing beside its grave, merely watching us with empty sockets in its skull."

Dr Samuel reported that the woman commanded the figure back into its grave, which climbed back into the Earth and clumsily covered itself over with dirt. Dr Samuel immediately took the old woman prisoner and transported her back to Britain where he placed her under the most stringent psychiatric tests known in the field. After the strain of travelling, her condition had grown frail and she consequently died during testing due to ill health, though Dr Samuel had seen enough to realise that the woman was nobody remarkable. Apart from her vivid trust in her occultist beliefs, she had been normal (as close to civilised as a barbarian can get). Her unflinching faith in the voodoo cult had provided her mind with a release of whatever kinetic energy it set upon the physical world. The only records from her autopsy were of an old woman of bad health, her only mark of civilisation two fillings in her teeth.....'

Vicki sat back, flicking through the book for the other passage she had marked.

"The next passage concerns a fifteen year old girl in Gilgandra in 1985," she continued to the recorder, "there had been reports for several months of strange happenings around her house and the property where she lived, and a team of investigators from the A.N.U. travelled to the property and stayed with the family, studying the phenomena over the course of two weeks.

".....during the three months previous to the research, the family reported a series of unexplained happenings. One evening, Mrs Dowling prepared a sinkful of hot water to wash the dinner dishes. She was interrupted by a short phone call, and returned to find the sink filled with blood, confirmed by Orange Base Hospital to be type A+ menstrual blood. Mrs Dowling, along with daughters, twenty four year old Sheree and fifteen year old Natalie, all matched the sample following subsequent medical testing. During dinner on several occasions, cook books would suddenly burst from their shelf in the kitchen and launch across the room, damaging crockery on the table and opposite bench. And, always late at night, water and gas pipes in the walls near the main bathroom would begin to vibrate, eventually building to a level where they would wake the entire household. Plumbers' inspections reported no damage or apparent effect.

Realising that they were dealing with a poltergeist, the research team turned special attention to Natalie, being the youngest of the three children and in the middle stages of puberty. The phenomena continued, giving the researchers plenty of material but no clues as to their cause. Loud, sudden knocks were heard late at night on the walls in the hallway and entry of the house; in front of seven witnesses, the laundry door refused to stay open - when opened (over fifty times by those present) it simply swung shut again; kitchen appliances started up at all hours of the day and night, sometimes when they were stored in cupboards and not plugged in; on one occasion, Mrs Dowling went to her pantry and was assailed by the smells of hundreds of rotten and stale foodstuffs - even though the pantry was stocked every week with preserved food, every item was spoiled, the inside of the pantry unbearably hot.

The appearance of blood was a frequent and harmless but frightening occurrence around the household and property, each time it matched that of Mrs Dowling and the two daughters. Tests would show that occasionally the blood was ordinary, but mostly it contained the proteins and secretions of menstrual blood. It was found smeared across the bedroom and bathroom walls, produced from taps and showers (both the household and the makeshift water tank shower at the western end of the property), in bottles left for collection by the milkman, and even appeared dribbling from the back of the TV set in the living room.

The most inexplicable instance was reported and photographed by Mr Dowling. He arrived at one of the work sheds at the back boundary of the property early one morning - it housed an old work truck and other mechanical odds and ends. Beneath the old battered fluorescent tube against the wall hung a portrait of Jesus Christ, an old family trinket. The picture was slowly seeping blood from the images of the hands and forehead of Christ, and had obviously been for a long time. The blood

had spilled over the frame, onto the shelves and bench top below to form a dried, clotted pool.

The blood was again found to match that of the womens' menstrual cycles, and this time tiny strands were discovered by laboratory researchers and found to be minute particles of pubic hair. According to every member of the family, Mr Dowling and several casual farm workers were the only ones ever in or around the shed.

After several fascinating and frustrating days of study and observation, the research team decided to examine the lifestyle and habits of each family member, through detached observation and interviews. The key was found to lay with fifteen year old Natalie. Without the knowledge of her parents, Natalie had become sexually active at the same time of the onset of the phenomena. After careful and thorough analysis of her movements and habits over the previous weeks, the source of each phenomenon was revealed.

Every event that occurred throughout the day on weekdays, when Natalie and eighteen year old brother Mark were at school in Gilgandra, was passive and harmless, seeming to indicate that the source was absent. The dinner table, like in most homes, was the focus of family discussion, and during those times, just one of the many topics of conversation was a local boy with whom Natalie had become infatuated. Why the shelf of cookbooks was the area where activity was concentrated was never ascertained, but that activity occurred only during mealtimes.

During confidential discussion with Natalie alone, she admitted to several things; the night the phenomena began, she had been at a party with school friends and lost her virginity to the boy, seventeen year old Danny Kemp. She also admitted to having started masturbating, but recounted only having done so late at night when she was sure her family wouldn't hear. Consultation with chronologies confirmed that the disturbances with the pipes had occurred at these times. It was subsequently realised that the pipes lay in the wall between Natalie's bedroom and the main bathroom.

Natalie entered her menstrual cycle during the third week of investigation, which apparently had no bearing on the frequency or nature of the phenomena. No connection between the mysterious appearance of menstrual blood was made and no distinction was ever made between the three women of the family, all the same blood group.

The researchers' findings and conclusions were met with controversy and scepticism at the Australian National University and weren't widely publicised. The researchers were criticised for drawing inconclusive theories from abundant but meaningless evidence. It was a normal case of poltergeist activity, the opposed professors said, and to equate it with the sexual awakening of an adolescent was grabbing at

straws. It was a coincidence. If it were true, they argued, why don't poltergeists appear in every household in the world when a teenager first has sex?

The research team, more to save face than prove their point this time, maintained that Natalie had become charged with strong but dormant emotions of fear following a fall from a horse that hospitalised her at age eleven, a steel pin in her ankle the result. The deep seated psychology involved wasn't the area of expertise of the research team, and so when they couldn't elaborate on her emotional condition, the findings were further ridiculed and largely forgotten.

The study had originally concluded that becoming sexually active had awakened the energy in the girls mind to influence her physical proximity. The connections were too obvious; During acts of self arousal such as masturbation, heart rate increases, the social conditioning created by the mind collapses, imagination and emotion spark to extraordinary levels of activity, and the mental condition is ideal for parapsychological kinetic energy. Fuelled by the exciting emotions of having become sexually aware of herself, the girl became an unequalled source of mental energy....."

Vicki stopped reading and snapped the tape off, reaching behind to replace the text on her shelf. She lifted her arms high over her head and stretched, cracking her knuckles outwards in a series of grotesque snaps.

She reached down and unsnapped the lock on her bottom drawer - she was careful to lock it. The Pig, the replacement psychiatrist the AMA had provided while she worked on Dale's condition, was still here and she didn't want him rooting through her pleasure drawers. The thought of his hands on her Tanqueray and leafing through her novels reading about *her* musclebound heroes made her seethe.

She poured a generous splash of gin and an equal amount of tonic water into her tumbler and swirled it around in her hand, her eyes wide, locked in a concentrated stare far off in space, between the support cables of the Harbour Bridge.

Something huge nagged at her, as if a heavy and lumbering monster was hidden behind a black veil, its tiny snout and fangs sticking through to nibble annoyingly at her.

She was excited at having fallen across a new angle to explore - the power of the mind, but something kept drawing her attention back, something she almost had, could almost *taste*, either in the passages she just read, or her other study. It seemed to promise the key to this entire Harbour Bridge ordeal. Something about the old Haitian woman from the first passage stuck in her mind. Obviously it was only a matter of narrative description in the book, or else it would have been clearer.

Something about that old woman felt so pertinent, so.....huge.
The answer to this entire case.

III

Vicki tried her best to push the nagging thought to the back of her mind, in her mental filing cabinet (currently overflowing with scraggly paper, scrawled notes, hasty and ill-conceived ideas, and several terrifying journal entries of her adventures throughout the investigation) for later consultation. She experimentally flexed her bandaged elbow, and a lance-fire of pain shot up and down her arm, setting her fingers and shoulder alight. There were several of those cabinet drawers full of memories that she didn't ever want to open again, memories from last night. It was the most fearful few hours she had ever spent alive.

The rain hadn't eased but the lightning had seemed to lift, or maybe it was just her dulled senses. She had lain in the middle of the Port Jackson highway for an eternity after the explosion in the shelter, a river of rainwater cascading over her like waves. All she needed was seaweed and Burt Lancaster on top of her.

Her body had felt like a human icicle, but her elbow was like a furnace, as if she had rubbed half a tube of heat ointment into it. Both the hot and the cold were only perceptible when she concentrated, her nerves mostly numb.

She remembered finally rising to her feet, in a final effort to keep the rainwater from lashing her face viciously, and standing, holding her singing elbow, lost and alone. There was no shelter to go back to, Tim, Albert and that Asian scientist were at the opposite end in the research van, Dale and Barry were down there looking for them.

Red and blue lightning had gone off through the rain from behind her, and dozens of yellow lights glared at her, police, fire and ambulance vehicles roaring up to her and beyond, out onto the Bridge.

It was only when two St. Johns ambulance officers ran to her with a blanket and rolling stretcher that she realised how weakened she had become. She collapsed into their arms and onto the stretcher, felt herself bundled into an ambulance, and then woke up in hospital, her elbow heavily bandaged. Then she had been visited by a doctor and a detective and told that two people had died in the incineration of the research van, another in an explosion in a canvas council shelter, and a fourth, Slavin the council worker, from massive coronary failure.

She remembered speaking numbly to Dr Hacker and then her heart almost gave out at the sight of Dale. She burst into sobbing in the taxi bound for her house and wouldn't let go of him, pleading with him never to leave her, never to let her get hurt. It didn't occur to her once what a

fragile person Dale was and that *she* should be doing the supporting for the horrifying ordeal. It wasn't until later, when he had drawn her into the shower and into bed alongside him, that she realised that *he* had been the tower of strength.

She had fallen asleep with her arms around his middle, the smell of his skin and the bedclothes, his arm protectively curled around her, stroking her hair, with the midmorning sunlight streaming into the room, and knew that she would die willingly right then if her time was up.

At six o'clock she'd awoken to a dinner of salad and grilled fish fingers cooked by Dale and felt wonderful. They left the house, he to his mother's house and her to her office to make head or tail of the experience and its ramifications. He had promised her that he would be back at her place when she returned.

She smiled suddenly to herself. It was funny about falling in love. Here I am, giving my house to a man I've know a couple of weeks, and feeling so lonely when he has to sleep at his own place. She smiled wider. It was a delicious change in her life to be able to give her house and herself to him. Being a therapist, she knew her craft when she saw it, and throwing her heart and her caution to the wind by letting herself fall head over heels for Dale was self therapy from the conservative professionalism of her career.

She leaned forward and reactivated the recorder. "If the preceding excerpts from Dr Wessington's study are true, then they serve as further evidence of the powers of the human mind.

"The brain is such a complex tool, and so underestimated and unused, most of its potential never realised in modern day life. Our conditioned view of the human brain as a tool to tell us when to eat or sleep or calculate solutions or make choices is outdated. We see the mind as a wholly internal tool and function, which can only influence the outside world through cause and effect of our actions, which it defines.

"But with so many untapped reservoirs and no indication of what they contain, might there be much more power than we realise? Maybe the power to wilfully create and transfer the energy necessary to move objects, produce sound and light? Maybe poltergeist phenomena aren't really there, but it's the brain of the subject creating the energy to make the minds of others perceive what isn't really there. Or can the human brain summon the energy to alter the position and configuration of atoms to produce light and sound, move objects or harm others, even if unknowingly?

"Dr Reiner of the Santa Ana Institute of Parapsychological Research wrote in his book *Ready For The Truth* that psychic powers are the next logical step in the evolution of man. He says that the reason spiritualism and the supernatural have become so studied and frequent

over the last two hundred years is because human beings have been entering the next stage of evolution - gradually but constantly.

"He says that the next evolutionary advance will once again be in the mind. Psychics and hauntings and the entire paranormal field deals with energy. He writes that now, natural selection is creating humans capable of interpreting those fields of energy, and unwittingly using them to see into the future, see ghosts, move objects or influence the physical world, and contact the dead. Before the next century, he believes that supernatural powers and the power to interpret them will be spread throughout the gene pool of humanity and that our descendants will see it as being as natural as our ability to tie shoelaces.

"Maybe Dale Milling is only an advanced specimen of our species, like the first fish that crawled onto the beach and breathed with lungs, and can interpret and.....maybe.....mass perceive a paranormal event, even to the point of causing harm to others in the physical world. Maybe he has the power in his mind to bring the scientist and Albert back from the dead sometime."

Vicki still stared across the water, the sublime mood carrying her along. In the light of day amid the bustle of the real world and city life she didn't think she'd consider any of this very seriously, but her imagination was fired and she was fascinated at the path she was travelling down.

"Can that be the reason?" she wondered aloud, "And the rest of us are just like the dark ages church when they threw Galileo in jail for suggesting that Ptolemy was wrong about the solar system? Are we still that archaic and scared of the truth?"

"Maybe we won't know why it's Dale who can do this -"

(the old Haitian woman the secret lies with her)

"- until we have a computer that can read every gene in a string of D.N.A. and tell us who has psychic powers. There must be a gene for a sort of biological electricity receptor, since all paranormal happenings are fields of energy, and when they can decode D.N.A. one chromosome at a time, they'll-"

Vicki stopped short and sat up straight in shock. There was a heavy clank in the back of her head of two gigantic jigsaw puzzle pieces locking together. Her mind swam and reeled at the enormity, her heart lurching in the ecstasy of such incredible realisation. The old woman! Of course!

She had it!

Vicki leapt from the chair and grappled in the bookcase once more.

Healthy flowering shrubs lined smooth, neatly kept grounds between the rows of Waverley Cemetery, a lazy breeze rolling off the Tasman Sea, up the hill and across the solemn grounds. The plants and the air warmed to the weekend summer morning.

Dale stared at Albert's coffin. It was a robust caramel wood, with a bright bunch of white roses, lush and healthy, laying across the lid, and a polished gold star of David at the head. The neatly trimmed lawns, pleasant conservative shrubs, the polished gold, finished wood and health and vitality of the roses all seemed a paradox to him, a distraction to the violence and fire by which Albert had died.

The coffin was a little smaller than a fully grown man, like coffins are, but Dale guessed (the thought kept nagging him, no matter how much he tried to deny it as being improper) that Albert wouldn't even fill a third of it.

Dale found himself pleading that there wouldn't be some embarrassing accident and the coffin didn't fall to one side - then the whole congregation would hear the rattle and clunk of Albert's blackened and charred skeleton as it rolled around inside. No amount of flowers or neatly trimmed grass or shining gold could overshadow the obscenity, decay and uncleanness that we try to hide about death.

Barry glanced up at Emily Dimitriou, her face a round mask of disbelief. He wished she had looked miserable, maybe tired, distraught or frightened. But she wore the face of a corpse, and that was worse. An old woman stood beside her, arm around Emily. Every now and again Barry saw it squeeze the shoulder of the younger woman, to no effect.

The Rabbi intoned gravely at the head of the coffin. Family and other mourners stood in a small circle, staring at the coffin, and the astro-turf covered sheet of fence wire it sat upon, over the hole of the open grave where Albert Dimitriou would spend the rest of time.

Dale and Barry leant against the hood of Barry's car, watching the last of the mourners disperse, waiting for Albert's widow. Barry couldn't put his finger on why he wanted to wait and talk to the woman, but when they left this graveyard and joined Bronte Road to make their way to the southbound expressway, he would never have any association with Albert Dimitriou or anything connected with him ever again. Knowing that he had died so horribly, letting go so quickly wasn't an easy thing to do. If he said something to Mrs Dimitriou, maybe it would make things easier.

Before long, Emily approached both men, carrying a large gold kraft envelope. She nodded slackly to Dale, who smiled encouragingly and looked at his shoes in guilt, and handed the envelope to Barry with a shaking hand.

When she spoke, her voice was the same. "Whatever's in here was left to his estate," she began, "they came from New South Wales uni in the mail the other day with a letter. I've put that in there too. I know you kept all that other junk, so....." she shrugged and started to turn.

"Mrs Dimitriou," Barry began, his voice slightly pleading. She turned back, staring dumbly. Barry struggled and said "Call me, if you need anything. He would have left my number somewhere."

The woman nodded without smiling, turned to walk away. As she turned, she stopped short, staring at the site of Albert's resting place, and all three watched as the coffin was delicately lowered into tomb.

Dale read as Barry drove south along South Dowling Street towards the airport expressway system that would lead them back home. The contents of the envelope were spread across his lap and the back seat behind the two.

Along with all the documentation, there had been a pile of about fifty stapled sheets with a gold cardboard cover that proclaimed the booklet as a very rough instruction manual for the research van, explaining its capabilities very broadly in alphabetical order.

The documents were in a document wallet, and there was everything from drawings to computer print-outs and diagrams, texts, handwritten notes, double and triplicate forms, faxes, photocopies of textbooks, and even a cheque book full of butts, obviously expenses incurred throughout the investigation.

An accompanying letter explained remorselessly to Mrs Dimitriou that the envelope contained the final readings taken from the Research Van, and their subsequent findings. It had explained extremely high tech equipment available to them that had enabled them to scour over the charred, water logged remains of the computer circuits, and extract ninety percent of the information stored and oven baked in their memory banks. Together with the readings that MARV had sent to external databases (Joanne Parkes' computer and the University databank), the researchers had been able to make their conclusions.

And with Donald Chin-Hsei Lambert dead, Albert Dimitriou's estate had become the recipient executor of the information. It obviously hadn't been made clear to them that Albert, since his dismissal from George Slatten & Bromigal, didn't hold any legal rights over the information, a stroke of luck for Barry and Dale.

"This looks like a computer print-out," Dale said, holding a heavy white bromide sheet up for Barry to glance at. Barry frowned in wonder, looking between the page and the road, trying to work it out. It was a 3D diagram of the Bridge, seen from above and beside. The individual cables and smaller details were omitted, only the general shape was left.

And, all over the image, a spindle-thin black line, as if it were following a path of movement, like a mad dog had been fitted with a homing device and let loose, its path plotted later.

The line approached from one end, stopped a little way in, then movement was concentrated in a single spot, back and forth, overlapping, until it went off back towards the beginning, abruptly turned back and returned to the point of initial action, where it then continued to travel in a straight line away from its point of origin to almost the opposite end. At certain points, the line would be adorned with a dark spot, which ranged from barely visible to almost black.

"It's something moving," Dale said, realising, "something is being tracked, and look.....see these dark spots every now and again? I reckon that's where it stopped. The darker the spot, the longer the object was standing still."

Along the top of the print-out were the printing and document details; **TRACK3-MSTR.XTS/1936'43"-2305'19"/MRV TMP-LINK DATA/REALTIME inc10.0**

Dale flipped over to the University *with compliments* slip stapled to the back for the reference to the correct document. He fished through the papers until he found a few stapled sheets entitled *Track/Monitor*, then searched through the Research Van guide until he found the short paragraph on the function.

"The MRV sensors," he began, "when monitoring each component of the proximity, may refer their readings to archives, where the graphics computer can devise a simple diagram of that proximity. Then, referring to the chronology, the computer can plot, from an external perspective, the movement of a given object, usually a source of energy - i.e light, microwave, ultra violet, radiation, infra-red, sound, heat, electricity, electromagnetism, magnetism, quasi stellar."

"What does the report say?" Barry asked.

Dale referred back to the printed report. "It says the track facility monitored the movement of seventy nine fields of energy in the duration of the event. Most were fluctuating and obviously random. The primary concern was what the computer object monitor register dubbed Apparition L. Apparition L seemed to move in a purposeful manner, as seen in figure 4, where several instances of direct travel are occurring, but more often was stationary or moved very little in a given proximity.

"Paranormal disturbances were reported by surviving members of the expedition on many occasions. It has since been proven with the help of police forensic reports that several of the deaths can be attributed to these disturbances.

"Because of the movements of the object, two theories have been formulated about Apparition L. It moved in straight lines more than once,

indicating given purpose in a certain place to which it moved uninterrupted. During the time of its presence - the entire duration of the event - Apparition L moved a total of one three four seven two five point zero eight millimetres."

"That's about a kilometre and a quarter, just over." Barry said to himself.

Dale nodded and continued. "There was concentrated movement in a small, assigned area, where one of the victims died. There was path of travel to a point southward where a second victim died. There was a long, straight path of travel to a point north, where the third and fourth victims died. At that time, when the MRV was destroyed in a second explosion, all monitory functions naturally ceased. Whether the object remained after the observatory operations ceased cannot be determined with this equipment. Apparition L may have been one of the 'phantoms' that killed one or all four of the dead researchers.

"The second theory is also attributed to the movements. Each member of the expedition approached from the south prior to commencement of observation. Several travelled the length of the Bridge. The base of operations was a canvas council shelter at the southern end of the Bridge, where the movement of the object was concentrated, for the longest periods, and also where the object spent the longest periods of time stationery.

"Apparition L may have been one of the expedition members themselves."

Dale stopped reading. There it was again.

Something.

The answer.

The sun was high in the sky and Tim was still in the lab out the back of the house. He had been working continually ever since arriving home the previous morning. While Barry Paul visited Albert Dimitriou's widow, while Vicki Holt drove to her office to explore her musings, while exhaustion drew her and Dale Milling into deep but nightmare-plagued sleep together, while Barry and Dale stood by Albert Dimitriou's graveside, Tim worked on the computer, downloading files from the office over the modem, comparing notes, walking around in frustration swigging a bottle of Pub Squash and watching endless playbacks of all the video and other images from the IF meter.

He had gone to sleep the previous night at about quarter to two until he awoke staring at the clock radio beside the bed, which read 4:53. The sun was painting bright fires in the dimming light of the stars and Tim got out of bed, washing the taste of sleep down with mouthfuls of orange juice, and returned to the lab. His usual self discipline that he get

the right amount of sleep or food and not overwork himself was gone, crushed by an unpleasant but self-absorbed lust for answers.

The phone rang at eleven o'clock. He and Dale were on their way home from Albert Dimitriou's funeral.

"Doctor, sorry to bother you." came Barry's voice, muffled by the car phone reception, "Thursday night, when you were at the other end of the Bridge, Joanne Parkes sent the records of all the disturbances through to the shelter. They all reached a minimum voltage of 58 volts. Sometimes higher, but nothing ever happened until the electromagnetism was at that level. Does that number mean anything to you?"

Tim blinked hard, thinking. God, it *did* mean something. What?

"I can recall something, Barry. Give me your carphone number, and let me get right back to you." He took down Barry's number and hung up.

He paced the room several times, looking around at the equipment, the computer, the trees out in the backyard. With a sigh of frustration, he strode out, through the house and into the kitchen, where he opened the fridge and took out the bottle of squash.

Tim tilted the bottle upwards and drunk the squash in gulps, thinking desperately. His eyes drifted down to the fridge door.

The fridge.

His eyes widened. He slammed the fridge door closed and ran back into the lab, bottle in his arm.

The phone rang four times until:-

"You have reached the office of Dr Tim Hacker. I'm sorry the office is unattended right now, but please leave ..."

She waited impatiently for the message to end. "Tim, this is Vicki Holt, I can't stay here much longer, so please call my mobile, 0122 346 732. I'm on my way over to Dale Milling's place, so if you don't reach me before then, please call me there."

Vicki hung up the phone and opened her desk drawer. She fished around for her mobile and strode out of the surgery and through the office, locking the door behind her.

"But that's obviously why I was the first one to see it," Dale said, "I saw the old Bridge, the accident, the cars and buses and people. And each time, I got a sore back. The very first time I went across the Bridge for the job interview, my back hurt, and it hadn't hurt in twenty years."

They were travelling along the Grand Parade, Brighton Beach. Botany Bay was shimmering in the sun to their left, seagulls wheeling in the air and standing in clusters amongst picnickers, waiting for chips or

pieces of fish cocktail. The air conditioning in Barry's car was almost full power.

"But what would that affect?" he asked Dale, "it could have been emotional stress. Maybe there was some sort of electrical surge from your mind because of the fear, and it was transferred down your nervous system, including your back."

"Maybe that's it." Dale mused, watching the beach shrubs and people race by, "Maybe I got magnetised as high as fifty eight volts."

Barry looked at Dale, wide eyed. "Holy shit." he said, "That *is* it."

"What?" Dale asked. Barry had already snapped on the blinker to pull over.

"What are we stopping for?" Dale said as they pulled into a space beside the road. Barry popped the boot lid from the lever at his feet and got out. Dale followed.

"You *were* magnetised," Barry said, reaching in and beginning to fish through the papers and boxes, "remember? You were in hospital for prosthetic magnetisation twice." He took the lid off the box and began to extract piles of manilla folders.

"So what are we looking for in here?" Dale asked.

"Your old records." Barry explained, opening a file and beginning to leaf through it.

Dale looked into the boot, a disarray of paper and storage. "God, you've got all this on me?"

Barry ignored him, engrossed in the file. "That's where I've seen that figure." he mumbled, "Fifty bloody eight volts." Dale looked around and peeled off his jacket, the heat making him start to sweat.

"Here," Barry said in concentration, "the first time you complained of back pain. It was the first time you went across the Bridge. The 6th of last month. Remember?" he looked at Dale, "You'd been for the job interview in North Sydney and come straight to the surgery, where you told me about the pain in your back." He read through the paper. "Bend test, electrical response test, circuit timer. Then, we hooked up the BraceTest equipment again to see what was making you sore, and....."

He held up the sheet for Dale to see, pointing to a line of Barry's own scrawled handwritten notes of that day; *Neuromuscular system incl. Brace electromagnetised: 58.45V.*

V

Tim scrolled back with the video playback unit, a \$7900 Marantz - an industrial video deck, not just a VCR. There was absolutely no shake while paused, it could play back up to eighty thousand frames per second, and it could support a 4500 pixel monitor if need be. Where the

paranormal was under scrutiny, any missed detail because of poor research recordings was unaffordable.

He advanced one frame at a time. The image was of a dual occupancy house in Fairfield, owned by Waylan Pakesh - the civil servant and part time cult leader and psychic medium - whose home Tim had knelt outside and seen extraordinary things, including his own life flashing before his eyes.

Tim's memory had been jogged by his own fridge. The appearance of a refrigerator through the front window of the house that day had been the peak of the entire event, in paranormal and electromagnetic terms.

The time, at the top left of the screen, was 8:09 am, the timer almost frozen as Tim advanced the film frame by frame.

The image of the digital numbers was in the way of the front window of the house. Tim picked up the light pen from the desk, touched it to the screen over the image of the time and dragged it across the screen to the bottom corner.

The front window of the house moved. A tiny bulge was appearing in its centre. With each passing frame, a series of cracks raced outwards, the glass shattering in their wake. Before long, the corner of a large white object has punched a whole through the window, throwing a slow motion glassburst across the lawn. Tim flicked to real time and the refrigerator flew through the window, crashing to the porch and rolling over onto the grass, throwing its contents across the lawn.

Tim froze the playback and consulted the stapled sheets of the computer print-out on the desk in front of the video deck. The print-out was a chronology, a record of numbers that represented every reading taken by every piece of equipment, downloaded into the computer's word processor.

He scrolled back through the frames until the fridge had disappeared back through the window and the glass had all flown together into a single panel, then froze the picture again.

The time on the video was 0809'44. He checked the chronology. Between 0809'42"87 and 0809'44"10, the electromagnetic field surrounding the house had risen from 4.52 volts. It was risen over fifty volts.

To 58.45.

Tim raced through to the front of the house, bottle and file in his arms, cursing for the billionth time not having found the time to have a telephone plug installed in the lab. He slapped the Pakesh case file on the table, and swigged the bottle of squash as he lifted the receiver and dialled Barry's mobile number, which he'd left next to the phone.

It rang several times before a well spoken female recording answered that Barry's phone was switched off or not in a mobile service area, please try again later. Barry and Dale must have reached Dale's place.

Tim tried Dale's home number, but received no answer, which meant they might have gone straight to Barry's surgery.

He looked up Barry's Miranda office number in the phone book, and had no luck there either.

Gulping more mouthfuls of squash, Tim realised that they may have called his office before getting out of the car and left a message, in case neither had his number at home. He called the office answering machine, and was shocked as he let it scroll through seven messages.

"Doctor Hacker, it's Vicki Holt. Please call me as soon as you can at work, 9391 4900. I think I've got the answer."

bleep

"Doctor, it's Vicki Holt again. please pick up the phone if you're there....."

bleep

"It's Vicki Holt. I hope you're not too much longer. I have to leave soon. If I'm not here, I might be at home. Try 9338 4206."

bleep

"Doctor Hacker, it's Vicki here again. Please pick up if you're there. I know what's going on, it's not Dale at all."

bleep

"Tim, it's Vicki Holt. Call me as soon as you get there."

bleep

"Doctor, it's Vicki again. It was right under our nose. I've spent all night reading about it, getting cases together. I even slept here. It makes all the sense in the world, I can't believe we didn't-"

bleep

"Tim, this is Vicki Holt. I can't stay here much longer, so please call my car phone, 0122 346 732. I'm on my way over to Dale Milling's place, so if you don't reach me before then, please call me there."

Tim hung up and dialled the number he had just heard. It answered to loud music and the roar of a car engine.

"Hello?" Vicki shouted, the music suddenly softened.

"Doctor, it's Tim Hacker, what's wrong? You called so many times! What have you found out?"

"Oh, thank God," Vicki shouted exultantly, "I've been trying to get you since six thirty!"

"What is it?" Tim said.

"I went to the office last night because all my books are there," she began, "I was thinking about all the supposed kinetic powers of the brain,

like telekinesis or psychokinesis. There are hundreds of accounts of hauntings and supernatural occurrences where the disturbances have been attributed to one person. Some scientists believe that it's the next step of natural selection until we all have psychic powers.

"Anyway, I read through dozens of journals and accounts of people who were supposed to induce paranormal happenings. The ones that caught my interest were a teenaged girl out in the country. She'd just started having sex, and they thought the emotional response made her induce poltergeists. Another was some British biologist who saw a Haitian woman bring a zombie up out of its grave.

"Something bothered me about them both, and when I realised what, I looked further, and of all the stories I read into and all the research, my theory was about ninety nine percent accurate."

"What was it?" Tim asked.

"The girl was thrown off a horse and had a pin in her ankle. The old woman had a lead filling in her tooth. Another study was of a man who could contact the dead, who shook windows and moved chairs during seances. There was a few paragraphs at the end of the book about his history.

He was a Palestinian soldier who had a steel plate in his head. Starting to sound familiar?"

Tim could hardly speak. His mind was transported back to the Waylan Pakesh case. He could remember the man's G.P. report almost photographically.

Because it had suddenly become numbingly crucial.

The Pakistani had been to the doctor twice in the past five years, once for V.D., and before that, for a shoulder injury. The shoulder injury had not been elaborated on the doctor's report, so Tim had requested a more comprehensive report. When the doctor had compiled and casually forwarded it the Thursday before last, Tim had been so immersed in Dale's case that he barely had time to look at the Pakesh files, let alone read a medical report that almost certainly contained nothing.

As Vicki spoke, Tim opened the file in front of him and withdrew the report, unopened, Vicki's voice on the edge of his comprehension as she spoke about more cases.

Tim scanned through to December 11, 2014.

Mr Pakesh complained of extreme shoulder pain following an accident. Relaxing at home with friends, under the influence of alcohol, Mr Pakesh was struck in the right shoulder with a cricket bat.

He was diagnosed as having a smashed clavicle, a shattered shoulder socket, and permanently damaged shoulder cartilage and muscle.

On December 28, Mr Pakesh was admitted to St Vincents Public Hospital, Sydney to undergo prosthetic surgery. He was fitted with an electronic shoulder coupling, complete with muscular movement motor and battery, and recovered 89% use of his right arm.

Tim closed the file and swallowed, hard.

"And wait for this....." Vicki said, ".....a woman from Norfolk, Conneticut, when she yells at her children, levitates them."

"What does she have?" Tim asked, anticipating.

"She was in a car crash in 2012 and became a paraplegic. In 2013 she was fitted with the 3M Abdominal brace!"

As soon as Barry dropped Dale off at home and drove off down Chuter Street, Dale heard the phone ringing upstairs through his open window. He ran into the building and up the stairs as fast as he could, but it stopped as he stepped in the door.

He sighed in annoyance and shrugged his jacket off, undoing his tie and throwing it on the table. He sat heavily and stared out the window, feeling the black weight and the spring of tears almost straight away. His mother was being buried in a week and a half.

Some solicitor had called to explain the delay, something to do with the family plot at Woronora cemetery, they were trying to get the entire Roman Catholic Western Lawn declared aboriginal heritage and protected. The guy had sworn proudly to Dale that they would put his mothers ashes there legally.

Dale had listened but not cared very much. A vase full of ashes didn't mean anything to him. You couldn't burn down a tower of steel into a little pile of ashes. He didn't really understand where the woman that was his mother had gone.

Dale put his head in his hands and wept soft, innocent, honest tears. Christ, he felt so utterly lost. Not his old friend Barry, not his new lover Vicki, could overshadow the grief. For a few hours, Thursday night up until lunchtime today, he had been so surrounded by sudden movement, terror and violent death that he had almost forgotten about it, but worshipping the woman who carried and fed you in her body for nine months was an old habit that died hard.

When the security buzzer pierced the Saturday afternoon quiet, Dale was asleep with his head cradled in his arms, which were folded across the table. His head came up with a start, sending the puddle of tears up in a spray. His eyes were puffed almost closed, and he rubbed them red raw.

He splashed his face with water from the tap and answered.

"Hi baby." came Vicki's voice, concern at the crackle his voice had been. His heart glowed a little. Maybe Vicki could ease the pain. Dale knew his mother would be overjoyed about Vicki.

He opened the door to see her smiling face, and she came in and put her arms around him, stroking his hair and whispering to him that it would be all right. Dale felt the stab in his heart lessen, and whispered back that he needed her around.

She took his hand. "Come on," she led him to the table where they both sat down, "I'll be your painkiller." She produced a manilla folder from her bag and put it down on the table.

"I've got great news." she said, "You're healthy."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

She opened the folder and turned it to him. "Cases. Some of my notes." she began, "These are all cases of people with apparent psychic ability, or who have been the subject of hauntings or poltergeists. Either way, they have all been associated with some form of paranormal phenomenon. Just like you have. But look." she began turning the pages, pointing to highlighted words; *pin in his ankle, artificial aluminium leg, pacemaker, gold fillings*.

"Every one of these people has some sort of prosthetic or artificial body part." He looked up at her and she smiled, squeezing his hand.

"What's it mean?" he said.

"Everything we've talked about, all our sessions and field work. I tried to attribute a normal, healthy man with a history of emotional trauma to a series of unexplained happenings. Everything has always only pointed to you being normal. You fell off the Harbour Bridge, so you're terrified of it. That's all it is. These horrible visions and happenings and deaths are nothing to do with your mind or your emotions." Dale smiled back, beginning to understand. "It's not you, Dale...." she said excitedly, "....It's the brace!"

As soon as Barry went into the house and kissed Julia, she said

"You got a call from a guy called Tim, I wrote his number down next to the bedroom phone. He said it's an emergency."

"Thanks love," he said, patting her bum and jogging up the stairs. "I've solved it, Jule." he told her on the way up.

"Really?" she said, "How?"

"Tell you in a minute." he smiled.

He sat on the edge of the bed and dialled the number, Tim's house judging by the prefix. It answered after a couple of rings, and Tim was panting. He'd run.

"Dr Hacker," Barry began, "We found it. We looked at Dale's records, and the first time he came to me with a sore back, I found that it was badly electromagnetised. Guess what the voltage was."

"The same I just found, I'll bet. Fifty eight point four five volts."

"It's Dale!" Barry exclaimed. "He's the catalyst. Whenever he was there, he'd become electromagnetised. Always to fifty eight volts. When the train stopped beside the car he was in, the Bridge was up to fifty eight volts. When we all went out there the other night, it repeatedly went up to fifty eight volts. Remember the findings we exchanged, that I got from Albert? He and the university scientist found out that fifty eight volts was some sort of electromagnetic peak. Nothing could happen unless it got that high. Every time Dale is out there, it gets up to fifty eight and all hell breaks loose. Four people get killed-" He stopped for a second. "What do you mean, the same you just found?"

"I'm afraid you're wrong, Barry." Tim said, "It isn't Dale at all. I had a case going the same day Dr Holt first came to see me. In fact, it's still open. It involved a guy out in the western suburbs who said he was a psychic medium. He was holding a handful of people hostage inside his house, and there were reports of unexplained phenomena. The police called me there for input. I saw a two hundred kilogram fridge get thrown through the front window of the house, like it was a house brick." Barry swore to himself. "A whole group of people may be able to lift something that heavy," Tim continued, "but there's no way they could propel it through a window and off the front patio, so I knew it was paranormal. When I looked a bit deeper into the man's medical history, I found that he had the same kind of prosthetic apparatus that Dale has."

"So it isn't Dale raising the electromagnetism by emotional stress, like you've been saying?" Barry asked.

"No, Barry," Tim replied, "It's the brace holding his spine together."

VI

The violent storm on Thursday night had broken the heat and Friday had been cooler at only 24 degrees. But, as predicted, more fronts of boiling air cooked by the outback deserts had started to drift across the coast, and by Saturday morning the temperature was back up to 34. No more breezes stirred and the air was heavy and humid. The dusk on Saturday night brought no comfort from the humidity. Sydneysiders turned on ceiling fans, swam at midnight, and slept naked.

Between the northern pylons of the Harbour Bridge were a long stretch of Sydney County Council barriers. Behind that, four police cars parked nose to nose. And beyond that, a group of men talking. Four

uniformed NSW police officers, and two armed guards in Army reserve uniforms.

Far down the Bridge, flashing blue, red and yellow lights were visible. And beyond the cluster of emergency and council vehicles, the men knew, was the vanguard at the southern, or access, end.

The toll booths were manned at all times by army reserve guards checking every pass and credential offered to them by incoming vehicles.

Inside the toll gates, to the western half of the Bridge, a parking area had been established, complete with a police constable as an attendant. It was usually full of about ten police patrol cars, as many police utilities, two police trucks and a police bus, four army staff vehicles, two Armoured Personnel Carriers, four army trucks and a small armoured car, as well as a neverending fleet of council vehicles, utilities, vans and wagons, small trucks ferrying equipment in and out, and a semi trailer. There were also three ambulances and a fire truck standing by, fully crewed.

To the eastern half was a huge council canvas shelter similar to the one incinerated those few nights ago, except that it was the size of a medium sized house. The inside looked like a room from Churchill's bunker during World War II, except for the battery of computer equipment, test equipment and accessories.

Outside, all along the Bridge, workers and scientists toiled. Along the cable car system, police and army officers slid along the cables on flying foxes, balanced on top of the cable cars, hooked up wires, conducted tests and measurements, and reported to their operations centres. On every level of the pylons, more equipment was set up and manned, in communication with officers scaling the walls of the pylons to take readings. Underneath the Bridge, men and women worked in and amongst the beams and struts that held the Port Jackson Highway aloft, measuring stress on the road, gravity pressure on the ironworks, and yelling instructions to each other.

The road was covered with specialist vehicles. One was spraying the road with a coating of chemical to test the reaction. One was an electricity pole maintenance truck, with its small two-man compartment held aloft at the end of its great hydraulic arm, while a scientist and a police officer conducted tests on the middle structure.

Around one of the arch cables on the edge of the street, a large frame of metal the size of a room had been constructed, then covered and sealed with a huge sheet of see-through plastic bearing the red nuclear symbol on every wall. Powerful portable arc lamps oversaw the structure, as five men inside dressed in protective white radiation clothing conducted tests.

Cables and wires stretched across the road, up into the air and down towards the water. A spectacular array of multicoloured lights, search lights and lamps pointed and illuminated in every direction, making the Bridge look like the enormous endostructure of a great alien ship, its occupants without humanity's natural sense of order or symmetry.

A smaller shelter back from the five officers housed a communications deck, some documents and a transistor radio that screamed at the top of its electronic lungs to reach the men over the din of activity in its tinny, distorted voice. 2 Day FM reported that tomorrow would be fine and sunny with temperatures in the low thirties, a humidity of sixty five percent, and little chance of rain or cloud. The weather was expected to stay until late Tuesday, when a southerly change would possibly bring more storms.

Looking into the frenzied activity around them, the men cursed to each other about the weather. Rain would bring the operation to a halt, and none of them believed that this would be over by Tuesday.

Of course, they had no idea what was going on back there and weren't really supposed to. The outcome of the investigation was really only business of the town councillors, the Police Commissioner, and the editors of the major papers. The public cried out for answers, and it was such a big deal when they got them. Nobody really thought about all the men and women who had spent their Saturday night guarding the Bridge against thrill seekers and larrikins. Nobody had told them anything. Their most reliable source of information so far had been the radio.

The Police Commissioner and the Minister for Transport had held a press conference at quarter to six that evening saying that they had nothing so far to report, but with four hundred people from the army, police and scientific community backing the operation up, they were confident of having the Bridge open to usual traffic by the end of the week.

A walkie talkie barked on an officers belt. Senior Constable Fellowes answered his sergeant and trotted across to the first patrol car guarding the rail.

* * * *

In the shelter, a warning signal captured the attention of a man at a console with his tie askew, working on a page of figures. He looked up at the computer terminal in front of him, and picked up his telephone receiver.

"Doctor," he said, "I've got a small electrical anomaly at the far end.....let me check," he punched some commands into the computer,

and was treated to several lines of numbers, equations and jargon , "no, I can't tell.....electromagnetic, it looks like.....I think so, it's increasing. Looks like it's just clocked fifty eight volts.

* * * *

Senior Constable Fellows took the tool case from the boot of car 032 and slammed the boot shut. As he walked around to the door, he received a shock that almost made him fall down.

All four cars came alive. Halogen headlights stabbed the road, blue and red police lights flashed and flickered, some stuck on, and each siren blared into the night, in every tone and frequency.

All at once.

From Sydney's Eastern Suburbs, where Vicki lived; the inner west, where Tim's office and house were; and the Sutherland Shire to the south, where Barry worked, Dale's place in Ramsgate was the most central place, so the entire party met there that night, Saturday.

Dale liked to think of them as the party, except that their ranks were somewhat depleted. It seemed wrong not to set a place for Albert, the investigator, and that young researcher from the university, but the party was over for them now.

Dale had felt safe until the weekend. It was as if he had been attacked, and a group of people from every professional circle had formed a protective shield with himself at the hub. From every angle his attacker struck, only to be driven back by the rationality of medical science, physics, orthopaedic medicine, legal investigation and psychiatry. Now Albert and the researcher, Donald, were gone, and suddenly Dale felt open to attack from too many sides. The groups legal and scientific recourse had been severed. It wasn't that he didn't feel safe with Vicki and Barry and Tim.....

Yes, it was, he admitted to himself, laying in his single bed with Vicki asleep on top of him. He didn't feel safe. He knew Vicki and Barry both felt lost and dwarfed by this whole thing, and that somehow counted them out of his protective circle. His only hope was Tim, and suddenly his protective circle had gone from five direct or indirect members to one.

One knight, no matter how valiant and brave, could not guard each wall of the castle.

Dale had showered and Vicki had drawn the blinds, drawing him into bed. She had lain on top of him, her head across his chest, and they had whispered to each other and fallen gradually into a light doze. Only Tim calling at three o'clock had disturbed them. He had been talking to

Barry on the phone for hours discussing possibilities, and both felt it a good idea that everybody meet in light of the new discovery.

Tim said he would take a few readings and make a few calculations, and would be at Dale's place at seven. He said that Barry intended to be there at six thirty.

Suggesting and discussing what to give everybody for dinner was a task in itself, and Dale was grateful to have the subject and Vicki there to take his mind off his mother, the Bridge, and the sudden consciousness of the monstrous contraption sewn into his back.

The mood wasn't a party one, and conversation was neither pleasant nor lively. The radio droned in the background from Dale's small tape deck. They all picked at the remains of a Chinese takeaway spread across the table, talking sombrely. Tim spoke the most.

"No, there's no way it's hallucinatory," he was saying.

"But, if it's completely within his body, doesn't that point to something internal?" Vicki asked, "I've already established that he's normal. The only therapy necessary throughout this whole thing was to deal with the terror caused by it."

"You're right," Tim said, "It's not his mind."

"So if it's the brace," she argued, "the most logical explanation I can see is that it's doing one of two things - maybe both; messages are getting scrambled because of the magnetism to the brace, making Dale think he's seeing things that aren't really there. The second thing is that the brace being magnetised has caused whatever disturbances we've seen so far, the same way a hair dryer interferes with the TV or lightning creates static over the radio."

"That's fair enough, Vicki," Tim said, "but we all know that some of the things we've witnessed can't be attributed to electrical disturbance. I've got infra-red film at home in the lab of people floating down towards me on lights, which I recorded on the IF meter. And a lot of things that have happened have obviously been way beyond Dale's capacity. He didn't think Albert and Donald dead. He didn't think that huge thing that had you trapped in your car, did he? And even if he did, what really fractured your arm, and what bashed your car roof in so you were trapped inside?"

"That's right," Barry agreed, "if it's completely hallucinatory within Dale, how do you explain all the things the rest of us have seen?"

"There's too many things that have happened that we've all witnessed for it to be just Dale." Tim added.

"Well what about the theories I've been reading about?" she asked, "About people who can control the outside world with their mind, even without knowing? If all this supernatural activity is a result of Dale's brace, maybe it's giving his mind the electromagnetic boost it needs to

make the rest of us see things that aren't really there as well. Didn't you say, Tim, that the electrical power generated in the brain is the cause of all this? If there's such thing as telekinesis, why not some sort of influential neurokinesis?"

"I don't know any more, because we don't know how much of it is the brain. The only proof we have of electromagnetic activity is the brace." Tim said.

Vicki squeezed Dale's hand under the table. "What do you think?" she asked.

He sighed and stretched. "All I can tell you is that I can feel this thing in here now, this brace." He glanced at Barry. "I haven't been aware of it being there in nearly five years, and suddenly it feels like a horrible growth or something. I can really feel it."

She ran her hand over his forehead. "At least it isn't your mind."

"What if I die?" he said to Tim.

The parapsychologist shrugged, fishing for a piece of young corn. "The brace will become inert. With no input from your brain it'll be a useless piece of metal."

"So it really is making me more frightened just so my mind produces more electricity to the brain?"

Tim paused, breathing deeply, and nodded. "If it's an intelligent being, that's how it would bring about the energy it needs."

"So if it needs the electricity from my brain and it needs the brace, what's to stop it from bringing me back to life over and over again?" Dale wanted to know, "How do I know if I'll ever die properly?"

Tim shrugged. "We don't know. Until it's gone, or the brace is, it may just keep bringing you back, maybe a bit more decomposed or smashed than last time."

Dale looked fearfully at Vicki. "I still don't understand," he said, "why me?"

"You're a perfect target," she said, "you're full of anxiety about the Bridge, which is all potential energy like Tim said, and you've got the hardware to process it." She patted his stomach, smiling to cheer him up.

"Doesn't this change everything?" Barry offered. "Up until now, we've been working on the assumption that these hauntings and everything haven't really been there, but that there's been some malignant thing in Dale's brain that's using the electricity his brain produces to create all this chaos. But now it's all different. Now we know it *does* really exist, and there *are* really ghosts, and Dale is only receiving them, like as if the brace is an antenna."

Tim regarded the idea. "There *are* really ghosts, Barry." he agreed, "But they're not things that wear cloaks and rattle chains in the parlour at midnight, they're fields of energy manifested in this world. So far, I think

that Dale provided the easiest.....way in. Just like running water chooses the easiest path down a mountain.

"He was so full of anxiety and fear about the Bridge. When all those people died there, it made the place a huge concentration of electromagnetic energy, even if it was dormant. When Dale first went across the Bridge as it is today, I don't know, maybe they were matching energies, born of the same fear or something, or maybe the brace is just tuned to the right frequency. I can't explain that, but it made the energy active instead of potential energy. Like a match being struck and held to the wick of a candle. All the energy is there, waiting, until the necessary chemical reaction.

"They are real. Dale made them come. Every time he's afraid, he produces more electricity in the brain. Albert and Donald's last thoughts were obviously of great fear, there's more electricity. I know I was as scared as hell most of the time, there's more. We're all providing a great big electromagnetic beacon. Haven't you noticed that it doesn't only affect Dale any more? It doesn't only happen when he's there? Remember the day Donald was attacked in the van, alone. Dale was in your surgery." He regarded the rest of the group.

"It's running under its own power now.....the brace became an antenna, like you said, Barry. It was the conductor that transferred that fear. Think about it. You don't get an electric shock when you touch someone's head, do you? Yet the electricity produced in the human brain in one minute is enough to power a household for twenty four hours, but it's so perfectly insulated and efficiently used that we never see any external effects of it.

"That's in a normal person, whose body is made up of 100% organic material. But remember what you read, Vicki? Some people had fillings, some had surgical pins, some had electronic couplings like the brace. Electricity produced in the brain is transferred into a system no different than the wire out of the back of your toaster. You *can* get a shock from that, because it's been transferred to an electronic system. When Dale produced such extraordinary amounts of electricity from his fear of the Bridge, the brace soaked it up like a battery, and there could have been millions of volts waiting to be tapped. It was tapped, by the energy already at the site of the Bridge, and the huge field of electromagnetism in the brace was the energy source for these supernatural disturbances, constantly topped up by the fears generated in Dale's brain, and in the rest of us."

"So, you're saying that by letting it get this far," Vicki said, "we don't have any hope? That we've given it too much energy and we have to all stop being scared to stop it?"

"No," Tim said, in sudden exasperation. He fished in the oyster sauce with his chopsticks for a piece of stir fried beef, "Look, what do you need for your toaster to work?"

"Bread." Barry smirked.

Dale and Vicki laughed softly, but Tim continued undaunted. "You need electricity. You need an energy source. This thing needs its energy source. It may not know or care that it's getting it from Dale's fear and mind, but it hooked itself into one thing - the brace. The brace is the electrode."

"But there's hundreds of sources of electricity." Vicki said.

"When you unplug your toaster, it just switches off," Tim explained, "it doesn't go looking for an alternative energy source."

"That's ridiculous," Barry said, "toasters don't want to stay on. I can understand water running downhill, but....."

"No Barry, it's no different," Tim continued, "toasters *do* want to stay on.....nature has an aversion to potential energy, like it does to vacuums. A ball being held in the air wants to travel downwards because of gravity, water wants to reach the bottom of the hill for the same reason, and a toaster's electric heating bars want to be running, the electricity wants to be moving along a circuit. Nature uses physics as much as it can to make energy active."

"What's all this got to do with the brace?" Dale said.

"Your brace is the only primary source of energy for this thing," Tim explained to him, "it can't use the energy from our fear directly, but the energy is passed, by way of emotion, along the chain to Dale, and in turn the brace. The brace is its battery. That's why it was lit up like a Christmas tree in those reports. That's why his back hurt. It wasn't a sore back at all - it was electrical stress on the brace heating his muscles."

"What about the demagnetiser he had fitted?" Barry suggested.

"That doesn't stop the energy being there, it only neutralises it from the rest of the system."

"How do you explain all the energy that was at the site before Dale even got there?" Vicki asked, "If it was caused by fear and death when the last Bridge fell, how did it get transferred?"

"It didn't," Tim said, "that's what I mean. It was all *potential* energy. It was created by all that fear and emotion, and energy can't be destroyed. It became potential energy, ready to manifest in any form. The potential energy in the minds of those people became active energy brought about by extraordinary emotion, which, with nowhere to go, reverted to a field of potential energy. It just got locked up in the physical matter around the site, all that steel and metal."

"How do we even know that Dale's the energy source?" Barry asked. "You said yourself, Vicki, that people with this kind of ability

have some sort of conductive prosthetic in their body. Imagine how many people with fillings or pins have been to the site since 1998?" Vicki shrugged and looked at Tim, referring the question.

"The lowest common denominator," Tim said, picking up half a spring roll for a bite, "No paranormal occurrences appear until Dale's own critical mass is reached." Barry regarded Tim quizzically. Tim leaned back and said quietly "Fifty eight volts."

"What's the answer then, Tim?" Dale interrupted.

The parapsychologist paused. "The answer is to sever the energy source." Dale looked at the floor, everyone else looking at him with concern.

Nobody had to say anything.

The radio interrupted. The track that was being played was cut off.

"This is Debbie Tynan live at Circular Quay. We've interrupted normal programming to bring you a report as it happens from the Sydney Harbour Bridge. There's some sort of.....mass disturbance."

The horrified members of the gathering looked up at the radio.

"There's a great flashing of light, and there appear to be explosions of some sort. From what I can tell.....there's just complete disarray on the Bridge itself, vehicles trying to get away.....the streets are full of people now.....Tune to ABC for live TV coverage and simulcast."

Barry scrambled out of his chair across to the TV cabinet and switched the set on, using the remote control to turn over to channel 2.

The picture was being taken from Circular Quay station. The international cruise liner terminal was visible in the bottom of the shaky picture.

The Bridge was surrounded by a halo of light. Bright flashes went off amidst, and flaring ghostly flames like solar prominences licked outwards from the glare. Emergency vehicle lights were visible scooting back and forth. Long, low booming could be heard, its ancient baritone voice lost through the airwaves of TV, but enough to shake windows of business towers in the city. The announcers voice came through the radio and TV simultaneously.

"The Bridge is still closed tonight undergoing extensive testing following four deaths late this week....." the newscaster continued.

There was a loud boom and someone nearby said 'Jesus'. The camera moved, shook, as if the camera operator was trying to regain his footing.

"I can't.....describe the scene here. There's just an air of.....utter helplessness. Those poor people are trapped up there. If you look, you can see the cable cars swinging." One of the cable cars let go of its mounting and plummeted into the halo of light.

Shouts.

Horror.

Over the TV.

Dale stared at the TV screen, overcome. He could see the future now. This footage would be on the news every night, for weeks. In a flash he understood. The Bridge falling down with him on it was incidental.

The real Horrorfall had occurred on TV.

He stood and backed out of the room, his stomach pressing painfully downwards, feeling like he would vomit. As the others watched the horrific broadcast, Vicki noticed Dale slip into the bathroom.

She stood slowly from the dining table and walked into the bathroom after Dale, knocking softly. "Dale?" she said quietly, trying to make herself heard but not disturb the others. It had looked like something only a loving lady's touch could heal. She slowly opened the bathroom door.

"Dale?" she said, stepping in. She gasped once in revulsion before an arm shot out at her and a hand closed around her throat.

VII

Two people sat on top of the cable car emblazoned with *Coca Cola*, Dr Ruth Geraghty and Lance Corporal Peter Cuff. Lance Corporal Cuff stood carefully near the edge of the car, reaching up for the cable above him. In his hand he held a wire with a large electrical clip on the end. He looked down expectantly at Dr Geraghty and shuddered involuntarily as he thought of the drop only inches away. He had expected a bit of adventure when he joined the army reserve two years ago at age nineteen, but he didn't think it would be so bloody frightening. He'd envisaged shoot-outs in the jungle against Papua New Guinean guerillas or maybe the odd patrol through the Persian Gulf aboard the H.M.A.S. *Wollongong*, but not hanging off the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

"Not quite yet," said Dr Geraghty, still fooling with some machine that the wire was attached to. She was sitting near the centre of the car, the machine set up in front of her. It was funny, how Lance Corporal Cuff was here to assist and protect her, but she was old enough to be his mother, and, so self assured, he was sure he'd be looking to her in a crisis.

"Okay," she said. Lance Corporal Cuff reached up and clipped the wire onto the cable, turning back to the scientist.

"All right," she said, tapping keys and flicking switches, "let's see what we can-"

She was interrupted by the sudden explosion of light from below. Cuff jumped almost out of his skin with fright and fell to his knees. The light was blinding, and it had just appeared. From below, a boom, and the structure shook. Both the soldier and scientist reached out fearfully for

the cable tether on the roof of the car to overcome the sudden rocking of the car.

"Look over the side and see what's happened." the scientist suggested.

Cuff shook his head violently. "No fuckin' way." he said, holding on tighter. There was another crash, more shaking. Cuff closed his eyes tightly, and heard Geraghty gasp beside him. He opened his eyes to see what she was so amazed at and screamed.

Faces floated all around. In the light, in the air, detached faces and ghostly bodies wafted to and fro like angels, all staring at the two people perched on top of the car. Skull-like eyes and rotting faces leered. Blank faces stared. Some were open mouthed, as if in the midst of their death-screams.

Cuff's mind blared an emergency and collapsed to all further rationality. He unholstered his sidearm and began to unload it uselessly into the air around in a panic. He didn't hear Geraghty scream for him to stop or rise behind him to try and disarm him, he only turned and saw another face, closer, wide eyed, reaching, threatening. He panicked and emptied the gun into the scientist, watching her body topple back onto the roof and roll over the edge, leaving a smear of blood.

There was another crash. The cable car rocked wildly, Cuff screamed for his life and hugged himself to the mooring. When the next boom came from below, the cable car rocked so wildly that the mooring creaked and there was a metal snap at his feet. Cuff felt the roof fall away from his feet and he screeched in apoplexy as he watched the car fall away, revealing the ground far below, the cars scooting back and forth, the light emanating from everywhere.

His feet dangled in the air and he felt the sweat pour from his palms and loosen his life or death grip around the mooring pole. He started to slip, and watched the ground so, so far below.

".....*Oh God, somebody's falling from there.*" came the announcers voice. She gasped in horror and swore, uncontrollably and unwittingly. All of Australia watched the tiny helpless body fall from the cable and disappear into the glow. The camera zoomed in in a flash, the focus blurring and then fixing on the tiny inert silhouette as it fell through the blinding whiteness. The picture was shaking, the camera operator fighting to keep it in the picture. It disappeared onto the road amid several parked cars, their lights feeble through the glare.

"Where's Dale?" Barry asked, looking around the flat. He and Vicki had disappeared. Tim shrugged and didn't divert his attention from the TV.

Vicki was swung around and a hand was pressed over her mouth. She was shoved up against the wall and her head thumped against it painfully. She looked into Dale's face in terror. His eyes were red, his face was contorted into a mask of hatred. He gripped her around the throat and cut off her screams.

Black fear sprang up in her. This was Dale, the man she loved! She slapped at his hands uselessly. Too late, she saw him raise his hand. She pleaded some sort of forgiveness from whatever black god controlled Dale's fate right now, but he smacked her hard across the face, then again. She felt blood trickle down her cheek.

Dale shoved himself against her and she froze in fear, beyond action. His eyes were wild. One hand still over her mouth, the other left her throat and slid down to cup her crotch under her dress. Her blood went cold. He leant into her ear and shoved his tongue hard down it, letting a trail of cold saliva dribble out.

The words (sound) that came out of his mouth was a low babble of nonsense, like some language that hadn't been spoken for thousands of years. It was lower and more menacing than Dale's normal voice, and something about it seeming heavy and sodden with lechery and murder.

Vicki bucked under him to try and throw him off. His face darkened and he grabbed her arm. The one she had just broken.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.....

Dale pressed it to the wall and shoved it up above her head. She heard and felt the crack and her shoulder became a fire, a scream. She did scream, into his hand, her voice breaking wildly in agony. Tears began to gush from her eyes. The fire spread through her body, her arm howled with the most complete torment she had ever known.

She felt herself begin to faint from the pain. Her body twitched in agony and tears ran down her face. She saw Dale raise his hand and felt the stinging blow across her cheek. She let her head fall to one side but he grabbed her hair and thumped her head back against the wall. Her arm dangled uselessly at her side.

"Nobody knows Vickeeeeeee....." he taunted in that voice of a years-dead demon , "because everyone's watching me on the TVeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

With one hand still across her mouth, Dale reached down and hooked his thumb into the waist of his pants. In one motion, an act of strength no man could ever show, he tore his pants and underwear away with a solid *rrrrrip*. They fell down his legs in tatters and his engorged penis wavered at her.

Another black wave of horror. She would stand here, with a broken arm, and get raped.

By Dale.

"Help." she said weakly into his hand. He cracked her head back against the wall again to shut her up, and slid his hand inside her panties, pushing them down her legs. She felt the head of his penis

- cold cold oh my god it's ice cold! -

start to press into her.

Vicki felt a single moment of control, and she knew it would be her last. The only thing left she could do was strike out. The bathroom cabinet doors were mirrored, and within reach. Her hurt arm useless, she raised her other fist and sent it rocketing at them.

* * * *

The crash from in the bathroom made Barry and Tim jump. In panic, they stood up from the broadcast of the hellish scene and ran for the bathroom. Barry reached it first, and opened the door to find Dale, shoved up against Vicki, trying to force himself up between her legs.

Vicki was half unconscious. A bone jutted out from her broken arm. Her cheek was bleeding. Her underwear was pulled halfway down her legs. And her left hand was a pulp of blood.

Barry threw himself at Dale, who yelled out in shock. There was a squeal from Dale's shoe as it slipped on the tiled floor and the pair went sprawling into the bath. Barry came crashing down on Dale, and his weight knocked Dale's head and shoulder against the bottom of the bath.

Barry grabbed him but soon realised that he was out cold. A few drops of blood had fallen in the bath, but the hateful look on Dale's face had disappeared to leave one of infinite peace. Barry struggled to turn and look behind him.

Tim knelt on the floor, Vicki collapsed into his arms, her underwear around her ankles, bleeding everywhere, sobbing and blubbering desperately like a little girl torn and lost.

VIII

Hospitals, Dale thought to himself. I've been in too many bloody hospitals. The last period of his life when he had spent so many days in a hospital had been nineteen years ago when they had been trying to put him back together. Taking skin from there and covering that, restructuring bones from here, sewing this up, putting that back where it belongs. In those old days, he often wished he had died, instead of coming within a hairs breadth of it. At the best of times, he had nothing anyway. At the worst of times, laying up in hospital crying, pleading for the pain to go away, he thought that death was far more welcoming than this anguish.

But the strangest thing about the human spirit is how fast it can change gear. Time flies, and in the blink of an eye it's twenty years later and you wouldn't really give up what little you have now, and can't believe you *were* willing to give it all up. He supposed he owed some thanks to that old, staunch medical tradition - keep 'em alive no matter what.

But he wished he were dead now. He wished there was something sharp in this room to plunge into his wrist and tear it open. He wished his wrists weren't strapped to the bed. What had he done?

He had visitors. A police psychologist. He had closed his mind completely off to her, because she was prodding and intruding in areas only Vicki was welcome - areas Vicki would never want to go again. A police officer, to interview him about what everyone kept calling 'last night'.

The same police officer had returned to say that Vicki was not pressing charges of sexual assault, and that the police psychologist had found Dale to be suffering enormous emotional stress. Vicki herself deemed that he had not attacked her under the influence of a rational mind, and therefore could not be seen as responsible.

Barry had been by to tell him what happened. They had burst into the bathroom at his flat and found their clothes torn from them, Dale trying to force himself into her. It had made Dale sick to think that he could try to do something like it to any woman. He pleaded with Barry to agree that it was completely out of character. He hadn't fully believed what he'd done.

Until he learned that Vicki wouldn't come and see him.

Then, the old pain came back. Sitting up in a hospital bed in the middle of the night, the pain keeping him awake. Only now, the pain was in his heart, and it was so much worse.

Tim had been and confirmed Barry's story. He didn't have any news about Vicki, and Dale was worried senseless for her, horrified at himself, and sick to his stomach. He and Tim talked more about the brace and the revelations of the previous night, as they were the only parts of the evening Dale remembered. When pressed, he recalled being interrupted by the news story. The next thing he realised he was strapped to a hospital bed.

Tim spoke about the brace. It was the answer to their research. It should have been the only joy in Dale's life, to realise that he wasn't mentally affected or sick, only frightened as anyone would be, but even that joy was taken away from him. Tim had finally articulated what they had all realised over that Chinese dinner, but which all had been too afraid to admit.

To exorcise whatever plagued the Harbour Bridge, the brace had to be removed from Dale's body and dismantled.

Dale was still very conscious of the brace, only now, with the threat of having it taken, it felt a part of him. It felt part of him, because without it, it would be back to the wheelchair. Back to the subsidised flat and hired help. Back to the impotent worthlessness. Back to the bleak days, one rolling into another. Deep in his heart, he even preferred this haunting and paranormal to that, because removal of the brace would mean a long remainder of his life in numb and blending days; routine; obscure, pathetic pursuits and boredom.

It would also mean he would never rape Vicki Holt again.

Dale called the nurse, asked her to call Barry and say that he agreed to the operation to remove the brace.

By Sunday night, she still hadn't been to see him. They wouldn't let him call her house. Dale went to sleep fitfully and without hope, dignity or peace. Like demons waiting around street corners in a filthy, deserted city, his nightmares were waiting around the corners of sleep, and they plagued him along his journey through the night.

It was 9:30 a.m., and Dale was on his front in an operating theatre. He had been awoken by a nurse at seven and asked to follow her to the patient prep room. He had gotten out of bed and felt the cold tiles of the floor underneath his feet. She offered to get his slippers but he refused. The hard, cold tiles were the last things he would ever feel below his waist.

Dale followed the nurse down the corridor, the very last time he would ever walk in his life. Tears sprang to his eyes but they took it as a bad sign, as if he would suffer hysteria again. When they tried to take him into the wheelchair to anaesthetise him he fought weakly, pleading for just one more step, but they sat him down strongly and closed the mask over his mouth. He felt his last seconds drain away, flexing his toes to feel his feet for the last time.....

The next few hours passed in and out of consciousness. He heard snatches of voices, instructions. He felt an incredible numbing coldness in his back, felt strong instruments clamp him inside and shake him back and forth. At one point, he looked up and saw a surgeon pass something into a large paper bag a nurse was holding, a long rod with ceramic clamps either end and a striped metal box halfway down with a series of cogs. He drifted off again.....

Dale awoke the following day, Tuesday, at home. There was a hired nurse there with him, who would remain with him from now on. He

reached for the phone and called his mum. The phone rang and rang and rang before Dale realised that it would be ringing to an empty house because his mother was dead.

He tried Vicki's number. A Telstra announcement told him that the number was not connected, or had been changed. Please check the number before dialling again.

Dale cried for the rest of the day.

The rest of the week passed without incident. The nurse helped him like a little baby, putting a bedpan under him, feeding him, reading him books. He could pick at his legs until he drew blood and not feel it. She always went mad on him for that.

There was no other mention of strange occurrences on the Harbour Bridge. Since the violent visual display of Saturday night, all those lifetimes ago, no other disturbances had occurred. Fifteen people had died that night, crushed by cars, fallen from the heights of the structure, or incinerated in blasts of violent electromagnetism. No further freak conditions or findings had been reported, and Dale read in the paper that the Bridge was due to re-open at midnight on Wednesday night.

It was over. And that was that.

February came and went and the weather turned unseasonably cold early. By the beginning of March Dale had the small blow heater on in the mornings and the days were drizzly and no higher than fifteen degrees. Dale moved into a smaller, subsidised disabled persons unit in St. Peters, an industrial district of the inner city.

He didn't have many visitors. Barry came around only occasionally now that there was no real orthopaedic function for him to monitor. Dale couldn't really expect him to visit often, anyway. He had his own family to worry about and this whole Harbour Bridge ordeal had aged him beyond his fifty five years. He had lost all interest in his orthopaedic article that had been published. He began to talk about retiring early next year.

Tim rang a few times. He officially closed the file soon after Dale's operation, after conducting further tests and deciding that all presence of the supernatural was gone. The link of energies had been severed, and all the energy at the site was locked again in the metal of the Bridge and city, and would hopefully spend the rest of time waiting for another transmitter like Dale's brace to unleash its horror again.

The fact that it had happened *before* Dale actually had the brace removed proved to Tim that an intelligent force was at work with access to powers and knowledge across all fields of energy, including the passage of time, but now it was gone, and they would never know.

He had become a celebrity overnight. He was the man who had proved the existence of apparitions and their presence as sentient beings. Cambridge University had offered him a four year, thirty million pound research grant to further his studies, which he had accepted. He spoke to Dale once more to say goodbye. Before leaving for England at the beginning of June, he was going to spend the rest of his time in the country with his mother on the Gold Coast, where she was dying of cancer.

Halfway through March came what Dale thought of as his 'difficult time', and he rarely thought of anything else. One of his only hobbies was reading local newspapers from all over Sydney. It was a freezing morning and he was skimming through the Bondi Variety when he came across a picture of a recently married couple, Dr Victoria Holt, of Edgecliff, and Dr Wallace McAvaney, of Dover Heights.

Dale knew the name, McAvaney. Barry had said (after Dale pleaded with Barry to tell him) that McAvaney was the man Vicki was seeing for therapy of her own following the attack. They were married in St Augustine's Methodist Church, Bellevue Hill, and planned to spend three weeks in Rio De Janeiro and Mauritius for their honeymoon.

After that, Dale closed in on himself. He didn't talk very much, he didn't read all that much. He hardly ate. He almost never got out of bed, only to have the hired nurse change the sheets. He helped himself to one of her cigarettes one day and before long he was smoking a packet a day of his own.

He remembered a young boy, cruelly cut off from the world in the prime of his life, crushed and dejected, haunted forever by what might have been. Haunted by a vision of a girl in a beautiful blue dress, and a smile that contained a lifetime of promise.

He remembered when that boy had grown up, and become happy. He remembered when the boy had become a man and met someone new. He remembered how silly it had been to believe that a smile could mean anything like a lifetime, because that man and the woman he had met had given each other their bodies and hearts, and that still wasn't enough to stop the woman from being ripped away from him.

He kept the picture out of the Bondi paper, of Vicki and her husband. She looked great. She was smiling and happy, her arm clutched around her husband, her cheeks full of life, everything wonderful ahead of her. She was so beautiful. It stabbed Dale's heart, and made him cry tears that felt like a weeping sore. He looked at it every day.

He found out in late March that his hired nurse had been reporting about him to the hospital. He hadn't known that was part of her duties. She had reported that he had grown erratic and suicidal. He threatened her and tried to fire her, but she only called the hospital and two male

nurses came around and fixed up his bed so that he spent about five hours a day strapped to it, a raving prisoner, a former rapist and a monster, in his own house. He couldn't smoke when he was strapped down, and the withdrawal killed him, knotting his stomach, making him want to vomit. Sometimes he vomited over himself purposely just to make the bitch clean it up.

Barry almost never came or called now. What orthopaedic work was there to do any more, now that Dale had no back? He had never gotten any kind of contact from Vicki, or Tim, even though he scoured every scientific magazine he could get. On a Cambridge grant, he supposed Tim lived in a suite in the London Dorchester, had a Bentley, and went to Majorca for weekends.

A trip out for Dale was the shower, where a plastic school chair was waiting for him to sit on while he washed himself. It was the only place he could shit in private. He wasn't allowed to shave himself either, so there were no sharp razors to slice back and forth on his wrists.

March was followed by April and May and June, and by the freezing middle of July Dale had forgotten almost everything that had happened to him. It was as if he had merely been in a wheelchair since the fall in 1998 and dreamed about those people he had loved and those horrifying events. He forgot what Vicki's voice sounded like. It had been early May when he had last seen Barry, and he hadn't bothered to remember what he looked like. He heard somewhere that Barry's wife had died in a car accident on the way to Brisbane. He also heard that Vicki and her husband were expecting their first child.

For a week after that, Dale had been reminded of sex. How wonderful it had been with her. He spent days at a time trying to achieve an erection, and when he failed, the hired nurse arrived back from the shops one day to find Dale in bed, with his pyjama pants down, unconscious, an ocean of blood covering his sheets. He had dragged himself into the kitchen and back into bed, trying to saw his own penis off with a blunt butter knife.

From then on, he spent eight hours every single day strapped down, staring at the ceiling. He decided that he believed in God, and prayed for hours, quite calmly, that his brace would come back, just so he could stand up, walk to the window, and jump through it to the ground five floors below, making sure he landed on his head.

This time, when he fell, he'd do it properly.

One night, while dreaming, he remembered what he and Vicki had been like. How wonderful she had been, how deeply in love they were falling. He imagined her happy, joyous with her husband, looking forward to their child, secure in her career, with her nice house in Edgecliff, her Iceland Pine table where Dale had made love to her, and

him, laying across the pavement in Burrows Street, St. Peters, his head cracked and bleeding like a broken egg. Funny how things ended up.

IX

Since April he had been seeing a therapist in Gordon, in the middle North Shore. The therapist was an old man who asked a lot of questions that Dale thought pretty rude, and wouldn't take no for an answer. After a while Dale had called Barry's surgery, asking Eileen to ask Barry to recommend someone else that Dale might go to. Barry had never called back.

Nobody in Sydney remembered how hot it had been when the disturbances on the Sydney Harbour Bridge had ended, because it was so bitterly cold now. The train doors closed off the freezing wind and drizzle. The hired nurse pushed Dale into the carriage, into the vestibule area where she accidentally banged his ankle against one of the steel poles before sitting down and opening her magazine.

People stared at Dale, so he just looked down into his lap. He was wrapped in an old woollen jumper, an old pair of faded jeans and woollen socks that poked out below. Across his knees (why the fuck he needed it to keep warm when he had no feeling he never knew) was an old moth-eaten blanket, the kind with every colour in an ever increasing square out to the edge. He hated it, but clutched it tightly.

It was one of his hired nurses stupid rituals to get off at Town Hall and go shopping. She never took him in with her. She said it would be too crowded and too much trouble to push him around. So she used to leave him outside the doors on the street for her. Once, a young, professional woman in tailored slacks and a fine jacket had dropped a handful of coins into Dale's lap, smiling vaguely at him. He flinched and wiped the coins off onto the footpath as if they were a stain, horrified.

From there, laden with bags, the hired nurse would hail a taxi that would take them all the way to Gordon. Once the session with the rude old therapist was over, they would catch the train from Gordon to the city, and change trains to go back to St. Peters. It was Dale's only day out, visiting an old guy he hated while Vicki Holt got a sweet, understanding therapist who was so caring and so helpful that she fell in love and married him.

This particular freezing July day, the 19th, the hired nurse came out of the store and finally agreed to Dale's pleas to call a taxi before he froze. She lifted him up and dropped him unceremoniously onto the back seat of the taxi before folding the wheelchair up and bundling it into the boot and climbing in the front to instruct the driver.

They joined the Western Distributor and began the slow climb between the skyscrapers of the city toward the Harbour Bridge. Dale looked out the window for the familiar first glimpse. It terrified him, the first time he looked at this Bridge - the first time since the fall, and it had opened up such a can of worms. It was the only thing that made him feel even nearly alive now, the sick notoriety of it.

But it held no more fears for him now. No more memories. It was just another Bridge to be crossed. The water of the years had passed underneath, and his good fortune was way out to sea by now.

The driver paid the toll and they started out through the pylons. Dale didn't know if it was winter, or his eyes, but one thing he did notice was the colours of the pylons, the red and the orange. He remembered them as being bright and vibrant before. Now they seemed drab, faded by years, or maybe too many hardships. Faded by age, whether it was in the paint or in his eyes.

Before too long the traffic drew to a halt. Dale craned his neck to see what was going on, but there was only traffic banked up. The oncoming traffic was very slow as well, he noticed. The hired nurse uttered some complaint and the taxi driver shared her sentiment. They began to wonder what was happening, and the hired nurse turned to Dale and said that she and the driver were going to walk up and see what the hold up was - if there was an accident they might be able to help. She told Dale not to go anywhere and laughed. They both got out, closed their doors and were gone.

Dale looked around but didn't find anything to attract his attention. He looked down into his lap, trying to amuse himself, but his mind was battered with tobacco and malnutrition and couldn't conjure up one entertaining thought. Dale reached inside his jumper and took out his cigarettes and lighter, lighting one and taking a long, grateful drag, blowing a plume of smoke inside the cold cabin of the taxi.

He heard a soft knock across the taxi from him, on the opposite window, and turned to look. Probably the driver and nurse back from down the -

In that instant he was engulfed. A floodgate opened and every horrible memory came crashing back. Hanging off the cable car system. Watching people die. Seeing the Bridge fall over and over in his dreams.

Falling.

Falling.

Falling.

Across the lane was an overturned White Mitsubishi Colt, and pattering at the opposite window was a dead, white, cracked man, howling wetly, slapping weakly on the window of the taxi to get in, his leg sheared off, a river of blood from the stump.

Dale hitched in breath but couldn't bring up the air to scream. He turned back and shoved his door open, unfastening the seat belt and pushing himself out to thump to the road. He could see, underneath the car, the man with the dead face and half a leg fall to the ground as well, peering at Dale through his dead waterlogged eyes. The dead man began to crawl around the taxi. Towards Dale.

Dale croaked in fear and began to drag himself, army style - using his elbows, away from the car. Ahead, the drivers side door of another car opened and a middle aged woman fell out, her eyes white, her skin sopping and blue, her mouth a tangle of overgrown teeth and bloated purple tongue. She cawed obscenely and rolled, a sack of dead flesh, to the road, her eyes skyward. As Dale desperately dragged himself past her, panting in fear, her hand came to life and began to grope for his face. He slapped it away and continued on.

Far ahead, people were spilling out of cars, dripping wet, all dead, all with their eyes fixed on Dale.

The brace! He was being haunted again, and this time he couldn't even *walk*!

A train was stationary on the track on the Western edge. Its doors opened and a cascade of stinking seawater spilled out, dead fish, seaweed, waterlogged harbour rubbish and living dead bodies that climbed to their feet and shambled towards Dale.

There was a clang ahead and a steel-grey beam clanked to the road. Dale looked up in horror. There was the old Bridge again, shaking back and forth, iron beams falling from within the arches, clanging and crashing together on their way down. Around the top, lights of energy began to explode through the sky. They burst into life, smoky fingers of light erupting across the air to drift away.

He heard that horrible choked wail again from behind, and as he turned, the man with his leg torn off stared at Dale with wild, lustful dead eyes and grabbed Dale's ankle.

It was the first time the corpse from all his nightmares had reached him.

It was the first time the entire horrible thing, whatever it was, had reached him.

He was without strength or muscles. He had no back, and couldn't run. He could only crawl, and so now, it had reached him.

Without all his friends to help.

Without his mother.

Without his back and his legs.

Without the strength he had spent nineteen years slowly bricking up.

It *knew*, he could feel it in his shrivelled putrid heart, and it had bided its time for months on end, waiting for him to be alone, without anyone or anything to help him.

Christ Tim, he screamed to himself, you're in England living like the Prince of Wales and you were fucking *wrong*, it hasn't gone at all, it's still here! It's been here all this time waiting for me and now it's *GOT ME!!*

Dale tried to scream again but only produced a gravelly choking sound. He wrenched his ankle from the things grip and kicked at its face, dragging himself out of its reach again.

Dale dragged himself across the lanes to the centre of the Bridge, his breathing harsh and rasping, his energy draining fast, crawling for his life, knowing it was useless. Creatures were converging from every direction, the lights were erupting along the arches and in the sky like fireworks, beams were crashing to the ground only metres away, showering him with splintered concrete and asphalt. He was trapped here, with every direction to run to, and no spine to take him there.

He managed to drag himself up so he was kneeling, his knuckles balancing himself on the road, when there was a monumental crash from ahead. A Sydney bus burst through two cars, hurling them aside in showers of glass.

The bus bore down on Dale, its engine screaming like a beast, and as it neared, Dale glanced in terror at the driver.

Vicki Holt, her eyes white, as dead as the rest of her, her face a vengeful smile of hatred.

The final metres closed, Dale felt the bus strike his flesh and the pain was sudden, flaring, and gone.

X

Dale screamed and fought to sit upright. He was wrapped in sheets and, in panic, shoved himself aside, suddenly in midair. He had a sickening sensation of falling and crashed painfully to a cold tile floor, still crying out.

He started to drag himself forward away from the horrors pursuing him along the highway, but froze. It was almost pitch dark. And.....

His legs.

He could feel the cold underneath them. He could feel his legs!

Experimentally, he tried to draw his legs up. It worked. He fought and clambered and was on his feet!

A wave of relief like ecstasy washed through him. The brace. His beautiful spine. It was back! He became aware of the erection under his hospital robe -

Dale held his breath, hardly daring to hope.....

He was wearing hospital robes.

The brace being removed, his descent into poverty, misery and madness, his last ever trip across the Bridge.

They had all been a single nightmare.

A dream.

The air was warm. It was still February. Barry hadn't deserted him, Tim hadn't closed his case. And most important of all, Vicki might still love him. He used all the strength that felt so new to love her back.

The ward door burst inward, making Dale jump, and the fluorescent lights twittered as they flickered on. The male nurse came forward carefully, wary of Dale.

Dale put his hands up. "I'm fine. I just had a nightmare and fell out of bed....sorry."

"Did you hurt your back?" the nurse asked, coming forward to help Dale back into bed.

"No, I landed on my feet. Horrible dream."

The nurse walked to the end of the bed and checked the chart hooked over the bar. It seemed to be some standard operational procedure with these people. If your patient wakes from a nightmare, check his chart, if he complains of chest pain, check his chart. If he keels over dead, check his chart.

"You've got that operation tomorrow morning, haven't you?" the nurse said, "You should be sleeping easier than you are. I'd like to give you some sleeping tablets."

Dale thought to himself for a few seconds, while the nurse considered the chart again. "If you think they'll help." he offered.

The nurse nodded, looking up. "Yeah, I'll go and grab some, just two should do it. I'll come right back." He turned and walked briskly out of the room.

Dale sat back and sighed heavily. He flexed his upper leg and calf muscles. The dream had been an incredible time-play by his mind, where so much time can fit into so short a space, and every detail seem so real. It felt like his legs had been useless tubes of wasted meat and bone for the last five months, and he really had sunk into the depths of depression, but suddenly they were strong again.

He sighed again, his heart pounding with excitement. No way, he said to himself, patting his legs, his penis pounding with pulsing blood. No way am I giving these up. I don't care if I'm haunted for the rest of my life.

The private health care Dale was under was the best, and the ward he was in had everything, including a communication handset to the hospital's reception, which was on the wall beside the ward door.

Terrified but wildly excited, Dale slid out of bed and crossed the room quietly to the door. He picked up the phone and heard it beep steadily until a female voice answered.

"Reception."

"Yes," he began, "I'm here with Mr Milling in his private ward, I'd like to place an outside call to his doctor please."

"What ward number, nurse?" came the voice. His chest tightened in exhilaration. It had worked for a second. Then, terror. He was locked inside and had no idea of the ward number.

He put on his best stressed voice. "Oh, I'm here inside at the phone and I didn't notice the number on the way in."

"Is it one of those wards on the second floor they're renumbering?"

Dale almost laughed out loud at his luck. "It must be. His records will be at reception somewhere, won't they?"

"Well, I don't know where to look if I don't know what ward he's in. The ward number's on his chart."

Dale looked back at the bed. Of course! He asked the receptionist to hang on while he trotted back to check the number.

"Ward seventeen." he reported. The receptionist asked him to hold and before long the phone began to ring again. Dale looked worriedly out into the corridor through the glass window of the ward door, wary of the nurse returning.

A sleep-encrusted voice coughed and answered.

"Julia?" Dale asked. The disorientation of the dream was charming to feel, like the cosmos sharing a private joke with him.

Once, at school, Dale had dreamed of a fire that had burned down the school gym. The next day, when he arrived at school and the gym was intact, his sense of continuity was thrown way off balance. Of course there was no fire, but he had spent the entire morning living with what he remembered. It was the same now. Julia had died months after the operation in his dream, and her voice over the phone now sounded so eerie. "It's Dale."

"Dale?....." Rustling. Turning over to check the time on an alarm clock, "What's the matter?"

"I'm really sorry to call you there so late, Julia. I'm all right, but I've got to talk to Barry." Julia asked him to hang on and he heard murmuring, clanking and shuffling while Barry awoke and took the phone.

His voice was heavy and quiet. "Are you all right?" he said.

"I'm fine. I've got to ask you a medical question. Hospital isn't like jail, is it? They can't make you stay."

Barry paused. "Dale, the ward door is locked because you attacked Vicki. I know you, I know you aren't really capable of that, but-"

"I know, Barry. You've told me what I did. Just answer the question. They have no legal rights to keep me here against my will."

"It's a grey area, Dale. You're not supposed to leave before your treatment is over. I wouldn't try it though, there's probably some disclaimer in your insurance."

"I don't give a stuff about the insurance, Barry. I don't need any more medical attention."

"Dale, you've got an operation in.....seven hours. Get the hell back to bed."

"I've got to go, Barry. I'll come by the surgery and have a cup of coffee with you later this morning." He hung up before Barry could speak.

The clock was ticking now. Barry would ring the hospital straight away, worried, so every second would be precious.

Dale hung up the handset and lifted it to his ear again. The receptionist answered.

"Hi," he said quietly, "we've got to get Mr Milling's orthopaedic specialist over here for a few hours, could you put me through to a taxi company?"

The nurse came back into Dale's ward and Dale was sitting up in bed, waiting. "Here you go. You'll be out of it until tonight now. When you wake up, you'll be a new person." He handed Dale the tablets and cup.

Dale smiled his thanks, put the pills in his mouth and drank the whole cup. "I'd really like to use the men's room before I go back to sleep." he told the nurse.

"Well, I've got to accompany you." said the nurse. Dale shrugged and started to climb out of bed. He picked up the plastic shopping bag beside the bed, the one his toiletries were in, and followed the nurse out of the room.

The men's room was a short walk down the corridor. The nurse waited outside the cubicle and the two talked while Dale was inside.

"What are these sleeping pills?" Dale asked, taking them from under his tongue and wrapping them in toilet paper which he dropped down the toilet bowl.

"Panalyx." the nurse said, "Not just the pharmacy ones though. Industrial strength. That stuff is only available to G.P.s and hospitals."

"Aren't they supposed to work quicker than this?" Dale asked.

"You should be starting to get drowsy now." the nurse said, "It affects different people at different rates, though."

Dale sighed dejectedly, taking the towel from the plastic bag, unwrapping his sneakers. He put them on his lap and said "God I'm

terrified. Isn't there any way I can take another one? I feel so keyed up nothing could put me to sleep."

"You can't really take three at a time." the nurse said casually, seemingly more interested in something else.

"Can't you leave one in my room?" Dale suggested, "If I wake up again at five o'clock, at least I'll have it there to knock me out the rest of the way. I don't feel tired in the least, I've just got a knot in my stomach.....please? I'm not going to go very far in this bloody robe, am I?"

The nurse laughed. "All right, look, I'll go and get another one and a cup of water. I'll leave them next to your bed, I don't want to give them to you in here. But you're not to take it unless you're sure you can't get to sleep. I don't want to have to pump your stomach."

"Yeah fine." Dale said. He was careful to let an annoyed tone into his voice, making the nurse realise that it wasn't just casual banter any more, that Dale really was bothered by it. He heard the nurse pad across the floor and leave the men's room.

Dale stood up and pulled the robe up over his head, over the clothes beneath - the same ones he had been wearing on Saturday night, khaki shorts and a long sleeved green shirt with white stripes. They had been laundered and left in his room for his release after treatment.

His release, he decided, was going to be early.

What Barry said about the hospitals authority to keep Dale here might be right, but he would get nowhere while he was locked in his own ward. If he made any demands for release, they'd be able to attribute it to his current emotional stress. Once he got outside the doors of this building, he was safe from any legal grey areas or hospital regulations.

After all, it was in the capacity of the patient (while sane) to consent to any treatment.

Dale had just refused, a new trait in himself he found wild and thrilling.

The nurse pushed the men's room door open and said

"All right, they're on the bedside table. I checked the reaction and biotic times. You're not to have it before an hour has lapsed, no matter what. The third tablet should keep you asleep until six o'clock tonight, so there's no chance of you waking up before they administer the anaesthetic for the operation-" He stopped. It was too quiet.

The nurse crouched down to look under the door of the cubicle. Lying across the floor was a hospital robe, hospital towel, and an empty plastic bag.

The taxi turned off New South Head Road and began to make its way along the secondary roads through to Lincoln Place. The meagre traffic that had accompanied it along the main road was left behind, and no signs of life were visible along the residential streets of Edgecliff. Streetlights cast islands of light along dark roads, the tall trees that created a leafy tunnel along Lincoln Place were dark shadows making the stars flicker on and off as the taxi roared underneath them. Cars were silent and dark in driveways, no lights burned in house windows, the night was a world made out of glass, and the passage of a taxi down such a peaceful dark street at two thirty on a Monday morning shattered it.

But as Dale stepped out and watched the taxi swing a U-turn and drive off the way it had come, he realised that the night was made of special, magic glass. Because as the tiny red spots of the taxi's tail lights turned off at the end of the street and silence descended again, the glass was back together, a beautiful scene of fragile serenity.

Dale turned to the front of number seventeen, the charming tudor house with its trio of gabled windows on the upper level, its lovely wall of flowering shrubs along the front, its wide, inviting doorway. It looked a little bit big for one person, and Dale had often dreamed of living there too. He prayed he might still one day.

He silently walked down the driveway and across the path adjacent to the front of the building to the door.

The doorway, set back in the alcove, was enshrouded in darkness, and he had to feel for the doorbell. He heard it from inside the house, and despite its lovely chiming tone, it sounded like a cannon blast in this sleeping neighbourhood. He stepped back and watched the upper storey window at the left, counted slowly to fifteen and returned to the door, pressing the button again. Somewhere down the road a dog barked, and a light came on in the window. Dale breathed deeply, the excitement of his escape from the hospital gone, apprehension a rock weighing his stomach down.

He saw another light, deep in the house, go on through the glass arch in the front door, and saw a shadow descend the staircase towards him.

The alcove light above him came stabbing on, making him clench his eyes tightly closed. His brain reeled, and the glass of the night was crashing violently to the ground.

The door opened a few centimetres and Vicki stood there in her Nike T shirt, the one she slept in that reached past the top of her legs. Her arm was bound in a cast. Black rings were smeared across her face under her eyes, and her throat was blotchy with red marks. A bandaid covered her cheek. Her other hand was bandaged up. She looked shocked, then only looked at him. His heart sank sickly at the state of her.

"Hi." he offered weakly.

"What are you doing here so late? How did you get here? Your operation's in the morning."

"I'm not having the operation, Vicki." he said.

"How did you get out of hospital?"

"I just left. It took a bit of planning, but I changed my mind tonight. I'm keeping the brace."

"What about the Bridge? It's the only thing you can do to stop it."

You. Not us any more, just you. God, it hurt.

"I just decided that I can't live without it.....Um, I had this.....dream tonight. I had the brace taken out and everything went bad. Everybody stopped seeing me. Tim closed the investigation because the disturbances stopped. Barry was going to retire and he didn't see me very much. I had to move to this horrible little flat and have a twenty four hour nursemaid."

"Why is that so bad?" she asked, not knowing that it was life without her that had been so horrible, "You've done it before." Dale felt a hot block of sadness rise into his mouth, and closed his lips tightly to try to swallow it. He was terrified to tell her what he really wanted to say in case he broke down, but more in case it just didn't make any difference to her. Tears sprang to his eyes. He looked at the ceiling of the alcove, blinking hard.

"You didn't see me any more." he struggled to say evenly, "You got married to someone else. I kept the picture from the paper of you on your wedding day, and every time I looked at it I could feel you, wherever you were, trying to forget about me because of what I did to you."

Vicki looked at the floor, tears springing to her eyes as well. Her voice, when she spoke, was a quiet squeak. "I've been waking up all night from nightmares of your face while you were.....doing it. I have been trying to forget about you. I can't believe what you did to me."

"Vicki," he pleaded, tears running down his face now, "It wasn't me. I was watching TV with the rest of you, and the next thing I knew I woke up in hospital. Barry and Tim came and told me what I did and I didn't believe them. You've said yourself I couldn't hurt a fly, not with my personality type. How could I do something like that to you, of all people?"

Vicki glanced up at him, her eyes running with tears. "I don't know. All I know is that I was looking at your face and your hand was around my throat and it was your hand that broke my arm even worse than it was.....Do you know what they told me? My shoulder is splintered so bad I might never regain full use of it....." Dale could

only stare at her. ".....What are you really doing here, Dale?" Vicki asked, drying her eyes.

Dale swallowed hard but couldn't get rid of the lump in his throat. "I came to see you.....because it hurt so much when they told me you wouldn't come and see me. I came to tell you that it wasn't really me, and I hope you forgive me. I hope you believe that I could never hurt you. I lost you in this dream and it was the most painful thing that's ever happened to me, worse than falling off the Bridge, worse than all the years in the wheelchair. I know I hurt you, but.....I couldn't live with losing you in real life."

Vicki shrugged and looked at the ground. "Maybe I'm not really yours in real life." she said, "We haven't been together that long, after all."

It sent a knife through his heart. He cried harder, his voice fighting sobs. "I knew I had to be ready for you saying that." He tried to smile. ".....well, I'm keeping the brace. If I lose everything else, at least I'll still have my own body." Vicki kept staring at the ground. "I know you must have been frightened of me," Dale said, suddenly desperate to know, "but are you still now?"

Vicki shrugged again, and couldn't look him in the face. "What if I was?" she said, fighting now to stop the tears coming in a flood.

"It'd be worse, knowing that I've done that to you." He turned away from the doorway, looking out into the street. "I just wanted to tell you that I'm not having the operation, that's all. Maybe the only way to stop everything is to move away. If I'm far enough away from the Harbour Bridge, maybe the disturbances will stop. I might be risking someone's life being even this close." He gestured his hand in the direction of the city.

"How do you know it'll help?" Vicki asked. "What about the day in Barry's surgery? You were over thirty kilometres away."

He shrugged. "I don't know. I just know I'm not giving up my legs. I'm probably being stupid because I had a nightmare, but at least it's made me remember how pathetic and worthless I was before I ever had the brace."

God Almighty, a voice said inside him, I've fallen in love with this woman, I've lost my virginity to her, and here I am talking to her like we're doctor and patient.

Because I broke her arm and tried to rape her.

"I better let you get back to bed." he said.

No, a voice screamed. Please don't lose her.

He started to turn away.

"I don't understand you," Vicki said angrily, "why do you think you're only worth something because you can walk? You told me about your life before you had the brace. You admitted that it wasn't so bad."

"It was never as good as this." he said.

"Why can't you learn again? Your life can be just as fulfilling. You've still got a heart and a mind. You can do community work or charity work, you don't need legs for what you can achieve, Dale."

He was shaking his head before she had finished speaking. He'd never been more sure of anything in his life. "I can't, Vicki," he said, shaking his head, "you know yourself I'm not strong enough to live through it again, I'm not nineteen this time. I can achieve all those things you just said, but not if I couldn't walk. I wouldn't have the strength. I'd be worthless."

"Why do you think you're nothing without being able to walk? I didn't fall in love with your legs, Dale. I fell in love with you."

Dale looked back at her, a glimmer of hope. "I didn't mean to hurt you, Vicki. Please believe me, it wasn't me. If I'd been there I would have killed whatever was hurting you." He watched teardrops fall down her face, sparkling in the alcove light. She looked so beautiful and lost.

Vicki licked her lips. "I know you would have, baby." she said quietly, "Come inside before someone calls the police.....I won't leave you. You only had a bad dream, I wouldn't marry anyone else. I love you. Please come in."

They went upstairs hand in hand, both undressed and got into bed together, Dale laying behind her, wrapped tightly around. When Vicki felt his erection hardening against her bottom she kissed him softly and asked him to make love to her. Neither could go through with it.

XI

"I'm not having the brace out," Dale said, "I wouldn't survive through it."

"Don't be ridiculous, Dale." Tim said, "you're only thirty eight, you're physically-"

"I don't mean that," Dale interrupted, "I know I'd live through it, but I just decided that I'd never have a good life after it. What if I want to have children soon?" he squeezed Vicki's hand, sitting next to him on the lounge in Tim's Birchgrove office. Ever since he had shown up on her doorstep early that morning, she had held his hand tightly and not let go, unconsciously reaching for it if they had to let go for a few seconds for whatever reason (He had been watching her change gears in the late century Daihatsu her insurance company had provided while the purchase

of her new car went through; between every gear her hand returned to the passenger side of the car searching for his).

Of course, Dale had no intention of having children. The thought had never crossed his mind. But how could he explain to Tim that the possible future had been shown to him in a dream, one which he could never condemn himself to? Tim would (quite logically) say not to be silly, dreams were fanciful sparks of imagination in the brain, they were the cerebral cortex leaving it's rubbish out for collection every night, they didn't tell the future.

But Dale somehow just *knew*. He wasn't a fighter, and he would never be able to make his life work.

"Well," Tim said, "I don't know if you've stopped to consider this, Dale, but what about the disturbances? So far there have been over twenty deaths there because of paranormal phenomena, and maybe you've forgotten that you're the cause of that."

"You didn't say that, Tim." Dale corrected, "You said that the brace wasn't causing all this, only that it was receiving and translating it. That's what you told me the other night in hospital."

"All right, I'm sorry, you're right. I don't mean it's your fault, but the fact remains your brace is the answer to stopping it."

"And what about if it isn't?" Dale said angrily, "you know what happened in this dream I had, Tim? I had the brace taken out, and I lost everything. I lost the power to walk, I just lost everything. I went back to the Bridge after a couple of months and it all started again. Only this time, I couldn't run away, because I had no spine. So they finally got me, like they've been chasing me for twenty years." He suddenly remembered that he hadn't intended to mention the dream.

"Dale, you can't make decisions this important from your dreams!"

"But what if I'm right?" he said, "This idea that getting rid of the brace will get rid of the danger is only a theory, Tim. I'm not a guinea pig, it's my life we're experimenting with. Besides....I've found something that I don't want to give up now." He looked at Vicki's face. She was smiling softly at him, and through the broken skin and black eyes, through the hardship and terror and violence, that smile was a little doorway in her pretty features that let the real beauty shine through to him. They kissed softly.

"We've all seen the way you two feel about each other, and it's wonderful," Tim said, "it's probably contributed about seventy percent to the strength you've found to deal with this." His face grew grave. "But people are dying, Dale. Maybe you have to ask yourself what's more important."

"How dare you." Vicki said venomously to him.

"Vicki," Tim continued, "this thing won't stop until-"

"Like I said," Dale interrupted, "that's only a theory. I know you've been a support and friend to me Tim, but you've also had a microscope over me the whole time as well.....I think you're just disappointed because all I really am is a big scientific experiment, and you won't be able to see one of your great theories proved."

Tim looked evenly at him. "How can you say that to me?" he said quietly, "I might be a scientist but I'm a human fucking being. What kind of bastard do you think I am? I *have* been a support and a friend to you. At least I've tried. If you go looking for ulterior motives in all my research, that's your problem.....Jesus, Vicki, you're a scientist, surely you know how really attached we become to the subjects of our analysis? Look at the two of you, you're both living proof."

He stood and walked across to his desk, wrenching a drawer open and taking a book out. "See this? It's the Bible. Every night I kneel beside my bed and pray for this ordeal to end, for people to stop suffering. I've prayed for you to overcome your fear and to be safe. When I realised how the two of you started to feel about each other, I prayed for your blessing. I prayed for Albert and Donald as they went flying past me on fire.....so how dare you accuse me of treating you like an experiment."

Vicki looked at Tim, and Dale looked at the floor in sudden shame. "I'm sorry." he said like a scolded child, the years of timidity a hard habit to break, "I just.....want you to understand. If it was your power to walk you'd know how I feel."

In the silent seconds that followed, the three heard heavy footsteps approaching down the hall of the office block, and Barry came into the office like a wounded bull, with sweat running down his temples and his eyes wild with worry.

He pointed viciously at Dale. "I'm losing too much fucking time off work and not getting paid for it. I've had three regular patients leave because I can't ever honour their appointment times. I get woken up by you at two in the morning and all you do is ask me if hospital is like prison, then when I show up there this morning, out of my bloody mind with worry, they tell me that you tricked a nurse into letting you go in the middle of the night and then rang twenty minutes before your surgery to tell them you'd decided not to have the operation!"

"Sit down Barry," Tim said, "before you have a coronary. The coffee machine's on. Cups are in the cupboard."

Barry looked at Tim. "What's that for?" he demanded, pointing at the bible in Tim's hands, which the scientist held defensively, "have you all been having a sermon?"

"Barry, calm down." Dale told him.

Barry crossed the office and sank heavily into the lounge adjacent to Vicki and Dale. "Why'd you leave hospital, Dale?" he asked.

"I just don't want to risk it if it doesn't work. Like I was just saying to Tim, it's only a theory. It's my back we're talking about, I'd like it studied a bit deeper."

"And like I was just telling you," Tim said, "We can study it as deep as we like, but two and two always equal four, Dale, you have to trust me. You consulted me because you believed I could find the answer for you. Well, I've found it. And the fact that we've all grown pretty close in the process should give you more reason to trust me. You're not a guinea pig, you're my friend."

For several suspended seconds Dale felt the recognised the sudden unmistakable presence of a miracle in the room. Spending his life waiting for miracles like the sun turning black and chariots of fire lancing through the sky, like most people, he was taken by surprise by the real-life miracle of coming together to connect with other human souls.

"I mean, we can try to make two and two equal five all we like," Tim continued, "but people are getting killed while we do it."

Tim was completely right, of course (like always), but nothing he could say could wipe the horrible residue of that nightmare from Dale's mind.

"Call me what you like," he told the group now, "but I'm not strong or selfless enough to give up everything. I'll move overseas if that's what it takes, but I just can't do it."

"Dale, you don't know if that'll work." Vicki said.

"How the hell do we know if anything will work?" he said, getting out of the lounge and crossing to the coffee machine, leaving Vicki with her hands clasped nervously in her lap, fidgeting, her eyes downcast, uncomfortable to be out of his reach. He poured a cup, and turned to regard the others.

"I'd rather take a lethal injection than have to spend one more day in a wheelchair. I hated the thing. Didn't you ever see that, Barry?" Dale's voice dropped in pitch, but rose in a tone of anger.

"I hated that thing so much, but I was so quiet and reserved that even my hatred wasn't enough to show. I didn't even let myself see it. But inside, I was miserable being stuck in it every day. Now that I've lived these few years - no, just the last month, and seen what I can do, I've realised that there's no way I'd go back to sitting in that thing, watching people run around parks and laugh, drive cars, listening to the people below me having sex and loving it. I never had those things. You all ran along the beach and screwed your girlfriends and boyfriends and walked up and down your stairs and didn't think twice about it, while I couldn't even stand up. I missed all that.

"I'm sorry, but I'm keeping the brace. Because it hasn't only reconnected my spine, has it? In the last six weeks it's taught me how to

fight. When I was trapped in that supermarket, when I chased that thing up the pylon by myself, I've always been fighting with it, and sometimes winning. If I have to go back to that wheelchair again, there's no way I can fight. And ten thousand people can die for all I care, but I can't live if I give the brace up."

Barry sighed and looked at Vicki. "You're his psychiatrist. It sounds like a power complex to me. Dale, it happens when you fall in love."

"It's got nothing to do with me." Vicki said, "He taught himself his own worth before this happened to us. It was only because of his new sense of worth that we came together. When I first met Dale, he didn't have the self esteem to start or pursue a relationship. He overcame his fear of the Bridge, and that was the first step to everything."

"Maybe in his mind, Vicki," Tim said, "but the Bridge and whatever lives there is another thing altogether, isn't it? Don't you remember what you told me when we found you in the bathroom of Dale's flat? He told you that nobody could hear you, because everybody was watching *him* on TV. Don't you get that? All the stuff that happened on the Bridge on Saturday night, all the people who got killed, it was all a cheap diversion so that it could attack you without being caught. You were only lucky enough to be able to attract attention."

"It made a whole city of people suddenly turn on the TV so that it could take control of Dale's body and r-rape me?" Vicki said.

"Yes, very probably." Tim said. "It told you in as many words that everyone was watching it on TV so it could have you alone and defenceless."

Vicki shuddered and clutched her hands tightly. She looked down into her lap. Her fingers and knuckles were white. She shook her hands in the air, sighing. "Jesus, I've got to relax. You haven't got any gin in here, have you Tim?"

He shook his head, shrugging in apology. "You can relax all you want, Vicki, but what about next time?" Tim began ominously, "Of course Dale didn't mean it, it wasn't him attacking you, we all know that, but if he leaves the brace in, whatever possessed him could come back, and might just wait until it doesn't need a diversion. How do you fancy being in bed together at home in Edgecliff and Dale rolling over-"

"Don't, please." Vicki pleaded.

"You bastard." Dale yelled, "Don't you dare use scare tactics to turn her against me."

"I'm trying to make everyone see how important it is that we have the brace removed, Dale."

"Get used to it Tim, I'm leaving the brace in."

"Dale, you might be murdering people," Barry said calmly, "please think about it."

"I don't give a fuck about people," Dale cried. He pointed at Vicki. "I've got something I love, and I'm not giving her up."

"I've known you since you were twenty," Barry said, "and you've never lost your temper before. Ever. What's this all done to you?"

Dale turned to look at him. "It's made me grow up, out of all the shadows of the Bridge and the wheelchair and even my mum dying." He looked at Tim. "I'm not taking the brace out, that's it."

XII

The meeting at Tim's office broke up at about eleven. Dale returned home in a taxi and Barry drove back to his office and tried to repair the damage his absenteeism had made.

It was funny, but even though there was no way the trouble would just stop, now that Dale was keeping his abdominal brace, it seemed like they were meeting for the last time in this capacity. Like it would only be Dale and Tim now. Vicki wanted absolutely no part of it, and she knew Barry had always been sorry he'd first called Albert Dimitriou instead of minding his own business.

It seemed over.

Vicki drove out to her surgery at Bondi Junction, looking forward a great deal to the pleasure of telling The Pig to vacate her desk and office, her field research was over and his services were no longer required at her practice.

Felicity, Vicki's receptionist, would be glad to get rid of him as well. When she and Vicki spoke on the phone every few days, she would tell Vicki what a sleaze he was. He talked to her too much for her liking, and the conversation became too personal at times, despite Felicity's best effort to steer it in harmless directions.

He'd lean over the reception counter to chat her up, and she would lean back defensively, sure he was trying to see down her top. Vicki told her to put the prick into the sexual harassment board, but Felicity laughed, saying he would be gone soon, and they could get down to serious business again, bitching about the other doctors in the complex, swapping beauty tips, and emergency scout missions for chocolate during lunch.

Because it was over now. Dale was, as close as can be described in psychoanalytic medicine, 'cured'. Looking back, he had been an incredible subject. After only a handful of sessions and lots of field work, he had accomplished facing his fear and overcoming it. Obsessive compulsive disorder sufferers could take up to a year, rape or child abuse

victims could take decades. It had been only just over three weeks since she had first set eyes on Dale Milling, those couple of lifetimes ago.

Obviously an unfavourable turn had taken place in the parapsychological study, but that was out of her hands now, and she agreed with what Barry had said to her once, that he wanted nothing whatever to do with it. Tim was still employed chiefly by her (she tried not to think about his invoice at the end of the ordeal), but she had no further connection to the case.

If there was any real legal structure, she didn't know about it, but Tim was studying the disturbances more under his own pursuit than her instruction. It suited her fine. She only wanted her little house in Edgecliff, her little practice in Bondi Junction, and to begin to build a little life with Dale. Funny how all her dreams had suddenly become little, comfortable and compact, after being thrust into the midst of something so huge and crushing. She thought about the 1999 Mercedes that was waiting for her in a prestige car dealership somewhere in her dreams, but realised that she really wanted her little red Holden DeMode hatchback, which had been smashed by.....

Maybe (probably) the deaths would continue, and the terror. Dale had sounded so cruel, willing to damn the helpless population of a city, but in the little black pool of terror signposted *Truth* in her mind, she could stand with him and watch them all fall into hell, as long as she was safe with him. She'd been through too much, and she was too tired to cry for all of humanity any more.

Ordinarily she'd scold herself for being so selfish and heartless, but she felt she owed herself the indulgence of stealing Dale away while the rest of the world burned. She'd almost been raped by a demon wearing her lover's clothes, and she owed herself.

But for now, it was back to the office. She could tell The Pig to go back to whatever trough he crawled away from, she could send the equipment back to old matronly Mrs Pilanté at the AMA in Parramatta, with a note telling her to stick her equipment up her arse, and settle back with her sad helpless people, and feel the gratification and rush of love for humanity she got when they smiled and thanked her, yes they were feeling much better about their husband/mother/attacker/children/inability to orgasm.

They were all ants scurrying about an enormous cosmic garden, genetically implanted with worry and self pity, she saw that clearly now, but helpless, sensitive, emotional and lovable. No matter how many trillions were born onto this Earth, with all its hatred, its violence, its death and misery, its loss and indignity, its loneliness and anguish, they were all innocent and clueless and bewildered, and all deserved a little happiness sometime. And to think of them leaving Bondi Central

business tower with just a little happiness in their heart and a little sunshine in their smiles made Vicki sit in the middle of the night and cry with quiet joy.

She'd work too hard every day and develop an ulcer, and at nine o'clock she'd have a G&T beside her, and be up to page 120, where Drill Bryson had taken Lady Miriam in his arms and, despite her protests, kissed her forcefully on the lips, his muscles rippling with barely contained passion.

No, bugger it. She wouldn't work too hard and get an ulcer. She'd start leaving early and maybe by six thirty, she'd be Lady Miriam, and Dale would be her swashbuckling knight with torn short and blazing pectorals. The thought made her smile. Should she ask him to move in with her? He couldn't live in that flat forever, not with her laying in bed miles away, aching for him.

She had to close off his file, for starters, and then - start seeing patients, she supposed.

Dale had gone to sleep apprehensively. The force and determination he had felt that morning in Tim's office had dwindled a little bit. He should be overjoyed at laying down with Vicki again, but even that was denied him.

He would already have the brace out by now, and be at home recovering from the operation, his hired nurse tending to everything, organising his move to a smaller disabled persons flat, smoking the cigarettes he would one day steal, going on shopping trips that would one day make someone mistake him for a beggar.....

He shuddered. Never. He was so glad he'd stood his ground.

Still, he couldn't stop thinking about something Tim had said. The brace was still in, and he and Vicki were alone now.

Might he awaken from a euphoric, psychedelic dream of primitive bloodlust to find Vicki's unconscious beaten body, bleeding and cut, maybe with her arm snapped off altogether, impaled on some monstrous misshapen cock that didn't belong to him?

He was too tired to think of it, and if he was going to be worried about it now, he would be neurotic and insomniac in a few days. He couldn't spend his life afraid of their every moment alone together. Nothing had ever happened the same twice, anyway.

It never did happen again, but something else did, and it sealed the fate of everybody involved forever.

The nightmares came back, as usual, and it was almost a relief to be having a normal nightmare about the Bridge falling. No corpses, no vengeful spirits, nothing supernatural. Only Dale, nineteen years old and

so scared that his heart was beating one hundred and thirty beats per minute, an orchestra of clanging metal chasing him down a concrete path as he ran for his life.

The four people calling him desperately to safety, the two women, the jogger, the skinhead.

The path opening up beneath him.

Swallowing his body and spewing him into the empty air.

Clutching for anything, hanging suspended.

The grass and strip of road suddenly darting towards him.

Limbs flailing.

Screams falling upon his own deaf ears.

Falling,

falling,

falling.....

Violent movement and sound awoke Dale. The movement was himself sitting up and crashing down violently onto the bed, the sound was his own screams. A hundred knives of fire were embedded in his back, and he was in agony. After a second, he realised that he couldn't control himself.

He screamed and screamed.

She felt the wall of Dale's bathroom behind her head and the pain exploded like a light at the back of her skull. The thing was too quick, too strong. Every time she tried to recover it had struck her again. She knew that even if it gave her time she would be too terrified of the consequences to try anything. She felt the hand slide roughly down her short floral dress and the nails dug into her stomach. When the fingers found the waistband of her panties the hand dove in and cupped her crotch. The fingers were cold and obscene digging and prodding at her, and her whole body went stiff with absolute terror.

No, please, anything but that.

The dream melted and Dale and her were together, somewhere she didn't know, but she was sitting on the edge of some diffuse object (a table? bench? car?) while he stood close. Her arms and legs were wrapped around him. They were fully clothed, only their shirts were open and she rubbed her bare chest against his. The figure before her smelled lovely, like soap and aftershave, smooth and clean, quiet and caring, timid and a little nervous. It was Dale. That thing in the bathroom at his house had been something she had never seen, just wearing his clothes. The dream dissolved and she would be aware later in the waking hours that her sleep had turned sweet as her trust for Dale cascaded back into her heart.

Her sleep dissolved like the dreams and sounds broke through, becoming deafening.

Screams.

"Dale!" Vicki shouted, sitting up. His entire upper body was flying violently into a sitting position, then crashing back down so his body was straight as a board. Spit was flying from his lips in the dark, tears of terror were streaked across his face and neck, and his screams were pleading.

Vicki scrambled to a kneeling position and grabbed his shoulders. She was nearly thrown off the bed as he dragged her forward. He was like two huge blocks of iron with a joint in the centre. She couldn't even slow the speed of his body slamming back and forth, let alone stop him.

She stood quickly, fighting for her balance, looking at his back, trying to calm his screams of panic. The brace. It had gone haywire.

Something about the way he moved made her think of a record with a scratch, jumping back over and over to the same place. Maybe it would break a connection, or knock a battery loose, and anything she did would require major surgery to correct it, but Dale was beside himself with pleading desperate terror, and she had no idea what to do.

The next time he was upright, she used the instep side of her right foot and crashed it against the small of his back. The crack of flesh rang out, and Dale's body jolted stiffly, every muscle straining against the skin for a split second. He became inert, falling back down before he was still.

The tears of panic and terror were a splatter across his face into his hair. Saliva ran from the corners of his mouth. Sweat pasted his hair to his head and the pillow. His eyes were like saucers, wide with terror. His body shook fiercely.

Vicki brushed his hair away from his forehead and softly soothed him. "Ssssh.....you're all right now." she whispered, kissing him softly under his eye, brushing her cheek against his.

Dale shuddered violently and spoke "Wh-what happened to me?" he said, his voice shivering.

"I don't know baby," Vicki said, "what do you feel?"

Dale wiped his face clumsily. Vicki finished for him, wiping the fresh tears away. "I was in agony. " he said, "I could hardly feel myself going up and down, because I was in so much pain. But I knew I was going up and down, and.....I was terrified. I didn't know what was happening to me."

"You're all right now, it's over," Vicki whispered.

"How did it stop?" he asked, starting to breathe normally.

Vicki stopped for a second. She didn't want to induce fresh panic. It was the first rule in fire drills and psychiatry - stay calm no matter what. "It just stopped." she said. "Do you feel better?"

Dale looked around the room, wiped his face, and looked suddenly back at Vicki, fearfully. "Vicki....." he reached for her, clutching.

She put her arms around his shoulder. "I'm here, Dale, it's all right."

"Help me....." he whispered, ".....I can't feel my legs!"

The red lights of the ambulance flickered into the night, but it was silent, the siren off, as it sped down William Street towards the city. Once it reached George Street, the siren came on, and the 3.30 a.m. city traffic pulled out of the way as the ambulance wailed like a violently lit harbinger of death.

Vicki sat on a bench at the edge of the cabin, holding a handrail along the top of the wall, jeans pulled onto herself, a large jacket dragged around her Nike T shirt. With no bra and no socks underneath her brogues, she felt naked. The instruments, lights, machines and equipment around her would have been fascinating if she hadn't been so choked up with dread.

In front of her, an ambulance officer knelt over Dale, almost lifeless on the rolling bed. The officer had adjusted a machine near the bed head and slid it along two tracks that ran underneath the bed. An arm reached around and supported a large flat metal box that the attendant moved so that it lay right over Dale's stomach. He hooked the machine up to what looked like a notebook computer, and tinkered with it before it produced an X ray picture of Dale's back.

The ambulance attendant indicated the black shaft that was the brace, and the vertebrae of the spine. For the first time, Vicki saw the break in Dale's spine, between two vertebrae, a gap of several inches between them, the loose cartilage hanging off and floating in torsal fluid like seaweed from a wharf bollard. The attendant turned on what he said was the electricity receptor, which would detect electricity in the nerves and highlight the nervous system in the picture.

He flicked more switches and gradually a lighter system of cords and sinews came up on the picture. Below the brace, none were visible, and above, they darkened and finally became invisible closer to the brace.

"It doesn't look very good," the man said to Vicki, "see how there's no activity below the brace?" she nodded, "That's from the kick. It's obviously knocked something out of alignment in the connections or something, that's expected. But above the brace, see how the nerves become less active and stop altogether before they reach it?" Vicki agreed.

"There's been some nervous damage." The attendant said, "I can't say if he'll get feeling back naturally again."

"But that's what the brace is for!" Vicki said, suddenly fearful.

"I realise that, but the best electronic device in the world is no good without input. The nerves leading into the brace have been damaged, they may be inactive permanently. Without them, the brace is useless - He won't walk any more. The nerve damage may even extend to his neck, because if the nerve endings don't rejuvenate, they'll just rot.....I'm sorry doctor, he may end up a quadriplegic."

Vicki covered her mouth and began to cry, staring at the ceiling.

"He'll probably be fine as long as we neutralise the nerve endings." the attendant added, "It's just a matter of time."

The bleeping from some machine or another became erratic. The attendant reached over and bashed on the cabin wall to the driver.

"Faster!" he yelled.

Dale didn't like the doctor as soon as he walked into the ward at the Royal North Shore Hospital orthopaedic care clinic. His eyes were too intense, and the bearer of bad news should always have an easy, likeable face.

But at six in the morning, any doctor walking into a hospital ward where you're laying with no feeling in your legs is hard to like.

Vicki stood on one side, Tim sat near the end of the bed, his hands clasped, his head resting against the wall. He looked ragged from lack of sleep. Dale sighed. He wanted to be done with this little magic ghostbusting team. He wanted to be done with hospitals. He didn't want to have to go back to a wheelchair.

"Mr Milling?" the severe-eyed doctor asked. Dale nodded timidly, not wanting to own up to himself and have to find out.

"I'm Doctor Crisp," the man said, helping himself to another seat which he brought near the bed.

"I've been over every test we've made, and the news isn't the best I could have." Dale felt a lead ball drop into the pit of his stomach. That's it, he said silently to himself, if he mentions a wheelchair, this time I'll break into the drug repository myself and swallow a whole bottle of industrial strength Panalyx. I'm not going back.

"Dale, you've suffered irreparable damage to your central nervous system. There was an apparent short circuit of some sort in the abdominal brace, which caused the violent reaction. The computer lost its path, or....." he waved his hand in the air, "I'm not a computer engineer, I don't understand all the RAMs and bytes and chips of the situation, but suffice it to say that it was suddenly scrambled somehow, and the motor's reaction was to just.....go haywire as well. The prosthetic engineer explained it to me like a person walking a dog. If the person goes into hysterics and runs off in a panic, the dog doesn't understand why, only knows it has to follow the same irrational behaviour. Anyway, some sort

of loop was created, which resulted in the repetition of your actions, but why the motor was throwing you back and forth depends on the jumbled commands coming from the computer, but that's all very technical and not very necessary."

"Whose fault is it?" Vicki asked, "is the brace faulty? We'll sue the manufacturer."

Dale looked terrified and resigned all at once, wound up like a spring that might zoom to the roof or roll weakly off the bed like a slinky.

"The fault doesn't completely rest with anyone." the surgeon assured her, "The brace shorted because it was overridden temporarily.....We could blame the manufacturer, but the brace is fitted with resistors to guard against short circuit and special buffers against power surges. They left no stone unturned and prepared for the worst possible surge of electricity a human body could receive in normal society."

"Well, it obviously wasn't enough!" Vicki said.

"Doctor Holt, the brace was shorted out by a surge of power far and above any imagined scenario.....There was a rumour among medical circles when this brace was released that they obtained a dead body from death row in America and fitted it with the brace before putting it back in the electric chair for another shock. Even that wasn't enough to break the resistors."

"Well where would a power surge that strong come from in my house?" Vicki demanded, her voice angry, trying to blame something. Dale could see by the doctors face that he understood her anger, and that he was only the nearest convenient punching bag. He was probably used to it. When loved ones wanted to hate God, he was the closest thing to Him in the room.

"One of the surge buffers is an external guard against any outside electrical influences." He continued, "There's no way the brace can be shorted from outside, not even if you get hit by lightning. The surge has to come from inside.....where I don't know, because the brace is only capable of producing a surge of about a hundred volts. The computer isn't a big one and the battery is low output. The whole system is designed to be long lasting, but not strong."

"How strong was the surge?" Tim asked.

The doctor consulted the pad in front of him. He looked up, addressing Dale rather than Tim. "I don't know how they find out, some sort of heat test.....eight thousand and sixty volts."

"Ssshhhit." Vicki whispered.

Dale spoke for the first time. "So it could only have come.....from my brain?" The doctor paused, and nodded slowly. Tim started to speak, but Dale cut him off. "What's going to happen to me?"

"We have to operate on your nervous system, in your lower back. The nerves leading into the brace through your spinal cord are rotting, and we have to neutralise the major nerves before the decomposition spreads up into them. It's called 'cutting and burning', we sever the nerve and expose the live end to heat to seal it. I'm afraid the nerves below your stomach area won't be working any more, Mr Milling."

[illegible]

"You're comparatively lucky," the doctor continued, his voice a background drone of music against Dale's crashing heartbeat. He didn't see tears come to Vicki's eyes or Tim look at him in deep concern. If Dale had been coherent, he might have screamed at Tim, asking if he was happy now.

"If we hadn't been able to stop decomposition of the nerves, it might have spread to your neck. You might have ended up a quadriplegic. This way, you'll have normal, healthy use of your arms, neck and upper body. I'm sorry Mr Milling, but we have to remove the brace, and you won't ever walk again."

If there was a God, Dale hated Him for sending him back to the wheelchair forever. He hated him more for the irony - when Dale had made the first real decision of his life, one that had felt so *right*, this God had overruled him.

XIII

It wasn't a dream any more. A nurse came to get him. She asked him to follow her, please. She spoke excitedly, trying to make him see the thrill of his new life.

Just like the nurse in the dream.

She offered him the wheelchair she had brought to take him to the operating theatre.

Just like in the dream.

He wanted so badly to accept, to let it go right now, so that maybe this last walk was a turning point in the space time continuum, and that if he accepted the ride his life would turn for the better instead of his most dreaded worst, like in the dream. But he had already lost the strength to give up the last seconds he would ever spend on his feet - maybe never had it - so he smiled and thanked her anyway, said he would rather walk.

Just like in the dream.

As he walked through the door of the ward into the corridor he suddenly, ridiculously imagined all the times he had entered his flat in Ramsgate, all the times he had walked into the office in Barry's surgery, the few times he had walked into Vicki's house, all the times he walked through the bathroom door at his childhood home. A ridiculous thing to think of, doorways, but he was overcome with a numbing sadness, realising for some reason that it was the last time he would ever walk out of a doorway in his life. He reached up and touched the door jamb as he went through.

The nurse let him into the operating prep room and asked him to lay down on the bed. He sat on the edge of the tall mattress covered bench and wriggled his toes, as if clutching for the floor, trying to hold its grip.

Dale's feet left the floor for the last time.

The nurse smiled at him to wait, saying that the anaesthetist would be here soon. Dale looked up into the fluorescent bar along the ceiling of the room.

Vicki and Tim had wanted to stay to see him into the operation, but Dale had told them both to leave and go to work. Barry had even turned up and wanted to stay. Dale had refused them all. He couldn't understand why.

But before they left they all saw him in turn on his own, as if saying goodbye.

Tim had spoken softly for awhile about technical things before Dale realised his voice was wavering. Tim cried, and told Dale that he hadn't really realised what having the brace meant. In his office those few days ago, he said, he had only been thinking in electrical terms. Now that it had become a reality, he couldn't stop the guilt that was crushing him. He begged Dale to forgive him. Dale told him it wasn't his fault, and sent him away.

Before Tim left, he told Dale he was closing the investigation, and wanted no more part of it. It was over.

Barry wished him the best, and tried to convince him that his life would still be full and happy. He told him that the whole thing had been such a strain on them all and he was glad it was finished. Dale was shocked to see his old friend looking so tired, now that he had time to really notice. Barry told Dale that the whole thing had been a lesson to him. He wasn't a twenty six year old undergraduate any more, and it was time to think about retirement.

Vicki came and the two could only look at each other most of the time, tears and shattered hopes in their eyes. Vicki had stammered that they would try to make sure things didn't change too much, but Dale's sob made her stop.

Before she left, Vicki said that her emotions were in a heap, and she had been thinking on the way to the hospital of getting counselling for herself with a colleague. Dale had been too frightened to ask his name.

Just before 8:30 a.m., the anaesthetist had come into the prep room with a tall gas bottle and a mask. He had asked Dale how he felt, told him about some of the wonderful things that were waiting for him in his new life, and strapped the gas mask to Dale's face.

Dale panicked against the gas and desperately fought it, but it overcame him in a cloud of mist. He fell asleep flexing his toes and ankles, feeling their presence for the last time.....

He was being led down a long corridor, where the walls were made of light. Thank God, he said to himself, I've died in the middle of the operation and I'm going to heaven. I never believed in You but You loved me after all, and now You're bringing me into Your home.

People and faces drifted in and out of focus at the edge of his vision. Hands clasped his arms, warm and soft, maybe angels, leading him forward.

* * * *

The surgeon scrubbed himself up and walked into the operating theatre, barking commands at the nurses and assistant surgeons. He noted the time at eight fifty. It was an easy but huge job, locating, cutting and burning all the major nerves, unclamping the brace, and taking it out.

"Poor bastard." he muttered at the inert body of the patient on the operating table.

* * * *

The doctor was there at the gate to meet him, with the nasty thin eyes that are no good to bear bad news.

it's a relatively simple operation to get there, he said, pushing the gate aside, **all you have to do is cross this bridge.....** he gestured away to the Old Sydney Harbour Bridge, spanning a deep harbour of filthy light and screaming anguished faces.

but remember, the doctor said, **off the edge is the sea and kingdom of the damned. you don't want to go there. your path lies straight onward, where it leads into eternity. but it's a shaky road.....**

The Bridge began to rock and sway. Pieces of the arch began to fall loose and crash to the ground. A bus was hit. A train plunged through a hole and plummeted into the eternity of the damned below.

.....so be careful. You don't want to *faaaaaaaalllllll!*

* * * *

The surgeon looked around at the monitors and machinery, checking vital signs and readings off in his head. Everything looked ready. He turned to the nurse and took the marker from her, bending over the patients back.

* * * *

He had run, his tie streaming out behind him, his bag forgotten, kicked aside in his panic, his apple and newspaper now swimming in the metal debris, and finally reached the end. A group of people were calling desperately to him. Two young women, office workers by the looks of them, a man in jogging gear, a frightening looking young guy in skinhead gear, and a narrow eyed doctor, calling him ever onward, smiling. He could hear the doctor murmuring, even over all the noise. The words puzzled him;

- was a rumour in medical circles that they obtained a dead body from death row in America and -

Dale put on a final burst of speed because of the smile on that face, enticed by its promise, and leapt clear over a yawning crevasse that had opened up beneath him. He reached the doctor, and the crashing and orchestra of falling metal dwindled away behind him. The other people were gone, and he and the doctor stood outside a door made of bars.

* * * *

The surgeon consulted the marks he had made on the patients back, a criss-cross of incision and limiting marks. He asked for the scalpel and leaned back over, ready to begin.

* * * *

The doctor smiled again, wider, but his smile had become dark, menacing. Dale looked into the eyes, and gasped.

It was *it!* He'd seen it a million times, of course, in dreams, on the Bridge while he was still alive and mixed up in all this with Vicki and Tim and Barry and Albert, he had seen it in the face and in the flesh, he

had *battled* it, and now he finally recognised it. The intelligent force Tim had been searching for, the electromagnetic field they had all seen and been hurt by, this was *it!*

He had recognised it, but too late.

He had let it lead him into its filthy chamber.

The unnamed, unknowable thing picked him up by the neck and shoved the barred door open. The room was small and grimy and its walls were made of disease. In the far corner was a dirty down-lamp that shone down onto the greasy, pus-encrusted floor. Sitting in the island of tarnished light was an old, battered wheelchair, *his* old wheelchair, the same blue seat and handles, the stickers from Weet-Bix packs across the backrest.

The demon carried him by the neck across the room and slammed him down into the chair, producing leather straps from underneath and lashing his hands to the armrests, his ankles to the footrests. Dale thrashed in terror. From above, it produced an upside down metal bowl attached to wires that twirled away into the invisible darkness. The thing put the bowl on Dale's head, and jeered at him.

they need live death row inmates to test resistance of the brace.

* * * *

The heart monitor bleeped suddenly. The surgeon looked up and his brow furrowed, the scalpel just brushing the patients back.

"Now what?" he mumbled.

* * * *

The satyr reached out into the dark for a heavy iron electrical switch. He turned back to Dale and its lips crinkled back from its teeth and snarled.

the brace must be removed by electrocution it gibbered.

"No," Dale pleaded with it. The thing smiled and threw the switch.

The people of Sydney were getting used to fearing the Harbour Bridge again. Now they had cause for terror. Fresh outbreaks of unexplained and deadly electrical activity assailed the site without warning. The last terrible episode had caused the deaths of seven policemen, four scientists, and four army reserve personnel. Now, the Bridge was bare. The police forensic and scientific study operations had been moved far away from either end of the Bridge, where they were deemed safe. Nobody went onto the Bridge without every possible safety

measure accounted for, or without authorisation from the police chief overseeing the whole operation.

The Police Minister and Minister for Defence had issued joint press releases stating that no explanation for the violent electrical activity was found, and the site was in a state of emergency. Conclusive study was very hard because sending teams of people and equipment onto the Bridge was just too risky, given the circumstances and speed of previous onslaughts, and findings would be a long time coming. Sydneysiders were warned to prepare for not being able to use the Sydney Harbour Bridge until at least March.

At 8:53 a.m., as a scalpel was being lowered to the back of a middle aged ex-paraplegic in St Leonards, the train lines exploded with violent sparks of energy, shaking and crackling loudly, like lightning. Within seconds, it was over.

Vicki's phone rang while she was working on old files. She wasn't due to start seeing patients again until tomorrow, and she was using the day to catch up on all her paperwork.

Although, in truth, she was more often than not staring out the window sadly. Dale would be a slab of meat on a hospital table right now, and the one thing that he believed gave him freedom was being taken from him.

He had tried to be brave, which had made her cry all the more, and tell her not to bother coming, that there was no point. Because of that, she vowed to get some work done and not think about it for a few hours. For his bravery, she owed him that. But God, it was hard.

She picked the phone up and someone introduced himself as Dr Stephenson. He said that he had obtained her number from Dale's hospital admittance form, where he had nominated Vicki as his next of kin. Vicki felt the colour drain from her face as the doctor told her that complications had arisen during the operation. He solemnly advised her to make her way to the hospital as soon as she could, as the surgeons were now fighting for Dale's life.

Vicki ran out to Felicity in tears, telling her to call Barry Paul and tell him to get to the hospital straight away.

The beast clanked the switch back to the off position and raised the bowl off Dale's head. He saw steam rising from his skin and felt the heat on his scalp.

Jesus, he thought, it electrocuted me. I must be dead.

The thing rested its claw on the armrest and reached for Dale's stomach.

He felt the icy/scalding claws sear into his flesh and the hand searched inside his guts for the brace. He felt the claw close around it and his whole abdomen exploded outwards onto his lap as the thing wrenched the brace out of him. He felt his organs, still beating, slide out onto his lap and ooze down to the filthy floor. He felt a river of blood and bile surge upwards in his throat, and he vomited it down the front of himself. The only thing he didn't feel were his legs. The brace was out, like everyone had promised, and now he was back.

Back in the chair.

The thing threw the brace across the room, where it clattered off the wall and clunked to the floor, smeared with Dale's innards.

yes, it is done, the thing rumbled, **and they come...** it gestured off into the air, and Dale's mind reeled as he saw Vicki, miles off, trapped, struggling, in the things other hand. She was trapped, and her life was in danger, and only a few miles away.

The sight of Vicki made him enraged. Strength flooded back. The thing turned back to him again, fear in whatever it had for a face, the same fear he had seen on his knees at the supermarket when he had forced it out, the same fear he had smelled as he followed close to it as it fled up the pylon of the Bridge.

The brace was back, his stomach was in. His legs tingled with pins and needles and he stood up, the cracked leather straps snapping under the sinews of his wrists and ankles. He crashed past the trembling thing and burst through the barred door.

Vicki came out of the carpark of the Bondi Capital Tower at almost forty, and screeched out into the traffic. She desperately tried to steer straight but slammed sideways into a new Peugeot. The other car crashed up onto the garden on the median strip, and an orchestra of horns followed her and she planted her foot flat in the direction of the city.

The patient had started to jerk and convulse. The heart monitor screamed the patients death throes for him and the surgeon shouted for the electroshock equipment. He had already decided in his mind that the surgery would be postponed if the patient lived.

Most probably, it would be postponed for eternity. The poor man was a hairs breadth from death.

Dale jerked once, stiffly, and struggled over onto his back, sitting up. The whole team froze. After enough anaesthetic to knock out a horse until next week, plus sleeping tablets the night before (the idiot nurse who gave him those would get the bloody sack quick smart, the surgeon had already decided), plus standing at deaths door with his failing heart in his

hands, he just sat bolt upright as if waking up from a light and disturbed sleep.

Or a nightmare.

The men and women in the room were so stunned, they could only watch as the patient tore the robe off himself, leaving only the canvas hospital pants, struggled off the operating bench, and knocked over a tray of instruments in his urgency to get out, which crashed like glass across the floor.

"No way, we're not even allowed out there ourselves," the policeman said, "no public access whatsoever, I'm sorry, you'll have to go back and try the tunnel."

"Christ," Vicki pleaded to the eyes somewhere behind his sunglasses, "my boyfriend's in hospital dying, I have to get there. Please!?" The police sergeant moved like he was blocking her way in case she made a break for it, and put his hands on her arms.

"I'm sorry madam, but if you go out there you'll end up dead yourself. I'm authorised to detain you if you try." Vicki cried in frustration, backing away from the policeman and dragging the hair away from her forehead. She turned back to look past the barricades at the approach up onto the Bridge, the tollgates in the near distance.

Dale ran out the front of the hospital. He had been a blur past terrified and shocked staff and had left the building without meeting any resistance. The Bridge was a twenty minute drive away. He ran out onto the road and began waving his arms at passing cars, begging for them to stop. Horns blared at him, and frightened motorists rolled up windows and sped up to get away.

Dale turned to look towards where the Bridge was in the distance, swearing and crying. He turned back to the footpath, and a lady was fighting with her keys to get into her car, looking nervously at him. When she saw him looking at her, her face darkened with fear and she tried to hide from him.

As Dale ran to her, she turned and began pleading with him.

He put his hands up to show he was harmless. "No, don't.....I don't want to hurt you," he took the keys from her hand and looked inside the car. It was an automatic transmission. Thank God. There were two pedals, and he didn't have to try to remember how to change gears from seeing it on TV. He let himself into the car, looking at the woman, "I can't.....explain,.....don't worry,.....I'm really sorry."

He slammed the door and pumped the accelerator as he turned the key. The car roared to life and he flicked the lever to *D*. The car lurched forward, crashing against the back corner of the one in front. Dale

pressed the accelerator until the tyres were screaming and the other car had been pushed aside. He lurched out into the traffic, clipping the bull bar of a four wheel drive as he fought to stay within a lane, and tromped on the accelerator pedal as hard as his strong, working feet could.

The police sergeant glanced around for the hysterical young woman. Poor thing. *If* her boyfriend was really dying in hospital, that is. Still, risks were risks, and he didn't want to become a media spectacle.

The constable screamed a warning to those near him and threw himself aside as the light blue Daihatsu roared past, clonking the thin barricades aside. It raced off towards the Bridge.

The police guards stood up, swearing and muttering. One called out to the sergeant.

"Sarge, let me go after her. I'll get the little bitch!"

"Fuck off," the more senior officer answered, "let her risk her own stupid life. Nobody goes after her. You'd better call and report it in, though, maybe get a helicopter up there."

XIV

Dale sent the Burgundy Mitsubishi Lancer down the Pacific Highway through North Sydney at over ninety kilometres per hour. He was blessed with only having gotten two red lights, one of which he had ignored, climbing the median strip and waiting for a break in the cross traffic to continue.

He laid his hand on the horn almost continually. A Mazda changed lanes ahead of him, and he jerked the wheel to the left to pass it, hearing the squeal and feeling the earthquake as he hit the Volvo beside him. The Mazda hurriedly got out of the way and Dale roared forwards again, leaving the Volvo spinning and fighting for control behind him. He sped past Thomas Ross Tower, his place of work that day in 1998 when the Bridge had fallen, and the barricades became visible at the bottom of the hill, where the road veered right and began the long climb to the Port Jackson Freeway.

* * * *

Vicki glanced in her rear view mirror again, but she was sure by now that she hadn't been followed. She sighed heavily, a brief flicker of worry at what she would tell the insurance company. There had been heavier barriers at the tollgates, the sort where the arm rose into the air to let you underneath.

She had seen a million cars drive through them in a million movies, and she knew what to expect. The car would smash effortlessly through the wood like it was paper maché, and the heroic driver would go on to save the day.

Except that, she now realised, they probably *were* paper maché in the movies. The wood had been so heavy that she had felt the whole car jolt on its chassis. The barrier had broken roughly in protest, not in hundreds of spectacular flying pieces. And it had bashed the headlight and corner panel in so badly she was amazed the car still worked.

The Bridge was completely empty, probably for the first time since 1932 when it was built. No, she realised, it was empty the other night, after we all finally got off alive. Except for Albert and Donald.

She glanced down to the time on the dashboard. The call had come at five past nine. It was ten past nine now. Was he already dead? She prayed not, and pressed the accelerator heavier into the floor.

* * * *

Dale would have crashed through the barriers as well, he was so knotted up with tension, but the usual council barriers were in front of a continuous unbroken line of police cars, stretching the entire way across the road. He came sliding to a halt, the tyres whispering and rasping on the road, and jumped out.

Police officers were running forward, but he had run to the barriers and leapt over them before they reached him, his hospital pants swishing in the wind. A group of three officers chase, but Dale bolted with all his strength, hardly noticing them. One of the police officers drew his pistol and shouted a warning, wondering about the strange pen markings across the mans back, as if someone had been trying to draw a skeleton on him. The man continued running now, shouting something. It sounded like a name. Nicki, or Mickey.

The policeman stopped and aimed carefully at the back of the mans knee.

A blue light exploded across the road between Dale and the four policemen. Dale looked back in fear. The light disappeared as quickly as it had come and the four officers were rolling around on the road, covering their faces, screaming with pain. Dale turned on his heel and ran, his bare feet slapping down on the highway.

* * * *

Vicki glanced down at the clock again. She was passing the middle pylon. When she looked up, her foot instinctively slammed onto the

brake. She fought the Daihatsu back and forth so it didn't fishtail, and came to a screaming halt in the middle of the road.

Down the highway a few metres she was *sure* she could see something moving. The sky was blue and cloudless above and the day was clear as crystal, but on the very edge of her perceptive vision, she thought she could see the drifting outline and shape of some huge thing ahead, maybe ten feet tall, or more.

Before Vicki had a chance to decide whether to ignore the thing or back up in terror, she saw the outline jostle and swish - no, it was hardly even an outline now that it moved. It was just a sense of movement. Was she imagining it, like she imagined the two tiny white lights that seemed to blink on? Two tiny lights.....right where the eyes would be.

Vicki was wrestling the gearshift lever into reverse and trying to judge the distance of the thing when the flurry of movement was right on top of her. The bonnet of the Daihatsu buckled and a huge dent appeared in the middle. The car leaned down at the front under some crushing weight.

Vicki froze. She hadn't felt her foot slip from the clutch in terror and the car stall.

She could almost see the air drift under the force of some object that was not quite in her world, and three pinpricks appeared on the windscreen in front of her. She stared at them while they became scratches, as if three invisible blades were being drawn across the glass. The high, keening whistle stabbed at her ears and the two tiny white lights blinked at her from beyond the glass. The weight on the bonnet shifted, making the metal creak and buckle noisily under it, the car shaking. The scratches followed each other in a circle, as if

- as if they were attached to a hand. Or a claw -

Vicki shuddered but tried not to breathe. If she couldn't see it properly, maybe the invisible electromagnetic barrier between their worlds clouded its vision of her as well. Maybe if she heaved the door open and bolted, it would lose what sight of her it had.

The scratches stopped, and three round holes appeared at each point they had travelled to. Something had punched through, effortlessly.

Vicki shrieked as the windscreen was suddenly torn from its frame, causing the car to rock violently, and hurled down the road where it smashed on the asphalt.

The lights gazed down from above, and she leaned across to reach for the doorhandle.

Something shot out in front of her, she *felt* the air from it this time, and she felt a vice-like grip that felt like a wet metal clamp around her wrist. It easily dragged her arm back and pressed it into the seat beside her. Her other arm was gripped and forced down as well.

Fear threatened to overcome her, and panic fought its way upwards. Despite the loathsome feel of the binds

- *claws* -

holding her down, she fought it back down. She had, for some reason, to stay still and calm. The thing was moving. She was more aware of it because the shifting bulk made the car rock, but she also saw something, a huge shaggy torso, an enormous angry head, huge upper leg muscles on legs that were maybe five feet long, a huge swaying pair of diseased balls.

She felt a crushing weight and heard the rustle of the hair on the object as it came down on top of her, far bigger than her, smothering her. The weight made her groan. The thing smelled of decay and sewer-shit. She knew they were claws flattening her arms to the seat now, and she pressed herself back in the seat in terror, turning her head away and squeezing her eyes closed. She heard an ancient, rumbling voice from a dug up crypt in her ear, disembodied like a radio broadcast that had travelled for thousands of years and millions of miles. It was so deep, so full of malevolence, so slow and lumbering that it might have been for another universe where ears are attuned to lower frequencies, because she hardly understood it. It sounded like;

I'll have you this time

This time.

Oh God.

When it had been wearing Dale's skin in his bathroom, it had been almost bearable. Compared to this.

A word she had seen in her books suddenly plagued her like the maddening buzz of a mosquito in her ear.

Inkubba. It was a Mesopotamian word, which the Romans had translated the word to *Incubus*, a god worshipped in 7000 B.C., a man immortalised by the evil deities, who plagued the Earth committing the same atrocities he had been put to death for; the bashing, rape and mutilation of over forty thousand women.

In more modern times, women still recounted being sexually molested in their sleep by what they dreamed to be horrible monsters. The word *Incubus* had stuck. Vicki prayed to Christ it hadn't, because if there wasn't any word for it, maybe it wasn't on top of her right now.

The backrest of the drivers seat flew down under her, crashing to the front of the seat behind, so she was laying down. She froze with terror.

The thing still had her elbows pinned to the seat, but she had reached in so her hands were clutched protectively around her crotch, numb tears falling down her stony face.

The thing reached down and ripped her dress up to her neck with one motion of its clawed hand.

It tore her underwear from her with another, the elastic biting so hard into her skin that it drew blood.

It split her knees apart with a crash, against the drivers side door and the handbrake lever. She didn't know what was more horrible, the thing, what it was doing to her, or the fact that it still wasn't what could be termed clearly visible. The sun and Bridge were plainly visible above her, beyond the old cracked vinyl of the car ceiling, and she had to concentrate almost to the point of discomfort to fix on any aspect of the drifting air/light creature. Things were distorted behind it, things wavered as its outline passed, solidity drifted in and out of fragments.

Vicki was too terrified to scream, and she fought and fought, but fear had become a desperate animal, thrashing in its cage to get out, and for the first time ever she felt the animal become so strong and frenzied that it burst free. A hard weight rose through her and she screamed shrilly and brokenly, pleading and crying as if it would make sense to the thing.

One claw laid flat on her stomach and the pain of the weight was unbearable. Her screams became gurgles, and she was denied even the delirium of panic.

In a split second of recognition, Vicki saw the entire deal. The thing had all the power over her mind and body, even her *earth*, that it wanted. It wasn't just a monster touching her - if it wanted to it could empower her to be so overwhelmed with desire that she would commit the same atrocity, it could empower her to think it was Dale laying on top of her and that this was beautiful lovemaking she was experiencing.

But instead, it made her see it as a huge shaggy thing that she couldn't see and couldn't fight that would split her in half with its enormity and it might even be so bad it would kill her. She understood that it made her feel all these horrors because it was a murderer and a torturer.

Then, came the fire, jetting and burning into her. She tore.

* * * *

Dale heard the scream from the car far ahead. He screamed Vicki's name and tried to run faster. He saw the car bouncing up and down, like a cartoon parody of a couple in the back seat at lovers lane. Except that it wasn't a cartoon and the car was nearly leaving the road, and if anything was coming down that hard on top of a woman it would break her back.

* * * *

The creature threw its head back as if it was having a violently satisfying orgasm, like a human man would instead of an ogre from another universe. Vicki was too numb through her body and soul to feel the thing grow inside her, and she didn't feel the wave of boiling fluid fill her.

An explosion of light erupted from her body as it distended in reflex, skin stretching and breaking, ribs cracking, her vagina and uterus exploding inside her. Jets of blood spurted from where her skin had split and dribbled across the dashboard and floor of the car.

She lay there, her fingers slack, in silence.

* * * *

Dale saw the car rock and shake, erupting light. He was only twenty metres away from it in the middle of the lonely highway when the door opened and a shape not quite there appeared, a huge thing over nine feet in height. He didn't see it, but knew he recognised it. The thing stepped out of his mind and onto the Port Jackson Highway. Its face was invisible at this distance, only a drifting air pocket that, if questioned, he would say wasn't there at all. But he recognised it. He felt it from here.

It was his adversary.

Vicki's inert body was dragged out of the car and held aloft. Her dress was hitched up around her bra, her hips limp and her pubic area glistening with blood, her thighs and groin an angry nest of bruises, her eyes closed and resigned. The thing brought her to it by the neck, and sealed its face on hers. Even from this far away, Dale heard its putrid breath fill her up with some unholy semblance of life. It spun once as it breathed into her, and Vicki's eyes were open again. She looked slackly at Dale, and her head dangled again. The dress fell and mercifully covered her.

Dale was frozen. The thing promised, threatened that it would kill them both if he moved. And suddenly, Dale knew it would. Whatever supernatural the Bridge had produced had been a game, and he and Barry and Tim and Vicki and Albert and Donald had been chess pieces. It could have wiped the board clean any time it wanted to, destroyed the Bridge, the city and maybe the universe as soon as Dale had awakened it, and now it would.

Dale didn't care about the world or the Bridge. Vicki was badly hurt, and that was all he cared about.

He perceived the dancing light rise to its full height and draw back its arm, sending it plummeting into Vicki's head. A shower of blood sprayed into the air as her face opened across her bottom lip. Blood ran down her chin and into her dress like the make-up of some neo inter-

planetary clown. Her eyes opened weakly again, fixed momentarily on the head of her captor.

Her mind was useless, just like Dale's had been. Just as he had fallen, his brain and body had hummed like a radio between stations, Vicki had no more knowledge what was happening to her, except the agony of the claws around her throat, her singing and smashed chin, the warmth down her face, her ruptured insides and the poison sperm only now dripping out of her.

The thing rose up and struck her again, and again, sending blood splattering her hair and face, the road and the thing itself. Its claw was a dream from another world, sticky with blood from this one, floating in thin air. Vicki's head jerked back and forth, her neck starting to snap.

Dale's madness snapped as Vicki's had and he started to run forward.

The creature held Vicki towards Dale and suddenly its neck stretched out appallingly, its head lengthening, its mask of rage becoming wilder, and it lifted Vicki's blood-streaked hand with its other claw, sending its jaws crunching on her forearm.

Vicki's hand and wrist thumped to the road, rolled over once, and was still. As Dale ran, he saw her glance in disbelief at her severed arm, and look back at the monster.

The thing threw her body behind it where she slumped, disfigured and clearly dead, and its arm stretched across space, its fingers of dirty ether closing around Dale's throat and stopping him short. It dragged him forward and snarled loudly in his face

- (except it wasn't a sound in his ears, it was in his *mind*) -

the two seeing deep inside each other for many seconds, weighing chances, feeling for weak spots, seeing true selves. Enemies by blood and love.

Overhead, a helicopter chopped through the air and began descending towards the Bridge. Sirens sounded and a small squadron of emergency vehicles, three police sedans, two police utilities and an ambulance, came speeding from the north, More sirens were screaming from the other direction, towards the city.

It screamed in rage or fear or triumph, its head rolling back and forth, its mouth gaping, and the road and Bridge became alive around it.

There was a colossal explosion and a wave of heat that bathed the city. Cool blue/orange flame, like that of an electrical explosion, danced hundreds of feet into the air, the Bridge suddenly gone in a thunderous fireball that licked the harbours surface, boiling it. The sound was incredible, the fire was inescapable.

The fire disappeared and the Sydney Harbour Bridge was left smouldering and black. Smoke drifted away in a gigantic tidal wave towards the west. The city had stopped short in shock. Cars were burning, trees were withered and on fire near the harbours edge. The only sounds were the sirens that sang a song of pain on both sides of the harbour.

Dale was laying face down on hot dirt. He rolled over, groaning, his body in pain as if from a bad fall or a bout of punishing sport. His nylon hospital pants, previously light fairy-blue, were streaked with blood and dirt, torn down one leg to reveal an angry gash, still dribbling.

He sat up slowly, his muscles aching, fleeting memories dancing in shock in his head. He squinted against the sunlight and looked around. He was sitting in Bradfield Park, under the Northern end of the Bridge, where Burton street ran underneath the Port Jackson Highway as it began its flight across the harbour.

The Bridge was there in all its grandeur, only it was covered with black blotches, as if scorched. Smoke rolled and wafted away in the wind in enormous clouds down the harbour. The flags, Dale could only just see, hung in burnt tatters on top of the three main arches.

Underneath him, Bradfield Park was scorched and dead, the grass mostly burnt, the trees wilted and shrivelled from the burst of heat. People sat or laid around in shock. Police and ambulance crews ran everywhere. Sirens sang all over the city, from every direction.

Dale stood up slowly.

From a sore back to this. So timid, so quiet, so unassuming a lifestyle, to laying on his face in a park on the North Shore that had been decimated by the Sydney Harbour Bridge exploding underneath his feet while ghosts and demons danced around his head, challenging him.

Why was he alive? They *were* afraid of him. Suddenly he realised that *he* was the bigger of the two. He was like the shark teeming with remora. They needed him to glide along their way, causing havoc to other fish, knowing every second that if food became scarce, the shark would thrash and shake his passengers off and devour them all.

And they couldn't just kill him. He was a battery for them. The brace would be a useless lump of steel and wire if he was dead, just like he'd be a useless lump of meat if he had taken the brace out.

Jesus Christ, his fate had been planned for him all along! The operation, the desperate flight to save Vicki, maybe even the dream! He had decided not to have the brace out - maybe they had given him that nightmare to give him the strength to decide to keep the brace in. Then, they had interfered with it, causing it to short circuit, maybe unwittingly sealing his fate - to have it removed after all.

Then, in hospital, they had come *inside his body*. His nerves had been microwaved beyond use and he was a vegetable from the waist down. They had injected him with some magic medicinal potion, regenerating his nerves like they had regenerated his dead body before.

They had woken him up, cut through the swathe of anaesthetic and drugs that had knocked him unconscious, and injected him with some superpower (he had driven a *car*, for God's sake, in *peak hour city traffic*) that made him break out and try to reach Vicki. They had shown him what they were going to do to her unless he reached her, but the whole scene had been set up. He was never intended to reach her. It happened just like it was supposed to, he had been seconds too late, and Vicki's body had already been pummelled and pounded and raped and torn.

She had been an accessory, to get him within reach. To weaken him, maybe. To make him submit. But it had had him within its grasp, and *still been too afraid or unsure what to do*. In the end its courage/knowledge/malice had failed it, and in a rage of temper, had caused a huge electrical explosion. There had been a dozen police and ambulance crews on the Bridge, they were probably ashes littered across the harbour. But Dale had landed

(been placed)

here, in safety. Because he couldn't be allowed to die. He couldn't be allowed to be hurt. The explosion on the Bridge had been an eruption of hatred that really wanted to be directed at him.

Tim was right about the brace. It wasn't himself at all, Dale realised. It was the brace the thing needed, whether it was tuned to the right wavelength or something he didn't know, but otherwise he would have been dead long ago with all the others. He had been within its grip too many times. They'd been opposite powers at war.

Something else Tim said once occurred to Dale.

He tried to imagine what force in the universe was constantly correcting and correlating a neverending stream of events, no matter how minuscule and unnoticed by humanity, that led to an inevitable, pre-written conclusion.

What intelligence would bother to cause a piece of dust to fall on the brake cable of a moving car half a kilometre away from the Pacific Highway, detailing a chain of reverberations throughout the continuum of space-time, ultimately causing Dale Milling to have clear passage through a simple set of traffic lights, speeding on his way to the scene of Vicki's rape and murder?

What power could possibly engineer all the trillions of tiny details through the surrounding time and space that would result in a preordained incident, something as circumstantial as somebody arriving in an exact spot at an exact millisecond.

Tim had said in a frightened voice that he believed they were witnessing the power and intervention of God.

God's will was terrible and merciless, true, we all know that from Sunday school, but in the two thousand years since any big-time miracles occurred before humanity, we've all become lulled into a false sense of security. We expect miracles to be forty day floods, Christ rising from the grave and angels descending from staircases of light, not the pure orange glow across the ground when the sun rises, or the feeling in our heart laying in the arms of our lover, or the rattle of a twenty cent piece in a Salvation Army cup.

But now, if Tim was right, here was God's Hand, reaching down and striking the Earth for some purpose only He understands. And Dale was willing to bet that most people would crumble in terror instead of praying thanks.

Whatever will directed the presence in this place had destroyed, killed and hurt.

Dale couldn't remember how he got here, but as he climbed to his feet, looking around at the ambulance crews helping terrorised, lost people to their feet, he suddenly remembered Vicki as the woman, instead of only part of the cosmic equation he had just realised. And all feeling left him, in a wave of numbness that poured from his heart to the tip of every toe.

She was bashed, beaten, ravaged and shredded
Gone.

BOOK 8

"Death, we all feared, had become a way of life in Sydney. This morning, our most horrible fears were reconfirmed. In the most violent and spectacular display of electrical disturbance seen so far, the Sydney Harbour Bridge exploded with an eruption of heat and electromagnetism just after nine a.m. this morning, resulting in the deaths of twenty nine people on the Bridge and in the surrounding area.

"The death toll before today stood at seventeen, tireless councillors, police, State Emergency Service workers, scientists and researchers who gave their lives in the name of discovery and public safety. But, sadly, today's violent phenomenon claimed the lives of many innocent civilians.

"Tragedy and disaster struck when, at nine twenty three local time, the Bridge emitted such a burst of electromagnetic activity that an electrical explosion resulted from the core structure, leaving the Bridge and highway charred and intact, but sending such a violent shock and heat wave across the harbour that buildings shook, trees were burnt along Circular Quay, the water at the harbour's surface momentarily reached boiling point, and the Bridge now stands, a menacing black figure, still spewing thick smoke that is drifting towards the west and blocking out the afternoon sun in the sky over the harbour.

"Among the twenty nine killed by the blast itself or the effects were fifteen civilians who were unlucky enough to be in the proximity, including a Japanese family of five standing at the water's edge in Dawes Park, three tourists on a pleasure craft below the Bridge, and a total of six motorists on both sides of the harbour whose fuel tanks exploded under the heat, or who were sent through shop fronts, into oncoming cars, or simply overturning before the might of the shock wave.

"The remainder of the victims were all State Emergency Service workers. An unidentified man and woman, the only civilians to perish on the Bridge itself in the blast, had broken through police barricades at each end of the highway and entered the restricted area. A police helicopter was despatched from Police Headquarters at Surry Hills, and the police chief in charge of the operation ordered several units to pursue the trespassers.

"Six police officers and four St Johns ambulance crew members were racing towards the centre of the Bridge where the two man crew of the police helicopter had observed both parties near the northern arch. All were incinerated in the blast. Police plan to launch the operation to recover the remains of the helicopter late this evening.

"The Police Minister and Premier issued a joint statement at lunch time today declaring a state of emergency in the Central Business District of Sydney. The city as far back as Alfred St Circular Quay is to be closed to all traffic and pedestrians as of midnight tonight, similarly in the north as far as Fitzroy Street, and police and Sydney County Council representatives are this afternoon evacuating and sealing buildings and shops, clearing everybody from the new danger areas.

"Representative professors from University Metallurgy and Physics departments from all over the world are being called in to assess and advise on the situation from high level observation points around Sydney Harbour. Among them is Dr Jeffrey Myers-Ford, the outspoken and controversial physicist from the University of Minnesota.

"Ferry routes from the city are closed, as are any lines that pass beneath the Bridge. Motorists are advised to avoid all approaches into the city and the North Sydney area, while traffic across the Glebe Point, Gladesville and Ryde Bridges remains at a standstill. Police urge motorists to use them only if necessary.

"You're with ABC news. I'll be back with an update in one hour."

How could a woman I love be laying in a burning box? Dale asked himself as the curtains from each wall beside the altar platform closed towards the middle of the floor, like the curtains of a huge horror movie screen, spewing slowly apart to open a world of the appalling and maddening depths of hell upon the terrified audience. It was just like that, except that the movie was over. The curtains were closing, inching slowly together and cutting off everything. Cutting off the tasteful pale blue curtain against the wall of the church, cutting off the stairs that led to the pulpit platform, cutting off the spindly altar where Vicki's dark brown wooden coffin lay.

Dale watched the curtain close his view of his dead lover off, the last thing he ever saw of her the wild and beautiful spray of bush flowers and leaves at the head. Beside him, to the front, Vicki's father's head dropped to the floor, and Dale saw the side of the old man's face move as he fought tears, which came anyhow. After the photo Vicki had shown Dale of herself and her father, Dale believed that it was a face which smiled all the time, and meant it.

It wasn't smiling any more.

As everyone stood outside in the pretty grounds of the church in Lane Cove, Dale had wanted to go to the old man and offer him some words of encouragement, or at least their shared loss. But what could he say? 'Hi, I screwed your daughter a couple of times, and she died because I dragged her into something that was too big for her.'

Dale hadn't even trusted himself to speak. He had answered Tim's few questions with quiet grunts or nods, frightened that the gale of tears and sadness would escape through his open mouth.

Dale was again overwhelmed by the paradox of it all, like he had been at Albert Dimitriou's funeral, where the beautiful flowers and neat lawns and smart suits and the polished box had all been to hide the truth of Albert's rotten charred body underneath it all. The beautiful and horrible black velvet curtains inching together to block his view of Vicki hid the truth - that two workmen in greasy gloves would brush the flowers off the coffin into a garbage bin, carry it and Vicki unceremoniously out and lock it into a huge oven.

What a stupid waste of time, Dale thought. He'd seen Vicki's coroners report. The heat from the blast had singed every item of clothing and every hair from her body. The lips of both her mouth and vagina were fused together. She was completely black, smooth and burnt, like a misshapen sausage left on the barbecue too long. Now, all this covering up with stupid flowers and polished wood when they were only going to burn her more. It hurt Dale more than anything.

The guests began to stand, and Tim guided Dale to his feet and led him outside into the sunshine. He asked Dale quietly if he wanted to go to the wake (it was at some old Aunt's house or something). He didn't. He wanted to kneel in front of that hot old oven and scream and scream and scream, feeling the heat as she burned.

He just shook his head, and they walked towards Tim's car.

The shiny red Holden ute had a lime green door and a sky blue front panel, both on the driver's side. They were the only unpainted replacement panels from the damage inflicted by.....neither Dale nor Tim could think of what to call it any more, or even what to think of it as. Hard to imagine that awful rainy night had only been a week and a day ago, when the ghost of a car hit Tim's ute (however the hell a car could have a ghost).

Tim opened the passenger door for Dale and watched him worriedly as he slackly fell into the seat, his jaw limp, his eyes glazed and wet. Tim closed the door and crossed to the driver's side, pausing to wipe his own eyes and blow his nose.

As he climbed in, Dale was looking off toward the church and the crematorium beyond.

"They shouldn't really be burning at this time of year should they?" he asked quietly, "Especially in this heat. Ashes could start a bushfire." He smiled at Tim, "Funny if Vicki started a bushfire, eh?" Tim smiled back, nodding sympathetically. He started the ute and drove off down the avenue.

"It seems sort of corny, doesn't it?" Dale continued, "How it used her to get me onto the Bridge? It's like an old B grade movie. Using a trick like that, I don't know.....it seems beneath it.....I wonder why it let me live?"

"Desperation." Tim said, "you're holding the ace. It needs the brace, and it needs it in your living body."

"When I was in fifth class, we went out to the AMCOR factory at Seven Hills for an excursion," Dale began, ".....It was so great. The walls were all steel and there was this fine white dust in the air. In some of the big chambers it was moist and humid, where the big million litre pulp bins were, in some it was really dry and dusty. One of the rooms, the recycling chamber, had a big shaft that led down into the floor. A steel walkway led around the room so we could see what was going on. Down at the bottom of the chute was a huge roller, the size of the tank on those petrol trucks. It was covered with blades and spikes.

"The engineer played around with some controls and this conveyor belt carried all these blocks of waste paper into the room, big bricks of washed paper that had been dried into these big cube. They'd fall off the end of the conveyor belt and into the shredder, and those blades were spinning so fast that you couldn't even see them. But these blocks would scream and whine and burst apart, and they'd be in a million pieces and down the outlet pipes in seconds. It was just so incredible how fast these blocks of paper would get shredded into nothing.

"Next they took us downstairs where the outlet pipes opened into the backs of trucks that would collect the shredded paper. When we looked inside one, it was amazing. The paper was in bits no bigger than splinters. Those teeth and spikes were spinning so fast they just tore all that paper into tiny tiny shaved pieces."

Tim looked over at Dale, who was looking at him.

"If I dived into a big industrial shredder like that, there'd be absolutely nothing left of me. No brace, no bones or blood, no brain. I'd be pulp. No more coming back to life with more horrible injuries each time. There'd be nothing to bring back to life. It can't create organic material from nothing, can it?" Tim shook his head.

"We don't know what it can do, Dale, except what we've seen it do."

Dale looked out the window at the trees along the sides of the road.

"She loved streets like this. She told me once in bed about when the real estate agent was showing her through her house in Edgecliff, and all she could think was how she loved the trees outside that made a canopy over the road.....she's only lived there two years."

"Dale," Tim said to him, "I know you probably don't want to hear this right now-"

"Then don't tell me." Dale said quietly, his face darkening as he fought fear and sorrow.

"You have to know." Tim said evenly. When Dale didn't answer, he continued. "There's a chemical reason why it can't and won't kill you, and I'm beginning to think that there's some sort of electrical opposition to it when you're near."

"You mean why it's frightened of me?"

"I don't know - that might be a poetic way of putting it," Tim said, "but maybe you have some opposing field of energy that reduces its access to our spectrum of emissions. It's seemed unable to hurt you, and even avoids you, like that night in the pylon."

"I don't mean to be poetic either," Dale said, "but it seems a coincidence, doesn't it? Trapping Vicki and making me watch her die."

"Remember," Tim reminded him, "that may only be your emotional interpretation of opposing electrical forces. You and this thing may just be like two north poles on a couple of magnets. The opposing force causes friction, and your mind is the only tool you have to interpret that friction."

"So I imagined Vicki being attacked and bashed? They told me about the autopsy finding, Tim. Her uterus had blown apart from some flood of liquid loaded with protein that had to be some form of semen. Her jaw and teeth were all broken where the thing punched her. Her hand was gone. I didn't imagine all that, it happened."

"It was only the manifestation of the energy it thought it needed to neutralise whatever threat you pose to it." Tim argued, "You've heard me talk about the equation where it can harness the energy produced in the brain by emotion, the emotion sparks the electrical current and on it goes from there."

"Well, maybe the right types of emotion actually produce a neutralising effect on this opposing field you have. To do that, it presents itself to you in forms or actions that induce that emotion in you that provides that self-destructive energy. Making sure you knew about Vicki and weren't there to save her would produce the energy it wants."

"Try to imagine it as a strictly physical concept, Dale, instead of a spiritual one. As humans, we rely so much on feelings and emotions and interpretations and never give a thought to the basis of electrical charges and atomic movement that causes them all."

"But just imagine. There's a force that exists - a field - with an evolutionary advantage that we would interpret as intelligence. It detects a field of energy that is neutralising it, so it produces a counter-field to oppose the neutralising factor. How that counter-field manifests in the emotional world is immaterial and irrelevant to it."

"Instead of ghosts, imagine this whole thing as an electromagnetic field. It has sensed another field overriding it, so it produces a second field to influence and neutralise the opponent. That field - say it was magnetism - crosses the physical proximity of your brain, and causes electrical sparks to neutralise the field your brain is producing. The product of those sparks are emotions. By coincidence, they're fear and loss, because they are the only emotions that result from having the opponent field in your brain countered."

"So the old adage is right? It lives off my fear?"

Tim shrugged. "Well, like I said, that might be the romantic's way of describing it. The way to look at it is in terms of physics. Making you watch Vicki die is just like you or I turning an air conditioner from heat to cool when we realise that there is a force opposing our needs. It's all chemistry."

"So what don't I want to know?" Dale leaned his head back. Tim had seen the talk bringing Dale out of his unbelieving daze, and he sensed a wave of sorrow again that turned the cab of the ute icy and mournful.

"You have to stay strong." He said, "it's only in times of your strength that you've been able to fight against it or produce this opposing force. By murdering Vicki, it's trying to undo you."

"You just said it was all physics." Dale corrected.

"It *is*." Tim said, "I was speaking emotively.....I know you can't believe any of this now, but you have to keep fighting it. Because while your strength's up, that's when the neutralising field is at its strongest."

Dale sobbed. "That's asking too much. Her dying has taken all my strength. It's worse than being in a wheelchair." Tim looked across and felt a pang of pity. Dale looked so shrunk.

In that instant, Tim realised something incredible. Dale possessed an extraordinary strength and always had. Tim suddenly thought of all the "normal" people he knew. Faced with such a huge and frightening disaster, he knew that an average person would be too assaulted and tested by what lay before them. The war against what they saw and what they believed alone would kill most people.

But Dale had, in a very special way, never grown out of childhood - he had never learned how to devise his own ideas about the world (because he was so cut off from it), and because of that he had the gift of being able to believe whatever occurred and let it carry him wherever it travelled. He wasn't a fighter by nature. Only love and justice had made him one. He was an acceptor.

God help us, Tim prayed, he's got a tighter grasp on this than any of us had. Albert, Donald, Barry and Vicki all saw him as a helpless victim, but he understood the whole time, thinking it was only natural. None of us saw that, and now three of us are dead because of it.

Tim listened to Dale cry beside him and thought deeply about what he had just said. Did he really see all this as giant cathode ray tubes and magnets and electrical sparks? He knew it was no more than that, but why did all that exist? Why did God invent physics? Physics is God's instruction book on how the Universe works, and why did God create the universe? As a prelude to everlasting peace and a test for his children - humankind.

Everything really revolved around people, what they know and what they feel. And that made Vicki's bashing, rape and murder more real and more horrific than any magnetic repulsion. For the first time, Tim asked himself the most horrible questions that had arisen from all of this.

Were he and Dale Milling searching for the wrong truth?

Were they leading humanity to war against God?

II

Dale was dead, along with Dr Holt, and twenty seven other men and women. He had died in the explosion on the Bridge. Fourteen policeman had positively identified him, (from the small *before* and *after* article in the Daily Telegraph Mirror showing Dale after the operation to have the brace fitted) and the Royal North Shore hospital had provided the missing link. They called the police department emergency line at eleven past nine to report a patient who had 'escaped' under dubious circumstances. The patient was wearing hospital dress and fitted Dale Milling's description.

Dr Holt's secretary at her surgery confirmed that Dr Holt had left the office looking distressed at around quarter past nine. Details were verified and the names of the confirmed dead were released by police, among them Dale Milling and Victoria Holt.

On the night of his memorial at St Josephine's Presbyterian church in San Souci, Dale sat beside the phone in Tim's living room, his fingers brushing the receiver.

Tim worked silently in the laboratory at the back of the house. Dale nursed a glass of tomato juice with a gulp of Stolichnaya Vodka (purely medicinal) and stared absently at the TV, between channels, the volume turned all the way down. He sat transfixed by the flickering ghost lights leaping and dancing around the room and fought with himself whether to call Barry.

He told himself not to be such a selfish bastard and call his old friend. Barry had no idea what had happened - he would have heard that Dale escaped from hospital, but his name had been released by police as one of the dead. Dale couldn't imagine how Barry would feel, and he felt

he should be leaping at the chance to turn Barry's sadness into relief and happiness. But something inside held him back. He had felt something in Barry.

There had always been a fear of the Bridge and the whole situation, but Dale had felt a spark of fear of himself in Barry, too. He knew this had aged Barry before his time, and he also knew that the wounds would heal, the hurt would pass, and Barry would be able to finally forget. He would retire now, Dale was sure, and spend the rest of his days with Julia in peace and happiness.

Then, some time after midnight, the TV still flickering, Tim still working out the back, Dale realised how ridiculous he was being. When it was over he would be able to re-enter the world with open arms, go and see Barry, and they'd *all* be able to live happily ever after. How could he be thinking about not telling Barry he was alive?

That was something to consider, seriously. What would happen when this *was* over? He couldn't live in Tim's house in hiding from the government and everyone he knew forever, officially dead.

He told himself that it was because he had decided to move overseas and change his name. It would hopefully break the link between the Bridge and its netherworld resident, and besides, he knew that this city would be too full of painful memories. Everywhere he went he would feel his mother, Vicki, or the Bridge and what had haunted it.

But the real truth existed in a small place in his heart, no matter how much he denied it. Tonight, watching snow on the TV in dark, he had an inexplicable feeling that some major threshold had been passed, and that the next time he and.....it.....faced each other, it would be for the last time. It would end in a war of rage.

Dale felt sure he would die.

He had seen a place in dreams, so far away that no human could travel there. He couldn't picture it, but it was always there, in every nightmare he had ever had, as a big backdrop to the Bridge and cityscape, an eternal land that surrounded everything, but was so, so far away.

Just like the brace had been on the tip of his tongue when they'd been looking for the connection between himself and the hauntings, the name of the place, the *feel* of it, were almost in his grasp now. They felt so familiar, because now he recognised them, the first time he had thought of the place in his waking hours.

Or maybe the flickering ghostly lights of the TV had put him to sleep, because he could almost see it, he was almost there, racing towards it, recalling the landmarks and the sounds and the taste in the air there.

He knew he'd never see Barry again, because when he arrived in that strange, far, familiar place inside him, there he was, laying dead on the road.

A computer image of the Bridge was on the A3 sized screen of the PC on one of the laboratory desks. The PC had no real monitor of its own, but shared the video display with all the other televisual equipment, giving a large, clear picture.

The white line image spun slowly around and around, yellow spots blinking on and off around the beams and columns as well as the ironworks under the road.

Tim was reading a manual on his lap and glancing momentarily up at the image on the screen before him. Among all the reasons he wished the horror and death would stop, one was definitely because he couldn't catch up on research. He'd no sooner be amid a flurry of experimentation sparked by the previous happening than another more chilling and horrifying one would appear.

Normal ghost sighting were fleeting glimpses, indistinct noises, momentary lights. Even those induced reams of notes and hours of tape and observation. This thing was big enough for a hundred university psychology departments to work on around the clock and still not have the answer. Tim had nursed the nagging reminder that he'd have saved lives if there had been enough manpower with the knowledge he already had.

He was scanning and theorising events from the night of the rainstorm, where the team had accumulated the most data in one session of observation.

He reached up to the mouse on the bench and brought the spinning diagram to a halt. He moved to the top of the screen and selected **View** from the menu bar. A selection palette appeared and he selected **Realview**. The picture switched to camera image, and the line drawing became a perfect still image of the Bridge and the surrounding area, from the same angle that the line drawing had left off. Tim selected the **Insert Data** palette and the **Camera** option. A new box appeared to offer him the selection of recorded films that were available to him from the CD ROM, where copies had been stored from the downloaded files sent via modem to Joanne Parkes' house that night.

Tim selected the file for SC1, the southern arch central camera that had met an unfortunate fate. The first frame of the film appeared and the **Video** palette appeared, offering him the playback controls. He selected the **Sensor Control** palette and clicked on **Show Message Prompts**.

He moved the mouse to the **Play/Realtime** button and with a click, set the film in motion. SC1 scanned slowly back and forth, scanning the road, sweeping away from the edge of the Bridge to scan an indefinable sheet of grey. Lightning flickered in the picture

Tim opened the **Visual aids** palette and selected the compass icon. Two small interlocked circles appeared at the base of the picture, moving in slow 3D, a pointer wavering amid them, giving precise direction and elevation. A small digital read-out below gave the exact heading of the picture and elevation above sea level. From the same palette, Tim selected the film counter, which gave the time in hours, minutes, seconds, hundreds and thousandths of seconds.

The compass icon indicated that the camera was slowly panning the west, away from the heads of the harbour, and sweeping towards the northern end of the Bridge. The grey blanket of colour was the rain, the harbour and west invisible beyond.

From the playback palette, Tim clicked on the **Forward** button, and the picture raced ahead. Checking the print-out of the chronology beside him on the desk, Tim stopped when the counter in the corner of the screen came to a time he had previously marked for attention with the software.

The camera was sweeping back out towards the north, following the road below, hazy through the downpour, when a small message prompt appeared at the bottom of the screen, reading **Manual Override**.

The camera stopped with a jerk and began panning steadily in another direction. The controller at the time, the unfortunate Jeremy, had manually overridden the random tracking of the camera and was now using the controls himself.

The view of the road fell away out of the bottom of the screen and Tim thought he saw something in the picture. He froze the playback and selected the **Graphic Enhance** palette, selecting **Background**, and was met with another palette that offered him all forms of enhancement, from using a ninety thousand dollar picture scanner and restructurer (a piece of hardware that came the closest possible to drawing in your picture what was invisible to the camera) to using a simple layer by layer picture method.

He used the simplest in-built enhancer in the program and selected **Far Plate Enhance**. The palettes disappeared and Tim was met with the playback frozen where he had stopped, only now the faint objects at the back focus of the camera had been selected by the program and enhanced.

Through the rain, Tim was presented with a system of bright, white squares and neon signs in every colour with letteres such as *AMP*, *National Mutual* and *CitiBank*, together with other corporate logos he recognised. He was given a perfect reference of the city skyline as it passed out of view.

He checked the compass. The camera was panning up into the sky. He deselected the icon for background enhancement. The lights

disappeared behind the rain once more and the camera continued sweeping into the heavens.

The rain became more visible as it began to fall straight down and the compass rested on a ninety degree magnetic heading, 0-90 elevation. The camera was aimed directly up. The picture froze and a further message prompt appeared; *Searching/Struct;South Arch*. The operator, Jeremy, had realised that he couldn't see the southern arch and was searching for it.

The camera panned down, out of the sky, directly west, Jeremy now searching for the diagonals and the rest of the southern arch pillars that Tim now knew weren't there. He froze the picture and travelled through the process of enhancing the background once again. The error message from the enhance feature confirmed what they had already learned; the camera had been focused on one plane of vision - the rain. The arch structure hadn't been detected or focused on, because it wasn't there.

It had turned into a hundred foot monster.

Tim turned to the laptop, where he was halfway through his current notes on the word processor, and typed *Realtime search conducted from operations: arch DEFINITELY gone*.

He returned to the mouse and resumed the realtime playback. The camera swung down out of the sky and towards the south, and even though Tim had watched it several times already, he jumped.

The enormous head of the creature stared back at him through the rain, its small eyes pig-like but hateful, its enormous jabiru head dripping filthy rainwater, its teeth huge and broken. The thing's jaws parted and it blinked. Tim brought the mouse to the **Video** palette and slowed the picture to twenty percent of realtime.

From the edge of the picture came the beasts great fist, racing for the camera, the same one that had recorded the playback he was watching now that was destroyed in the following seconds of the film. On the counter, seconds passed like deep breaths.

As the closed claw of the enormous giant engulfed the picture, Tim froze the playback. He opened the **Graphic Specs** palette and selected **Most Forward Focus**. The computer clicked and whirred and a dialogue box appeared with all the specifications he would need; The most forward object, the skin across the knuckles of the hundred foot beast, was seven metres away from the camera. It's width was 5548.02154 millimetres. It's current velocity was 97.8451 kilometres per hour.

Tim accessed the most comprehensive enhance feature the program had, and set it to work on the image. Because of the time it would take, the specifications of the function shrunk to a small icon that fell to the

corner of the screen, to indicate that the selected image was being enhanced while further study with the playback could be pursued.

When the enhance function had finished, he would have a better look at the things skin, and maybe be able to ascertain what form it had taken. It looked reptilian on the playback, but he wanted to be sure.

Tim resumed the playback and opened the **View** palette, switching the image back to that of a line drawing. The creatures face and hand were much less threatening as a spindly line drawing. Tim accessed the **Enhance** box again and got the program to call up all points of focus it could from its recording of the object in the foreground.

When he accessed the **View** palette again and selected **Plan View**, the picture fell away, spun, and he was left with a side-on view of the Bridge and the entire stick figure of the beast reaching for SC1 on the arch structure.

Tim called up a new window for statistical information. If the monster had taken a true organic form, he could have a very educated guess at the things weight, knowing it would be crucial to his knowledge about how the force at work could manipulate matter.

Tim reached behind him to the larger desk and picked up the biology textbook. He opened it to the marked page and read through the quick paragraph about cell mass. He returned to the computer and accessed the specifications on the southern arch. It's height, structure, materials, mass, width, molecular weight and gravitational pressure appeared. The mass was the important thing. 904.257 tons.

He reached for the calculator on the large desk and, reading from the book, inputted a few figures. He referred back to the diagram and calculated the height of the beast - 40.0579 metres. He punched the numbers into the calculator, hitting the total key.

A beep from the computer made him look up. The enhancement was ready. He called it up and it scrolled carefully down the screen, a carefully devised graphic of the creatures skin, close up, was laid very clearly across the screen. It was unmistakable. the skin of a crocodile, or a dinosaur.

Whatever intellect haunted the Bridge had plagiarised the rule-book for organic life and created a creature built especially to produce the sort of energy necessary to its survival - emotion. Vicki's fear had been driven into being by this horrifying creature. If it hadn't been such an abomination, it would have been beautiful.

Tim's face darkened. Only one magician could make gold from lead, or in this case, organic matter from solid steel. Only one being or energy in this universe could create a living organism, a life.....

If the mass of the creature matched that of the arch structure, there was no doubt - the creature had been created using the atoms/cells/matter that had previously made up the arch.

Tim looked down at the calculator, where he had worked out the approximate mass of the creature.

904.257 tons.

III

Dale struggled to lift his head. He could see himself, bloodied and smashed, his face pale. Clearly dead, *really* dead this time, he felt, with no ghostly force to keep bringing him back and damning him over and over again.

He knew where he was. If he could just place it he'd know where this was all going. The place he was looking at now was where he was going to end up. laying dead, alongside -

A hand grabbed his shoulder, shaking. Dale shrieked and jerked backwards.

He lurched on the lounge below Tim, who was shaking his shoulder and saying his name to wake him. Tim jumped with fright, and Dale blinked in disorientation.

"You were asleep." Tim said. Dale looked around. The room was still dark, the TV still cast it spectral glow across the room, but the kitchen light now threw a shaft of yellow across the room and against the wall, like a portal from heaven inviting the saved inside.

"The TV put me to sleep, I suppose." Dale yawned, settling down again.

Tim crossed the room and switched on a lamp, returning to sit across from Dale. "Good show?" he joked. Dale smiled, nodding. Tim rubbed his face and yawned deeply. "I think we should both go to bed." he said. "I hope you don't mind the sofabed down here."

Dale was suddenly terrified. The memory of this room, its darkness and the light of the ghosts in here from the TV were too fearful. He imagined laying awake at three in the morning and the eerie phantom light suddenly bursting from the TV into the darkness, reaching for him. He couldn't sleep here. The room felt evil.

"No, fine." he said quietly.

Tim cleared his throat. "There's something new." he began. Dale didn't speak. "We may have to be even more careful that we have been. So far, it's only shown second hand influence on the physical sphere. It's manipulated fields of energy, so it's been able to appear as light and sound and appear to have mass and momentum. But we've never seen it manifest matter, not directly."

"What about all the cars that have been smashed and the explosions and monsters that have attacked us?"

"That's all been cause and effect. Every paranormal happening we've witnessed has been an influence from some other energy field, not our world of matter and particles itself. Until now. That giant thing that attacked Vicki in her car that night when we were all there, I ran some tests on it from the cameras. I won't give you all the figures on how I worked it out, it's all to do with weight and formation, but the arch structure didn't disappear, like we all thought."

"I know," Dale said, "it became that huge thing."

"We didn't know that." Tim corrected him, "But it's proven now. It can take hold and reshape atoms and their configuration as it pleases."

"How does that change everything?" Dale asked.

"It gives us one less ally. We've lost our own world to it now. We can't trust the cars we drive, the equipment we use, the clothes on our back, or our own bodies. It controls everything."

It was five twelve in the morning when the fishing boat spotted the object floating in the water.

The *Lady Spirit* was a fifty nine foot trawler, carrying it's full crew of four beyond the heads for a days prawn trawling off Clovelly. It had launched from The Spit at half past four that warm Saturday morning and was passing underneath the Harbour Bridge when the man on the deck waved at the window of the bridge deck to his helmsman and skipper. The captain poked his head around the corner and the man on deck yelled for him to cut the engine.

The man walked to the bow and engaged the spotlight, used for night fishing. Whatever had been bobbing in the water was huge, probably as long as the boat. He had seen glints of the city lights off what looked like glass or steel.

He swept the spotlight beam across the water towards the object when it passed over a smaller, white object, bobbing on the surface. The crewman felt his stomach turn and bile raced upwards in his throat. The white object had limbs and was covered in rotted cream clothes. Long brunette hair floated in a fan away from the dead white neck, one shoe was missing off a dead white foot. Dead fingers clutched desperately for a last escape.

As the light travelled across the water, more dead white things became visible floating in the water, wearing suits, shorts and rotted green sneakers, miniskirts and blouses, ties nibbled and eaten by fish and rot.

The flash of the spotlight off steel made the crewman think - *capsized boat. Dinner cruise from last night.*

But his eyes fell upon the painted symbol on the steel, the configuration of windows down the body of the object, and the dead, horrified faces of victims trapped inside, screaming mouthfuls of water, clawing at the windows, a million hands and agonised faces, fighting for escape and one.....last.....breath.

The beam of the spotlight shot into the air, licking the underside of the Bridge above, as the crewman let go of it and fell in a dead faint to the deck of the *Lady Spirit*.

"Back?" Tim said, "No way in hell, not with things the way they are. This needs so much more research now, Dale. In fact, you might as well go overseas now and change your name like you said you would, and if you come back in three years I *still* might not be finished."

Dale looked from Tim's face to the floor. He sighed heavily. He was badly affected this morning by Vicki's loss, now that the threat seemed over for the minute, and all strength seemed to have left him, leaving the tired, timid man. He had been breaking into sudden tears all morning and staring out the window, his heart torn. Not much had happened since he had lost her, other than all the times his heart told him she was still gone.

"My dreams are different now." he said.

"The last time I told you not to rely on your dreams, you ignored me because you were afraid. And because of that, Vicki's dead." Tim said. He knew it was cruel, but this was too important not to get through to Dale.

Dale looked up. "It showed me while I was under anaesthetic that she was going to-" he began.

"Yes, and only because you went did it do it to her. It was for you, Dale, I've told you that. It doesn't kill to no energetic purpose. If you hadn't been there, it wouldn't have just killed Vicki for the hell of it!"

"I've seen a place where we're going to be-" Dale protested.

"There's no room to base anything on mysticism, Dale." Tim said, "Forget about your dreams, because they don't mean anything."

"What about what you said?" Dale asked him, "About it being able to manipulate matter. What if it's changing the atoms in my memory and telling me things that will happen."

"And if it is?" Tim said, "Do you think it'll be giving you the answers to beat it? It's only feeding you more fuel to power it. Ignore what your dreams tell you."

There was a thump at the front door. Tim muttered that it was the paper and went to the front door to get it.

"It's calling me back, Tim." Dale said, listening to the front door open and close.

"I'm talking about pure scientific fact, Dale," Tim said as he returned, taking the elastic band off the rolled up newspaper, "your feelings aren't the issue."

"I thought my feelings were exactly the issue!" Dale said, "After all, they're what's producing the electricity for the brace!"

Tim raised his hands to reassure Dale. "Just stay away from it, and we'll be fine until I can sort it all out."

"So sit here and watch you take your time researching it while more of these awful things happen and more people die. It wants me there again, Tim, I've felt it pulling me in my dreams, and maybe if I don't go it'll do something a lot worse than just blow up the Bridge."

"Dale, nothing will happen now. You're not there, you're inactive. Your emotions are sad, obviously, but they're passive and calm. If I'm right, there is almost no active energy to be gained from that. It's the safest way for you to live."

Tim opened up the newspaper and froze.

After Dale asked him what the matter was three times and got no response, he stood up and crossed the room to stare over Tim's shoulder.

The headline was like the inscription on a crypt.

BRIDGE DISASTER FIND

Dale read snippets in disbelief.

- *by a prawn trawler in the early hours of this morning -*
- *after nineteen years and somehow missed by police divers in 1998 -*
- *carriage of a suburban Sydney train from the 1991 fleet, the identification number verified by the SRA -*
- *over sixty bodies in the water or still sealed in the carriage -*
- *preserved somehow by the salt content of the water, according to police forensic experts -*
- *race is underway to identify the bodies, surviving relatives of victims still unaccounted for waiting for the news they never received almost twenty years ago -*

Tim looked up at Dale, his face slack. "Did you do this?" he asked dumbly.

Dale breathed deeply. "It's got to finish now, Tim. Get your equipment ready."

IV

The most important race was on to find out why the police forensic unit had been wrong, so many years before.

For the rest of the day, the news was full of theory and speculation. Wild stories and scientific conjecture claimed that the carriage had

become dislodged, that it was subsequently buried under hundreds of tons of rubble from the fall of the original Bridge that probably still littered the Harbour floor, that it had fallen through the water away from the others and sunk further to the east, remaining unnoticed.

The most popular theory to evolve in the media was the vacuum-sealed carriage theory. Several scientists proposed different parts of the story, and based only loosely on possibility, but the editors and news producers around the city soon had the story packaged and ready to sell.

As the carriage hit the harbour's surface, the story went, and water started to pour into the windows, those who weren't dead of broken necks from the impact would have closed the windows tight in a panic.

As the clean-up operation showed, the entire train did in fact sink, either under its own weight or underneath a piece of the Bridge that had fallen from above, and the terrified people would have been treated to a horrific show of undersea life in Sydney as the carriage floated down to the harbour floor and settled among an endless sea of bottles, cans, plastic bags, cables and wire, beams, planks, machinery, shells of old cars, rotten food and wrecks of small boats.

Once there (the current affairs and newspaper people elaborated on the delicious possibilities here), they would have spent the most horrible few hours of their lives. Their only company would have been the steady whoosh of water as it leaked through cracks in the vestibule doors or panels on the floor or ceiling. Inquisitive sharks or rays might have left the usual ocean of garbage covering the floor of the harbour to examine the shiny new acquisition, and drifted by the dark windows, staring in at the people.

The petrified commuters would have been overcome by terror so dreadful that it was like some crazy satire, although not at all funny. They were innocent city dwellers, they had their kids and wives and husbands and homes and jobs and new cars with ABS braking and front fences to paint and new restaurants to try on the weekend and affairs with their secretaries to hide. They crossed or saw this expanse of water every day of their lives, and here they were, so close to it, in the centre of all that was so familiar to them, but so alien, lonely and terrifying, just because of a few metres of distance.

Even the hundreds of litres spilling in wouldn't have filled the carriage by the time the victims used the last of their air and asphyxiated. By then, the carriage would have been filled possibly 10% with water, and 90% with pure carbon dioxide.

As water seeped in steadily, the carbon dioxide (together with the gases gurgling and belching out of the bodies) would be forced out, through the body of the train and out of the carriage where it would bubble to the surface. Water, instead of just seeping in, would have been

actually sucked in harder, to try and occupy the space inside voided by the release of carbon dioxide - the same way water is drawn up into a pump.

And in trying to fill the carriage, the laws of physics would provide the undoing of its own scheme. As more space inside was vacated of matter, the carriage walls would have gradually buckled to try to close in on the vacuum and take up the voided space - perhaps no more than a few centimetres - but enough so that the doors would be jammed together, split panels would be pressed back into one piece, and the intake of water would be cut off.

After several weeks of this process, the carriage would be a virtual laboratory on the harbour floor, a simulation of some far-off planet unfit for human habitation, completely devoid of matter except for the fittings of the train, the water slowly turning stagnant on the floor, and the strewn corpses of horrified people as they had clawed and fought for one final breath.

Empty of any atmospheric gases, there would be a state of neutral pressure and temperature, and the chemical conditions inside would lay untouched and unchanged for the next twenty years.

Then, several days ago, perhaps no more than a week, something would have dislodged the carriage - maybe a storm surge of water from the heads (the storm the previous Thursday had certainly provided enough rain to cause minor current surges), maybe a large animal visiting the harbour, maybe a floating car that a gang of joyriders had stolen, driven around the city, and sent careening off the edge of the Botanic Gardens.

The shift might have caused a new split, or maybe smashed one of the windows, that allowed water to again thunder in. Over the duration of the following hours the carriage would have slowly filled. Finally, some of the preserved corpses would have been washed out. Maybe a pocket of air from bubbles was formed in one end which carried the carriage back to the surface, along with the dead. Even though the carriage resurfaced no sooner than the previous night - nine hours before the *Lady Spirit* found it, there would be time enough for the water to bloat and wrinkle the skin of the dead, for fish to take the odd nibble.

Other theories described the salt and high methane content of the harbour water which had preserved the flesh of the corpses, and even the accusation of a negligence. Some popular news publications of mixed integrity decided that police divers *had* in fact found the carriage all that time ago. Because the carriage had become separated from the rest of the train, the bill to taxpayers to recover both wrecks had doubled. So the hierarchy of the city council allegedly covered up existence of the last carriage, fabricating the report that they had recovered the train but the

bodies had completely decomposed (jewellery and personal effects were sent to families for identification). The police and councillors involved in the cover-up were warned to silence.

But a small troupe of retired police divers who knew the truth had decided that twenty years was enough, now that the suffering had started again. They organised a dive to go down and attempt to dislodge the last carriage and somehow expose the cover-up.

With the city's media crawling over each other in a violent feeding frenzy for blood and sensational theories, the real question was slugged out in parliament ministries - how the carriage was overlooked or missed.

The coupling on the carriage had obviously broken - the carriage had broken away from the train on impact. The train's paint and metal walls were said to be in near perfect condition, a result of rubbish on the harbour floor rotting to produce sulphur hydroxide that acted as an anti-rust agent and chemical decay arrester.

The papers and TV screamed and the authorities stayed silent. By 5:40 a.m., a chartered barge had moored beside the floating carriage while police forensic frogmen swum to and fro collecting bodies and securing what evidence they could.

By 9:00 a.m. a floating barrier had been erected in a wide circle around the floating carriage, and a floating pontoon barge almost forty metres long had been set up beside the carriage. Two twin propeller helicopters hovered in clear view of the city and airlifted the carriage to the deck of the barge, where a million scientists, policemen and advisors converged upon it like ants to a dying lizard in the baking sun.

The news cameras peered keenly from all around, but the best the public was treated to were fuzzy pictures of a great silver bulk lying on its side on a large ocean-going platform, men and women climbing and scrutinising it desperately.

It was a morning of conflict. At barricaded-off Circular Quay, police and the media battled, one for answers, one for control. By midday, three official statements had been issued by the police senior inspector in charge of the investigation saying that no significant progress had been made, owing to the sensitivity of the operation.

And behind the curtain of red tape, the police service battled with the State Rail Authority. The SRA records had to be found. In the days before the State Transit Authority kept all its archives in a databank at Rydalmere, computer print-outs were the only records kept long term.

The records for October 2, 1998, were tracked down to a soggy archive box among hundreds of others in a cracked blue computer binder at a self storage facility in Wallacia, contracted by the State Transit Authority for seven years up until the turn of the century.

At twelve midday, the police service issued another press release, admitting that over one hundred people had spent two decades rotting on the harbour floor because of an administrative oversight.

In the furore and chaos that was the evening when the Bridge had fallen, a young office administrator with the police department had been threatened with her job by a red faced detective sergeant if she didn't have the answers he needed by six o'clock. A panicked phone call was made to the head office of Urban Rail Control - the quantitative arm of the SRA, where a middle aged muslim woman with a poor command of English verified that the train that had fallen in the wreck had contained six carriages - outside the peak periods most suburban trains didn't consist of eight carriages.

By 12:55 that afternoon nineteen years later, when the carriage had resurfaced that wasn't supposed to be there at all, eighty separate formal complaints had been received at the offices of the police service and the State Rail Authority - solicitors across the state had formulated lawsuits for negligence totalling \$720 million, representing distraught families whose loved ones had never been accounted for in the fall, families who realised that their father or girlfriend or supervisor or husband had been allowed to sleep in their steel coffin underwater because of poor government administration.

All day the legal industry battered the proverbial doors of the police demanding compensation for families, demanding that the victims were the prime concern. While the police agreed that the victims were the prime concern, they would get nothing done letting barristers and solicitors into their offices screaming for justice - they kept their doors barred, and across the state the upper ranks of the police force and ministry met and argued among themselves. Jobs were threatened, accusations made, and emergency meetings of parliament called while the government hierarchy thrashed the mess out.

While the police battled within themselves, their spokespeople, together with the NSW Planning & Development office, flooded in and out of the offices of the upper echelons of State Rail, legal action, making demands of review and threats of investigation.

But there was another, real truth, which no investigation would uncover and no government or citizen would ever know. It was buried forever beneath the mountain range of red tape that was human society.

By 4.02 on the afternoon of the disaster in 1998, the Bridge was crumbled and nearly down, and Dale Milling was the only person left the furthest from safety who would survive. All the others who would be lucky enough to live were well and truly off the Bridge by that time or nearing either end.

People in cars still in the centre were closed in by wrecks of cars that had tried to escape. Some had left their cars to try to run, but by that instant, only people within seventy metres of either end of the Bridge were to live, and everyone within those boundaries were doomed to die.

Except for Dale.

Dale therefore wasn't the only person to actually *see* the train as it passed on it's way towards the centre of the Bridge, but he was the only one who would see it, notice it, and live.

In his dreams and his mind, Dale remembered, almost photographically, that the train was indeed an early afternoon service and therefore had only six carriages.

The six carriages that had already been recovered from the ocean floor in the days following the tragedy were scrutinised finely by police forensic people and released back into the custody of the State Rail Authority, who commissioned them to be cleaned thoroughly and dismantled.

From there, the seats were recovered and painted and several still existed throughout the rail system, the matting floors were thrown in a warehouse and gradually rotted or taken away to be garage floor oil-covers for motor mechanics, and the metal parts were sold as scrap for a total of twelve thousand dollars, and could soon be found anywhere from computer chips at a major bank to a craft stall at Paddington markets.

The structure of those six carriages still existed in their original atomic configuration somewhere in the physical world. And yet an additional carriage had been *created*, complete with a set of corpses.

(The police would discover to their horror, after inspection of records from the department of Births Deaths and Marriages, that several of the bodies recovered and identified had already been registered, examined by autopsy, and released to families for burial, a scandal which would spark a new wave of fear and anger through the city that more records had been botched up - those of the accounted-for dead).

The knowledge of the carriage would be one of bloody fascination for the general public, had they known. And one of trepidation and further terror for Tim Hacker.

The instance of a carriage and bodies floating in the harbour meant that matter had been produced where it already existed. Would exhumation of the graves show that the bodies and ashes of the dead had been reclaimed by the forces at work on the Bridge to complete its bleak artwork? Or was another horrible possibility true - could organic and forged matter, atomic matter - be conjured out of absolutely nothing by the work of electromagnetic forces?

If so, ghosts and human death were the very modest beginning of what Tim and Dale were dealing with. For matter to be created from

nothing at all was the work of the most fundamental force in the universe. The spontaneous occurrence of atomic creation was the building block theory of the roots of **all** creation - the Big Bang.

But no such scandal would break out, no such terror would be realised. It was almost the end.

V

All Tim had was the IF meter. He gripped the handle of the carry case tightly as if it was all he was taking out of this world into the next. Sweat beaded on his upper lip and he prayed in a constant mumble to himself. Everything was too calm down here on the ground. They needed chaos to sneak up there unnoticed.

He'd thought of a helicopter, like the ones with the big winches and harnesses, which could lower them down to the arch, but he had called four hire companies and their entire fleets had been chartered by studio and freelance photographers and journalists. Anyway, he'd heard that they had several fighter planes at the Richmond RAAF base ready to scramble in case of thrill seekers or the curious. There had been rumours in the paper that they were authorised to shoot you down if you went too close.

He'd thought of taking a police officer hostage, but Circular Quay would be crawling with armed officers and probably Tactical Response Group riflemen on the rooves of buildings. Tim had never held a gun in his hands and didn't want to start now.

They had to trick their way up there - but how?

Tim gripped the handle of the carry case tighter. He approached the police barriers, where people were milling around and scooting back and forth on this side and policemen and women stood and talked or ran to and fro among a small armada of police cars and utes on the other side of the barricades.

Tim glanced over the heads of the police officers across from him. Out in the harbour was the barge and enclosure, the train lying on its side like a dying leviathan, floodlights from around the enclosure spraying blinding cascades of light into every niche and crevasse, ready to fight away the gloom as soon as it overcame the bright sunset that was beginning to paint the west. The first stars had begun to appear over the Pacific Ocean.

"Excuse me," a voice ahead made him jump, the policewoman glancing at the carry case and up at Tim, "no press allowed down this far."

Tim shook his head bravely. "No, I'm with the university," he said, "I'm meeting my professor down at the station." He indicated the huge

canvas shelter that sat on the grass in Dawes Park, where the army of scientists from around the globe were turning every electronic eye and ear on the Bridge. Right at that moment, he thought excitedly, the eminent Dr Myers-Ford was in that shelter, right down the street, assessing and advising.

Tim had read and studied the theories of Dr Myers-Ford during his thirty year career in the paranormal at the University of Minnesota. The media loved him because he was eccentric and passionate.

The man was eighty years old and sometimes forgot to comb his hair, giving him the typical mad scientist stereotype. He sometimes spoke too fast and tripped over his tongue. He wore a white coat and carried a clipboard. He fulfilled an unconscious need in humanity - that the men who were trying to explain the most frightening things were fools themselves, rendering the object of their studies a harmless crock.

Money and brains were a dime a dozen in America, as history had proven. America had always made the best movies and TV shows, produced the best food ideas, marketed the best toys and products, and studied the most science. If there was something to look at, explain or try, someone in America had the money and the manpower to spend doing it. It was therefore no wonder the U.S. was at the pioneering forefront of supernatural science. The most comprehensive studies and serious conjecture on the paranormal since its birth in the early 1900's had always come from the U.S.A.

And Jeffrey Myers-Ford was one of the trailblazers of that pioneer front. Behind the wild hair and lab coat was a brilliantly creative mind with extremely accurate insights into the relationships between the paranormal and the emission spectrum. He had seen the truth before everyone else - that ghosts and goblins, even if the souls of the dead, were fields of energy no different than the electrical system of your house.

Tim had been relieved when the news said that Myers-Ford was coming from overseas to take part in the investigations. Even though the man was now less informed and had been surpassed by Tim himself, Tim still felt everything would be all right with him on the case. For the same reason, he had been distraught at the idea of he and Dale going onto the Bridge alone when resources like the Minnesota University professor were available.

Tim had always thought that Myers-Ford had come the closest anyone ever had to proving the existence of ghosts. That is, until Tim himself had. To suddenly realise that he had surpassed the greatest mind in the paranormal today gave Tim such a shock that it jolted him back to the present, out of his whole-story-in-a-millisecond thought, to where the policewoman was looking at him a bit dubiously.

"I was told that I'd need verification," Tim said encouragingly, pulling out his business card, "apparently your chief inspector knows about it." The officer nodded, took the card and unhooked a radio from her belt, mumbling into it. The only word Tim caught clearly was his name. The radio crackled and the policewoman replaced it, handing Tim back the card and smiling.

"Go right through." she invited, moving the barrier aside for him. Tim smiled his thanks and began to make his way throughout the police fleet. The guards at the front obviously had reception duty. Thankfully, no more challenged him.

Back in the city, an ambulance was parked on the footpath outside the deserted Queen Victoria Building. The city around it was almost empty. After the explosion and the violence and death, even the most hardened ragers avoided the city this Saturday night.

Its engine roared into the early evening and its lights and flashers came on, its siren silent. It bounced off the kerb and entered George Street, whereupon it began a steady, slow path towards Circular Quay.

In the back of the ambulance, Dale sat opposite Tanya, a university friend of Tim's who had been following the case and assisting Tim from time to time.

She'd had no trouble in finding the right frequency and breaking into the radio enquiry from the policewoman at the barrier. The transmitter equipment was state of the art, and it had been a snap for Tanya to affirm Tim's required presence past the barrier to the police constable who was none the wiser.

Now she had a heavy machine on her lap - like a laptop computer, only thick enough to be a complete desk-bound PC. She clicked and clattered away on it as she explained it to Dale.

"Tim said all the links and transmission channels to the in-built electrical system on the Bridge were still intact. After the links set up by the research van and the encodings you set up while you were sending the information to that lady's place, you still have a definite connection to all the electrical test circuits."

On the screen below her, a list of all the terminal points of the in-built electrical test frame of the Bridge were listed. Tanya was increasing the voltage in each one, higher than was safe, to produce the desired effect.

"We're just lucky the electrical frame didn't get hurt in the explosion." she continued. "A miracle, really."

She leaned over and bashed against the inside wall of the cab, shouting "Ready?"

A muffled 'yes' came from Graeme in the cab, a medical acquaintance of Tim's from the same university, who had readily agreed to purloin a state ambulance for half an hour at \$300 for his trouble.

Tanya looked up at Dale and sighed. "Here goes nothing."

There were shouts from ahead and a violent crackle. Tim looked up with satisfaction the huge eruptions of sparks shower into the night air from all points over the three arches, once, twice, and again.

The proximity around him came alive. Cars started up, police officers, scientists, uniformed defence personnel ran towards the canvas shelter far ahead, from it, into and out of cars, yelling instructions into radios or at each other. Emergency lights came on the rooves of police and fire vehicles. Police and army spotlights, mounted to the rooves of patrol cars and on the ground, clanged on and stabbed through the near dark at the Bridge. A helicopter raced overhead towards it.

The ambulance had no trouble joining the sudden flurry of emergency vehicles unnoticed. As it neared the barrier it had become part of a river of cars and trucks - armoured personnel carriers drove squads of army personnel towards the barriers while police utes and cars blazed trails for the bigger vehicles.

Graeme flicked the siren on for a quick burst. Guards at the barriers looked up. He blew the horn a handful of times.

"They're getting a bit calm!" he yelled over his shoulder, "You'll need another one!"

The spires of the Bridge ahead were haunted looking, bathed in ghostly light and uninhabited. The blazing field of emergency lights at its foot made it all the more eerie. From way up there in that other world, more showers of sparks erupted, and this time Graeme heard the crackle from them, like fireworks.

Pandemonium reigned again. Graeme blew the horn and several policemen hurried to move the barrier aside for him. He edged the ambulance through and joined the no man's land that was lower George Street, yelling out that they were through.

Tim stopped a few metres away from the canvas shelter, trying to avoid the running, shouting scientists and policemen. He raised the IF meter and peered through it. Nothing, in any spectrum. He alone knew that the sparks were the furthest thing from supernatural.

He switched the machine off and turned. There was the ambulance edging down towards them, along with a fleet of other cars and trucks. The lights of the ambulance were flashing and the siren was off. It stopped not far away and the back doors swung open. Dale and Tanya

jumped down, both dressed in normal clothes with white medic jackets over the top.

Graeme jumped down from the cab as Tim jogged towards the ambulance, reaching into the inside pocket of his leather bomber jacket for the envelope with six crumpled fifty dollar bills. Graeme smiled his greeting and thanks as Tim handed the envelope to him. They shook hands and Tanya wished Tim and Dale luck. They both thanked Tanya and Graeme and watched them run back to the ambulance and jump into the cab.

The siren wailed and the back wheels squeaked on the road as the ambulance lurched backwards. It did an awkward three point turn and raced back towards the barriers.

Tim checked his watch as they watched the ambulance disappear, wailing its song of death. Tanya and Graeme had fifty minutes to get out of the city and return the ambulance to the Glebe depot unnoticed. Plenty of time.

He turned to Dale, who shrugged and raised his eyebrows. "Phase one, I suppose you call it." Dale said doubtfully. Tim smiled. Dale started to unbutton the tight medic jacket.

"No," Tim said, grabbing Dale's arm, "until we're out of sight. Don't you remember the plan?"

Dale looked confused and worried, then realisation fell in a wave down his face and he started to button the jacket back up.

"God, Dale, don't fall apart on me now, you've taken me this far."

Dale breathed heavily and nodded. Tim looked at him worriedly and tried to forget it. No use worrying about something unless it happened. He just hoped that Vicki's memory brought some traces of Dale's former confidence in him.

Tim looked around and gestured towards the nearest pylon. They started off, past the shelter. Inside, silhouetted in the lights inside, a hundred panicked figures raced back and forth.

Tim and Dale jogged away from the Bridge, towards the Cumberland Street steps. Every now and again they would pass a white coated scientist, police officer or defence force guard, but nobody stopped them. They were only a thread in the disarray.

"Are you sure you can do it?" Tim said.

"Yeah." Dale said half heartedly. Tim stopped and took his friend's arm. Dale stopped, looking at him.

"Dale, you have to be sure." Tim said, "We can't have any half-arsed acting." Dale sighed heavily and rubbed his mouth roughly. For the first time (not that there had been any time to notice), Tim saw the fear on Dale's face. He put the IF meter down and unzipped his bomber jacket, pulling it off.

Dale apologised as he unbuttoned the medic jacket. "Tim, I'm sorry,-"

"It's all right," Tim assured him, hurried rather than angry, "we just didn't have the time to stop and swap characters like this. If we're not running we're sitting ducks."

The role plays had been worked out. Dale was to keep the medic jacket on and play the desperate ambulance officer, Tim the patient. This close to the Bridge, two men stopping to swap jackets would be easily noticed and too suspicious not to be challenged by a nearby police or army guard. It was too much of a risk to stop and swap roles. Tim had been afraid that Dale might falter, but prayed he wouldn't. Dale just wasn't cut out for covert secrecy or trickery. Maybe all the confidence he'd suddenly grown had been too fast and too fragile, and too easily destroyed along with Vicki.

They swapped jackets, and Tim helped Dale stuff the IF meter down inside the loose fitting bomber jacket. Tim actually looked a little more like a medic with the white short sleeved jacket and his pleated black trousers and white Dunlop sandals, and Dale looked apt enough in the bomber jacket, white T shirt and black stonewash jeans.

They ran off again, safe in the confusion. The Port Jackson Highway loomed overhead and they mounted the stairs to Cumberland Street, where an entourage of police guards awaited them. Tim said another tiny prayer, this time that Tanya had crawled through into the back of the ambulance and had reached the scanner in time.

The police officers were as disordered as their counterparts below, yelling into radios and trying to get a thousand things done after the violent show a few minutes earlier.

One officer, obviously senior, came forward to block the two approaching men. "Sorry gents," he said firmly, "no access to the highway this way. It's blocked off past the tollgates."

"There's an ambulance up there waiting for us," Tim panted, sounding desperate. Dale was petrified. "unit number fifty seven ninety. I've got to get this man to detox."

The fancy terms baffled the police officer, and before he could get his thoughts together Tim threw him into further bewilderment by panicking him. He jabbed at the radio on the officers belt.

"Come on," he shouted, "radio up there, they're waiting. I've got to get us to St Vincents *now*.....fifty six ninety."

The police officer, disoriented, unhooked his radio and turned away while he received confirmation from Tanya's heavily disguised voice (as the ambulance was just passing Central Railway) to let Dale and Tim pass.

Without giving him time to doubt, Tim dragged Dale past and they ran up the stairs as soon as the policeman said the word 'okay'.

The officer hooked his radio back on and started to walk back towards the small band of police bikes and cars that blocked Cumberland Street away from the stairs. He tried to get his mind back to organising his constabulary when he paused.....

Hadn't the medico said fifty six ninety? Because the first time, he had definitely said fifty *seven* ninety.

He unhooked the radio and opened the same frequency again.

Static. What kind of emergency channel closed off after one transmission?

A pirate channel.

He switched over to another channel and raised the guards up at the tollbooths.

No, there was no ambulance number fifty seven (or fifty six) ninety awaiting a special emergency pick-up. In fact, there were no ambulances up there.

The police sergeant swore and reported two fugitives in a designated disaster area. He advised the senior officer in charge of the tollbooth barrier guard to shoot with intention to harm.

Dale and Tim burst out onto the Port Jackson Freeway. The Bridge loomed to their right. Tim flung the white medic jacket onto the road, leaving only his blue and white striped shirt, its long sleeves flapping at his wrists. He wrenched the sleeves up past his elbows as the two looked around. Far off down the left, along the empty expanse of the road, lay the tollbooths and another line of police and army vehicles standing guard. Dale opened the bomber jacket and handed the IF meter to Tim.

There was a faint squeal of tyres and sirens screamed into the night. At least three cars began towards them.

"Shit!" Tim screamed.

Dale grabbed his sleeve and dragged him towards the Bridge.

"Run!" Dale shouted, and took off.

Tim called out after him and ran as well. "Where are we going to run to?" Tim protested, throwing a wild look over his shoulder "if we stop now they might not shoot us!"

Dale ignored him and bolted, leaving Tim with no obvious choice but to follow, as the police cars screamed down towards them. He passed the pylon, panting uncontrollably, Dale several metres ahead.

There were explosions of glass and metal into the night, like small thunder. Tim gasped in shock and froze, spinning around. Littered across the highway were the wrecks of the three police cars, one spinning slowly on its roof to grind to a halt, its underside torn and twisted, another with

its side bashed badly in, the third with its front end obliterated. The blue and red lights still spun sickly on two of them, the horn of another blared like a dying animal. Glass and fragments of the smashed cars littered the road in a ocean.

It had been a horror highway-wreck of a smash, the sort parents have nightmares that their teenaged children are in, the smashed plastic across the road as real and as horrific as blood. All three vehicles had come to rest underneath the pylons where they had crashed.

Into nothing at all.

Tim shouted in terror and started to run back in case any of the officers were still alive.

"Tim no, it won't let you!" Dale shouted, unsure of why he was so certain.

In the most frightening moment of his life, Tim was aware of the most violent movement he had ever lived through.

There was a flash, no.....a *sense* of something moving across the highway from him, something so colossal it was unbelievable. There was a dull crash, and he felt the road beneath his feet shift several sickening metres before flicking just as violently back, rocking back and forth. The entire Bridge was moving.

It was moving because it had been hit. By something that would have to weigh so many thousands of tons.

In his mind's eye, as he toppled, Tim saw a horrific picture. It was of a huge filthy creature, covered in shaggy dripping hair tens of metres long, so enormous and lumbering its snarl would drown out all of Sydney, and it was butting up against the Bridge with its terrible snout, shaking it to its foundations.

As he fell flat, Tim heard the incredible squeal coming from each corner where the pylons struggled to hold onto the road with their tethers.

He saw, above him, the arch structures shake and rock, the cables bouncing like monstrous harp strings in need of tightening.

Only this harp didn't belong to an angel. In the dark city night, Tim and Dale all alone, it was being played by a huge, hairy, filthy demon.

Tim struggled to his feet even as he heard the angry snapping sound. It was the sound of elevator cables breaking that he'd heard a thousand times on TV, only the sound was dull, somehow slow, and huge. He saw giant construction clips fall down through the ghostly light of the army spot lights, and several cables were falling towards the road.

Tim bolted back towards Dale as the cables sung their metal-whip song behind him, crashing to the asphalt. He reached Dale, who was just getting to his feet, and looked back in horror. Across the highway, and hanging towards the water, were a collection of sparkling moor cables, electrical sparks showering from the ends. They had fallen across the

road and were crackling, snaking back and forth, electric pythons waiting to ensnare passers-by.

"Jesus Christ." Tim gasped, "This whole thing nearly came down." He stared off towards the west, searching the darkness for a sign of the huge presence that had hit them, when he realised, somehow more horrible.....

"The lights." he whispered in horror.

The city was totally blacked out, north, south, east and west, as far as they could see.

The only light on the Port Jackson Highway was from the gibbous moon sinking in the north west. Dale could hardly bring himself to breathe, and when he tried to swallow, his throat was too tight with fear. He'd seen such extraordinary happenings, felt indescribable pain and watched as people died, but despite every supernatural or horrific phenomena he'd seen, nothing was quite so horrifying as a city like Sydney, a hub of twenty four hour life and energy, the apex of human society, black and dead as some mythical deserted gold mining town of the old west.

"Well, I suppose we go forward anyway." Tim said, eyeing the serpents of electrical cables that slithered evilly across the road behind them, the sparks of light like little flashes of lightning inside a colossal dark storm.

VI

It might as well have been a ghost town around them. the only thing that reminded them where they were was the symphony of distant voices around and below and the occasional flash from a building window - presumably panicked executives doing some weekend work had found torches in their secretaries' desks.

Tim and Dale walked slowly and without an apparent purpose. Neither sensed the use in running to reach the other side. Dale had been so convinced that something would happen, and to come all this way just to run screaming to get away was stupid.

Tim couldn't help thinking that by coming here, they'd brought it all on. Dale had been adamant that it had to happen now, whatever *it* was.

But there was so much more to be studied, so many unanswered questions had piled up. What was the next step? Finding out the exact nature of the energy in control here? Devising a way of communicating with it, assuming it had a conscious (and malicious) intelligence?

But instead of waiting, they had tricked their way through the most advanced minds and machinery on Earth to come here with nothing but an IF meter. Tim tried not to think about it. If their time was up.....

"A light." Dale whispered. His musings interrupted, Tim brought his concentration back to the situation. Dale was right. A soft, ghostly blue hue was appearing at the edges of the road, as if coming from underneath.

It grew in brightness until it hurt their eyes, as if the Bridge had become a starship and its glowing propeller drives were holding it aloft in space.

There was a scream of

- (*voices*) -

metal and an explosion of hundreds of little lights and globes arose from underneath the Bridge, burst free from somewhere to drift on the air.

Dale and Tim had no choice but to walk onward. The lights were like balloons, rising gradually until they were just above the Bridge where they flickered out of existence, a constant stream coming from below, bright and round, all the same blue as the glow that birthed them.

"I wonder if it's all the souls of the dead being released." Dale whispered in awe.

"That's romantic fanaticism." Tim whispered back, not only to disagree with Dale, but to fight his own terrified instincts, "they're emissions of electricity or something. It's just a release of energy. They can't hurt us."

"They can bloody scare us," Dale said, "because they've got the shit scared out me."

"No." Tim said, turning to Dale and grabbing his shoulders, "Fight it. I don't know how you can, but you can - I've seen you do it before. Remember the night you climbed up into the pylon. Try to grab hold of it, Dale."

Dale remembered. It was the night he had learned about the doctor, Lambert, from the university. The young man had been dying, struck down with some stomach thing. Dale remembered hearing about it on the phone and being just *so angry*, that this force could lash out so cruelly and so humanly. Instead of conjuring up some horrible monster to tear the man limb from limb, it had injected him with a poison that already contaminated humankind - disease - and in doing so it had hidden itself while it struck. It had seemed so cowardly, like they were all being laughed at. *Look what I can do*, voices had said to him, *Kill you all...Nobody will ever know while I kill you all!*

Bursting out of his place to travel into town late at night hadn't been any mercy mission for him; he wanted to face and fight.

And he had become so intoxicated with his own power during the flight up the pylon to its pinnacle, the knowledge that he was beating it, despite its best efforts to stop him, a creature that had such an incredible

hold on the physical world and something so strong and timeless as the Harbour Bridge, and was cowering before the power in Dale's mind.

"That's it, you can feel it, can't you?" Tim said.

But then, in one swift and brilliant stroke, with one tiny gesture that meant nothing physically but everything emotionally, there was his old bag, waiting for him, covered in his own blood. It had proven two things to Tim Hacker; that it had control of all fields of energy, maybe even time, and that it was employing a very human intelligence, or what we interpreted as one.

What it proved to Dale Milling in one single crushing second was that the move had been checkmate against him. It had been too much.

He felt his defences crumble and his confidence die and when he took his own life because he had no more strength to carry it, he had placed himself in the hands of the creature, who was free to direct the laws of atomic movement to bring Dale back from the dead at its will.

Now, Dale felt his confidence crumble again.

"No, Dale." Tim said.

Because of that, he had lost his mother.

"Fight it, Dale."

Because of that, his weakness had overcome him and he ended up in hospital to have the brace removed.

"Jesus, Dale, stay with me." Tim said, trying to peel Dale's glassy, half closed eyes open.

Because of that, he hadn't been in time, and he had lost.....the one thing.....that.....meant.....everything.

"Vicki." he mumbled.

A hand fell on his shoulder, and Dale turned to see his lover waiting for him at the door to salvation.

Tim screamed as Vicki's face appeared over Dale's shoulder. Her head was horribly bruised, a hundred cuts were dribbling blood down her face, her hair was matted flat to her head with blood and sweat that she had produced in the fearful agony of her death. Her nose, chin and neck were painted with a carpet of dried blood where the thing had punched her repeatedly, and one eye was swollen closed. She reached out a hand and a bloody, bitten off stump to Dale.

A look of amazed fear was on Vicki's face, but as Dale turned a stomach churning smile crept to her lips, of wide-eyed, lustful glee, the blood streaming down her face, dribbling into and filling her smile.

Dale slowly reached up and took Vicki's hand. Tim was transfixed with terror.

Vicki fell heavily against Dale's chest and he bent his lips to hers, smearing her blood and pus across his cheeks.

Tim stood, appalled and frozen with horror. He could see sluggish liquid - pus, maybe blood, maybe spit - oozing from between Vicki's broken lips, dribbling between their cheeks as they brushed together in a filthy parody of lust. He looked around at the lights, at his feet, at his watch. No solutions.

His eyes fell on the IF meter, and even as he was raising it and switching it on - just to do *something*, he had a single clear memory.

The IF meter!

His first intention after news of Dale's return from the dead had been to test him with the machine. They'd consequently missed each other during the ill-fated mission to the Bridge during the week, and Tim had spent the time since recovering and trying to make head or tail out of the readings obtained during the ordeal. His idea about testing Dale had slipped his mind.

He raised the IF meter at Dale and the Vicki-monster. If Dale had really died and been brought back to life, the soul and the personality inside the body was truly Dale, and no abnormalities would show up through the machine.

If Dale was lit up like an electromagnetic Christmas tree, the real Dale was dead, and this version, albeit flesh and blood, was a facsimile to trick them, possibly to be used against them (as it had been when it attacked Vicki).

Nothing of Dale showed up through the LCD viewfinder.

The figure of Vicki was a shaft of bright light.

Vicki was dead. This thing was an illusion and a beast.

"Dale," Tim lurched forward, grabbing Dale's arm, "get away from it! It's not really her!"

Dale did his best to shake Tim off, his and Vicki's lips still locked in pleading desperation. Tim swung the IF meter over his head and brought it crashing down on the head of the monstrosity.

Vicki jerked backwards, away from Dale. Her mouth opened wide, sickeningly, the bones and muscles of her jaws cracking loudly. Her face was shadowed in a sudden darkness, and her eyes were wide in fear and hatred. As she stared at Tim, her arms by her sides, the hideous expression on her face her only weapon, a strangled hiss encrusted with phlegm came out of her mouth in a drawn out "*Caaaaaaaaaaaaa....*"

Tim dragged Dale away. Vicki's eyes were too white and too wide, and she looked horrifying. He glanced down at the IF meter. It was split down the side, the liquid crystal seeping out of the smashed display, the tiny control pad punched into the body.

He turned and started to run, dragging Dale behind him. Dale followed, staring back, his face streaked with tears, as the figure disappeared into the misty light.

Tim threw the smashed IF meter to the road and yelled

"We've got to get off here."

"But I've got to go to Vicki!" Dale protested, still glancing back over his shoulder.

"No." Tim yelled back, "It wasn't her, Dale. Jesus, I knew this was a mistake. We weren't prepared."

"Running away won't help," Dale shouted, "If she's here, and I can save her-"

Tim stopped and dragged Dale to a stop beside him, making his friend look into his eyes, "Dale, for Christ's sake, that's just what it wants you to think! Vicki's dead, I promise you."

"But I was too, and I came back."

"It brought you back, because bringing you back served it's purpose. It also killed Vicki to serve it's purpose, but it doesn't need her. It's showing you an illusion to trick you. You can't help her now. If you believe it's really her, you won't fight it, you'll give yourself up to it. It'll take all your power, and if it can do that it might not need the brace at all any more!"

Dale only stared.

"That's right, Dale, if that happens we're as useful as Albert or Donald or Vicki or all those policemen were. How long do you think it will let us last? If it's an intelligent force with social consciousness, what's to stop it wanting revenge?"

"This doesn't sound like the Tim Hacker I know, full of theories about electromagnetism and physics."

"I've told you, it's all interpretation." Tim argued. Dale stared off back down the roadway, into the curtain of light, where the balloon-lights were coming faster.

"Well, I interpreted Vicki down there, and she meant more to me than this Bridge did. More than you did. More than I did myself."

He turned and bolted.

"Dale, nooooooooooooooooooooo." Tim screamed, beginning to run off after Dale. He stumbled a few steps and Dale began to gain a big lead.

In that instant, the time it takes for a stepping foot to hit the ground, Tim made a life or death decision. He knew he was right, and the monster that haunted this haunted house would take Dale with its trickery and temptations of what he had lost (maybe his Mum would be waiting down there too), and suck the life and energy right out of him. When that had been done, he would die. Properly, and finally.

Tim couldn't stop that now. In those first few steps, he let go of everything.

He turned on his heel and sprinted in the other direction. Maybe the world would end now, with two colossal energies combined and

unbeatable in their unison (maybe Dale would take a place beside the throne of this beast), but Tim didn't want to be on this ship when it sank.

He had to reach the northern end and safety before all hell broke loose back there, literally.

Then, the world shifted. The whole *cosmos* moved three steps to the left. Tim felt an enormous wave of force approach him. He thought of the wave travelling through a carpet or rope, when you flick one end, and the wave of energy runs in a fold down the entire length. That was happening *here*, he felt it.

A wave was travelling through the world, a huge wave like a tidal wave as tall as a skyscraper out of a 1950's end-of-the-world film, and as he stared towards the north, there was no light, no movement, but he could *see* that huge fold racing down the universe towards the Bridge. The fold rolled like a colossal wave onto the end of the Bridge, flashed over and through him with a snap, and knocked him out clean. He crashed to the ground in a different place.....

VII

.....where the most appalling squeal tore him out of trance that felt like it lasted

years upon years upon years

a nanosecond. His head came up with a jerk, and immediately a jolt of agony tore through his skull, agony at the sound, the light.

Light? It was early evening, wasn't it? Tim lay in the middle of the same roadway, only now he and the city around were bathed in light. Not the light from the balloon ghosts drifting into the ether, but sunlight. It drove through his eyes like a house-light in the peaceful darkness of early morning.

The squeal erupted beside his head again, and he screamed in shock. Only feet away, a train was trundling past, the wheels squeaking on the track like they used to.

The Bridge! It was open again! Had he just been laying here, for days on end, sleeping through the whole aftermath of this Bridge disaster?

On the other side of him, cars and trucks zoomed back and forth, as normal as blood through a vein.

Tim sat up. His clothes were wet with sweat. He realised in a sudden panic that he was sitting in the middle of the highway, where he'd just been walking (before he blanked out, days ago), cars and trains back in working order either side of him. Not strictly in the middle, but against the old grate that separated the twin train tracks from the lanes of the highway.

He had a sudden fearful thought. He'd have to cross all the lanes of the Harbour Bridge to reach the safety of the footpath on the opposite side. How the hell had he been allowed to lay here so long? A car tooted angrily and swerved as he stood, and then the final disorientation dissolved, and the last and most terrible realisation carved its way through the mist into his perception.

This wasn't days later.

It was years before.

Around him, the majestic grey arch of the old Sydney Harbour Bridge stood in splendour.

He wasn't dreaming. It wasn't a horror story or TV show, where the character couldn't decide if he was dreaming. In real life, you know when you're dreaming and when you're not.

He wasn't dreaming, and here was the old Bridge.

That only left the possibility that he was hallucinating.

Tim started to walk down the edge of the lane, avoiding the cars that sped past him, beeping impatiently and swerving to avoid him.

Something was wrong, that he didn't like. He felt tired, like he'd been through some tremendous field of force, like the come-down after a surge of adrenalin. He felt.....aged. His muscles were tired and his joints ached, as if from a flu virus. He felt like he'd been asleep for years.

He remembered the horrible way a *fold* had occurred in the earth and the air around, how he'd felt it approach from the north, and how it had engulfed him and the city around.

Except that it wasn't in the air. It was a wave travelling through the *fabric*, not just of Sydney, or the Earth, but the whole universe. No, *cosmos*, that was the word that had sprung to mind, not just a place where physical things happen, but where *everything* happens, where fields of energy meet, diverge, and overlap, and where one force can control it all.

Tim remembered telling Dale more than once how the force haunting the Bridge obviously had control over the entire emission spectrum, as well as the fields of electromagnetism, radiation, electricity, and even.....

Tim looked out through the iron beams of the arch into the city, and his nightmare was confirmed.

Vicki had been right there, within a few metres, when Dale had been pummelled by wind from behind. He'd run back into the mists to find his lover, and she'd been waiting for him, her skin clear and beautiful like before, her eyes searching longingly, her lips smiling lovingly, just like she'd been when Tim had dragged him away.

But he'd been knocked over by the most hideous force he had ever felt, had rolled over a few times, felt heat and light burst from above, and

stood up in the middle of a waking nightmare. No, not a nightmare any more. After all these years of nightmares, this was the real thing.

He was back.

Cars scooted back and forth, buses and trucks, a train squealed opposite on the tracks. The old arch structure reached, lofty and strong into the sky again.

Behind Dale, a horn erupted into the air, and there was a scream of tyres on the asphalt. He spun to see a car screeching to a halt behind him, the driver shouting inside.

Dale almost wet himself. He was standing in the middle of the highway! He panicked and started to carefully pick his way across the lanes to the footpath opposite. Horns blared and cars swerved, brushing him.

He finally jumped over the guard rail onto the path. Over the other side was the sickening drop to the water below.

Dale's breathing became laboured and terrified. His limbs felt unnaturally heavy and sore. Everything around him was focused and clear. This wasn't any dream, and it wasn't any hallucination. The ground beneath his feet was real. The cars going by were real. The buildings and the air around were real, smelling of big city exhaust fumes and construction dust, salt water flavoured air, sounding like industrial jackhammers, the hum of traffic, the swish of ferries through the water.

Some of the buildings he didn't recognise. Some of the ones he knew weren't there. Maybe the creature had somehow altered the past, and they were now living in a new 2017, where the Bridge had never fallen and Sydney had kept on living and breathing, instead of falling out with history like a bitter, resentful married couple.

He felt in his back. There were the mechanics of the brace, through his shirt and skin.

If the brace was still in, why was the Bridge here? Why this great illusion? He had only gotten the brace because he'd fallen and lost his legs. If this was a new reality, what kind of life did he have? And how did he end up here, at this time, standing in the middle of the Bradfield Highway (so called because here the Port Jackson Highway had never existed).

Even more frightening, he realised that he *had* been dreaming. Just like the dream he'd had where he'd had the brace taken out and lost everything again, where months had passed, he had just woken up from another dream, one that had lasted twenty years.

After only being a few years out of school, he was often tired at work, still getting used to getting up so early. He had gone to sleep with his head in his hands at his desk in the Allocations department of Thomas Ross, and had dreamed a nightmare where the Harbour Bridge had fallen

down with him on it. He had been rendered paraplegic in the fall, and lived through hell before a medical miracle gave back his legs years later. Only then, the medical miracle had unearthed a horror so black and crawling he didn't want to think of it. One where he needed an army to protect him, including a big fat doctor, a beautiful psychiatrist who had become his lover, and a paranormal researcher.

How ridiculous. How the hell would he get mixed up with people like that? The most complete relief Dale had ever known washed through his body.

All a dream!

He was nearly forty now. The rest of his life (between the dream at his desk at work and now) was a blank, but he supposed he had some sort of temporary amnesia. He suddenly realised why he had ended up in the middle of the highway. He must have been in a car accident, and just wandered out of it in a stupor. He looked desperately back at the road for the wreck of his restored 1968 Mustang, which he'd always wanted as a kid.

Nothing there.

Oh well, whatever happened, he was sure it would come to him later. His wife would be at home waiting for him. His heart still swelled at the thought of her. He remembered an image of her from his childhood, of her standing across a room, in a beautiful blue dress, and she smiled in a way that promised him everything. And had delivered everything, giving him twenty years of the most blissful matrimony.

They would be worried about him back at his office, where he was the director of a major city construction company. The only things that remained a complete mystery were the strange device he could feel in his back (he was sure it had been in the dream), and the strange, familiar man running towards him as he turned, a man he was sure had been a character out of his weird and terrifying dream.

Tim vaulted the rail to the path after a death-defying dash across the road, cars narrowly missing him. He looked around desperately. There was Dale, way down the path, looking around disjointedly.

Tim bolted, unzipping the bomber jacket and flinging it to the ground beside him. His arms and legs ached like crazy, and his head swam so badly that after a few seconds he had to stop and lean on the guard rail before he passed out. The swimming in his head became nausea, and before long, he felt his stomach squeeze upwards and the contents of his stomach showered out of his mouth onto the concrete.

Tim gradually righted himself, wiped his mouth, and started off again, at a fast walk. He couldn't run any more. His joints sang, his eyes

were stabbed from behind as if by a migraine. His muscles all felt bruised.

Why wouldn't they be? he asked himself. He had just been transported between fields in the universe as if they were pastures on a farm. He had been thrust from his bright green pasture through a curtain of pure cosmological energy disguised as an iron gate, into another pasture where the grass and sky were unfamiliar, alien colours, where no time passed and physical feeling didn't exist, where there was no where, what, how and why, and then shoved back into his own familiar pasture, where he awoke in a different corner, one so far away that the place he'd started was unreachable.

Just like a wave will pick up a surfer and carry him into the shore, Dale and Tim had been picked up by a wave of energy moving through the cosmos, transported to another

-(dimension/place/ether/universe/state of being?)-

before being dumped unceremoniously on the beach, in the same world they started, but with really no consciousness of the force that took them there.

He had known as soon as he had looked out into the city. The AMP tower had reverted to its bleak 1970's skyscraper aspect, the Cahill Expressway and train line were back over the top of Circular Quay, instead of running underground with the parks and Entertainment Complex above it, and the IDI tower wasn't in its place, perched in the water off Mrs Macquarie's chair.

Tim had seen the interaction of every field of energy known to man over the previous three weeks. He had seen a human being die, and a malignant force transfer the energy of that human being back into the dead shell of its corpse. Now he had seen the last, and most terrifying.

He and Dale had gone back in time.

No differently than Dale's energy (soul?) had been transferred back into the physical world, this time they'd both been transferred across another field of energy, time.

To somewhere before the Horrorfall of 1998. Maybe Dale *had* been right. Maybe this was the final contest, the last time they would face this nemesis. Wasn't it right to transport them back to the spot where it all started? Here, at the beginning, it could use that energy to enslave and destroy Tim and Dale.

The only hope Tim could see was to run. Forever. Somewhere, in this strange world, he was a twelve year old boy attending St Julius Private Secondary College for boys in Dulwich Hill. Like all of us, he would have fancied meeting himself any other time. Now, the thought made him feel sick again. He shuddered, and hurried up.

Dale began to back away as the man approached, and he could barely move before the man grabbed his shoulders and screamed his name into his face. "Dale, Jesus, are you all right? Do you realise what we've done?"

Somehow Tim's touch washed away Dale's trance, and the dream was washed away as if it had been hosed, like mud, from him.

There was no dream. There was no girl. No house or great executive job. It was all true. All real. The brace (he knew what it was now) belonged where it was, and so did this strange man, because there had a place in Dale's life for a parapsychologist for a long time.

Tim turned Dale around and began to lead him towards the end of the Bridge. Dale began to cry weakly. There was a numbing pain in his legs that he didn't understand, and took as being a new onset of paralysis, and the sheer disorientation of shifting from one rock solid belief to another was as staggering as changing your entire life in the blink of an eye.

"Don't worry about the pain," Tim assured him, "it's normal. Remember when you came back from the dead? You felt the same then, right?"

Dale did. He nodded, not really understanding anything.

"We've passed through a new energy field, Dale. We felt the same as your bag did the night up in the pylon. It came across nineteen years for you, and now we've come back nineteen years for the same reason. We've been transported across fields in the cosmos we don't really understand."

"But the old Bridge," Dale protested weakly, "it has to be a dream."

"No, there isn't an old or new Bridge, Dale," Tim said, "there's only ever been one. One in the universe we know. Nothing we've been through has happened yet." Dale stopped.

"You mean we've-....."

"Yes," Tim said, trying to assure him, "For God's sake, Dale, the fucking thing has sent us back in time!!"

On the heels of that knowledge came a much heavier understanding. Back (forward) at Tim's place:-

The place he had seen in his dreams.

So far away no human could travel there.

Always there, in every nightmare he ever had.

A backdrop to the Bridge and the cityscape.

He knew the landmarks, the sound and taste in the air.

An eternal land that surrounded everything.

So familiar, from his dreams.....

His dreams.

His dreams.

What was the one place that was always in his dreams? The most terrifying, the most familiar? The place where it had all began?

It had begun back in-

(back

back)

.....here!

The Past!

Again his mind reeled, as he remembered another thing. The last time he'd seen this place, he'd seen himself in it, laying on the road.

Dead.

VIII

"Why have we come back?" he asked Tim.

"The only explanation is because it's finished with us. Think about it! Where was the largest concentration of energy throughout the whole thing?"

"When my back started hurting?"

"No, when the Bridge *fell*. That's when all the energy was released. When your back hurt was only when it was converted back into active energy again. The point where the Bridge fell was the point along spacetime where the energy was first manifested and harnessed, because it had come from cause and effect during the Bridge collapsing."

"So why this, now?" Dale said.

"By bringing us back here, it's brought us to the point of the greatest concentration of energy. The first time, there was nothing to bring the energy to its active state, because the brace didn't exist yet. By bringing us here now, from our present, where the brace is receptive to the signals, it has the initial release of energy and the harness together. Once the brace has liberated the energy from its passive state, we're useless. It has full control of it for good, just like it did after the first time it hurt your back."

"So then it'll return us to our own time, with my brace still working?" Dale asked like a hopeful child. Tim glanced at him but didn't answer, taking Dale's arm and leading him towards the southern pylons to safety. He felt hands on his collar and Dale stopped him in his tracks with a strength Tim was surprised at. Dale wheeled Tim around to stare at him.

Tim sighed. "Dale, I just don't know, but from what I've seen so far, things are like this; it has to be an intelligent force to have decided that this is the only way to beat us and protect its investment in your brace. Now, if it's intelligent, I can't be sure that it doesn't hold other human or socially aware characteristics, like revenge or hatred. If it does, then....."

Dale finished Tim's answer in his mind. If a robber broke into your house, raped your wife and stole all your money, and you had the power to bring him back to get the money back from him, would you just turn him back out into the street safely afterwards? No, you'd club his head in with a cricket bat.

"What time is it?" Dale asked, more to take his mind off their impending and seemingly inevitable doom.

Tim glanced at his watch, expecting it to read seven thirty, not long after they had tricked their way onto the Bridge that had never existed, all that time ago (not yet passed). He'd expected the watch to read the correct time where he'd come from, imagining travelling here with inside a specific *pocket* of time where everything kept the physical attributes it had held before they came.

His watch read a minute after four, what appeared to be the correct time of day.

Tim's mind began to tick over. Maybe time, being a singular field, simply could not exist in two times at once, and instead of reading the correct time for *there*, it read the correct time for *here* because *there* didn't exist yet - it was in the future.

But if that line of reasoning was correct, then Tim and Dale should both be young men, with no knowledge of the haunting or each other - their consciousness would reappear *here* in the physiological proximity they correctly occupied in this time.

Maybe time affected matter the way Einstein had discovered that gravity could affect time, and the molecular structure of Tim's watch had been altered to read the correct time.

But no, his mind shouted, this watch is a physical object and has no bearing on time's passage - it's not linked to the field of time, only matter.

Something had changed the watch to read the correct time. Some force that knew what a watch was. Neither time, nor gravity, the electromagnetic or nuclear forces, knew what a watch was.

An intelligent force, such as the one that had brought them here, did.

This wasn't an accident of physics. A monster had altered time and transported Dale and Tim to the twentieth century, not missing a single detail.

"Where we belong it's about seven thirty." Tim said, "But here, it's four in the afternoon."

As he said it, Dale was staring straight ahead, to where they could see the end of the path, where it adjoined the old stone steps to Cumberland Street, and where it continued alongside the Bradfield Highway into the city.

If Dale had not been looking straight ahead, the connection in his mind would not have been made. Four o'clock was a time that dug up the ghost of a bad memory, again from his dreams. And within his field of vision were four people.

Sitting on the wall was a young man in stonewash jeans, a midriff T-shirt with a Union Jack, and heavy Doc Marten boots.

Nearer the top of the steps, were two young women, both dressed professionally, looking through a file together, briefcases and handbags on the ground nearby.

Much farther down the path, approaching the Bridge, was the figure of a man in jogging gear, running steadily towards them.

Tim didn't realise for a few seconds that Dale had stopped. He turned back and the look on Dale's face made him gasp.

Dale turned around slowly, and as the first beams began to clang in and around the arch and fall towards the road, and slowly covered his mouth with his hands.

"Oh shit, Dale." Tim whispered. "I didn't realise we'd been left right here."

The metal started to clang to the road, and the car tyres began to scream out on the Bridge.

Dale's knees buckled. His terror was too complete, and too awesome. It wasn't a dream this time, after so many millions of nightmares, it was real.

Again.

Tim was useless. He felt his capacity for rational thought slide away.

As if Dale sensed it leaving, he grabbed Tim's shirt and shouted at him. "If there's no brace, there's no way out for it, is there, it's locked up here forever?" Tim nodded stupidly. The first screams rang out. The clanging became an orchestra. "So we can stop it now." Dale yelled, "We can stop me from ever getting the brace, so there'll be no way out."

"How?" Tim said, "You've already got it!"

"I have," Dale said, swinging Tim around, "but *he* hasn't yet!"

Tim followed Dale's pointing finger. Way off in the centre of the Bridge, there was a figure. A young man, dressed for work, running for his life towards them.

Before Tim knew what was happening

-(holy jesus god almighty that's HIM I'm seeing running along there, that's dale, nineteen years old and just about to fall!!)-

Dale took off, bolting for his life towards his cosmological twin.

"Dale, no," Tim screamed, rooted to the spot, "for God's sake, it won't matter! The brace is still inside you!!"

Dale ran as fast as his aching legs would carry him. He fought down the impending faintness desperately. He remembered every detail of what the child ahead of him was going through - he knew every second of it from his nightmares. How strange that they were going to save his life now - that other life of his.

He could stop this whole thing before it started. Vicki, Barry, Tim, Donald, Albert, the research van, the ghosts and fear and death might as well never exist, because he could erase them all right here. There would be no impotent years in the wheelchair, no hospitals and psychiatrist. Maybe, like he'd imagined after he woke up in this other-world, he could *make* all those things a dream, and he would stay with that beautiful girl who had blown a kiss and promised everything with a smile.

Maybe he'd turn up at work tomorrow, nineteen years old again, ready for the rest of his life.

It all hinged on a few split seconds. All those years ago, his horror at the sight of the building-train falling past him had been so complete that it had stopped him dead in his tracks. That pause of a few seconds had been just enough to set his flight back only metres - metres that would have saved him, because when he got to the other end, he fell through the road where it opened up, and fell.

Now, Dale - *this* Dale - could change everything. He would make sure that terrified young man used those few seconds so that when the road began to split open, he'd be in safety with those four people (except there were five now).

If Tim needn't exist the second the young Dale joined the group of people and reached safety, might he simply fade away and join his real self, in the universe that had branched away at that point? Was he fading away right now, so that Dale would never know him? He was suddenly desperate to turn and tell Tim he was grateful, he was sorry, and that he was a friend. In case the parapsychologist was gone forever.

Tears sprang to his eyes, which spilled onto his cheeks, and the cold helped him not to topple over from the nausea of time travel.

Beams rained down around, crashing into the road, the path shuddering. The young Dale was only seconds away now. There was the White Mistubishi Colt, overturned, no dead man with one leg crawling to get him.

Other cars littered the highway by now, people running or crawling, bloodied, to get away. Ahead, the bus had already crashed onto its side, the spiders-legs system of beams had bashed the poor people to death trying to escape.

To the left, across the Bridge, the unfortunate train packed with hundreds of people seconds from death squealed as it rolled onto the Bridge.

Dale turned to the front and the young man was almost upon him. He heard the electrical explosion as the train trundled, one carriage after the other, down the hole.

He stopped and braced himself for the shock as well as the force of a nineteen year old boy crashing into him - he expected some sort of mild electric spark of understanding, some spiritual bond that they would both feel. But, as Tim would say, this was all electromagnetic and not spiritual, and when he grabbed the wrist of his younger self, it was just the sweat-slicked skin of a nineteen year old boy.

"Don't stop," he yelled over the symphony of crashing metal and asphalt, "whatever you do, run!" He held the boy's wrist as the building-train screamed from above and went crashing past, and when the young Dale didn't stop, he let go and watched the boy sprint onwards.

Dale breathed deeply in relief. He could scarcely believe it. He (the young Dale) would be safe, and now there would be no Barry Paul, no job application to Warren & Cooley, no sex on Vicki's desk, no desperate chase up the pylon some night. It felt so empty suddenly, so frightening. The future was truly a mystery now, because in grabbing a boy's arm, he had wiped the entire future out.

But Dale didn't try to return. He simply stood, trying not to hear the carnage around him. Tim's last sentence was still ringing in his ears. He may well have saved his younger spirit, but the brace still did exist, in a very real physical sense, in *him*.

Dale saw clearly that when the Bridge finally collapsed, this time he had to be on it.

Better yet, to keep from being brought back from the dead again, he had to take his own life.

And the brace.

Properly.

He vaulted over the rail and ran amongst the wrecked cars and smashed bodies. Up above, the Bridge had crumbled almost halfway down, and the northern pylons were beginning to disintegrate.

He finally found what he was looking for. A dark blue Holden Commodore (a VR model - the latest - because the VY didn't exist yet) was lying on its side. Its bonnet had been torn open and spewed parts across the road. The horn blared from within, so Dale knew that the circuits were working. He knew anyway, from his dreams, where details like this were etched in his memory.

He knelt down in front of the car, in a litter of broken glass, and reached for the car battery. He grabbed one terminal, then the other.

First there was an incredible burst of heat from inside, then a sharp pain. He saw sparks of lightning crackle from his flesh, and his hair shot out in wild tufts. Pain spasmed through his body in shock after shock.

The pain in his back became a boiling flood, then there was a crack from within that felt like a spear through him and made him scream, and then numbness drifted down his legs in a flow.

A sharp pain began at the base of his spine and began to seep around to his stomach. He understood at once - the fried metal and plastic was leaking into his bloodstream and torso. They probably contained bubbles of air. Whatever the chemistry, it didn't take a doctor to tell Dale that something had ruptured into his body that wasn't supposed to and pretty soon he would be dead.

And now the brace was gone - a twisted rod of molten steel poisoning his spine and blood, so there would be no coming back. He tested his legs, and got no response.

Dale, old mate, it's the way you were supposed to be. This world has spent twenty years teaching you that you were never supposed to have use of your legs, and it's been a lesson that will cost you your life.

Dale let go of the car and collapsed onto the ground, struggling over onto his front. He heard his name spoken, and looked slowly up.

There was Vicki, in a beautiful blue dress. She blew him a small kiss and gave him the sweetest smile he had ever seen in his life, ever. Come with me, that smile said, I promise you everything.

For the first time in a long time, Dale believed it.

The arch above had crumbled into pieces, and now huge iron beams twenty feet long began to crash down amid litters of rivets.

When the beam hit Dale squarely and crushed his already severed spine and cracked his skull like an egg, he was staring at the apparition of Vicki Holt ahead, smiling and crying.

His last moment of consciousness was when he was dead, he was sure, unless you're allowed a few seconds of out-of-body experience immediately following your death, but he was looking down at himself, laying dead on a road, in a horrible place of nightmares and death (but a place that he'd always known) just like he'd always dreamed he would.

IX

Tim stood with the others and watched as a young man bearing a striking resemblance to his friend ran, sweating and dribbling, panting in fear, towards them. Under his feet, there was a crash and a shudder and the path opened in a violent gash underneath him, threatening to swallow him.

The boy stumbled, regained his footing and leaped, sailing over the opening as it formed. He joined the group of people and all six of them ran for their lives as the Bridge screamed and groaned behind them.

Tim split away from the group when he was sure he'd reached a safe spot. He had the advantage of hindsight and knew that the path wouldn't be affected down this far. He watched as the two young women, skinhead, jogger, and nineteen year old Dale kept running, towards the city, the four on the chosen road to their repeated lives, Dale towards a whole new life, without haunted bridges or his friends or lover.

Tim turned back and watched as the rest of the arch structure crumpled as one and came crashing to the road. The force of the weight smashed the road in two. There was an explosion of dust from the north that sent an atom bomb cloud into the air as the road was torn out of the northern pylons and crumbled in pieces, into the water. The southern half of the highway dipped down to splash into the harbour, the heaviest looking boat-ramp in history.

The northern pylons were hit the worst. They had been shaken too much and were crumbling apart from the tops down, bricks the size of houses still falling away even as Sydney came alive with sirens.

X

As the enormous job of mourning and cleaning up became apparent to five million permanent residents, one temporary visitor was walking down George Street, Sydney, the only one who knew of the ordeal which had been narrowly averted. The harbour would still become the grave of six hundred people, but at least in twenty years time it wouldn't be desecrated by something it had taken fifty more lives to understand.

Whatever it was, it was gone now. No, not gone, just not born at all. The energy was there, it would be lighting Sydney up like a supernova right now. If the IF meter was here instead of lying on a non-existent highway years into a non-existent future, it wouldn't be able to receive properly, the reading would be so strong.

But with no abdominal brace and no mixture of painful memories and clutching fears available in one man, the energy would stay dormant. Forever.

What was funny was that, now that Dale's life had been rediverted down a path where he would never know Tim or Barry or Vicki (even though he glanced into the sky and decided that heaven transcended all time and energy and Dale and Vicki were together now, up there), what was Tim's part in this? Along with his never having come into the picture, he shouldn't be here now.

He leaned into a garbage bin and pulled out a copy of the Sydney Morning Herald.

October 2, 1998.

Yes, he was undoubtedly here. And, he realised, for good. When he was supposed to be thirty two (and another version of himself *would* be), he - the Tim *he* could feel himself being, would be fifty one. Maybe he would have to spend his life avoiding his other self, watch from the shadows of obscurity as the other Tim got all the rewards, all the accolades, when Tim himself knew more than that younger version ever would.

Or maybe, because he had appeared in this time, he automatically replaced the other, previously real, Tim. If that were true, he would be the same age as his mother.

Tim shook his head. Decided to think about it later.

He watched a squadron of police cars roar past, their sirens screaming blue murder.

What he *did* know was that, whatever the physics of being taken from your time and being dropped in one where you already existed, he was here for good now. The power that had brought him here had been undone at its conception. It was like a car taking you across town - If the car crashed on the way back, you didn't automatically get teleported back to your starting point just because your mode of transportation has been rendered powerless.

He had the rest of his life to wander and explore territories he already knew. He had to wait nineteen years to catch up to where he would have been and start seeing what he should be seeing now.

Tim saw a life of solitude and roaming ahead of him. Maybe he'd get a false identity and a beard, get a job at the university, where his knowledge would pay off quietly, and spend the rest of his life travelling on the money.

He wasn't exactly a creature from another dimension, so his human comforts were more than catered for. He was just a little worried that he'd spend the rest of his life wandering around in a daze and never be able to accept that he wasn't living in his own time. Would he always feel like an illegal traveller in a hostile foreign country?

Ordinarily he supposed he would be scared, but he was just too bloody tired. Another thing he could see for years in his future, he thought as he watched another armada of police vehicles and a few ambulances wail past him, was rest.

All the fighting, all the struggling for knowledge and money and power and a nice car and a house in the Northern Beaches that he and everybody else had always been taught to want didn't seem at all important now, now that he had seen how weak it all was and how fast it could all be undone.

Now that he could see all that happening around him instead of being caught up in it, he felt like God watching the selfish mindless

scurryings of his beloved human race, secure in the lonely knowledge of how futile it all was.

And now that all that fighting and turmoil seemed to have been banished from his life, one thing he saw in his future was a lot of time, a lot of amused observation, and a lot of rest.

And if there was one thing Tim needed after all he'd been through, it was a good rest.