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Where The Light Is

by

Michael Klerck

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, even though some events are broadly based on the author's life experiences. A happy year spent at the St Joseph's Catholic school in Simonstown provided a basis for the main character's memory of the statue of Mary and the like, but the author's schooling was not under this religious system. The author was inspired to fictionalise his boarding-school experiences after a pointed observation by a friend that this institution must have been "invented" by the British as it was not at all common on continental Europe. A ground-breaking documentary film, ***The Making of Them****, that portrays the plight of young boys shipped off to boarding school in the UK, influenced many of the school scenes; this documentary also resulted in a controversial feature article, by the author, appearing in the South African edition of Men's Health Magazine in December 2000, in which the positive as well as the negative aspects of hostel life were debated.*

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~

I dedicate this book to my mother, Barbara Joy
Ueckermann/Klerck/Olivier.
Thank you for always believing in me and
for always trying to do your best.

~

1

"When in Love's book, I sought an augury,
Forth came the words of one in ecstasy,-
'Happy the man that hath a moon-like bride,
Prolonged to years may his sweet moments be!' "

OMAR KHAYYAM

I have to admit, looking back, that I felt a degree of conflict about my mother coming to visit. She was still reasonably fit, almost ninety, and here was my wife May facing the end. Of course Cecille was always available when needed, trying now in her old age, perhaps, to compensate in looking after me; how ironic.

Before May's illness, she would often pop in with some of her aging party friends in tow for tea or just a chat – one in particular, Avigail Markowitz, her sergeant major during the war. But then when May was near the end, I think Cecille felt just that little bit uncomfortable about coming alone - most of her friends were by this time gone, all except Avigail.

When the boys were little, years before, they would stare at Aunty Avigail – a women sergeant major, indeed, they probably thought to themselves. At that time, well into her eighties, I can imagine that she didn't fit any image of a

sergeant in our boys' minds. My mother loved telling the story, though. And gradually, as she got older herself, it would be told over and over.

"Nanna – tell us about Aunty Avigail – was she really your sergeant major?"

"Oh yes..."

And I would retreat to the kitchen, looking sideways at May, and shaking my head, and May would always chuckle lovingly at my reaction.

"Well, I joined up when I was quite young, in my twenties. My mother and I came down to Cape Town, and someone told me about the coast artillery, so I joined the army. All of my boy friends were in Europe fighting and I felt I also wanted to do something for the war effort."

"All of your *boyfriends*?" Mark and John were intrigued by the idea of their Nanna having so many boyfriends.

"Well, you know, *men* friends – they were all fighting in the war; one had many friends in those days. Anyway, there I was, on my first day in my new uniform, looking quite spiff and tidy, and we lined up on the parade ground, stood to attention, and this sergeant major arrives with a pen and a clipboard for roll-call, and she goes down the line, and all the girls call out their names, and she asks how to spell them, but when she comes to me she says, "Name?" And I say, "Aarestrup!" standing as proudly as I could, looking dead ahead of me and to attention..."

"And then?" says Mark each time.

"Well then nothing...I mean she just carries on down the line. And I think to myself has she got the spelling right? How many people know how to spell Aarestrup?"

And the way she tells it makes the boys laugh, of course it helped to have a funny name like this in one's family.

"So what did you do?" I seem to remember that every single time it was John who asked this one.

"Well I went up to her afterwards, and said: 'Excuse me Sergeant Major. I just wanted to make sure you got the spelling of my name right.' And she looks down at her board and spells it out exactly right: A-a-r-e-s-t-r-u-p."

The boys are proud, and they spell it out too.

"And that's not the end...,"says Mark.

"No? Oh, I thought that was the end," said Cecille every time.

As the years passed we realised that she was not just having them on, as she often did, but with age she would have to rely on Mark's prompting to finish the story.

"No!" shouts Mark. "What about great-grandpa?"

"Oh yes, of course. So Aunty Avigail says to me: 'I know how to spell it because my husband is in East Africa fighting with an Aarestrup! And what do you know, it was grandpa fighting with Aunty Avigail's husband! He was much older than her, of course."

"And she's been your friend for one hundred years," says John each time, with his distinctive rough voice.

"Oh, not quite one hundred; but it will be if we live long enough!"

And each time they laughed, the three of them. And then the boys would ask me to tell them about Avigail and the oxtail.

When I came back with a beer and looked down at my boys I could not help but think of myself, during school holidays, with a dishcloth over my arm, and a tray of drinks in both hands.

"Oh, it's a stupid story."

"No dad, it's such a funny joke – we like Jewish jokes."

"It's not really a Jewish joke; just a story," I would say.

"Tell it anyway."

And I would sit back and think about it, hoping they would loose interest. And always, in my mind I would find myself back in my parent's lounge and on the veranda.

I walk around it like a waiter, taking orders at Cecille's cocktail parties – never quite got the cock, or the tail sorted out, but all I remember is that we seemed to have an awful lot of them. Admiral Crous drank only beer off the shelf, with one block of ice, which was considered strange. Mrs Crous drank only gin and tonic, but with two blocks of ice and no lemon. No lemon? Mr Lipshitz drank only medium cream sherry but in a whiskey glass, and so the list went on. And I was always commended for remembering everything.

And the veranda was the place to be, listening to all the gossip – could her friends gossip! Even though she was supposed to be Catholic, Cecille had lots of Jewish friends (probably because of her friendship with Avigail), and they were the best. If I wanted to know anything about anyone, all I had to do was linger alongside one of them – Mrs Maureen Lipshitz and Aunty Avigail Markowitz were always my first choice, even though Mrs Lipshitz pinched my cheeks like they were fat (which they weren't – my boys laughed at the idea of some women pinching my cheeks). Those two ladies knew everyone, and that meant everyone's business. Even stuff about my father. But they never spoke about Cecille.

And all the jokes – I was the only gentile child they shared Jewish jokes with. And it seems that every single time my mother threw a cocktail party, or these two came round for a drink, Mrs Lipshitz told the story of a Jewish family that arrived at a little country hotel – the Mamma, her son and his wife and all the kids, and they sat down at the dining room table at lunch on a Sunday, and they were loud – of course Mrs Lipshitz didn't say they were loud, but the way she told it, I could just picture it. Loud, like only a happy Jewish family could be. And the father says, "Oy vey! Wot is all zees on t'e menu – oxx-tail! Wot is Oxx-tail?"

"I don't knooow," says the wife, shrugging her shoulders without even looking at him. And then his mother, at the opposite end of the table, raises her hands into the air, and she says: "Oxtail? Wot do you mean, wot is oxtail? Oxtail is oxtail – wot else can it beee, but ***ox-****tail*?"

Mrs Lipshitz told that joke, the glass of sherry shaking in her hand, and I laughed every time, even though I never really understood what was so funny about saying that oxtail is oxtail. But just to see her stomach shaking right next to my head and Aunty Avigail shrieking as though it was the first time she had heard the story – that was funny.

And every time Cecille would say, "Oh really? I don't remember that story at all."

And the boys would find this even funnier.

Aunty Avigail had told us, years ago, how Maureen Lipshitz had had a double mastectomy, and that if there was any doubt, to always have the double.

"Let me tell you, my boy, you need to tell May, have the double. The double! Trust me, have lost too many friends; you think it's just something small, the next thing they take one off, and then everything is okay, and then you have to do it all over again. Tell her. Have the double...!"

A few nights later I had made a point of getting home early. Instead of sitting outside on the veranda – it was winter anyway – I had showered, gone downstairs and put some music on. When May was cooking, I loved to play music from the sixties – the boys used to have their own mock band, strum at a guitar – anything they could find lying around.

"Come here," I said. I took her in my arms, and we danced.

"Daaad!?" Mark and John stared at us. "What are you doing, dancing in the kitchen?!" Like we were some freaks. She nestled into my shoulder and we laughed with the steam rising from the pasta pot, and a tap running slowly in the sink, so that as I passed it, I reached out to turn it off.

"May."

"Mmm?"

"Avigail – you know what she says. Will you think about it?"

She looked up at me; I supposed she had the right to be angry, with Life, perhaps even with me. Who wants to be reminded? Instead, she kissed me.

"I'll talk to Dr Sorresen."

I said nothing more.

Some time after that she had spoken about nodes in the armpit, and said to wait and see. The whole issue of the double came up again, but May said the doctor had said wait and see.

Then one clear, beautiful day I remember so well, it was too late.

Now I could see the regret in May's eyes when I looked at her. And when she looked at me in that way, I used to bend down and nestle my lips in her neck and tell her it's okay; everything was going to be okay. And usually, I gathered her tray, or fluffed her pillow or made as though I had to do something in the kitchen so that she didn't have to see the welling in my eyes.

And often I and the boys (when they visited towards the end) would gather around her and try to make her laugh, and take out a board game – something they had always enjoyed, and we would play Monopoly, or Settlers...but she would soon fade, and we would pack it all up and once or twice we, all three, lay down on either side of her and tried to recall family holidays and the silly things the boys had done, like the time I enticed Mark to jump off a rock on the Catwalk, in Fish Hoek, and he had been so daring, and then claimed I had offered him money and it was a big family mystery as to whether I had actually paid him or not. Of course I had. But he always claimed I had not and it made us all laugh.

Silly, the things that make families laugh.

It drove me crazy seeing her eyes slowly fade, the light go away now and then, almost entirely. And then one day, she said to me: "a bit of a mess, isn't it?"

And I had to be brave, because I had sided with Aunty Avigail's advice. Of course it was her body and I had left it all to her. But in the end one learns that one's body belongs to oneself, and also to others. I could see this when she sometimes spoke about it. But the last thing I needed was my wife telling me I had been right, because I didn't want to be right.

I just wanted the light to come back into her eyes, and the soft beautiful chardonnay tones to her skin, now waning, that I had fallen in love with when we were both young. And to remember the freckles on her back, down to her

butt, and the way I kissed each one every time, and how she always squealed so deliciously when I did. I used to start laughing, myself, in response to her squeals, so that I had to focus when moving further down, around the curve of her butt-cheeks, and into that warm place below, and then down her left leg where that really big freckle always waited for me, in the fold behind her left knee. And when I let my tongue wet it, she always brought her leg up and knocked my head away, and we both giggled each time as though we were sixteen and this was the very first time we had discovered that tender spot together.

It had been two months, and I tried to remember what the freckle looked like. Like a freckle, I said to myself, as I straightened the duvet at the bottom of the bed. Like a freckle.

I looked down at her now. She closed her eyes, and I lifted the tray from her bed side table – in the middle was the hand-blown glass I had bought her in Venice as a twentieth anniversary present, still with more than half the guava juice in it. I knew, instinctively, that the greater the volume of food I carried back to the kitchen each day, the closer her time.

And I remember my anger, so well.

And when I could feel even that dissipate, I realised how close to the end we both were. I was just so tired, right at the end.

Dear God, imagine how tired she must have been.

2

"There is a mystery I know full well,
Which to all, good and bad, I cannot tell;
My words are dark, but I may not unfold
The secrets of the 'station' where I dwell."

OMAR KHAYYAM

The very first time Jace was strangely resolute; strangely calm. He had felt some anxiety in making the appointment, but once he was there, and had parked his car in the driveway and was knocking on the door, he felt reasonably confident.

His name was Bernard Stuart; May had said she thought he was Freudian.

"What are you expecting from me?" Bernard asked after they had both settled into their chairs. Uncharacteristically, Jace was somewhat speechless. May had warned him to have an answer to this question, but Jace had stubbornly said he hadn't wanted to conjure up any prepared speech. He floundered.

"There's no pressure, of course," Bernard said, folding his right leg over his left, and adjusting his expensive trousers under the knee, "we can simply chat and find some theme. Perhaps an issue will surface – how do you feel about that?"

"That's fine," said Jace.

Bernard suggested, then, that Jace relate the story of his life.

How often had he done this? Yet, he embarked on the journey, once again, devotedly as though there, deep down, the answer lay and he was willing to retell it again and again until some decomposed body finally rose to the surface. It was, as Bernard said later, like a crystal clear lake all the way down, until one reached the muddy bottom, and then swishing it with one's hand or a stick made the mud rise and the water became cloudy and one was then blinded a little, until it all settled and there under the surface was the *thing*, the issue that had been hidden one's entire life.

Jace thought it was a fine analogy.

Bernard looked directly at Jace as he spoke; his thin, well groomed eyebrows perfectly framing his noble expression. He was tall, six two or three at least, and they sat facing the fireplace; there was a small window behind him, through which Jace could detect little besides the branch of a tree. A coffee table stood between them with a writing pad, a pen; a box of tissues.

Jace told his story. And it was mostly about his mother and how she had sent him to boarding school. It always seemed to be about his mother.

Jace told him about his life in the hostel, and how much he had resented being put there. And he was thorough in telling the story of his life, as Bernard had suggested, but in order to fit it all into the first session he related only broad overtones, highlights, with a few details here and there that he probably felt might bolster his claim: especially the feeling of being abandoned by his mother. He also spoke about the twins in the bathroom that day.

He then spoke briefly about his deployment.

Bernard seemed interested.

Jace seldom if ever spoke about this time in his history. It had been war: Africa's very own Vietnam. He had lost two good friends: one of them had been in the same class with him from grade six all the way through to grade twelve, and another he had met in training, someone that had stuck with him, and often to him. For a while they had been inseparable. And then he was gone.

Another death he had successfully buried had been that of another boy from school, someone he had never really seen as a friend – he had been with him when he died. Jace shuddered almost imperceptibly.

Immediately he found his mind redirecting his attention to his days at school. *That's why I'm here,* he heard, inside his head. In his mind whatever problems May might have spoken about had arisen from his incarceration in

boarding school, and that was his story, and even when Jace spoke about his deployment into the war zone, it was as though he didn't want to divert any attention away from the real pain of feeling abandoned by his mother.

"I am interested in your account of the war. You were deployed for six months, you said?"

"Yes, two terms of six months, and the court martial in between," Jace added quickly.

"Court martial?" Jace was relieved at the thought of this diversion.

"Yes, it was a silly business. I was a Corporal, in the supply depot." Jace stopped. He looked up at Bernard, away from the focal point of the fireplace. Bernard looked at him with just enough invitation in his eyes to make Jace want to continue. "Do you remember that crazy guy in that Donald Sutherland movie about the second world war? Where they steal the gold from the German bank? With all those tanks in the town square?"

"Kelly's Heroes." said Bernard, articulating each syllable as though he were recording the words.

"Yes. There was that American character with a cigar in his mouth and Donald Sutherland's character went to see him to get new tanks? Well that reminded me of my job. In fact the movie came out a few years before I went to the Border."

"The court-martial could not have been easy for you. Tell me about it."

He was stirring the bottom, but Jace knew there was nothing much underneath.

"Well, our boys were being hit really badly with machine gun fire from a fortification not far from the camp, just a few miles out on the supply road. So each time they went out, we lost lives. The problem was that most of our..., our armoured cars were out of action – two had faulty water pumps; another one very bad gearbox linkage problems, and another had, I think, its fuse box blown out. We needed them to take out the fortification – the machine-gun nest that was plaguing us."

"So what did you do?"

"Well everyone kind of turned to me, y' know – I was the supply guy. So they wanted supplies to fix the vehicles. We were two hundred miles from the main supply depot and nothing coming through, and anyway they would have been shot up by the machine-gun nest. So I did the next best thing."

"What?"

"I waited until after midnight, got into cahoots with a friend who stood guard, and leopard-crawled, dragging a tool bag behind me, under the fence

between our camp, and the compound next us. And I stripped some of their vehicles. I stole the parts."

"Stole the parts?" Bernard leant forward, showing a very tiny smile.

"Yes. Next to us were supply trucks, engineering machinery, and two smashed and broken armoured cars ready to be taken back south to the main depot. They belonged to another unit; if I can recall, these guys were working with the Americans. So for us they were strictly out of bounds. Crazy. I mean, here we were fighting the same war, and I couldn't get them to help us. It drove me nuts – I could see the vehicles through the fence and beyond some shrub, just waiting for me."

"So you helped yourself?"

"Yes."

"And, you were successful?"

Jace thought back – nearly thirty years. "Yes, I managed to get most of what I wanted and put one of the armoured cars back into commission; and a Bedford truck if I remember correctly."

"But that was commendable, don't you think?"

"I suppose so. Two days later when the mechanics had fixed them, they knocked out the nest and killed five of the enemy. Our camp was never attacked again and the road was opened for as long as I was there."

"You must have felt like a hero?"

Jace nodded, allowing himself a wry smile. "Until I was issued with a warrant, and then the court-martial."

Bernard shook his head slightly. Jace stared at the fireplace.

"I was only twenty. Imagine – so young and there I was sitting in the dock with a team of senior officers behind this enormous teak desk in front of me. They were the judges – three of them, I think; can't remember what they called them. It was a bit scary – all the evidence laid out before them on the table. I can remember the prosecutor's face so well – an army captain. And my defence counsel, a young Naval officer – one of the first women in the Navy back then. She was really good, and tried to show that I had done the best I could for my unit."

"And did they think you had?"

"No, I was found guilty."

Bernard said nothing.

"*No matter what your motivation, and no matter what the outcome* – I remember the Judge President saying just before sentencing – he said that to

steal parts from any unit in action against the enemy was tantamount to treason."

Jace looked at him, allowing his head to fall backwards, against the headrest of the chair. Just then, Jace could feel a weakening inside of himself, as though there might have been a welling in his eyes. But he had been too strong for that, he felt – boarding school had hardened him, made him angry.

"But they didn't find me guilty of treason, thank God. There was one man – a retired Naval officer, also. Some kind of Admiral. Mansell, I think his name was. He also spoke, before the Judge President gave his address and sentenced me. I suppose they were each allowed their turn. But he was the only one who disagreed. In fact he looked quite sad about it."

Jace was silent for a while. Bernard seemed to come to the rescue.

"Strange that they would have a Naval officer sitting as a judge over an army case, or not?" He seemed interested.

Jace thought back. "Not really, they used legal buffs from any arm of the service. Someone told me about him afterwards in the detention barracks. There was someone there – can't remember his name, who said that it was a pity he had not been my defence council."

"Why?"

"Because..." Jace's voice trailed off as he tried to think back, and the memories came seeping through, even the rank smell of his cell that he shared with four other young men. "Because he had fought in the army during the war himself, and had earned a military cross for bravery – apparently he was the only one in the Navy with a military cross, which of course was an army medal."

Bernard nodded.

"Anyway, apparently he was the best defence counsel one could have – he once got a man off who had stolen victuals off a ship – very serious, apparently. I think the story itself must have become a legend: they said in his closing speech he had quoted from the Grapes of Wrath, showing what it was like to be poor and to go without food. It was so moving that the sailor was sentenced to light punishment only. His charm didn't work for me, though, but I was always grateful for his attempt."

Jace glanced at Bernard, then continued: "He stood up and said that he felt I should get a medal for what I had done. The Judge President thanked him for his opinion, and then they voted, and that was that. I was guilty."

"And you went to prison."

Jace nodded. "It's funny, you know. Now that I come to think of it. I suddenly recall the look on the face of that retired Admiral as they escorted

me out of the court-room. It was a mixture of anger, and pity. I wanted to thank him, you know, but never got the chance."

Bernard nodded, leaning forward again. "That must have made you feel better about what you had done."

"Yes. That's why I suppose I don't think that the whole experience was so traumatic for me, in a way. I mean I felt I was a hero. I had stood up to the enemy...stopped them...defied them, and saved lives."

Bernard looked at Jace for what seemed like a long time, and then said: "Just like you did the two little boys in the bath, when you alerted the hostel prefects?"

Jace was stunned.

He had reached down into the mud, and had touched two parts of something that were connected, deep under the surface.

It was only when Jace drove away that he realised those two parts were not some remnant of some armoured car lying below the surface in the lake of his past. He had reached down and touched two very sensitive parts that belonged exclusively to him.

Jace then realised what May meant when she had said that therapy might help, even though he was never really sure that it in fact did.

Right to the end.

7

"On that dread day, when wrath shall rend the sky,
And darkness dim the bright stars' galaxy,
I'll seize the Love One by the skirt, and cry,
'Why hast Thou doomed these guiltless ones to die?' "

OMAR KHAYYAM

There is perhaps only one thing more distressing than a man floundering amidst the dishevelled maze of his own sexuality, and that is one trying to cope with his own mortality. Especially when the impending truth is like some old, gnarled ghoul staring him right in the face.

The strikingly similar genetic makeup was unfolding more clearly as Jace slowly but surely approached his mother's age. He seemed to struggle with the same hip, and one day confided in May, just before she died, how the same eye had been plagued with the same astigmatism. He resented the fact that Cecille often did not have to wear glasses to read which had become essential for him.

He shared many of her habits, such as not being able to seat himself until the kitchen was cleared, and encouraged guests to start eating, even though he was not ready to sit down; he shared her mild obsession with natural foodstuffs and supplements, and despite the fact that those close to him sometimes pointed out his impatience towards Cecille, of personality quirks

that he himself had clearly adopted, he could no more quell his impatience towards her than he was able to suppress the irritating habits within himself.

He sat now in the chair opposite her and watched her go through the motion of reading the paper. She unfolded it, put it on her lap, then lifted it again, turning back the main page, then going back to the front. He could see she was not reading anything. He had brought her a few toiletries in a packet, some flowers and snacks. He had wanted to store the snacks for her, especially so that the staff in the facility could not find them – an impossible task, he knew. And so the process of asking her for a safe place, and then having her say she wanted them with her wine, and then her getting up and trying to remember where she had put the wine the previous evening was about to begin.

Jace closed his eyes and shook his head, trying hard not to react in any way – each day he returned, and placed her wine, her wine glass and snacks in the bureau she had saved two years to buy just after the war – the key he had remembered all his life was now placed on top in a small ceramic container. They went through the process each day, and just before he left, he would ask her again where the key was, and she would waddle over to the bureau and extricate it by opening the container itself; satisfied Jace would hug her and leave.

The next morning the wine and the snacks would be gone and she would not know where she had put them; the key would sometimes also be missing. And so the process started all over again.

He sat looking at the small packet and tried to remember what he had bought her. The logo of the store on the outside of the packet made him think of shopping with his mother when he was little.

Cecille would be all dressed up in those days: hat, gloves and they'd be off *to town*. Specifically, for Cecille, the wholesalers. If there was one thing Cecille knew how to do, besides, play the piano, was spend money. Jace was dragged from one shop to the other to fulfil the gruelling schedule Cecille always had in her head. He remembered it mostly as a treat, even though there was always a lingering feeling when she bought him a new coat, hat, shirt or shoes, that she was really doing this all for herself. Still it was an outing, and it

meant he had her undivided attention when he was expected to try on any new clothing. Besides there were fascinating places to explore.

Mr Levine, with what looked like the same cigar in his mouth every time they visited, was always behind his wooden counter that seems to stretch the entire length of the building itself. He would call Cecille over whenever she entered the old Sacs Futeran building in Buitenkant Street, waving across the floor to her. Mr Levine was always their first port of call, and he would roll out endless yard lengths of material across that vast expanse of old wood, for Cecille's comment. While Jace could barely see over the edge, all that he ever remembered was Mr Levine's shirt sleeves rolled up and a bouncing cigar in his mouth as he spoke to his mother. And then there was the clothing department upstairs – they got there by using an elevator shipped out from Scotland (it said so) in the late eighteen hundreds – it was in fact just a metal cage, and when one closed the door that was simply a thick, black metal frame, it shuddered and shook and made the whole cage sway precariously so that Jace had to hold on to Cecille's hand. He was always convinced it would fall, down onto the rickety wooden floor, already a hundred years old, and because it was so heavy it would carry on falling, through the earth and all the way down to Australia. Cecille said, every time, this was impossible and berated him for his insistence.

Jace remembered, suddenly, the display of dinky toy cars on a table in the household and ornaments department: American Chevies, a 1955 Oldsmobile with a sharp double arrow on the bonnet, and his favourite – a 1953 Studebaker Commander with the protruding nose. His nagging had got to Cecille and she had relented and allowed him to choose one. He remembered grabbing the Studebaker before she could change her mind. His father had told him one day that one didn't have to put one's foot on the brake on an incline – the car would automatically prevent itself from rolling backwards. It was probably the most fascinating fact about motor cars Jace could remember from his childhood.

Once he had the Studebaker in his side pocket, most of the rest of the day had been a blur, and he had woken up in the Grape Vine at the top of the Garlics department store, with his nose buried in a Fanta-float.

Giddy days those were in the late sixties, with all the fuss of dressing as they did, driving along the scenic De Waal drive with the harbour brimming with ships below them as the car swept, banked, this way and that down into the city itself.

And then up Strand Street into the Parkade, finding a parking spot, and then the long walks from one wholesaler to yet another and another would begin: only one full exhausting day of shopping seemed to ever satisfy Cecille, and she would look mildly satisfied for a while, until the next announcement, sometimes within the same month, that she *needed to go to town*. Sometimes he longed to be back there – Cecille swishing from one building to the next – few if any discount stores in those days – it was all about having contacts (mostly through Aunty Avigail) to buy wholesale – lists, orders, clothing exchanges, new product revelations, this one to greet, that one to tell a story to.

Now she could not even venture beyond the gates of the frail care centre: it was forbidden. She was allowed to walk around the building in the grounds, each afternoon, but there was no going *over the road* to buy her *things* as she had done for so many years. Jace never knew what she spent money on, but spend it, she had. And for years whenever he had asked her about her finances and what she drew money for the answer was always, *for things*.

"What things, Mum?"

"Oh, I don't know; just things."

And he had shrugged, thinking it was her money.

And now here he sat with a small packet of *things*, knowing that by tomorrow they would probably all be lost, or stolen. He looked at her fumbling with her newspaper, and said a silent prayer, hoping she would not begin fidgeting in her handbag again. Deep down Jace cherished his mother's breeding, and poise, her artistic prowess and fine taste – and to have to witness, now, her fumbling for her wallet and having to tell her her credit card was taken away because she had lost the wallet so many times, and that the power of attorney they had signed years before was now in place – this was simply too much.

Jace had finished the arduous job, the day before Cecille had returned from hospital, of moving her furniture and worldly goods into her new room in the frail care section of Beaumont Court in Constantia, with the oaks that shaded them in the Summer, and the blue mountain at their back to protect them from the Winter rains.

Jace had so carefully positioned Cecille's favourite bureau against the one accommodating wall in her now smaller room, and in it her precious things: three files: one for his father, one for John and one for her own mother, Jace's grandmother – some letters, their certificates, birth and death, passports

– Jace knew the content more or less. And then there was her own personal file – a steel filing case and in it various sections for banking, travel, finance, savings and investments, etc.

And then there was one very special case, similar to an old school case, but large enough to keep all that which was most precious to her. Jace had placed it very carefully on the top shelf at the bottom of the bureau so that she might easily find it.

"You simply cannot let her keep these things – she will either lose them or they will be stolen." Jace had looked at Sister Green in amazement.

"I can't take all this stuff away from her. Some of it she has had since she was a teenager. There is a sewing box, for instance, inside the case," said Jace, pointing to the case itself, "from some uncle, made for her when she was sixteen or something."

"Take everything, even that. And her jewellery. What we often advise is for the family to buy a few pieces of costume jewellery for them to wear." Them. Sister Green looked at Jace patiently, "It's not always the staff that steal; the residents themselves wander into each other's rooms and take stuff. We found your Mum in Mrs Templeton's room yesterday, looking inside a cupboard. When we opened it, we found the wine you had given her; she had hidden it there. Trust me. Take everything."

Jace stared back at her, deciding whether to accept what she was saying or position her in his mind in that distant spot for terrifying people, such as cruel nursing sisters in cruel hospitals, or Nazi camp officials. Why was Cecille here at all? Why could she not live with him?

Aunty Avigail, as larger as Life itself, gave him an answer. There she was standing at the door.

"Come how Jacey boy. You know this is for the best. Sister Green knows what she is saying...I have two friends here, one now passed. It was the same for them; they will steal what they can, and she will lose the rest. Trust me, she's right."

Jace sat down. All the while Cecille was fiddling with one of her bags, looking inside it for something, then putting it down again, then picking it up to take another look. It irritated Jace so much, and he just wanted to get out of there.

Aunty Avigail came in through the door.

"Now look who's here!" called out Cecille.

Avigail beamed at the reaction of her old friend: "I came to see how the old girl was doing," she said jovially.

"Old girl? Cecille let out a giggle. "Looks who's calling who old!"

"Ninety four next month; how's that?!" Avigail had a broad smile on her face, but then she looked at Jace and became serious.

"Now this is what we're going to do. You open that case of your mother's and we'll all take a look inside, and we'll decide what to do with it. Right!?"

Jace had never in all his life ever thought of countering Aunty Avigail; she had always been right – this stalwart, this forever friend of Cecille, and supporter of him in everything he had done. He had no choice.

He sat down and took the case out of the bureau. It opened with some difficulty, the lock on the left sticking. He slapped it on its side and it popped open. He peered inside. Nothing had changed. He could remember the many occasions, as a child, when she had opened it, or he had discovered it and, curious, had asked her about each item. She would always tell him why everything was special to her and who had given certain things to her. It had always fascinated Jace to think of Cecille turning a certain age – this was for her twenty-first from an uncle, and this her mother gave her when she turned sixteen.

Jace took out her medals.

"Oh look at that!" said Aunty Avigail. "I gave my medals to Michelle; she's framed them, up on the wall. Cecille – you don't need these any more. Jace should keep them for the kids...!" It was more a command that a query. Cecille nodded, "Yes, I don't want them. What must I do with them?" She smiled at Jace and this gave him some impetus.

Jace put them to one side.

"That book, a favourite uncle gave me when I turned sixteen, and the sewing box he gave me when I turned twenty-one. He made it himself," she said.

Jace shook his head. "I don't want this stuff...; I want you to keep it Mom. What must I do with it? It's yours, not mine...."

"Keep it safe for your children and grandchildren," Avigail interjected quickly.

When Jace opened the sewing box itself, his hand was shaking. He opened it as though he had only seconds to do something about it, and then discard it. Like a thief.

"You can take it home, unpack it when you have time," he heard Aunty Avigail say.

Inside the box he could see things he could remember from years back: an ornate sugar spoon; it looked Victorian. And two beautifully embroidered

handkerchiefs. A leather bound copy of Omar Khayyam's Quatrains, and a small square red leather box. Jace had opened it gently, prying the lid loose. He looked inside and retrieved something. In his hand was a yellow, but otherwise perfect tooth. And a piece of paper which read: *Jace, first loose tooth: December 1959.*

Aunty Avigail always knew how to rescue the moment, and laughed when she saw the tooth. "Now what would your mother want to do with that?! Take it home and frame it also," she chuckled.

He trembled as he put the tooth and the note back inside the little box. Aunty Avigail leant forward; Jace could smell the foundation and make up coming off her cheeks.

"She never looks at these things anymore; you know that," she said softly, avoiding the space between her and Cecille.

Jace began to mumble something, and Avigail cocked her head. He felt almost compelled to say what he was thinking.

"I feel as though I am raping her," he said.

"Oh, that's vulgar and harsh; and nonsense," said Avigail.

"No. No...Aunty Avigail. It comes from the Latin 'rapier' which means to steal, seize or carry away. That's what I am doing. I am carrying her life away, and leaving her with nothing." He put his head in his hands and fought back the tears. "If she has nothing, it almost seems as though I have nothing."

Cecille leant forward as though interested in what they were saying.

"Right! I think your mother and I shall go for a walk, while you settle things here," said Avigail getting up.

"What's that?" asked Cecille, craning her head upwards toward the large figure of Avigail.

"Jace needs to tidy up a bit. You and I are going for a walk."

"Walk? Now that's a good idea," said Cecille. Avigail chuckled. Sixty years of friendship meant having meaningful insight, thought Jace.

When they were gone he sat back, the case on his lap, open; its contents bare to the world, ready to be ransacked.

Jace realised there and then this move was proving to be far more difficult for him than for his mother. He felt he had been caught doing something illegal. Something immoral.

He felt he was stripping her bare.

"This isn't my house, is it?" she said now over and over now, every six or seven minutes.

"No Mum; it's where you live now; look, all your pictures...and ornaments around you ..."

"Yes I know my things, but this isn't my room...,oh, I know, something... I can't find my money; someone has taken my money out of my handbag," she had said with a little reserve of irritation, and then looking at Jace, she had become a little afraid, knowing that he was present because something was wrong, and her lips would begin to quiver.

And so it went on and on. And each time it was like a sharp knife slicing away at Jace's confidence, in Life, in his future, in himself.

She was him; he was her: he knew it was only a matter of time when he would become her.

And worst of all, in putting her in that 24-hour frail care centre, and standing at that door and saying goodbye, life itself had handed him the cruellest of all victories: it had allowed him to swap personas, and become her forty four years before, when she had waved him goodbye in front of those steps and driven off to her comfortable home, with his room, next door, stark and empty.

He looked down, closing the case firmly, as though it conclusively ended a part of her life.

It was payback time.

But Jace was not enjoying it one bit.

13

1966: May 30th
300 US airplanes bomb North Vietnam.
Graham Hill wins The Indianapolis 500 (232.2 kph)

There were no tears on Saturdays. Sunday evening, yes. But Saturday?

Saturdays were coloured yellow, or light green; in fact, thought Jace, they were so many colours he sometimes became confused, and they were not dark in any way. Sundays? Dark red.

It was rugby in winter, and swimming in summer; and if they were not standing at the local stadium in the afternoon, after winning or losing their own matches in the morning, and watching their local teams pit themselves against one another, the rain often pelting down, they were, in summer, far away from there, and beside the pool where the sun burned against the tall trees and made them shimmer with heat. And the days were so long and languid, and Saturday was always the best. Even Fraser looked vaguely likeable. Christ, was that possible? thought Jace as he threw his towel over his shoulder and ran to catch up with Jason.

The pool was just a short walk, on the way up the embankment, and was the first landmark on the long trek across the rugby fields to the main school building.

It was huge, and purposefully built for their age, so the deep end was only five foot. It was as though the pool was off limits to any kind of animosity, any confrontation: Jace could never remember any altercation, any fight or

difficulties in the pool changing room. And for some reason the masters never entered.

Even Father Emerson sometimes swam with them.

Man, that was cool. Imagine – they dived down and used to attack him under the water, and if he caught them, they were dead! He would wrestle with them, and dunk then, keeping them under for as long as he dared, and they were bursting with desperation to get air, and also with pride that they had been caught and had lasted this long. It was summer, and sun and water was all about: life itself, and here up on the pool deck, all seemed to be forgotten. One even reluctantly greeted Fraser. And Boycie would interject in a conversation with excited staccatos of bated breath.

But that was not all. Oh my God, even if it rained and there was no rugby, and they would have to go "lie down and rest" in their dormitories, it was the best time. Because Boycie would start with a joke, a joke he never knew the ending of, and some of them would know, and they would hold back, waiting for him to fall into the hole he had dug for himself; and he would get exasperated, and this would make them all laugh. And when they had started laughing they could never stop, and when their stomachs ached, and they were stupid enough to look up and see one another, they would start all over again. One time Ramsey got so bad, he started to choke, and they watched him, while still shuddering with spasms of laughter. But then he was okay and told a joke himself, and had to leave the dorm, because he had wet his pants.

The next day was Sunday! Home.

But before that is was Saturday night.

And Boycie and Jace got to ride on a bus all the way into Sandy Bay. Not too far, and they had to be back in time for lunch, and swimming was always only after lunch, anyway. It was the sixties, and there was no video tapes or video machines – and that meant big reels. And they were heavy. Hence Boycie.

It took them two busses, and a bit of a walk, but the freedom and the trust of the entire hostel was enough to make it feel like a huge privilege. And it was.

They sometimes took their time and meandered through the side streets, stopping in shops they had never seen before. And if Boycie got all excited about something, Jace would have to tap his watch and make him get a move on. Besides if they got to the film rental shop too late, the good movies would all be out and that was disastrous.

When they did, all the John Wayne movies were out, and Boycie noticed something about a spoof. And when they asked the guy behind the counter – Jack – he was there every Saturday, Jack said it was a comedy. Jace took Boycie aside.

"Boycie, listen. Cowboys are supposed to be serious. I don't know about this one."

"It's funny Jacey. It's funny."

"Yes; okay, let's get another one that's funny. Okay?"

Boycie looked from Jace to Jack who simply shrugged his shoulders.

"I want the spoofie."

"We have to get what the rest of the guys back at the hostel want; remember we have to make sure Father Emerson is also happy. Remember that horror film we got a few weeks back, and the small kids cried – you remember Peter? Shit man, we nearly got it that time. I'm not going to stand in Father Emerson's office again trying to explain why we chose that film. Come on Boycie, comedy is for dogs and small kids and stupid clowns. They want cowboy; everyone wants a cowboy film."

Boycie walked away and Jace felt this was going to prove to be more difficult than he was prepared for, and he started to shake his head slowly. It was never Boycie who had to explain; always Jace. Jace the responsible one, Jace the honest one; Jace the mature one who could argue, and who "has a philosophical edge to him", as Father Emerson said when he wanted to show off to some parent, or some important person. "Come here, Jace, and let me introduce you...," he would say.

But aren't you forgetting the last time you caned me? Jace would think to himself. But he would smile and put out his hand as his father had taught him. Just one of the gentlemanly things his father had taught him, like opening car doors, and always sitting in the back when an adult was a passenger, and jumping out to open the door when they arrived somewhere.

He was so used to this that when they all went one day to the Labia theatre one day, he had opened the door for his grandmother, and when his father heard the car door slam, had driven away. Jace had run after the car, but alas, no one had noticed except his grandmother whom Cecille always ignored because she had no memory, so he had stood there in the dark of the night, with people getting into motor cars and driving off home. And he wondered how long it would take before he started to cry.

And nearly all the way home, Isabella had tried to tell Cecille and Jace's father, that Jace was not there.

"Jacey boy; he's coming with us, then?"

Cecille ignored her and continued her conversation with her husband.

"Jace; I thought he was here...do you have him in the front with you two?"

"Mum, what are you talkin' about? Now please just settle down. For goodness sake, you hardly stopped the entire evening. Why do you have to go on like that?"

"Okay, I'll just keep quiet then..."

And it had been about half an hour when they realised that Jace was not in the car, and his father had driven like a demon, with Cecille screaming at him, and wanting to slap him on his head as he tried to bring the vaulting car to a halt in the theatre parking lot, finally.

"Don't worry about me," said Isabelle, "I'll mind my own business, and keep quiet, shall I?"

Jace had not opened car doors for a while after that, and Isabelle had died, and Cecille had not allowed him to go to the funeral; and he had stayed with a friend eating hot dogs, fuming, not wanting to say anything to anyone.

"We have to make up our minds," said Jace eventually.

"I want the cowboy comedy. If you get it, I'll buy you a bee-sting."

Oh, my God, thought Jace. A bee-sting. It was something he definitely could not resist. He delved as deep as he could into his jacket pocket – no money; he had forgotten to bring any change with him beside the bus fare.

The thought of the bee-sting was simply too much; perhaps the film was really funny.

He walked up to the counter and looked up at Jack. "What's this about a spoef?"

"Spoof," said Jack. "It's called Carry On Cowboy, and it's funny."

"Are you sure?" said Jace, "I'll be in for it if it's not."

"Sure, I'm sure. It's one of the best in sixty-five. Trust me."

"Okay," said Jace, thinking more of the b-sting than anything else.

Looking at the poster, it did look like it could be fun.

Boycie carried the two reels, in a leather box that was heavy. And when they got to the café at the corner, Jace went inside and stood staring at the glass counter with the B-stings inside. One had a fly on top of it.

"Come on," said Jace, "let's get one each."

Boycie shrugged his shoulders, "I don't have any money on me..."

"You big shit!" said Jace, trying to hit him, but Boycie pulled away, and the blow landed on his chest.

Boycie laughed, but it was only on the second bus home that Jace began to laugh also.

When they had no sea to look at, they sat with their heads on their hands on the cold metal bar that encased the seat in front of them; the bus shuddered and bounced a little so that their foreheads were red from banging against their hands.

When a big bounce came along Jace decided to raise his head and when he did so, he noticed they were passing Dobson's Memorial Hospital.

"Hey, Boycie, get the film. We're getting off here!"

Jace couldn't understood why Boycie was never really keen to be in the pool back at school, but any delay or detour was never a problem with him, so now they stood on the pavement in the hot sun, facing the hospital.

"What we get off for?" asked Boycie.

Jace took a deep breath and wondered whether he had made the right decision. It was a long walk up to the main entrance, and then there was no guarantee they would let them in; he had no idea what ward to ask for, and then there was the bus – it was gone, and Saturday midday things started quietening down. What if they couldn't get back to the school in time? What if they didn't get back before dark? He shook his head, feeling silly.

"We'll make sure we stay only for an hour or so, and we must be back here to catch a bus back to school around lunch-time."

Boycie nodded. "So where we goin'?"

"Up there," said Jace, "all the way up there to find Roger."

"Roger, but is he alive, like? I thought he had polio and he died."

"He's alive, only just, and I think it's time someone went to see him."

"Father Emerson went to see him."

"Now that's a thrill and a half," said Jace. "Don't you think it would be nice if someone like us, like one of us, popped in? – we don't have to stay long."

Boycie fell behind, and it was some time before Jace found he was talking to himself. The concrete pavement was hot, and Boycie felt the heat rise up though his rubber soles so he stood like the desert lizard, with one foot lifted up off the ground.

"What yo' doin'?"

"It's mighty hot out here."

"Well, don't stand there; let's get inside, it'll be cooler inside."

Boycie didn't move so Jace went back, sighing as he did because he knew that this was beginning to be more of a mission than he anticipated.

"Come on Boycie, for goodness sake, we still have to find him."

Boycie shook his head slowly.

"Oh, my God," said Jace, "what now?"

"I'm not goin' in there. I don't want to get polio."

"Christ, you'll not get polio just from a visit!"

"Who told you?"

"Jesus himself told me, Boycie, now come on!"

Boycie began, slowly, to saunter up towards the main entrance.

"Roger Meed," said Jace to the man behind the counter who had lost one of his front teeth, and whose long fringe covered his left eye.

"Ward nine, high-care," he said with difficulty as his tongue wanted to poke out through the gap as he spoke. "Are you thaw you have permithin to see him? Heeth on life thupport." His tongue came right out, through the gap.

Either the tongue, or the mention or life support or perhaps the word permission put the creeps into Boycie and he sat down on the floor and refused to budge. This was turning out very quickly to be a very bad idea, thought Jace.

"You can't thit there," said the man. Boycie just looked at him. "You muthd take the litht to the third floor, and arth-k the nurth if you can thee him; but wath your hanths before you go in." he said, his head and fringe bobbing in unison.

"Come Boycie – I promise you won't die, and you don't have to go inside, just come and sit in the passage while I pop in; how's that?" That was okay, he said.

Jace leant on the counter trying to attract the nurse's attention when they arrived, and after a painful look of desperation and sadness which Jace was good at, she led them both, Boycie falling behind yet again, down the passage to the last room on the left. There was Roger.

But it was a mistake. He was emaciated, as thin as a snake, and hooked up to so many tubes Jace could hardly recognise him. They both stood in the doorway, the sun filtering through the curtains opposite them, and onto Roger's bed.

Boycie began to squirm.

"Shit; he looks like that spaceman – are they going to send him up or something?"

Jace knew this was the point of no return; Boycie might be getting away with lurking behind, but he had no choice but to make that giant leap into the unknown. He was not sure he was glad he had come – the place smelt so, so hospital-like and the colours were funny too – those of the covers and curtains, and poor old Roger looked like they were starving him; maybe, thought Jace, the polio had taken his stomach away.

"You can go inside," said the nurse, "but for just ten minutes. Here put this on first, and don't take it off..., okay?"

She handed Jace and Boycie each a mask. Jace put in on, lifting his hands behind his head to secure it. It felt really strange. He wondered if Roger would recognise him. Suddenly he didn't want to go inside. He felt really foolish.

"It's okay," said the nurse, "we all wear them so he's used to it. He'll really enjoy seeing you."

Boycie refused to put the mask on and sat down in the corridor with it in his lap.

Jace stepped over the threshold. Roger turned his head and saw him, so he quickly gathered himself, and put on a smile.

"Hey, man! Roger, how's things?"

Roger mumbled something while trying to smile; it was hopeless, so Jace quickly looked away towards the window.

"Man, it's hot in here; pity it doesn't rain a bit!" His voice was dampened by the mask and he was desperate for Roger to say something more so that he didn't have to speak.

It was a stupid thing to say.

"It's doesn't rain in summer," said Boycie from behind the wall outside. And Jace began to fidget as much as Boycie when he was next to him.

"That's true, Boycie – don't you want to come in, Boycie? Roger would like to see you."

There was silence.

Jace squeezed out a quick laugh, "He's ..., well, you know Boycie!"

Roger smiled and said something again, but Jace couldn't catch it, so he put his right hand on the bed, feeling the rough texture of the blanket, and patted it as though that's what visitors did, like kicking the tyre of a used car.

"We're on our way back to the hostel with the film; Boycie's got the film outside."

Roger smiled. His mouth moved again, and his head jerked up and down.

Oh my God, thought Jace, what if all those tubes came out? Please Roger, he said quietly to himself, don't do that, keep still for Christ sake. And then

Jace realised that he would have to feign some form of conversation, so he leant forward a little, trying to catch what it was Roger was trying to say.

He was reasonably certain that he wanted to know what the film was.

"Oh, yeah; it's...it's called Carry on Cowboy!"

"It's a comedy," said Boycie from behind the wall.

The nurse came in. "Everything okay? Roger isn't this wonderful, your friends come to see you?" He mumbled something again and Jace didn't get it this time either. Obviously the nurse did.

"Oh, don't worry about him," said the pretty nurse looking over Jace's shoulder towards Boycie – Jace couldn't believe that he had noticed she was pretty, "he's probably just a bit shy, so he sitting on the floor outside the door," she said to Roger.

She looked at Jace, whose eyes darted from her to Roger each time something was said. "Don't you want to ask your little friend just to say hello?"

Little? Jace shook his head. "He's not himself today. Roger, you know Boycie."

"I don't want to catch it," came a fearful voice from behind, and Jace cringed.

"It's just Boycie, Roger; you know he's full of nonsense. Hahaha...!"

The nurse left, pausing to look down at the blob that was Boycie at the foot of the door, the movie in the large metal case held tightly in his arms.

Roger smiled as broadly as he could and then Jace realised he was pointing to something, his head trying to rise from the pillow. Christ, what now? Was he needing more air, or something from the tubes? The thought of having to help him made him panic, and he was sorry the pretty nurse had gone. Roger insisted, and finally Jace could make something out:

"Offa aaair; thuuu caaard; caard," he managed in a gruff voice.

Jace followed his gaze and the direction of his pointed finger and noticed a large card on the bed table at the foot of the bed. He thought he recognised it and went over, picked it up and looked inside. It was the card they had all sent from the hostel.

He took it over to Roger, leaning this time a little less fearfully over the edge of the bed towards him. Inside were all the signatures, and a drawing or two. It was the crutch Jace needed, and he read out every name slowly.

"Old Banger; trust him to draw a plane; Ha! I wonder if he's ever been up in one! And look at Hobbes – man that guy could never write; how's he ever going to get through school? Check this one – this is Boycie. Hey Boycie come see your message here!" Jace was suddenly feeling a lot more confident and

relaxed and Roger was beginning to smile, nodding his head every now and then.

"I already seen it," came the reply.

Jace shrugged his shoulders, curling his mouth up to one side, and throwing his eyes upwards so that Roger would understand.

But perhaps he had stayed too long, or perhaps the excitement of seeing all the signatures and messages again had been too much because Roger began to cough, except that it wasn't really a cough, but more of a desperate wheeze. His face became slightly contorted, and then an alarm went off on one of the machines next to him.

Boycie jumped up and stupidly turned around to look, just as the nurse came in.

"It's okay boys," she said, and then turning to Roger: "Let's get you sorted out here, big man." She made some adjustments and took his mask off. Another big mistake. Roger actually managed to look much worse than he did with the mask over his face. Jace could hear Boycie whimper nervously, but things were a bit of a blur, what with the nurse fiddling, his attention on Roger, his face, his mask, his fingers flicking this way and that, Jace was expecting him to turn blue and die right there.

Boycie could take it no longer and came down like a dead weight, hitting his head solidly against the linoleum floor. Thuddd! This elicited a mob of white frocked bodies that came hurrying down the corridor, to fluff and fuss and fan poor old Boycie, just as if they his own attempts at restoring a bed. Thank goodness it wasn't long before Boycie was sitting up again, this time holding his stomach and looking like he might want to be sick. This is the last visit, thought Jace, shaking his head.

By the time Roger was settled, Boycie was up and focussing more or less as before – although how would one know, thought Jace to himself. Jace was exhausted, and after sitting with Roger for a little while longer, he decided it was time to go, so he waved at him with somewhat of a limp hand, made Boycie peer around the door and mutter a goodbye, and then escorted him down the corridor, into the lift, out through the front entrance, and back into the pounding sun on the boiling hot pavement outside.

"So you don't think I'll catch anythin' from him?" said Boycie finally, clutching the film case and the mask he had refused to put on.

"Frankly I wouldn't mind if you did; shite I can't believe you left me alone in there; I had to do it all alone..."

"It was your shitty idea, not mine!"

"Shit, Boycie – you could have helped a little, you know. I mean I was also afraid. That's why I brought you in the first place. I think Roger really appreciated us visiting him, don't you think?" said Jace, trying to lift the mood.

"Yeah," said Boycie clutching the heavy case, "I really enjoyed seeing someone like that, so close to death; a real happy time, you know. For all the horrible things I been thinkin' since I saw him just then, I'm goin' t' need from here till next week t' finish all the Hail Mary's I'll need to say. Mother of God, if you take me there again, I'll throw up as well as fall over."

Jace put his hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Jesus is proud of you, Boycie; it was the right thing to do."

This seemed to perk Boycie's up a bit, as the mention of someone from the Bible always did and, with the timeous arrival of a bus after fifteen minutes in the hot sun, they made it back just in time for the end of lunch so that, as the privileged pair, they sat together in the huge dining room, all alone, and with a treat provided by Mrs Moody as compensation for their long expedition and appreciated sacrifice.

Jace noticed that Boycie's stomach had managed to recover.