

Chapter 20

The darkness strikes

From early morning on Holy Saturday, Fr van Engelen had been anxious about the arrival of Fr de Jonge. The Provincial had told him that he would be driven up from Melbourne and arrive early to mid afternoon. But three o'clock came and still no Fr de Jonge. Four o'clock came and still no news. Fr van Engelen planned to start the Holy Saturday ceremonies at five o'clock and he would not delay that on any account. If the Provincial arrived then, or during the ceremonies, he would have to wait. By seven o'clock Fr van Engelen was back in the presbytery and not a sign of the Provincial. He hoped for a moment that something had happened to make him put his visit off, but then decided that that was wishful thinking. He took up his daily office. He would pray and wait patiently. At around eight o'clock there was a knock on the door. He opened to reveal Fr de Jonge standing stiffly under the porch light.

'Goedenavond,' said the Provincial officiously.

Fr van Engelen had a quick look around outside as the Provincial passed him, saying he had just come to ensure that all was in readiness. Fr van Engelen replied that there was not much to prepare. Everything depended on him and his companions.

'Have you arranged for a table in the sanctuary, Father?'

'Oh, I'm sorry, I did not think of it,' said Fr van Engelen.

'I thought that may happen,' said the Provincial, maintaining his formal manner. 'That's all right. We have brought a portable altar table. With white linen draped over it, nobody will know the difference.'

Fr van Engelen was inclined to ask what that difference was, but decided his inquiry would sound facetious.

'Are you able to disassemble the altar rails? I assume the altar rails are still there?'

'Yes, they are there and we cannot disassemble them.'

'Just as I thought,' said the Provincial, remaining standing. He fidgeted a little and appeared to want to make the visit as short as possible. 'Not to worry. The dancers are able to move through narrow spaces.'

'You mean the dancers will enter the sanctuary?'

'Don't be obtuse, Father. Of course they will.' He looked at him sternly. 'We will be at the church at nine o'clock for the preparations and for a brief rehearsal.'

‘A rehearsal?’

‘Yes. Don’t worry. It will just be a question of adjusting to the space and the length of the aisle.’

‘The length of the aisle?’

‘Father, will you stop repeating me. It sounds offensive.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Fr van Engelen, whose heart had sunk so low that he had to sit down.,

‘Well, that’s it, really. That’s all I wanted to say,’ said the Provincial, turning to leave. ‘Don’t move, Father, I know you are in a state of stress and fatigue. I will let myself out.’

Fr van Engelen was too weary to move. How could he stand it? How was he to get through Easter Sunday morning?

Suzie McNamarra had been at Bob McKinnon’s house from late afternoon. At around nine o’clock, Bob was stretched out on the lounge room sofa, lazily watching television while Suzie dressed in her underwear was leaning over the back of the sofa and playing with his hair. She contemplated him as she ran her fingers through his hair and over his cheek. The phone rang.

‘Oh, leave it,’ said Bob, ‘it can’t be anything interesting.’

‘I can get it. It’s no trouble.’

‘No, No. No need to give people something to gossip about,’ he said, without moving.

But the phone continued to ring and ring.

‘Well, that’s being insistent,’ he said at last. Removing Suzie’s hand from his head, he got up, walked lazily to the phone and picked it up.

‘Hello, yes...that’s right...’ There was a long break while he listened and then: ‘okay...how did you know about me?...okay...yes, I’ll be there. Give me fifteen minutes.’ He put the phone down slowly and looked absently at the floor without moving. He glanced at Suzie. It was a strange expression, thought Suzie, not one that she was used to. ‘I’m going out for a while,’ he said, as if he had come to a decision. He sat on the lounge in front of Suzie, putting on his shoes and buttoning his shirt. ‘Won’t be too long,’ he said, getting up. ‘You can wait here if you want.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘Don’t ask questions and you’ll be told no lies,’ he said, resuming his jovial manner.

Suzie felt inclined to try to get it out of him, but knew it was one of the conditions of their relationship that she ask no questions if he did not want to talk about his activities. It would not work otherwise, he told her. He liked her tremendously, but he had these other wants.

‘Are you going to stay here?’ he said, ready to go.

'Yes, but don't be long. It's Saturday evening, after all.'

'You're sounding like a wife, tut, tut.' He wagged his finger at her and was on the point of walking to the door when he stopped and contemplated her standing barefoot and in her underwear beside the lounge settee. 'What's a gorgeous young thing like you doing with an ugly, fat, self-indulged bugger like me?'

'It's not the weakness I like...'

'Oh, stop! You sound like a priest – you know, love the sinner and hate the sin!' He flapped his hands about. 'I'll back shortly.'

Suzie sat on the sofa and looked disconsolately for a moment at the television. She picked up her dress that had been draped over the end of the settee and put it on.

Ten minutes later, Bob entered the smoky, noise-filled saloon bar of The Commercial Hotel. He ambled to the bar, glancing around a little nervously. He caught sight of a slender young man neatly dressed with short fair hair sitting in the corner. He let his eyes alight on him. The young man gave him a nod.

He was scarcely outside on the footpath when the slender young man hurried by. He followed. At the end of the square, the young man got into a car parked behind some trees on the border of the park. Bob got in the passenger side. The car reversed, drove out of the circuit onto Melbourne Rd, and headed at a moderate pace out of town. Five minutes later, it pulled to the left off the road into the clearing at the crest of the road as it passed through the two peaks. The engine died and the lights went out. Two figures silhouetted against the half-moonlit night got out of the front seats and into the back.

The entrance to the track that ran along the ridge to the top of Death Rock was about twenty yards further along in the clearing. Out of the darkness of that track, emerged three men wearing balaclavas. One signalled the other two to stay. Keeping close to the trees and shrubs, he moved soundlessly to within a few yards of the car. He stood there for fifteen minutes, observing the glint on the car roof as it moved almost imperceptibly every now and then. Then the window on the bush side of the car was wound down. An item of clothing was draped over the opened window. The dark figure signalled to the other two.

The two men came up beside him and they slowly approached the car. They reached slowly for the door handles. At the whisper 'go!' they wrenched the doors open and dragged the two occupants out. The young man, with his pants around his ankles, was held by the two men. Bob, barefoot and naked from the waist down, was choking in the grip of the arm around his neck.

‘What do you want?’ he gasped, as the arm relaxed its hold.

‘Shut up and nothing will happen,’ came the rough reply.

‘What...?’ he began to whimper. ‘What do you want?’ He felt cold steel against his temple.

‘Stand still!’

The man relaxed his hold a little more, but the barrel of the pistol was pressed harder against his temple.

‘You move and I blow your brains out, right?’

Bob shook his head convulsively. He felt a tight elastic blindfold being pulled over his head and adjusted over his eyes. He was shivering.

‘Stay still!’

Bob tried to control his convulsive movements. Next moment, his pants and his sandals were pushed into his hands.

‘Take these and don’t try anything or it’s the finish. Put your shoes on. Just your shoes.’

Bob crouched down uncertainly in the vague light of the clearing and slipped his sandals on.

‘Pick up your pants.’

Bob felt around for his pants, picked them up and held them against his chest like a child awaiting orders from an adult.

‘Come on.’

He was pushed forward a few paces and then his arms were taken by men on each side of him.

‘What’s happening? Where are you taking me,’ he said, shaking and whimpering in terror.

‘Shut up and nothing will happen,’ came the same voice that was now behind him.

‘Please don’t hurt me. I’ll do whatever you want.’

With tears rolling from his eyes, Bob was pushed and dragged to the track leading along the ridge to Death Rock. The leader signalled to the young man, who was standing free and waiting patiently, to pull his trousers up. He beckoned him to follow and as they fell in behind Bob and his escort, he handed him an envelope. The young man put the envelope in his trouser pocket.

After being dragged and pushed blubbing and pleading for about twenty minutes, Bob found himself on a hard flat even surface. He was released from his silent escort.

‘Where am I? What do you want?’ he pleaded.

‘Just stand there.’

The night sky was clear and the beams from the part moon gleamed in the shiny smooth surface of the rocky platform. The leader signalled to the young man. He was thrown several lengths of rope. He then tied

a length of rope around each of Bob's ankles and wrists.

'What's happening?' cried Bob. 'If this is what you want, I'm willing. You don't have to go about it like this.'

'Now you two, finish what you were doing.'

As the young man approached Bob, the leader signalled to the other men to retreat. He went with them to the start of the track along the ridge, issued some instructions and then waited until they had disappeared into the darkness. Five minutes later, he returned to Bob and the young man.

'If you want to look,' Bob said, feeling a hand roughly taking hold of him, 'you don't have to go to this trouble.'

The leader shuffled Bob towards the edge of the outcrop, slipped the blindfold off his head, grabbed his right arm with both hands, hissed, 'Die Crusader filth, die!' and flung him into the dark. There was no cry, no words, just the thump a few seconds later and the short rattle of shifting rock and gravel. Then there was silence. The dark balaclava'd figure approached the young man standing paralysed with fright in the centre of the rocky platform.

'You have done good work,' he said. 'Very good work. You have earned your money.'

He then grabbed him and in a series of violent actions ripped his shirt open and his pants down to his ankles, flung one arm around his neck and put his hand over his mouth. The young man was marched to the edge of the outcrop and with the same message whispered in his ear, 'Die Crusader filth!' he was lifted off his feet and thrown into the abyss. Again, there was no cry, no words, just the thump and the rattling of stone a few seconds later. Boris removed his balaclava and peered into the dark below. He took the torch from his pocket, but thought better of it.

Twenty minutes later, he was at the fence at the bottom of Death Rock. He flashed his torch, but his view was obscured by the long grass. He crawled through the wire fence and only had to walk a few paces before the beam of the torch, which he flashed intermittently, revealed the two bloodied bodies lying next to each other. He held the beam on long enough to assure himself that there was no life in them. He returned to the road and flashed his torch once in the direction of the crest of the hill. A minute later, a car arrived, picked him up and headed in the direction of Bendigo. The empty car standing in the clearing with its back window open took in the full force of the chilly night air that slowly wrapped around the peaks.

At one o'clock in the morning, a dark van nudged in between the trees that bordered the clearing. Eight robed figures, seven in white and one in black, assembled at the start of the track along the ridge. With a solemn nod, the black robe headed off with the others following. They stopped some way in and lit candles. The glimmering line then resumed its way.

Twenty minutes later, the robed figures emerged on the rocky outcrop, keeping the same solemn glimmering line. At a signal from black robe, a cloth, marked with a pentacle, was laid near the edge. The seven white robes formed a semicircle around the cloth while black robe stood in the middle. There followed several minutes of low chanting. At a signal from Gerda Vrouwendijk, Lesley Conos and Faye Croft came forward. Lesley Conos produced a terrified rabbit. She and Faye Croft, each taking a fore and hind leg, held the wriggling rabbit in the centre of the pentacle. More chanting followed. At the end of the chanting, Gerda bent forward and grasped the rabbit around the neck. The rabbit wriggled furiously for a short time and then was still.

'The atoning and purifying male sacrifice,' she said, holding the dead rabbit aloft. 'Unblemished.' She turned and threw it into the dark.

The eight women, holding their candles and chanting softly, made their way back down the bush track.

At a few minutes to nine on Easter Morning, Fr van Engelen left the presbytery to open the church. He greeted some adults and young girls in overcoats, standing around. They returned what looked like a cautious greeting. He opened the doors and stood back, but the people pretended not to notice. He entered and knelt in the back pew. Some time later, he returned outside and was surprised to see the numbers had grown considerably. In the midst of them, he made out Fr de Jonge who was dressed as the evening before in a spotless white shirt and neatly pressed black trousers.

As he walked to greet him, a girl of thirteen or fourteen years discarded her overcoat to reveal a tight fitting black leotard and a small pink gauze skirt. She was heavily made up, with her lips coloured a bright red. Other girls of around the same age began divesting themselves of their overcoats to reveal the same attire. The adults proudly took the coats.

'Goedemorgen, Father,' said the Provincial, breaking in on Fr van Engelen's silent observations.

'Goedemorgen, Father,' said Fr van Engelen vaguely, and unable to take his eyes off the pubescent girls.

'They are the dancers,' said Fr de Jonge, clearly pleased with himself.

'Do you think that's appropriate clothing for a church?'

'Of course, why not? They're dancers.'

'Do you think pubescent girls dressed in immodest clothing are suitable for Easter Sunday Mass?'

'They're not dressed immodestly. And there's nothing wrong with young girls. They give an air of innocence and purity to the occasion.'

'That's what I'm afraid of,' said Fr van Engelen, no longer able to hold back. 'They're going to give the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass the appearance of a pagan goddess ceremony complete with vestal virgins!'

'Now, I will not stand for this offensiveness any longer!' said Fr de Jonge, angrily. They had been speaking in Dutch and it was only now that those standing around noticed the tension. 'If you are unable to say anything positive or encouraging, I would request you to go inside the church and leave us to get things organised.'

Fr van Engelen agreed that it was probably the best thing for him to do. He could not stand there without raising objections. As he was turning to go, he noticed behind Fr de Jonge two young men dressed in tight white shirts and tight black trousers. They had their hair slicked back. One had his face coloured white, the other black. Undoubtedly, they were the seminarians who were going to mime the Gospel reading of the Resurrection. He did not say anything. He knew it would make no difference, and the Provincial was standing there glaring at him. He returned to the pew at the back of the church.

During the next half an hour, Fr van Engelen watched the preparations with increasing alarm. After the portable table was erected, the two seminarians entered the sanctuary talking gaily and not bothering to genuflect as they passed the tabernacle. They rehearsed their Gospel mime, breaking off continually with much chatter as they discussed the effectiveness of certain moves and actions. Fr de Jonge came into the church during the rehearsals and every time the seminarians looked in his direction after a sequence of miming, he would nod approvingly. After fifteen minutes of rehearsals, they left the church to the dancers to go through their paces.

Sister Parker, dressed in a grey modern habit with a small veil, brought her pubescent girls into the church and lined them up at the back. Fr van Engelen counted eleven of them. One was dressed differently from the other ten. She had on a deep red leotard and a small black gauze skirt. She was also more mature than the other girls. At a given signal, the ten girls in quick succession weaved and spun themselves down the aisle through the break in the altar rails and formed themselves in a bunch facing towards the back of the church.

Following quickly on the heels of the last girl, the red leotard and

black gauze dress came weaving and spinning with greater flourish and grace in her movements than her companions. When she got to the bunched girls she stopped abruptly, swivelled, stood on the toes of her left foot, lifted and bent her right leg, and then arched her back with her arms raised above her head. She slowly fell backwards to be taken up in the arms of the ten girls and was raised high into the air. When she was at the maximum height, she arched her back flinging both arms behind her so that they drooped towards the floor. She was now looking upside down into the tabernacle. She was deposited on the floor after which she rushed in graceful movements with the other girls following towards the back of the church. The girls repeated this manoeuvre several times after which Sister Parker said they could rest.

With the rehearsals finishing, Fr van Engelen made his way to the front and knelt in the foremost pew. Charles, Aine and Estella came into the church as the girls were gathering after their last rehearsal. The Winterbines looked with undisguised amazement at the dancers. The girls looked back with an equal amount of amazement at the beautiful girl that had passed them. Their eyes followed her. They watched transfixed, as she took her position in the front pew. Sister Parker, noticing the staring group of girls, shooed them outside.

'I would like you to support me when I get up just before the start of Mass, Charles, if you don't mind,' Fr van Engelen whispered.

'Of course, Father, just give me the sign.'

At that moment, there was about twenty minutes to go before the start of Mass. Fr van Engelen's congregation was arriving. Bemused, each person had to run the gauntlet of the pubescent dancers and the miming seminarians with their entourages as they came into the church. There was a growing restlessness. A couple of minutes before Mass was due to start and the girls were lined up at the back of the church ready to dance ahead of a vested Fr de Jonge, the whispering and movement stopped. The congregation seemed to freeze. Then, when the sound of shifting feet was heard, Fr van Engelen rose slowly and stood in the middle of the aisle. Charles followed him, offering his arm. There was an eerie silence as all eyes turned towards the crippled priest.

Fr van Engelen moved slowly forward leaning on Charles's arm. He came to the break in the altar rails. Steadying himself with Charles's help he dropped to his knees. He let go Charles's arm and fell forward prostrating himself in the opening of the altar rails. He stretched his arms out in the form of a cross.

'Jesus, have mercy,' he said softly, but clearly.

Charles looked on for a few moments and then knelt down directly behind him. Aine rose and knelt beside her husband. Now everyone –

Fr de Jonge, seminarians, pubescent dancers, supporters and the congregation – watched spellbound as the tall dark girl of peerless beauty, serene expression, modest dress and hands clasped together rose and bowing her head knelt behind her parents. For a few moments all was in suspension. Then slowly, at first, the aisle began to fill with kneeling faithful. It gathered pace and grew into much bustling and movement until every walkway in the church was blocked. The sound of movement died away and Fr de Jonge and his entourage were left staring in consternation. The scene was too much for some of the pubescent girls and they started to whimper in dismay.

Fr de Jonge's indecision did not last long. He saw the determination on the faces of the congregation and realised his cause was defeated. He beckoned to his entourage to withdraw with him. After more shuffling of feet, silence came on the congregation. Fr van Engelen signalled to Charles to help him up. Once again on his feet and steadying himself on Charles's arm, he bowed his head and began chanting the Church's ancient song of praise to God. The congregation joined him.

Te Deum laudamus: te Dominum confitemur
Te aeternum Patrem omnis terra veneratur...

[We praise Thee, O God: we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord.
All the earth doth worship Thee the Father eternal.
To Thee all the Angels cry aloud, the heavens and all the powers
therein:
To Thee cherubim and Seraphim continually do cry:
Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Sabaoth...]

Fr de Jonge stood outside with his people gathered around him and listened in silence to the chanting of the *Te Deum*. He was furious. He could not bear to hear that ancient song of praise and thanksgiving sung to mock and triumph over him. It was the bitterest of experiences and he determined then and there that he would never ever again suffer defeat at the hands of someone in the paralysis of a dysfunctional past.

He told his people that regretfully he had to send them back to Bendigo or Melbourne to attend Mass that day. They must keep their strength and courage up, he said. There were going to be obstacles for them to overcome. There were going to be selfish people too attached to the past to see the new springtime in the Church. All these things were a suffering to overcome. But they must persevere.

After finishing the chanting of the *Te Deum*, Fr van Engelen faced the congregation and told them that the miracle he had hoped for had occurred. It had occurred in the simplest but most unexpected fashion and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was protected. It was now time to say the rosary in thanksgiving. It was time to say the five Glorious Mysteries, the first of which celebrated the Lord's guarantee of His redemptive act: his rising from the dead in defeat of sin and death.

As Fr van Engelen was divesting after Mass, one of Fr de Jonge's seminarians entered the sacristy with the message that Fr de Jonge requested a meeting.

'Would you please excuse us, sir,' said Fr de Jonge to Charles, who had accompanied Fr van Engelen, 'I have something important and confidential to say.'

'You will have to excuse me, Father,' said Charles, standing his full six foot four inches. 'I feel it is important that I stay. It is not only Fr van Engelen who is concerned with what happens to him. We all are vitally concerned, those of us here in Binawarra and those who drive many miles to come to Mass here. We value Fr van Engelen as a priest and we value the way he conducts the parish. I think we can expect after today that you plan to take action against him. I want to warn you that we, as a congregation of faithful, will resist, as long as it is consistent with the teaching of the Church.'

Charles's words and willingness to stand up to him were yet another shock for Fr de Jonge and he did not know quite what to say. Fr van Engelen was similarly taken by surprise.

'You warn me? Obedience to the authority of the Church is consistent with the teaching of the Church,' said Fr de Jonge, disconcerted by having to face such bold and untutored resistance.

'We are being faithful to the Church and its teachings,' said Charles simply. 'Nothing else motivates us.'

'Are you in a position to know truthfully that you are being faithful?'

'In this case, yes,' replied Charles. 'How could the Mass that has been said for centuries be suddenly unlawful or against the faith or the truth?'

'You are taking the course of rebellion. Indeed, you are taking an unauthorised and incompetent lead in this. I will not discuss the matter with you. You are failing to render obedience to the Church.'

'We are faithful to the Church, Father, and will continue to be so.'

Fr de Jonge looked in silence at Charles for a few moments and then turned his gaze on Fr van Engelen. 'It appears, Father,' he said, speaking in Dutch, 'that I am even thwarted in having a private meeting with you. I'm sure that the seriousness of your rebellion is not beyond you. I

will leave you now, but you must expect a disciplinary response.' He paused. 'I am obliged to take action that I have hitherto been reluctant to take. It concerns your medical condition, which I suspect is at the bottom of your rigidity and stubbornness. I will be arranging medical appointments for you. Please hold yourself available.'

'Fr de Jonge,' said Fr van Engelen, 'it's not just me any more, not just a personal decision. I have a duty to the people who come to Mass here. How can I abandon them? Nothing that I have done has been done without painful contemplation of my duty as a priest.'

'I have explained your duty,' Fr de Jonge snapped. 'There's nothing more to be done, other than to obey.' He strode through the iron gates. Fr van Engelen and Charles watched him walk resolutely in the direction of Melbourne Rd. A car reversed from a parking spot and came alongside. A back door was pushed open and Fr de Jonge got in.

'Thank you, Charles,' said Fr van Engelen. 'We priests take on a heavy responsibility. We do that willingly. But sometimes it becomes almost too heavy, for we are also only human. It is in those times that support is most welcome. I thank you for standing up for the faith and for giving me support at the very moment I felt like buckling.'

Bill Huckerby stood at the head of the table and beamed at his guests. Around the table in the Huckerby dining room sat Charles, Aine, Estella, Fr van Engelen, and Miss Barker. Joanne was to the side on his left.

'This is the first time we have all been together and what an occasion for us to be together – Easter Sunday, the day of the Lord's resurrection. I welcome you all very very warmly. I cannot tell you how overjoyed Joanne and I are to have you here.'

'We are all very glad to be here,' said Charles.

'Thank you, my boy, I know you are.' He stretched out his hand and shook Charles's hand warmly.

'Let's all remember that time, too...how old are you, Estella, my dear, seventeen?...that's right...it was almost nineteen years ago that Charles met Aine for the first time on our verandah outside. What an act of Providence! It's almost as if we are together now because of that meeting. Let's celebrate that occasion, too, as the action of the Lord.' He sat down. 'Now, Father, you are the senior religious here. You can say grace. I ask the only heathen among us,' inclining his head in Miss Barker's direction, 'to indulge us in this.'

'Thank you, Bill, I will be glad to say grace,' said the priest, now feeling more relaxed than several hours before, 'but may I also offer a prayer for you all, in particular for Miss Barker, and a prayer in thanksgiving for our Mass today.'

With grace said, everyone sat back while Bill carved the roast and Joanne urged the guests to serve themselves from the bowls of vegetable and salad on the table.

'You know, Bill,' began Miss Barker, making herself sound particularly stern. 'I may not be the heathen you think I am.'

'What, Flo? What have we now from that overactive mind of yours?' said Bill loudly, while he worked away at the roast. 'Be careful, Father,' he said, turning to the priest at the other end of the table, 'she's a slippery customer this one. Her library is bigger than the town's public library.' The priest returned an amused smile. 'Okay, Flo, let's have it, full barrels!'

'Well, correct me, Father,' she began, with a hint of mischief in her eyes, 'but doesn't the Catholic doctrine of "no salvation outside the Church" really entail this: that salvation comes only through the graces provided by the Saviour's death and that not only are those living a life of grace within the Church, but those also living a life according to Christ's teachings, even though they are not formally a member of the Catholic Church, or have never even heard of the Church, may be saved?'

'Well, Miss Barker, you surprise me yet again. If a person lives a life of charity and virtue in the way Our Lord taught, while not hearing about the Christian Gospel, or in all sincerity not having been able to accept Christ or the Catholic Church, he is saved, not despite, but by virtue of Christ's graces. We talk of a situation of invincible ignorance. The important point to remember is that no one is saved except by Christ through the Church he established, the Catholic Church.'

'Bill?' said Miss Barker pointedly.

Bill put down his carving knife and fork and looked perplexed for a few moments while the others awaited his reply. 'Invincible ignorance! You mean that there is still a chance for me, Father? I will still get into heaven as an Anglican?' he asked, resuming his usual joviality and picking up the knife and fork again.

'Yes, of course, Bill, but you will enter heaven as a virtual Catholic.'

He stared at the priest for a moment and then opened his mouth in a big grin. 'A virtual Catholic! Hah! Hah! That's a good one! Well done, Father. No doubt about you Romans, you have an answer for everything!'

Nobody could resist Bill's amusement and they laughed heartily. Even Miss Barker had to drop her stern expression and smile, something that Bill did not miss.

'Hey, Flo, you're laughing, or almost. There, Father, that's an even bigger miracle than heathen Miss Barker getting into heaven as a virtual Catholic! A virtual Catholic! What next?' he muttered, shaking his head

highly amused.

The humour of the situation was enjoyed and the conversation lingered around the subject for a minute or so before moving on to Fr van Engelen's predicament. It was Charles that brought up the subject. As Charles answered Joanne's and Bill's questions, Bill became increasingly concerned.

'Do you mean that they could transfer you out of Binawarra?'

'That's one possibility,' said the priest.

'That's scandalous!' said Joanne. 'How could they get away with it?'

'Could they really force you to undergo psychological assessment?'

'Yes.'

'That is a gross misuse of authority,' said Bill, appalled. 'That is contrary to administrative practice and good business sense. How do such people get into positions of authority? Is there no one to appeal to?'

'Bill, you have to understand that I am a Catholic priest. I have willingly taken the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. There can be no reason for me to go against the first two, and there must be exceptional reason for not obeying the directives of my superiors. Really, it can be only a question of faith. Nobody may order me to do something that is contrary to the faith. Humiliation, discomfort, disadvantage, and those sorts of things, are not reasons for disobedience. Being a priest is not the same as being an employee of a business or a teacher in a school.'

There followed a thoughtful silence.

'You're going to stick up for Father, aren't you?' said Bill at length to Charles.'

'Yes,' said Charles, with Aine and Estella following in their support.

'Well, so will we, won't we, darling?' he said to Joanne.

'We will give Father whatever support we can give,' said Joanne.

Father van Engelen expressed his appreciation of their support, but in reality everything must be left to him. There could be no other way. 'We'll see about that,' said Bill, exhibiting much indignation.

In due course, lunch came to an end and the guests were invited to retire to the verandah to enjoy the fine and mild weather. Joanne went to the kitchen to make coffee. As the others were settling themselves on the verandah, the phone rang. Moments later, Joanne was heard walking quickly down the hall.

'It's Sergeant Willis,' said Joanne. 'He said it's urgent.'

Bill got up as quickly as his bulk would allow him and disappeared into the hall. Joanne followed him. The others waited in silence. A few minutes later, Bill appeared, looking deathly pale. Joanne followed with a handkerchief held to her nose.

'What is it, Bill?' said Charles, standing up.

'There's been an accident. Somebody's been killed.' He sat down and Joanne sat next to him, sniffing.

'Who?'

'Bob McKinnon has been found dead just outside Binawarra. On the roadside as you pass through the two peaks.'

There were quiet gasps from Charles, Aine and Estella, while Miss Barker and Fr van Engelen looked on gravely.

'Where exactly?' said Charles.

'I don't know,' said Bill. 'That's all Sergeant Willis would say. He said he couldn't say any more for the moment. News has gone down to Bendigo police. He was waiting for instructions. He said it was important for me to keep abreast of what was happening. There was something odd about it all, something that may cause trouble in the end. I asked him if there was foul play or something. He replied that he didn't think so, but he couldn't say any more. I should stay by the phone.'

A sombre silence descended on the group. At length, Charles said that he, Aine and Estella would stay if they could be of support. Bill and Joanne pleaded for them to stay. Fr van Engelen gave Miss Barker a look that was a silent plea. Miss Barker then said it would be best if she and Father left. Charles, Aine and Estella would be free to offer their comfort. If they needed any help, she was only a phone call away.

'What do you think of this, Father?' said Miss Barker, as they drove away.'

'It's tragic. Very sad.'

'Nothing more than tragic?'

'Do you think there is more to it, something connected with our discussions?'

'It seems just too coincidental, doesn't it?'

'I don't know. What connection could there be?'

'I don't know directly. We will wait and see. But don't be surprised if there is a connection. A foul wind has been blowing through Binawarra since that woman arrived.'

She dropped him off at the presbytery and headed out of town. It was about two thirty when she passed the empty car in the clearing on the crest of the rise and stopped behind Sergeant Willis's police car. The sergeant was standing nervously against the boundary fence under the sharp peak.

'Please, Miss Barker,' he began apprehensively, when he saw her. 'I have to protect the scene from all intrusion. It's essential.'

'Calm down, Sergeant. I know. I'm here to help. I am a nurse, you know. Has the doctor been?'

'No, he's away for the afternoon. I have left a message for him.'

'Let me have a look. Where's the body?'

'I don't think you should. It's not very pretty.'

'Don't be silly, Sergeant, I've see such things before, far worse than a simple death.'

'It's not a simple death. It's disgusting.'

'Disgusting? Where is he?'

'There,' he said, pointing, 'and don't say I didn't warn you. I would put a handkerchief over my mouth, if I were you.'

He held the wire up and she crawled through. She had gone ten yards when she saw the upper part of two bodies. She stopped and examined which way was best to approach without disturbing the scene. She made her way to the base of the peak, keeping a proper distance from the bodies. She took in the scene carefully. It was not just odd, she thought. She looked up at the rocky platform and then at the bodies. Then she saw the dead rabbit partly hidden in the grass not far away. She made her way back to the sergeant who was relieved to see her come away from the bodies.

'Who found the bodies?'

'Three priests who were driving back to Melbourne. One of the young ones caught a glimpse of a light colour in the grass as they came over the crest. He must have been looking directly at the spot. Otherwise he would not have seen it. Nobody else before them saw anything. Anyhow, they were curious and got out to have a look.'

'Where are they now?'

'At the police station. They have to stay there until they can be interviewed.'

'How are they?'

'Shocked. Very shocked, the two young ones in particular,' said Sergeant Willis, shaking his head. 'It's not good for young priests to see something like that. The older priest is trying to comfort them.'

'Have you been up there?' she said, looking up at the outcrop.

'No,' said the sergeant, alarmed.

'I will have a look.'

'Please, Miss Barker, do not touch anything.'

'Do you think that dead rabbit means anything?'

'What dead rabbit?'

'Over there, not far from the bodies.'

'Miss Barker, there are dead rabbits all over the place here. Leave it to the investigators.'

'Relax, Sergeant, I won't bother you any more,' she said, walking towards the empty car in the clearing.

She was pleased to find on the way, as she expected, the track leading

along the ridge at the crest of the hill. She walked on to the empty car and peered in the open window. There was nothing. She saw from the sticker on the back window that it was a hire car. She returned to the track along the ridge.

She made the climb, looking for anything unusual along the track. Two things she saw: the track had been negotiated recently and it looked like feet had been dragging in the dirt at different places. It also appeared that someone had walked off the track. She saw the pair of trousers as she walked onto the rocky outcrop. She looked around carefully and found a few drops of wax. Without touching the drops, she bent down to examine them. She walked to the ledge and looked down. It seemed to her that the bodies were further from the cliff face than if they had merely fallen from the ledge. At that moment, three police cars arrived from the direction of Bendigo. She got out of sight and made her way down the track. Back on the road, she walked quickly to her car but was spotted by one of the Bendigo policemen.

‘Madam,’ he called, ‘can I ask you to keep on your way? This is now a police scene.’

Miss Barker waved her acknowledgment, got in her car and headed straight for the Huckerby house. The Huckerbys and Winterbines were still sitting on the verandah when she pulled up outside.

‘What is it? Do you have some information?’ Bill said, realising that she would not have returned for idle talk.

She came up the steps without replying and indicated that Bill should resume his seat.

‘It’s not good news, is it? I can see it all over your face,’ he said, in resignation. ‘And I think that somehow I am going to be involved.’

‘Involved!’ cried Joanne.

‘You’re right, Bill. But I fear it will be a lot of involvement rather than a little,’ said Miss Barker.

‘Come on, let me have it without any diplomacy,’ he said.

‘There are some very disagreeable, nasty things to relate,’ she said, looking at Charles and Aine. ‘I wonder whether it will do Estella any good to hear this.’

Aine took Estella’s hand. ‘We will go for a walk, Miss Barker. Charles will tell us later what we need to know.’ She walked off with Estella in tow. Miss Barker then related as much as she knew.

‘How shocking! Did you know about his activities?’ said Joanne.

‘I had my suspicions,’ said Bill, ‘but as long as he did his job and made no issue of such things, then it was not my business to inquire. He was a good science teacher.’

‘Think, Bill,’ said Miss Barker, leaning towards him, ‘was there ever

any indication that Bob McKinnon was in the habit of arranging for male prostitutes to come to Binawarra?’

‘Male prostitutes?’ said Joanne.

‘Yes, Joanne, I think Flo is right,’ said Bill. ‘That’s what it looks like. On the surface, it looks like some sort of sexual encounter gone wrong.’

‘On the surface,’ murmured Miss Barker.

‘What? Do you think it could be something else?’

‘I don’t know, Bill. Let’s leave it until we hear more. But you haven’t answered my question. Was there ever any indication of this?’

‘As far as I am concerned, none at all. The only relationship I am aware of was with Suzie McNamara. And he was reasonably discreet about that. There may have been somebody in Melbourne where, as you may be aware, he went often.’

‘Yes,’ she said, thinking. ‘I wonder whether Miss McNamara is aware of what’s happened.’

‘Yes, that’s a point,’ said Bill. ‘I think I should check. I have a feeling that that young lady was fonder of Bob than she let on.’ He went to the phone and returned a few minutes later. ‘No, she had no idea where he was, she said. The last she saw of him was last night when he was called out suddenly. I told her that she should contact the police and tell them what she knew. She began to panic right away. She asked me what was going on. I told her to contact the police. Then she was gone.’

‘She was at his place when he was called out,’ said Miss Barker slowly. ‘I assume someone rang up.’

‘That’s what she said.’

The phone started ringing. Bill went to answer it and was back without delay. ‘Darling, it’s Suzie McNamara. She’s hysterical. Apparently the constable told her straight-out that Bob had been killed. Can’t blame him. The young constable, he had no idea of the relationship between them. Would you speak to her, the poor girl? It’s not my bag, I’m afraid.’

Joanne went to the phone and returned shortly after. ‘The girl’s completely overwrought. She asked me to come around. I told I could not move from the house, but if she wanted some comfort she was very welcome to come over. To my surprise, she said she would.’

Five minutes later, Suzie McNamara’s small car stopped outside, but there was no further movement. Joanne hastened to the car. At that moment, Aine and Estella came around the side of the house and saw her trying to help Suzie out. But Suzie fell forward on the ground, crying uncontrollably. Joanne and Estella half carried half dragged her up onto the verandah. Joanne gave Bill a sign that he and Charles should leave them alone.

‘We’re not much good up there, are we Charles?’ he said, when they

arrived at the front gate. They looked helplessly on while the women crowded around the distressed girl sitting with her head in her hands. Comforting words amidst the sound of weeping drifted from the verandah. Then they heard Miss Barker asking questions between long pauses. Eventually, Miss Barker joined them.

'The girl is very upset,' she said. 'It seems there is no one in Binawarra that she can turn to for comfort – not even among your staff. It appears that she and Bob took sides against the Jane Cox faction. She said she would never go near them for comfort, that they would be happy to see Bob dead.'

'That's very sad,' said Charles.

'It's more than sad,' said Bill. 'It has implications for the school. I had no idea that there had been a split among that group of...well, whatever they are. They've been in each other's hair in the past, but it has never come to a split.'

'Bill, I think it's time for you to start looking into what's going on in your school,' said Miss Barker. 'Politically. You are far too trusting.'

'What are you referring to?'

'I'm asking you to start weighing things up.' He did not respond. 'Anyway,' she continued, 'Joanne has told Miss McNamara she can stay with you for the moment.'

'The break must be serious if she wants to stay with us,' said Bill.

'By the way, Charles,' said Miss Barker, 'the bodies were discovered by Fr van Engelen's superior and his two seminarians. I wonder if he knows. It would not be too comfortable sitting in the police station all the afternoon waiting to be interviewed.'

'I had better phone him,' he said. 'Can I use the phone, Bill?'

'Of course, lad, I'll come with you.'

They left Miss Barker at the front gate, pondering the events. It was now past three thirty. A few minutes later, another car pulled up.

'Good afternoon, Miss Barker,' said Ruby cheerfully. 'We thought we would find you all here. We went first to the Winterbine's, then to you, and now here... What's happening?' she broke off, seeing the women bunched around Suzie. Miss Barker related briefly what happened. 'Bob dead!' cried Ruby. 'We only spoke to him a week or so ago.' She paused. 'I was well aware he was into that sort of thing but had no idea it would end this way.'

'There may be more to it.'

'What?'

'Let's wait until we get more information,' said Miss Barker.

'I will join the ladies for a minute,' said Ruby. 'Geoff, wait here.'

'I think I have something that may interest you,' said Geoff, after he

saw Ruby settle among the women on the verandah.

'I would never expect anything frivolous to fall from your mouth, Captain Shawcross.'

'I have only met the man once and I found him very odd. But there is one thing that I remember in particular about that meeting and I am surprised it did not come back to Ruby immediately.'

'It depends on what your mind is attuned to, Mr Shawcross. Go on.'

'Ruby asked him what he thought of the proposal for Estella to pursue a career in public relations. His first reaction was to pick correctly that the proposal had come from Miss Bicknell. When Ruby asked him whether he agreed with the idea, he started flapping his hands and saying that Estella did not have to do anything, she just had to be there, you know, because of how beautiful she is. But then he went suddenly quiet, changed mood completely. He muttered something like "So that's it?" and left us in a hurry.'

'Excellent, Captain Shawcross! That's the link I was wanting.'

'There's more,' he went on. 'Later that day, Bill told me that Bob had rung in a state to warn him...something to do with the students. Not everything was as it looked on the surface, he said.'

'Well, indeed, indeed. I had my suspicions immediately about the circumstances of Mr McKinnon's death,' she said. 'As strange as he seemed, it was not in his character to make the effort to go to the top of Death Rock, as the young people call it. He was far too lazy for such exertion. Viewing the site and the bodies strengthened those suspicions. Hearing Miss McNamara's last words with him and now this, it all points to his getting on to Miss Bicknell. Unfortunately, his well-known way of making the target of his subtle teasing suffer a little may have meant his death. That, of course, and his lack of personal discipline.'

'Can you be sure of this?'

'I've been here long enough to be aware of many things in this town, Mr Shawcross. Mr McKinnon was too open in a lot of respects. No, all things considered, I am as sure as I can be. Further developments will show whether I am right or wrong.'

'If you are right,' said Geoff, 'things have become very dangerous.'

'Yes, that's correct. It's not Miss Winterbine who is in immediate danger, though. It's those that look like disturbing Miss Bicknell's plans for Estella. You realise, you are putting yourself in danger? In fact, you may be putting yourself on the frontline. Keep in mind that it would not have been Miss Bicknell who threw those two men off the cliff. It had to be someone with great strength. Our friend, Mr Rostowski, seems to be our foremost candidate in all this.'

'Yes, I realise that. It does not matter. I'm fully committed, until

Estella is completely out of danger.'

Miss Barker searched Geoff's face. 'Very good, Mr Shawcross, we are both committed. But I must remind you not to involve Miss Waiting more than is necessary, for her good and for the success of the plans.'

'Yes, Miss Barker, I will be very strict with her.'

'Good. What are you doing here? I thought Miss Winterbine was to be taken by her mother and father to Bendigo tomorrow.'

'You know what Ruby is like,' he said. 'She thought it would be good to come up today and see if Estella would come back with us this evening. It would give her time to settle in before the program tomorrow. If it was not convenient, we would stay overnight and take her tomorrow. It would save Mr and Mrs Winterbine the trouble.'

'That's a good practical idea. I'm sure Charles and Aine will be happy to agree. That also works well for me. I have the photos of Miss Bicknell and her minder. Call around on your way to the Winterbines to pick them up.'

At that moment, Bill and Charles appeared on the verandah. Miss Barker and Geoff then joined the group. Geoff noticed a shy welcoming expression on Estella's face. That pleased him, considering the way she looked when they had left her two weeks before.

'Geoff, good news,' said Ruby, 'Estella's mum and dad have agreed to her coming this evening.'

Geoff smiled in reply and sat down. Miss Barker took the opportunity to ask a few more questions of Suzie McNamara. What were the disagreements that she and Mr McKinnon had with the others, and with whom did they have the disagreement? The answer to the second question was direct: it was mainly with that revolting Jane Cox and that creepy Stephen Calder. She was not precise in her answer to the first question. It was about ideology, she said. It would not interest the people present. And with that she began to cry all over again. Miss Barker then excused herself and went on her way, leaving the other women to comfort her.