

Listening

by Dave McKay
davidmckayjc@gmail.com

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Chapter One--The Monster is Dead

The news of his execution was flashed all over the world, and everywhere it was greeted with celebrations. Chaim Judah Rosenberg, the notorious endtime prophet, was dead -- shot through the head by a young Israeli sniper. Killed with him was his partner in crime, Rayford Strait. Strait, too, had been shot in the head by the same soldier.

In the week before their execution they had, on two occasions, publicly burned to death people who had tried to arrest them. These were the final victims in a three-year worldwide reign of terror by the two desperadoes.

Chaim had been dubbed the "smiling assassin" because of his apparent indifference to the suffering that he inflicted on anyone who dared to challenge him. It is estimated that more people died as a result of these two men than had died during all of the genocides in history.

Authorities had been working for years to bring the pair to justice, but they had slipped through every dragnet that was thrown around them, often killing dozens of law enforcement personnel in the process.

Chaim and Rayford were leaders of a tiny cult of religious fanatics whose members were so totally under their control that it was said that they would gladly betray their own families and even lay down their own lives at the behest of either Rosenberg or Strait.

Some news reports, reflecting on the long-awaited deaths of the notorious cult leaders, sought to unravel the mystery of their twisted lives. Chaim, in particular, interested the public, because he had started out as a peace-loving liberal Quaker just a few years earlier, a man of tolerance and love. But in a few short years he had evolved into an evil, perverted monster. What had caused him to change so dramatically, and what had been going on inside his own head to have led him to such a tragic end?

This book is an attempt to tell Chaim's story.

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Chapter Two--The Holocaust

Chaim looked deep into the lifeless blue eyes of the child that lay on the ground in front of him. She would have been only about six years old. Long ringlets of golden hair stirred in a gentle breeze around her tiny horror-stricken face. Her frilly white dress was covered in blood. There was in her face all the innocence of childhood, and yet Chaim sensed in her death all the worst of human depravity as well.

Around her lay other bodies, stretching for as far as he could see. But this one child was the only one on whom he could focus. Her face and her death embodied the suffering of each individual in a disaster that could not be comprehended through the use of numbers alone. He understood that she was part of the greatest destruction of human life that had ever occurred on earth. Millions had been killed overnight. Exactly how they had died was not clear, nor was it clear how Chaim had escaped. In fact, it was not even clear what country he was in. All that mattered was the awfulness of what lay in front of him, and his own feeling of helplessness.

Deep sobs wracked his body, though he cried silently. He was overcome with grief and compassion, but he was also overcome with a feeling of personal responsibility, like all of this was his fault, or perhaps like there was something he could do to ease the suffering, but he did not know what it was. Tears began to form in his eyes.

And then he awoke.

Three nights in a row the same dream had come to him. It was just a dream; and Chaim was intelligent enough to know that it would go away eventually.

Still, during the past two days, those innocent blue eyes had returned to his thoughts over and over, to haunt him even during his waking hours. The feeling was one of revulsion at whatever had caused this, but there was also a feeling of great despair over what to do about it. Being only a dream, of course, it was not possible to do anything; and so Chaim, in his own way, would shake it off by having a laugh at himself for being so obsessed, and then just wait for it to fade from his memory.

There was a protest rally that afternoon to attend, and then the flight to catch tomorrow morning, and so Chaim turned his attention to these and other events of the day.

Chaim Judah Rosenberg was in his late fifties, grey-haired, short, plump, good-natured, and single. He was a lecturer in comparative religions at the University of Newcastle, and a faithful member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) for the past 18 years.

Although respected for his knowledge of all the world's great religions, Chaim's speciality was new religious movements. He had been invited to participate as the Australian Quaker representative at an interfaith conference to

be held in Chennai, India, starting that weekend. The university had gladly given him leave to attend.

Friends (as Quakers are known amongst themselves) recognised Chaim as a competent, honest, and humble representative on any body that he had been appointed to. His Jewish faith had not been a problem with Friends in Australia, where the movement tolerated people of all beliefs on the basis of their willingness to “walk in the Light”. Not even amongst his most liberal Jewish relatives and friends had he found such broad-mindedness as he had found amongst the Quakers. He knew, when he had known them for only a short while, that this was to be his spiritual home.

Defending the rights of Aborigines was another one of Chaim’s (and the Society’s) interests, and that was the purpose of the protest that he was planning to attend that afternoon.

The Australian Government had been becoming progressively more militant in its attitude toward refugees, minority religions, and now toward Aborigines. In a perversion of the concept of “equal rights”, funding had been taken away from a long list of Aboriginal bodies. The argument was that special treatment for Aborigines was making them more equal than others. In keeping with this approach, legislation which had originally been brought in to protect Aboriginal rights was now being rescinded. The concept of “one nation”, which had been condemned as racist when it was first raised so many years earlier, was now being touted as the answer to just about all of Australia’s problems. Flag-waving and patriotic fervour were gripping the nation, and any minorities who objected were seen as being un-Australian. Friends in general were a part of the minority who opposed the present political trend.

The demonstration that afternoon was low-key and peaceful. Members of the peace movement had planned it without the usual support of various socialist groups who seemed more interested in confrontations with authorities than with reconciliation. This candlelit vigil under the clock tower on Beaumont Street was well attended and almost awesome in its complete silence. It had been advertised as an hour of mourning for the loss of yet another right for Aborigines, that of being able to hunt and fish without licences.

With a lit candle in one hand, and with the other hand supporting a poster that stood on the ground in front of him, Chaim looked out at the people walking by. And then the innocent blue eyes reappeared in his mind. The image was so powerful that it threatened to destroy his purpose for being there; fishing rights seemed like such a minor issue compared to the holocaust that the little girl represented.

Chaim passed his sign to someone nearby who did not have one, and he retreated to the back of the group. The burning candle was still in his hand as he seated himself on a bench beside an elderly, wrinkled Aboriginal woman. He had seen her at a number of other rallies, although he had never spoken to her personally. She was simply known as Aunty Molly, and it always seemed to be her job to look after the children while others took part in the protests. Chaim smiled toward her and then bowed his head, to look into the flame of the candle.

The little girl, lying there on the ground, seemed almost as real to him at this moment as she had in the dream. Tears started to form in his eyes, and he fought to hold them back. In front of him was the real world with its real needs, he reminded himself. Why was he letting himself become so distracted by something that existed only in his imagination?

"You ben dreamin'," said Aunt Molly in a quiet voice which was both smooth and raspy at the same time. In the total silence of the demonstration her words almost echoed inside his head, although, in reality, they were little more than a whisper. "You ben dreamin'." Her voice went neither up nor down at the end. She said it as a question, but she also said it as a statement of fact, as though she already knew the answer.

Molly had not turned her head, and she too was looking down toward the ground, so Chaim was tempted to pretend he had never heard the question. After all, she had no way of knowing what was going on in his mind. Maybe she was talking to one of the children playing nearby.

"Best you listen to it," she said, after a moment's silence.

"Are you talking to me?" Chaim asked.

"It's not me talkin'," said Aunt Molly. "It's the spirit. No need to answer me."

And that was it.

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Chapter Three--The Vaishnu Sect

Chaim didn't know how to answer Molly's question even if he had wanted to; so he just threw an embarrassed grin in her direction... a grin at his own predicament if nothing else. Dreaming, no doubt, meant something different to Aborigines than what it did to him. She could have been talking about any number of things. If he had said yes, would it have meant anything? After all, by a White man's interpretation, everyone dreams.

And what about her advice for him to listen to his dream... assuming, of course, that the frightened blue eyes of the little girl were what she was talking about? How does one listen to a dream?

As soon as the rally had finished, he hurried home to deal with a few last minute chores and then get a good night's sleep before leaving for India the next morning.

Thankfully, there were no more dreams that night... at least not the worrying kind. Maybe the episode was behind him.

The conference in Chennai was routine, although full of enough business to leave little time for delegates to do anything more than attend meetings. When it finished, however, Chaim had a day and a half to himself, which he planned to use to investigate a Hindu sect that had been arousing considerable interest in South India. The guru behind it had consented to a private visit with Chaim, and his ashram was only a two hour drive from Chennai.

At the ashram, Chaim was greeted by a beautiful young woman in a light brown sari.

"Vanakkam. My name is Lakshmi," she said as she placed her palms together and bowed her head in the traditional Indian greeting. "How can I help you?"

"My name is Chaim Rosenberg. I have an appointment with Guru Vaishnu for two o'clock," Chaim replied.

The woman's brow wrinkled in bewilderment. "I am so sorry," she said. "But Guru Vaishnu has appointment with another man today."

After some checking, Chaim learned that there had been a mistake and his audience with the man had been scheduled for the following week. The sect leader was being interviewed that very moment by Geoffrey Baum, a reporter for the BBC, after which Vaishnu would be leaving for the airport and a flight to Bangalore. Still, with some explanation about his own interest in the movement, Chaim managed to get permission from the reporter to observe the interview and to take notes for his own research.

"Why do you think your movement has attracted so much interest here in India?" Baum asked.

Baum was a big man (both in height and build), in a white shirt with an open collar. Beads of sweat dotted his brow, and his long brown hair was damp as well. (It was May, and the heat in Tamil Nadu at that time of year was almost unbearable.) By contrast, Vaishnu was small, thin, bald, and cool as a cucumber. He was clad only in a blue plaid lungi. Chaim was immediately struck by the guru's quiet confidence.

"People in India have always been interested in spiritual things," Vaishnu said with a patient smile. "But our religion does not have one leader to teach all our people. Because of this, people believe many different things. Only now we are seeing things that were secret for many years. They receive it because in their hearts they know it is true. This is what happened when Gandhi started teaching ahimsa.* It is happening again now." The time is right.

(*ahimsa means non-violence)

Chaim had already noted that Vaishnu looked a lot like Gandhi, but with much darker skin, and a plaid lungi instead of a white one.

"Did you get your ideas from Gandhi?" Baum asked.

"We know his teachings; and we study the holy books. Truth is in there, but many do not see it."

"Can you give me an example?"

"I will give you a big example: You see statues of Laxmi in many shops in India."

Baum nodded to indicate that he had.

"The shop owners do poojah to Laxmi because they know from the books that she is the goddess of provision. She is most favorite goddess, because all people want to be rich. But real faith in Laxmi will make them stop trying to be rich. Think about it for one minute."

Chaim thought about it while Vaishnu and Baum also paused. He was struck by the simplicity of this radically different approach to wealth, where people are taught to show their faith in God's provision by not trying to be rich.

"What we are doing now," continued Vaishnu, "we are teaching devotees to do good and to help others, and then Laxmi will feed them. The people are simply seeing the truth in this."

In several villages in Tamil Nadu people were discovering this new interpretation of Laxmi's role. She and her legendary husband Vishnu represented the power of God's provision. In her name, Vaishnu's followers were quitting their jobs by the hundreds and setting out to make the world a better place through freely offering their services wherever they were needed. As word had spread that their needs were still being met (often by the people whom they helped), others had warmed to the idea and joined the movement.

"Many are saying that you are the tenth avatar. What do you have to say about that?" Baum asked.

Many Hindus believe that Vishnu appears in a total of ten incarnations or avatars, including Rama, Krishna, and the Buddha. Nine avatars have already appeared, and the tenth, or Kalki Avatar, they say, will come riding on a white horse with a meteor-like sword. He will pour out death and destruction on the earth as a prelude to re-establishing righteousness. It will mark the end of an age of darkness, and the start of an age of purity and innocence.

"I am not even a prophet," Vaishnu said humbly. "All I do is prepare the people for Kalki Avatar."

"Do you know who he is... or where he is?" Baum asked hopefully.

"I know nothing," said Vaishnu. "All that I say is already in the vedas and in the Gita."

After the interview, Chaim was barely able to introduce himself to Vaishnu before the guru was whisked away by his attendants. However, he had seen enough to be deeply impressed. He arranged to maintain contact via email with the little man.

Authorities in Tamil Nadu were starting to see the political advantages that could be gained from supporting the Vaishnavites. In those fields where Vaishnu's followers had chosen to apply their talents, they were said to be the most honest, the most enthusiastic, and the most reliable workers. The fact that they were happy to work for free, or for whatever they were offered, was an added bonus for those who employed them.

Fundamentalist Hindus controlled the Government in Tamil Nadu. They had quickly thrown together a series of projects aimed at occupying the talents of followers of Vaishnu. As a consequence, cities were being cleaned, trees planted, and roads repaired in a way that they never had been before.

In return for their labour, the Government had provided Vaishnavites with basic necessities, and had offered to build them a temple. Members would provide the labour, of course.

Now other states were showing a similar interest. In fact, Vaishnu's trip to Bangalore that same day had been financed by the Karnataka State Government, in order for them to interview him about future plans.

In Chaim's mind, one of the best things about Vaishnu's teaching was that he had taken Gandhi's opposition to untouchability a step further, and had urged those who trusted in Laxmi and Vishnu for their provision, to give first priority to work that no one else wanted. The most despised jobs were those related to sanitation and hygiene... the work of untouchables. As a consequence, the state had inherited an army of zealous street sweepers, toilet cleaners, and nursing aides. Even Vaishnu's attire and that of his attendants reflected that of the lowest castes, suggesting that his idea of 'provision' was not one of luxury, but just of necessities.

Between naps on his overnight flight back to Sydney, Chaim mused on how the movement would affect India and the rest of the world if it should continue to spread.

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Chapter Four--Those Eyes

Even before he had cleared Customs in Sydney, it was evident to Chaim that something was seriously wrong. Everyone at the airport, from cleaners to Customs officials, was busily passing on bits of information to one another. This information gradually filtered through the queues of incoming passengers as well. Something terrible had happened in America. Hundreds of thousands of people had been killed... maybe more.

A surprise Russian Air Force attack over the North Pole, linked with the launch of hundreds of nuclear missiles, had wiped out, or nearly wiped out, scores of American cities. Reports were sketchy, but U.N. Secretary General Xu Dangchao had already appeared on TV, asking for governments to work in co-operation with the U.N. to mount a rescue operation. Many of America's international airports had been destroyed, but tents, medicine, and other supplies would be sent to those places in the U.S., Mexico, and Canada where planes could still land. Because of widespread fallout and the extent of damage, it would also be necessary to fly hundreds of thousands of people (if not many times more than that) out of the U.S., to seek refuge in other countries.

The airport was in chaos, but Chaim's flight to Newcastle was not affected. Throughout the day nothing occupied his attention (nor much of anyone else's attention for that matter) nearly so much as getting news updates on what was happening in America. Although it would be weeks before the full extent of the damage was known, it did not take long to realise that this was a disaster which towered far above all other disasters in human history.

The world was amazed at the ease with which America had been destroyed, and especially at the apparent failure of her defence system. The Secretary General was so quick to respond that there were rumours he knew ahead of time that the attack was going to take place.

Back in his flat in Newcastle, Chaim was watching the news the next morning when the first video clips of the scene in America were being shown.

They included an amateur video probably taken from a camera that had been found in the rubble of an American airport.

A family of three was facing the camera, with their backs to the large windows that looked out on the airport runway. In the final second or two of the video, a ball of fire could be seen hurtling across the taxiing lanes. Planes were just beginning to upend, before the windows exploded and the filming ceased.

What transfixed Chaim, however, was not the action in the background. It was the family in the picture. In the center of the trio was a beautiful little girl, about six years old, with springy blonde ringlets surrounding an angelic face. He watched in shocked disbelief as the girl's innocent blue eyes filled with horror at the very moment that the video cut out.

Although tolerant of other beliefs, for himself Chaim could not remember a time when he had ever believed in miracles. The miraculous, he taught, was a special spin people put on things which do, in fact, have natural explanations. Like Tolstoy, he believed that miracles filled a need for certain uneducated people, but that they also were used by unscrupulous religious leaders to manipulate people.

Despite this apparent cynicism, Chaim would never have referred to himself as an atheist. Definitely not. There was much that transcended human understanding, and for Chaim, God was an appropriate title for all that he had yet to learn. Quaker teaching referred to this Godness as residing in the hearts of everyone. And Australian Quakerism tended to see the same force residing in all of nature as well. Such pantheism enabled Quakers to relate better to both primitive religions and to much of the New Age movement.

But the girl on the amateur video clip had Chaim rattled. The dream never came back after that, and her eyes ceased to haunt him. Yet he knew, as the whole world became occupied with rescuing American survivors, that he had experienced some kind of foreknowledge about this.

But why? And how had it happened? The whole experience went beyond any explanation that he could come up with, for even if it could be explained as a fantastic coincidence, something in his spirit would not let him accept that. He had definitely been party to something of great significance, and he continued to feel the burden of responsibility that was a part of the original dream. It had all happened for a reason, and he needed to find it.

All through meeting the following Sunday, Chaim went over the facts, searching for an explanation.

Quaker meetings are held largely in silence, with short interruptions for "spoken ministry", which are brief moments when someone shares a few words that they feel they have been led to share as a result of their silent worship.

As an elder in the local meeting, Chaim had often spoken. His previous contributions had been little more than thoughts that sprang to mind during the silence, often reminders of something he had heard on ABC radio that morning or read during the week. Now, having experienced something undeniably powerful, (He still could not bring himself to call it 'supernatural'.) he was unable to speak, and the reason he was unable to speak was because he feared what the others would think of him.

Ostensibly, meetings for worship were a time when the congregation waited expectantly to hear something that possessed divine unction, either within their own hearts, or through the words of others in the meeting. But academic pride had caused many attenders to regard anyone who spoke with such authority as being misguided visitors who had not yet come to appreciate "Quaker ways".

Now Chaim had become party to something that was at least worthy of consideration by others in the meeting, yet he could not bring himself to share it. He did not want others to think he had lost his academic impartiality and turned into a religious fanatic. Instead, the meeting, which was more than double its normal size due to insecurities everyone was feeling about the disaster in America, was punctuated only by feeble attempts to bring meaning out of all that pain and suffering.

Rather than share with the others, what Chaim had decided, was that he would visit Aunty Molly that afternoon. At least she would not think less of him for his experience.

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Chapter Five--Baxter Detention Centre

"Git on down from there! We got better things to do than scrape your remains up from offa the floor."

Sandra Buckley, one of the 'nicer' guards at the Baxter Detention Centre, was talking to a prisoner who had managed to scale the compound wall, using the roof of the canteen to get there. It was obviously not an escape attempt, as there were other walls beyond it, and a lot of razor wire in between. It was, instead, another suicide attempt.

Sandra, like all of the other guards, saw such actions only as attempts to get attention... empty threats from people who were not prepared to play by the rules of the Department of Immigration.

"I want meeting with my lawyer," the distraught man cried. "Why you stopping him from visits? I will break my head on the concrete if you do not bring him here."

It was Mahmoud Aziz. Like all of the detainees, he was not officially entitled to legal representation. Some lawyers and solicitors had offered to represent them pro bono, and Mahmoud had a particularly good lawyer who had agreed to act on his behalf. But last week, the lawyer had been 'caught' bringing a small photo in for Mahmoud... a photo of his family in Afghanistan. The photo itself was not the problem; but it had been sent in a small frame with a glass front. The glass could have been used to cause self harm. Mahmoud's lawyer had failed to mention this before entering the prison, and for that he had been barred from returning.

Ironically, the same system that insisted suicide threats were childish temper tantrums--best ignored--had outlawed everything from disposable razors to liquid detergent, for fear these items would be used to inflict self harm.

"Please, you let me talk to him," said a short, quiet inmate named Mashallah. He was respected by guards and prisoners alike, and several times previously he had prevented prisoners from committing suicide. Sandra backed off to let him work his magic. All she could think of was how ridiculously selfish Mahmoud's behaviour was, in light of the really serious news from America. In her eyes, Mahmoud was probably connected to those who had destroyed America anyway. He didn't deserve all the care he was getting there at Baxter.

Mashallah spoke quietly with Mahmoud for a few minutes, asking about his family, listening to his concerns, and then reminding him of his faith in Allah.

"Allah loves you, Mahmoud," Mashallah said with deep conviction. "I think he will not love you less if you do this awful thing to yourself. He knows what we go through here. But I think he has other plans too... good plans. Please wait with me and wait with the others. We need you."

A few minutes later, Mashallah and a few of the other detainees were helping Mahmoud down from the wall, watched cautiously by Sandra Buckley and two other guards.

For eight long years Mashallah had lived as a prisoner here at the Baxter Immigration Detention Centre, outside of Port Augusta, South Australia. Mashallah was no closer to being released now, than he had been when he was first taken into custody.

Nine years earlier, back home in Iran, when he was barely twenty years old, he had seen his father and uncle killed by the authorities there because of their involvement in an outlawed political group. He himself had been forced to flee for his life. While in hiding, he had learned that his two sisters had been taken away to be interrogated by the authorities, and had never returned.

His mother had smuggled all of the family's savings to him, and begged him to use it to flee the country. Up to that point she had been spared by the Iranian authorities, and she said that if he was successful in finding refuge in another country, she would be happy to face whatever fate awaited her in Iran.

With the money, Mashallah had been able to get a ticket and a false passport, to bribe an airport official, and to fly out of the country to Singapore.

In Singapore, he had located a people smuggler who had promised him freedom and a new life in Australia. Mashallah had paid the exorbitant fare and was put on a small boat that would take him and 150 other refugees to a larger ship for the journey to Australia and political freedom.

When the tiny boat was far out to sea, the people crowded into it discovered that there was no larger ship. They had been ripped off. This leaky craft was their only means of escape to Australia. They spent weeks of deprivation on the open seas, with rations that were barely sufficient to keep them alive before they landed on a remote beach in Western Australia. Good fortune had prevented them from being stopped by authorities before they landed, but as soon as locals learned of their existence, the refugees were rounded up and put into detention.

Over the years, Mashallah had seen most of the other refugees released, though often only after lengthy appeals to the Department of Immigration. But his case was different. His real name was not on his papers, and he had

resolved not to disclose his true identity. He and his mother might be executed if he returned to Iran, or she could suffer further problems if the authorities there learned about his existence in Australia. When the Department of Immigration treacherously tried to verify his identity with authorities in Iran, using the false papers, it became clear that Mashallah was not whom he had claimed to be, and this threatened his status as a legitimate refugee. Ironically, at the same time, the government's use of his false papers (rather than his real identity, if he had provided it) protected his mother. He vowed never to give in and tell them his real name after that.

Others around him had been able to enlist public sympathy by converting to Christianity and arguing that they would be killed if they were sent back to Iran. The Australian Government, at first suspicious of their motives, sent a few back, but the deported refugees were taken into custody by Iranian authorities on arrival and were not heard from again. This brought angry protests from many churches in Australia, and after that, Iranian refugees who claimed to have converted to Christianity were given slow and begrudging assistance from the Department of Immigration.

But claiming conversion to Christianity was not an option as far as Mashallah was concerned. It was true that even as a student in Iran he had faced persecution for defending Christians, and it was true that his appreciation for at least some aspects of Christianity had increased as a result of his time in Australia; but his official position was that Islam and the kingdom of heaven were his religion. In his mind, he had not converted to anything; he had only discovered in Christianity a greater appreciation for his Muslim roots. Despite advice from his lawyer and other refugee advocates, he had stuck to this position.

"I have lost everything but my faith," he explained to them. "Not even to save my life can I change what I believe. I try here in Australia to follow the truth in both religions, but I pray in Arabic, and I was born a Muslim. Allah will be with me, I know, but only if I am true to him."

As a consequence, Mashallah was a man without a country. He had applied for refuge in almost forty other countries, but they all argued that he was Australia's responsibility now. The Australian position was that he would remain in detention until he revealed his true identity (after which he would still face the possibility of being deported to Iran).

In the meantime, Mashallah had set about making the best of his situation. He continued to pray five times a day, and to follow other Muslim religious rules. He saw his role as that of a humble servant to others in the detention centre. His refusal to react to the callous treatment of the guards won him their approval as well. More than once he had been able, like today, to instill hope into the heart of a fellow detainee, and he had come to think of this as his primary purpose for being alive.

Shortly after Mahmoud touched the ground, the poor man was roughly seized by the guards and taken away, to be locked up in Red One compound, where all potentially suicidal inmates were placed for round the clock observation. The inmates themselves knew that Red One was really the

detention centre's version of solitary confinement. Mahmoud would have no access to normal amenities or recreation; he would be allowed no visitors; and he would be forced to sleep on the floor as punishment for having upset the status quo of the prison cum detention centre.

It was time for Mashallah's afternoon prayers by the time Mahmoud was led away, and so he quickly retreated to the privacy of his room, where he bowed on the floor, facing Mecca. Unlike the other Muslims at Baxter, he said his prayers privately now. He had learned this from his readings of the Bible. Jesus said to pray secretly, and not to be seen of others. This made sense to Mashallah, and he had put it into practice in his own prayer rituals.

Perhaps it was the stress of Mahmoud's rescue, or the fact that he had lost another friend that afternoon who (fortunately for the friend) had won release and been taken to Adelaide. Maybe it was because the previous day had been the eighth anniversary of his arrival at Baxter. For whatever reasons, in the middle of his prayer, Mashallah broke down and began to cry quietly. He tried to stifle the sobs and to refocus his attention on the words of his prayer, but he was having little success.

It was then that he heard a voice, not quite audible... but very distinct, inside his head. It said, in Arabic, "This year, freedom! But only if you use it for me."

"Yes, yes, certainly! I will do anything you ask," he responded. "Allah be praised! You are so good to me!"

That started a fervent and deeply sincere search for what he must do for God if the Voice was right about freedom coming to him in the near future.

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Chapter Six--Listening

"We don't have words for these things," Molly said, when Chaim asked if she would tell him more about what Aborigines mean when they talk about dreaming. "When you be quiet you know. That's all I can say. You just know."

Chaim had expected something like this. And much as he hated to admit it, her words spoke to his condition. Although he had refrained from speaking during the morning meeting, he knew that something of spiritual significance was happening to him, and this conviction had been reinforced within his own spirit during the silence.

"But how can I be sure?" he asked.

"You White Fellas allus wanna be sure. What is sure? You get too smart and you miss the Spirit. Just you be quiet and listen."

Chaim laughed at the irony of Aunt Molly lecturing him on silence. After all, Quaker theology practically revolves around silence.

"You're absolutely right, Molly!" he chuckled.

Whatever else had happened as a result of the dream, Chaim's appreciation for quiet times had deepened. From that point on, the more he sat

in silence, the more he knew that God had spoken to him, and that God had used the dream to get his attention. He found comfort in just being quiet before God.

Something akin to this was happening during his sleeping hours as well. Even when he could not remember his dreams, he had the feeling that important things were happening deep down in his spirit.

Even with all of his education, Chaim felt no more literate than Aunt Molly when it came to verbalising what it was that was happening to him. He was spending more and more time in solitude, just listening (in the Aboriginal sense). He wasn't hearing anything that he could put into words, and the chief result of his listening was that he was losing interest in all that had previously engaged his attention. An odd side effect was that Chaim became even more cheerful than he had been previously, almost to the point of being foolish.

It's a little like being drunk he had thought to himself, as he observed his own feelings when listening. Part of it was deliberate; he disliked anyone who took themselves too seriously, especially in religious matters. But it also grew from the thrill of being so totally free from care when he was alone with God.

Although he continued to refrain from sharing this experience with others in his local meeting, Chaim looked forward to meetings much more now, and he found himself wondering whether other Quakers had ever experienced anything so powerful. Maybe there was a whole dimension to Quakerism which had previously eluded him. If there were others like himself, who had experienced this powerful relationship with God, how would he recognise them? What would he say to them? He had no answers to any of these questions.

Chaim spent many hours pondering all that was happening in America. He lost interest in his duties at the university, preferring to voluntarily assist American refugees settling in the area. Apart from that, there was little he could do to make a difference, and that frustrated him deeply.

For a while the university was sympathetic about him missing lectures... after all, the tragedy was foremost in the minds of everyone. But as time went on, and as other Australians returned to more traditional pursuits, Chaim seemed to be moving in the other direction. At the end of the academic year he applied for an extended leave of absence, in order to work out where his life was heading.

There was an irony about world events that dominated many of his thoughts. For centuries Quakers had sought world peace, better conditions for the poor, and religious unity. Now it seemed like the most destructive (if not the shortest) war in history had brought (or at least was bringing) significant improvement in all three areas. Did such an end really justify the means?

Under the influence of the U.N., many countries had adjusted their foreign and economic policies to favour developing countries; and Australia was no exception. Without America to back her up, the government was yielding to other pressures now.

The United Nations had assumed responsibility for bringing order out of the chaos, and Secretary General Xu Dangchao was doing an admirable job of co-ordinating relief. American interests overseas were being returned to local

governments and absorbed into the local economies, thus boosting incomes for much of the developing world.

As often happens during disasters, the world had been brought together as one in response to the catastrophic events in America, and this was particularly evident in the attitude of the religious community. Terrorism had dropped to almost nil now that America was out of the picture. People were reaching out to embrace and support one another across national, political, and religious boundaries that had sharply divided the world only months previously.

Although they were deeply saddened by the war, Quakers in general were heartened by the encouraging developments toward world peace.

But as Chaim considered it all in silence, he started to "hear" things that disturbed him. He had a feeling that something far worse than the destruction of America was yet to happen, and that the world was being drawn into a false sense of security. Was he being too cynical, or had he, in his 'dreamings', tapped into something that Aborigines had known for centuries? He found himself returning for more clearness from Molly.

"Big trouble comin' for sure," Molly said when Chaim shared his misgivings. She had no more information to add than what Chaim already knew, but it was a source of comfort to him to know that he was not alone in his misgivings.

Although distressed by what alcohol had done to Australia's Aboriginal community, Chaim began to genuinely enjoy being around them. He was discovering a spiritual dimension and dignity in these people that he had only theoretically acknowledged before. As opportunities arose, he would journey from town to town, spending days at a time in the various Aboriginal camps along the way. He just wanted to soak up the new-found mysteries of these first Australians.

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Chapter Seven--Clearness

It did not take long for word to spread through other Quaker academics that Chaim was no longer working. Although most of the talk was out of Chaim's earshot, there were a few informal approaches made by well-meaning Friends who were concerned about his mental state. Chaim just laughed it off.

"Think of me as insanely happy," he would say. "Life is an adventure, and I've never felt so much alive."

This led to comments about the need for Friends to submit their concerns to the wisdom of the meeting. "Right order" it was called. Chaim patiently listened, but then gently reminded them of early leaders who had acted contrary to the wishes of the religious hierarchy.

"The way I see it, the meeting wouldn't come right out and tell me what to do anyway," he said on one occasion. "The only reason for a clearness meeting would be if I wasn't sure about what to do; I don't have all the answers, but I've never felt so confident that what I'm doing is right."

Another problem with having a clearness meeting was that he didn't think he could explain what was happening in terms that anyone in the meeting would be able to understand.

Chaim's position as an elder, and his faithful service for the past 18 years in the Society, protected him from official opposition. It would be awkward for Friends to fault him on his intimate involvement with Aborigines. After all, they had been promoting the Aboriginal cause for many years, and now they had one of their own practically becoming an Aborigine himself. Surely this was not something they could officially oppose, and Chaim would teasingly remind them of this.

It could not yet be called a faith, but in the back of Chaim's mind, there was a hope that what he was going through would all lead to something dramatic, useful and powerful. Because of his Quaker tradition, he assumed it would at least start with some significant revelation in the meetings for worship that he attended each week. Nevertheless, although the meetings were extensions of the pleasure that he enjoyed during quiet times at home and with Aboriginal communities, and although there often was a "quaking" which he experienced in the meetings, like the rumblings of a volcano about to erupt, nothing came out. For months it seemed that what was happening to him was to be for him alone.

Then, at Yearly Meeting in Brisbane, six months after the fall of America, Chaim finally spoke. It was by far the biggest yearly meeting he had ever attended, due almost exclusively to the big changes in world affairs. It was not an ideal time to test his new understanding of spoken ministry, for a mistake in front of so many people could mark the end of his high regard in Quaker circles. Neither was it the dramatic event that he had thought it might be. Inside his head what he wanted to say was bursting with authority and divine anointing, but spoken through his lips it seemed apologetic and weak. Only Chaim's ability to laugh at himself had carried him through it.

"Friends, I want to share something that's been happening to me over the past few months," he began quite earnestly. "I trust you won't be offended by what I'm about to say."

And then there was a painfully long pause as he sought for the next words. He had trusted that if he began, the words would come to him, but they were not. His speech was full of starts and stops.

"We're missing something..." he started, and then stopped, remembering the need to "keep low". He smiled sheepishly and started again.

"I mean, I feel we're missing something. Maybe it's just me.

"As a Society..." And he stopped again.

"Mmm, no, not as a Society. There's nothing wrong with societies. Sorry, Friends, I'm having some difficulty with this, as you can see." And he laughed at himself while others waited patiently.

"What if we stopped thinking of ourselves as a Society? What if it's just you and me and the Spirit? Are we really listening to the Spirit? Or are we the blind leading the blind? Each trying to guess what the others expect of us?"

"Let me put it this way: Things are looking much better in the world at the moment. Peace, Unity, more equality. But I have a leading in the spirit that says something is very wrong out there. I feel it so strongly!"

Yes, Something is wrong summed up best what he wanted to say. Those three words came out strongly, confidently, but they were vague enough that no one could say he was being judgmental. So he repeated them.

"Something is wrong. I think I'd best leave it there." And he sat down.

The Spirit must have known how much his audience could bear.

Afterwards, most people seemed almost indifferent to what he had said. There was some uneasiness, and Chaim could tell that a few people were mildly embarrassed, but that was all. On the other hand, three or four came to him privately and said with deep conviction that his comments had "spoken to their condition", which is Quaker parlance for spoken ministry that strikes a chord with a listener.

They did not say anything more than that, and so Chaim had good reason to wonder if he and they were talking about the same thing.

Something is wrong, he thought with the left side of his brain. That could mean almost anything. They could have been reading into it whatever was bothering them.

But the other side of his brain... the part that had learned to listen... felt encouragement ... reason to believe that his new lifestyle and the direction in which it was heading were part of a bigger plan.

Maybe there were others apart from the Aboriginal community who were hearing the warnings.

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Chapter Eight--Trouble in India

"You seeeee, sometimes we must do things that are not...?" The Minister for Law had a habit of turning a simple sentence into a question like this, by raising his voice in anticipation and then pausing before the final word.

"... Easy," he concluded, like a teacher answering on behalf of a slow student.

Guru Vaishnu and his followers had benefited greatly from the generosity of the Tamil Nadu Government, but now the popular sect leader was seeing the other side of the Government's generous support. He had never liked this Minister, whose political career had always depended on Mafia-like control of the slums in his electorate; yet here Vaishnu was, seated in one overstuffed chair facing his opponent, who was seated in another overstuffed chair. K.A. Krishnamurthy smiled wickedly through a mouthful of crooked teeth as he spoke. His hands were clasped on top of his huge stomach, and his thumbs rolled around each other as he spoke.

"Your people can finish the job in a...? ... Day. And then you will have a second...? ... Temple. You see how easy it is?"

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