

Fidel

by

Rigby Taylor

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Fidel is on the run when religious fundamentalists take over the state. He falls foul of the government and during a series of adventures and horrifying experiences, joins forces with Robert and Bart, Peter and Jon, Sebastian and Jarek, Mortaumul and Zadig.

Fidel is a prequel to NumbaCruncha, and a sequel to my other five novels—*Rough Justice, Dome of Death, Sebastian, Jarek and Mortaumul*.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it
are the product of the author's imagination.
Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead,
events or localities is entirely coincidental.

Other titles by Rigby Taylor

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Dome of Death
Sebastian
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"So long as the people do not care to exercise their freedom, those who wish to tyrannize will do so; for tyrants are active and ardent, and will devote themselves in the name of any number of gods, religious and otherwise, to put shackles upon sleeping men." - Voltaire

1 Fidel

Fidel was scared. Shit scared. He felt like throwing up and probably would have if he'd had any breakfast. He had to stop thinking about it or he'd chicken out. His whole life had been one long worry that he'd done something wrong and would be punished...but this was sharper, more urgent, more exciting too if he could only stop thinking about all the possible consequences. Taking a deep breath he shouldered the backpack that had been hidden in a corner for weeks, let himself out of the shed, crossed the back lawn and tapped on his brother's open window.

Hylas appeared, rubbing at sleepy eyes. 'Fidel! What's the matter?'

'I'm off.'

'Now? But you...'

'Shhh! You'll wake Mum. I just wanted to say goodbye and tell you I love you.'

'Where are you going? I love you too! Will you write?'

'Brisbane. Of course I'll write. Don't tell Mum anything. Pretend to be surprised I've gone.' With a cheery wave that even Hylas knew was fake, Fidel adjusted his pack and ran off before his courage ran out.

Twenty minutes later he was sticking out his thumb on the David Low Way. Almost immediately an elderly couple in a battered Toyota stopped and demanded to know his age, where he was going and why. He said he was sixteen and was going to visit his grandmother in Mooloolaba. Shaking their heads in suspicious concern they remarked tersely that he was small for his age and didn't look much more than fourteen.

Fidel's sad eyes pleaded.

'Get in then. If we don't take you some monster will.'

Vistas of twinkling blue sea, sand hills and sunny skies flashed by unseen during thirty minutes of well-meaning but dire prophesies about the abduction, rape and murder that awaited Fidel if he persisted in trusting strangers in this day and age. It was different when they were young—everyone was honest and reliable and young people were safe and...

Predictably perhaps, their predictions of impending doom calmed Fidel's nerves. Old people were always exaggerating—it couldn't be that bad. When they let him out he thanked them profusely, waved them on their way, jogged to the motorway entrance and grinned his relief at a road sign informing him he was already forty-seven kilometres away from his former life. With new confidence, he again stuck out his thumb and smiled encouragingly at every passing driver.

Half an hour later, confidence was being edged out by images of abduction, rape and torture. Bravely, he thrust such febrile imaginings from his head, reasoning that although he looked younger than his years, he wasn't pretty enough to attract predators. As if to reward his courage, half a minute later a yellow sports car stopped beside him. He clambered in, smiling gratefully at the middle aged, solid man in a cream linen suit and full black beard who took off with such speed the tyres screeched and Fidel was thrust back into his seat without time to attach the seatbelt. In mounting panic he clung to the dashboard as the car zipped out into the traffic, zigzagging between other cars at top speed, the driver's elbow on the windowsill, his fingers barely touching the steering wheel, eyes half closed as if he wasn't concentrating.

Fidel didn't dare speak in case he distracted the man and caused a fatal accident, so he was hugely relieved when ten minutes later they pulled into a lay-by and parked behind a low screen of banksias.

'What the fuck do you think you're doing?' the driver growled angrily.

'What do you mean?'

'How old are you?'

'Sixteen.'

'Crap! Fourteen.'

'I'm fifteen. I know I'm a bit small for my age but I'm strong and Dad says he was also small but he's nearly two metres now.'

'Who knows where you are?'

As the implications of this sank in, Fidel's heart pounded. He stared at his abductor in horror.

'No one knows,' the driver sneered. 'No one saw me pick you up. No one can see us now because I concealed the car behind those shrubs.'

A tiny, 'Yes.'

'Are you as strong as me?'

'No.'

'So I could easily tie you up, rip your clothes off, fuck you stupid and then strangle you before dumping your body in a hole.'

A whispered 'Yes.'

'Don't you like living?'

'I...I'm sorry. I thought...'

'Young man, you did not think at all! You've ended up on your own, parked in the middle of nowhere with someone three times as strong as you. What, apart from screaming, could you do if I decided to do all those things I mentioned?'

Fidel's eyes were swimming. 'Nothing, sir. I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean...' he hung his head in shame.

The driver put the car in gear and drove angrily onto the motorway. 'How many lives have you got?'

Fidel frowned in surprise. 'One, sir.'

'Exactly! You have one life that starts the moment you are born and just goes on and on relentlessly till you die. It isn't like a play you can rehearse until you get it right. You get it right first time or live with the consequences. There's no back button to start over.' He looked across at a very wilted young man and his face softened. 'Okay, end of lesson. Look out the window and let's see how many things you can name and describe in two words.'

Fidel concentrated hard, naming everything that caught his eye, labelling it ugly, beautiful, interesting, messy, tall, huge, unpainted... it was an interesting exercise, relieved his sense of stupidity, and the next hour passed swiftly until they took an off ramp and stopped.

'That was very good, you're a keen observer,' the driver said with a smile. 'I'm sorry I have to let you out here, but I'm running short of time and need to use the bypass. The city's straight ahead and there are loads of busses.' He held out his hand, which Fidel took and shook warmly.

'Friends?'

'Yes,' Fidel breathed in gratitude, feeling slightly sad and very much alone as the little yellow car sped away.

The city towers looked deceptively close so it was dispiriting to discover he was still twenty kilometres from the centre. Manfully he trudged along the noisy, smelly, dangerous road, wondering if there was another, quieter route, but determined never again to accept a lift from strangers, when an elderly woman in a newish sedan stopped and with a motherly smile asked where he was going. Fidel looked carefully at the pleasant, grey haired woman wearing no makeup, and decided if he couldn't trust a woman who was contented with her natural appearance, then he could never trust anyone again. She was heading through the centre of Brisbane and could drop him off wherever he wanted. With profound relief he jumped in and learned about her grand children, her charity work, palliative care, and her husband's dementia.

To allay her obvious concern for his wellbeing, Fidel proudly confided he had fifty dollars for emergencies in case the grandmother, whom he was now almost believing in, wasn't at home.

Suddenly the elderly lady pointed to the dashboard. 'Oh dear. I'm almost out of petrol.' She pulled into the next Service Station and asked Fidel to put fifty dollars worth of petrol into the tank. When he came to her window for the money, she was searching in her purse.

'I can't believe how stupid I am...I've come out without any cash.' She pulled out a credit card and pointed down the road. 'Look, there's a cash machine along there in front of that bank. You go and pay for me, then we'll drive down and I'll take out the money and repay you.'

Her smile was so disarming, so honest, that without the slightest twinge of doubt Fidel ran in to pay, proud to be able to assist this nice kind lady. When he came out the car was gone. His heart stopped, then rallied. She must have driven down to the cash machine and would be waiting for him. Fear clutching at his chest and belly he sprinted towards it. 'Please, please, please let her be there. Please don't let her be a thief. Please...'

Heartfelt whispers were in vain. Iced water settled in his stomach and cold crept to the tips of his fingers. She had stolen his money. All the money he had in the world. What could he do? He'd never had a bank account. It had taken him nearly a year to save even that fifty. He could scarcely breathe. What to do? Tell a policeman? Hardly. They'd ask his age and send him home. The thought of that put firmness in his step. He'd think of something, and with a heart heavier than he could ever have imagined, set off towards the city centre.

Traffic became denser; a bridge led him over rail lines and other roads. Tunnels belched endless cars onto already crowded, smelly, noisy streets. An hour later he was walking down a relatively quiet road towards what looked like an important shopping centre. His feet were sore, his enthusiasm for adventure gone. Near exhaustion—both physical and mental, he sat on a bench under a couple of small trees near a drinking fountain and ate his biscuits. After a long drink of water he gazed around. Behind him was a sex shop advertising twenty-four hour videos, massage and a sauna. He felt scruffy and tucked in his shirt. Maybe he'd just sit for a while, he rationalised. He had no money and nowhere to go, so what was the rush? If he had an instrument he could busk. But he couldn't even sing.

When his legs felt strong enough to carry him without wobbling, he wandered down to the shopping centre, scrutinising every window for notices offering work. There were none. He asked for directions to a Jobs Agency, but received impatient shrugs of ignorance. He went into shops and asked for work, but no one needed him. He was told to go back to school.

A panic attack saw Fidel leaning against the wall of a shop. He slid down till he was sitting with his head resting on his knees, feet tucked well away from passing pedestrians who paid him not the slightest attention. Eventually, dismay at his situation was replaced by a deep loneliness that began eating holes in his soul. But then he remembered what had happened at home that morning and was glad he wasn't there. Even this was better than that.

He retreated to his bench and watched passers by. No one looked very rich, but they were all carrying parcels or eating or laughing. A woman approached on high heels. She looked smart. On impulse he stood and walked to meet her, smiling to show he meant no harm.

'Excuse me, madam, but someone stole my money and I was wondering if...'

'Fuck off or I'll call the police,' she snapped.

Crushed, Fidel returned to the bench to find a man had taken his place. He was large and solid; body and face both sort of shapeless. Probably about fifty, Fidel guessed. Clean but dull. Almost ugly with very little chin, loose lips, clear blue eyes and a red face. Rolled up sleeves exposed powerful hairy arms that ended in large hands with fingers like sausages. They looked immensely powerful.

He looked up as the youth approached, then slid sideways and patted the seat beside him. 'There's room for two,' he invited in a warm and friendly voice, exposing unattractively crossed and protruding front teeth in a shy smile. 'I've been watching you from my window over there,' pointing to the third floor of an apartment block on the far side of the road. 'Are you on the game?'

'Game? What game?' Fidel's innocence was evident.

'Sorry. I got it wrong. I saw you approach that bitch and assumed you needed money. You look a bit like the other boys your age who hang around here, mainly in the evenings hoping to...' he stopped, but whether from embarrassment or in order to invite a question wasn't clear.

'To?'

'To find a buyer.'

'A buyer for what?'

This time the man was genuinely embarrassed. 'For their bodies. Lots of men find young bodies attractive and pay to spend time with them. They prefer boys because they don't make things

complicated—sex without emotional baggage; and their bodies are smoother and firmer than girls' and just as versatile.'

'And you thought I was one of them?'

'Only from a distance, now I realise you are far too innocent and fresh. Too nice, in fact. Those boys are tough. I guess they have to be, considering some of the people who buy them. I see a lot from my window. It makes me sad, but I know they'd sneer at me if I started just talking to them like this and showed any sympathy.'

'Why? You're nice.'

'But not rich and not handsome.'

Fidel hesitated before deciding to be truthful. 'Neither am I, but you have a lovely voice and you look very strong'

'Thanks for those kind words. As for you, you are handsome, but not conventionally. I think it's your eyes. They're alive, interested, and you want to be pleasant—to make people feel good—and that makes you handsome because as my mother used to say when I got depressed, handsome is as handsome does.'

'I'll remember that next time I'm depressed. Do you enjoy doing...things with the boys? How much do they charge?'

'I've never done it. It's a fantasy. I'm perfectly happy with my wife but I keep remembering the first time we had sex; we were about the same age as you are now, with smooth, firm flesh. I've often thought it'd be nice to experience that youthful feeling once more. But if a middle-aged man even looks at a young woman he's labelled a sexual predator. And prostitutes are not what I want. And I figure it isn't worth the risk of my wife finding out if I tried a local boy; and like I said, up close they're not...nice and probably have diseases. Character is an important part of sexual attraction for me; not just youth and a pretty face. Anyway, there's no way I could afford a hundred bucks to be sucked off, or two or three for a screw—and that's not what I'd like to do anyway.' He uttered a slightly embarrassed chuckle. 'But why am I talking like this to you, a mere kid? You're the first person I've ever confided in—you must be a hypnotist.' He held out a giant paw. 'My name's Ted.'

They shook hands

'I'm Fidel. I expected you to crush my hand—but you're very gentle.'

'Not when I'm annoyed. But enough of me, what's your story?'

Fidel gazed into Ted's eyes and thought he saw genuine interest and even concern. But then he wondered if he only hoped he saw that. And then he thought he was thinking too much and should trust his instincts. But then he recalled the old woman. By then Ted had realised the kid had more problems than he'd guessed.

'It's okay,' he said softly, standing as if to go. 'I'm being nosy. You don't have to tell me anything. I'll leave you to it.'

'No!' Fidel blurted with more force than intended. 'I want to tell you.'

To his relief Ted resumed his seat, and in what seemed like a single breath Fidel told him about running away from a mother who had abused him his whole life; his misery at leaving his younger brother; the warnings of the old couple and the man in the sports car, the old woman who stole all his money, and his inability to think of what to do next.'

'You poor young bugger,' Ted said shaking his head. 'What a fucking bitch.' He reached into a pocket and produced a small purse. 'As it happens I have a fifty dollar note on me. I want you to have it.'

Fidel, who had noticed that it was the only money in the purse, drew back in alarm. 'No! I couldn't. There's no way I can repay you.'

'It's a gift for a brave young man who I like more than anyone I've met for ages.'

'I can't accept such a present from a total stranger. I'd feel...' Fidel's eyes lit. 'But what if I earned it?'

'How?'

'You said you'd like to...just once to...do things with a young person.'

'Are you serious?'

Fidel's smile was brave and perhaps slightly excited and definitely more than a little nervous. 'Yeah...I'm serious...but you won't hurt me will you?'

‘Never! And that’s a promise.’

Upstairs in a small but pleasant and scrupulously neat apartment, Ted pulled the covers off the spare room bed and they stripped and stood facing each other—neither sure how to proceed.

‘You look different without your clothes,’ Fidel said seriously, forcing himself to lightly touch Ted’s chest. ‘I thought you’d be fat, but you’re not, just solid. What do you do?’

‘Until last month I was a construction worker—hard yakka but I loved it. The company went belly up so I’m out of work.’

‘Like me.’

A slightly embarrassed pause; Ted wondering how to start; Fidel wondering what on earth had made him offer himself. He had to get it over with before he chickened out.

‘You can touch me if you want.’

Tenderly, Ted ran hard yet smooth hands over Fidel’s shoulders, down his arms, around his waist, over his buttocks, then drew him close. Fidel felt him harden and held his breath. Effortlessly, Ted lifted the youth and laid him gently on the bed, then followed, kneeling with his legs either side of the young man’s hips. Fidel closed his eyes and tried to relax. He knew that if he looked up he’d be so repelled he’d run away. He wanted to earn his money honestly and didn’t want to hurt Ted who was nice but couldn’t help being old and ugly...the last person he would ever have considered doing this with.

Ted knew exactly what to do, having imagined it being done to himself for years. Mistaking Fidel’s shudders, sighs, slight moans and twitching for signs of pleasure, he massaged the firm young flesh from toes to feet to calves to thighs; his own arousal leaving no room for concern at his victim’s lack of it.

‘May I kiss you?’

Fidel’s eyes opened in alarm, stared into the kindly eyes, felt pity for the nervous old man and nodded.

It was the lightest of touches, a mere brushing of lips that lasted but a moment before Ted sat back on his haunches pulled roughly at his cock and with a high-pitched expiration of breath, contracted all his muscles in a shuddering spasm that caused a tiny quantity of thick creamy stuff to ooze from the gigantic knob and trickle down over his fingers.

He stared at it as if surprised, then clambered off, still holding it. ‘I’ll just go and wash this off.’ He turned at the door. ‘I sweated a bit so you’d better shower—I’ll get you something to eat.’

Dressed and clean, Fidel drank a large glass of milk while Ted opened the backpack, put the fifty dollar note in the inside pocket and wrapped a large slice of chocolate cake, a bread roll and two apples in paper before stuffing them in among the few clothes and other possessions.

Fidel was having difficulty looking brave.

‘If I lived alone, I’d let you stay as long as you like, but my wife, although a wonderful woman, wouldn’t understand. Do you know where you’re going?’

Fidel shook his head. Unable to speak.

‘Go to Roma Street Transport Centre and ask the Help Desk where the free refuge is for street kids.’ He pointed out the window to the main road that led to the city centre. ‘When you get to The Mall, ask directions. Okay?’

Ted held out his hand which Fidel shook manfully, then with a whispered, ‘Thank you’, ran down the stairs and away before he cried.

Ted had ten minutes in which to put the spare room back in order and wonder what had come over him, before his wife bustled back full of delight at her sister’s problems. For once he was pleased she showed no interest in his day.

2 City Centre

It was getting dark by the time Fidel stopped at a small park. He didn't fancy going to some sort of doss house for street kids. From what he'd heard they were tough and took drugs and stuff. Perhaps there was a sheltered spot beneath a small stand of trees and shrubs. But they were thin and surrounded a statue of Robbie Burns where a dozen or so guys and girls were lounging on the grass, smoking, drinking, making a noise. A girl asked if he wanted a fuck, only eighty bucks. He smiled, shook his head and continued down to the Queen Street Mall where smart people were queuing for the cinema, eating in restaurants, laughing and enjoying themselves with friends. He hoped the ache in his chest was loneliness, not an incipient heart attack and asked the way to Roma Street.

Feeling conspicuous wearing a rucksack, he crossed to the bare area in front of the Town Hall where mainly white youths wandered aimlessly. Someone was playing a clarinet. He crossed a busy street to a grassy park in which young people were sitting near a pond bordered by trees and rocks down which water tumbled like a real waterfall. There was a path leading up the hill through the trees. Surely he could find somewhere up there to curl up and rest, if not sleep. But as he moved towards it three police cars drove up, officers leaped out and started hitting the young people.

Everyone was shouting, it was too dark to see clearly and before Fidel could escape he was knocked to the ground, handcuffed, dragged to a wagon, thrust inside with a dozen other young people and driven to a watch house, where names were taken.

A tall, slender young man complained that the cops were racist—no one had been doing anything wrong. He was told to shut the fuck up and had his head slammed against a wall for his insolence. He dropped to the ground and lay moaning, blood dripping. A cop prodded him with his shoe and told him to shut the fuck up. No one dared assist him. Unable to bear it, Fidel shouted that he shouldn't be there because he'd just been walking past; he didn't even know these guys. A backhanded swipe broke his nose and he crumpled onto the concrete floor. In shock, he could only stare wide eyed as a large hand pulled him up by the hair and an acne-scarred face peered into his and said, 'You're not a fucking black cunt. Who the fuck brought his guy in?'

Fidel was bundled out, followed by his rucksack that he only just managed to prevent skidding across the pavement onto the road.

Having been told he'd be locked up for life if they saw him again, he ran for his life, nose a swelling bloody mess. With no idea where he was, he ran blindly, tripped, sprained his wrist trying to cushion the fall, gashed unprotected knees on the concrete and lay sprawled in silent agony, head hanging over the edge of the gutter, unable to think of anything except the pain, the hopelessness, the sadness of...of everything.

A group of drunks staggered past, stepping over him.

It began to rain softly. Cars flashed past spraying dirty water, headlights briefly raking the still body as they carried their happy occupants back to warm and cosy homes.

Fidel's head cleared slightly. He knew he was wet, getting cold and lying on the footpath, but didn't want to move. 'I'll stay here until I die,' he thought without sadness. 'I hope it's soon.' And then he thought of Hylas and tears welled. But still he couldn't move. His head and wrist and nose ached so much it was hard to think about problems. It seemed easier to just lie still and try to remember everything in the hope of working out where he had gone wrong.

His first five years hadn't been too bad. His father had been home so his mother hadn't belted him around much—just an occasional thrashing with a length of plastic-coated wire and a few bruises on his legs, and a broken arm when she threw him down the steps, and some burns on the back of his hand when he didn't bring the ashtray quick enough. But then a baby arrived, so they needed more money and his father got a job as a fly-in-fly-out mine worker way out west, which meant he was away all week, sometimes longer, and so tired when he got home he had no time to listen to Fidel's problems as well as his wife's complaints.

Fidel adored his young brother, Hylas, and by the age of seven had taken over most duties usually performed by a mother. Not that this saved him. It seemed that the more he loved his brother and the more he did to help his mother, the angrier she became. Sometimes she was almost nice, then suddenly he'd be told he was a nasty, wicked little boy and be sent to his room without dinner. He never got used to feeling hungry; that was worse than being slapped around the head. If he accidentally banged the spoon on his teeth when eating he would be sent from the table, or denied dessert. After every meal

he washed the dishes. If he made too much noise or she found a spot on a plate, he'd have his head plunged into the hot soapy water until he was sure he was going to drown. But the worst thing was when visitors came and she told them what a naughty, horrible boy he was. The shame almost overwhelmed him because he always tried so, so hard to be good.

Fidel's mother considered herself an honest woman who called a spade a spade, demanding that everyone take her as they found her; she wasn't going to pretend to be what she wasn't for anyone. The truth of that was never tested as she managed to never be found less than well groomed, or with her house in less than pristine order—thanks to Fidel. Her honesty extended to profligate generosity in sharing her opinions about everything from the behaviour of acquaintances' children to their hairstyles, figures, sloppy housekeeping or taste in clothing. The reluctance of others to return the favour was taken as approval. On the rare occasion when someone dared to point out one of her shortcomings, she would laugh contemptuously at their jealousy.

Well aware of her unpopularity, she insisted that popularity was proof of sycophantic bootlicking. This allowed her to despise those who were popular. 'Huh,' she would snort dismissively, 'I'd rather be unpopular than a greasy, crawling, smarmy, toady.' It was inevitable, therefore, that her son, a natural empathiser who made whoever he was with feel good about themselves, should bear the brunt of his mother's disdain. The more he tried to please her, the more vicious her response, justified by insisting that the world's a nasty place and her duty as his mother was to prepare him for the future, not mollycoddle him into a false sense of security. 'To survive you have to be tough,' she declared on more than one occasion, 'and that's what I'm determined he'll be!'

Fortunately for Fidel, the number of people who wanted to hit him for being too nice were outnumbered by those who liked—even loved his gentle determination to be decent at all costs. That he hadn't become a neurotic mess was due to his young brother, Hylas, who never tired of telling him he wasn't naughty, it was their mother who was. Despite the risk of punishment, Hylas would always secretly take food to his adored brother when he was sent to bed hungry.

Fidel never cried.

It was Hylas who cried when his mother attached one end of a four-metre leash to his brother and the other to the clothesline, then proceeded to hit him with a heavy stick as he ran desperately around in circles in a vain attempt to escape the blows; his mother laughing, his brother screaming at her to stop. When her arm tired she wandered inside, still laughing while Hylas desperately struggled to untie the knot and comfort his brother who was too exhausted to do anything except squat on the ground, bleeding, bruised and shuddering. But not crying.

Over the last two years as he grew older and stronger, physical punishments were replaced by snide, carefully worded insults intended to undermine his self esteem and confidence. She was on the point of succeeding in both regards when that very morning she overreached herself and triggered the rebellion that saved him.

Sprawled uncomfortably on the pavement, getting wetter and colder, the realisation that at least he wasn't at home caused Fidel to smile softly; his hurts temporarily forgotten. Perhaps he should just stay where he was. Uncomfortable, but happy—at least he'd never have to see his mother again. Happiness quickly turned to shame when he recalled his friend Tad, with whom he used to go to a private spot and with the innocent curiosity of youth, admire each other's erections, compare sizes and jerk off. One day it rained and as Fidel's mother would be at bingo, they went to his room. She returned early and caught them.

After slamming her fist into the side of her son's head, she shoved the terrified Tad out the door, tossing his clothes and schoolbag after him. Then in silence she gathered up all her son's clothes and meagre possessions, including his bed linen, carried it out to an aluminium garden shed and threw them in. 'This is your room now you evil, nasty, wicked little boy! Filth like you will never sleep in my house. And if I see you speaking to, touching or even looking at your brother, you perverted creep, I'll beat you within an inch of your life!'

Hylas—the only person Fidel loved in the world. The only thing that had made his life bearable. Fidel felt his life had ended. From then on he became an automaton, refusing to think, to feel, to question; kept going only by the thought that one day he would be old enough to run away. To this end he procured a small rucksack and kept it stocked with spare clothes and biscuits.

When his father came home he was permitted to have a mattress, but no light. Every morning he filled a basin with cold water from the garden tap, took it into the shed and washed himself thoroughly. Apart from banishment to the shed for sleeping, life continued much as before; he still had to clean the house and do the dishes. When he started high school he was allowed to sit at the dining room table to do his homework, and if his father was home, watch television. At school he learned to use computers, joined an Internet afterschool club, and usually managed to anticipate his mother's moods, escaping to the shed when danger loomed, where his father had finally rigged up electricity so he could read in an atmosphere that was almost cosy with pictures on the walls cut from magazines.

Imperceptibly, this life began to seem normal. It was cold sleeping in the shed, but he was young and fit and didn't suffer unduly. His mother got a job, so after school he and Hylas secretly took up where they left off, making sure they were never together when their mother returned.

Unfortunately, she didn't enjoy working in a factory, and when at home returned to taking out her frustrations on her son—muttering while he worked that he was a useless, ugly wretch, a perverted queer fit for the gallows, enumerating the dreadful things she would do to him if she was certain of not getting caught. Despite the nightmares this triggered, Fidel refused to let her see how much he was affected, which was perhaps a pity. Like all torturers she needed a reaction and the lack only encouraged her to redouble her efforts. People like that don't admire fortitude, bravery, decency, goodness...these are things they smash to prove their superiority.

Fidel turned fifteen and was halfway through Year Ten and doing reasonably well when one evening, instead of accepting his mother's insults and vile innuendo, he told her to shut up because he was sick of her insane ranting. She had the problem, not him, and should go and get her head shrunk. She said nothing, merely looked at her son with half-closed eyes, a slight smile twitching at shiny lipsticked lips.

Fidel's heart pounded. Now he'd done it. That smile was more frightening than a punch in the head. He took his fears to bed and slept badly.

Just before sunrise the following morning his mother let herself silently into his shed, ripped off his duvet and straddled the mattress. He woke with a start and stared up in horror as she lifted her nightgown and sprayed hot urine over his naked body. He scrambled away, cowering in a corner, sick from shock, nauseous from the stench. She laughed, lowered her skirt and, humming something tuneless, wandered out.

Fidel scrubbed and scrubbed himself under the tap as if trying to remove his skin, then returned to the shed, dressed, checked his rucksack, went quietly out, closing the shed door behind him, then tapped on his brother's bedroom window.

Cold, wet and pain dragged him back to the present.

'That was only this morning!' he shouted into the blackness. 'It wasn't a dream! It happened and...and...If I fall asleep I will die,' he whispered. 'I must go to sleep!' But he couldn't. Instead, his body began to shiver to maintain warmth—determined to stay alive despite urgings from the brain, which in its turn refused to maintain the barrier he had so bravely constructed to contain his emotions. Like a dam bursting, fifteen years of tears he had refused to shed, flowed over his cheeks into his mouth, over his neck and into the gutter to join the rainwater on its way to the sea.

Traffic had slowed slightly to an occasional car and when the episode ended he decided he was being a bit stupid to just lie there, so tried to push himself up, but the pain in his wrist made him fall back and consider other options.

A vehicle slowed and almost stopped. Hope of rescue set his heart pounding, only to be dashed when it continued on its way. A few seconds later it backed up, the passenger door opened and a woman got out, took a look and called, 'He's not drunk, Sanjay, he's hurt! Come and help.'

3 The Karims

An hour later he was bathed, patched up, dressed in his host's pyjamas, drinking hot chocolate, describing his experience with the police, and his ill-fated search for somewhere to sleep because he had left home. To the polite Indian gentleman in his late forties who introduced himself as Sanjay, and his wife Monique who spoke with a charming accent, it was obvious there was much more to the story than that, but just as obviously the boy was in shock, in need of rest, and there would be plenty of time in the morning to discover the truth. So they smiled, congratulated him on surviving such a tumultuous first day in the capital and led him to a comfortable bed in a separate granny flat attached to the end of the house.

Sanjay apologised for locking the communicating door, but with a twinkling smile explained that he didn't know Fidel, so it would be foolish indeed to trust him not to steal, or murder them in their beds. He hoped the pleasant young man would still be there in the morning for breakfast, but if he decided he wanted to remain independent, he was free to leave through the other door that led into the garden and out to the road. Did he have any money? Fidel opened his rucksack to show Sanjay his fifty dollars, only to find it gone...stolen...at the police station! Sanjay fetched another fifty and pressed it into his hand, insisting he had plenty more, and yes, it was only a loan, Fidel could repay it when he found a job. But he must rest now and all his problems would be resolved in the morning.

Fidel let himself be led to bed where Sanjay tucked him in before placing warm soft hands on his young guest's forehead while calling on the gods of sleep to protect and restore the young man to health. Sleep arrived almost instantly, and morning found Fidel eating a hearty breakfast with his hosts who assured him they would be pleased to have someone living in the flat. Their son had gone to live with his partner at the beginning of the year and the house felt empty with only themselves; so if Fidel wanted...

He certainly did, and excused himself to go to the toilet so he could cry and sob his relief in private—wondering why niceness made him cry but nastiness didn't.

While he was thus occupied, the Karims held a brief conference. On his return, eyes still somewhat red, they apologised profusely for invading his privacy, but they really needed to know the real reason for his leaving home. Fidel's heart sank. These nice people would tell him he wasn't nice and he'd have to go. He was on the point of making up a story when he caught Sanjay's eye. Suddenly he couldn't lie, but neither did he want to tell about his humiliation, so he told them of his mother's reaction when she'd discovered him playing with Taddy. 'You see, I feel sexy about men, not girls,' he added by way of explanation, 'and Mum couldn't understand that. She says it's evil.'

To his astonishment his rescuers sat back with perplexed faces. 'Is that all? You haven't robbed a bank? Attacked an old woman with a knife? Burned down the family home?'

Fidel shook his head.

'I understand it is unpleasant for you that your parents disapprove, but surely it wasn't necessary for you to run away. There's something else, isn't there? We noticed several bruises and old scars when we were cleaning you up last night. Don't you think it would be better for us to know the truth about what has happened to you, rather than to imagine all sorts of horrors that are not true?'

Fidel thought about this and reluctantly agreed. 'I'll tell you some things as long as you don't think I'm complaining or trying to get Mum into trouble. I probably deserved everything, but it became a bit too much when she...' his voice trailed away and he sat helplessly, allowing tears to cascade over his cheeks and soft sobs to wrack his chest.

Monique wrapped her arms around him in anguish herself at seeing a boy in such misery. Sanjay began to wonder if they should let sleeping dogs lie. When Fidel calmed enough to speak, Sanjay said he didn't have to tell them if it was too difficult.

'No,' Fidel sniffed. 'I want to tell someone. I've never told anyone, not even Dad, but...but I can't go on, with all these...these thoughts bursting inside my head. I have to tell someone or...or I think I'll kill myself.' The last few words were so softly spoken the listeners had to strain to hear. They shared glances of concern. The boy wasn't being melodramatic; he was serious.

‘Then we would like to hear your story. All of it.’ Sanjay said seriously. ‘Don’t try to spare our feelings, we’re not hot-house plants.’

Despite being determined not to reveal too much, Fidel discovered that once started he had to either tell everything of importance or nothing, so he told everything...except for his mother’s parting gift. That was still too incomprehensible to think about.

Deeply shocked, the Karims offered the young waif their protection on condition he continued his schooling, obeyed house rules, didn’t drink or take drugs, and never brought his friends home without first introducing them and gaining permission. And if he agreed, they would like to introduce him to their son, Robert, and his partner, Bart.

Fidel could only smile. He hadn't the vocabulary to express his thanks.

To make sure Fidel wasn’t being sought by the police for having run away from home, Monique phoned his mother, who said if she never saw her son again it would be too soon, and promised that written permission for him to live with Mr. and Mrs. Karim would be in the post the following day, signed by father and mother. However, she was not prepared to pay a single cent for his upkeep. He was fifteen and could take care of himself or fall by the wayside.

The somewhat uncharacteristic act of charity bestowed on Fidel by the Karims had its origins in the murder of their son’s school principal nine months earlier. The certainty of Robert’s innocence had enabled them to reject Inspector Kareltn’s accusations against him with such assurance that the inspector lost faith in his ability to judge people, and took early retirement.

Three days after the accusation, however, Robert discovered he was unable to live with his secret and confessed to his parents that it was he who had killed the horrible old man. At first appalled, on mature consideration they agreed with Robert’s boyfriend, Bart, that the murder had saved their son’s sanity, the young men’s relationship, and Bart’s future as a teacher. The Headmaster had thoroughly deserved his fate, as did Lance, who, although not guilty of murdering the headmaster, deserved to be sent to prison because of his part in the death of a fellow pupil, and his three attempts to murder both Robert and Bart.

The parents’ decision to remain quiet, although perfectly justified on rational grounds, weighed on their conscience and strained relations with their son. Neither Robert nor his parents dared to speak about it, although they desperately needed to clear the air. No matter what was said or how, it always sounded either like an accusation or an excuse.

Monique became paranoid...certain their house was bugged, phone calls monitored and emails spied on. The pretence of normality became such a burden it was a relief when, a year before expected, Robert went to live with Bart. He was now halfway through his first year at university. With the buffer of space and time, embarrassment was gone and everyone looked forward to the weekly visits, determined to preserve their love and concern for each other.

Robert and Bart were delighted with their life and naturally didn’t miss the lack of parents. But despite the visits and a satisfying social life, the family house soon began to seem too large for Monique and Sanjay, who missed having a young man around the house—forgetting all the irritations and problems. Thus it was almost inevitable that having rescued an emotionally and physically damaged, but pleasant and thoughtful youth, they would invite him to stay in Robert’s old room...at least until he recovered.

Any qualms Monique had were overcome by Sanjay, whom she knew to be an excellent judge of character. He assured her the lad was honest and reliable. Nonetheless she insisted on locking him in the granny flat at nights for the first week, by the end of which they were thoroughly delighted with their guest who was so different from Robert, yet still very engaging. He was quiet and helped around the house doing every chore he could find without being asked, and refused financial assistance.

As soon as he could, Fidel wrote to his brother Hylas, telling him he was in good circumstances and how to contact him. He received no reply.

Taking him aside on the day before enrolling at the new school, Sanjay discussed problems that might arise, and asked innocently if Fidel would like to borrow a razor. Startled, Fidel asked why.

‘I noticed on the night you arrived that you are somewhat hirsute for a fifteen year old; you have a moustache better than many adults. There's nothing wrong with that, however it might attract attention you don’t need as a new boy.’

Fidel blushed deeply. 'I... I've tried not to mind; I've sort of got used to it. I hoped it would stop but it hasn't. I'm also getting hairy legs and chest. So yes, please... please show me how to... to shave.'

'Has your father never mentioned it?'

'He's got a beard and is only home for a few days every three weeks and doesn't...' Fidel shrugged in resignation.

'Then I shall be delighted to be in loco parentis. I'll meet you in your room in two minutes.'

Two minutes later Sanjay arrived with a new disposable razor, showed Fidel how to soap with warm water and use the razor carefully so as not to slice or create rashes. Fidel gazed at himself in the mirror with a beatific smile. 'Sanjay! You've saved me. I was getting really worried that I had to grow a beard like Dad. I know that was stupid, but you've no idea how ignorant I am.'

'There's nothing wrong with ignorance if it's combined with a desire to learn.' I must say you look a different man. Clean, perky and bright.'

'I feel different! Thanks!'

The following day Fidel was enrolled in Year Ten at Robert's old school, where the guidance counsellor, on learning of his straightened circumstances and desire for work, suggested he join half a dozen other pupils as after-school assistant cleaners. He did, and enjoyed both the work and the hundred dollars it earned him each week. As well as endearing himself to the cleaning contractor, he also pleased his teachers by never questioning them, never speaking, always working and never being late with homework.

In the evenings he studied. On weekends he washed dishes and cleaned tables in a fast food restaurant. By the end of the month he had forced Sanjay to tell him exactly how much he was costing them, and despite their protests paid them that amount every week.

Bart, being the lover of his headmaster's murderer, had thought it better to discontinue teaching in that school, so had quit at the end of the year. Although enjoying teaching, he disliked the disciplinary problems in a high school where so many students seemed to do all in their power to obstruct every effort by their long-suffering teachers to actually teach them. With his qualifications he found a better-paid position in a gymnasium in New Farm where he held popular sessions in fitness training for a variety of sporting codes, as well as personal fitness and health. In the evenings he completed a course in psychotherapy with the intention of eventually opening a private practice and using those skills in conjunction with physical training to assist people with problems.

At their first meeting, Fidel was in nervous awe of Robert's cool self confidence, exuberant health, physical and mental prowess, and easy acceptance of his homosexuality—daring to live openly with a lover five years older than himself, who had been his teacher! Bart inspired no such puerile hero worship. Lean and fit, calm and relaxed, he smiled gently when speaking to Fidel and listened as if genuinely interested—which he was. By never pushing the young waif to do anything, offer opinions, or move out of his comfort zone, he unconsciously ensured that Fidel fell in love with him—it being so easy to like the man who likes us.

Despite Fidel's success at school and work, it became clear to both Monique and Sanjay that the quiet young man who always smiled nervously when spoken to, never complained, never asked for anything, and was always ready to help, was heading for a nervous breakdown, probably due to unresolved issues regarding his abused childhood. Monique, who realised her young ward was in awe of her son but secretly in love with Bart, asked the latter to have a word to see if there were problems.

While Robert was writing assignments the following Sunday afternoon, Bart took Fidel to the gym. After a workout that Fidel enjoyed more than anything he'd done to date, they wandered down to the river, bought ice creams, sat and talked. Fidel was amazed and thrilled that Sanjay and Monique had kept their word and told no one else his secrets, but his admiration for Bart was such that with scarcely a prompt all his self-protective walls dissolved, and he told him everything.

As if talking about someone else, he told of his mother's treatment, shared his thoughts, fears, tears and misery, all in an oddly detached manner that seemed at odds with the foul mental sewage. He left nothing out—not even his mother's parting gift. In the sudden silence that followed he forced himself to look straight into Bart's eyes where he saw not the revulsion and contempt he expected, but a gentle smile of understanding and compassion.

‘You poor young bugger,’ Bart said softly. ‘You deserved none of it. Your mother is clearly not right in the head. It doesn’t matter why she was like that; all that matters is that you understand and believe that you were not the cause of your treatment. She alone is responsible. What amazes me is that you’re so sane, sensible, pleasant...a really nice guy! Someone I’m proud to have as a friend.’

He touched Fidel lightly on the shoulder, triggering another outpouring; this time silent tears of relief interspersed by deep wrenching sobs that in some mysterious way acted like a mystical elixir flushing his insides clean of all the vile bilge deposited by his mother, leaving him spotless, pure of heart and mind.

When the brief paroxysm passed, Bart removed his hand and Fidel laughed softly.

‘What’s funny?’

‘Mum looked so ridiculous with her nightgown hoisted up squirting all over the bed.’ He giggled. ‘She’s really hairy there.’

Bart hoped the laughing wasn’t hysteria, but it quickly died down leaving Fidel grinning shyly and gazing across the river.

‘It’s sort of glamorous and exciting isn’t it, with the café’s, water, bridge, boats, restaurants and...I feel like one of the beautiful people.’

‘You are, Fidel. You are.’

Later he realised he hadn’t told Bart about Ted, and wondered why; then realised it was because it meant nothing, had no effect on his happiness or unhappiness and therefore was not a problem.

‘What did you do to Fidel?’ Sanjay and Monique asked Bart later. ‘We don’t recognise him. He’s bright and cheerful, chattered all through dinner about the gym, told us about school, his work, said he was very happy to be here and...and thank you a million times.’

‘I think it was the gym that unlocked his inner self. He loved it so much I got him a job there on weekends, cleaning and storing gear instead of working at that awful fast food place, then as well as wages he can have use of the equipment. He’s a fine young man and as far as I can gather has only one problem—he’s so grateful to you both he doesn’t know how he can ever repay you. It’s a burden, this debt, as he sees it. But don’t be fooled. His new confidence is very fragile. It wouldn’t take much to send him into a tailspin. Child abuse is the most dreadful crime; I reckon it equates with murder and should be treated as such. Many abused kids effectively lose the chance of a decent life, and that’s a form of death. Until now he’s been quiet and subdued from fear. After a lifetime of rejection by his mother he was terrified you too would tire of him and throw him out.’

‘But why would a mother...?’

‘Loads of reasons. Perhaps she’s depressive; she hated her father or his father; she’s just a miserable bitch who gets off on hurting boys. Whatever the reasons it makes no difference. She has damaged, possibly for life, a gentle wonderful young man. Has Fidel told you everything?’

‘I think so.’

‘About regularly being nearly drowned in the kitchen sink when doing the dishes?’

‘Yes.’

‘About being tied to the clothes line by a length of rope while she lashed at his legs and back with a stick?’

Sanjay and Monique shuddered. ‘Yes.’

‘That she woke him by straddling his mattress in the shed where he’d been exiled and urinating on him?’

‘No! No...surely not. That...that is so terrible...’

‘Don’t let him know I told you; he tried to laugh about it, but I know he’s ashamed and still can’t help thinking everything was in some way his fault. I think I’ve persuaded him none of it is, she’s just an evil bitch, but we have to keep reinforcing his sense of self worth to make it permanent.’

‘Oh dear...the poor, poor boy. How lucky we are to have you, dear Bart. I still remember you explaining that homosexuality was normal. You are so wise.’

‘Hardly wise, Monique, I just read a lot, and at the moment I’m studying psychology and counselling. Abusing a child is domestic violence, and researchers now accept that women are as capable of violence as men, and just as physically aggressive as men in relationships. But unlike females, male partners and sons are expected to put up with the aggression and not complain, with the resulting

emotional, and psychological damage—the fear and shame which is no different from that suffered by women.’

‘I hadn’t realised. When they talk about domestic violence on the news. It is only ever about men being bad to women.’

‘And that’s a real problem because it makes men very angry and increases the likelihood of further violence.’

‘Yes,’ Sanjay said slowly. ‘I can see that. The feelings of hurt will fester.’

‘Exactly, but because most people think only men are violent, when men call the police to report abuse by their spouse, they risk being arrested for abuse themselves because no one believes a woman can hurt a man. Reliable statistics gathered by women’s groups show that mothers are almost twice as likely to be directly involved in abusing and neglecting their children, especially boys, than their fathers. But until girls are taught what appropriate behaviour is and what non-violent conflict resolution looks like, nothing will change. If women want to be considered as capable as and equal to men, then we and they must accept that women can be as aggressive as men, not always victims.’

Monique laughed sourly. ‘Women know, all right, but refuse to admit it to men. But is Fidel really worried we might get tired of him and ask him to leave? How terrible!’

‘When I told him he would never be thrown out because you like him, he was at first incredulous, and then gave a smile of such relief it brought tears to my eyes. As for insisting on paying his way, he has a natural and healthy urge to be as independent physically, mentally and financially as possible. He isn’t rejecting you when he rejects your offers of financial assistance; he loves you like he would have loved decent parents. So don’t pressure him, let him keep what little self respect remains by treating him as an equal, able to make decisions for himself. I told him he was doing you a favour by preventing the place turning into an old people’s home. That made him laugh. Have you heard him laugh? It’s the happiest sound I’ve heard for ages.’

‘Yes! He laughed at dinner when Sanjay told one of his awful jokes. I had to pretend I was sneezing to hide my tears.’

4 What to do?

Days, months, years slipped by and suddenly Fidel was seventeen in his final year of high school—the sole cloud in the sky of his happiness being the absence of any response to his letters to his brother, Hylas. He’d even tried writing to the school, but it had been returned unopened, that’s why he knew the letters home must be arriving, as none had been returned.

Monique and Sanjay who had been talking for years about revisiting France and India to see old friends and relatives, decided to take advantage of Fidel’s honesty and reliability while he was still living with them, and asked if he’d be prepared to house sit while they were away so they could recharge their cultural and emotional batteries without worrying.

Fidel was speechless for at least ten seconds. ‘You trust me to look after your beautiful house?’

‘Of course; you’re seventeen, sensible, trustworthy, and know how to keep everything going better than we do. We can’t think of anyone more suited to the job. So will you?’

‘Will I? Of course I will and I’ll not abuse your trust.’

‘Silly boy, we know that or we’d never have asked. However, there is one condition.’

‘Yes?’ Fidel’s hopes sank slightly.

‘We insist on paying you a small retainer—a hundred dollars a week. It’s not much, but it makes us feel better.’

‘You don’t have to...’

‘We know, but we want to, so is that okay?’

‘Very okay! Thanks.’

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