

# GLIDE IN SLOWTIME



**BARRY  
ROSENBERG**

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

With love to my wife, Judith Rosenberg.

In memory of my parents, Solomon and Gertrude Rosenberg.

With many thanks to Wendy Palmer for her excellent editing.

Barry Rosenberg  
September 2011

‘WHOOPS, IT’S COMING!’ MARY CLAPPED her hands over the swell of her belly. ‘Yes, dear.’ John lowered *The Namba National* a fraction and gazed at his wife through his pinz-nez glasses. ‘What is?’

‘My waters have burst.’

‘The tap again?’ When the going got tough, John preferred not to get going.

‘My waters, John! My wat...ers! The baby is coming!’

‘Oh!’ Suddenly aroused, John leapt to his feet. His knee went up and hit the table. The table went down. ‘My keys, my keys! My kingdom for my keys!’ Putting the table back on its feet, he searched along its surface.

‘Have you tried your pockets, John?’ Though happily married, Mary sometimes found it difficult to keep the impatience out of her voice.

‘My pockets?’ He clapped his hands over his waistcoat as if beating on a tambourine. He next slid his fingers into his brown canvas trousers. He felt a bulge and the panic washed out of him. ‘Oh good, here they are. Let’s go. I’m waiting ...’

John put a hand under Mary’s elbow and steered her as if she might break at any moment. Since she had indeed broken, she thought him a little late for that. She was grateful, though, when he helped her into the car. Though modern steam cars with pipes had replaced the old-fashioned boilers, the door was still an awkward height off the ground.

John was about to start the car when a young Ne’verman extended his blue hand towards Mary’s window.

‘Got a dollar, missus?’

Ne’veermen were not common in coastal towns. They usually kept to their own desert settlements. Tall and long-limbed, the original inhabitants of Ausphalia were not very popular either. One cause, of course, was their colour. Having broken away from *Homo Saps* at some distant point in time, their blood carried less oxygen than the non-indigenous and gave their skin a blue tinge. Naturally, rednecks called them Blueys.

Another difference lay in their development. While the rest of the world had followed the ancient G’eks and pushed technology, the Ne’veermen had focussed more on being one with the land. They had also promoted mental development. Some, with a sneer, called that magic. Not that any of the mind stuff survived testing by modern technology, of course. The reason? Well, they gave the same worn

out excuses as western mediums. They had to be in the right mood for the magic to work. Well, who didn't have to be in the right mood to work — magic or otherwise? Mostly, though, it was just their laidback lifestyle that put them at odds with mainstream society.

So having rarely spoken to a Ne'verman, Mary was intrigued enough to lean her head out of the window. 'Why do you want money?' she asked.

'I wanna get a beer.'

'I thought alcohol didn't mix with your blood.'

'One beer! An' I was gonna drink it, not mix it with me blood.' The man thrust out his hand. 'That's all, just the one.'

Mary's stomach sent her a painful message, telling her to hurry. 'Here you are, then.' She leant forward and handed the Ne'verman a coin. Oddly, as their fingers touched a curious tingle ran up her arm. A moment later, she realised her bodily pains had receded.

'Thanks, missus. That boy you're gonna have, great potential in that boy, real great.'

John glanced anxiously from his wife to the stranger. 'We'd better get going. We don't want you giving birth in the car.'

Mary felt a shadow lift from her. She glanced up. Oh, a balloon, it was merely a freight-carrying air balloon passing over. All the same, the passing of that shadow felt like a portent, a good one. With a smile, Mary nodded to her husband then leant back against the worn leather. John turned the key in the ignition. The electrical circuit started the air compressor and the car immediately fired up. Thirty seconds later, the steam pressure also built up and they chugged away. Mary sniffed. She knew she wouldn't be able to smell steam since the water system was sealed. Still, in her heightened state, she imagined that she could detect the odd escaping molecule.

As the car pulled away, the young Ne'verman turned the new dollar in his hand. Intuition told him never ever to spend it. Its metal was charged with Mary. With it, he could always find her — or her child. He slipped the coin into a pocket. He didn't drink beer, anyway. Nor did he normally beg. He'd just responded to the moment.

With the pain in her belly reduced, Mary quite enjoyed the short ride to the hospital. Gliders, air ships and solar-powered flitters dotted the sky as people made their way to work or occupied themselves at play. Maybe one day, they'd go up in a glider. John always spoke about it but they'd never had the nerve. Well, one day, but it wouldn't be today.

John ushered her into the hospital, a long low building used only for births. Deaths and accidents were in a completely different building. While trying not to seem anxious, John hurried his wife towards the receptionist. She, in turn, summoned the medics. Still distanced from any discomfort, Mary was hoisted up, locked down and generally made ready for take-off. John hovered on the periphery as the medics took over. On the Richter Scale of Births, however, this delivery was rated just a breath above zero.

'Too easy,' the medics said and hurried on to more urgent matters.

Even the local newspaper that published the new births forgot to include their photo. For a boy expected to show great potential, he certainly didn't start with a bang.

JOHN, SON OF JOHN WAS, in turn, the son of a John. This was a tradition that he and Mary had intended to continue. After all, the current John, an accountant by profession, was not one to go against custom. Even so ... even so ... he had wanted to fly. Hadn't he?

'I've been thinking.' John, son of a long line of Johns, screwed up his face to signal thought. 'John is okay but I also want another name for the boy.'

'Another name?' Mary was quite taken aback.

'Yes, another name,' John sang, sounding like a character in a Gildert and Sullivan chorus.

'What name?'

'Glide.'

'Glide?' Mary looked askance at her husband. 'Well, that's an unusual name for a baby.'

'His second name can be John. Or Jack.'

'But why Glide?'

John, an average man of average ability, pursed his lips. 'Well, you know how I always wanted to fly?'

'Oh?' Mary had the vague idea that her husband was about to flap his arms and go *cluck, cluck*.

'But mostly, I've just worked in Accounts.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'Yes.'

'Well, there you are.' And John pulled back his shoulders as if he'd actually braved the air.

'Right.' Mary became silent. She didn't like to argue, especially when John had made such a rare and definite statement. She did think, however, that you couldn't call a person Glide and expect him to be normal.

John, used to his wife's silences, said, 'Still waters run deep. What're you thinking?'

'Oh, nothing.' Mary rocked the baby.

John peered over his glasses. 'Ah-ha, you're not Tolkien about it, eh? You'll develop bad hobbits.'

Mary smiled. Except for their son's name, she knew where she was with her husband — safe, secure and terribly punny.

Despite his name, Glide passed easily through toddlerhood and was quite happy when he started school at five. On the first day, he met Jonathon. They took to each other straightaway, even though Jonathan was pink and knobbly while Glide was a little dark and stocky. The touch of colour, according to Mary, was because her great grandfather had been a Ne'verman.

'My friendsh call me Johnno.' The little boy had a marked lisp. 'What's your name?'

'Glide.'

'Glide? That'sh a funny name. We'll call you Glido.'

'Glido?'

'You've gotta have a nickname.'

That was true. Aussies always shortened names. Yet neither Glido nor Gli nor Glio seemed to work. So, though uncommon, Glide remained as Glide.

He turned out to be uncommon in other ways as well.

On their quarter acre block, one area was enclosed by chicken wire. Inside it were the chooks — another sign, perhaps, that John had always wanted to fly yet never did. After work, he normally threw handfuls of seeds to the chickens. Glide waited at his side, big-eyed and clutching at his father's canvas trousers. At age seven, though, the boy tugged at the bucket.

'Dad,' he asked, 'can I feed them?'

The risk-averse accountant studied the animals. Though reluctant, he had to concede that even he didn't regard the chooks as dangerous. 'Of course,' he replied and handed across the bucket.

John was surprised to see the result. With him, the chooks waited at a distance for the seeds. Yet when Glide clucked, the animals immediately ran to him. Nor was it long before he was also collecting the eggs — and they were bigger than they'd ever been before.

One afternoon, as it was becoming dark, Mary watched her son as he went about the feeding. 'He's really good with animals,' she remarked.

'Too right.' John put down his paper. 'Funny, though. Have you noticed that the pythons have stopped trying to get into the chicken coop?'

'Because of Glide?' Mary frowned. 'There was that really big one that tried to get at the chooks.' In the fading light, she squinted through the glass. 'It was twice as long as him and easily as thick as his leg.'

'Oh, yes.' John rustled the newspaper. 'That one with the smudgy black and yellow markings. I thought the snake catcher had relocated it.'

'He had.' Mary stiffened and put her nose to the window. 'John, he's put the chooks away for the night but he still seems to be feeding something.'

'Possums, probably.'

'John.' Mary's voice had become as stiff as her body. 'Go and see what he's doing. I've got a funny feeling about this.'

'Oh? All right. Yes, dear.'

With some reluctance, John left the comfort of the living room to see what Glide was up to. He expected that his son had found some other small creature to feed. But what he saw made him shake in his boots. Glide was handing out meat scraps to a python that could easily have swallowed his arm.

'Glide!' John froze. 'Don't move! Don't breathe! Just shout and stamp your feet! That'll drive him away.'

'But, Dad,' Glide brushed back the hair that fell over his eyes. 'I don't want to frighten him away.'

'Forgodssake, it's a wild animal!'

'It's only wild if you shout at it.'

John shook his head. Glide, wearing just ragged shorts and with hair down to his shoulders, seemed to be as wild as any of the local animals. He took a short step forward, patting down the air, not sure if he were trying to pacify his son or the long python. Picking up a handful of soil, he threw it at the snake. There wasn't much force in the throw and the creature simply flicked out its tongue to see if these bits were food. Then, with a contemptuous look at John, it slithered into the bushes.

'Awesome,' Johnno lisped from over the fence.

'I told you so,' Glide said.

'Johnno!' His father turned red. 'Home! Off you go. You shouldn't be encouraging him.'

'It wasn't me!'

Johnno slid down the fence and ran. He was going to tell the other kids that Glide was a snake charmer. Yet the charm didn't only apply to reptiles. Glide was to demonstrate an affinity with all animals. Though this was not a quality that his father really appreciated.

After Johnno had vamoosed, John cried, 'Don't feed the snakes! You'll encourage them to go after the chooks.'

'But, Dad,' Glide managed to sound both cool and rational, 'if I feed them then they won't need to go after the chooks.'

'Ah!' John hopped from one foot to the other, confused by his son's logic. 'But that means,' he said, 'that your mum goes shopping for the snakes.'

'But it's only scraps, Dad.'

John saw that he wasn't winning this argument and was relieved when Mary came out.

'Glide,' There was a sharp edge to her voice, 'I don't mind for whom I shop. But I do mind who eats whom. Feel free to feed the possums or the magpies. But please, please ... *please* don't feed the snakes.'

'Okay, Mum.' Glide made a face. 'I won't.'

Somewhat mollified, his parents returned to the house. Alone, Glide did something that he often did. In his mind's eye, he conjured up a detailed image of the python. He saw the black and yellow smudges that coloured its back. He saw, as well, the triangular head with a wide mouth that, to him, was always smiling. In the last of the light, he even projected the image on the grass and captured the sinuous way that the python moved its body.

He scarcely gave this talent any thought. His interest was more in the python and, despite his promise, Glide didn't give up on feeding snakes. He just did it in secret, stuffing his schoolbag with tempting scraps. To boost his reputation, he said he kept a python in his bag. That helped to keep the bullies away. He only had to hiss for them to run.

For the young boy, it was a short step from snakes to Krakens. He found a book about these deep-sea monsters in the library. They had huge bodies with big eyes and curved beaks for noses. Each Kraken had many legs. Though to judge by the pictures, the legs weren't legs at all but the writhing bodies of giant snakes. Glide took this book to bed and when he was supposed to be asleep, he read it beneath the blankets. He shivered with a delicious fear that only a saved bar of chocolate could soothe. Even when going to sleep, he would scare himself by creating a vivid picture of this awful monster. Indeed, dealing with the fear of the Kraken helped him to face up to the occasional bully, the snide comments of young girls and the bespectacled eye of his chemistry teacher.

Glide's love of animals increased as he grew older and it was quite usual for him to bring home a wounded animal to nurse. These ranged from fruit bats to possums and even to wild dingos. His speciality, though, was kangaroos. He'd go bush and return with a young one, an orphaned joey, that he would hand-rear until the roo was strong enough to release.

His mother was impressed. 'He belongs in a zoo,' she remarked.

'He's not that wild.' John chuckled, hidden as usual behind a newspaper.

'I meant as a keeper.'

'Well, *I* hope he gets over it.' John turned to the financial pages. 'There's no money in it. No jobs. Accountancy, now there's a profession. You can always get a job in Accounts.'

When he found that he couldn't persuade his son to change interests, John hoped Johnno would be more persuasive. So, in their last year at school, he asked, 'So, Johnno, what're you planning to do next?'

'Business Arts,' Johnno promptly replied. 'I'm no academic but I'm pretty good with an abacus. Anyway, I reckon anyone can be a business executive.'

'That's good. And you, Glide?' John hoped Johnno's enthusiasm would be contagious.

'Environmentalism, dad. I've told you a million times.'

'To be a vet?' John looked hopefully at Johnno.

'No, Dad! I'm interested in conservation. You know, the big picture.'

'Oh, the big picture.' John sank deep in thought. Eventually lifting his head out of the previous century, he wailed, 'But there's no money in it! Why don't you do Business Arts with Johnno?'

'Oh, well, you know,' Glide replied and he made the sort of soothing sounds that he used on injured sugar gliders or koalas.

Johnno did well enough in his exams to begin Business Arts at Sunny Coast Uni. Glide, with his phenomenal ability to visualise, sailed easily into Environmentalism.

'So,' Johnno said, 'you gonna learn to cut up animals?'

‘No way!’ Glide was shocked. ‘We learn how to observe them in the wild.’ He brought out two glass test tubes from his backpack. ‘We also do chemical analysis on water and measure pollution in the air.’

‘Cool.’ Johnno yawned to show what he thought of chemical analysis. ‘I’d rather be measuring dollars.’ He put a hand out to stop a steam-bus. ‘Meet you at the beach on Saturday and hit the waves?’

Glide nodded in agreement. Weekends were for surfing, Glide would wax his board, put cream on his nose and paddle out. Sitting on his board, he’d wait for the big one.

Weekdays were for study and for basics, they both had to study Calculations. Their first year was with the Institute of Abacus Technology. Then, in their second year, they moved onto the Centre for Vacuum-Tube Computing.

As often happened, one day there was a pop, a smell of burning, and their machine whirred to a stop.

Johnno opened the manual. ‘We’re supposed to fix this ourselves now.’

Glide took a quick look at the page. ‘Easy.’

He removed the computer cover and traced the complex connection of wires in the machine until he located a tiny ergon tube. He de-soldered it, inserted a new one and re-soldered without a second glance at the relevant page.

Johnno’s mouth dropped open. ‘Jeez, mate, how d’you know where to put it?’

‘Easy,’ Glide repeated. ‘I can see where.’

His friend looked at the tangled spaghetti of electrical components. ‘I can’t see where even when I’m holding the manual.’

‘Course you can. Everyone can.’

‘Well, I can’t.’

‘You can.’

‘I can’t!’

Glide thought his mate was joking. ‘That’s ‘cos you’re a funny ginger head.’

‘Who’re you calling funny?’

At that, Glide pushed Johnno. Johnno pushed Glide and in a moment, they were in a friendly tussle. Their conversation forgotten, Glide didn’t realise that he had a gift, a very rare gift. He could visualise. The screen of his mind was more than a metaphor. On it, he could project images in complete detail.

It was a pity that in two years of uni neither of them had come across the word *eidetic*. It would’ve been so helpful.

His visual ability was particularly useful in the third year. Then, as well as learning about the wiring of scientific instruments, Glide also learnt how condensers, resistors and batteries could be used to model nerves and parts of the body. Other students had problems remembering the complex diagrams. But for Glide, one glance and the complexities were stored in the library of his mind.

At the end of this third year, though, Glide had a choice. To continue with study or to look for work? For, Johnno there was no choice. He immediately moved down to Brissie and became an apprentice manager. On his first payday, he cranked up his phone to speak to Glide.

'Hey, mate, the money's fantastic!' he exclaimed.

'So? You going to buy a week's worth of tee shirts,' Glide asked, 'so you can save on the washing?'

'Oh, mate! I'm not buying tee shirts. I'm buying these really neat canvas suits and wearing a cravat.' The voice on the phone became more self-important. 'And by the way, no more Johnno. In future, you've gotta ... I mean, you've *got to* call me Jonathan.'

Jonathon! Glide groaned. How his friend was changing! Almost as a reaction, he decided to go on to further study. And, as this was mostly research, he was delighted to be able to return to his original passion — kangaroos. He soon converged onto a topic and, this time, it was his turn to crank up the phone.

'Hey, Johnno.'

'Jonathan!'

'What's that, Johnno?' Glide was confused for the moment. 'Oh, yeah, Jonathan. Well, mate. Guess what? I've just worked out my research topic!'

'Yes? How to stop pythons from eating chooks at night?'

Glide paused, wondering why his friend was referring to that incident of so long ago. He assumed that it was a form of jealousy. Glide was still free at uni while his friend was out there and caught in the battle of business.

'Not chooks but kangaroos. You won't believe this but we still don't know how to measure kangaroo body condition in the wild. Mostly people make visual estimates. But we don't really know how good they are.'

'You'd be good at that,' Jonathan grudgingly conceded.

'Well, I know I'm pretty accurate with the tame ones. But this project would allow me to spend most of my time in the bush and the rest of my time mucking about with condensers and stuff in trying to devise the right sort of measuring device.'

'Sounds good.' Glide heard the rustle of paper. 'Sorry, got to go,' Jonathon said, 'got another meeting. If I play this right ...' He hesitated. 'If this works out the way we want, I'll be due for a nice little bonus.'

'That's nice.' Glide put down the phone, once more feeling sorry for his friend. His own life was so perfect. Real men didn't work in an office. Fancy being stuck at a desk!

GLIDE WAS STUCK AT A desk. Damn and strawberries! What the hell had happened?

As expected, he'd done so well on his project that he was offered further research. It did mean, however, that he would have to tutor and to mark papers. As far as he was concerned that was more than halfway toward being a pen pusher. He wanted to be a ranger and only the great outdoors would be his office. His teachers tried to caution him.

Even his Environmentalism teacher looked at him with a worried expression. 'Life wasn't meant to be easy, Glide.' He pressed his bifocals onto his beak of a nose, creating a slight dent.

But that had only reminded him of the Kraken and he'd dealt with that fear. Hadn't he? He wasn't going to be like his father, scared of life. Slamming doors behind him, the young man left the university in a huff.

Still keyed up, Glide applied for work with kangaroos. Glide next applied for work with possums. Glide also applied for work with crocodiles. He even applied for work with mosquitoes. But, no go. Environmentalism was a hot subject and there were a hundred applicants for every vacancy. And who would pay for him to go to Dorwin or Krokadu when ninety-nine applicants already lived on the doorstep? Especially when volunteers would be happy to do the work for nothing.

Briefly, Glide's hopes reawakened when there was a sudden spurt of sightings of Yowie and Bunyips in the central deserts. He wouldn't mind doing cranky research if it took him outdoors. He'd even search for Kraken — though he still shuddered at the idea of them — if it meant he could be a ranger.

But nothing came of those applications. So, in despair, and in exchange for his mother's home cooking, he eventually agreed to apply to the Ausphalian Civilian Service. His acceptance moved so fast that before he could say *pen pusher*, Glide found himself in an office in Brissie and earning a salary that brought dollar signs to his eyes. It was his turn to ring Jonathon.

'I can't believe it,' Glide shrilled. 'It's huge! What do I do with it?'

'Spend it. Get used to it.' His friend chuckled. 'You'll soon be wondering how you ever managed to exist without it.'

'No way. Impossible.'

'No way? All the way! Mate, a salary is subtly seductive. You'll see. Anyway, what're you doing to earn it?'

Glide's tone lost some of its enthusiasm. 'Data analysis on housing.'

'You like it?'

'It's all right, I suppose,' Glide said slowly. 'I don't dislike it.'

'Is it important?'

'Yeah, I think so.'

'Don't sound like there's any animals in it.'

'No, just stats and computers. I try and fiddle with the vacuum tubes when I can but that's really not my role.'

'Well, there you are, mate. Got to go. See you.'

Glide put down the phone and stared out of the window. Down below, people and steam cars rushed along the street. The work was okay but it wasn't animals and it wasn't outside. It was okay but it wasn't him. But he no longer had the heart to send out applications. It was easier to stay where he was and wait until he was pushed.

When the push came, it was upwards. With one salary increase, he bought a new car. With the next, he acquired a loan for a townhouse. By risking nothing, Glide let strands of money engulf him and he became as trapped as a fly in a jar of honey. It was all too easy. And all too easy made it all too hard.

After yet another promotion, his father rang. 'Only one more year,' he pronounced, 'and you'll be into middle management.'

'Yes, Dad.' Glide's tone was flat.

John noticed. 'Is something wrong? I thought you liked the work.'

'I do like it, Dad.' The young man tugged at his ragged black hair. 'But it's not me.' He was hit by a realisation. 'Even when I like it, I hate it.'

'Oh, Glide!'

What a terrible thing to have to admit. Glide dropped his head. He had to change his life.

His head tight, he again considered the few ranger jobs that were available. But as he did so, a strange thing occurred to him. It struck him that the salaries were pathetic. *All those years of study*, he thought, *and this is all they pay?* As Johnno, now Jonathan, had once said, a good income was seductive.

A little dazed, Glide went to the window of his Brissie office. He gazed at the few small parks that dotted the cityscape. Other than birds, he knew there would be very little in the way of wildlife there. And Brissie was too far inland to make surfing an easy outdoors option. He tapped the glass while thinking and idly watched an air balloon as it sedately headed toward the horizon. Suddenly, an idea came to him, a brilliantly appropriate idea. It could even appeal to Jonathan — though nowadays his friend had become as stuffy as a hot air balloon himself.

'Jonathan,' Glide shouted over the phone, being extra careful to get the name right, 'how do you fancy hang-gliding?'

'Hang-gliding as in going up in the air? Surfing the thermals?' His friend was silent for a moment. 'I don't know. I've put on a bit of weight since uni.'

'It's on at Mt Tambourind. Let's, at least, go and take a look.'

‘Okay. But just so long as we go in my car.’

*My car* was fine with Glide. Jonathan possessed a red roadster with a multi-parallel-circuit steam generator that had one millimetre bore tubing and made Glide’s car look like an old bathtub. It would be fun to drive in that car.

The following Saturday was bright enough to dispel some of Glide’s blues. He left his own car and walked the short distance across Fortitude Valley to his friend’s townhouse. After making suitable cooing noises at the new roadster, they left at ten. The traffic was light and when they arrived at the hang-gliding centre just over an hour later, Glide took a deep breath. Just what he wanted: to be outside of the Big Smoke and in the bush. Well, almost in the bush — the land was just too cultivated to be taken for wilderness.

Not sure what to do, the two young men watched a pilot as he made his preparations.

‘G’day.’ He nodded at them but then continued with his tasks.

Glide watched with acute interest, keenly aware of his father’s desire to fly. Though office work had dulled his visual ability, curiosity somewhat revived his eidetic talent. He looked at the manual that he had bought with him. Though nowadays he needed more than the one glance, he was pretty sure he knew what was being done when the pilot checked the sail and harness connections together with various other tests.

When the man was satisfied, he fitted himself into the harness and began to run down the gentle slope. As he rose into the air, Glide gasped with delight. With its wide and colourful wings the hang-glider seemed as free and attractive as a butterfly.

At the implied freedom, however, Glide’s gasp turned into a groan. ‘I can’t do this, Jonathan. It’s so much the opposite of office work, it would kill me just thinking about it all week.’

‘You reckon?’ Jonathan, still ginger-haired but now slightly portly, watched the wide wings as they played with the slight shifts of wind. ‘Like father, like son, eh?’

Glide shot an angry look at his friend and his mouth opened for a sharp retort. Then the young man closed his mouth. He’d always assumed that his father was simply too afraid to push his boundaries. Was the real truth the opposite? That his father feared pushing his boundaries in case he went wild and fell off the edge?

Glide returned to the Sunny Coast feeling bluer than ever, the dark dog of depression yipping at his heels. Obviously, he couldn’t take up an outdoorsy hobby. That would be a case of *once was too much, a thousand times not enough*. He felt so trapped. He just had to do something.

Though not interested in the news, the young man began to read the newspapers. More precisely, he scanned them. Instead of making his own decision, he wanted the world to tell him what to do. When it did, he immediately contacted Jonathan.

‘You remember we did Shaikspere at school?’

‘Yes?’ Jonathan was cautious. ‘We read *Hamlot* and *A Midsummer Night’s Scream*.’

‘Well, some bloke has written a parody, *Hamalot’s Midsummer Night’s Scream*.’

‘Sounds fun.’ Jonathan sounded even more cautious than before.

‘There’s an audition for two small parts, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.’

‘And?’ Words struggled to exit Jonathan’s mouth.

‘I spoke to the director. These two are a pair of larrikins, a bit impish. He’s hoping that one of the actors will be dark and the other will be ginger.’

Jonathan groaned. ‘I thought you were going to say that. I haven’t acted for ages.’

Glide knew how to be persuasive. ‘There’re lots of girls in the cast, dancing around in skimpy costumes.’

‘You know,’ Jonathan said quickly, ‘a bit of acting might be quite helpful in my management career. I don’t know about impish, though. All right, I’ll give it a go.’

‘Good and remember,’ Glide began.

‘There are no small parts, only small actors.’ Jonathan laughed.

The acting experience proved to be quite interesting. The women told Glide that with his sunken cheeks and haunted air he ought to audition for a part as the original Hamlet. Yet despite their interest in him, it was the chubby and cheerful Jonathan that always got the girl.

Glide wasn’t surprised. He knew that he was no fun to be with. In fact, as soon as he had completed his commitment to the theatre, he knew that he had to do a completely different sort of activity altogether.

He couldn’t kid himself any longer. He needed an activity that was sufficiently physical — he hesitated to say violent — that would serve to exorcise his growing and in-turning anger. A sport, in other words. But not just any sport — he needed an exercise in which conflict was essential. Having made a decision, his first port of call, as usual, was Jonathan.

‘You interested in foils?’ he asked over lunch.

His friend’s round face broke into a grin. ‘Foils? I’m often foiled.’

‘I’m mean as in sword-fighting.’

‘Wow, a samurai!’ Jonathan patted his round stomach. ‘I could lose some. But sword fencing, that Johnny Debt, *Pirates of the Carob-Bean* type stuff, I don’t know.’

‘Go on. I want to try a class.’

‘You could go by yourself.’

‘I could but ...’ Glide made a face. ‘I can’t.’

Smiling, Jonathan put on a bushie accent. ‘You got the pen pusher blues, mate. I unnerstands that. Okay. When?’

Glide didn’t think his friend had truly understood the depth of his feeling. But that didn’t matter as long as he had his company.

Opting to go to the Brissie Uni sports club, Glide looked forward to foiling. It turned out, however, that his heart wasn’t in it.

After a few sessions, he whined, ‘It’s not working.’

‘What’s wrong?’ Jonathan asked.

‘It’s too elegant.’

‘But you’ve got so good so quickly!’

‘No, I want more bash for my buck.’ Glide considered the other uni activities. ‘What about Kendo?’

Jonathan whipped his foil so it made a satisfying whoosh, whoosh, whoosh. ‘Just when I’m getting to grips with this!’

‘Kendo is better. We get to whack each other with sticks.’

‘But I don’t want to be whacked.’

‘Well, of course not. Whack the other person first.’

Jonathon made a face. He couldn’t see himself whacking anyone. And he didn’t. Glide’s stagnant ability to visualise was stimulated by competition and that allowed him to easily whack his friend. On the other hand, even Otto the octogenarian managed to whack Jonathon. Glide, however, whacked nearly everyone. He really enjoyed that part of Kendo. He didn’t, however, enjoy the bowing, the kneeling or any of the other rituals.

‘It’s too pseudo-spirituo,’ he complained. ‘Let’s go back to foils.’

‘But you said that was too airy-fairy.’

‘I could take my Kendo stick there.’

Jonathon saw trouble. ‘And whack people? No way! How about the gym? No swords, no nothing. Just you and the weights.’

Glide thought for a moment. ‘Oh, yeah. May as well give that a go.’

They went to the gym and started to pump iron. Between pumps, Glide sniffed around. Behind a curtain, he discovered a punch bag.

‘Oh, yeah!’ he cried and whacked it with his fists.

That suited Jonathon. Glide could beat up on anything so long as it wasn’t him. The curtain billowed in and out with those fists of fury. For it was a fury. Glide’s frustration was growing and his moods were getting darker. One day, he was so down that he rammed the bag with his head. K-O! With a groan, he fell to the ground.

At the noise, Jonathon rushed in. ‘What the hell!’

Glide’s eyes were open. ‘Do you see stars?’

‘No.’

‘Oh!’ Glide held up his hand. Coloured lights flickered around it. Gingerly, he climbed onto all fours. ‘Bloody damn and strawberries! That hurt. Bloody inanimate object!’ His speech slurred, he tottered forward, rubbing his head. ‘It’s better when I take it out on others.’

‘Oh, no! Not foils again? Not Kendo?’

‘Nah.’ Glide rubbed the bright red patch on his forehead. ‘I don’t want a punch bag. I want bodies! How’s about that Korian martial art, Taikwon-dont.’

‘Taikwon-dont?’ Jonathon squeaked. ‘You mean Taikwondo?’

‘Nah, that’s got too many rules. Taikwon-dont is better.’

‘Mate, where do you get these ideas?’ Jonathon threw out his arms in protest.

‘I dunno, matey. But have you looked in a mirror lately? You’re looking really svelte.’

‘Svelte, eh?’

With pride, Jonathon patted his stomach and breathed in to svelte himself even more. Consequently, when Glide went to *KickButt*, his friend followed. As Glide had pointed out, Jonathon was losing weight. It was the fear, of course. Fear was causing him to sweat buckets.

*KickButt* was somewhat therapeutic. Jonathon held a kick pad and Glide kicked it. Glide held a kick pad and Jonathon kicked it. In a strange can-can, pairs travelled the width of the gym, one leg flashing out after the other. It certainly provided some release. Yet less than Glide had expected. He found, to his surprise, that he was holding back. He could kick and punch harder but he didn't. Nor did he go crazy and unexpectedly hit out with his Kendo stick. The reason: he didn't dislike anyone enough to really risk hurting them.

'It's no good,' Glide said, heading for his car. 'It's the office itself. I've got to get away from the office.'

'What's wrong with the office?' Jonathon was fanning himself with his Taikwondo jacket, showing off his newly developed muscles.

Glide slapped the car bonnet with irritation. 'Oh, just the four walls, the writing, the four walls, the reports! Oh, and did I mention the four walls, the same four damn walls?' He flung his exercise bag into the car. 'I've switched to wildlife issues but the work doesn't change. It's still shoving bloody paper around and around and going to bloody committees and doing the same old yak, yak, yak!'

Jonathon was horrified. 'You don't like management?'

'No, I goddam hate it!'

'You do?' Jonathon was astounded. 'Well, I like it.'

Glide fought to control himself. After all, there was no reason why Jonathon shouldn't like it. Jonathon was one person. He, Glide, was another.

'Look, mate, I'm sorry. It's me. I just don't think I'm cut out for it.'

Angry with himself, Glide slid into his car while self-pity sat in the passenger's seat. He had problems, bad problems, and the walls were closing in. He turned the ignition to start the electric air compressor and, with a bad-tempered wave, drove away. On the slow drive through Brissie's busy streets, he thought that a dark blue storm cloud had covered the sky. Then he realised. The storm wasn't outside. It was inside, inside of him. That was a realisation, a realisation of the worst possible kind.

It was true that he hated the office. But his inner storm went far deeper than that. He was not at the office now. So he shouldn't be feeling this gutful of hate. No. He understood that it wasn't really the office that he hated. It was himself. There was no cloud in the sky. The darkness was in him. It was coming from him. That was why he could never shake off the bad feelings. He was living totally against his grain. He had wanted a real life but instead he had settled for an easy life. Yet making it easy had ended up making it hard. He had wanted magic but had stopped at security.

Like father, like son. Bloody father, bloody son.

Comfort gnawed away at him. He was feeling blue, depressed and blue. He was so blue he verged on black.

THE NEXT DAY, GLIDE HAD to force himself to go to work. The day after that was even more difficult. The next week was worse still. He had been a clerk, a pen pusher, for four years! Four bloody years! How had the time slipped away?

On the penultimate night of his fourth year of pen pushership, Glide opened a bottle of vodka. It wasn't to celebrate. It was to commiserate. On the last morning of his fourth year of pen pushership, Glide crawled out of bed. Jackhammers pounded at his skull. His head was going to be blasted off. If only it would. If only!

Another Monday with the blues after another Sunday with the blues after ... the jackhammers pounded. The shower threw daggers. Glide's olive face was lined with blue-black patches. The pollution of his mind was infecting his skin. He tried to massage the patches upwards and out. It didn't work. Glide resorted to his stagnant eidetic ability and tried to visualise the blemishes as being drawn upwards. In his imagination that, at least, began to work. Cranking the motor of his mind, the blemishes gathered into a blue cloud above his head. That was his life, a blue-bruised mushroom cloud. He groaned. Where was his destiny? Where was his fate? The cloud settled above his head, a misshapen doughnut pretending to be a halo.

Glide left his trendy townhouse and walked slowly towards the bus stop. Every so often, he lifted his hand. Something was pressing down upon his head. The doughnut couldn't still be there, surely. Was it a storm? He looked up. A stormy sky? No, the heavens were a radiant blue. Still sensing pressure, he stopped. But twist and turn as he might, he couldn't see through the top of his own skull. With a grunt, he gave up. What did it matter anyway? Was living under a cloud of bruised blue any worse than being embalmed in a grey pall?

A few steps away, a black magpie cocked red eyes at him. It strutted away, wings folded like an old headmaster. Glide scowled — what did the maggie have to complain about? The bird didn't have to go into an open-plan office. He cranked the rusty projector of his mind. A picture of a maggie appeared.

*Had that bird been a maggie?* he thought. *Shouldn't it have yellow eyes?* He gave a silent and bitter laugh. *Maybe the maggie also has a hangover.*

Encased in misery, Glide suffered an inner lurch. How far he'd strayed! *What's happened to me?* he mentally cried. *What's gone wrong, so bloody wrong?*

As if to externalise his words, a white cockatoo screeched. He glanced up. Was it calling him? Was it shouting his name? Surely not. Three kookaburras laughed hysterically. They definitely weren't saying his name. The noise rippled out, collided with tree trunks and died. Waves of a silent scream continued onwards.

A bus halted at the stop. Glide entered along with a burly Islander, a slim Asian and a knobbly Aussie. 'G'day,' they all said to the driver.

Glide felt alien. *Is it just me? Why aren't they unhappy?*

Entering his open-plan office, Glide sat in front of his workstation. Between the computer icons, he saw his reflection, no more than a vague ghost of a being. He began to tap the side of the keyboard, muttering, 'It's wrong, so wrong. It's all so bloody wrong.' Unconsciously, his voice rose.

'What's that?' An office worker peered over his partition. 'Who's Wong? Did you go out with a girl called Wong?'

'Wong, Wong? What's Wong?' Glide hadn't realised that he'd spoken aloud. 'Nothing, nothing.' He waved his hands in denial.

At six, he went with Jonathon to *KickButt*. At the end of a tough session, the punch bag was free. Glide kicked it and punched it until he fell down. Jonathon helped him up and he immediately launched into it again. The instructor came over. He gently put an arm around the young man and led him away. Glide saw himself in the wall length mirror. Steam issued from his nostrils and his eyes were scarlet whirlpools. Now he knew. He'd fallen over the edge.

With aching limbs and with aching heart, he went home. He should've been exhausted and gone to bed. But he was beyond exhaustion and instead, he stayed up late. The later to bed, the slower came the morning. When his eyes were gritty, he tucked himself away. Yet as soon as he gave up on his thoughts and tried to sleep, a cloud of blueness sat above his head.

The young man considered the blue fugue. Oddly enough, the dark cloud seemed not to be threatening but soothing. Still, blue was blue and he wished it away. He didn't want to be blue anymore. The next morning, he was drained. Good, he'd be too numb to notice that he was in the office. Glide stumbled into the shower. He didn't take too long in case it snapped him awake. Besides, he believed in saving water.

With a towel around his waist, he began to shave. He held the blade to his neck. Quickly he struck down. A tiny cut appeared. What more could one do with a safety razor? He leant against the sink and peered at his reflection. The blue-black cloud had reappeared.

'G'day,' Glide said. 'How ya doing?' He imagined zigzags of lightning shooting out of the cloud. 'There will be local thunderstorms,' he muttered. 'The Head Land will be dark and there will be gusty squalls in Stomach Land.' He gave a dry laugh.

He set off for the bus stop, taking the bruised cloud with him. Like the cloud of last night, this blueness seemed to be more positive than negative. As before if anything, it was vaguely comforting. Huh, he must be accepting his craziness.

The next morning, his mini-mushroom cloud returned and his head was again enshrouded in mist. Glide shrugged. So what? Blue, he decided, was more fun than tepid grey.

‘It’s Fleudian,’ he told himself on his morning walk to the bus. ‘A dissociation of what I think of work.’ He sighed. ‘Is that what I really think of work? Damn and strawberries!’ He reached a high hedge. On the other side was a small park. He looked longingly at the green as he entered the bus. Inside, though, he said, ‘Why me? Everyone has hassles. Why should I get a blue thunder cloud lumbering above my head?’ He gazed out of the window at the passing houses and daydreamed. In his daydream, the cloud settled inside him. Unexpectedly, he saw himself in the desert.

A word popped into his mind, and the word was, ‘Stroll-about!’

Glide dragged himself through work, went to the gym, and went home. After another sleepless night, the blue seemed more profound. His halo was almost a second head. As he dragged his feet to the bus stop, the sensation was virtually tangible. The cloud was a reality that dwelt above his head, around his head and inside his head. Suddenly, though, there was a stretching tension and he had the strange sensation the cloud was pulling away from him. The cloud was a blur of blue elastic.

Slowly, like a genie out of a bottle, if the bottle was his head, the cloud began to take shape. A human shape! The blue cloud took shape at his side! Excitement, like a dash of premature arthritis, briefly stirred in Glide. Fear came, too. Fear wrapped in a cloak of scientific scepticism pushed aside the excitement.

‘I don’t believe this,’ Glide snorted. ‘I just don’t.’ He plodded on, not bothering — or daring — to look to the side. The almost solid cloud wavered, became less substantial, and eventually became translucent. Glide ploughed on until only a misty candyfloss of shape remained.

*And that’s where it belongs,* he thought grimly, *in the dark cobwebs of my mind.*

Yet it occurred to him that this darkness was the nearest to lightness he’d felt for months, for ages. The darkness was a challenge and Glide knew that he needed a challenge. Lethargy was okay, he thought, as long as he didn’t get sluggish about it.

He arrived at work. The vacuum tubes were fine today. His cards and paper tapes spewed out data. It was a typical day that he quite liked but deeply hated. At the end of work, he consulted his diary. Not a punch bag day, today he went to archery. Usually, however bad he felt, he hit the bullseye. This time, unusually, his first arrow didn’t even reach the target.

‘Visualise the trajectory,’ the instructor said.

‘Yeah, right. Visualise.’ Fancy him having to be reminded.

Glide commenced his visualisation, as he had so often done before, by imagining his boss on the bullseye. To his surprise, he again missed. Next, he thought to imagine a puffed up version of Jonathon. Yet for a third time, he missed. On the fourth time, he imagined himself. Bullseye! Bullseye? Bullshit! A deep well of self-pity surged up. Yet it was so dense, so dark, that it was almost parody. It was as if he was so blue that he was falling out the other side. *So that was the cloud,* he thought, *a fall through to the other side of depression.* And that was magic. Or more likely, it was the touch of magic that he denied himself.

Having no idea what he meant, Glide made his way home. As usual, he delayed going to bed until he was too exhausted to think. At first, sleep embraced him, a deep dreamless sleep. Then it gave way to a dream, a curiously vivid dream.

*Oh, Glide thought in his dream, I've had this dream before.*

The blue cloud took shape. It took shape and spoke. In a reverberating voice, it praised Glide and his Talent. The voice called him a hero.

'A hero!'

In the dark of the night, Glide awoke, his body taut with excitement. He believed the dream. He wanted to believe. He was a hero. But gradually, as dawn fingered its way into his room, scepticism took over. It was a dream, after all, just a dream ... a fantasy.

Glide, wondering what could bring excitement to his dismal life, slept again. The darkness in him grew. In the morning, the blue cloud was even more solid. He thought he might be able to lift it like a hat and say, 'G'day.'

He did not, however, dismiss it. Better, he mused, to have a dark fantasy than to have a grey life. Accepted, the shape became more definite. It became less a part of him and more independent. Glide shrugged humorously. Him, humorous? Since when? He set off for work and had just reached the park when the cloud totally separated. It took a clear shape and kept pace on the opposite side of the hedge.

Then, to Glide's utter amazement, the blue-black cloud called out to him.

‘HEY, MATE.’

‘Go away.’

‘It’s a lucky thing,’ the cloud said.

‘Go away. I never speak to clouds.’

‘It’s a lucky thing,’ the voice repeated, ‘that you don’t believe in me.’

‘Yeah, right.’

‘Else you’d be speaking to nothing.’

‘I am speaking to nothing!’ Glide snapped. Two schoolkids gave him a wide berth. ‘See?’

‘Nah, they saw me.’ The voice was dark and gravelly. ‘They were avoiding what they saw in your tone of voice.’

The two boys hurried on without a backward glance. They must be confused, Glide thought. They were imagining that he was speaking to a real person. He turned his head. Was he? What was he speaking to? He slowed his pace and took a good look through the hedge. He blinked. On the other side, the park’s side, the darkness had coalesced into a strange figure, a very strange figure. Though it should not have been. Not in Brissie, capital of Quinsland. What, or rather who, stood before him was a Ne’verman.

This was not so odd in itself. After all, the occasional Bluey did come into town. When they did, though, they dressed for it. This one hadn’t. He simply wore the traditional golden shorts with the silver fringes. He also stood in the traditional Ne’verman posture with his weight on his left leg. His bent right leg was horizontal so that the heel, at waist level, could be cupped in the left hand. His right hand held a spear. In theory, a Ne’verman could stand for hours with his weight balanced between his left leg and the vertical spear. This one didn’t. He fell backwards in rigid slow motion, only a moment later to pop upright again. It happened again and again. A slow fall followed by a sharp upright.

Glide shook his head. He should’ve been frightened but wasn’t. The sight was just too strange. It might’ve been scary at midnight but now it was daylight. He actually wanted to laugh. To laugh? That was so unlike him that he tried instead to be depressed. After all, it was Friday. Just two more days and he had to be back at

work. Then another Friday, followed by another two days of bleak anticipation, then once again back at work. The endless cycle. Depression, however, wouldn't come. Instead, he giggled.

'Buzz off.' He flicked his hand at the apparition. 'I don't believe in you.'

'Right, mate. A lucky thing, too, otherwise I might've appeared in your office.'

'You what?'

'That's right. I might've appeared on the bus, sitting right next to you.'

'As if.' Glide shrugged, still walking slowly.

The figure wobbled, fell back yet somehow stayed the same distance away. 'Glide,' the Ne'verman murmured.

'Go! Away!' Glide flapped his hand. 'What part of *go away* don't you understand?'

He glanced around. It was bad enough being depressed. But damn and strawberries if he was going to let other people see him going crazy. Luckily, he was on the uncrowded side of the park. It was only around the corner that he'd join the busy part of Paddlington. Well, that was a relief. It was one thing for him to know he was potty. It was another for six degrees of separation to convey the news to his parents, or worse, to Jonathon.

Peering through the hedge, Glide mumbled, 'So it's really happened now. Gone loco. Gone loopy. Misery and frustration have done for me.'

Yet try as he might, right now Glide did not feel miserable. Nor did he feel like he was cracking up. This strange apparition excited and enlivened him.

'Glide.' The Ne'verman spoke again. 'I am Ne'wang the Ne'vermaker.'

'A Ne'vermaker? A magician? They don't exist.'

'We don't usually show ourselves to pinkfellas. But we are real and we do have magical skills.'

'Real? You're simply a figment of my imagination. Magical? So why don't you just magic yourself away?'

'Because ... because I need your help.' The man was now as solid as a blue thundercloud.

'Sorry, can't help.' Glide shook his head. 'I'm really busy right now.' Which sounded pretty silly even to him. He started again. 'I'm sorry but I've had a scientific education. I just don't believe in you. You're an illusion. I'm demented. Go away, vamoose and leave me alone.'

'But, Glide, that's why we need you. Because of your scientific education.'

'Oh?'

'We need a sceptic.'

'Yeah, I'm a sceptic, a sceptic tank. Well, no t'ank you. See? I'm rambling. I'm demented.'

'You're not demented.'

'No? Well, you're wrong, see. Why else would I be talking to you? So just leave me alone and let me be miserable in peace.'

'In peace?'

'In pieces, then. I'm falling apart.'

Glide walked faster. The vision, however, kept pace, toppling and righting, toppling and righting. As it appeared and disappeared, Glide passed a hand over his eyes.

'Damn and strawberries!' he cried. 'Can you stop doing that?'

'Glide,' Ne'wang said, 'you said your life was miserable and frustrating. But do you really worry about it?'

'Worry about it?' Glide stopped in his tracks. 'Worry? I don't have to worry about it, I live it.' The young man took a good squizzy at the figure. It was much more solid now and the falls were less frequent. 'Damn.' He hugged his briefcase to his chest. 'I've really made you now.'

'You have.' The Ne'verman put his weight on his spear. 'But then again, you didn't.'

Glide frowned. 'Yes, I did!'

'No, you didn't!'

'Did!' Glide dropped his voice to a hiss. 'I can't believe this. A shouting match with my own hallucination.'

The Ne'verman wasn't falling at all now. 'Well, you did evoke me,' the blue man conceded. 'Though not me as such. It's just that you're so desperate to be outside, to go stroll-about, it was that what called me. Your desperation along with your vivid imagination.'

Glide pouted. 'I don't imagine.'

'Yes, you do.'

Glide sighed. A woman hurried past. She looked at him and then peered through the hedge. Apparently satisfied, she nodded briefly and continued on.

Glide looked at his watch. 'Damn, I've missed my bus.' With another sigh, he set down his briefcase. It was made of stiff black leather and bristled with combination locks. Civilian Servants used them to carry their sandwiches, jigsaw puzzles and impressive looking computer printouts. 'Ah, well,' he said. 'Now I'm late, I may as well go crazy without all the hassle.' As he idly twirled a combination lock, he recalled a discussion after a session of Taikwondo. The instructor was talking about the hidden causes of tension. Somehow, he'd gone on to discuss Yung and his theory of archetypes. Suddenly Glide understood what was happening. 'I know,' he exclaimed, 'you're my shadow, my dark side, the me I try to repress.'

With grim hauteur, the Ne'vermaker drew himself up to his full height. 'No, mate! I'm dark but I ain't your dark side. Don't you try and therapise me away!' The figure made a wide sweep with his arm, narrowly missing Glide with the spear. 'Oops, sorry.' Regaining his composure, he intoned, 'I am a gateway, a portal, the way. I am, Glide, even though you think I am not.'

'Like hell you are.' Glide pointed at the bushes between them. 'You're like that tree in the forest. It doesn't exist if nobody sees it. I bet ... I bet ... I bet if I look away, you just wouldn't be there.' He quickly turned. 'Oh!' A dark blue shape had appeared in front of him. 'There must be two of you.' He turned again. 'No, three! Four! Bloody hell, five!' He whirled dizzily.

'It's no good, Glide,' Ne'wang said. 'The philosophical tree remains.'

'Huh?'

‘The philosophical tree ...’

‘Yeah, yeah, I heard all that. But what do you know of philosophy?’

‘That was Bishop Berknee, Glide, a famous philosopher.’ Ne’wang stroked a pretend wispy beard. ‘Or was that Kant? I kant quite remember. Ha-ha.’

Glide kicked his case with annoyance. ‘Hey, you’re my hallucination. How come my hallucination knows more than me? No, hold it, hold it. I know. As Yung said, you’re a projection from my unconsciousness and my unconsciousness knows things that my consciousness doesn’t. And if I wasn’t conscious, I wouldn’t know these things and you would cease to exist!’

‘Good thinking, Glide. Just the kind of thinking we need. Why not knock yourself out and prove it?’

Glide’s face brightened. Then darkened. ‘But if I knock myself out ...’

‘Precisely. How would you know anything?’ It was the Ne’verman’s turn to sigh. ‘So much for a scientific education.’ His tone was ironic. ‘So much for your fantastic faculty of critical comment.’

Ne’wang began to waver, to become a smoky outline. Glide threw up his hands in despair. ‘All right, all right, from my point of view you’re just a projection but from your point of view you’re more than a tree in a forest. I mean for you, you’re real. Okay, let’s cut the metaphysics. The point is: Who are you? Where on Earth do you come from?’

‘Where on Earth? Mate, that’s a difficult one. Let’s leave that for the moment. As for who.’ The dark face split into a huge impish grin. ‘As I said, I am Ne’wang the Ne’vermaker.’

‘N the N.’ Glide scuffed at the briefcase at his feet. ‘Look,’ he said. ‘I know and you know that you just come from inside my head. So in simple terms, where do you think I think you come from?’

‘Ah well, that’s the rub.’

‘It is?’

‘You think life is evil.’

‘Ye...es?’

‘But you ask yourself what is evil?’

‘Right. What is it?’

‘It is what you are living.’

‘Oh!’

Glide huffed and puffed. The two of them, or the two of him, were going around in circles. Worlds of words spun around his head, making him dizzy. But it was true. If he reviewed the past weeks, months, years, he’d lived the very opposite of the life he’d intended. He never went bush. He had almost no contact with animals. Didn’t even manage to go surfing anymore. The very sense of adventure in him had been stifled, perhaps killed. In every way, he had become curtailed.

‘My life is pretty bleak, I suppose. I have been feeling pretty blue.’ Glide rubbed his face. His eyes were on the verge of tears. ‘And so, do I as you, have an answer?’

‘No.’ Ne’wang was becoming misty. ‘I as I don’t. But I, as we, think that you do.’

Glide refused to be confused. 'Right, you mean in my subconscious.' He paused. His subconscious had stumbled over a word. 'We, you said we. What do you mean, we?'

Like the Cheshire cat, nearly all that now remained of the dark face was a luminous smile. 'If I told you,' the Ne'vermaker began.

'Then you'd have to kill me. I know. I know.'

'I was going to say that that would just be words. If you want to escape, let me take you there.'

'Take me there?' Glide tapped his head. 'What, so I can disappear up my own subconsciousness?'

In disbelief, Glide looked around him. The sky was a bright blue. The grass was a lush green. Across the park, shiny tops of cars chugged along the road. The shouts of schoolkids reached him. The world couldn't have been more concrete. Yet just in front of him was the smoky version of a man, a genie of the bush, a romanticised image that could be found on a celebratory postage stamp. But such an icon was totally unlikely here in inner city Brissie.

With hope, Glide blinked. But to no avail, the figure remained. Well, if the outside wouldn't change, what could? He dipped into himself. What were the options? Work and depression? Or not work and going crazy? Of the two, crazy without work seemed to be more fun. Just to think of work filled him with a blackness. Not the blue-blackness of the figure in front of him. No, that was a luminous sort of darkness. What haunted him was the empty blackness, a draining blackness, an awful sucking void of blackness. In contrast, crazy was a beacon of glorious lightness.

'All righty,' he declared, 'you've convinced me. Take me to your leader. You've got a problem? Well, I'm your man with the solution. You got a problem? Well, I'll make it straight, as straight as a roo's hind leg.'

'That's beaut, mate!' Ne'wang cried. 'You definitely won't be sorry.'

'You kidding? I'm sorry already. Still, go on.' At Glide's words, the Ne'vermaker raised both arms in a dramatic gesture. Without the support of the spear, though, he slowly toppled. 'Oh, jeez,' Glide groaned, 'some hallucinations do have 'em.'

With an embarrassed cough, and a purpling of the skin that might've been a blush, the blue man sprang up. 'Sorry, mate, lost me concentration. Too busy working on me spell.'

'Try using a dictionary.'

'Me magic spell.'

'Yeah, sure.' Glide pretended to undo his combination locks. 'You want to borrow my frog's eyes and newt's tongue? Not a problem. Don't you worry about me. I've got all day to hang around. It isn't as if I've got to go to work or anything.' At the mention of work, he expected the usual pall of grey to descend. It didn't. 'Work?' he repeated. 'Go to work?' It still didn't come. 'Jeez, I must be believing this more than I thought! Go on,' he exclaimed with Mary Pooppins enthusiasm, 'sing me a song, spell me a spell!'

The Ne'vermaker looked at him curiously. 'Olrigh', he said, 'if that's what you want.' He issued a sequence of letters. He stopped.

Glide looked at the Ne'vermaker, looked around the Ne'vermaker, then looked back at the Ne'vermaker. 'So,' he said, 'nothing's happened.'

'Why should it? I just spelt out the spell. Like you asked.'

'Oh.' Glide did some more looking around. Some grey did enter his heart. Perhaps life wasn't meant to be easy? Perhaps he wasn't going to get out of work, after all? 'Look,' he said, 'I don't think we're communicating here. Like, weren't you supposed to magic me, to take me to somewhere?'

'Oh, yeah, sure. The fact is, mate, I've not really acted as a portal before for a pinkfella. So while I was trying to spell, I lost me spell.'

Glide reached for his case. 'I might just as well go to work,' he sighed. 'I can't even be disturbed properly.'

The cloud remnants darted in front of him. 'No! Hold on, mate! I'm just getting into me swing.'

The Ne'vermaker suddenly stretched to his full height. His arms reached up and up. He was reaching to the heavens, bringing the heavens down to him. Blue met blue. His voice was a strong incantation. Glide shivered, not only on the outside but in the inside as well. The incantation was a vibration deep inside of him. He had to admit, he was impressed. Just then, he fully believed that the proud figure in front of him was no figment of his deluded imagination.

'Hey,' he called out in alarm. 'What did you say your name was?'

The majestic sound paused. 'I am Ne'wang the Ne'vermaker.'

'And a Ne'vermaker is really a magician?'

'Really.'

'Oh, hell! Oh, damn and strawberries!'

The majestic sound continued. Glide felt hazy. Did the blue sky wobble? The landscape? Reality? Everything was slowly wavering as if in the grip of a tremulous heat haze. Glide tried to hold on to something: the flickering air molecules, the wavy blue cloud, or the sight of the waving branch of a tree. But there was no substance to hold on to. He tried to shout. Perhaps a passing schoolchild would save him. Or a sceptical scientist. He closed his eyes but it was too late. His mind exploded. The landscape shattered. Shards of blue light shot through him. His ears popped and his legs extended. A powerful electric current swept him away. He was a wave pulsating through waves. He was the music of the spheres — a concerto written in heavy metal. He was a black hole that sucked in light. Once more, he tried to shout. Then, out of nothingness, his feet hit the ground.

'Ouch!' He crumpled backwards.

Lying on his back, Glide opened his eyes. Big mistake. A huge grey wall was rushing at him! With no way to escape, Glide closed his eyes and opened his mouth.

'Let me out of here!' he screamed. 'Let me out! Ouch ...!'

THERE WAS A CONFUSION OF sounds. A roar. Squeals. Glide's squeals. The rough hiss of something huge skidding to a halt. Dirt flying. Voices shouting. Pandemonium, chaos. Then there was a sudden hush, the hush of suspended activity. Glide remained curled up. His eyes squeezed tightly shut. He had the distinct impression that the hush was centred on him. After all that frantic hubbub, the hush was now worse than the noise.

He held his breath for a week, for a month, for a year. In that fraction of a second when his eyes had been open, he'd glimpsed a great grey wall hurtling towards him. He waited for the crash to come. When it didn't, he risked a slow breath. When the sky didn't fall, he began to uncurl. When uncurling did not result in calamity, he dared to open his eyes.

Big mistake. Calamity loomed! The great grey wall was falling! Falling down on him! Eyes shut! Curl up! Glide rolled into a ball.

The sense of action suspended continued. Glide remained in a tight ball for so long that he became aware of the ground pressing its grainy particles against his side. There was a dry smell and a pleasant breeze. Uncrushed, he had time to think. Could he really have seen what he'd seen? No, it was impossible. It was even more impossible than having seen the Ne'vermaker. Surely. Surely? It was quiet now, except for heavy breathing. Whose breathing? His? No. An industrial vacuum cleaner's? Could be. Could he believe his eyes? Could he believe anything? Start at the beginning, he told himself. Deny everything, as Draycart the French philosopher had once said, begin at the beginning and see what he could see. Though, on second thoughts, maybe that was Mary Pooppins?

Okay, to begin with, he wasn't crushed. Well, that was pretty hard to believe. After all, he had seen that incredible grey wall rushing towards him. Except it wasn't a wall. It was something else altogether. Hard to believe but there it was. Its image was imprinted on his mind's eye. Plus its afterimage. In fact, Glide shuddered beneath the apparition of a whole infinity of after-afterimages. That was the problem with eidetic imagery. It captured everything.

Glide sifted through each image and each one shouted one thing, one incredible thing: *elephant!* Elephant? Ridiculous! One moment he'd been on his feet and talking with a blue-black cloud. Now he was on his back and cowering before an

elephant. Wasn't that ridiculous? It was. Damn! Well and damn! Damn and strawberries! Glide didn't like to swear but, for once, he could get little further than those *damns*.

He rewound the projector of his mind. He didn't have eidetic hearing. But he was pretty sure that it was the elephant that had bellowed. It certainly hadn't been a mouse that had roared. Nor Glide. Okay, he might've squealed. Yes, he had to admit, he might've done. He might even have wet his pants. But definitely, it was the elephant, the pachyderm that had given a deafening bellow. The elephant had cried, 'Oh, no! Oh, no! Oooooo ... nooooooo!'

Glide was still curled up and persisting in being a Draycartian Philosopher when a warm wet thing slobbered over his face.

'Oh, no!' He curled up even tighter. 'I survived the crash but now I'm going to be eaten.'

'Hey,' said a voice. 'Knock, knock. Open up. Open up.'

'No,' Glide mumbled. 'Go 'way.'

'No. G'wan.' The wet thing slobbered over him. 'At least, open your eyes.'

'Nop.'

'G'wan. Do I have to keep licking you?'

'You've got me licked. Please do not continue.'

'I'd rather you opened your eyes.'

'No. I might see what I think you are.'

'Ahem.' The elephant made a disturbing noise. 'I am definitely not what you think I am. I am what I am — despite whatever you think I am.'

'Jeez, a philosophical eleph—'

'Careful, careful! Don't say it! Watch your language.'

There was a pause, and a silence. Glide unfolded a little. Cautiously, very cautiously, he cracked open his eyes. A grey and hairy tube floated in front of him. His incredulous gaze travelled up. The tube broadened and joined to a massively bony grey head. An elephant! It was an elephant! Glide quickly closed his eyes again. But the trunk slobbered all over his face for yet a third time. He had to look. A panting pachyderm peered back.

'No!' Glide scrambled backwards. 'You are an elephant!'

'No, no, I'm not!' The creature reared upwards. 'I ... just happen to be big and ... and grey and ... and with a long sloppy nose.' A huge foot stamped down and the ground trembled.

Glide edged further away. He didn't think it a good idea to argue with an elephant. It was bad enough to be looney. He didn't want to be a squashed looney as well. 'Er.' Another realisation hit him. 'Excuse me. But did you speak? Words? Actual words?'

'Did I speak? Does the wind blow? Do birds sing? Does moss collect on rolling stones? Eh, eh?'

'Moss doesn't collect on rolling stones.'

'Exactly!'

'But you're an elephant.'

'No, *snort*, I am not, *snort*, an elephant. Who ever heard of a talking elephant?'

‘Um, that’s what I mean.’

‘So I can’t be an elephant. Right? Right. So don’t even mention it. Right? Right.’

‘Right.’

Glide suddenly realised that he had formed a policy, an instant policy: don’t argue with elephants, especially angry talking elephants, especially big angry talking elephants with big problems of denial. He sat up and looked around, vaguely hoping for a solution. Or even a well specified problem. Should he believe his ears? Or his eyes? Or neither. Just go with his impending insanity. That seemed to be the most reliable solution, to go with the flow and simply accept his insanity.

But he didn’t feel insane. He assumed there must be a certain sort of feel to it. So being of a logical turn, Glide searched for another explanation. For instance, a ventriloquist. That would explain it. The blue Ne’verman, for example. He might be like an Injun in Injia, they used elephants. So maybe he was throwing his voice. Glide stood to look this way and that. But there was no sign of the Ne’verman, no sign at all. Not within throwing voice distance.

Nor was there any sign of the park. Nor of the hedges. There was not even the distant rumble of traffic. Some delusion. This was too much. Glide’s legs turned to jelly and he plopped heavily onto the sand. Sand! Sand? It couldn’t be, shouldn’t be. But then, there couldn’t, shouldn’t, be a talking elephant either.

‘Where?’ he gasped. ‘Who? What?’ He flopped onto his back. ‘And if not now, when?’

The elephant stamped a second time. ‘Stand up, man. Give yourself some pride.’

Staring into the blue sky, that stern voice reminded Glide of all the *sensei* that he’d ever met. In a false calm, he asked, ‘And who am I anyway?’

‘Ah, my very question. Though,’ the elephant rubbed his trunk over his huge bony brow, ‘if I were to ask myself that very same question, I’d want a more meaningful answer than Longnose or Narrow Tail or ... or ... or Strongarm even.’

Clutching at straws, the trunk being nothing more than an oversized straw, Glide said, ‘Are you Longnose, then?’

‘No!’

‘Oh! Narrow Tail?’

‘Don’t even think of it!’

‘Strongarm?’

‘Strongarm, yes.’ The creature squinted at his trunk. ‘Hence this.’

Not familiar with squinty-eyed elephants, Glide said, ‘Hence what?’

‘The trunk, stupid!’

‘So,’ Glide cried triumphantly, a fool rushing in, ‘You do admit to having a trunk?’

‘Of course.’

‘And what has a trunk?’

The elephant furrowed its brow. ‘Clothing?’

‘What animal?’

‘An elephant, of course.’

‘So you do admit to being an elephant!’

'No, no, no! Not at all!' A heavy foot crashed down. A sandquake threatened and Glide hastily backpeddled to avoid disappearing into a newly made pit. 'Bronze shields!' the creature shrielled. 'It's all that woman's fault, that mad, mad woman. Look,' the pachyderm proceeded, 'I can see that from your point of view, I might be ... *mistaken* for an elephant. Yes, a great grey beast with a hairy trunk. You name it, that's me. Inside though, and be very clear about this.' The great grey head lowered. 'I'm a man.' He verged on the edge of a song. 'I'm just a man.'

Glide goggled. He'd heard of cross-dressing. But that was only in terms of clothes. It was never in terms of skins. Except perhaps for werewolves. But they didn't exist. Or did they? Perhaps they did wherever he was now? Was this big hefalump a were-elephant? His mind tried to adjust and his brain wanted to balloon out of his skull.

Carefully, very carefully, Glide said, 'Okay, fine, I get it. You're a man in elephant's clothing. But you're not a beast. Definitely not a beast. In fact, except for appearing to be an elephant, you're very nice. Very nice indeed.'

'Well, I was,' Strongarm admitted grudgingly. 'Very nice. And not at all conceited. Even though I was the best archer. And the best wrestler. Even the best poet, I dare say. And dashingly good-looking. The best in the whole country, I dare say.'

'In the whole country?'

'The whole country.'

'So you were the best in the country?' Glide rose to his feet again. There was sand to one side and forest to the other. This certainly wasn't Brissie. 'But what country is it?'

'What? Really! Great tusks of fire! This one, of course.' And the elephant rolled its eyes as if talking to an idiot.

'Yes, yes! But what is its name?'

'Name, eh? Interesting. You need names. Something metaphysical, is it? A bit like the Witch, eh? You think name is essence? Or name is power? Or is it merely habit, the way you usually talk?'

'Bloody hell! Damn and strawberries!' It was Glide's turn to thump the sand. A talking elephant was bad enough. But a perpetual philosophical prattling pachyderm was too much. He turned away. In the distance, he spotted waving palms. 'I know,' he said, 'I'm in Injia or Barley. I must be in Barley. Is that right? I'm in Barley? You know, that place just to the north of Ausphalia.'

He'd no sooner said that, however, than a familiar but definitely non-Injian, non-Barleynese animal hopped into view. It was a big red roo and on its head was an akubra with corks dangling from the rim.

'Oh!' Glide sat heavily on the sand again.

'Oh,' Strongarm echoed. 'Hernandes.'

'Hernandes?' Glide addressed the roo. 'And I suppose you're not a kangaroo?'

'Of course he is,' Strongarm trumpeted.

'But what do you say?' Glide spoke directly to the roo.

'Oh, he won't say anything,' Strongarm said airily. 'He's just a kanger.'

*But you're just a jumbo.* Those words balanced on the edge of Glide's tongue. Fortunately, discretion got the better part of valour. 'This is all very puzzling,' he murmured. 'Very puzzling indeed.'

‘That’s just the half of it.’ Strongarm sadly shook his head. Then at a commotion behind a small sand dune, he added, ‘Oh, oh, and here comes the other half.’

A slim figure appeared. Half Glide’s height, it slithered and slid over the slippery sand. ‘Heyo, Horsey.’ He waved his arms. ‘You come back heres, straightaway!’

Glide scratched his head. ‘Are you Hernandes or Horsey?’ he said to the roo.

The animal didn’t reply but hopped a few steps back to the caller. The tiny man grabbed at the roo’s akubra, which now served as reins, and leapt astride. ‘Heyo, Cisco!’ the rider cried, ‘Heyo, Pancho!’ Roo and rider approached rapidly, at the last moment slewing to a halt with a cry of, ‘Whoa, whoa! Heyo, Horsey, but wots have we here?’

‘Who,’ Glide said. ‘Not what.’

‘Hugh Knotwhat?’ the rider echoed. ‘Never heard of you.’

Strongarm snorted. ‘Very metaphysical he is. Keeps asking who he is. Even tried to speak to Horsey.’

The elephant lifted his trunk and bellowed with laughter, creating a local cyclone. It blew off the roo’s akubra and the corks whipped around the rider’s head.

‘Quiets!’ the little man snapped. ‘I wants to think!’

Glide was impressed at how this small person spoke to the huge pachyderm. He thought it must be a magical creature such as an elf or imp. There were Ne’verman stories about them. He’d just never believed them before. Still, they made for a good hallucination.

‘Lets me think,’ the imp said. ‘Lets me think.’ He dismounted and stood in the shade of the big elephant. ‘Olé!’ He pointed around them. ‘Strongarm, did you sees him with anyones?’

‘No.’

‘No ones?’

Strongarm furrowed his brow. ‘No ones. No twos or threes, either.’

‘So, no ones? Nobody?’

Strongarm sighed. ‘No one else was around, Hernandes. If that’s what you mean?’

‘Si, si, that’s what I means.’

As imp and elephant established a tenuous link of communication, Glide realised that the imp was Hernandes and Horsey was the roo. The imp now turned to Glide.

‘You, did you see anyones?’

‘Me?’ Glide said cautiously.

‘Si, yous.’

‘I only saw it ... that ... him.’ He pointed at the elephant.

‘Him!’ Strongarm trumpeted.

‘Oh.’ Hernandes’ face fell. ‘And that’s all?’

Glide’s mind, once nimble, was now dulled by weeks and months and years of gloom. ‘Well,’ he said hesitantly, ‘there was a someone.’

‘Exactly, a someones. Who is?’

‘Yes, who?’ Strongarm shrilled.

‘It was ...’

‘Yez?’

‘Yes!’

‘Someone Ne’wa ... Ne’day ... Ne’ba ... jeez, I just can’t remember now. But he said he was a Ne’vermaker.’

‘The Ne’vermaker! See he says the Ne’vermaker!’ Hernandez jumped gleefully, his head bumping on Strongarm’s underbelly.

‘Listen, you,’ the elephant roared, ‘if you don’t stop that, I’ll squirt you.’

Still excited, Hernandez stepped away from the pachyderm’s penumbra. ‘Et’s the promise, the promise!’ he cried. ‘Ne’wang the Ne’vermaker brought yous. Just as he says he would. For us, you will fights the great evil that surround us.’

‘But, I, er, don’t want to fight anyone.’

‘But you will! You will!’

‘No, I don’t want to.’

‘You don’ts?’

Strongarm glowered at Glide, then at Hernandez and then at Horsey. ‘Just what we need, a pacifist.’

‘He only thinks he’s a pacifists,’ Hernandez thumped excitedly against his saddle. ‘When I tells him what happens here, he will wants to help. He will wants to. Listen closely, thees is our problem.’ He glanced around him and motioned for the others to lower their heads.

‘This bending is such a pain in the neck,’ Strongarm protested. ‘I’m gonna need a chiropractor.’

But Hernandez pulled at a huge ear so that the head followed. ‘You must have mades a promise,’ he whispered. ‘A beeg promise.’

‘I did?’

‘And so you will happily fights our evils!’

‘Evils? Oh. This doesn’t sound good.’ Glide turned his head, searching for a way out. ‘Not good at all!’

MAGGOT THWACKA TWITCHED. THE MOVEMENT began with her nose, a jerky Min-out, in-out of the nostrils. With a sniff, she moved her head around. Detecting an inner odour, tremors ran the length of her green-tinged skin. Her bony elbows and knees flicked. Led by a nose-driven spasm, her body jerked out of her throne. Her murky green eyes glittered.

‘So,’ she screeched, ‘he has arrived. Someone has arrived.’ She paused — and glass on the verge of shattering just about held itself together. ‘No,’ she corrected herself, in a tone of cracking ice, ‘someone has been brought.’

Greenvort, an imp the size of Hernandez, but with the warty skin of an olive-brown cane toad, scampered around her. ‘Shall I ssee?’ he chattered. ‘Should I spell him?’

At the noise, a shaggy heap in a dark and webby corner stirred. It looked like a creature might emerge from the heap. But the heap itself was the creature, a great slab of fur-covered muscle. This was Haggort, a Giant Dwarf.

‘Witch,’ he rumbled, ‘you want I go crush dis creature? Or would dat I bring to you his very best feature?’

Maggot Thwacka the Witch shot her arms forward. Sparks flew out, freezing Greenvort the Imp, his weight balanced precariously on one foot. Haggort the Hulk halted at an impossible angle. They seemed as immobile as two carved statues. Yet a closer look would have shown the frustration of effort on both their faces. Given a day or two and Greenvort would’ve placed his other foot down. Haggort would’ve straightened.

‘Mindless grubs!’ Maggot Thwacka cackled, snapping off a strand of her stiff blue hair. ‘Listen to me. Hulk, you must skulk. Greenvort, you must court. This person must have powers. If we know them, we use them. If of no use, we crush him. Go!’

The Witch cackled wildly. She was good at cackling. She often practised when no one was around. She wanted more crackle from her cackle. For a second time, she shot out her arms. Unexpectedly released, Greenvort’s second foot jerked forward and stepped on his first. Haggort straightened so quickly that his bones cracked. The Witch sneered as they shook themselves back to life. Haggort rumbled some curse deep in his throat. But it stopped as soon as a pair of icy green eyes turned on him. He lumbered out of the room and followed after the imp, their footsteps

echoing along the dusty corridors of faded grandeur. Posted along the corridor were suits of armour. They appeared empty, yet when Haggort's delayed anger attempted the old one-two at a helmet, the suit neatly stepped aside.

'I'll get you. Just you wait and see.' Though other dwarves were known for their fine craftwork and gold jewellery making, Giant Dwarves were known for wreaking destruction and revenge.

After they had gone, Maggot Thwacka stood very still. Her eyes were open but unseeing as her mental vision tracked her henchmen. At Haggort's attempted strike, it was partly her power and partly that of the daemon inside that allowed the metal to move. Haggort was lucky, however, that her real focus was elsewhere or the blow would've been repaid — with interest. She rubbed her hands together but then grimaced. Damn arthritis! But that was the price of her power. Till now. Soon, though, and she'd have that wretched Ne'vermaker at her mercy. Then he could have her pains, all of them.

The Witch moved to the window. From there, she watched as Haggort directed his men. They moved with the reluctance of unwilling conscripts.

'I'll teach you,' Haggort growled.

With a gruff laugh, he picked up one of the men and tossed him through the air. The spinning body didn't crash to the ground but came to a dead halt in midair. It had entered the moat, the moat of Slowtime that surrounded the Witch's castle. Greenvort chattered gleefully as the others huddled away. The imp reached into the field of Slowtime and pulled the man out. The poor fellow staggered to his feet, only to be buffeted with diminutive cuffs.

'On your way,' Greenvort chortled. 'On your way or I hitts you again.'

The dazed man tried to catch up with his fellows. But that only made them go faster. So the faster he ran, the faster they did. What a pantomime! Haggort roared, bursting buttons from his jerkin.

Maggot Thwacka was pleased. Fear served her well. If only she could spread it further. The domain of her grey-green country was small, too small. Reminded, she snarled. Her domain was hemmed in by the sea and by the escarpment. Above her, yet unattainable, were the bright and dry areas. She rubbed at her aching joints. Up there, the pain would be so much less. Up there, the power would be so much the greater. Up there was Auslan. Down here was Inklan.

The Witch snarled again and strode jerkily to the centre of the room. From there, she glared into the corner at a young woman. Encased in Slowtime, she was a frozen statue of beauty. Trapped as she was turning, her silver hair rippled out. Her sky-blue eyes were open wide in surprise — or in horror. Her lips were just parted. Like her hair, her dress also showed signs of sudden turning. It pressed against her motionless body and outlined the long slender lines of her limbs.

Although the young woman was trapped in Slowtime, her presence alone was enough to make Maggot Thwacka burn with jealousy. For whatever the Witch did to torment her, this person still shone. Infused by fury, the Witch scampered around the dignified figure, stamping her feet. Darts of pain shot along her leg, causing her to hop about with agony.

‘Oh, I’ll wake you,’ she screeched. ‘Wake you and bake you. I’ll scratch your fair cheeks till your hot blood creaks. I’ll pull out your hair till your scalp is quite bare.’

But though she hopped around cursing, she did no further harm. Today’s magic had taken all of her energy, leaving her weak and allowing the damp mists of grey-green Inklan to seep into her bones. Best to reserve her energies. She muttered to herself. The girl was her chief bargaining chip. If she was harmed, the Witch might lose her leverage. So far, peaceful Auslan had not shown a capacity to organise itself to fight. Barbequed nut cutlets on the beach and sandsurfing were its main industries. Growing herbs and playing games were its main hobbies.

The Devil take them! In a fit of fury, the Witch took a cup of cold water and hurled it over the frozen figure. The stream hit Slowtime, splattered and fragmented into the glistening drops of a halo. Maggot Thwacka snarled. She wished she could’ve kept the other one when she’d had him. The two would’ve made fine bookends. Ho, ho, ho. She cracked her swollen knuckles.

‘A PROMISE?’ GLIDE CRIED. ‘I made no promise. Who to? Go on. Tell me. Who to? And when? I’ve only been here for a minute. When could I have made a promise?’

‘To the Ne’vermaker, of course.’ Hernandez bounced around with excitement. ‘To the Ne’vermaker.’

‘Oh.’ Glide had only been *here*, wherever here was, for a minute but *there* seemed a million years away. ‘To the Ne’vermaker?’ His mind went back a minute and a million years. ‘Oh, to him.’ He recalled the blue Ne’verman. *Yes*, Glide had said, *You gotta problem. Well, I’ll make it straight, straight as a roo’s hind leg.*

Glide simply hadn’t anticipated just how crooked the roo’s hind leg would turn out to be. It was beginning to dawn on him that he really was someplace else. Not just out of the Sunny Coast, not just out of his mind but really in some other place. He had been transported to somewhere else. He shivered. How could he get back? This was terrible. Awful. Then he noticed his briefcase on the ground by his feet: a black rectangle with a combination lock. No, that box was truly terrible and awful. In comparison, this was merely a puzzle.

‘Oh,’ Glide repeated but in a totally different tone of voice.

He thought for a moment. Did he want to go back? Really? Sitting on the sand, he sank into contemplation.

The others moved away to give him some breathing space. Beyond them, he saw a thin line of blue. He looked at it in a vacant sort of way. Suddenly, though, Glide straightened. He squinted. The line of blue was moving. Slightly. Up and down. Up and down. Blue! Blue and gold. Waves! Waves and sand! Waves and surf! Surf! Surf plus sun plus sand!

‘Far out! Reality or fantasy, this isn’t half bad. I could’ve done much worse. A helluva lot worse. Where’s my bucket? Where’s my surfboard?’ He turned back to the others. Strongarm was watching him quizzically, his trunk in the air. ‘Ah,’ Glide was moving from depressive to manic, ‘a trunk call.’

‘Beg pardon?’

‘Nothing, nothing.’ Glide squinted again at the sea, not really thinking, just absorbing. Suddenly, he saw a small dot in the sky. It didn’t flap wings and it didn’t wander off a straight course. ‘That ... that’s an airship, isn’t it?’

An ounce of hope arose in Glide's breast. Part of him still did want to go home. Part of him still thought this was a fantasy. All parts of him were coming to grips with the meaning of the word, vacillation.

Strongarm and Hernandes both gazed into the far horizon. The imp twisted a long strand of his black hair. 'The Ne'verman tells us they are floating machines. They don't lands here.'

Strongarm was also squinting. 'They can't land here.'

'They can't?' Glide's ounce of hope evaporated. 'Why not?'

Strongarm made a circling movement with his trunk. 'Ne'wang says that this is or was an area of powerful magic. When Ausphalia was invaded, the old Ne'vermen made these islands invisible to the pinkfella.'

'Great! That's just great!' Glide kicked the sand. Clearly, waving his Civilian Service ID card was not going to bring him rescue. He took a few steps, leaving prints in the sand. His, he noted, were tiny compared to those left by an ele... he dared not even think the word. He looked up at Strongarm. 'I'm on the beach.' He quickly made a little sandcastle. 'I can see that. I belong on the beach. But you, an er, ele—whatever ... what are you doing here?'

'Me?' Strongarm said. 'I live here.'

'Yes, but right now, what were you doing?' Glide had stark memories of that great grey wall advancing on him.

'I was jogging, of course. What else would I be doing?'

'Jogging? Whoever heard of an elephant jogging?' In his surprise, Glide forgot not to say that word.

'What elephant?' Strongarm stamped a huge foot.

'Er, yes, quite,' Glide said quickly. 'But, still, why were you jogging?'

'To keep fit, of course. All warriors must keep fit.'

'All warriors, eh?' Glide was beginning to think that maybe this lovely beach wasn't such a good place for making sandcastles. After all, didn't warriors imply war? 'You, too, Hernandes?'

'Oh, si.' The imp set Horsey the kangaroo bouncing, lowered an imaginary lance and shouted, 'Olè, charge!'

'I see.' Glide scuffed sand. 'You're in trouble. You're in some kind of war.'

'Right.'

'With?'

'Not with, Witch.'

'Which?' Glide frowned. 'You mean with which?'

Strongarm shook his large head. 'No, I mean with a Witch. To be precise, Maggot Thwacka the Witch.'

'A Witch?' Glide's stomach heaved. 'The Ne'verman's bad enough. If you don't mind, I think I'll be going now. One war with Witch outweighs any sun, sea and surf.'

'You whats?' Hernandes slapped his akubra against his thigh.

'I think I'll be going now.' Glide walked aimlessly in a circle. Damn and strawberries but officework was beginning to seem attractive.

'Well as long as you just thinks it.' Hernandes the imp had a heart-shaped face made for smiling. It wasn't smiling now.

'No, I mean nice knowing you and all that but I think ...' Glide looked around him in a new way, a sort of door-in-the-air sort of way. But except for the shimmer of a heat haze, the air held nothing, certainly not a door. There was no sign that said *Exit*. 'Um,' Glide said, 'do you think you might help me here? Sort of show me the way to go home?'

'Whiches way is that?'

'No, no! No Witches. I want home.' Glide put on his vacuum-tube computer voice. 'Me phone home.'

'Home?' Hernandes echoed. Exchanging a quizzical look with Strongarm, he pointed towards the jungle. 'Over there. Your hut awaits you.'

'Hut? My hut?'

'That's your home.'

'The hut is my home?'

'That's right, the hut es your home.' Hernandes sighed and hopped nearer to Strongarm. Remembering that he wasn't on Horsey, he reverted again to walking. He pulled down a big ear. 'Not too bright, eh? You thinks maybe Ne'wang makes a mistake?'

As Strongarm gave a stiff-shouldered shrug, Glide gazed towards the forest. Over there was not home, over there was a hut. So, he was stuck, hopelessly dimly stuck. And all because of that Ne'wang, Ne'wang the Ne'vermaker. Blast him! He was the one. He was the cause. The cause? Glide became abruptly alert. What had the Ne'verman said? In his deep chocolate voice, he'd declaimed that he was the door! He was the portal! The gateway! Without further thought, Glide opened his mouth.

'Ne'wang,' he bellowed, 'Ne'wang the Ne'vermaker!'

After a moment's delay, Strongarm lifted his trunk. 'Ne'wang,' he trumpeted, 'Ne'wang the Ne'vermaker!'

Hernandes the imp stood high in his saddle and also called. Even Horsey the Roo made a sort of noise. A terrible cacophony rolled across the dunes. Fuelled by anger, Glide's eidetic ability projected a clear image of the Ne'verman. The shimmer in the air curled around it. A shape formed. It grew dark and solidified. All of a sudden, the Ne'vermaker was there. Or was probably there. Perhaps.

Certainly, someone was there. And that someone was blue. What could be seen of him. That wasn't very much as most of him was packed away in a dark blue suit. Slowly, however, he raised his right foot and cupped the sole of an elegant shoe into his left hand. His right arm went out to use his spear for balance. Unfortunately, he no longer held a spear but merely a short umbrella. It provided no support and, like a falling tree, the Ne'vermaker toppled into the sand.

'Damn and strawberries! You a comedian or something?' Glide helped him up. 'You should be on steam TV.'

'I might be,' came a strangled voice.

'Is that why you're in this getup?'

Ne'wang sprang to his feet. 'I was in a meeting.' He brushed sand off of his suit. 'We've gotta protect a sacred site.'

'You're in a suit!' Glide snarled. 'Is your sacred site an office?'

'When in Rome ...' the Ne'vermaker began but broke off. 'G'day, Strongarm.' He grabbed the elephant's trunk and shook it briskly. 'G'day, Hernandes.'

The imp sniffed. 'Don't you g'days me. You were supposed to gets help.'

'I've got him.'

'Him? He doesn't know what days et es. And he wants go home.'

'Wants? Anyone can want.'

'And I do want. I mean, I'm not a prisoner here, or something, am I?'

'Nah, mate. I rescued you, didn't I?'

'Rescued! Rescued! I was on my way to work. I said I'd help but there was no mention of wars, or Witches, or dragons.'

'Dragons?' The starch went out of the suit's jacket. 'Oh, mate, we got dragons now?'

'In a manner of speaking. I mean, talking elephants ...'

'What talking elephants?' Strongarm went trunk to nose with Glide.

Glide backedpedalled. 'Er, none, none, my mistake. But I still say, it wasn't exactly a rescue.'

The Ne'vermaker opened his mouth. He seemed to be wondering what to say when, instead, he pressed his broolly into the ground. Snapping his fingers, dull blue sparks leapt out of them. Reminded of arc welding, Glide jumped back. More snaps followed until a bruised blue cloud formed. It settled above Glide, sank down into him and then permeated into his very bones. Automatically, his shoulders sagged and the blue sky lost its brightness. Everything was seen through grey shades. Everything lost its meaning.

Glide blinked. 'Oh yes,' he muttered. 'I forgot. Yes, I ... maybe you did rescue me.' He brushed wearily at his forehead. 'That's enough, thanks. If you don't mind.'

Immediately, the Ne'vermaker jerked a bony finger. Lightning struck the cloud and the dull blue changed. A magnificent rainbow arched over Glide. The colours slid into him and his mouth curved upwards into a brilliant smile. A film star twinkle danced along his teeth.

'Jeez, mate,' he cried, 'don't overdo it! Just tell me. What the hell is this all about?'

The Ne'vermaker sighed. 'It's about hell, all right. How to avoid it. How you can help us to avoid it.'

Strongarm trumpeted. 'Him? But he's such a whinger!'

'Heem?' Hernandes shrugged eloquently.

'Ah,' said the Ne'vermaker, 'but you just saw.'

'Saw?' Strongarm said.

'Saws what?'

The Ne'vermaker took hold of his broolly. 'He images.'

'Images? Ah yes, images!' Hernandes struck his brow. 'The blue cloud! Now I sees.'

'Blue cloud,' Strongarm murmured. He nodded, making non-committal but possibly positive noises.

Glide shook his head, wanting to forget how the blue cloud had entered him and become the black dog of depression. In a comradely way, however, Hernandez rested a hand on him while Strongarm drooped his trunk across his shoulder. A little nervously, the young man looked around for the Ne'vermaker. He, however, had already disappeared.

'Unstable person, that,' Glide murmured.

'Never minds,' Hernandez said, 'you'll fixes him.'

'Fix?' Glide said. 'Maybe. I'm not sure. How?'

'Like you make the blue cloud.' Hernandez tapped his head as if that were an explanation.

Glide turned and gazed with longing at the rolling surf beyond the golden sand. 'Fix the Ne'vermaker,' he murmured. 'To fix him here. I'll do my best. But what, then, happens to me?'

And for no apparent reason, a sad premonition ran up and down his spine.

‘COME,’ HERNANDES CROOKED A FINGER, ‘and we will takes you to your hut.’ Glide didn’t have high hopes for a hut of any grandeur but, when the others began to walk, he followed. They soon crossed the strip of sand, passed through the dunes and stood on the edge of the jungle. Glide looked back. The distance was just perfect for the classic surfer run, board under arm and zinc on the nose. He glanced sideways at Strongarm. But no, the elephant did not have cream on his trunk.

Still bemused, Glide entered the forest. That, he soon decided, was too strong a word for it. The trees formed more a plantation than a forest. But even that was not really correct. The plantation was also a village. Houses rested on trees. Trees grew in, out and around the houses. Life, work and play all took place in the one area. No need for a black briefcase containing sandwiches. Lunch was straight from the vine.

Of course, Glide had been to Barley, too. What Aussie hadn’t? Courtesy of Kookaburra Airships, he had taken his surfboard to Koota. He had even hired a car and gone in search of the perfect wave, said to hang out in the environs of Tan-A-Lot.

Glide had passed numerous tiny villages during his Barley trip. He’d seen the villagers, in multi-hued sarongs, busily climbing up and down the coconut trees. He’d seen the carpenters lop the trees for their dwellings. The overall impression was that the huts and trees were intrinsically interwoven. The village in which he now found himself had the same quality. It had grown out of the forest, and the people with it. They lived with their land, not against it.

A sudden flash lit up Glide’s mind. Perhaps he was now on a hidden Barley peninsula? But no, Barley was too small and too densely populated for secret places. He thought it likely that even Ne’wang didn’t know the geographic location of this place. He’d managed to transport himself here on magic. Magic did not necessarily have longitude and latitude.

As they walked the forest path, Glide could also see why Strongarm had been jogging along the beach. He’d have flattened trees and huts if he’d followed the narrow pathways. He might even have squashed the imps. Imps! For the first time, it struck Glide what a weird world he really was in. Hernandez wasn’t just a little man. He was a different sort of creature altogether. Mostly human in form, but not quite. His ears were pointier, his lips were wider and his face was more heart-shaped.

Glide was reminded of the play that he'd acted in with Jonathon, *Hamalot's Midsummer Night's Scream*. It had been a parody of work by Shaikspere. Had the bard also been here? Or had there been a magical leakage from here to the bard? He couldn't help looking sideways at Hernandes.

'Puck?' he said aloud.

Hernandes shot him a dirty look. 'Language! Language! You wants to lose your kneecaps?'

'It's the name of a character in a play. So you really are an imp?'

'I es an imp? Imps es fine.' Hernandes grinned and, unsurprisingly, managed to look extremely impish.

The forest around them was peopled with imps. No. Glide corrected himself. The forest was imped with imps. And, like the seven dwarves in *Snowd White*, they approached their work in a special kind of way. They didn't just pluck fruit. They also had a fruit-plucking song. They didn't just prune branches. They also had a branch-pruning dance. *Hey-ho, hey-ho*, they turned all work into a cartoon of fun.

'They look really cheeky,' Glide said, 'and totally untrustworthy. They look like they'd lock your arms inside your trousers.'

They seemed so untroubled that the young man was surprised at Hernandes' response. 'No, they are not happy nows. They used to be. They used to be so care-frees.'

'Unhappy! If that's unhappy,' Glide retorted, 'then I'm a brass monkey!'

'Ah.' Hernandes considered him thoughtfully. 'So you climbs in trees.'

'No, no. I mean, you stick them in front of a computer all day!'

Hernandes looked puzzled. 'A comp'ter? What is a comp'ter?'

'It's ...' Glide waved his hands, wondering how to explain. 'It's when you're stuck in a building all day. The air is artificial and the light is artificial and the windows don't open. You're stuck in front of a screen. Do this. Do that. Then the vacuum tube blows and you have to do everything again.'

Hernandes shuddered. 'That is a comp'ter? But et sounds like a prison. Why did you work in a prison?'

Glide shrugged. 'It just happened.' He gazed at the jungly fields around him and breathed in deeply. It was a long time since he'd felt so liberated. 'In your village, you mix the houses and the forest. Where I come from, we all live in houses but the wilderness is outside of the village.'

'You dos?' Hernandes looked with disbelief at Glide. 'But the trees give us our airs. How do you live without airs?'

'Yeah, right. We cough.'

Glide took another deep breath and gazed around contentedly. But some thing, some small thing started to niggle. What was it? While he was staring at the imps, they were staring back at him. Many were female. Both sexes wore multi-coloured shirts and striped trousers to mid-calf. He nodded at them with a puzzling, but increasing, unease. Suddenly, though, it hit him.

'Where are the people?' Glide cried.

'People. They are heres.' Hernandes pointed at the imps.

‘Sorry, sorry. I mean the humans. Where are the humans? There are other humans, aren’t there?’

‘Oh, them.’ Hernandez sniffed disdainfully. ‘Over there.’

Leading Horsey, he took the young man into a glade where Strongarm already waited. In this area, humans were cutting a tree trunk with long saws. Glide felt an instant relief. He’d begun to fear that there were only two other humans around. Of which, one was an elephant and the other was a transient cloud.

The human males, he noted, did the heavy work. They did the cutting and the hewing, the building and the smithying. Their dress was marginally more sober than the imps, loose white pants and fringed shirts. Many of the women had flowers woven into their hair. To Glide, they also seemed happy. But, this time, Strongarm sighed.

‘See how sad they are,’ he rumbled. ‘So sad.’

‘Sad?’ Glide snorted. ‘Huh, they should know what it’s like to work on a policy paper.’

‘Policy paper?’ Strongarm’s trunk rose to form a question mark.

Glide rubbed his cheek. He was finding it difficult to explain pen pushing. ‘A policy is that which tells people how to behave.’

‘To behave?’ Strongarm considered this. ‘In emergencies?’

‘Could be.’

Strongarm bobbed his head thoughtfully. ‘Maybe that’s why you’re here.’

Glide halted, nearly bumping into the sinuous trunk. ‘A policy paper here? I don’t think so. I don’t think Ne’wang wants just a policy paper on Witches.’ He snorted at the idea of it.

For an anxious moment, however, he pictured himself with a feather pen, bent over a parchment as he outlined issues and options. Bloody hell! Damn and strawberries! If this was a delusion, surely he could do better than that? The very idea of it was depressing. With an onset of the blues, he sent out a signal.

In return, the air spoke. ‘No, no! Not to write. To do. Only to do!’

‘Thank goodness!’ Glide relaxed. Write a policy paper here? He’d rather jump out of an airship with a parachute made of palm leaves.

As usual, as the blue figure manifested, it balanced on one leg then slowly toppled. It righted again and held for a moment. It reminded Glide of a diver going for a backward dive from the high board. There was a soundless splash and the apparition disappeared again. Glide looked at Strongarm. Strongarm looked Glide. The pachyderm did the massive equivalent of an elephant shrug.

They waited but when the Ne’verman didn’t reappear, Glide spoke. ‘Did you hear what Ne’wang said? He said it’s not to write, only to do. So, to do what?’

Strongarm looked down his long nose at the slim human. ‘Well, you might not be doing the doing. That could get a bit rough. You might just be telling us how to do the doing. You know, how to counter magic, how to unspell spells and how to block enchantments. That sort of thing.’ He glanced covertly over his trunk to see Glide’s reaction.

‘That sort of thing,’ Glide echoed. He idly kicked at a lump of grass. ‘Not exactly my field. Witches? Never met one.’ Kick. ‘Magic? I’ve seen a conjuror pull a rabbit out of a hat.’ Kick. ‘Enchantments? Rescue Remedy gives me a headache.’ Kick. ‘No, I really don’t think I can help you there.’ Glide’s idle kicking turned into a manic little dance. ‘But stabbing in the back? Yes! Yes, I have years of practise. Crawling up the ladder of success? Yes! Phrasing clear thoughts into obfuscatory legalise? Most definitely yes! As a fully-fledged Civilian Servant, I can give you obfuscatory workshops. Yes, I give you Stabbing in the Back 101.’

Entering his manic phase, Glide looked around hopefully. Perhaps Ne’wang had left a door in the air? Perhaps there was a shimmer that he could simply step through.

‘But Witches? Spells? Enchantments? No. Sorry, guys. Sorry and goodbye...ee. I’ve got a Ne ... Ne ... Ne’vermaker to catch.’

But as neither Ne’vermaker nor door reappeared, Glide couldn’t catch one. He passed rapidly from elation to puzzlement as the other two patiently waited. Eventually, Strongarm turned and led the way deeper into the jungle, on the way passing beautifully thatched huts. Glide peered inside one and saw that it was small and obviously domestic. Further on, they came to a large barn. Outside it, humans and imps were working together. Glide watched them with interest. They were heating metals and pouring the molten mix into moulds. The moulds were long and narrow so he guessed they were meant to be swords. But the curves and blunt edges suggested large-scale jewellery rather than weapons of messy destruction.

‘And they are?’ Glide asked.

Strongarm frowned. ‘They are beating their ploughshares into weapons.’

‘Into swords?’

‘Swords? Instruments to hack with?’ Strongarm lifted his trunk. It fell in a hopeless gesture. ‘Giant brooches meant as shields? Who knows?’

‘You don’t know?’

‘They are not fighters. They don’t know about weapons. Hernandes doesn’t know. I know but, in this shape, can’t teach. They are waiting for your instruction.’

‘Mine? Damn!’

‘You can teach us?’ Strongarm didn’t sound very hopeful.

In answer, Glide picked up a chest-sized creation. ‘This is meant to be a shield. But it looks like a Celtic knot. Look at all these holes.’

‘But es very lights to carry,’ Hernandes offered.

‘Yeah, but can it protect anyone?’ Glide held the Celtic Knot shield to his chest. ‘Strongarm, see if you can hit me.’ The big creature began to prance on all fours, like a boxer seeking an opening. ‘A medium-size hit,’ Glide suggested. Suddenly, the trunk narrowed and the tip shot out. Passing easily though a gap, it walloped Glide on the chest. He staggered backwards. ‘Jeez, I should’ve said touch, not hit.’ He gasped for breath. ‘Anyway, you see what I mean.’

‘Rights,’ Hernandes agreed. ‘We needs better weapons and better defences. You can policy us on designs.’

Meanwhile, Strongarm was turning pink. ‘Sorry, sorry, sorry,’ he muttered. ‘I didn’t mean to hit you so hard. Well, I don’t think I meant to. I might’ve done. But you could’ve moved. You could’ve ducked. Anyway, we had hoped for more of a warrior. You could’ve had a bit more grunt. Anyway, the Ne’vermaker ... the Ne’vermaker ...’

Strongarm’s words hung in the air with disappointment. The unsaid finally got to Glide and the worm started to turn. It was time to head-butt punch bags, take a crossbow to archery, or a foil to Kendo. Smoke burst from his ears.

‘So you wanted a fighter, did you? A real fighter? Well, you ain’t got one! Ain’t got no fighter! But you sure as hell have got a fight!’ Glide shadowboxed around Strongarm, about as effectively as a mosquito around a rock. ‘Strongarm, are you? Well, I’ve gotta strong arm, too. Come on, putt’em up. Bit of arm wrestling. C’mon, let’s see how strong you really are.’

So saying, he grasped the tip of the muscular trunk and began to push. But there was no opposition. Strongarm hastily stepped back with a cry of, ‘Hey, dat’s dot my arm, dat’s my dose!’

‘Oh, damn and strawberries!’ Glide dropped the trunk. ‘Nose wrestling, then.’

But the moment had passed. Embarrassed, Glide stepped back. He looked at Strongarm’s huge legs. He sure as hell wasn’t going to arm wrestle with one of those. One huge foot, however, had already risen. Glide gritted his teeth. What had he let himself in for? He tensed. In sudden relief, though, he realised that he wasn’t being challenged. Strongarm was pointing.

Glide turned. He watched. His jaw dropped and his eyes boggled. Now that was funny. Funny? Huh, it was the theatre of the absurd. Yes, it would have been genuinely funny if the intention hadn’t been so bloody serious.

MAGGOT THWACKA CONCENTRATED.

A black raven flew above the jungle. Darkness oozed out of it. Cawing creakily, it circled into Glide's conversation. The bird's sharp ears heard the sounds that were words. His sharp eyes clicked on the shapes the lips made as they uttered those sounds. The bird wheeled and dipped as it transmitted information. When it was above Glide, it released a line of droppings. Yet, without even realising that he was doing it, Glide sidestepped. At the same time, a blue hand burst out of the air and gave him an added shove. With a splat, the droppings made white smears at Glide's feet. He looked up and waved his fist as the large bird winged away.

He turned to Strongarm. 'This is getting personal.' He scratched his head. 'It's a good thing cows don't fly. Ha, ha.' He imagined a direct hit and a necklace of cow dung.

'They don't?' Strongarm's big ears waggled in surprise. His trunk pointed upwards. A large cow drifted serenely through the air. Amazed, Glide immediately sheltered behind Strongarm's bulk. But since no one else seemed bothered, he quickly relaxed. The cow, it seemed, was not as ill disposed as the raven.

Goresh, the bird in question, was not well disposed at all. Fortunately, although no birdbrain, he was no graduate from Toastmasters either. His transmission of words and pictures to Maggot Thwacka was far from perfect. Oh, she picked up Glide's anger all right and did a bit of fist waving and foot stamping herself. But the words, the actual words that went with the pictures, they verged on gibberish.

One thing was certain, though, a stranger had appeared in Auslan. He had been brought by the Ne'vermaker and seemed to have a penchant for arm wrestling. Or nose wrestling. Well, neither of those frightened her. Yet if the Ne'vermaker had brought him then there must be more to it than that. But the creature was so clueless! How could there be more to him? There must be some potential. But if it were merely potential then that meant that he must yet be trained. And training required time. Good, the more time the better. For now, she'd send out Haggort and Greenvort, the most trusted of her almost-trusted minions, and they could gather information about this stranger.

She rephrased that thought. For now, she'd send out Haggort and Greenvort, the most least distrusted of her completely untrustworthy minions, and they could gather information about this stranger.

But the Ne'vermaker. Ah, the Ne'vermaker. He was a boil in her mouth. She'd have to lance him, do something about him. She went to the window. Outside, the mists swirled around her narrow strip of land and her bones ached to be under a clear, dry sky. In a sudden rage, she whirled. The full force of her glare fell on the girl, frozen in the magic of Slowtime. Under that glare, the Slowtime fell from her like hot water running down a sheet of ice. Off balance, she stumbled and her silver hair streamed about her face.

Maggot Thwacka cackled. That was what she liked to see, abasement. But she was not satisfied. The girl rose with a grave serenity. Though her eyes were as grey as troubled seas, her voice was controlled.

'Let me go,' she said, 'Let there be peace between our countries.'

'Peace! A pox on your peace!' Maggot Thwacka shrieked. 'Our countries? You call this poxy strip of swamp a country?'

'This is where you were banished to.'

'Banished!' The Witch paced, cracking her knuckles so that the girl winced almost as much as she. 'If I'd known then what I know now, we'd've seen who'd've been banished. Banished? A pox on it! I've been put in a cage!'

'The Ne'vermaker saw only too clearly what you intended. He just never knew how powerful you'd become.'

'Powerful!'

'All the same, it pained him.'

'Pained me more!'

'Him, too.'

'Pain! I'll show you pain.'

Maggot Thwacka flung herself around the room in an effort to think. But she was not a thinking person. Mostly, she acted on impulse. But finally, she had an idea. With a cackle, she waved her hand. The room changed. One corner became vaguely spidery, vaguely cobwebby, and vaguely ghostly. It was a space to fear. The girl saw it and gave little shudder. The Witch, however, decided that her fear was not yet big enough. She wanted a full-blown shudder. She concentrated again. Her blue brush of hair stood up straight. Horrible images formed in her mind and vile sounds poured from her mouth. The corner became darker, the webs more alive, the spiders more deadly. Now the girl really shuddered.

'Oh, my lovely,' Maggot Thwacka croaked, 'it's all so worth it.' She rubbed her head. 'Despite the migraine.' She glared. 'This little present is not just for you to admire. This little present is for you to clean.'

'To clean?' The girl gasped. 'But why?'

'Why?' Maggot Thwacka cackled. 'So your fingers will learn what my fingers have suffered.'

'But you've never cleaned.'

'Still a good way to suffer.'

'Once, we ...'

'Once, never!'

The girl sniffed. Though no superwoman, she was no pushover either. Since a toddler, she'd ridden on horses, on roos and even on the occasional unicorn. She could also shoot an arrow straight into a bullseye — as long as the bullseye wasn't a real eye. She'd even had a go with a spear; but since she'd refused to aim at anything vaguely warm and fuzzy, more people had been hit by her drawback than by her actual throw.

So though she wouldn't fight, she did have a black belt in arguing.

'A good way to suffer, yes. But why should I go in?'

'Because ...' Maggot Thwacka began, 'because ...' She was almost drawn into an argument. 'Oh, drat it!' Her mind clouded with fury. 'I don't have to give you a reason!' she shrilled, shaking with fury. 'I could just freeze you and drag you in by your pretty silver hair. But, girl, I'll tell you. If you don't do as I say, that thing, that Ne'vermaker, will suffer and suffer most horribly.'

At mention of the Ne'vermaker, the girl paled and her hands clenched. She and the Witch glared ferociously. If she thought she could've made it, the girl would've leapt at her. But she knew from past experience that Slowtime would hit her first and the next time she came to her body would be covered in painful bruises. Slowly, she unclenched her fists and forced herself to take a different tack.

'He is more powerful than you,' she said. 'How could you hurt him?'

'Through you.' The Witch cackled. 'With you in my control, he wouldn't dare anything. And anyway, he showed his weakness long ago.' She frowned in thought. Her head ached as she dug up the memory. 'When he let in morality, he also let in weakness.'

'No.' The girl shook her head. 'He was always honourable. He was honourable and you took advantage of him.'

'Honourable! I knew his weaknesses.'

'You knew him well enough to know his goodnesses as well.'

Maggot Thwacka threw back her head and chortled, 'I did what I did and I'd do it all again. And again and again. Till all his kingdom is mine and he is in my power as you are now. Till I have made him crawl from Auslan to Inklan and back. If you think you suffer, girl, see how much more your ... your ... my ... my ... the ... the Ne'vermaker must do so.'

The Witch's voice rose to a sharp shrill, penetrating the girl's skull with the whine of a giant hornet. Echoes within echoes added to the cacophony. Her head vibrated with pain, weakening her resolve.

'Now into the room,' the Witch screeched. 'Clean it, brush it, scrub it. Spiders' webs entwine you. Tentacles will hold you. Snakes bodies will enfold you. Ha-ha, he-he. Do it, do it for the Ne'vermaker. Ha-ha, he-he, a pox on the Ne'vermaker.'

With a sad shake of her head, the girl moved towards the corner. She tried to tell herself that it was only magic, only an illusion. At its very edge, she stared in. It was a ship's cabin, a hundred years rotten in the murky deep. Dank and musty, a rank smell came out of it. Spiders hung from webs and stared back at her. A dark shape slithered across the floor. She stood as if frozen, unable to make the last step. But a sudden shove from behind sent her staggering across the threshold. There was a hideous cackle as a broom was thrown in after her. She clutched at it, but

more for defence than for cleaning. With a heavy heart, she thought once more of the Ne'vermaker. Then as the deepest and darkest fears gripped her, she was thrown once more into the pit of Slowtime.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BARRY ROSENBERG was born in London but moved to Canberra, Australia after completing a PhD on the topic of visual information processing. Becoming involved in meditation, he left research and taught tai chi and yoga relaxation. After some years, he joined the Australian Public Service. Marrying an artist, he realised that he had hands and left the APS to become a craftsman.

Since 1997, Barry and his wife have been living on the Sunshine Coast, Queensland. He began writing poetry in 1975 then moved onto stories and plays. Since 2008, he's become active in sending stories out. Most are speculative fiction and quite a few have been published or have been accepted for publication.

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'All righty,' Glide declared. 'You got a problem? Well, I'll make it straight, as straight as a roo's hind leg.'

'That's beaut, mate!' Ne'wang cried. 'You definitely won't be sorry.'

'You kidding? I'm sorry already ...'

*Great potential in that boy, real great*  
a Ne'verman predicted when Glide was born.

So how did he end up working a dull office job, his potential squandered and his true dreams unrealised? Glide's got the pen pusher blues. Then he accidentally summons a magic man, Ne'wang, who whisks him through a gateway to Auslan, a former paradise in desperate need of a hero. If Glide wants to fill some big hero boots, he's got to face a wicked Witch, rescue a beautiful princess trapped in Slowtime, and deal with a Giant Dwarf. Good thing he's got a roo-riding imp and a talking elephant on his side.

Life can be hard for a hero and Glide is in a right pickle. How can he hope to defeat the Witch? What is the secret of Slowtime? Will Ne'wang ever stop toppling backwards out of Auslan? Will Strongarm ever stop insisting he's not an elephant even though he looks an awful lot like one? And just how much planning can you do down the pub, anyway?

A comedic fantasy with a uniquely Australian flavour and a steampunk twist, *Glide in Slowtime* will take you on a romp where science is magic and magic is science. It's Dreamtime ... in steam time.



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