

Chapter Twenty-Six

O ME OF LITTLE FAITH

Thursday 11th May

University of Queensland, St Lucia

James sat outside his Supervisor's office holding a rough draft of his Master's thesis and a copy of the article he hoped would be accepted for official publication. As he waited for his weekly appointment his mind was in turmoil. Late last night he had felt tired as he struggled to finish off the article; but as he ran off the final copies on his printer his tiredness vanished. He was then so keyed up he found it hard to get to sleep so he started worrying about his future with the Daily Mail and his forthcoming dinner with his boss. He still wondered what was behind the invitation. Also he was a little disappointed that Stephanie hadn't got back to him about the radio interview.

He also felt excited about the prospect of publishing an article and the possibility of getting some recognition for his new theory. He fantasised about changing direction to a career in religious academic studies although he knew that would require a Doctorate and more years of study. He knew he was probably pipe dreaming, but he felt unsettled and in need of a new goal. He was also looking forward to this evening's dinner outing with Mary. It was their anniversary and they were going late night shopping afterwards to buy themselves a joint present. With his extra hours and her recent rise, their finances had improved somewhat and they could afford to have a little splurge.

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‘Well James, what do we have here?’ asked Dr Phillip Gill with genuine interest.

James placed the two documents on the desk and sat back. ‘An outline for my thesis and a copy of the condensed version you suggested I write for publication.’

Phillip picked them up and flicked through them. ‘I’ll read them with great interest, James. But first, take this.’ Dr Gill handed him a sheet of paper. ‘It’s the name and address of a publisher that I’m having quite a bit of success with lately. They’re one of the few remaining publishers that still accept articles direct without making you go through agencies.’

James looked down at the sheet and read, ‘Asia Journal of Theology’. ‘Thank you Phillip. You’ve been a great help.’

‘You’re welcome, but I’m not sure it’ll be enough.’ Phillip gathered a small pile of books in front of him.

‘Why? What do you mean?’ asked James anxiously.

Phillip pointed at the pile. ‘Well, these books have just been published recently. They are not even in the library yet but you may like to borrow them.’

James looked over and recognised some of the authors - John Hick, Raimon Panikkar and others, all leading scholars in the field of world religions and spirituality.

‘Thanks, I will. But what do they have to do with getting my article published?’

Phillip pushed the pile closer to James. ‘They all exalt the mystical experience as the higher truth behind all religions.’

‘Then my theory’s still original?’ James asked hopefully.

Phillip leant forward. ‘Yes, but the point I’m making is that the market seems to be only interested in the mystical viewpoint, or at least the publishers think so. You could be going against the trend.’

‘Do you think they’re right?’ asked James, once again suspicious that his Buddhist supervisor was being influenced by his own beliefs, but his reply dispelled that thought.

Phillip held up a restraining hand. ‘Not at all, but don’t get your hopes up about getting your article published. The market may not be ready for your theory yet.’

‘Oh! I see what you mean.’

‘It’s all a matter of timing. There just seems to be a popular swing towards mystical experience at the moment, probably fuelled by the New Age movement.’ Phillip shrugged. ‘Anyway, send it away and see what happens.’

‘I will,’ said James without much enthusiasm.

‘Did you get something in for that essay competition?’

‘Yes, I did.’ James replied, ‘but I haven’t heard anything yet.’

‘The results are out.’ Phillip pointed at James. ‘You should hear today if you’ve won anything.’

If I’ve won anything. ‘If’ being the operative word, thought James. He felt depressed by his supervisor’s pessimistic estimate of his article’s chances of success. His supervisor sensed his mood swing and realised that he had probably contributed to it as he brought the interview to a close in a positive way. ‘You get that article away and I’ll let you know what I think of the draft of your thesis next week, OK?’

‘OK.’ James forced a smile. ‘Thanks again Phillip.’

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A Restaurant, Carindale

‘Thank you very much. This looks very nice,’ said Mary to the waiter as he placed the entrees in front of them.

'Do you want to say grace for a special occasion?' asked James as soon as the waiter had gone.

'We don't normally say grace at restaurants,' answered Mary. 'You always say it looks ostentatious.'

James thought Mary was acting a bit cool. 'Yes, I forgot. Maybe I wanted to show some gratitude for three happy years.' James started to eat his entree.

Mary softened a little but her eyes became a little misty. 'Yes. Our third anniversary and still an uncertain future.' She hadn't started to eat yet.

James stopped eating and looked hard at Mary. Why was she so concerned about the future, just because he was uncertain about his job at the paper? Then it hit him. How could he have been so blind? He reached over and took her hand. 'You want to start having children?'

She looked back at him and her eyes confirmed his insight.

'Then why don't we, you know - go ahead in faith?'

'James,' she said shaking her head reprovably. 'I'm the main bread-winner at the moment. We can't afford for me to give up work, and I'd have to eventually. I don't have that much faith.' She withdrew her hand gently and started to eat as if there were no more to be said.

They finished their entrees in silence. Not quite the anniversary dinner that he had envisaged. The problem was he didn't know what he could do to rectify the situation. Eventually he said, 'Darling, I'm very sorry that I can't offer you anything more definite. I have no idea where my future lies. I'm so confused.'

Mary looked at him and smiled sadly. 'Would it help to talk about it?'

He nodded briefly. 'Probably.'

Just then the waiter returned with their main meal. Mary withdrew her hand and could hardly conceal her exasperation. Every other time they had been to a restaurant,

they had waited for ages for their main meal. Why couldn't they have been slow this time just as James was about to open up? But she need not have worried because James wanted to talk. In between mouthfuls he talked about his options of continuing in Journalism if allowed, or changing to full-time academic work eventually or going back to the ministry.

Between mouthfuls Mary asked, 'How long would it be before you could apply for a lecturing position?'

'There are tutoring positions available next year but they're not full-time. Full-time positions would need a doctorate – at least three more years full-time study.'

Mary paused again and looked at him anxiously. 'Then is that really an option?'

'Not if we want to have children.' He looked down at his food. 'I think I've left my run too late.'

Mary sighed in relief and said, 'Then you only have two options left – full time Journalism and going back to the ministry.'

'Mmm'. James was not comfortable with those options. He was still hoping that, somehow, his new theory might lead to something in academia. 'You're probably right. The signs pointing to further academic research are not clear.'

Mary frowned at the realization that he hadn't really given up on that path but asked dutifully. 'Why not?'

'Well, this new theory of mine.' James put down his fork and sighed. 'I was hoping to test it by publishing an article but Phillip thinks I'm up against a popular swing to mysticism.'

Mary did not understand. 'But your theory places equal weight on mysticism.'

James nodded. 'I know. But he thinks that publishers and the market place aren't ready for a balanced approach.'

Despite her own opposition to his academic ambition, she didn't like to see him give up so quickly. 'So aren't you going to send your article in now?'

James shrugged. 'I don't know if it's worth it. I sent an essay on the subject to that essay competition but it couldn't have been any good or I would've heard something by now.'

'Wait a minute.' Mary pushed her plate away and opened her handbag. 'There was something in the mail for you today from interstate. Sorry, I forgot about it. Here it is.'

James' heart missed a beat. He took the letter from her and opened it eagerly. 'It says that I missed out to an essay called 'The Mysticism of Infinity'. There you are. What did I tell you? Even the essay judges are into mysticism.'

Mary shook her head in exasperation at his negativity. 'You can't assume that. Maybe the other essay was better written. Does it say anything else?'

James read on despondently. 'It says, 'Your essay was highly commended. The judges believe that your ideas could make a significant contribution to the world-wide study of religion and that you should therefore offer it for publication'. James looked up in surprise. 'Well, what do you know?'

'Say 'thank you Lord', for the sign.' Mary pointed at him grinning mischievously.

'Thank you Lord for the sign,' said James without a pause. He smiled ruefully and finished the remains of his now cooler meal with relish while he reconsidered his outlook. Eventually he said, 'Oh me of little faith... Maybe I'll receive some sign about my future on Saturday evening.'

Mary took his hand this time and didn't withdraw it. It then occurred to James that this was going to be a nice anniversary evening after all.

'If we go now,' he said, 'We should have time to find something special at the shops before closing time.'

They gathered their belongings, paid the bill and walked out hand in hand.

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Saturday 13th May

Hamilton

The Preston's had a beautiful home on the top of a hill in Hamilton with panoramic views from the living areas. Stephanie was an excellent hostess and they had shared a delicious roast dinner with old-fashioned hospitality. James had a momentary thought that he might be being fattened up for the kill but the conversation had been mainly social chitchat with no reference to the issues that concerned him. They had discussed their families, their respective homes and the effort needed to care for them and humorous incidents in their daily work. Peter persuaded Mary to reveal some handy hints that could help him with his tax return. Stephanie had them all laughing with some awkward situations that had arisen in the course of some of her interviews. When it came time to adjourn to the lounge for tea and coffee, there had still been no mention of the real reason for the invitation and James was becoming a little anxious.

When they were settled PP cleared his throat as he often did before making an announcement to his staff and said, 'You may be wondering why we invited you here tonight.'

James tensed up but didn't say anything.

'Well.' Peter leaned forward. 'One of the reasons was to thank you for what you have done for us as a couple. I know you felt a bit awkward about counselling your boss and his wife but I didn't know how long you would be with us and - I didn't want

to miss the opportunity of using your particular skills and insights.’ Peter smiled self-consciously as he spoke these last few words. He was not accustomed to giving out compliments.

However, James had fixated on the comment about the length of his employment and said rather tentatively, ‘But I can change the content of my article if the negative feedback continues.’

Peter Preston stared at him. He suddenly realised that James thought he had invited him to dinner to terminate his services and he was embarrassed. ‘Of course you can James but not until you finish the current series. To hell with the feedback. I want to see it through to the end. Anyway, if people are getting annoyed then it shows they must be reading it.’

James gave an almost inaudible sigh of relief. ‘I don’t know what to say.’

Peter raised a restraining hand. ‘Say nothing for the moment. Baring my soul is not easy for me. I wanted Stephanie to say it but she has things of her own she wants to say.’

James’ heart gave a little leap of excitement at the prospect of an invitation from Stephanie to go on radio but he made an effort to give Peter his full attention.

Peter continued, ‘As I was saying, we are very grateful to you for your help to us with our personal conflict of religious loyalties, and the reason why I didn’t think you would be with me much longer was that I know where your heart lies. You are too good a pastor and theologian to be satisfied with a newspaper job for too long, even with a religious column. You’re wasted here and you know it.’ He paused to marshal his thoughts while James sat like a stunned mullet. ‘The Church needs men - people - like you, who can see both sides of a problem as you can and be spiritually open-minded - especially in a religiously plural society like ours. Now do you see what I meant?’

‘Yes. I see.’ He felt quite overwhelmed by what was said.

Mary jogged James with her elbow. ‘A sign about your future?’ she whispered quietly. Stephanie and Peter exchanged glances but neither inquired about the sotto voce comment.

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‘Well, think about it.’ Peter pointed at James. ‘Meanwhile what are you going to do about your theory? Are you going to publish it?’

James sighed. ‘At this stage, it’s only in the form of an article. I’ve sent it away to a magazine and I’m waiting for a reply.’

Peter raised his eyebrows. ‘That’s an academic magazine I presume?’

James nodded. ‘Yes. One recommended by my supervisor.’

Stephanie cut in. ‘What about a book for the general public?’

James looked at her quickly with a frown. ‘I was thinking about it but I think it might be a waste of time.’

‘Why?’ asked Stephanie.

James lifted his hands palms upwards. ‘Because in all the books coming out lately from leading scholars, it’s mysticism and spirituality that’s being promoted as the ultimate truth.’

‘James,’ Stephanie asked, ‘have you lost confidence in your theory.’

‘Not in my theory, but Phillip Gill feels that the market is not interested in balanced theories just now.’

Peter Preston’s eyes narrowed as he said almost angrily, ‘Listen James. Do you remember my original brief? I asked you to find some common truth behind the world’s religions.’

James nodded.

‘Well, I meant it.’ Peter shrugged. ‘I admit I had an ulterior motive - a chance to solve my domestic dilemma - but I am genuinely concerned about sectarian violence.’ He pushed one finger into the palm of his other hand. ‘Last week, there was more violence in Indonesia between Christians and Muslims. There is a great need for a harmonising of beliefs and a reconciliation of religions - not the exalting of one understanding over another. There is a need for your theory.’ He paused and then said slowly, ‘You must publish.’

‘Yes,’ Stephanie took over the conversation. ‘I don’t care how attractive their arguments are. You have convinced me - us - that exalting one religion over another is not the answer. I don’t care how popular this trend is, it must be opposed in the name of tolerance.’ Stephanie leant forward and lowered her voice. ‘James, you have the evidence. You have to make it known.’

James was starting to feel more optimistic. ‘You really think my evidence is enough?’

Peter nodded and Stephanie replied, ‘Actually, you have provided more evidence for your theory than you realise.’

James screwed up his face. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Your mind game, James. Your ‘switching’ technique. Every doctrine you used to test your theory made perfectly good sense in both world-views. That’s very useful evidence. Actually, that’s what finally convinced me.’

‘Almost every doctrine.’ James said quietly and then brightened up. ‘Yes. That is another argument isn’t it? I hadn’t thought of it that way.’

Stephanie smiled and reached out with one hand. ‘Now, to give your theory more exposure, I propose that you let me do a four week series on my programme. What do you say?’

James' jaw dropped. 'I say 'great' but I thought I had to publish something first?'

Stephanie gave a smug smile. 'Normally yes, but we can twist the rules a little. My producer said she will allow me to interview you on the basis of the articles in your column.'

Peter broke in, 'It will be good publicity for your column.'

'And it won't do your paper any harm either, dear,' said Stephanie with a sideways grin at her husband. Then she looked back at James. 'Can you start recording next Friday?'

'I most certainly can,' replied James with fresh confidence as he looked at Mary who smiled widely and squeezed his hand tightly.

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