

The Zenith Syndrome

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Chapter I

I'd decided to give myself a near-death experience.

This was not a spur-of-the moment decision. I'd thought long and hard about this for many years. But I needed some firsthand knowledge of what happens when someone kicks the bucket, and the only way conceivable was to go there myself. I was not some kind of *suicide freak*, as you might be assuming, although I guess I was a little unusual. But I loved my life too much to end it—permanently that is. I just wanted to gain a little glimpse of what it was like on the other side... and then come back to tell my story.

I thought about the possible means at my disposal. There were tons of them: asphyxiation... drowning... drug overdose... petrol-sniffing... I'd heard that self-strangulation at the point of climax with a sexy chick was the best way to go, but how did I know for sure? People who'd managed this, like my hero Michael Hutchins, had never come back to verify this rumour. And besides, I didn't know any sexy chicks who would agree to have sex with me whilst I strangled myself to death. Matter of fact I didn't know any chicks who would agree to have sex with me, period. Now, keep this to yourself won't you. I was actually a virgin at the time and I

didn't have any experience in this area, so that option was sadly crossed out on my list of possibilities.

I decided that my experience had to be clean and straightforward, as I didn't want to wake up as a zombie or with limbs missing, or blind or impotent or incapacitated in any way. And I did think about those who had to watch me do this. I didn't want a mess. No blood or vomit or piss or shit or anything. Nothing like that. I'm a considerate person. Anyway, this narrowed the field down considerably. After some careful consideration I decided on drowning. I'd confided in one of my few friends, Wombat Wiggins. Wombat may not be over-endowed with brains, but he may well have had some inkling of the subject. You see, he'd been dragged out of a swimming pool a couple of summers ago after being found lying on the bottom for just a few minutes. His heart had stopped and he'd ceased breathing. The ambos gave him CPR and mouth-to-mouth to start his heart and his lungs pumping again. His recovery was said to be complete and he suffered no apparent long-term damage to his brain or any of his other organs. Not that they could tell anyway. In my opinion, Wombat's brain had always been dead—or at least badly retarded.

'Tell me what you saw, Wombat,' I prompted.

'I seen the most beautiful scenery I ever seen in my life,' he mused, a stream of dribble running down his chin as he spoke. 'Rollin' fields of green grass, greener than you could ever imagine. And all covered in sorta sunlight, real bright it was. And there was little streams of water runnin' through the fields, bubblin' over these tiny rapid things.'

'Yeah, yeah,' I muttered. 'How fucking boring.'

'There was lots of people and lots of animals!' Wombat added enthusiastically, trying very hard to impress. 'It was just like I reckon Heaven must be like. The people was all deliriously happy

and smiling and loving towards one another and stuff. Nobody seemed to have a care in the world, mate.'

'Sounds like a laugh a minute. Did you see anyone you knew?'

'Nah, I weren't there long enough. I just remember seeing all these glowing, smiling faces, all gazing at me real lovin' like I was their long-lost brother or something, and aksing me to come and join 'em.'

'Did they have any clothes on?'

'Course they had gear on, you perverted little turd! They looked just like they do on Earth, only a hell of a lot happier and much more contented. Everyone seemed to be at peace with 'emselfs and with each other, like.'

'Did you get to see *God*?' I asked, with a deft touch of cynicism.

He looked at me quizzically. 'I was only in the water for a ten minutes, you dickhead, and I was only clinically dead for a coupla minutes. Course I didn't see *God*!'

'I'll tell you why you didn't see him. It's because he doesn't exist.'

'How do you know that? You're suddenly a big authority on the matter are ya?'

'I've never believed in God. I've just never made a song and dance about it, that's all.'

'That's blasphemous language, mate! You can be struck down dead by a bolt o' lightnen' for saying somethin' like that.'

I glanced up into the sky.

'Doesn't even *look* like a storm,' I said, unphased.

'If I was you, next time there's a thunder storm I'd hide under me bed. And even then God'll prob'ly find ya.'

'You've been listening to Dipstick O'Donnelly and Miss Bean too much,' I said. 'You've been badly brain-washed old mate.'

'At least I'll live a few years longer than you.'

I observed Wombat for a few months after his near-death experience, to see if I could notice any changes in him, for the better or the worse. But nothing became apparent. His brain certainly hadn't been affected any more than it was before, and his limbs were all functioning normally. I was interested in his physical and mental state, and I became quite convinced that he had not been adversely affected by his experience. This fact was very important to me.

I told Wombat of my plan. He was shocked. And that's putting it mildly.

'Why the hell would you want to deliberately try and *kill* yerself, ya moron? You're not a brainless kid any more Andy. You're a seventeen-year-old brainless adult and you should know better by now. I thought you might've matured a little bit by now. Seems I was wrong.'