

SAMPLE CHAPTER OF BEING JARVIS KREEG

1. THE HOUSE IN THE DUNES

I fled the city in a frenzy of exasperation, fed up with men and money and management techniques—I little realised that the things that had seemed to matter in my life were about to become utterly irrelevant. I thought I was taking a holiday to get over the latest in a long line of failed relationships and evading a thousand little sexual discriminations in the office and the pubs and the streets—in fact I was shedding the skin of my irksome urban existence as completely as a tiger snake. There had been one man too many, one hangover too many, one cigarette too many, one boring television program too many, one screeching tyre too many, one everything too many. I had been laid in every place and position imaginable, been taught everything and apparently learned nothing, said ‘been there done that’ every way I turned. But even I had no idea of how serious I was about all this; that I was just about to walk out on my own life and slam the door in its face.

I had always thought that mid-age crisis was the domain of men whose youth had finally eluded them, but that was as sexist as everything else. I was female and twenty-nine and definitely undergoing its mind-twisting throes. My life had seemed to have everything and it should have been good. I was fit and healthy, had money and beauty, didn’t need to diet even though I occasionally did, had one of those bums they thrust at you in Levi ads, a good car, friends, job, and my savings were in the right sort of account to get best advantage of the interest rates. It was all there, all mine—why then was my life a disappointing and frustrating bore?

Now you are going to say that what I really wanted was marriage and kids, you bastard—and you’re not wrong—but with a halfway decent bloke, if you don’t mind! All the decent blokes I ever met were ugly and brainless and the handsome clever ones were overbearingly conceited. They treated me like a sex object which was exactly the way I was designed, I suppose, so how could I blame them? Well, easily, in fact... but the penny really dropped when I realised that I could not have behaved any differently. You can’t make yourself intentionally ugly and be happy about it, you can’t deliberately refuse to take what you want and retain a satisfied state of mind.

I firmly blame the fake world created by television advertisers for this condition—bombarding us with images of a perfect world that can be bought, except it can’t with all the money on earth because it doesn’t exist. And I ought to know because I’ve been there done that too. One of those Levi ad bums referred to above was indeed mine, and that lanky girl in the tight-arse shorts thumbing her way into the outback distance in the Club Med ad—that’s me too.

But I wasn't a budding actor, I was an art student—graduated with honours—and did so well as a painter that I almost established full time successful careers in modelling, acting and managing a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet. Then one morning I said 'fuck it all' and flushed the whole damn thing down the toilet. I slipped into those tight-arse shorts and a skimpy top, woolly socks and John Kemp boots, slipped a pack on my back and plonked an Akubra on my head, and, looking indeed as if the Club Med girl had escaped through the back of the video tube, stalked out on myself.

I caught a train way out of town and then hitched a few rides down some side roads, fighting off the grubby hands of leering truck-drivers all the way. I didn't know where I was going particularly and ended up in a small sea-side town that didn't seem to have a name. It, like me, seemed to have just failed to get over the Victorian border into South Australia. It was a nice enough little town but I didn't really bother to look around. I stayed the night in the hotel, and in the morning bought a full supply of food—I mean tucker—then went straight down to the beach and started walking. Heading for South Australia I suppose, for Perth or Mauritius maybe, the full moon lay that way at the time, and later so would the sun. Any of those would have been okay destinations.

I tramped for most of the day. There were some fishermen working off the beach and then the rocks but after an hour or so I outdistanced them. There were rocks and then more wide beaches beyond, and it was getting hot—I stripped off and ran into the sea. I was thinking of how those ad directors would have liked to get a shot of me doing that—*so the poison was still in my mind*. In fact the sea was the Southern Ocean and the water fucking freezing, the undertow ferocious and I didn't care. I frolicked about madly, as if I was a kid again, but I didn't get swept off to Antarctica. In the end, I went back up the beach, had lunch, slept naked on the sand for a while, and then—would you believe—some bloke and his two kids came along, looking for a nice picnic spot. I got dressed in a hurry, cursing furiously. Just when I thought I had escaped, along came civilisation in hot pursuit. I suppose there must have been roads into this place up there somewhere, and a car parked amongst the dunes. I lifted my pack and marched on, smiling sweetly at the family group and they ignored me. I felt a bit silly really—all that naked abandon. Maybe I should have gone to a nudist colony.

Late in the afternoon, I climbed over some rocks and saw the last thing I wanted to see—a house set back in amongst the ti-tree. It looked like a rather tumbledown place but somehow I could tell it was inhabited. I sat on the rock and gulped from my water bottle—was there really no escape?

I thought about what I would do next for a long time. Carry on along the beach—I wouldn't get far before dark and there were clouds coming up which meant pitching my tent. What lay ahead—more houses, more civilisation? There was something about the house that kept me there and I couldn't work it out. It seemed almost to demand that I go closer, explore, see who or what lived there. I used to believe in God and read my horoscope and all that nonsense but I really never was comfortable with that superstitious

crap. Maybe I was just plain lonely and there might be some one there to talk to. I don't know...

But I wanted to go over to that house!

And I did. I advanced slowly, warily, maybe hoping they would come out on the verandah so I'd get a look at them before committing myself or maybe I feared a savage dog. Nothing like that happened anyway.

The house seemed handbuilt—a jumble of a place with all sorts of different windows and a verandah all the way around but somehow it fitted in with the surroundings. Perhaps that was why it appealed to me. The door was open but it kind of looked like it was never closed. I wondered if that was an invitation, or even a suggestion that I was finally far enough away from civilisation for there to be no thieves. I walked to the open ground before the house and called.

"Hullo! Anybody there?"

No one answered.

I hesitated, unable to go forward or back. Finally, I'd almost decided to walk away. If there was someone in there, they were hiding; if they weren't home but trusted folk enough to leave the door open, how could I intrude; if no one lived there, there might be snakes and spiders in there and fuck that. But I only got about three paces, and found I stopped and turned around. If there was someone in there, they must have been pretty shy to live so far from anywhere—maybe they needed encouragement.

"Hullo!"

Nobody offered the same non-answer.

I began to feel a bit of a fool.

Finally I advanced right up to the foot of the verandah, bending like a dill to see if there was anyone hiding under the steps—there wasn't. Like a lost kitten trying to insinuate its way into some human's life, I crept up onto the verandah. At the door, I stood, knocked on the wall, then went along to one of the nearest windows to peak and see what was inside but it was dark of course. You can't look from bright sunlight into anywhere. And the glass too dirty. I went back to the door—the boards on the verandah squealed unmercifully under my feet. Finally, after knocking again, I poked my head through the doorway.

"Anybody home?"

Rather more meekly now.

By then the shade on the verandah had allowed my eyes to adjust and I could see. Someone lived here alright. I stepped over the threshold and looked around—it was a rather pleasant place in a shambling sort of way, quite rustic, and everything seemed to be handmade. The table, chairs, a shelf with shells. A huge bookcase. There didn't seem to be anything here that anyone could have bought in a shopping mall. And all that made it okay by me.

But there was something else about it that made it even more amazing. All of it, every object and bit of wall, had been attacked with paint, every flat surface had some form of complex multi-hued embellishment on it. On the

walls, weird landscapes and people had been painted. It was like being in an Ancient Egyptian tomb, with all those hieroglyphic figures on the walls and everything, only much more so. One whole wall was a painting of the forest as you might have seen it had you possessed X-ray vision, another was a startling optical illusion that seemed to make the room continue on with imaginary furniture and rugs until it vanished into infinity. It was quite amazing really – the home of a demented Michelangelo.

Oh yes, with that thought I looked up and was not even slightly surprised to see the ceiling was painted with clouds and birds and aeroplanes. But no angels.

Feeling more at home now, I slipped off my backpack and allowed it to drop to the floor. There were two doorways at either end of the room, and I crossed to the one on the left and looked in. Kitchen. Kitchen chaos. And a workshop. A carpenter's bench stood beside the stove, and you could imagine that everything in the house had been built at that bench. The tools, culinary and tradesman, were hung all about with no real concern for their purpose. A handsaw took its place hanging beside the frying-pan, a drill dangled along with the coffee mugs. Again, everything had been painted, walls, cupboards, furniture and in a single theme – there was nothing other than endless stacks of dirty dishes running away from the eye in all directions. On the far wall, over the table, was a real painting – on a canvas and hung on the wall – a pathetic image of a sad bearded man washing dishes at the very sink that lay before it, with the exact view out the window duplicated.

I went closer to study the man in the painting – unquestionably the creator of this confusion. He was forty, maybe more, with silver running through his dark curly hair and wavy beard, his face deeply lined with decades of trouble. He wore a filthy shirt that bulged slightly, and had that overall stoutness of a man losing the battle to stave off middle-age. His nose was red from too much drink and there were huge bags under his eyes. A man who had lived a few thousand years longer than he might have liked to. With this, as with everything else he painted, there was an illusion. This scullery slave seemed diminished by his chore, but when I compared the height of the real window with its image in the painting, I saw that he was in fact a big man. Rough looking, yet gentle? No, that was just my imagination.

Boldly, I crossed to the door on the other side, which led into a dark corridor with an intensely lit room at the far end. As soon as I began to walk down the corridor, I sensed I was not alone. Nor was I – in fact I was in the middle of a crowd. Life-sized people, in business suits and pretty dresses, marched the streets on the walls to either side, those on the right going my way, those on the left coming back again. The life-draining uniform trudge of the commuters. I might not have known who this man was, but I sure knew where he came from.

Doors opened off each side. Right was the bathroom, painted to look like some other bathroom. There were tiles on the wall where there weren't, extra towels marked his and hers, imagined shelves of poisons and rubber duckies, an old toilet with a chain and Mr Crapper's name immortalised on the cistern.

Everything was painted in an entirely different design to the real layout, while the actual wash-basin with cupboards under pretended to be a park bench and the shower screen had the same tiles as the wall. There had to be something on the wall behind that shower screen. I walked over and pulled it back. Of course I screamed, but I would have worried about myself had I not. Behind there, Norman Bates' mother stood with her skeletal grin and bloodied knife raised. I fled out into the hallway and hid in the next room which conveniently happened to be the toilet. Thanks very much, buster. For revenge, I sat on his toilet and pee-ed, leaving the seat down. That'd infuriate him, I was sure. Then I weakened and flushed and put the seat back up again.

Opposite was the ultimate intrusion, the bedroom, but I had come too far to go back now. There was a large bed, unmade, a cupboard with what was plainly meant to be its contents lying on the floor all around it, and all four walls and ceiling were covered with naked female flesh. I might have known. Playboy Centrefolds – well, not exactly. When I overcame my lapsed feminist hackles sufficiently to look closely, I saw that each woman did seem more real, more lifelike, than those process-line cheerleaders. Breasts sagged, there were wrinkles, blemishes everywhere. The women were all of sexual fantasy age but while some were youthful, others were nudging menopause. Each woman was an individual. Had the man truly painted, on his wall, every woman that he had ever had sexual relations with? That was the implication.

I sat on the bed and contemplated that. Naked they may have been but each was executed with love and affection. I wondered if each had indeed been persuaded to take her place amongst her forebears, if each perhaps had chosen her own place and pose. Would it be some sort of honour to be added to his gallery of...

Shit, not a chance! I stalked out in disgust. In my mind though, already, I saw myself, just to the right of the mirror...

I carried on to the final room, the lighted one at the end of the hall. The light proved to be natural, for it was glass all over, including the ceiling. A greenhouse effect, an incubus for a painter. There were several large paintings in progress, each big enough to be regarded as a wall partition. They were a riot of intense colours, and yet there was a clear precision about them. There was a storm going on in each that was itself a nightmare monster of an indescribable kind. In each of them, civilisation was presented minutely in some way – here was the insignificance of humanity with a flimsy hold on survival, clinging to shreds of order in the chaotic universe.

The pattern developed from one painting to the next and against the wall a stack of others that seemed a retrograde continuation of the theme. It was a grand scheme, highly developed – I was floored! I had never seen anything so stunning in my life – as a conscientious art student, I suspected I ought to have. And there was something familiar about it all as well... but I just couldn't place it yet. The style, this work, was known to me. And yet wasn't. But that could easily have been a gap in my inadequate knowledge of the subject.

Everything else in the room was thickly layered with paint splatters – the

walls, furniture and floor would each have made a decent Jackson Pollock in themselves, but Pollack was frighteningly upstaged on the canvas. I walked amid it all in a daze, lost in a sea of the greatness of my chosen field, knowing that I had never before realised so completely why I had chosen it in the first place.

Beyond I saw there was an annexe that extended directly into the forest—the trees seemed so close to the glass that you believed you could have touched them. This area lay beyond the range of flying paint. At least the artist appreciated that he was the messiest painter in the world.

Under the window, there was an old sofa, that just begged for someone to lie on it. There were bookshelves with innumerable books, and drawings and sketches scattered all over everything, except the sofa. I advanced, completing my intrusion by checking titles. I expected art books for reference, instead I got literature. Every great literary work I could think of was there, all in cheap hardback editions that I could see. He didn't buy any first editions and he didn't buy anything new.

On the coffee table, I finally noticed the mug of coffee, half drunk. It was cold, and yet the stain around the edge suggested it wasn't very old. There was a jug and a tin of cheap instant coffee that just happened to be my preferred brand. It would be, I knew, the least of my crimes.

I made the coffee—there was a small fridge with no milk and a lot of beer—and then I made my biggest mistake—the one that denied me all possibility of undetected escape—I sat on that sofa. It was the kind that insisted on comfort. By the time I finished the coffee, sitting, still completely overawed by all I had seen, my legs were curled up under me in my favourite position. The coffee mug must have dropped from my fingers when I fell asleep but I never heard it hit the floor.

The wet object that touched my cheek proved to be what it felt like—the nose of a shaggy Kelpie that sat back proudly, its long pink tongue dragging, while I jolted awake and, I think, even gave a little cry of fear. The dog licked my hand to calm me and so I respond with a smile.

"Hullo Dog."

"Hullo burglar," replied a deep male voice from nearby, which generally put me into a cycle of shitting myself and trying to pretend I was calm.

"Ahh... What's happening... Oh shit..." were the sorts of things I suppose I said.

"It's alright, miss. He won't bite yer," the rough voice calmly replied.

Once I'd figured out that I wasn't being spoken to by a dog, I looked further afield. The man sat in the chair opposite and I could only admire the skill with which he had captured himself in the self-portrait, smoking a cigarette, can of beer nestled in his lap, watching me as if I was the television set that I knew the house lacked. He wore no shoes and his feet were very dirty—that gave me something to hold against him. In every other way, I seemed to be at a disadvantage.

"Oh my god," I was gasping and other such expressions, all designed to

show that I was not in the habit of behaving like a cuckoo. It didn't seem convincing, not even to me.

"Sorry about Cyril's nose, but I'm a bit old for the Prince Charming and Sleeping Beauty routine," he said laconically.

"Oh dear. Look... Oh, I'm so sorry..." I replied, and then realised that my best hope of subduing my panic was a more aggressive approach...

"Who are you?" I suddenly demanded of him.

"Since it's my house that you're burgling, I think that's my question."

"I'm not a burglar!" I snapped at him. It might have been the only thing I was sure of, except that I felt very irritable.

"Just as well for you if you make a habit of falling asleep on the job," he said dryly.

Since all that was just a tad complex for me in my dopey state, I didn't answer but instead blinked and looked around and yawned and stretched and finally began to remember where I was and how I came to be here. I lowered my tone. "Look. I'm sorry. I know this must seem strange..."

"So, who are you?" he asked persistently.

"Ummm..." I said—but my name did seem to have slipped my mind for the moment. After an appropriate and unfruitful pause, he gave up on that question and tried an easier one. "What are you doing here?"

I looked at the surroundings, hoping some explanation might be spotted in some dusty corner. Surprisingly, it worked. "I saw the house. I don't know. I just came in. Didn't think..."

His woolly eyebrows arched upward as he tilted his brow toward me. "So you're in the habit of just walking into people's houses and taking over?"

"The door was open..."

"It always is. I don't have anything worth stealing."

"I had no intention of stealing anything, except maybe a cup of coffee. I saw the paintings... Everything was so fascinating. Somehow, I was just sort of lured on, and got lost in it all. I really am sorry..."

"And it was all so fascinating that you promptly fell asleep."

That did seem to be the greatest offence. "I was very tired. And this sofa. It almost insists on sleep."

He smiled then—a small shy smile of someone who didn't do that very often. "Yes, that it does."

I seized the opening to get in what I hoped was an explanation of some kind. "And your paintings. They are just incredible. And the house. Look, I know it sounds a bit lame, but the whole place has something very...welcoming... about it."

"It's meant to do the opposite. Do you think I live all the way out here in the middle of nowhere because I like visitors?"

He took a long gulp on his can of beer—perhaps the fact that he hadn't offered me one was meant to prove his point. "I guess not," I sighed.

He cocked his head on one side—he seemed very comfortable in his chair but I would have to get past him to escape the room. And the dog, which nestled beside him but kept an eye on me. When he spoke again, it was in a

decidedly less aggressive tone, which I took as meaning that he accepted my explanation of events. "What on earth are you doing out here on your own anyway?"

I shrugged. "I'm on holiday. Bushwalking."

"Alone?"

I smiled and sat up, swinging my legs around. He was looking at my legs – probably planning already which pose to use when he added them to his bedroom wall. I decided that I didn't mind him looking and had to forcibly avoid an urge to slip into flirtation. That, for me, would have been the easiest way out, but I wasn't into sensible solutions right then. "Alright, look. I've invaded your privacy inexcusably and I'm sorry. If that isn't good enough for you, sue me. And now I think I'd better be going."

"Forget it..." he said. I wasn't sure which bit I was supposed to forget. I picked up his mug and returned it to the table and then stood. But did not walk. Outside it was dark and raining and I didn't have anywhere to walk to.

"Can I ask one question before I go?" and this was definitely flirtation.

"If you must."

"What's your name?"

"Why should I tell you *my* name? You didn't tell me *yours*."

"Lena Carlson."

"Jack Daniels."

"And why haven't I heard of you?"

"That's two questions."

"But why not?"

"Should you have?"

I didn't have anywhere to go. Play my cards right and I might get his sofa for the night. It was by far my best option. I sat down again to stake my claim. I'd handled enough sleazy arseholes in my time to be confident of avoiding the sea of female flesh, and this man was definitely not sleazy and probably wasn't an arsehole either. It would have been convenient had I found him sexy but he was a bit old and careworn and shabby for that. But if the worst came to the worst, I knew I'd ended up in less desirable arms many times. So I sat, and became earnest and tried to explain.

"I'm an art student. Or I was. Someone should have taught me about someone who paints as brilliantly as you do. No one did. Why?"

"Perhaps you were inattentive."

"Oh no. If I had been put in contact with this stuff, I'd have remembered. And I wouldn't have become disillusioned."

I said I was good at handling men, didn't I.

He thought for a long time before asking the obvious question – perhaps he had noticed its unavailability. "You became disillusioned? Why?"

"The modern artworld has too much bullshit and not enough substance."

"You *do* pay attention," he said.

To what? I wondered for a moment. Then I realised he was, with breathtaking conceit, referring to his own paintings which sure were big on substance and low on bullshit. Arrogant conceit, yes, but somehow the

paintings justified it.

"I do when I'm interested. Do you have any idea how good this stuff is?"

"I know exactly how good it is."

"Somewhat influenced by Jarvis Kreeg," I added, to try and deflate him a little.

"Isn't everybody?"

"But you've transcended him..."

"I wouldn't know about that."

Jarvis Kreeg. The name had popped into my head the way such things do, even as I spoke. Yes, the paintings did show much of Kreeg, but they were different, more advanced somehow. Of course, I had only ever seen two Kreeg's for real. But the flattery, whilst useful, wasn't really flattery at all. Someone who could paint as well as Kreeg had a big future, which Kreeg lacked, having been dead at least three years. In any case. I was in so deep now that the only answer was to go whole hog.

"I left Art School because they weren't able to teach me anything. But I could learn from you."

"Art can't be taught, only experienced," he replied with a shrug.

"Then I want to experience you."

He laughed. He got out of his chair and went to the bench. "You young people are so earnest. How about a drink?"

"I am serious. And I'll have the hardest drink you've got. Straight."

He poured a good honest whisky for us both. "Okay, so I'll be serious," he said. "I'm the loneliest man you ever met and you are one hell of a sexy young female. But you seem interested and you seem at least half sincere. You can stay. It's your risk, not mine."

I had it planned already. He was nice and provided he didn't show any axe murderer traits, I'd be willing to sleep with him. I'd done a lot worse. But first he would have to agree to repaint that bedroom. Until then, it would be the sofa for me. We drank and talked art long into the night, one of those conversations where the hours slip gracefully through each other and he made a few fumbling attempts at seduction that I easily deflated. My resolve held out despite drunken oblivion and I did finally state my terms.

"How do you want it?" he asked exasperatedly.

I grinned. "Something galactic, I should think."

He went off immediately, looking for a large roller and tray and started whitewashing the ceiling of his bedroom there and then—at four on a rainy morning. When that was half done and he had fallen off the ladder twice, I decided he had done enough to show his devotion and capitulated. The bed was even more comfortable than the sofa.

