

Annomee Awakening

Preface

'Am I dead?'

'As good as.'

Silence.

'What do you mean?'

'I never heard of anyone going back.'

Melinda suddenly became aware of two things; that she had spoken, and that the voice which had replied was unlike any she had ever heard.

'Try to open your eyes.' A cool, clear voice, with a hint of amusement.

Eyes! Melinda thought for a moment about what that might mean. Something moved; a brief impression of heat, then all feeling left her again. She gasped and air rushed in through her nose and mouth; warm air with a strange odour.

'Open your eyes!'

Straining and pushing, Melinda felt rather than saw a glimmer of light.

'Where am I?'

'We will explain later. Open your eyes!'

Now Melinda could feel something across her shoulders and she realised she was being lifted up. She gasped again as awareness shot through her body. Legs and hands were in contact with a cool, soft surface; something brushed across her neck and then fell comfortingly around her shoulders. She groped at the fabric and turned her head slowly. Dim images flashed in and out of view.

Panic. Screaming. Her voice? Something hard against her mouth and then a sweet, warm liquid in her throat. Peace, joy, luminous lights.

'Melinda! Tell us your story!'

Words poured out of her mouth while she looked from side to side. A little girl on a swing, the back seat of her mother's car, staring down at pizza, school shoes, a shining glass jar of bright sweets, someone stroking her hair, loud music, push him away, sand between her toes, brilliant water splashing against her face, laughter, elation. Faster and faster, she could hear her voice; a strange girl with a white face staring at her, a dark man hugging her, wiping away her tears, passport and tickets clutched in her hand, parents at the departure gate, the air steward's frightened eyes, heavy breathing, someone cried out, a man clutching her arm, oxygen masks falling like weird jellyfish. No! No!

The aircraft cabin exploded, the walls rushing away, disappearing into the gloom. She struggled upright and stared around. The immensity of the chamber defeated her. Someone touched her shoulder but she could not turn. The seats were gone. The fat man next to her was gone. Rows of white shapes rose in columns as far as she could see. Figures in pale gowns floated between them. One of the shapes moved, wriggled like a giant butterfly trying to break out of its chrysalis. She screamed again. The cup was pushed against her mouth once more and she swallowed gratefully. Joy. Peace. Darkness.

Chapter 1

He came from the west. Down through the leafy avenues of Indooroopilly, past the Lutheran school which had tried so hard to train him, past the turnoff to the university, through the shining towers of the shopping precinct and onto the airport flyover.

'Take the accelerator. I can't wait to get out of this dump.' Anthony stared contemptuously down at the small boats bobbing merrily on the Brisbane River and the surge of traffic heading towards the city center.

'Shut up!' Simon set his mouth in a stubborn line and eased carefully into the left lane.

'It'll take forever!' Anthony grinned. 'You don't want me to miss the plane do you?'

'I said shut up! You're the last person to tell me how to drive.' Simon white knuckled the steering column as the traffic slowed to a crawl. He glanced sideways at his younger brother; Anthony's perfect upper lip was curled in a sneer. "Young Adonis," their grandmother called him; the golden boy of a wealthy upper class family.

'You should let it go,' Anthony smoothed his blonde hair and checked his reflection in the dashboard mirror. 'I got off, didn't I?'

'You always get off. Never faced up to a bloody thing, your whole life. What *we* got is our name in the papers and our poor mother almost hospitalised. You're lucky you're not in jail.'

'Oh yes! Our poor mother.' Anthony grinned again as Simon swerved into the middle lane. 'Well, you can all stop worrying about me. I'll be out of your hair for good.'

'I can't wait.' Simon ground out. 'And don't think about coming back; not till you straighten yourself out.'

Coming back? You're joking. London! Paris!' Anthony laughed. 'Can't wait to pick up some of those French maids.'

Simon swore softly and the car swerved again as it moved onto the accelerator. He sat back and tried to relax. Anthony waved his hand at the music station and the sound blared out. Simon swore again and switched it off. The two men sat in sullen silence as they swept over the eastern rim of the central business districts, their reflections flashing on the mirrored surfaces of the city towers. Anthony winced and looked away as the glass suddenly caught the full glare of the sun.

Below them the ground traffic crawled across the Story Bridge. Anthony craned his neck to look down at the Kangaroo Point Hotel and felt a moment's regret. He stared at his brother's rigid profile. Poor bastard; getting married next week. That bitch Nicky would do for him. Again he felt a brief moment of something like remorse but he quickly suppressed it.

'What do you expect me to do for money?'

'I've told you. You check in with the concierge at London airport and there will be coin in your account. I gave you the card last night.'

'What about the trip over? You've put me on a cattle truck – we're stopping at every goddamn hole that has an airstrip.'

'Three stops – three k. Enough to keep you hydrated.'

'Ten hour stopover in Singapore – you gotta be kidding.'

Simon punched the steering column and the car shot to the right. 'Almost there,' he muttered.

'Sure you don't want me to stay for the wedding? Have you told Nicky I won't be there?'

Simon did not respond but the car accelerated again and Anthony laughed quietly.

The flyover descended gently, over the river lined on both sides by the shining white leisure craft, over the racecourse and the huge storage depots and finally onto the concourse leading to the international airport. Simon darted between a taxi and a limousine and drew up outside the airline's departure gate.

'Get out!'

Anthony pulled his cabin bag from the back seat and leaned in through the window. 'No fond farewells? Aren't you going to make sure I actually get on the plane?'

Simon nodded towards a security guard standing nearby and the burly man approached, his hand resting on his baton. 'Don't even think about it!'

Anthony jumped back as the car shot away.

She came from the south. The hovercraft was already packed with passengers – Scandinavian back packers, South American tourists, New Zealanders on working holidays; a cheerful rowdy bunch still a bit woozy from last night's pub crawl.

Chloe Banac tried valiantly to extricate herself from her mother, who was both urging her towards the boat and clinging to her as though she could not bear to let her go. Over her mother's shoulder she could see the bright crowds on the waterfront. Moreton Bay sparkled in the sunlight. Windsurfers scudded across the white tipped water and a flock of tiny sail boats gathered near the breakwater.

'I haven't forgotten anything, mother.' Chloe kissed her mother awkwardly on the cheek and managed to squirm free.

'Oh, I hope you will be alright.'

'It's only a few weeks. What can happen?'

'I ought to come to the airport with you.' Mrs Banac looked around and made a movement towards the ticket office.

'No!'

Mrs Banac's mouth trembled at the sharp tone and Chloe continued in a gentler voice, 'we agreed. You know I hate farewells.' She edged away. 'I'll miss the boat.' She tried to soften her voice again. 'I'll be fine. I have plenty of time to make the connection and Uncle Vane will be waiting for me at Dubrovnik.' She noticed some people nearby staring at her and she glared back.

'If you're sure,' her mother said hesitatingly.

'I'm sure.' Chloe bobbed forward and pecked at her mother's cheek, grabbed her bag and rushed up the gangway. She saw her mother wave and then she was lost behind a group of latecomers. Her stomach heaved as the boat bumped against the pier and she sighed with relief as they moved slowly away and then surged out into the bay.

She did not linger on the deck with the other passengers who were filming their last glimpse of the Manly foreshore.

'You ok, dear?'

Chloe avoided the steward's gaze and looked around frantically. 'I feel a bit sick. Where's the john?'

The man pointed forwards and looked at her critically. 'You're not dressed for the weather. We're in for a warm spell.'

The bathroom appeared empty but Chloe checked the stalls before locking herself into one. She retched violently and leaned panting up against the wall for a few moments. A quick scrabble through her bag, another bout of retching and then a feeling of immense relief as her hand closed over the leather pouch. She punched out one of the capsules, pulled up her sweater and pressed the tube against her ribs. Her hands trembled as she shook a yellow tablet out of a small bottle and placed it under her tongue. A few minutes hunched up on the floor and she felt almost normal again.

The sound of laughter roused her and she reluctantly opened the door. The small room seemed full of blonde girls; bright skimpy clothes, their long bare legs a golden brown, white teeth flashing. They became silent as she emerged and when they didn't move she pushed between them to a basin and stared at her reflection in the mirror above it. A chalk white face stared back at her, the brown eyes rimmed with kohl as dark as her hair, the shape of the mouth unrecognisable under heavy purple lipstick. The black turtle neck sweater lapped her chin and hung loosely on her thin shoulders.

Someone laughed and she turned. Clear blue eyes gazed at her. As she confronted them, the girls looked at each other smiling and then away.

'You got a problem?'

'No. No problem.' The accent was perfect, the smile genuine. 'We thought perhaps, maybe you are not well, but we see that you are.'

Chloe waited a few moments after the girls left the bathroom, then took a deep breath and opened the door. Most of the seats in the downstairs cabin were taken. She stared pointedly at two Chinese girls who had strewn their belongings over several seats and when they ignored her, climbed the stairs to the upstairs deck. The benches facing the ocean were less crowded and she hunkered down on one next to the stairwell, out of sight. She gazed out over the water until the nausea receded and when the tall cranes of Fisherman Island loomed she pulled the travel folder out of her bag. She looked closely at the flight details. She could cash in her ticket to Dubrovnik when she got to London. With the money her mother had given her, that should last until she found a job.

He came from the north, away from the cool wooden house with its view of the beach, across the causeway, where pelicans gazed down at him from the top of the buttresses, and onto the wide expressway. Squashed into the back seat between his two sisters Joshua smiled happily. He jiggled around, looking this way and that and kept up a running commentary on the bright murals which lined the road, as though he had never seen them before. His family made non committal replies but he took no notice.

As the car turned east he shouted, 'Look!' and pointed, narrowly missing his older sister's nose. 'There's a shuttle.' In the distance a bulky object was ascending slowly past the radar tower, while the sleeker shapes of the intercontinental aircraft dropped from the sky like arrows.

'Careful, Josh.' Susan Harper leaned back to avoid her brother's swinging arms.

His mother craned her head round from the front seat. 'Give me your watcher. I want to check it again.'

Josh shook his head but his sister seized his wrist, unclipped his watcher and handed it over. Mrs Harper fingered the screen, squinting in the bright sunlight. It was a typical winter's day in Brisbane; a cloudless blue sky, the midday sun pouring through the car windows. Josh looked from left to right as though trying to absorb everything around him.

'Ok.' Mrs Harper handed the watcher back. 'Now tell me what you are going to do.'

'Stay in the transit lounge at Singapore, Mumbai and Dubai,' Josh intoned. 'Drink plenty of fluids. Check the concierge if Uncle Geoff doesn't meet me in London.' He rubbed his head, as he always did when annoyed, pushing his short spiky brown hair into an unflattering ruff.

Patricia Harper leaned forward and patted her mother's shoulder. 'He'll be fine. Won't you Josh?'

Mrs Harper frowned. 'And then?'

'I'll stay at one of the airport hotels and take the next connection to Limerick,' Josh replied impatiently. 'RJE has a permanent desk at the airport and someone will meet me there.'

Mr Harper muttered something and touched his wife's arm. She turned and stared out at the road.

Josh crowed with delight as the car exited the freeway and ascended steeply onto the accelerator, and the airport came into full view. Aircraft large and small paraded in an orderly fashion to and from the terminals. Another shuttle was being towed towards a hangar, the huge RJE insignia flashing in the sunlight.

'Just think Josh. Soon you'll be building the software for the new shuttles.' Patricia smiled and squeezed his arm but winced as he pulled roughly away.

Before the car came to a halt, Josh had undone his seatbelt and was pushing past his sister, trying to get out.

'Take it easy!' Susan grabbed his arm when he stumbled on the kerb.

Josh flung his backpack over his shoulder. 'I'm fine. You can go now. Goodbye.' He turned away and looked back in surprise as his father grasped his arm.

'We'll wait with you until your flight is called. Sue, you park the car and we'll meet you at the cafe.' John Harper took a firmer grip on his son's arm as Josh tried to pull away, and together they marched into the departure lounge.

John glanced at his wife's face. 'The queue's short. Why don't you get us some coffee and a table at the cafe.' He watched as his wife and daughter retreated and then shook Josh's arm. 'Now listen. Your mother's worried. Try to show some consideration.'

Josh looked sorry for a moment and then was distracted by an argument just ahead of them. A tall blonde guy, what Josh would call a himbo, was gesturing furiously at the check in clerk. His voice carried across the background noise.

'I have to have an aisle seat.'

'I'm sorry sir,' the woman replied pleasantly. 'All aisle seats have been allocated. When you are aboard you may find someone who is willing to change seats with you.'

'What's your name?' Anthony leaned forward and stared at the woman's ID badge.

Her expression did not change. 'If that's all sir, I'll attend to the next passenger.' She pushed Anthony's bags onto the conveyor belt and turned to Chloe.

Anthony spied the number on Chloe's boarding card and interrupted. 'You don't need an aisle seat, do you?' He smiled winningly at this fantastically dressed girl and Chloe glared back at him.

'None of your business.' Chloe pushed her cards across the counter and stared into the iris identity scanner until it beeped.

'We'll be sitting next to each other. I'm very restless – you won't get much sleep.'

Chloe ignored him, pushed her bag forward and gathered up her cards.

'Oh come on!' Anthony took her arm but Chloe gave him a ferocious look and wrenched her arm away.

While Josh stared in fascination John stepped forward, ready to intervene. But the airline clerk had already signalled to a security guard. He pulled out his baton and put his hand on Anthony's shoulder.

'You don't understand,' Anthony's beautiful face took on a mournful expression. 'I'm going to London for a funeral. I can't sleep.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake. He can have my seat.' A blonde girl pushed past John, murmuring apologies. '4F. I don't mind.'

'That's very nice of you.' Anthony looked at the girl with real interest. She had a lovely face framed by shining blonde hair, and a fantastic figure. She looked as though she had been crying but this seemed to make her even more attractive.

As the security guard retreated, Melinda gave Anthony a brief smile and turned back to the young man standing behind them. He was tall and dark with a thin featured interesting face. Alex stroked her hair and whispered something in her ear and Anthony glimpsed the diamond ring on Melinda's left hand as she reached up to kiss him.

'Asshole!' Chloe muttered and disappeared into the crowd.

Anthony shrugged and gave his card back to the clerk. She corrected the seat number and said without looking at him, 'Gate 5. The flight will be called in thirty minutes.'

He stood above, looking down; watching closely as the passengers made their way through the security gates and up the escalator. As the last of the group disappeared behind the glass doors his mouth creased upwards in a thin smile, and he turned away.