

## Chapter 1

### Nowhere to begin

THE END – that was it, the only end possible to this story. Her straw-stacking camel-driver of a boyfriend was history. Her feelings about him boiled in her mind as she assessed the lone figure looking at her from her bathroom mirror. Long dark blonde hair curled a little on its way to shoulders where there hung a black nightdress just flimsy enough to reveal her figure enthrallingly. He'd bought the garment for her but he wasn't the type to allow himself to be in her thrall. He'd even tried to convince her that her hair was some other colour, golden or ash or even light brown – he'd stopped short of dirty blonde or dishwater blonde – but it was none of those and she resented his attempts to redefine the image before her. The nightdress was a concession on her part but he'd never seen her wearing it; indeed she never had before tonight and she wore it now solely because he wouldn't see it – ever. After tonight it would be in the rubbish unwashed, unwanted, unworn again, but for now it was special, a symbol of spite, something to stop all her thoughts about him. Its smooth hyphephial surface clung to her in places so closely that it was more like a tattoo than a fabric, but she didn't want him tattooing his life on her body like that. Where the garment hung away from her well-outlined form attempting to reach her knees it appeared as though she was already shedding the tattoo like a snake shedding its skin. If only she could shed her memories of time wasted with him so easily, but they would remain tattooed on her mind as a lesson learned. The illusion of a tattoo was enhanced by cunning use of a combination of glass-clear nylon, fine filigree lace and satin weave panels to mould the pattern around parts of her body unsuitable for ink; her nipples in particular were left clearly visible through the nylon. At present they didn't deign to disturb the smooth surface of the garment but the nylon would make it easy to prompt them to do so, if she had a prompter any more.

Despite its seemingly erotic appearance and touch her meagre covering was a beautiful one-sided illusion. To achieve its effect it had many hidden seams and the satin and lace were far rougher on her side, so it was an irritation just like him. It wasn't so much something to be worn as scenery for use in a play, with its artistic side to the audience and unfinished roughness behind. Given the chance he would have used it in play but she suspected that she would have been little more than a plain backdrop to his performance before it as he strutted within his own mind. The irritation was aggravated by the closeness of its fit to her, or rather of her fit to it as had they not fitted each other like skin and body he would no doubt have blamed the body.

She glared at her image returning the glare from that unreality beyond the glass. 'You are all he wanted, so now you are all he will get, an illusion without feelings only in his mind's eye,' she thought. She had to admit that the image looked appealing but she could feel the irritating reality. Just one night spent wearing the thing would separate her from any illusion or doubt about him and remind her why she had ended their affair. 'You go to him then and leave me to find someone else to share my life,' she silently said to the image which reflected on her unspoken words. As she turned to her right to walk out of the bathroom door her non-existent self turned to her left and went out by another.

She, that is the one whose heart was in the right place, flounced into the bedroom of her small flat and threw herself into bed. At her age she was lucky to have a place of her own and, although it had taken some financing by her parents to acquire it, it gave her the feeling that she was in control of her life, something that was important to her. Nevertheless that life was now lacking something and she wrapped her arms around her own body to feel the more sensual side of the material clinging to it, the side intended for someone else's touch. It didn't help much as hugging herself just made the seams even more unendurable and she felt the need to tear it off and be comfortable, but she resolved to put up with the discomfort just to brand it into her memory of him. It was time to put herself first, to have the confidence to find a young man with flaws which she could heal, not opt for a man who was so complete in himself that she would add nothing to his life. She looked up at a crack in the ceiling. It had always been there, a familiar imperfection reassuring her of a steady relationship with a ceiling which would never fall in on her life. That was what she needed, not a

total crackpot but a man whose personality was just a little crazed, but not enough to fall apart on her. She drifted off to sleep, swinging between anger about the past and optimism about the future, anger about the optimism and past about the future, nightdress about her body, flimsy not to be seen – whatever.

A bright light in her eyes woke her. She opened them to see an evenly illuminated crack-free ceiling, so looked around to see where she was. It had to be a dream. She was lying in what appeared to be an enormous green pizza. The surface under her was soft like her mattress but felt more like cheese and a border of something similar surrounded her several feet away. ‘It must be vegetarian,’ she thought dreamily, then, ‘No, that can’t be right, not if I’m the topping. That’s pretty evident wearing this nightdress. Well I hope I’m still wearing it. Yes I can feel the damned thing. I’m sure even sausages must be more comfortable in their skins than this. Hello, is this the delivery boy? Things are looking up.’ She saw a long-haired youth standing over her, brown curls resting on the shoulders of a neat vivid blue zip-fronted outfit that fitted in all the right places. ‘Too vivid for a dream,’ she thought, ‘and he’s no giant to match my pizza, so I’m not sure. Better ask then. I’d like to know before someone starts slicing.’

‘Am I dreaming?’ she said.

The slim figure replied, ‘I’m afraid I really couldn’t say,’ adding, ‘but I think I am.’

‘This will never do, wasting time debating ownership of a dream,’ she thought, ‘Perhaps we could share it.’ She needed distraction from the issues of reality and this seemed a pleasant opportunity without consequences. She had a feeling that he could deliver the goods on time. Stretching herself she spread her fingers and pressed them deep into the resilient surface. ‘In that case,’ she hummed lazily, ‘are you dreaming what I’m dreaming?’ but he’d already turned and was walking away over the spongy surface. ‘No,’ she thought, ‘I’m not having that.’ She stood up carefully, never having walked on a pizza before, and looking down at her bare feet spread her arms to balance as she bounced a little to ensure that it was safe. As she did so she realised that he’d turned back on hearing her remark and was watching her imitating a fledgling testing its wings. She cursed herself for looking so gawky, but it occurred to her that it shouldn’t matter if it was her dream. Clearly this ownership issue needed resolving immediately. Taking a pace towards him on the rubbery substance she asked, ‘Well, if we’re both dreaming then who decides what happens next?’

He seemed to consider the matter for a moment and then a worried look appeared on his face as he said, ‘The date – please tell me the date.’

‘What stupid sort of question is that to ask now?’ she thought, ‘I know he’s dishy but does he have so many appointments in girls’ dreams that he can’t fit me in? I thought he could deliver on time but apparently he doesn’t even know what day it is.’ Nevertheless the panicked look on his face persuaded her to humour him, but the date wouldn’t come to her mind either. Usually dreams go undated until they’re over. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said, ‘I can’t remember the date. Is it that important?’

Maybe it was as he looked at his watch. Perhaps that told him the date. They stood looking at each other for an apparent eternity. It had never occurred to her that it was possible to dream of nothing happening, but nothing was apart from her own thoughts, which strangely seemed quite distinct from what she was dreaming. He seemed like someone she’d always known, but presumably that was simply because he was a figment of her own imagination, which appeared to be working overtime. Perhaps like that nightdress he was a patchwork of pieces of other people known to her sewn together on the inside, in which case maybe he was feeling as uncomfortable as she was. ‘Well is it?’ she asked again, tiring of a dream where the pause button had apparently been pressed for too long. It wasn’t as though she could nip out and get a coffee in the interval.

To add to her confusion he said something about looking in the calendar for her, which she didn’t understand as she’d never consider her picture appearing in any calendar and most definitely not wearing that nightdress. Then without warning or asking he pulled her against himself and kissed her. She might have felt that at last things were going her way but instead she felt something else.

A pins and needles sensation started in her extremities and swept rapidly through her limbs until

she couldn't feel them at all. As he pulled her against his body she kept going as though she were soaking right into him. She could feel the fabric of her nightdress pressed against her back by his hands, but it was the sensual outer surface that she could feel, not the irritating side, as though he were holding the empty garment behind her. At the same time she felt her breasts rubbing against something hard curving around them, but apart from that she could no longer feel any sensations from her skin at all, not even a memory of her abrasive nightwear. What she did feel was her heart pounding strangely with a double beat as though it had split into two separate organs. She'd closed her eyes when he kissed her, but when she tried to open them all she could see was a black starry sky through which she seemed to be falling. She tried to gasp but her breathing was somehow controlled and steady, beyond her influence. Disoriented by the vision she closed her eyes but, feeling the sensations fade back to more normal ones, opened them cautiously again to find that she was simply in his arms. The postponed gasp came at last and she said, 'You call that a kiss?'

'I haven't had any complaints before,' he replied.

'No, not that, all the other strange stuff, the stars and the – squishing together. Standing on this stuff I wouldn't know whether the earth moved but I wasn't expecting an interstellar heart attack either.' As all sensation returned she felt a chill in the soles of her bare feet. She looked down at a hard grey floor surface and added, 'but what's happened to the pizza? My feet are getting cold.'

He looked puzzled. 'Squishing together? Pizza? I think I've missed something. I'm sorry, I've never done this before. I didn't actually expect to end up under the stars like that either.'

'Well, if I'd known that we were going outside under the stars I'd have worn something more suitable myself – like my skin at least. It felt like I lost most of it when I fell inside – inside something. I thought you were just going to kiss me. And why is this floor so cold all of a sudden?'

'I didn't even know there was an outside before,' he muttered, then added brightly pointing at the floor, 'but it must have worked,' as though the disappearing pizza had been a conjuring trick. He looked at his watch yet again and his face fell. 'My watch isn't working though. That's strange.'

She was getting annoyed at his obsession with dates and times. How could she enjoy a leisurely dream with a constant clockwatcher? 'Working?' she said, 'Is anything supposed to work in a dream? I don't expect things to make sense but why have I got someone so senseless?'

'Oh, I'm so sorry. I'm not usually like this. I was so engrossed in being lecherous that I forgot my manners. Come with me. We should be able to find something more for you to wear.'

More to wear? This dream was going backwards, but she was curious to know where backwards led, certainly not anywhere that she'd expected apparently. Bizarre thoughts of ballroom dancing crept into her mind; the man leads and yet the woman goes backwards; no, nothing was making sense any more. Anyway, now that the bouncy green surface had gone from under them the circumstances weren't ideal for lying back – and that damned nightdress was still scratching her again. How had that managed to accompany her into this dream? She imagined herself lying comfortably naked on that soft smooth green surface while he – no, apparently this wasn't her dream after all. He led her through a doorway and she realised that her pizza was simply a long green upholstered couch running around the walls of a circular room broken only by two doorways. However, the change in the floor remained unexplained as did the clarity of the details in this supposed dream. She wasn't just thinking these things; she was actually seeing and feeling them in incredible detail. They crossed a corridor, which curved around the outside of the room with big picture windows facing into it, and entered another room which looked like it should have been in a hospital. Well at least it had a bed. She thought it a bit odd to start playing doctors and nurses, but he just opened a tall cupboard and said, 'I thought these would be here. Nothing much has changed apparently. You should find something to fit you.'

In the cupboard hung a row of white dressing gowns and below them were towelling slippers, presumably for the use of patients. Realising that she was getting cold she gratefully found the right sizes and put them on, amused by his forthright honesty about his lechery and unexpected turn of gentlemanly behaviour. Meanwhile he walked back across the round room and looked at a darkened doorway beyond the one opposite, apparently lost in thought. He seemed to be swinging from outright passion to indifference and preoccupation. If this were really a dream then she'd have

expected just pleasant thoughts and sensations, but instead she found herself having doubts and needing information. Following after him she said, 'Please explain – well everything really,' not able to identify the question uppermost in her mind.

'Um, I'm not supposed to do that normally – but maybe that only applies there and we're here, I think. Look, I need to check some things. Could you just wait there for a moment and then I'll try to explain.' He walked away into the darkened room leaving her even more confused, knowing that he appeared so also. A little light filtered into the room from the corridor but she heard metallic sounds and curses as he blundered around. This made her even more apprehensive, doubting that anyone would use such language in her dreams, but she couldn't see how she could be in his and know it, so maybe it wasn't a dream at all.

Before dark thoughts grew in her mind he emerged again saying, 'Nothing's working, not even the emergency lighting. That's really peculiar. We'll have to go upstairs. Perhaps we'll find the answer there.'

He pointed out a staircase at the end of the corridor and as they walked over to it she said, 'Please tell me honestly. Is this a dream or is it really happening?'

He snorted a laugh. 'Doesn't anything happen in your dreams then? No, it's not a dream and it isn't happening, but I think it's real. I don't suppose that helps, does it?'

'No,' she said, looking at the walls of the staircase in front of them, which were painted with large fish against an aquamarine background. 'How can something be real if it isn't happening?'

'I mean that everything here is normal. The things that seem to happen here are just as you'd expect. If you miss a step you'll fall down the stairs and injure yourself, so be careful in those slippers. It wouldn't matter much though; virtually nothing matters here, but I don't want you to hurt yourself. Here, take my hand.'

She slipped her hand into his and she felt it close and stop with a gentle grip, but his fingers felt as rigid as though she were hand in hand with a marble statue. His flesh was smooth but hard as though he spent his time handling heavy objects, maybe just working out, but the texture didn't suggest that he was involved in rough labour. How was it that every cell in her body seemed to be contributing to this dream, that she was assessing him in a way that she'd only do in real life? Could it be that all this was real? No, there'd been that peculiar experience in his arms, drug induced possibly, but then why had it happened after the dream or whatever had begun and how could it have ceased so abruptly? She had to press him for answers. 'That kiss wasn't what I expected. That wasn't normal. Something weird definitely happened,' she said.

'I thought you were asking me about this place, not that one.'

'That place, what place? Is there a difference then?'

'Give me a chance. I'm still trying to understand what's going on myself.'

'You don't know either? But you seem to know your way around. How can you know where you are but not what's happening, or what's not happening as you insist?'

He stopped on the staircase to look at her. The only way to describe his eyes was that they were hazel, if only because she couldn't decide exactly what colour they were, but she could see every detail in them so clearly and – he was talking now, the look on his face suggesting that he realised that she was truly having doubts. 'The best way that I can explain it is that I know how this place used to be, but maybe not exactly how it is now. You could say that I've been here before, but I don't have a precise explanation for how I got here now except that I wanted to come. To be honest I wanted to find the time to get to know you and apparently I have somehow. If you think you're confused you should see things from my side, but I really can't explain it yet. All I can say is that this is more than a dream but less than reality.'

'What's more than a dream but less than reality? There's nothing in between those two.'

He paused for only a moment before replying, 'But isn't that how we plan our lives, dreaming of what we want to do and then making it a reality? Somewhere in between there are things that might possibly become reality or already are. We don't always know which is which. Sometimes we plan ahead, rehearsing the possibilities in our minds. Maybe that's how we should see this, as a rehearsal for something that we might want to happen, but as I said it isn't happening now. I'm

absolutely sure of that.'

'I really don't understand. How did I get into this – more than a dream?'

'Usually people can explain that themselves. Did you have a reason for coming that you can think of? Anything troubling you at all?' As he spoke he looked away and carried on leading her up the stairs, maybe not wanting to make the question too personal by looking her in the eyes any more.

This was getting pretty weird, someone in a dream asking her why she was having it. Perhaps it was some form of subconscious self-analysis after all and she should go along with it. In any case she was convinced that she would never meet him again and surprisingly that bothered her. 'No, I don't have any concerns now that I've split up with my boyfriend. Actually I was looking forward to the possibility of starting afresh with someone different – ' Her voice trailed off as the situation dawned on her. He was as different as she could imagine. She wanted a relationship where she could keep control of her life and he'd just said that nothing that happened here mattered at all. Not only had she realised the implication but she'd told him as much outright. She had to know whether she was playing this game with herself or someone else. 'Hold on,' she said, 'How can I tell whether you're even real?'

He stopped at the top of the stairs and looked around the room there. 'Smaller than I expected,' he said, 'They've made some changes.' Then he turned to her and said, 'Oh yes, I'm very real and so are my feelings. Maybe I'm not coming up to your expectations. Does that prove anything, the fact that I'm a disappointment to you? Probably not. Now you'll think you dreamed me up to criticise in place of your boyfriend. Okay, if that's what you need go ahead. It wouldn't be fair to disillusion you. Nobody should have their illusions shattered.'

She felt that at some point she'd shattered his and tried to soften her approach. 'Okay, so maybe I was partly responsible for getting here. If so then how do I get back – to reality or ordinary dreams?' she asked.

He looked crestfallen and said, 'We finish that kiss and then I send you back – where were you before you met me?'

'Funnily enough I was asleep in bed. There aren't many other places I'd be in a nightdress like this. I have been to pyjama parties in the past, but not in this.'

'Let me know if you do and I'll be there. You look exquisite in it. Do you really want to go back then? Back to what, to sleep, perchance to find a better dream? How many ways can you find to offend me? Or do you think more beauty sleep could make any improvements, because I don't.'

She felt assaulted by the oddly eloquent compliment. 'Wait, what do you mean, finish the kiss?' she asked.

'Don't worry, that never really happened either, but even things that don't happen must end. You want this to end as well, don't you? I'm disappointed. For a moment I thought there was something –' something he couldn't describe apparently.

She couldn't describe it either, but she also knew that it existed and she felt the need to press him on it. 'What if I did stay a while, if only to get some answers? What would we do?'

'Look for them and maybe decide how long a while it is. I've found the time but I don't know how much yet and I don't know how safe it is to be here.'

'Safe? You mean that we could be in danger? But you said that nothing here mattered.'

'Well danger can be unpleasant even if it doesn't matter, in the long run that is. It's a bit like a visit to the dentist I suppose. No matter how much you suffer at the time you know that it will end soon enough. That's the sort of danger that I meant. Nowhere is entirely safe and as that's exactly where we are we don't really have to worry. You've nothing to fear from me either. I'm an engineer, not a mad scientist. I'm hardly going to lock you away in a room while I play music on my mighty organ. This place doesn't even have an organ. Somebody here used to have a mouth-organ and they got pretty unpopular. There's really nothing here to be afraid of.'

An engineer, that explained his strong smooth grip, but before she could think any more about his grip, his eyes, his gentle attitude and a lot more besides something startling happened. In complete contradiction of his claim the peculiar room before them filled with thunderous organ

music and they stood staring at each other in amazement.

Bah! Humbug! Enough of this nonsense! This young man is no beefcake, indeed little more than an undigested bit of beef – or else this is a fairy tale beyond redemption, a romance wherein these two young people have mutually dreamed of such an encounter and Cupid has loosed his bow or Yue Lao has bound them with his red cord of fate. Either way it is love at first sight, irrational, illogical and either blessed or doomed. A woman who indulges her fantasies so rashly is more likely to conceive a child than such a young man. Perhaps we have it wrong anyway; perhaps she is his creation, a daydream wished into existence after he read a personal advertisement in a magazine or on a website. *‘Spinster, age 20, height five foot six when balancing barefoot on a giant pizza, dark blonde hair below a cracked ceiling in her third floor flat jointly financed by her parents, seeks imperfect young man with a good sense of humour for an unlikely relationship.’* Maybe not. No, probably this story should be lacquered with purple prose to protect it from the realities of life and the book promptly closed in the assurance that this couple will live happily ever after whatever their past or future. We could so easily call this the end if those very words had not already been written.

And yet, in closing the book so peremptorily wouldn't we ourselves be determining the fate of this young woman, to lie pressed into two dimensions between the pages like a flower deprived of all its nutrients, a flower which may have had life if we had given it the chance, for no matter how flowery the prose there can be no reality within these pages if they remain unread. *‘How can something be real if it isn't happening?’* she asked. Indeed how can something happen without being touched by reality? We are well acquainted with the sensation of reality, how it envelops us, clinging more closely than even her fantastic nightdress, continually stimulating every nerve in our bodies with the overwhelming itch of existence. Scientists can analyse every fragment of its nature, even down to the most fundamental quantum particles, themselves so fantastic that ultimately only mathematics, not any plain language, can describe them. They dream of creating a model of reality, exact and complete in every detail, and yet if such a thing ever existed who could say which was the reality and which the model? In fact it happens all the time, in every human mind, creation of a model so precisely matched to our own perception of reality that we hardly know where the boundary between the two lies, as this young lady has discovered. Only when the two diverge do we ask ourselves, *‘Is this real?’* but if we have no basis for an answer we ask someone else, *‘Did you see that?’* for if their experience was the same as ours we feel justified in believing that it was real. Therein lies the essence, that an experience shared defines a reality, be it merely a model or otherwise, and therefore this young couple can only truly experience the events in their existence and share them with us if we in turn share our reality with them and augment the imperfections of the written word with our own perceptions, restoring these pressed flowers to life and giving them the dimensions that the words lack, for though they may presently lack life they have unique identities, traits and personalities which once created can never be denied. Perhaps given this opportunity they may gain insight into the nature of their reality and maybe even ours.

Where to begin though? This truly is nowhere to begin, being both nowhere and no beginning. Indeed the tale seems virtually ended in our minds, but we must take care to separate the virtual from the real. Where does any reality begin? How is it conceived? Perhaps with an event so astonishing that it is itself almost inconceivable, the scientist's Big Bang, the aborigine's Dreaming or the preacher's Book of Genesis. Perhaps if this is tantamount to a fairy tale then the latter origin is pertinent to this reality, if fairies are beings trapped eternally between heaven and hell as some would claim; perhaps there is here the reason why the story has only just begun; perhaps this couple have not just fallen in love but unwittingly discovered the ultimate talisman, greater than the Holy Grail or the Ark of the Covenant, nothing less than the key to Eden, maybe not a tangible object but a living force capable of bringing all mankind back to grace. No way; they are not worthy, not exceptional enough, and how would they use it anyway? Would they simply unlock the gates to that sacred garden and allow mankind with all its shortcomings to trample the place? Even if they didn't, if they kept the discovery to themselves, how could any couple truly live happily ever after beyond the company of the rest of humanity? No, surely that isn't the story. Maybe the aborigine's dreaming is more apt, not a single event but the continual movement between a place outside of

time and reality. It seems unlikely that we'll find any solution in the scientific community, who seem preoccupied with fighting off the invisible unicorns, poor things, that trouble them so much, but anyway we are ahead of ourselves, already seeking the nub, the end when we haven't yet chosen a beginning.

Surely then there is only one way for this reality to begin if we wish it to, in the way that it began for all of us before we understood what it was, in a personal dreaming time that we don't clearly remember, before our memories had a sound structure to which to cling, in other words inside the mind of a child. Surely that is where reality is first conceived. That is it then, the only beginning possible to this story. All we have to do is pledge to give these people credence and turn the page, but first a word of warning that a long time ago someone very perceptive is said to have written on a wall in a temple at Delphi. It was written in Greek but perhaps a rough English translation of it would read *'Folly follows a pledge.'*