

The Salesman

Marly sat on the front verandah, waiting. Shaun and Azza had been working on Azza's car all day, driving the ute to the wrecker's for parts, taking Azza's black V8 for spins around the streets, steering the big car back through the hole in the fence to bury their heads under the bonnet like stupid long-legged emus. It was past six o'clock, though you wouldn't know from the heat. The house was cooked. Even the fridge was moaning. Marly was desperate for a beer.

She leaned back in the verandah armchair and wiped the sweat from her face. Chances were that the boys had stopped in at the pub on their way home from Supercheap. They'd be standing at the bar, promising each other just one beer before they headed back. And that meant she was stuck. Shaun had insisted they rent this crappy house, miles from anything except other crappy houses, because it had a ready-made hoist and pit in the yard and he'd be able to make a few extra dollars fixing mates' cars. Six months later and all anyone had ever paid was a slab. A half-empty slab by the time the guy had driven off.

She pulled her phone from her pocket and played with the buttons. No credit. No one had texted or called. Out in the front yard the dog yawned and stretched out in the patch of dust he had claimed as his own when Shaun brought him back from the swap meet a couple of months ago. Marly didn't get the idea of a dog. They didn't do anything for you. They didn't do anything at all except eat and sleep and shit. Cable had chosen one corner of the yard for shitting, and it happened to be on the way to the letterbox. The rest of the yard was littered with things Shaun had been going to fix but had never got around to. They'd all ended up in front of the house, waiting for the big day when he'd load up the ute and head off to the tip. Except Marly knew from experience that a trip to the tip meant a trip to the tip shop. The amount of rubbish around the house stayed the same – it only changed in shape and degree of uselessness.

'Excuse me, madam, am I speaking to the mistress of the house?'

Marly shaded her eyes and squinted at the dark-skinned man standing beyond the fence. 'Whatever you're selling, we don't want it.'

The man was short and slender, with small hands holding a blue clipboard, and feet in shiny black shoes tied with neat bows. He shook his head.

'I am not a salesman, madam. I am not here to sell you a single thing.' His face was perfectly proportioned, like a doll's. His skin was a rich toffee colour. He had the eyes of a girl, runny brown with thick lashes and an upward tilt

on the outside. He was as beautiful as a girl. Maybe he was a girl. Marly had seen plenty of sex-change people on TV shows. He might once have been a girl and now he had turned into a beautiful man pumped full of hormones with a prick made of sewn-up bits of skin and flesh.

‘Madam, I wonder if I might have a glass of water. I’m very tired, and thankfully this is my last street for the day, but I still have to walk through the reserve to get back to my car. It’s very hot. Very hot indeed.’

She could see the sweat glistening on his upper lip. His white business shirt was stuck to his chest. What would be the harm?

‘You can come and wait on the verandah in the shade and I’ll get you some water. But don’t you come near me,’ Marly said, certain that this honey-dark man with his girl eyes would bewitch her somehow into kissing him. ‘You sit on the steps there. My husband will be home any minute.’

As if he had heard her, Shaun’s tune rang out from the mobile.

‘Azza’s shouting us pizza for tea. You want capricciosa?’

He was slack in plenty of ways, but no other boyfriend had been as attentive as Shaun. She would never do better than this – a man who thought about what she might want, who asked, who had not once in eleven months raised a hand to her.

‘With double cheese and, hon, don’t hang up – I’ve got no credit. There’s a guy here, he wants to sell us ...’ She paused. What did the Paki want to sell them? He was sitting

on the verandah steps in the shade, elbows on his knees, shirtsleeves rolled up and hands hanging to his ankles. The blue clipboard and a canvas shoulder bag she hadn't noticed before lay behind him on the peeling floorboards. 'Yeah, anyway, bring home some beer, will you? And don't take long.'

The dirt from the verandah would ruin Pran's grey cotton pants but he was too exhausted to stay on his feet. The streets in this neighbourhood were desolate and confusing in their sameness. On his map the courts and crescents wound around each other like snakes. Spindly wilted gum trees stuck out from bald nature strips, and house after house had nothing but broken toys and rubbish in the yard. No shade anywhere. In some yards the carcasses of dry weeds stood higher than Pran's head.

About every third house his footsteps would detonate an explosion of barking. Mongrels, most of them, but occasionally a rottweiler or a pit bull would push its brutish head through a gate and stare at Pran as he passed. A few streets ago he had seen a weatherboard Church of Christ, surrounded by gravel and dumped cars. The windows of the church were boarded up.

Yet despite the dusty quiet of the hot streets and the empty yards, everyone was home. That morning in the office the team leader had said the area rated seventy per cent unemployment, so he told Pran and James not to turn up their noses like that. 'This is where the sales are. You

won't do any good in Toorak. They've got everything they need. This is where you'll make some money.'

The team leader had been right. Pran had overtaken his personal-best daily sales figure by eleven o'clock, and doubled it in the afternoon. He'd been about to take a short cut through this street and cross the reserve to his car when he saw the blonde on the verandah. She wore a faded yellow singlet and blue satin boxing shorts, and sat on an old stuffed armchair. Strapped to the stub of her leg under the left knee was a metal prosthesis with a running shoe fitted over a rubber foot. Her right foot was bare.

Pran knew he'd make a sale here.

It took a while for the cold tap to run cold water. Marly used to catch the warm water in a basin, then pour it later on the two-dollar punnet of pansies she'd planted in the square of dirt outside the back door, but they died so she didn't bother anymore. She waited with her hand in the stream of water, enjoying the sensation of the water cooling down. She thought about the pipes running underground, and wished there was some way they could use them to cool the whole house. On days like this, when the mercury rose above thirty, the flat roof sucked in the heat and it was five degrees hotter inside than outside, according to the thermometer Shaun kept on the kitchen wall.

'It's only out of the tap.' She handed the glass to the man, who was mopping his brow with a white handkerchief.

'Thank you very much.'

‘You’re not here about God, are you? Or Jesus? I’m not religious.’

‘No, madam. I am Hindu. Our gods are many and we do not proselytise.’

In rehab, when she was learning to use her new metal leg after the accident, the man working with the other physio in the room had said he thought his disability was a message from the Lord Jesus. ‘He made me this way and I don’t dispute it,’ he’d proclaimed, waving around his stumpy arm with its fused fingers. ‘I see it as extra rungs on the ladder to heaven, given to me free and clear as compensation for this damn flipper and the bits that I haven’t got.’ The physio strapped a harness to the man’s torso and helped him to ease into the contraption that took the place of his missing legs. ‘I just hope,’ the man said, ‘that this fancy new equipment doesn’t deduct from my extra allocation of grace.’

The Paki man drained the last of the water and placed the glass carefully beside the verandah post. Cable had finally stood up and shaken the loose dirt from his bristly brown coat. He wandered across the yard to sniff the feet of the new visitor.

‘What kind of dog is this?’ The man leaned backward, away from Cable – who, she had to admit, stank.

‘It’s a bitser. You know, bitser this and bitser that.’

The man tilted his head to the side. From this angle he was even more beautiful. Marly thought he should be a model or a TV star, not some loser walking around the suburbs trying to sell stuff.

‘What is it you want to sell, anyway?’

‘I tell you, madam, I am not here to sell you anything. I am here to give you something for nothing. I know it sounds unbelievable, but it is true.’

‘Yeah, sure it is. And will you stop calling me madam? My name is Marly.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Marly. My name is Pran.’

He held out his hand and she brushed her fingers against it, expecting to find the skin moist with sweat, but it was dry and cool.

He nodded at her leg. ‘I am very sorry to see you have a disability. It must be hard to get out and about.’

‘It’s not so bad. When I put on jeans you hardly know it’s there.’ She thought again about the man whose flipper and missing limbs pushed him up the rungs of heaven. Her leg would hardly count for a single rung. When it first happened, she thought the men would run when they saw it, but she’d found the opposite. She used to say to her girlfriends that having half a leg had ended up being a bloke magnet, in a weird way. All of them falling over themselves to prove they were cool about it. ‘Because it’s discreet,’ one of them had said. ‘If you’ve got to have something wrong with you, it’s good that it’s discreet.’ Marly knew what he meant, but it was more than that. Hep C was discreet. Having a bra stuffed with padding because of cancer was discreet. This was something else. And at that point it was better to stop thinking about it because it started to feel creepy.

‘How long have you been in Australia?’

‘Strange that you should ask. In fact, today is the anniversary of my arrival, seven years ago. I came as an undergraduate student at Monash University, then I completed an MBA. Now I am looking for employment in my field.’

‘You must be pretty smart, then.’ Marly’s sister always talked about wanting to do an MBA. Marly was going to heap shit on her now. Get an MBA and you can walk the streets selling door to door.

‘So Pran, let’s cut the crap. What are you selling?’ Marly collapsed back into the lounge chair at the other end of the verandah. It had been two years since the accident but she still leaned to her good side when she stood too long, and the aching would start in her hip and shoulder. ‘I told you my husband was coming home soon, right? He’s got a mate with him too.’

Sometimes she thought she and Shaun had a psychic bond. Like before, when she was playing with her phone wishing she had credit and then a few minutes later he’d called. Now he and Azza turned the corner into the street, the ute so polished and bright that its red gleam reflected off the fibro walls of the houses either side.

‘See? Here he is.’ In a movie she would leap off the verandah and run in slow motion toward the ute, her hair streaming behind, white dress fluttering in the breeze. But these days all she could do was stump around. The rubber foot connected with the ground at an odd angle, and she could feel it jar through her body with every step.

The boys pulled in to the yard and eased themselves up out of the ute that Shaun had lowered so far it almost dragged along the ground. They stood staring at Pran for a moment. Azza snickered. He turned his head so only Shaun and Marly could see his face and mouthed the word *Paki*.

‘Shit,’ Shaun said loudly. ‘A fuckin’ curry-muncher.’

‘Good evening.’ Pran stood and extended his hand, grateful that this would be his last sticky, grimy handshake of the day. The first thing he did when he got home each night was to take a long cool shower with antibacterial soap. Too bad if there was a water shortage. He needed to get clean after walking streets like these.

Neither of the men offered a hand in return. The tall one with the shaved head turned to the woman on the verandah.

‘What’s he selling?’

She shrugged. ‘Did you bring the beer?’

‘Here, gimme the slab, Azza. I’ll put it in the fridge.’

Pran watched the bald man heft the slab into his muscular arms and cradle it like a baby as he leaped onto the verandah and opened the screen door with his foot. It slammed behind him. The other man lifted two large pizza boxes from the cab of the ute and walked up the steps past Pran, the thick smell of the pizza following him, and the dog drifting along behind, nose held high as if it was riding the aroma. At the door, the man paused. He balanced the pizza boxes on one bulky arm and with

his free hand brushed his thick black hair back from his forehead.

‘Why is it always Pakis knocking on the door? Don’t they hire Australians anymore?’

Pran laughed. ‘Please, take my job. I earn seven dollars an hour.’ It was a lie. He was a natural salesman. He made a good living from these people. ‘But actually, I am not Pakistani. I am from Delhi, the capital of India.’

‘Right. That makes all the difference.’ The man laughed and passed through the door, dog following, leaving the screen door jammed open against a buckled floorboard.

‘Shut the frigging door, Azza! The flies get in.’ The woman hauled herself out of the armchair and thumped along the verandah.

‘Sorry,’ she said to Pran, stepping into the house and pulling the screen door shut behind her.

He listened to the uneven thud of her walking down the hallway. He would have liked one more glass of water, although when he looked again at the glass it was dirty. Still, he lifted it, tilted it high and waited for the single drop from the bottom to roll the length of the glass and fall onto his parched tongue. He put the glass back on the boards and gazed down the street to where the reserve began. Only a ten-minute walk to his car. The reserve was a patch of bushland that seemed to have been forgotten by the council or whoever created it. Even from here, Pran could see that the wooden barrier at the entrance had been torn out and cars had been driven in. A mattress was propped against the

fence of a house adjoining the reserve and further inside, under the trees, was the glint of broken glass.

‘Thirsty, mate?’ The bald man’s voice came from behind the darkness of the screen door.

‘Shaun, don’t, please.’ The woman’s voice echoed down the hallway. ‘Leave the guy alone.’

‘Come on, mate, don’t be shy. We’ll shout you a beer.’

‘You’re very kind.’ Pran used the verandah post to pull himself up. He was stiff from the long day of walking. ‘I’m not a beer drinker, but another glass of water ...’

‘I think we can rustle that up for you.’

Pran gathered his clipboard and bag and walked into the house past the bald man, who held the door wide with his arm.

When the Indian stepped into the room and smiled at her, Marly’s stomach flipped. He had been so serious before, an unsmiling manikin, but now that he had opened his face she wanted to touch his soft brown lips with her fingertips, run her tongue along his perfect white teeth. She felt the heat in her face and pushed herself up from the table.

‘I’ll find some ice,’ she said. ‘I think there’s a tray in the fridge in the shed.’

By the time she got back with the ice cubes melting in the tray, Shaun and Azza were sitting at one end of the laminex table with the half-empty pizza boxes in front of them, while Pran perched on a chair in the opposite corner of the room near the stove.

‘He doesn’t eat meat,’ Shaun said through a mouthful of pizza.

‘But I am most grateful for you offering it to me.’ Pran was holding his glass at chest height. When he raised it in a salute to the men, Marly saw that one of them had filled it with whisky. The Indian was so slim that half the amount would probably knock him out.

‘Here, let me fix that up for you.’ She emptied most of the whisky into another glass, then filled his glass to the brim with water and ice before handing it back. ‘This should cool you down a bit.’

‘You are very kind.’ He lifted the glass to his lips and sipped at it.

Marly watched closely. The whisky was the cheapest you could buy. She couldn’t drink it without drowning it in Coke. But the man’s angelic face didn’t flinch.

‘I see you have a plasma television.’ Pran nodded toward the screen, which was visible through the doorway into the lounge. It was a fifty-inch model Shaun had bought when they got the government bonus last year.

‘Brilliant for watching the footy.’ Azza directed his words to Marly, as if he couldn’t bear to speak to the Indian. ‘Right, mate?’ He said this to Shaun.

‘That’s why I bought it.’ Shaun reached for the pizza box and passed the second-last piece to Marly before taking the last one, rolling it into a tube and stuffing it whole into his mouth.

Marly took a bite and chewed on the salty, meaty, oily slice. She loved pizza. Sometimes eating was almost as good

as sex, like now, with the capricciosa sitting warm in her belly and a mouthful of fizzy sweet beer to wash it down. That Indian guy didn't know what he was missing.

'They say that next year all the football will be on pay television.' Pran took another delicate sip of the whisky and water. This time Marly thought she saw his jaw clench as he swallowed.

'Got it.' Shaun pulled a roll of paper towels from the bench behind him. He tore off four sheets and passed the roll to Azza before wiping his mouth and hands and tossing the used towels at the bin in the corner. 'You're here to sell us Foxtel, right?'

'No, sir.'

'That other one, then. Optus, or Star, or whatever it is.'

'Sir, I am not here to sell you a single thing.'

'Fuck, he's really starting to piss me off now.' Azza spoke to the ceiling.

'Your name is Azza, I believe you said? Where are you from, sir?' Pran seemed unperturbed. He swivelled a little on his seat to face Azza.

'I'm from Thomastown, mate.' Azza had gone quite still.

'And your family? They are from Thomastown too?'

'They're from Lebanon. Not that it's any of your fucking business.'

Pran nodded and took another sip of the whisky.

'So come on, give us your spiel.' Shaun rocked back on his chair and rested his thonged feet on the edge of the kitchen table like he was getting ready to hear a story.

‘I have no spiel. All I have for you is a free offer. No obligations, no payments, no commitments.’

‘Go on.’ Shaun was enjoying himself. Marly remembered the time he got the Mormons in and toyed with them for an hour and a half. She’d been drinking that night and so had he, and the evening was blurry – but the Mormons had never pressed charges, even though she’d found a piece of tooth in the glass on the floor the next morning, and it wasn’t Shaun’s and it wasn’t hers.

‘Do Hindus believe in God?’ Marly interrupted. If she could break the chain, tonight might end differently.

‘We have many gods, which are manifestations of a single reality. We believe in reincarnation, and in karma. What you choose to do in your life determines your destiny in this life and the next.’

‘Sounds like that chick in the crystal shop.’ Azza tipped back on his chair too, and swigged his beer.

‘Take your feet off the table, boys. It’s not nice.’ Marly tapped her nails on the tabletop. The Indian’s clean white shirt and his polished shoes were flickering like soft candles in the corner of the room.

Shaun and Azza were so surprised that they lifted their feet and dropped their chairs back to the floor.

‘Jesus, Marly, where’d the manners suddenly come from?’ Shaun reached across the table. He picked up a tube of toothpicks from the bench. He offered them around the table, but Azza and Marly shook their heads. The room was quiet as he rooted around the back of his mouth and

brought out the toothpick to examine it. The tip was bright with blood, like a thin match.

‘So.’ Shaun rubbed the toothpick between his thumb and forefinger, twirling it up and down the length of his thumb pad. ‘So, Pran, mate.’

‘Yes, Shaun?’

Marly couldn’t believe how relaxed he was. Either he was stupid or he had some secret weapon.

‘Pran, I don’t think we’ll be taking your offer of a free set of steak knives.’

‘I am not trying to offer you steak knives, Shaun.’ Pran lifted his canvas bag and brought out a pamphlet. ‘I am giving you free of charge six months of—’

‘I said we don’t want it, mate. The thing is—’

‘Mr Pran, what did you mean by manifestations of a single reality?’ Marly knew Shaun and Azza would be cursing her, but she had to make it stop. And maybe this calm little man had the secret. The secret of being happy, or of not always wanting to be someone else, somewhere else.

Pran wondered how the woman had ended up with these louts. ‘You see, Marly, our scripture, the Bhagavad Gita, says that there is a single essence that underlies all existence. You might call it the soul. “The soul dwells in every living being, and in every part of every living being; it dwells in the hand and the foot, the skull and the mouth, the eye and the ear.”’ Pran watched Marly move her lips as he spoke, as if she was trying to make his words fit into ones she might

understand. 'But for us in this world, it is only necessary to do one's duty.'

'You're giving me a headache, Pran.' Shaun finished his beer and lowered the bottle to the table. 'I think we're done here.'

'But I want to hear more. This is interesting.' Marly nodded at Pran and he saw the tension in her tight forehead. 'Come on, Shauny. Let him tell us a bit more.'

'Yeah, Shauny,' Azza whined in a mock falsetto, 'let's hear what the Paki has to say.' His voice dropped to its normal register. 'But you've gotta ask, if they've got it all worked out where he comes from, what's he doing here?'

'Come on.' Shaun leaped up from the table, his big body causing the room to tremble. 'We'll walk you to your car, mate.'

'I'm fine, thank you. It is very near.' Pran thought about the reserve and its bits of glass and discarded car parts. Outside, it was getting dark. The bush in the reserve would be dry and still and shadowy. He wasn't sure whether a path led straight through to the street where his car was sitting. Perhaps it would be wiser to take the long way around.

'Nope, I insist. Where is it?'

'Really, I don't want you to bother.' Perhaps these men thought they could attack him, take money from him. As if he would be stupid enough to carry money around a suburb like this. Pran eased his clipboard into his canvas bag and shook it until the clipboard had slid completely inside. 'Unless you feel like a walk. Company is always pleasant.'

‘That’s us, pleasant company. Right, Azza?’

‘Right.’ Azza stood and hitched up his jeans. ‘Let’s do it.’

Before he headed for the door, Pran turned and dipped his head to Marly. She was looking at him as if she felt sorry for him.

‘What you are suffering in this world’ – he waved his hand at Marly’s prosthetic foot, but his eyes were trained on her face – ‘will serve you in the next life.’

‘Great, ’cause it’s not doing her much fucking good in this one.’ Shaun laughed as he positioned his big hand on the back of Pran’s neck and guided him out of the kitchen.

Marly was waiting in the chair on the front verandah when the boys walked back through the hole in the fence. Neither of them looked at her. As she followed them into the house, a creased sheet of paper eased out of Shaun’s back pocket and fluttered to the floor. He didn’t notice until Marly had stooped to pick it up, then he turned and tried to snatch it from her. She stared at the printed sheet with Shaun’s scrawled signature at the bottom. ‘What’s this?’

Shaun tried again to nab the paper from her fingers but Marly held on.

‘A minimum of two thousand dollars over twenty-four months – are you fucking kidding? How did he get you to sign this?’ As she threw the paper onto the kitchen table, she noticed Azza thrust his hands in his pockets, but not before she had caught sight of the rusty brown stain on his palm.

‘Oh, no. What did you do to him?’ She pictured Pran’s melty eyes swimming with tears of pain, his soft mouth squeezed into a grimace. ‘Where is he?’ If they’d hurt that beautiful man she was going to kill them.

‘He’s all right, okay? I lost it for a minute, tapped him on the nose.’ Azza pulled his hand from his pocket, spat on it and rubbed it against his jeans until the stain was off his skin.

‘That’s blood.’

‘He’s all right. We said we were sorry. He drove away in his fucking Honda coupe. Now shut up.’ Shaun slammed his fist on the table. The dog bolted out through the back door.

Marly stood uncertainly in the doorway. Shaun was glaring at her, daring her to say a single word. She’d never find out how the Indian had got him to sign the contract.

‘I’m going out front.’ She took a beer from the fridge and stumped down the hallway to the verandah on her graceless steel leg. The streetlights were on. She could see the shadows of trees in the reserve. On the other side, somewhere, was Pran, flying along the freeway in his Honda coupe with two thousand dollars of their money. Money they didn’t even have yet. Two years of their lives signed away. Everything had turned upside down. She tried to remember what he had said about the essence. Something about hands and feet. Or skulls and ears. Or something.