

The Sweetest Dream

By Chris Barker

Theo lay on his back, staring at the ceiling as he waited for the nurse to return to his bedside. He wanted her to sit him up with his pillows slotted behind his head. He shut his eyes and breathed slowly; in-breath; out-breath; in-breath; out-breath.

He inclined his head to see the screen suspended over his bed. Television was Theo's world now. Cities ringed with flame; San Francisco, Vancouver, Athens and Sydney filled with smoke haze. Even London had seen spot fires break out across the city. Hospitals overflowed with asthma and heat stroke victims as temperatures soared to a scorching 40 degrees each day. The military had deployed to help exhausted firefighters.

A week ago, he had been sitting at his desk in his upstairs office doing the farm's accounts. Everyone else was out in the fields. He could smell smouldering wood in the air. *There must be back-burning on the escarpment.* Or perhaps fire was rampaging through the bush. One news report after another had warned them to expect a tough fire season this year.

The acrid stench of wood smoke began to pervade his senses. Theo coughed, opened his eyes, and stared into the void. The room was filling with a blue-grey haze. Flames crackled, and



raised voices drummed outside his window. Fiery heat enveloped the room. Bewildered, then viscerally scared, he ran to open the bedroom window, but it was stuck fast. He banged on the glass and shouted for help, then he picked up a vase and threw it. The pane cracked but did not shatter. He began to cough; he couldn't stop the convulsions. Panic rose within him.

When Theo awoke, he was drifting in and out of a world of red and blue blinking lights and silver machines that beeped and made his heart

jump. A siren exploded with a long whine, followed by a series of short stabs that took his breath away. Houses and cars and people and street lights whipped past the window as the ambulance accelerated down the street. Someone spoke on the radio about ETA and major burns. Then the back doors swung open, and mysterious blue figures shovelled him onto a trolley and whipped him away.

Later, he lay in a small room shadow-striped by half-open blinds. He was dressed in a light green gown and a blue cap. The left side of his face was sore and swollen, and his hair had gone AWOL. His arms and one of his legs were wrapped in a tan bandage. Assorted hospital equipment whirled like a helicopter at the end of the bed.

Theo reached for the remote and switched off the television. He needed to calm his mind. He did not think of money, fame, or why he had not written that novel. He remembered those he had loved and been loved by. And here was the bedrock of his life, strolling through the door towards his bedside. Alice bent forward and kissed his forehead, her long red hair engulfing him in a waterfall. She lowered herself into a grey plastic chair and dug her fingers deep into the edge of the mattress.

“And how are you?” she said.

“As well as can be expected,” Theo croaked. “The line between night and day is blurred these days.”

“Did you get some sleep?”

He nodded. “Hmm . . . How are things at home?”

“Everyone sends their love. Anna says she will come tomorrow. James is still in Spain. I’ve told him he needs to come home. But you know, he’s not a child anymore who does what he’s told.”

He picked up a pen and a notepad from beside his bed and wrote: “Sorry it’s hard to talk. All that smoke. My chest. James will be here when he wants to be. They say Anna came a couple of days ago. I was out of it. She’s a sweetheart.”

“She’s her daddy’s daughter. She loves you. It’s hard for her.”

Theo put down his pen and coughed.

“Could you help me with a drink of water?” he whispered. “My mouth is really dry.”

She lifted the glass of water from the bedside table to his mouth, and he sipped. Drinking had become hard work. His most basic faculties were slipping away. He gestured that he had had enough, and she placed the cup back on the table.

“The farm?” he said.

“Very dry and very burned. But we get by. There’s not much left of the house. But somehow, the barn survived, so we’re living in there. We’ve food stored, and not all the crops are destroyed. The roots vegetables are fine, and the greenhouses have protected the leafy greens. Our people are living on potatoes and kale and the odd egg given up by the last of our chickens. It could be a lot worse. Folks are starving out there. We’re afraid big bad men on motorbikes will turn up with guns and take everything one

day, but we've tried to prepare for that. We've put up barbed wire-topped fences, and we have patrols keeping watch. And after an endless argument, we've got guns. We'll use them if we have to."

"Guns?" he whispered.

"We had to."

"Can't the police protect you?" he wrote.

"I can't imagine they'll come to our rescue. More likely, they'd be cheering from the sidelines. They detained Joel for two days under the emergency powers and accused him of being a terrorist. In the end, they let him go, but it was scary."

"I can't believe Joel can just be taken away like that."

"It's the way of things now."

"Which is so not what we dreamed of."

"No." she said, her voice sad and heavy. "We had the sweetest dream. All gone up in smoke now." She paused to squeeze his frail hand. "Still, we must carry on. Maybe the children can dream again, one day."

They had met fifty years ago when he had arrived full of hope on her doorstep.

Before the bus had left the station, he had asked the driver about Arcadian Spirit. "They're a wild bunch up there," The driver was in his fifties, with neat greying hair. He wore a white shirt with a blue tie and peaked cap. "Typical hippies. All about living off the land and loving each other. Are you into that?"

"I'm visiting a friend," said Theo.

"Well, good luck with that. Hope you get out alive is all I can say. I've heard stories of strange goings-on up there."

"I'm sure I'll be fine," said Theo. "Could you tell me when to get off, please?"

"Sure, buddy. It's a while yet, but I'll give you a shout."

The driver was as good as his word, and Theo stepped off the bus beside a set of white gates beyond which a dirt track rose towards the shadows of indistinct buildings. A house stood on the dry and dusty lower slopes of hills that grew into rocky peaks silhouetted against the cloudless blue sky.

After fifteen minutes of sweaty uphill walking, Theo approached the homestead. Distant figures moved slowly in the fields beyond, but he met no one. According to the plaque on one wall, the California bungalow-style house dated from 1912. Its asymmetric gables, flaking, white-painted window frames, front veranda and sloping roofs traversed with terracotta tiles—some of which were missing or cracked—spoke of former glories and present neglect. Theo stared up at the central triangular peak painted with a rising sun and the name Arcadian Spirit. Then he scrutinised a series of corrugated iron Nissan huts and straw bale wigwams dotted around the area, which he assumed housed community members.

In the front yard, an abandoned and rusting tractor was succumbing to the entropic

consequences of time, now hastened by two girls, aged about six or seven, who were clambering over the bonnet and onto the cab roof. Nearby, a handful of Rhode Island Reds hunted for bugs in the dusty yard, and a scrawny grey dog snoozed in the sunshine beside the front door.

He knocked on the heavy cedar door and waited. When the door opened, a tall woman in her early twenties with flaming red hair and green eyes stood before him. She was wearing brown dungarees, a yellow T-shirt and large dangling silver earrings. An expression of surprise and curiosity etched her freckled face.

“Yes? Can I help you?” she asked.

“Hi, I’m Theo. We spoke on the phone yesterday. You said to come and see if I like the place.”

“Oh, hi, yes. I remember. Come on in. I’m Alice. I’ll show you around.”

He followed her down a long hallway towards the rear of the house.

“So this is the kitchen, obviously,” she said. “We share cooking tasks, but some people do more than others, depending on their interests and what other jobs they do around the farm.”

“Do you eat together every day?”

“No, we have two set meals together in a week, Sunday midday and Wednesday evening. Then in between, we kind of wing it. Most evenings, at least five or six of us gather here together.”

“So how many of you are there altogether?” asked Theo.

“Eleven adults and four children. There’s Joel and Steve and Mandy and Isaac, who are in the band along with Sally, Isaac’s girlfriend. Then there’s Mary, who’s with Joel, and Jill, plus Gary, Mike and Ryan, who are the roadies, and me, of course. You saw Molly and Grace outside. Then Jill has baby Billy, and Mandy has a toddler called Rose. And that’s that. It’s cool.” She added, “Come on, let me show you around the rest of the house.”

The house’s interior had aged somewhat disgracefully. Though the kitchen was bright, elsewhere the once white walls were now a dirty melancholic yellow.

“We’re working hard to smarten things up,” said Alice. “But it takes time.”

She showed him the bathrooms, one upstairs and one downstairs, and then pointed out the various bedrooms. They did not enter any until they arrived at her own. Two of the walls in Alice’s room were decorated with a mural of red and yellow flowers. The remaining two sides were painted white and adorned with reproductions of modern art: Kandinsky, Picasso and Dali.

Her double bed was covered with a pair of orange and blue sarongs. In the corner, a giant triangular bookcase housed her reading. Tucked under the window, her desk was littered with paper and pens. Though the room was modest in size, the window was well lit and felt more spacious than geometry alone would have determined.

“Great room,” he said.

“Let me show you the farm,” she said.

As they headed down the dirt track away from the house, Theo was enchanted by Alice’s flagpole posture and how she glided along the path as if skating across a frozen lake.

She led him across the yard and down a gravel pathway towards a giant pyramid of compost steaming in the bright sunshine. Beyond lay an area half the size of a football pitch subdivided into garden beds and planted with an array of vegetables Theo couldn’t identify. They stood side by side and admired the community’s handiwork.

“Wow, this is impressive,” he said. “You did all this?”

“Together we did, yes.”

“It’s fantastic! Are you self-sufficient then?”

“Not yet, but we’re moving in that direction. We grow about half our food, and we have eggs from the chickens, of course, and a goat. We’ve discussed getting pigs and even a cow, but we haven’t done that yet.”

“It all takes time and work, I guess.”

“It does, yeah, but it’s a labour of love. It doesn’t feel like work. It’s like Marx said, isn’t it? If you work doing something you hate for people with power over you, then it’s alienating. But if you work for yourself with people you love, it’s beneficial, and your spirit grows. Having a purpose—that’s the key to work and life, I think.”

“Are you a Marxist, Alice?”

“No, I’m not, but on that point, I agree.

Anyway, I am not an anything. I don’t like sticking labels on myself.”

She bent down, picked a daisy from the grass beside the path, and handed it to Theo. “To me, the antidote to alienation is love. Anyway, come and see our goat. Well, she’s a nanny, of course.”

He paused to adjust his baseball cap to better shade himself from the hot sun as he examined a row of leafy-green garden beds planted with lettuce, tomatoes and spring onions, all covered with shade cloth held up by lofty canes.

“If we don’t water them and protect them, the sun will burn the shoots before they get a chance to grow,” said Alice. “It’s a whole microclimate around here: not much rain most of the year. None of us were farmers, and we’re still learning a whole new set of skills.”

“It gets pretty hot around here, I guess.”

“Yeah. And I’ve been reading about this thing called the Keeling curve. It shows how carbon dioxide is increasing in the atmosphere. The temperature could rise three or four degrees, and that would be catastrophic.”

“How long have you been going?” asked Theo.

“A couple of years. It was tough getting established, and it still isn’t easy, but we’ve bedded in, and it’s worth it. It’s all worth it. The world can’t go on like it is. It’s a runaway train that we can’t control, and it’s heading over the cliff. Unless we find another way to live, it will all come crashing down.”

The evening ended with The Beatles' *All You Need Is Love*, and Theo's soul filled with the swirling colours of togetherness. He was happy: everybody could love everybody else forever, and the world would be saved.

A week later, Theo borrowed a van and moved his belongings onto Arcadian Spirit to start a new life. Alice showed him into his small, ground floor room in an outhouse behind the main building. Whitewashed walls, a single bed, a rickety wardrobe, a wooden chest of drawers that had seen better days, two bedside lamps and an electric bar fire. Not the Ritz, but good enough. He hung up his shirts and trousers, put his underwear in a drawer, and fastened a Woodstock 1969 poster to his wall.

Later that month, the communards held a party to celebrate the end of another year's collective living. The instant Theo stepped into the barn, a beaming Alice bounded towards him.

"Hey, Theo. Come and dance with me," she said enthusiastically.

"But no one else is dancing."

"So what? Let's get the ball rolling. It's about time someone started it off."

She took his hand and led him through the crowd towards the dance floor marked out in the centre of the barn with traffic cones someone had purloined from local roadworks. Theo felt self-conscious, but as she had predicted, others soon followed their lead, and the party began to swing.

They danced a metre apart until, after half an hour of lively, sweaty rock music, a slow ballad reached the turntable, and he welcomed Alice into his arms.

"I've got some acid. Want some?" she said.

He nodded, and she produced a tab for him to swallow.

The evening ended with The Beatles' *All You Need Is Love*, and Theo's soul filled with the swirling colours of togetherness. He was happy: everybody could love everybody else forever, and the world would be saved. LSD had opened the trapdoor of his mind.

Imagine. Arcadian Spirit had become a village, the village a city, the city a country; their world was the whole world, and it was easy to love other people. There were no petty squabbles, jealousy, anger, or fear of being lonely and abandoned. He was accepted, and he accepted others. Love, love, love. Love is all you need.

In his mind, the movement for love had snowballed throughout the land until thousands upon thousands were marching and singing songs of peace and togetherness. A revolution of the heart and mind. Governments fell, and the world was turned upside down.

Imagine all the people . . .

Theo had never felt so joyful. It was the victory of the human spirit. They could make a difference. God was dead, but with LSD, you could dream. He was filled with hope for the utopia of love. And he was not the only one.

He took Alice in his arms and kissed her. When the music ended, she led him by the hand into the farmhouse and the sanctuary of her bed.

That had been the beginning of his life with Alice. And now, a half-century later, the end was approaching.

Theo opened his eyes and smiled weakly as he took hold of her hand. “You’re still here,” he whispered.

“You nodded off.”

“Sorry.”

“We’ll take you home soon,” she said.

“Nothing more to be done,” he croaked, again reaching for his pen and paper. He wrote, “No more tests thank God, and no more treatment.”

“Nothing, are you sure?” Her voice vibrated with fear and disbelief.

“Nothing that I want to endure. Nothing worth the suffering. What I want now is to make the best of what time is left to me.”

“But surely—”

“No, Alice, please,” he scribbled. “We just have to accept that this is the way it is. My lungs are done for. My heart is on the edge of collapse.”

She leant forward and kissed him tenderly on

the lips. He floated in the bliss of her human touch. He wanted to lie here forever now with her lips resting on his. As the light faded in his eyes, she looked out of the window at the red sun as it dipped below the horizon.

Image: “[Post-bushfire recovery in Australia](#)” (Public Domain) by [U.S. Department of the Interior](#)