

MICHAEL PARKER



DOPPELGANGER

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FOR MARY AND STEPHEN

BUT HIS SOUL WAS
MAD. BEING ALONE IN
THE WILDERNESS, IT
HAD LOOKED WITHIN
ITSELF, AND, I TELL YOU,
IT HAD GONE MAD. I HAD
— FOR MY SINS — TO GO
THROUGH THE ORDEAL OF
LOOKING INTO IT MYSELF.
NO ELOQUENCE COULD
HAVE BEEN AS WITHERING
TO ONE'S BELIEF IN
MANKIND AS HIS FINAL
BURST OF SINCERITY.

JOSEPH CONRAD, HEART OF DARKNESS.

PROLOGUE

It was a few weeks before I killed my first person that the dizziness started. In the beginning, it wasn't much of a big deal. Everything would simply go soft around me for a moment and then click back into place. It usually happened at night, just before going to sleep, and I hardly even gave it a second thought.

But before long the hallucinations started kicking in. For two or three nights, right in the middle of the night, I'd feel like I'd suddenly *woken up* into a blackness that was all around me. Just like being buried alive. In a panic I'd think I'd already had my funeral and woken up in my own coffin and everyone else had gone home. The feeling would go for five seconds, sometimes ten, and I would thrash my arms and legs desperately, and scream. Then I'd wake up with a thump, as if I'd fallen onto my bed. I'd lie there in a sweat for half an hour before I could even think about getting back to sleep.

In the clear light of mornings, though, I just assumed it was my dreams going into overdrive. After all, I'd had nightmares on and off for years. They'd been worst about the time of Mum and Dad's divorce, and they'd come back every couple of months since. So, to cut a long story short, I was sort of used to them.

I thought for a while about telling Mum. Then I decided she'd get all freaked out about hardly ever being home for the only remaining member of her family. Then, to make up for it, she would call half a dozen specialists, who'd all call hospitals, who'd all call bigger hospitals. And before I knew it I'd be spending the next holidays lying in an experimental ward with tubes coming out of me and medical students poking at my exposed brain, instead of being on the school cricket tour that I'd spent six months saving for. So Mum – love her to death – would have to stay in the dark.

I could get through it on my own. Everybody has nightmares, right?

But then the images started.

Rising out from the darkness of my sleep would be smeared-out visions of a choked, grey night sky. I would stare at it with a fevered brain. Buildings would tower over me like concrete monsters brought to life and neon signs would leach their reflections into the oily puddles on the street. Once I gazed *down* on everything, swooping silently like a crow or a rook, weaving from block to chilled block. And all I could see was a city of grime and tenements with

no end; an urban wasteland that had spread out like an infection.

One time I saw two people in front of me. One had dyed green hair sculpted into spikes, and was wearing a tight-fitting silver bodysuit that looked as if it had been spray-painted on. There was a blade in his hand. The other man was just a normal guy and he was terrified. Then the blade was *inside* the other man and he was staring down at the hilt of the knife jutting from his stomach. I stared, transfixed. The green-haired figure twitched his head from side to side and opened his mouth to howl. Then the scene was gone.

Each time the images would last for only a couple of seconds. And they were unfocused, too, as if someone had rubbed Vaseline all over them. I knew, each time that I woke in yet another cold sweat, that they were something more than just ordinary nightmares. But I convinced myself that they were just some sort of dream or hallucination.

Except I was wrong. They turned out to be much more real than any hallucination.

I prayed to God that they would go away.

Instead they got a thousand times worse.



PART





‘Nothing will happen,’ the man in the balaclava said softly to me, ‘if you give me all the money from the till.’

Okay. It was okay, I said to myself. Keep calm. I had been told by my boss, my mother and the training videos exactly what to do. Give them everything they want and say nothing. No sudden movements. Most of the guys who hold up Seven Eleven stores were gone on dope or ice or speed or something, so any sudden moves freaked them out.

But I didn’t want to keep calm, I wanted to *panic*. I wanted to run out of the store screaming and waving my hands in the air. Jesus, I had a gun stuck in my face.

But no, come on. Calm. Calm. My boss told me that the best thing to do was hum a tune in your head. A soft tune. It stopped you panicking. He’d know – he’d been held up about five times. So I started humming some old song to

myself, just as if I was stacking the shelves. *Somewhere over the rainbow* . . . There, there, that's right. Almost working.

'Hurry it up,' hissed the man, and waved the gun at me.

I moved my shaking hand along the register and pressed the 'No Sale' button. The till popped open with a cheery ring. A couple of fifties and a bunch of twenties. I scooped them up and stuffed them into the hessian bag the guy was holding out.

The song I was humming was almost putting a lid on the panic I could feel in my stomach.

A car pulled up at one of the bowsers outside. It was a zippy car, red and new. A middle-aged woman got out – twin set on, and hair too high. 'Please don't come in,' I prayed desperately. It was when people like her started screaming that gunmen started shooting.

She went to the side of the car and opened up the petrol cap.

The man stared around. 'Come on,' he snapped. 'Hurry it or I'll shoot.'

I handed over the last bunch of twenties. The panic was still stuck down in my stomach, threatening to spill out. Now what would *Josh* do if he was here, I thought, just to torture myself. He'd say '*No – buy something or piss off you junkie.*' But no, not me . . . I would listen to my boss and my mother and the training videos. Because I wasn't going to be a hero. I was going to be me.

'Thanks,' said the guy in the balaclava.

And then his other hand shot out towards my face. The

panic suddenly squirted out of my stomach and towards my throat. I flinched backwards, but he grabbed my jawbone between his thumb and forefinger. He brought his face right up to mine. I flailed as if he was holding a cobra up to me. Oh God, after being a craven coward, I was going to be shot anyway. I could see straight into his eyes. They were a deep brown flecked with black – pupils too big for the corneas. For a moment they took up my whole vision.

‘Interesting,’ he said, as if he was looking at an experiment in a laboratory.

I felt something breaking, as if his hands had shattered a piece of plate glass inside my mind. Suddenly the world was slipping away. A blackness closed over. I was heading into the dark of my dreams as if it were a liquid. Taking me over, covering my skin. The panic was up in my throat now and moved up beyond, to my mind. Any moment now the images would start. I would be right in the middle of the neon nightmare with no way out.

And then I was back behind the counter at the Seven Eleven. The gunman took his hand away from my face. He twirled the hessian bag around twice.

‘Well . . . see you,’ he said. It sounded ominously like he really meant it. His balaclava crinkled as if he was smiling. Then he strode past the newspaper stand and out the glass door.

I slumped forward on the counter between the tic tacs and the jelly pythons. I didn’t close my eyes – there was no way I was going back into the blackness. Okay, I had to get a grip . . . get a grip. The darkness had happened dozens of times before, the only thing that was new was being

held up. Well, welcome to the world, I thought. It happens to every second late-night store attendant. Hey, people in wars had guns pointed at them every day. The whole thing had taken about fifteen seconds, for God's sake.

That's right. Keep it normal. I had been good, safe Andrew, and not done anything brave or stupid. I was fine with not a mark on me. Don't disturb the world and it won't disturb you. I got knocked around more than this in the average rugby game.

I could hear a drumming that made me feel weak, like ten different tracks playing at the same time inside my body. And what about those eyes?

But there was no time to think. I'd have to ring the manager, tell him the news, get the insurance filled out, go to the garage, get some change, then maybe get back to unpacking those Sarah Lee cakes for the freezer. Because that's what I liked about the job, didn't have to think, could just take it a minute at a time and what was gone you could forget, easy, see . . .

The woman with the twin set stood over me.

'I *said* . . . Full tank please,' she snapped. 'And you should sit down rather than look like that, young man. Get yourself a stool and eat something.'

I stared blearily into the mirror the next morning. The guy that stared back was someone who had been held up at work last night. Humming that song had really worked; already the whole thing was starting to feel like another dream. My boss had come and the cops had made me fill

out forms, and then I had been sent home early. Easy. Just don't think about anything.

Except for those eyes in the balaclava. For some reason they had really freaked me out. I wondered what I would do if I saw them walking down the street or at the train station, with a whole face attached. Would I punch them out? I laughed shortly to myself. Yeah, *sure*, Andrew.

Anyway, now I had the practical problem of whether to tell Mum. I knew exactly what she'd do. She'd butt out her cigarette in a millisecond and rush over, looking for bruises. She might see that sort of stuff every week on her beat, but she'd still stress out, because it was me. She'd call Dad, even though he lived in Brisbane with his brand-new wife and family. And then she would make me give up the job.

No job meant no money, which meant no school cricket tour to New Zealand at the end of the term. And that wasn't going to happen. I wasn't like one of those lucky bastards on the team with the big houses down south who could get the cost of the tour as a birthday present, or because they mowed the family lawn twice. I had to do six months of shifts at Seven Eleven. And there was no way, no bloody way, I was going to miss out because I had to work ten times as hard in the first place.

So, like with the dreams, it seemed that Mum would be staying out of the loop.

That was actually a lot easier than it sounded. Mum was the lowest ranking cop there was, so she had to work double shifts a lot, just to keep the mortgage on this ugly two bedroom apartment going. When she was home, she