

SNOWFLAKE'S HOPE

A novel by Elizabeth Harvey

Chapter 1

The Glass House

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At the very top of the Glass House (but still eighty-one metres below the summit of that famous flag pole) there is a Meditation Room which the building's Italian architect, in the venerable tradition of his race, no doubt put there in the expectation that those charged with the welfare of the nation would seek inspiration and wisdom in contemplation of the surrounding landscape.

However, that few but she ever seemed to frequent it, or indeed know of its existence, was of no surprise to Alice Perry. For in the twelve months she had been honoured to call herself a Member of Parliament she had learned that lofty reflection, or even humble cogitation, were not the currency of that place. To seem to be idle – to not be present at, or rushing to, or rushing from a meeting, to not have a telephone receiver appended to one's ear, to not be sifting through a mountain of documents, or to linger too long in casual conversation over breakfast or dinner – did nothing for one's political reputation in the capital and gained not one vote at home.

But for Alice the Meditation Room was a pleasant place to visit when the sun was setting over the hills, when she had a headache from the relentless talk, when the day's newspapers had depressed her, when her favourite minister had been absent from Question Time, and to think with fondness of the two House attendants who, so the story goes, had been caught 'canoodling' in that very room. It was nice to know that she wasn't the only person who had put the facility to good use, and she was sure that the venerable Italian, in the tradition of his race, would feel the same way.

When Parliament is sitting, no less than five thousand of God's creatures work, eat, drink, sleep, love and hate in the Glass House, but the casual observer would never think it. Apart from the obvious places of congregation such as the chambers, the cafeterias, the bars and the committee rooms at certain times of the day, the

denizens of the house are scattered over two hundred and forty thousand square metres of floor space and therefore rarely meet except by arrangement or when, by chance, two strangers pass in a corridor like ships in the night.

Of the five thousand, only two hundred and twenty are elected Senators or Members; the other four thousand seven hundred-odd supply them with information, accommodation, transport, secretarial support and food and sustenance, or else report on what they do. The Glass House is what is known in micro-economic jargon as a 'feather-bedded' enterprise. But every time some brave soul proposes cost-cutting measures there are cries of protest from certain parliamentarians, especially those of a conservative bent who, as well as being economic rationalists, have a penchant for silver-service dining and a pick-up and deliver dry-cleaning service.

The elected parliamentarians comprise a number of species and, of these, the most visible and active is the group to which Alice belongs, known as Marginal Members. The convenient definition of a Marginal Member is one who holds his or her seat by a margin of less than five percent, but this range can expand or contract with opinion poll swings. There are Marginal Members on both sides of the House but those on the Labor side are, on the whole, more numerous and better organised.

There are several physical features which distinguish MMs from their more comfortably placed colleagues. These can include dark circles under the eyes (from lack of sleep), dirt under the fingernails (from tree-planting and litter clean-up campaigns), a ruddy complexion and flat feet (from door knocking and standing for hours at school sports days), writer's cramp (from signing thousands of letters) and industrial deafness (from listening on the phone to disgruntled constituents with very loud voices).

Their psychological disorders can include advanced paranoia, amnesia (eg not being able to remember one's children's names), a short concentration span, an insatiable obsession with seeing one's name in print, a childish delight in being praised, and general disorientation such as not knowing what day it is or what floor of the building one is on. If you come across an MP who is overweight, relaxed, well-read, flush with funds and who will talk with you for more than a minute before moving on to something else, then he or she is not a Marginal Member.

MMs are gregarious, symbiotic creatures, inexorably drawn to their own kind for mutual comfort. A major function of an MMs' gathering, whether formal or informal, is the exchange of ideas on how to exact favourable publicity in one's electorate. One

MM's successful publicity idea will be emulated, plagiarised and generally done to death by twenty or thirty other MMs across the country, including even those from opposing parties, for ideology is generally irrelevant to this exercise. The only point of party-political divergence is when the same initiative will be called a 'service to the electorate' by the MM who instigated it, and a 'cheap vote-getting stunt' by the opposing candidate who is, of course, as mad as all hell that he didn't think of it first.

Common publicity ploys include community surveys of varying degrees of validity, sporting and other physical feats of often considerable foolhardiness, the granting of prizes and awards at great expense to the Member and the distribution of printed information of varying degrees of usefulness, preferably magnetised for display on fridges.

Wholesale plagiarism can have its dangers, however, as in the case of the MM who distributed in his electorate thousands of fridge calendars featuring emergency phone numbers for another state. Another risk is that, in an instance of really gratuitous publicity-seeking, the Member may end up looking like a complete fool. This, however, with good reason, is rarely a deterrent.

The diametrically opposed species to the Marginal member is the Senator. In other words, if you meet someone in the Glass House who is overweight, relaxed, well-read, flush with funds and who can expand on a subject at considerable length with clarity and perception, he or she is most likely a Senator. Senators are paradoxical in that, although they represent the entire population of a State or Territory rather than the mere eighty thousand or so electors under the wing of a lower house Member, they rarely move about at the same frenetic pace since their personal efforts have little or no bearing on whether or not they are re-elected.

There is an aphorism that the nearest thing to still-life in politics is a capital city-based, back bench Senator. That is not to say that Senators don't work; it is simply that their labour is of a more cerebral and sedentary nature. Senators speak more often in the Chamber, for instance, because there are fewer of them to fill the time available. They also do a lot more committee work which involves the reading of lengthy reports and much time thinking of new ways to terrorise hapless public servants. Senators have a fine grasp of detail and boundless curiosity which leads them to ask heads of departments questions like, 'And how is the kikuyu grass removal on Bowen Island progressing?'

When Parliament is not sitting most Senators are only ever seen at business lunches, ethnic food festivals and trade union centenary dinners. A few, however, to give them their due, are prepared, like Members, to appear at mass meetings and be abused by farmers, pensioners or religious fundamentalists.

A third group comprises lower-house Members in safe seats – charmed creatures who, unlike their marginal colleagues, have the luxury of being able to pursue matters such as company law and tariff reform which are important but don't have populist appeal. This is good practice for when they become Ministers, which they almost all want to be. The only time that Safe Members experience the paranoia which is the daily lot of the Marginal is when they get wind that someone in their party branch may covet their job and be gathering the numbers to knock them off at the next pre-selection. This drives them to drastic measures such as attending branch meetings or changing factions. Marginal Members feel secretly smug when a Safe Member's pre-selection is under threat because they know that this is the one catastrophe that will never befall *them*.

The elite of the Glass House are no doubt the Ministers, ritualistic creatures who emerge from their offices just once a day at Question Time, there to engage in mortal combat with their Opposition counterparts and retire hurt or triumphant as the case may be. Ministers are rarely seen alone. This is partly because, while able to handle with aplomb matters such as whether to float the dollar or declare war, they are, through lack of practice, incapable of carrying out simple every-day tasks like buying a sandwich for lunch or arranging a time to have their hair cut. There is also the sad fact that many Ministers cannot be trusted to go somewhere unaccompanied by a staff member and not miss their plane, lose their speech notes or contradict the Prime Minister.

These staff members, or 'staffers', in fact hold the political fabric of the place together and are therefore the unsung heroes of the piece. The staff of the Prime Minister and some Cabinet Ministers are called 'minders' and mentioned by name in weekend paper feature articles. They are thus accorded some public status and power, usually of a nefarious nature. The vast majority, however, work diligently behind the scenes, unappreciated even by their bosses. Staffers are expected to be, and usually are, unfailingly loyal to their Minister, Member or Senator. This can be difficult, especially when the staffer is a lot more intelligent than his or her employer. Some research assistants have been known to spend weeks on some scholarly piece of

policy analysis, only to have it presented, distributed and even published under the boss's name.

The most trying time is had by the staffers of Members or Senators who take themselves very seriously. Such a staffer will spend a lot of time making the boss look important by forming an entourage everywhere he goes, sending copies of unremarkable speeches to people who will never read them and placing phone calls which the boss is quite capable of making directly ('Hello, Mrs Bloggs? Senator Bloggs would like to have a word with you.')

The rarest and by far the most colourful of beasts is the ex-Minister – he who, due to either a lack or a surfeit of brilliance, has been forced by more or less subtle means to return to the back bench to make way for someone considered by the factional power-brokers to be more appropriate. Some ex-Mins fade into relative obscurity, which is a very honourable thing to do. Others, however, use their wealth of experience, their rat-cunning, their insider knowledge and the brilliance for which they were fired, to expose and even wreak revenge on their detractors – which is also an honourable thing to do. For the thing about ex-Mins is that they are afraid of no-one, are beholden to no-one and have nothing to lose. This makes them very honest and very scary people. The phrase most often used to describe them is 'a loose cannon on deck', nautical and military metaphors having great currency in politics.

Alice had found that she invariably got on well with the ex-Mins, especially those who had been demoted for reasons other than incompetence. They were generally personable, erudite and witty and had the time and the inclination to exercise these traits. They also liked women, enjoying their company at an intellectual and social level and not attempting to dissemble or apologise, as the younger men usually did, if their interest was not entirely platonic.

One such ex-Min was Doug Mannering, who happened to cross Alice's path one night as she walked alone down a dim corridor in the ministerial wing.

'Alice!' he cried in a voice which was gruff even when he was smiling, 'What it is to see friendly face! Let me offer you a drink.'

He had shed a few surplus pounds, she noticed, and the tired-lines around his eyes and mouth were gone. 'I was heading for Doyle's office,' she said.

'He's not there. Anyway, what's he got that I haven't got? Come round to my office and try the excellent red I just got in.'

Doug was a lawyer of the old labour school – a small ‘I’ liberal, an implacable adversary, an eschewer of bullshit and a street fighter – qualities which had enlivened many a Question Time in the past. Early in his career he had done a stint as Minister for the Arts, a portfolio usually assigned to a Minister on his way into or out of the ministry – or both at the same time – and his office was adorned with bright and beautiful modern works which, she suspected, belonged to him rather than to the national collection.

He took off his jacket, loosened his tie and fetched a bottle of wine from the rack next to the fridge. She watched as he slowly filled two elegant crystal glasses. Handing her one, he raised the other to the light. ‘Here’s to Truth, Beauty and all those things.’

She took a sip of the wine and nodded her approval as he sat heavily on the opposite end of the couch and stretched one arm along the back of it. ‘I wasn’t about to let you pass back there,’ he said. ‘Don’t let that friendly face go past, I said to myself.’

She frowned. ‘What are you talking about, Doug? You have lots of friends around here.’

‘I have a few, but when do I ever see them? It was all right in the Old House. If you felt like a yarn or a drink you just had to stick your head out of your office door and there’d be six like-minded people walking past. In this place you could drop dead and no-one would know until you missed a division and the Whip came looking for you. It could be days – weeks even.’

She shook her head. ‘The cleaners would find you the next morning.’

His look said, ‘Cold comfort.’

On a wall in the Meditation Room there is an Inspirational Plaque – a gift to the nation from the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary. The inscription reads: ‘*With your hands so kind and holy O my Father, you will guide me on each pathway to its goal. And your child is full of wonder, for your plans and deeds and counsels are a masterpiece of love.*’

Alice puzzled over this, especially the line ‘...you will guide me on each pathway to its goal.’ This implied to her that the pathway was already laid with its own predetermined destination and that the pilgrim was merely following it mindlessly. So what need of ‘counsel’? She felt that she was on the verge of some blinding revelation

concerning the business of the Glass House, but the division bells shattered her thoughts before the light came on.

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