

Money Collecting 1

Doc dropped onto the greasy, torn sofa with a grunt. His motion caused it to be displaced from the bricks it stood on and he fell sideways with it. Disgusted he stood and lifted it back onto the blocks and lowering himself gingerly he sprawled with his legs spread and his head back. Grease decorated his hands and arms as far as elbows which were hidden beneath the rolled-up sleeves of a tattered flannelette-shirt. His Levi jeans bore the marks of attempts to wipe grease and other materials from his hands although their purchase had been recent enough that they had not been holed or become too baggy.

Before him, in the middle of the room, a Triumph motorcycle stood on its centre-stand. There had been an attempt to protect the polished wood floor from the grease. A layer of newspaper covered it for several feet in all directions. Black footprints led into the kitchen and the light-switches were clearly defined from the rest of the room by a halo of black fingerprints. Greasy tools spread across the floor as though cast there by some small explosion that had its epicentre at the engine of the bike.

Out in the night OP struggled to find the turn into the track leading to Doc's shack.

The place had been built by Italian refugees during the great post-war emigration from Europe. The whole area was spotted with Italian, Greek, Dutch, Maltese and even German farms which had been developed from that time. Doc's shack had been an emergency accommodation built by a family that had almost nothing and needed a roof over their heads urgently. The building was basic and there had never been a council inspection or it would have been demolished. The shack was surrounded by a rich market-garden that had grown into an immense holding with the huge new house, built by Maltese, in a distant corner. The problem for OP was that the entrance was little more than a space between hedges along a stretch of darkness that consisted of many spaces. He had turned into the wrong one not long after Doc had moved in and ended up in a muddy ditch. Another time he had turned into a gap and crashed into the hedge itself. The gap had just been a shadow thrown by the lights on a passing car. He realized he could hear the Rolling Stones. He followed the sound to the driveway and parked the bike beneath the boughs of an old apple tree. He fumbled for a parcel on the rear of the seat before stumbling through the blackness to the front door.

Doc was still asleep on the sofa when OP found his way into the room. It was lit by a bedroom lamp that sat perched on a styrene fruit box on the floor. Beside the lamp a cheap turntable played Jumping Jack Flash over and over. A saucer with flowery patterns around the rim sat on the floor beside Doc's feet. A partially eaten sandwich was also decorated with black fingerprints.

OP threw the parcel so it landed in Doc's lap. Doc's legs shot up in the air and the sudden movement caused the sofa to displace itself from the brick supports and he slid to the floor amid a shower of comics, and a motorbike repair manual, all of which slid from beneath the cushions. He pushed the comics aside and picked at the manual.

"I was looking for that." he exclaimed.

He climbed to his feet and grabbed OP by the shoulders shaking him and grinning warmly. He had been working on his bike alone for a couple of days and was getting something that may have been cabin fever. There was no phone and considering the state of the shack everyone had been surprised to find it had water and electricity. It wasn't really the place for a long isolation.

"I have some work for us," OP said quietly. "I need you to back me up."

He picked up the parcel and allowed it to unravel. An ankle-length, British soldier's trench coat, the same as the one he wore, was revealed and a pair of fur-lined gauntlets fell to the floor.

"I know you haven't managed to get a decent jacket and gloves yet so I brought these."

"Have you asked Brett?"

"He was having some kind of family baked-dinner night at his parent's place."

"You didn't ask me until last?"

"I thought of you first but there is no phone and I had to ride out here to ask you."

Doc lifted the arm on the record player and turned back to face OP, his head tilted quizzically. "This sounds like serious business?"

"Maybe, if we are stupid. It doesn't need to be."

Motioning to the motorbike in the middle of the room Doc said "She has got new pistons, rings, gaskets and been tuned. I just need to polish the crap off the chrome exhausts and we can kick her over and see if she goes."

"We can ride double on mine."

"I want to ride my bike. I didn't do all this work so it could sit in the lounge room!"

Doc stood and went into the kitchen returning with a bucket of hot soapy water and a sponge. Together they scrubbed exposed engine surfaces free of grease and oil. OP pushed a few tools aside so he could get at a tube of chrome polish. He looked for a cloth that wasn't soaked in grease but gave up and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. Doc used the tail of his shirt and they polished the greasy marks from the chrome. There was always a chance the marks would have burnt in when the pipes were heated by hot exhaust gases. They knelt in silence and worked their way around the machine. The newspaper became a mess of soggy papier-mâché and OP gathered it together, emptied the bucket out the door, and stood holding the trench-coat. He knew Doc was putting off the moment of starting the bike. He surely wanted to see if it started when nobody was watching to see him fail.

It did start though. First kick! Doc had a jaw-breaking smile. They both closed their eyes and stood with their heads bent listening to the engine sounds to see if there was

a click, clunk or burble that should not have been there. Doc switched it off and OP looked at him questioningly.

“Have I got time to get cleaned up?”

OP sighed. This side trip was becoming a saga. He picked up a Mad Magazine from the clutter on the floor and looked at the sofa which still slanted on wobbly bricks and one shaky leg. Doc grabbed the small dining chair that stood hidden just out of sight in the kitchen and handed it to him before walking into the kitchen. Magazine in one hand OP watched Doc open a big tin and ladle some compound onto his hands. He swirled it about and as it changed to a sickly grey the grease on his hands turned back into skin and became spotless. He could not remember what it was called but everyone he had ever met who worked on engines had a can of it by the bench. He was surprised to see Doc stripping off his clothes in the kitchen. He stood and went to the door realizing that a small part of the kitchen had a hob to keep water from the rest of the room's floor. A dribble of steaming water landed on Docs back and he pointed at a football sized device beside him. It had a pipe in one end and the shower head stuck up from the other.

“That is the on-demand water heater. Barely enough to get you wet if you want the water to be actually hot and then not enough volume to keep you from freezing on a night like tonight.”

“How could a whole family have survived in here?” OP pondered out loud.

OP turned to leave the kitchen and realized he was skating as though the floor was made of ice. The ceramic tiles had a coating of grease and with the steam of the shower were now slippery. He looked about the kitchen. Doc's idea of cooking was to chuck a few sausages into a fry pan full of boiling grease and whack it on the highest heat until they were too dry and wizened to have much nutritional value. The splatter pattern went for a full body length in all directions from the stove. The fridge and most everything else in the kitchen showed signs of the last few days of mechanical work and were as black as the light switches. The taps over the sink were exceptional being covered not just in black grease but also surrounded with a thick pad of the degreasing solution Doc had used on his hands. OP slid and slunk from the room actually spinning in a controlled three-sixty degrees arc before he could get to the door. On his way around he caught a vision of a wiry and naked Doc grinning wickedly at his antics. He would have smiled back but was afraid a smile might change the precarious balance and pitch him to the floor.

“Can you grab me two shirts from the pile outside the door?” called Doc.

“Don't you want a towel?”

“I do not have any towels. A shirt can do duty instead. It's not as though I can actually get very wet in that shower!”

“You cannot live like this, man! I am going to tell the chicks how bad it is and see if we cannot all get together and lift your quality of life a bit!”

“Fuck that. I ain’t a pussy!”

“Don’t be like that. You need some sanity in this place.”

A clean shirt and clean underpants went onto his pale and underfed body. He held up two socks with the toes worn away.

“They didn’t look like that when I put them on”

“When was that?”

“Last week.”

OP almost fell over as Doc went to pull the mangled and smelly socks on his feet.

“You cannot wear them”

“I have to wear something under boots.”

“Bloody Hell, I will grab a few pairs of mine for you when I come back again. Mum can get me some more”

Doc slid into a thick woollen roll-neck sweater his mother had probably knitted while she fretted over what would come of him after he left her home. OP was relieved that Doc had something like really warm clothes.

They hit the fog bank no more than five minutes from Doc’s shack. Deep, rolling clouds of wet fog that allowed a visual range of no more than a few feet were common at this time of year. Very few people would risk travelling unless they had to. The boys rode at little more than jogging pace, their heads down, watching the lines on the road and listening for other vehicles. They rode this way for some time. Once they overshot a turn along an area of country road which had no lines. They knew it had happened when OP spanged into the wire fence surrounding a cow pasture on the far side of a ‘T’ intersection. By the time they reached a town called Middle Dural the fog had thinned enough for them to be able to work out where they were.

OP found the old church and with his engine just burbling scrunched up the gravel driveway. He went around the back of the tiny building and by the time he pulled up he had travelled a few yards into the fire trail leading into the forest at the back of the hall. He turned his engine off immediately and Doc followed suit. They both knew that good neighbours watch over their local community buildings and would call the police if they thought bikies were breaking in. The fog would muffle some of the sound though and certainly there was no way anyone would see them.

They were off their bikes and removing their helmets. Doc started to push the helmet strap through a tab on the rear of his seat.

“It might be better if you leave it on the seat. It could be we have to leave in a hurry and you may not have time to undo that.”

“If it’s that close I would rather leave it off and I don’t want to have to carry it while I ride.”

There is a richness and beauty to an old building backed by forest and wreathed in fog. The aromas of life and the earth seem to be held and enriched. The silence is a living silence. The boys walked to the stairs at the back of the building and both sat as though by agreement. OP took a cigarette from a packet of Wild Woodbine and handing one to Doc lit them both. They leant back against the sandstone wall and did nothing more than ponder for several minutes.

“Well? Do you want to tell me why we are here and what we have to do to get paid?”

“It’s nothing too serious. Fella down the road owes an old mate some money and the old mate has asked if we can either collect the money or, failing that, remind the fella who owes the money that it is owed still and perhaps assist him with a payment plan.”

“So we are not here to enforce collection?”

“No, I told our guy that we will not be involved in anything like that and he said he would not ask us because it is bad business to beat up debtors.”

“Did he really use the term debtors?”

“Piss off!”

The house they were visiting was about halfway through the tiny village and on the other side of the road. They both knew it. It had been low-cost rental for ever and a few of their school-friends had passed through its shabby halls when they were first moving to the area. OP’s plan was for Doc to mind the back door while he went and knocked on the front. The rear of the house was protected by a high hedge that ran for about half of the distance of the circumference of the yard and it should be easy to push through and find some place out of sight. The rest of the yard was enclosed by a hardwood paling fence. There were no other obvious ways out of the place. All of the windows were in easy view of the front or back.

Together they rose to their feet and began the walk to the house in the invisible distance. There were moments during that walk when both of them would have sworn they were walking through some incomplete world that existed as a soft outline of possibilities. At some point they crossed the road and found the driveway of the house. The fog had become less dense and they navigated their way to the hedge at the back of the house. Doc started to force himself into a patch of shrubbery. OP put both hands on his back and unexpectedly shoved as hard as he could. Most of the branches slid off the thick trench coat but one scored the face just missing his eye and raising a bloody welt down his cheek.

“Fuck you OP!”

“Shhhh.” Came the reply as OP headed along the fence line to the front door.

Doc moved across the yard. Five pre-cast concrete steps led up to a concrete slab where an old-style external toilet and laundry shared entrances with the back door of the house. The kitchen window looked onto the slab and indicated rear entry via the kitchen. Through a gap in the curtains he saw the head on what must have been quite a short woman. The way she moved in and out of sight indicated she was busy at the sink. She was wearing a towelling turban of the type women who have just washed their hair will make. He moved back from the steps and found a long shadow cast by a short bush near the path to the Hills Hoist clothes line that dominated the centre of the yard. Several cylindrical ten gallon or fifty litre drums had been filled with concrete and were spread about the yard as though to be used as seating during a barbecue or party. At the far end of the yard a burnt-orange Volkswagen Kombi with a heavily-laden box trailer attached was parked. He waited.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

The rumble of a male voice could be heard from within the house. An indefinable answer came from OP. There were several moments of silence that broke suddenly and became a stamping of feet and a rush of voices and activity. The backdoor was flung open by a tall skinny man with a beard and long hair. A woman's voice made a sound that Doc would later swear was "oh woe is me!" but could not possibly have been. The tall guy stepped into the middle of the concrete slab and launched himself into the air aiming for the path to the Hills Hoist and probably intent on crashing through the same gap in the hedge that Doc had used to gain entry. He almost made it. Doc calculated the flight path, trajectory, weight and angle of the body in a split second and as the man reached azimuth he stepped from cover and throwing his entire body into the motion stiff-armed him across the top of his chest. The strike causing him to land perfectly horizontal on the concrete path by his attacker's feet. There was a loud "Whuff!" as the air was forced from his lungs and he was winded. Several items spun from his grasp and continued for a short distance through the air before finding a place to land. One which clattered across the footpath and drew Doc's horrified attention was a sawn-off shotgun. Doc managed to look cool and crossed the distance to the weapon with a casual gait. He picked the weapon up.

"Doing a little hunting were we or were you aiming to use that on us?"

Still winded the guy continued grunt-breathing but his eyes widened and he seemed to exert a sense of desperation. Doc sat on one of the concrete filled drums and flicked the big paddle at the top of the barrels. The gun broke open and two shells spun to the ground. Doc picked them up and placed them in his pocket. He closed the barrels and sat the gun on the ground behind the drum before folding his arms and pointing his attention to the back door of the house. He had heard OP knock again and quite loudly this time. He knew it would not be long before he would get sick of being left at the front door.

Sure enough there was a crash that almost seemed to lift the house and shake it as OP finally decided he had been ignored long enough and battered the door open. A shrill female voice filled the night with curses and there came the sound of household items being treated very casually indeed. Doc was smiling wickedly by the time OP reached the back door. He was attempting to dislodge a tiny female who had attached herself to his back. She punched and scratched OP in a frenzy of motion until the struggling

biker finally leapt backwards against a door jamb slamming her into it and dislodging her in one motion. He picked her up and slung her through the back door and then hid in the shadow of the laundry. She rattled about in the kitchen screaming curses and threats before appearing against the light with a gigantic knife in her hand. She could not see OP when she cast about for something to vent her ire on but soon caught sight of Doc sitting beside her man's recumbent form. Screaming like a banshee she flung open the screen door and started across the porch. The wooden frame bounced off OP as it swung open and returned the way it had come smashing into her face as she charged. She dropped to the ground with a gasp. For the briefest moment OP looked horrified and surprised that the door's return had been so violent but he quickly shrugged it off.

"Aw man, don't hurt her. She is trying to protect me." The guy on the ground finally found some air and moved to a sitting position.

"We knew we were going to get home invaded today." he said. We just wanted to go before you got here."

OP's eyebrows lifted until they seemed to disappear into his hairline.

"Home invasion? This isn't a home invasion! We are here to remind you of a gambling debt and see if we cannot get a few bucks towards the payment."

Doc grunted. "This is a busy little place for it being in the middle of no-place. Why would anybody be invading your house? OP something isn't right. We have to clear outta here as-soon-as we can mate."

The woman got to her knees and began to cast about for the knife. She was still cursing and offering to kill OP but her words were slurred and her nose was bleeding.

"Honey, these aren't the guys." he called to her. "Go inside and let me deal with this."

She cupped her hand around her bleeding nose and looked at them through red-rimmed eyes.

"These aren't the bad guys? Does that mean it's going to get worse?"

Bursting into tears she seemed to drift back into the house and would have pulled the screen door shut behind her but it fell apart in her hand. She howled and disappeared into the kitchen.

OP looked into Doc's eyes and motioned his head towards a dark corner of the yard. Obviously it was time to talk business with the guy and what was being said was none of Doc's business. He remembered that the shotgun was not the only item that had flown from the grasp of the flying guy. There was a large dark shape out on the lawn by the Volkswagen.

The last words he heard as he walked off to check it out were "I would really like to give you guys some money but it all went into the fuel tank so we could get away."

The thing on the lawn was a black sports bag. Picking it up Doc noticed it was heavy. He moved into some light and unzipped the top. The first obvious thing about the bag when one looked inside were rolls of money. Thick rolls of money. Several paper bags shared the inside with the money so Doc pulled one out and opened it. There were sticks of compressed marijuana. They were probably Buddha or Thai sticks either of which was highly desirable and hard to get. The second paper bag held about half a pound of nice sticky heads. Where the hell had this guy got all this stuff at this time of year? Doc sauntered back towards OP in time to hear him say.

“Can’t you give us anything? Even a few hundred would be a good show of faith.”

The guy shrugged his shoulders, Doc noticed the guy was holding his head and body stiffly and keeping his face turned away from the direction the bag had flown. That guy knew there was hope a black sports bag might be overlooked in the night.

Doc sat on the concrete drum he had been seated on earlier and pulled a roll of notes from the bag. He began counting it. OP looked up and gave him the stink eye for invading the conversation. The first evidence he had seen the money Doc was counting was when his eyebrows rolled back up his forehead and met his hairline for a second time. The guy on the ground must have had some inkling of what was going on. His shoulders fell to an even deeper slump and his head rolled forward onto his chest in what must have been despair.

OP lurched forward as though he was sleep walking and put out his hand for the bag. Doc withheld it and asked how much money they needed to collect. He held onto the wad of cash and handed the bag to OP who spent several minutes ferreting through it while the skinny guy on the ground looked more and more miserable

“Cut twelve hundred out of that bundle.” said OP pointing to the wad held by Doc.
“That will cover your debt with Rick.” He said.

“It don’t owe that much!” argued the guy despite himself.”

“Eight hundred you owe and he has to pay us on top of that.” said OP. I would have let it go at one hundred each or even let him pay out of his share but you lied to us. Be thankful we are taking nothing else.’

It was the first time in the conversation OP had explained that they were limited to taking the debt rather than just plundering the guy’s stash. There were tens of thousands in cash and dope in that bag. The guy brightened and his frame became less tense.

Doc counted the money and then indicated he wanted to throw the balance into the bag. OP held the neck open and the now lighter wad of notes flew into it. He went to hand the bag to the guy but he recoiled and spun to look at the back door.

“Don’t let her see the bag.” he gasped, “she will not stop hassling me until she has smoked every bud and spent every dollar. She spends her days hunting to see if she can find my stash!”

The bag went on the ground in the shadow of another concrete drum.

Doc looked at the shotgun, then at the bag of goodies and then at the Volkswagen.

“Give me the keys to the car.”

The guy almost burst into tears. “Not the car.” he said. “Please do not take my car. It has all of my photographs and clothes in it. It is all packed for us to run away right now!”

Doc rolled his eyes. “I am not taking the fucking car you idiot. I have here one shotgun I do not want to be shot with. Nor do I wish to be caught carrying it about town. I have one big bag of goodies you do not want exposed to your house-harpy. I thought I would do us both a favour by locking the goodies in a hidden spot in the car. You could not shoot at us as we left and would not have to disclose anything before you left for safer climes.”

The guy leaned over towards Doc and gestured him closer.

“Take a couple of the sticks mate. They were imported by a guy I know just for me and nobody else has anything like em. You guys are honest and I realized how much that is worth to me tonight. Do not tell Rick I tried to get out of paying him. I will call him and say hello when it is safe to come back. Now let me up. We all need to get out of here!”

Doc took the keys and rammed the gun and bag deep beneath the clothes piled in the back of the Volkswagen. He walked back to OP and the guy put out his hand for the keys. OP pushed him away.

“The keys will be in the letterbox. Grab them when you are both ready to leave and we will be safe and long gone.”

“Thanks mate!” The guy bent forward and actually hugged OP. “Thanks mate.” he said again.

OP took the keys and as they walked around to the front and their new mate disappeared into the house he made motions as though he put the keys into the box. Doc heard them tinkle as they missed the mailbox and landed in a little tuft of weeds at the base.

“It will give us a few extra moments if he goes for the shotgun.” whispered OP.

They were two homes down the block when a powerful torch swept the front yard and stopped on the mailbox. A tiny figure raced across the lawn, opened the box and then howled with rage. It didn't take long for her to discover the keys had been dropped by the tufts of weed and head into the house.

“We should get off the road for a moment. Just how deep did you hide the gun anyway?”

“Not very. We should hide and wait!”

The torch was seen in the back yard for a short while and a set of gates opened in the rear fence allowing the Kombi access to the road. Both boys expected to see it crawl up the road and hunt them but it passed by moving at a speed dictated by fog and nobody inside looked anywhere else than the road. OP and Doc stood listening to the camper chug down one side of the steep valley and then slowly up the other before it faded away.

The deep fog seemed to burst with light as though a glow had grown through the mist and just exploded out all around them. OP wrapped one arm around Doc’s shoulder and one around his waist and pulled them both over a low sandstone fence that stood several feet from the road. They landed on top of a low hedge and then rolled over it before crashing onto the lawn in front a neat brick house.

“Ow! Shit OP, you have got to stop dragging me into the bushes every ten minutes.”

“Shush, stay down.”

The angelic glow surrounding them resolved itself into a set of car headlights and with an odd creaking of the suspension a worn looking Ford sedan slowed to a halt on the road by the fence where the boys were hiding. The car and the boys seemed to share a foggy cavern. Doc lifted his head above the hedge and watched.

“Check the number on the letterbox. I am lost with this fog and a house number will give us a direction.”

“Jesus Sarge, you have raided this place a dozen times, you should be able to sense where it is with your balls!”

A lumbering fat man who seemed to be drunk climbed out of the car. The suspension made a long drawn out creaking. He unzipped his fly and peed on the letterbox. He seemed certain that he was unseen in the fog and any other night he might have been correct. OP could hear Doc struggling to hold back a giggle so he punched him as hard as he could in the shoulder. The fat man turned and swayed and rolled back to the car pulling the door shut behind him. The conversation continued.

“Are you sure he will have the money?”

“Yeah man, that chick was too scared to lie to us after we left her alone in the cells for a few hours.”

“She couldn’t find the money or the dope so how will we?”

The voice of the drunken fat man rose from the car. “I will break his fucking fingers off until he tells me, then I will fuck his bitch and I will shoot them both in the head.”

“Crikey Sarge take a pill will ya!”

The whole coterie growled out a grim laugh. Doc shivered. These were the home invaders. That guy had been right to be scared. They were prepared to kill him to keep their secret. Unable to sit still OP punched Doc in the shoulder again. He made it softer this time. Doc realized if the guys in the car noticed them they might be dead too.

“It is a bit further on the other side.” The car rumbled forward and even through the fog the boys could see the lights sweep into the yard they had just left and they heard the suspension groan again, the doors open and shut and a loud smash broke the night’s silence as someone kicked in the front door. There was a brief glow as a powerful torch was turned on and then duller glows as some of the light of the torch leaked through the windows of the house.

OP, desperate to reach a safe place but not daring to lift his head, pushed at Doc.

“Go! Go! Get behind the bushes near the house!”

They crashed through another hedge and rolled into a small garden beneath the front window of the house staying in the shadows and out of sight behind the hedge they had rolled over.

A quavery voice called out into the darkness.

“Who is it out there?”

Doc recognised the yard they were hiding in. His mother was a community nurse and this was the home of old Mrs Mackenzie. Doc knew her from church. He had escorted her up and down the stairs at the fellowship a few times.

“It is alright Mrs Mac,” he called. “It is Doc. I am Lenore’s son. You know me from church.”

“Oh dear, are you boys in trouble?”

“We won’t be if you stay quiet and don’t turn on any light Ma’am.”

Her voice dropped to a whisper and the curtain she had pulled aside to see the boys closed silently.

“This is just like the old days. My boys were quite wild. They were always being chased by someone!”

Doc could sense the smile and hear the excitement in her voice. She had been alone a long time. Her boys had died badly, one from cancer, one during a drunken rampage and one had been stabbed to death by his girlfriend. It was said her old man, Rowdy Mackenzie, had been killed supporting a dockworker’s strike in the city. It was so long ago nobody was sure. Doc was touched by a deep sadness. The one bit of company in her present life was two young money collectors trying to escape some thugs. He had an epiphany. Life wasn’t fair. No amount of wishing made it better.

Several crashes rose from the fog-bound house down the road. Loud muffled cursing and the angry stamping of feet could be heard.

“I am going to shoot that fucking bitch.”

“Nobody is here! I only checked on her an hour ago. Bloody bitch! I need that dough and I need it tonight!”

“She knows about us dang it! We have to do better than slinging her in jail!”

The concrete stairs dissipated the noise of heavy steps but the doors of the Ford were slammed hard and the suspension groaned loudly as the raging and furious crew directed it over the potholed driveway and back the way they came. The boys could hear bitter voices after the car had passed and disappeared into fog.

“Ooh, what terrible men I understand why you don’t want them to see you. Would you boys like a cup of tea?” She asked. “I need a cuppa after all that. I have cake and lemonade as well.

“I love you Mrs Mac.” Doc whispered, “You are one of the great ladies of our time but it is too late and we have to get back.”

He was weighed down with sadness at her obvious loneliness but he remembered a few things about her cake. She had no concept of time and her cake may have been in an unsealed cake tin for months. He also felt that the sooner he left the less she would have to remember and his mother might not find out he had been hiding in her garden one foggy night.

OP slipped along the wall of the house and into the yard of the old stone church next door. His eyes were wide and his body seemed to want to escape in several directions at a time. He collapsed back onto a set of stone stairs and pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He put two in his mouth, lit them, and handed Doc one. They sat in the mist. Everything was wet with droplets of fog and there were no sounds from the bush or the road. They said nothing. The loudest sound was the low hiss and sizzle of a burning tube of tobacco each time one of them inhaled. Opie was not thinking at all. He was numb and the absolute terror he had been experiencing a few minutes before trickled away and left him sapped of his will power.

Doc was in another place all together. He didn’t need an epiphany on top of all the other new emotions that night. He was processing the girl’s desperation in attacking a man as large as OP and her protectiveness for her partner. He could sense her desperation coming from being busted and blackmailed into setting her guy up for late night raiders. He wondered if she had sensed that she and her boyfriend were unlikely to live through the attentions of those people. For Doc it was a huge knot of confusing and overwhelming visions and feelings. His world had never had so much reality shoved into it with such brutality before.

He remembered the Mackenzie and how much their lives revolved around each other. His mother being the community nurse he knew members of the church fellowship visited her all the time but tonight her loneliness had created wrinkles on his soul that

would be among the emotional baggage he would carry to the grave.. And it wasn't over yet.

They sat like that for several minutes. Neither of them spoke and each of them was alone with their thoughts. Finally Doc spoke up.

“That could have gone better.”

OP punched him in the shoulder again but this time it lacked any power.