Spinners

FROM THE SAME AUTHOR

The English Harem

Death of a Superhero

Spinners

Anthony McCarten

ALMA BOOKS

ALMA BOOKS LTD
London House
243–253 Lower Mortlake Road
Richmond
Surrey TW9 2LL
United Kingdom
www.almabooks.com

Spinners first published by Vintage New Zealand in 1998
Published in Great Britain by Picador 1999
This edition published by Alma Books Limited in 2008
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Printed in Great Britain by Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire

ISBN: 978-1-84688-035-3

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FOR PETRA

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Factory Girls

It was some time on Saturday night after work but before closing time down at the pub that Delia Chapman saw a spaceman. Well, that wasn't quite true. She saw ten of them. They stayed for about half an hour. And they took her on their vessel. They had silver suits and stainless-steel boots. The vessel was ultra-modern and entirely impressive.

Delia had completed her third straight split shift in the small-goods packing section at Borthwick's Freezing Works. Her body, therefore, was still at breakfast, her head at midnight, her internal clock as scrambled as a long-haul flight attendant's, and although she was completely exhausted she was too confused to sleep. Still wearing her white factory clothes and gum boots, she left her family farmhouse on foot, bought a bag of hot chips at the Texacana Take-away Bar and wandered on the river road towards the highway leading out of town.

Who expected to see something like a spaceman in Opunake? Since Delia was unprepared for such a nationally significant experience, she was, at best, clumsy in her observations. Two hours later she was able to report that she had had a nice time, seen some lights and a few shapes, and had received a dozen or so non-verbal commands. But beyond that, and when pressed for more explicit details, she could add only that her guests had been extremely polite throughout the incident and had treated her as if she were extremely important.

Only when the earliest and most amused reactions to Delia's claim had been voiced the next morning in the bakery, the betting shop and in the express lane at the New World supermarket, and only after people had purged their systems of terms like "silly bitch" and "stupid mole" and "total spinner", did any more open-minded appraisals begin.

Delia Chapman was sixteen years old. In her penultimate year of high school, she was one of a raft of light-headed young women to have taken summer jobs at Borthwick's. Requiring of its employees an inhuman rotation of day and night shifts as the seasonal kill reached its peak, it was known that eighty per cent of the town's female population were being taxed to the point of near nervous collapse by the factory's unrelenting regimen. Delia's hysterical claim had therefore to be seen in the mitigating light of a record-breaking slaughter.

There were other theories why she would invent such a story. Delia Chapman was known to wear a Lakers NBA basketball cap wherever she went. Often she added to this a University of North Carolina T-shirt and imported sneakers, and with a Walkman player on her hip and gum in her mouth she seemed to have become a living, breathing showcase of Americana. Could not the sighting of a spaceship, then, be viewed as just the next logical step in her metamorphosis into a Yank?

At the time of the visitation, put later by the town's resident policeman at approximately 9:20 p.m., most of the town was glued to a much-delayed broadcast of a rugby test match between the All Blacks and England played at Twickenham: a bitter fight for screening rights had left the area deprived of the live program, and those gathered in the public bar were tortured with the pent-up passion of a day spent avoiding even a hint of the final result.

By 9:50, while the game was still in progress and the outcome far from certain, Delia's life had been changed for ever, but except for the painfully dull boy at the Texacana, who remembered that Delia had bought one scoop of chips and declined vinegar, nobody could corroborate a single aspect of her strange story.

Harvey Watson, the local policeman, who also doubled as Delia's weekend netball coach, used a gentle tone with her, more akin to that of a priest hearing a confused confession, when he drove her home an hour later that same night. Why was she telling him a story like this? Had she just seen a movie? Half of the holiday movies and all the television shows nowadays were about aliens; perhaps she'd been watching too many. He could tell right away that she was in some kind of shock; she would feel better if she told him the truth, he said. He could sense her internal search for another story which could otherwise explain her tousled hair, the bruises on her arm and the unfocused look in her eyes. And yet something seemed to prevent her from finding an alternative explanation for her bewilderment. As her mouth opened, her expression faltered. And when the words came out, they were merely a reiteration.

"The ship was like um… kind of like a… ball of light, I s'pose. A great ball of light. And it was sort of resting on a… on a…"

"Yes, on a what?" he asked, craning forwards. "Resting?…"

"On a tripod."

Delia was not dressed for ambassadorial duties when she saw the glorious visitation. How must she have seemed to these visitors, standing before them in her rubber boots, holding her bag of chips? Her white uniform must have suggested that the human race was a much more practical life-form than is really the case: a pale breed, brown-haired, wide-eyed, uncertain, mute, compliant, vegetarian and polite.

Delia represented billions that Saturday night.

* * *

Across town, Delia's father sat in front of his television. Marty Chapman understood that his daughter had gone to bed with the same splitting headache which currently plagued him. His interest in sports, along with everything else, had dissipated in recent years, and had wafted away like methylated spirits from an open bottle. He watched a gardening program on channel two.

The propagation of dahlias in a hothouse environment was the subject, and Marty watched it with a weary detachment, one leg thrown over the arm of his chair while an unseen moth fought for survival on the froth in his half-emptied glass of beer. On the television, an overweight English lady explained her blueprint for cultivation. When the subject of the show switched and she began to describe a pogrom for combating noxious weeds, he rose and hit off the set. His house fell silent, and the fear of living his life alone arose around him like a fog.

The underarms of his white shirt were stuck to his sides with sweat, and his temples pounded. He decided to take an aspirin and water with him up the stairs to his single widower's bed.

Before going up, he went out onto his porch, which was bordered with his late wife's flower pots, and urinated prolifically onto the grass. His farm could use the liquid. In the distance against the moonlight he saw his bony, dehydrated cattle on the hills. In winter the lowland pastures flooded and were reduced to vast mud flats thick with river silt; now, he had to contend with an early drought and the hottest recorded Christmas season in forty-two years. He did up his fly and rested against the door frame, where his daughter's height was etched in ten levels from childhood to her maturity a year ago. He tugged his mud-stiffened bootlaces free, wrenched the boots from his feet and left them outside to air.

At the top of the stairs Marty stopped outside his daughter's door. He did this mostly from habit. It was not unusual that he himself had banished her there, and so would stop to listen for sounds of rebellion from behind her closed door. His solution to the great mystery of solo parenthood was to be meticulous in his supervision of Delia. But where greater wisdom and experience would have permitted him to conserve his energies for those moments requiring his genuine concern, growing ignorance of his daughter's maturing nature kept him in a near-exhausted state of perpetual vigilance. Women had always been a mystery to him, and the taller his daughter became, the more restless and desperate grew his dilemma.

With his teeth Marty tore the aspirin from its foil wrapper, dropped it into the glass and watched its merciful white bubbles. He waited in pain as the tablet sank to the bottom and the glass clouded, foamed and then delivered the effervescing pill back to the surface, dwindled by then to a white medicinal fudge. He swallowed it quickly, and put his ear one last time to Delia's door. His full attention was given to this task, listening for sobs, or the radio, or tuneless singing to an unheard Walkman. He couldn't hear a thing. He knocked and raised his voice, calling her name, but no reply came.

The often-repaired latch on Delia's door exploded into pieces.

The window was wide open. Marty Chapman could not tell how long his daughter had been gone. All women were beneath trust.

Phillip Sullivan had been driving all day as night fell. The trip had been uneventful, except for one incident in which he had overtaken a long line of slow-moving cars on the highway, blaring his horn to protest against their sluggish pace. On a

reckless passing manoeuvre, however, in which he overtook all eight vehicles in one sweep, he realized he had been honking at a funeral cortege. In his rear-view mirror, he saw each mourner's car, headlights respectfully switched on, and when he passed the hearse at the front of the convoy, he received from the graven undertaker a look of such stinging rebuke that it seemed an augury from God. Phillip decided in that vertiginous moment that his life must change.

Sometimes a single look can be the seed of the most lasting changes; and, coming after a month of sobering events, this one motivated Phillip to conquer his fatal weakness – a rarely displayed but frightening temper – once and for all. Easing his foot off the accelerator, he resolved to renounce his hot-bloodedness and to replace with quiet patience the rage that had ruined his career.

The sun sank into the Tasman Sea to the west as he approached Taranaki. The conical peak of the mountain reared up 2,500 metres above the farmland, illuminated in passionate colour in the long December evening. He stopped at a roadside picnic area in Patea, the heat bearable at last, ate a sandwich and watched the effect of nightfall upon the mountain. He consulted his AA map which lay on the passenger seat beside an extremely rare copy of Turgenev's *Sportsmen's Sketches*, and saw that he was almost at Hawera, only fifteen kilometres along the coast from Opunake.

Beyond Hawera, Phillip passed a cut-rate travelling carnival, a motley collection of trucks and trailers set up in a paddock. The enterprise was tiny and ramshackle. He watched as a short man with bushy sideburns and tattooed arms carried antique segments of railway four or five times his own size. As a very small boy Phillip had ridden once on a ghost train; his mother,

who believed in the bold confrontation of one's fears, had bought two tickets, hoping the ride might cure the boy of an infantile fear of the dark. But once inside the tunnels Phillip had fallen into a deep silence, not of terrified apoplexy, but of solid boredom.

Deafened by the screams of the other children, Phillip could only observe the frailty of the illusions, the botched effects and the amateurism of the ride. The dangling skeletons were clearly made of plastic; the fires intended to burn sulphureously in the eyes of skulls were simply flashing red lights like those on the family stereo; and the one real human face, animating several characters by appearing on top of their shoulders in appropriate hats – a witch spitting curses, a rancid sailor swilling porter, a dungeoned loon in manacles pleading for royal justice – belonged to none other than the lady ticket seller, breathless and untalented, who audibly scampered around the outside of the structure plunging her variously costumed head into the darkness through a number of small holes in the wall. Crushed in tightly beside him, Phillip's mother believed that violent cathartic forces would cause her son to try to jump from the train in the darkness, so she gripped him firmly in a primitive initiation ceremony. But it wasn't fear. Phillip wanted to ponder the stupidity of others in peace. Why were people screaming? Did they see something that he could not? Was it possible – a question to fill a lifetime! – to experience a single event on many levels? It would take Phillip fifteen years to realize that a penchant for analysis was born in those dark passageways, that the ghost-train experience had been his very first outing as a cynic, and that at the tender age of seven he had already been rerouted from daylight into those unlit catacombs which were the natural habitat of the intellectual.

Turning a corner, his car's headlights probing the intense darkness, he very nearly collided with a spectre in white, standing in the middle of the road. It was a young woman, barely real, her arm raised to shield her eyes from his headlights. She made no attempt to move. Phillip's car had stopped only centimetres from her shins, his tires smoking, his heart in seizures. He sat forwards in his seat to confirm the vision: shoulder-length brown hair, a white smock, bare legs channelled into white rubber boots. He gaped at her for several seconds before he got out of the car.

"I almost didn't see you." He caught his breath. "Are you… OK?"

Listlessly she looked back at him: wide-eyed, stoop-shouldered, bony, a reluctant beauty of about sixteen years. After several more moments, she asked in a voice barely above a whisper if he was going to the nearest town. She turned her face away and out of the light.

"I think the next town north is Opunake," he replied, studying her profile and noting a reluctance to talk.

"Oh," she said.

"Can I give you a ride there, then?"

She nodded after a second, ungrateful, strange.

"Do you know it?" he asked, losing patience.

She turned back to him. "What?"

"Do you know Opunake at all?"

Again, she nodded. "I live there."

These were the last words she spoke for the whole journey.

The road into the township swept in an arc between sea and mountain. Out of the corner of his eye, Phillip monitored the girl's small activities. Fingers, dirty under the nails, fidgeted constantly in her lap, knitted into a scrum one second and then

climbed all over each other the next. She also smelled vaguely of mud, and of the country, of manure. The odour and her finger gymnastics combined to give him the impression that at any minute she would burst out with a sensational explanation of what had happened to her. But nothing came. Whatever her story, he was unworthy of it.

In an effort to fill the awkward silence, he gave an exact figure to the number of kilometres he had driven that day, and enquired about the state of the old Opunake Public Library, casually mentioning that he would soon mastermind its long-awaited reopening. Reportedly, the building was no more than a shoebox, he told her, and from his correspondence he understood that for ten years it had sat across the road from the council chambers, abandoned, serving only as a greenhouse for cobwebs, as a mansion for mice, as an aviary.

But nothing drew a response, or even a turn of her pretty head.

Almost for his own enjoyment, he then began to describe the long list of desirable new books, classics and translations, encyclopedias and reference magazines, which would be among his first orders to the national library service in Wellington. All were volumes he deemed essential to a half-decent library, and it would be his responsibility, he told her, to present the town of Opunake with a comprehensive list of titles and to place within each rural's grasp the treasure trove they had for so long been denied.

Delia Chapman formed no opinion at all of this young man as they drove in the shadow of the mountain, only that the antiseptic smell of his cologne reminded her of being at the dentist's.