

*Beyond the
Western Margin*

Mark Morgan

Chapter 1

Disturbing News

“They’re locking us up tomorrow. Time to head for the hills!”

No answer.

The young man shrugged his shoulders and sighed, then turned, closed the door and made his way to the kitchen.

He helped himself to a slice of cake from the pantry and took it into the lounge room, where he slouched in an arm-chair and began eating. Dan Turner was 17 years old and had finished school that very day. Just one hour ago, he had put down his pen and filed out of the school hall with the rest of the students, walking out to freedom. His last exam was finished; no more school – ever!

When he woke in the morning, a dream of months of freedom stretching almost endlessly ahead of him had eased his doubts about that last exam.

Disturbing News

Now the exam was over – and it hadn't been too bad – but his dream had been shattered.

Dan had met his friends on the courts outside the hall where knots of students were reviewing the exam and discussing the future. After a few minutes, an impromptu game of basketball – or was it football? – began, using someone's now-superannuated textbook. Dan grabbed the battered book and was threading his way towards the basket, ready to put it through the hoop, when he bumped Osmond Ortrick. It was really only a slight brush, but Osmond was the son of the Premier of Victoria and considered himself a touch above his fellow students, and his person hallowed ground.

“You idiot,” he snarled, staggering a little.

Dan finished the lay-up and turned around. “Sorry,” he said. “I just couldn't resist putting the Ball through the hoop.” J. J. Ball was the author of the despised textbook whose influence in their lives was now a thing of the past.

“Well, make the most of your freedom,” Osmond replied sardonically. “It won't last long!”

The look on his face caught Dan's attention. Ordinarily, he would have ignored Osmond and dismissed his words as classic Osmond-speak: sneering and supercilious. But this felt different somehow.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Another lockdown starts tomorrow, Danny.”

“The name's Dan – as you know,” he replied. “But how come? We've got the virus licked, haven't we?”

Looking mysterious, Osmond launched into what felt like a prepared speech, raising his voice enough to be heard by a wider audience on the court. He enjoyed speaking and was looking forward to the campus politics of university.

Beyond the Western Margin

“The overall community response to the virus has been successful in minimising societal damage, but certain aspects of everyday life have been compromised such that modification to the common functional behaviour of ordinary citizens must be introduced in the interests of improved societal development and environmental protection. At times, freedom of movement and communication are the most dangerous features of a democratic society, particularly when the overall safety of the community is at risk.”

“Umm... what is all that gobbledygook meant to mean, Osmond?”

“My father is signing the papers today for the introduction of indefinite travel restrictions and extended health-related rules.”

“That’s more like English. So we’ll have to stay home most of the time again, check in everywhere and wear masks?”

“It’s going to be a lot more than just masks and checkins, Danny. Don’t you follow politics? Don’t you know that the opposition is deceitfully blocking important new legislation? They’re aiming for anarchy: resisting the responsible progressive direction of the government. They’re trying to stop the government governing. And they’ll ruin the state unless the government publishes these new health orders right away.”

“But if we’ve got the virus more or less under control, where’s the need for more health orders?”

“Ah,” said Osmond, looking conspiratorial. He put his index finger in front of his lips briefly, leaned forward a little and spoke quietly, with the timing of a consummate actor. The growing crowd of students around him moved even closer – as he intended that they should. “Sometimes the appearance of events on the surface is not the true perspec-

Disturbing News

tive,” he said. “There are... movements... at large in our society. Dangerous, underground movements that want to subvert our government’s courageous victory over the virus. They want to enforce their regressive minority opinions on the majority and take away our hard-won freedoms.”

“So your Dad will fight for our freedom with another lockdown?”

Some of the other kids laughed, but Osmond was not amused.

“You ignorant so-and-so! Better some short-term suffering than the destruction of everything the government has fought for.”

“I thought you said *permanent* travel restrictions.”

“No, I said ‘indefinite’.”

“And the difference is...?”

“The end date will be set at an appropriate time.”

Dan snorted. He left the conversation and rejoined his friends. Slam-dunking old Ball had lost its attraction now that his vision for the holidays might prove a mirage.



This is the end of the first part of the first chapter of *Beyond the Western Margin* by Mark Morgan.

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