



CHAPTER 1

Why We Lie Awake

One night I was lying in bed, eyes closing, seconds away from falling asleep. But then I looked up. There it was. A big, hairy, scary spider. On the wall. Just above my head.

The best option is to catch and release the spider outside, rather than kill it. But these spiders are very fast. Catching and releasing is great in theory, but nearly impossible in practice. And I couldn't leave the spider alone. It was hovering only inches above my face. So I slowly snuck out of the bed, grabbed a flip-flop and swung at the spider as hard as I could.

THWACK!

I missed.

The spider slid down the wall and down the side of my bed and hurried underneath it.

Out of all the possible outcomes, this was the worst. At least, when the spider was on the wall, I could see it and know where it was. Now it was under my bed.

Lurking.

Hiding.

Plotting.

What if it came out in the middle of the night, while I was asleep, and crawled over my face? What if it nibbled on my ear? What if it crawled into my open mouth or nose?

There wasn't much sleep that night. You need to be at peace to fall asleep, and I had no peace—not with a big, hairy spider under my bed.

On the Wall or Under the Bed

It isn't always a hairy spider under the bed that robs us of peace and keeps us awake at night. There are heaps of other things too. Most of us know that feeling, once the lights are off, of lying awake with our brains whirring. All of us have some "spiders": things that worry us, that nag away at us, that we would like to change but can't, or that we know we need to

deal with but avoid. Sometimes they're obvious, on the wall. Other times they're under the bed, but still there.

What is it that keeps you awake at night?

Maybe it's wars. There are always wars somewhere, but lately they've been getting closer to home. The war in Ukraine was unexpected. Surely, we thought, there'll never be another major land-based war in Europe after World War II. But we were wrong. When I was doing PhD studies in the USA, some of my classmates were from Russia and some were from Ukraine. I cannot fathom that they're now enemies fighting each other.

Ukraine is a long way from Australia, and yet life here still feels less safe. We're a sparsely populated nation floating around in the Pacific Ocean. We're neighbours to some major geopolitical players who have more military muscle than we do. When push comes to shove, we're not going to put up much of a fight. And even if things don't go down that path, lately in Australia we've suffered an endless cycle of deadly bushfires, dystopian rains, and dam-bursting floods. Whichever country you're reading this book in, I'm sure that right now you can think of your own equivalent concerns.

Meanwhile, politics seems more heated. I remember when most people in most Western countries were

fairly apathetic about who to vote for and reasonably relaxed about the result. We said things like “Do we have to vote? Does it really matter? Both parties are much the same anyway.” But now people are passionate about their politics and there’s often a feeling of apocalyptic zeal for one party and a pathological fear and hatred of the other side. It feels like life and death now. Doomsday stuff.

If all that isn’t bad enough, most of us feel poorer than we did, and our economies feel less certain. Throughout the West, inflation suddenly sky-rocketed. For a long time, prices were stable—we paid the same for milk, medicines, and mortgages. But no more. You can chart the increasing prices on a graph with a hockey stick. My wife and I now check our bank statements before we shop for groceries. It’s a white-knuckle ride each month to make sure there’s enough in the bank to pay the credit-card bills.

All those things are happening *outside* of us. There are a lot of spiders around. And that’s before we ask what we are like *inside*. I’m sure many of us would describe our inner world with words such as tired, exhausted, restless, wandering, searching, uncertain, unsettled.

Each day, most of us are greeted by a neighbour or colleague asking, “How are you?” It’s a standard greeting with a stock-standard reply: “Good!” (“Fine” is

also an acceptable option.) But deep down, in our heart of hearts, we sometimes want to scream back, “I’m not doing well. I’m busy. I’m over-worked. I have deadlines I can’t meet. My parents are ageing, and I don’t know how to help. I’m worried about my kids / I’m worried about whether I’ll have kids. I have aches. I have pains. I don’t sleep well. I’ve been awake since 2 a.m.”

Maybe you know that feeling. It’s the feeling of wishing you had peace but finding it hard to locate.

And then, to make things even worse, there’s one time of the year that’s sure to multiply the reasons for feeling that way.

CHRISTMAS.

The Problem with Christmas

I know that Christmas is usually associated with fun, happy stuff like brandy, bonbons and bonuses. But, if you’re like me, you find that Christmas also dials up the stress levels.

There are all the Christmas preparations (real Christmas tree or fake one?), diplomatic family negotiations (do we have to invite Uncle Roger?), and cooking the meal (which we always overcook). But there’s also the fact that the Christmas season comes around as an annual reminder that, yes, *twelve months have gone by*.

Twelve months have passed, and war isn't (despite what John Lennon announced) over. I still didn't clean out the study/shed/attic. We still didn't have the neighbours over for a meal. I still didn't exercise as I promised myself I would.

Christmas is my annual reminder that one whole year has passed, but I'm *not* one year better for it. Nothing changed. I'm still the same person as I was last year. So I'm haunted by the nagging feeling: "Is this the best it's ever going to get?"

Even Better Than Happiness

But while Christmas can make peace feel further away, at the same time, according to the Christian tradition, Christmas celebrates the possibility of peace.

Just for a moment, imagine if, this Christmas, you could be full of peace. Imagine being able to lie in bed and not have worries crowding in as you close your eyes at night or open them in the morning. Imagine being able to tell your neighbour or work colleague that you're doing well, and really mean it. Imagine being able to look at the to-do list and the calendar and the coming year and feel... peace.

Imagine that! Because peace really is the solution to all our problems. Recently, in the West, we decided that the goal of life is *happiness*. But more and more studies

show that our chase for happiness is actually part of what's making us exhausted and stressed. Instead, we should be looking for *peace*: not only the absence of anxiety or stress but the positive experience of living with everything—or at least, everything that matters most—in its right place.

But what would it take to experience that kind of peace? And what does Christmas have to do with it? I want to make this claim (it's what this whole book is about): *the Christmas story offers you peace.*

Most of us will be familiar with the basic contours of “the Christmas story”. It's the story that our well-meaning but perhaps mildly annoying Christian friend tries to tell us every year, when we'd rather just eat the pudding. It's the story we sing in the familiar Christmas carols. It's the story that the local church spells out on its billboard in the form of a dad-joke-esque slogan: “Jesus is the reason for the season” or “Putting Christ back into Christmas”.

But just for a moment, let me be that well-meaning but mildly annoying Christian friend and remind you of the core of the Christmas story:

On the original Christmas Day, about 2,000 years ago, a baby called Jesus was born.

That's it.

Christmas offers us peace because of this story.

Really?

How can that story—of a baby, born millennia ago—bring real peace to a real person's real life now?

That's what this book is about. And to answer that question, first of all we need to look at why peace is so hard to find and to keep.