

Cleanskin

by Michael Olsen

Characters: Melanie Crain, 30's/40's, a marketing executive
 Erica Banks, 30's/40's, a chronic gambler
 An unnamed pregnant woman, 20s, (non-speaking role)

In the darkness we hear a terrible storm: thunder, lightning, rain, wind—the works. Lights come up on the Church of the Immaculate Conception. We are at the front of the church, near the altar, and a few chairs suggest pews. There is an air of calm about the place.

Suddenly ERICA BANKS hurries in, dripping wet. She is a young mother in her 30s. She wears a raincoat over a dress, and holds a handbag. She unwraps a scarf from her head, puts it down, then peels off the raincoat. Finally she sits down at a pew, collects herself, closes her eyes, and bows her head in prayer.

MELANIE CRAIN enters, looking as if she is being pushed in by some unseen force. She's in her 30s and wears a white dressing gown and slippers, and she is soaked to the bone. She collapses in front of the altar, panting.

MELANIE: You're gonna have to do better than that!

And then Melanie is rushing off. Erica is astonished—but not as astonished to see Melanie come crashing back on, and fall in a heap in front of the altar again. Erica gets up to go to Melanie's aid, but Melanie holds up a hand.

MELANIE: Thank you I'm fine. Really. I'm OK.

Erica sits down again.

MELANIE: It's you!

ERICA: I'm sorry?

MELANIE: "If you go there she will come." Well here I am and so are you!

ERICA: *(slowly)* OK.

MELANIE: This is great! All I have to do is tell you the news and I can go home!

ERICA: News? What news?

MELANIE: You have been chosen by God for a very special task.

ERICA: Really.

MELANIE: Great, huh?

ERICA: Ah—

MELANIE: You are a very lucky woman. I'm sure He wouldn't pick just anyone. It's a very prestigious position.

ERICA: Is it?

MELANIE: Are you qualified? What's your resumé like? What are you like with children? What the hell am I asking for? My job here is done. See ya.

Melanie starts to exit, but is pushed back into the church by God.

MELANIE: Hey! What gives? I did everything you asked now I can go home. What? There's more? What more? You want me to give her the Book? OK OK I'll give her the Book.

From out of her dressing gown Melanie pulls what looks like a Bible, but some force makes her throw it up in the air. It comes apart and all the pages float down over the floor.

MELANIE: You've gotta believe me, that wasn't me. That was God.

ERICA: Oh really?

MELANIE: He does things like that—like pushing me back into this church just now. You saw that, right?

ERICA: Right.

MELANIE: What's the name of this church anyway?

ERICA: The Church of the Immaculate Conception.

MELANIE: You're kidding.

ERICA: No, I—

MELANIE: Just goes to show you the Man Upstairs has a sense of humour. You have to give Him that. *(Pause)* I suppose introductions are in order, aren't they?

ERICA: Are they?

MELANIE: *(holding out her hand)* My name's Melanie Crain.

ERICA: Ah, Erica Banks.

They shake hands.

MELANIE: Erica. Erica. That's a nice name. I'm in marketing, Erica. What do you do?

ERICA: I'm a full time mother.

MELANIE: Great. So you're definitely qualified then.

ERICA: For what?

MELANIE: For being a mother.

ERICA: I suppose so.

MELANIE: I couldn't do it. Too selfish, I think. If I took a kid shopping I'd get annoyed if it cried or wanted attention while I was in the shoe section.

ERICA: Oh.

Pause

MELANIE: You think I'm nuts, don't you?

ERICA: No, no, not at all. I—

MELANIE: It's OK. If I were you I'd think I was nuts too. Look at me. I'm still in a dressing gown for goodness sake!

ERICA: Well, yes, I had noticed actually. *(Pause)* Aren't you cold?

MELANIE: Funny thing is, I'm soaked through but I feel—fine. I feel great. I could give you the whole story, the campaign we got to promote this book called the New Bible, the presentation this morning, the washing I was hanging up—

ERICA: In this weather?

MELANIE: I had it coming, I definitely had it coming. There's always a time, you know, when the weather catches you out with the washing, either taking it in or putting it out, and you're racing against the elements. This morning I was racing. *(Pause)* They say a woman can tell when she's getting old by the fact she needs two pegs to keep her knickers on the line. Well, there I was, just about to put that second peg on my Bombay bloomers when bang.

ERICA: Bang?

MELANIE: Lightning, and I'm knocked out cold. It was freaky, man, totally freaky. I should have been dead. Instead, I've got these.

Melanie shows Erica the palms of her hands. They each have a slit in them.

ERICA: Stigmata?

MELANIE: Stig what? Sounds like a pasta.

ERICA: They're the wounds Christ received from being on the Cross.

MELANIE: Oh great. Now I got the dead guy's wounds? That is bizarre.

ERICA: Can I—may I?

Erica reaches out to touch them. Melanie whips her hands away.

MELANIE: What are you doing? I've gotta get to a hospital with these.

ERICA: But they're not bleeding, are they? They don't hurt, do they?

MELANIE: No, but you just can't go around poking people's cuts like that.

ERICA: Sorry.

MELANIE: Look, it's OK. I'm just new to this stuff, that's all. I never believed in anything religious in my life and look what's happened to me. Do you know how an angel is supposed to behave?

ERICA: No, not really.

MELANIE: There you go. I mean, I wasn't exactly handed a User Manual. "How to be an Angel in 12 Easy Steps."

ERICA: Angel?

MELANIE: Didn't I tell you?

ERICA: Tell me what?

MELANIE: That's what all this is about. I'm the angel and I have to tell you—you know—stuff.

ERICA: Oh. I thought angels weren't people.

MELANIE: That's exactly what I thought and I've told Him over and over, but He won't listen. There's been some mix up in Recruitment, and they picked me to be the new angel, the one that tells...you know.

ERICA: Tells what?

MELANIE: The woman I'm supposed to meet here—you—is going to be the Mother of the New Messiah. Pretty cool, huh?

ERICA: "Mother of the New Messiah?" What are you talking about?

MELANIE: Listen, I know it sounds weird. It really freaked me out when I first heard about it, but after the reign of two thousand years blah blah blah, there's going to be a Child who'll bring East and West together, a New Messiah, sort of a sequel kind of thing—if at first you don't succeed—well he did die, didn't he? So, there you go. Over to you now.

Melanie starts to leave.

ERICA: Where are you going?

MELANIE: I'm outta here. My job's done. You've just got to listen to the Big Guy now.

ERICA: Who?

MELANIE: God you ninny. Just close your eyes and He'll talk to you. Go ahead. Close them.

Erica closes her eyes briefly, but opens one in order to see Melanie.

ERICA: What am I supposed to hear?

MELANIE: It's kind of a rich soap-opera father kind of voice. Very Tom Horton. Very reassuring.

ERICA: OK.

Erica again closes her eyes briefly, but hears nothing.

ERICA: I can't hear anything.

MELANIE: You might be standing in the wrong position. It can mess up reception.

Melanie moves Erica to another position.

MELANIE: Anything now?

ERICA: Nothing.

MELANIE: That's funny.

ERICA: It shouldn't matter where you stand, should it?

MELANIE: That's what I thought, but apparently not. Bit like a mobile phone. Look, doesn't matter. You've got the New Bible—well it's all over the place now but once you read it I'm sure it'll all make sense.

Erica picks up a page.

ERICA: There's nothing on it.

MELANIE: What do you mean? (*taking the page*) This one's about some upcoming battle in the desert between the forces of—oh, whoever. There's always battles going on somewhere.

ERICA: There's nothing written on it!

MELANIE: Can't you read? It says—

ERICA: It's blank! They're all blank!

MELANIE: What? Can't you see—

ERICA: There's nothing there!

MELANIE: Oh. That's weird. (*picking up another page*) This one's about—

ERICA: Whatever it is I can't read it. Only you can.

MELANIE: This one sets out what's going to happen to you in the years ahead.

ERICA: It does?

MELANIE: Yep. After giving birth, you'll raise the New Messiah to the age of 18, at which time they'll go off and have a crack at saving the world.

ERICA: I don't want to be the mother of the New Messiah. I already have three boys. I don't want another one.

MELANIE: I'm afraid you don't have much say in the matter. It's all been worked out.

ERICA: But you don't want to be an angel.

MELANIE: That's different: my job is done. I should be free and clear. You haven't even started yet.

ERICA: I don't think it works like that.

MELANIE: Oh you know what's happening, do you? Listen, I'm the one with the Message. I'm the one who can read The Book.

Erica picks up a page, frowning.

ERICA: "And before all the cleanskin shall be loved by God."

MELANIE: You can read it!

ERICA: But what does it mean?

MELANIE: How the hell should I know? I told you I'm just the Messenger.

ERICA: Who's the cleanskin?

MELANIE: I don't know. You? Me? It's all just a metaphor.

ERICA: But—

MELANIE: Listen. There are things written here with all sorts of meanings you could drive a truck through. Maybe it's you—I don't know. This is your first time in church?

ERICA: No. I come here regularly. Every Wednesday morning, same time.

MELANIE: Whatever. Doesn't matter. You're a cleanskin in my eyes.

ERICA: But—

MELANIE: Doesn't matter. It's your gig now. Good luck.

Melanie starts to leave.

ERICA: Isn't it about you?

MELANIE: Pardon?

ERICA: Aren't you the cleanskin? You said yourself you didn't have a religious bone in your body.

MELANIE: Well, yes, but—

ERICA: So that means you—you're the cleanskin, the angel—the first before God.

MELANIE: No way. I told you you could read anything into this stuff.

ERICA: But you have to do something before you go.

MELANIE: Really? Like what? Tell you next week's Lotto numbers?

ERICA: Well, um, yes. If you know them.

MELANIE: That's easy. 17, 38, 35, 28, 12, 10 and the supplementaries are 5 and 3.

Erica mouths the numbers off trying to remember them.

MELANIE: I wouldn't bother. *(Pause. Louder:)* I wouldn't bother. The numbers are useless.

ERICA: But they are the winning numbers, right?

MELANIE: Sure. Only I told them to everyone I know: friends, family, work colleagues, strangers. I even sent them to a few newsgroups on the internet. The most you're gonna win is \$15.40 I think.

ERICA: Oh.

MELANIE: It's what I call the Cassandra Complex.

ERICA: What's that?

MELANIE: It's the little trick God plays on you when you can see the future: you can see the future but you can't benefit from it.

ERICA: So you can see—everything?

MELANIE: Snapshots. Only what the Big Guy let's me see.

ERICA: Can you see my family?

MELANIE: No. Bit of a blank there, I'm afraid. Same with my family. Just the big stuff. Wars, pestilence, game shows, that sort of thing.

ERICA: I have three boys: Bradley, Todd—

MELANIE: —and Joel.

ERICA: Yes. How did you...?

MELANIE: And you don't know how to go about getting a divorce from your prick of a husband, Darren. La di da di da.

Pause

ERICA: How do you know all that? How did you know Joel's name?

Melanie shrugs her shoulders.

MELANIE: I just—I don't—

ERICA: You really are an angel.

MELANIE: Not fully. No. I—

Erica kneels in front of Melanie.

MELANIE: What are you doing?

ERICA: You have to forgive me.

MELANIE: You're kidding, right? For what?

Erica takes a pack of Pokémon cards out of her handbag and hands them to Melanie.

MELANIE: Pokémon cards. OK. I forgive you for playing Pokémon. It's really just for kids, you know.

ERICA: They're not mine.

MELANIE: Isn't that what they all say?

ERICA: I stole them.

MELANIE: Oh.

ERICA: From my son.

MELANIE: Oh boy.

ERICA: I was on my way this morning to sell them and go to the Casino to see if I could win big.

MELANIE: *(holding up a card)* Well this is a Charizard Shadow-less. This one's quite rare. You could get quite a bit for him.

ERICA: How much lower can you go than stealing from your own child?

MELANIE: Not much.

ERICA: The lowest.

MELANIE: But why do you need the money so bad? You don't live in a hovel, do you?

ERICA: You can live in a palace and still be unhappy.

MELANIE: True. That's why there are so many shrinks in South Yarra: you should always fish where the fish are. *(Pause)* Things weren't really that bad, were they?

ERICA: Today was going to be the big one. I was going to win big and buy a big new house all new and clean and never been lived in before, and a big new car with that new car smell straight out of the showroom, and maybe a holiday in some tropical place where they bring you drinks with little umbrellas in them.

Pause

MELANIE: Not that you've thought about this or anything.

ERICA: Don't you have a dream?

MELANIE: Sure. It usually involves signing up a huge client, then grabbing a bottle of Johnnie Walker and that really cute guy from the Art Department whose name I keep forgetting.

ERICA: I guess you won't be seeing that now.

MELANIE: Like hell. It can still happen for me.

ERICA: I don't think so.

MELANIE: Oh really?

ERICA: If this is God's will...

MELANIE: Yes, if this is God's will what?

ERICA: Then that will be it. For both of us.

MELANIE: I don't think so. I'm no puppet. He can pick someone else.

ERICA: He picked you for a reason.

MELANIE: Oh you know how He thinks, do you?

ERICA: Isn't it obvious?

MELANIE: No.

ERICA: You haven't finished bringing the Message. You've brought it to me, but what about the rest of the world? There are millions out there who want to hear that the Second Coming is at hand. *(Pause)* You do believe in Him, don't you?

MELANIE: Of course. I didn't before, but I do now.

ERICA: There you go. You just need to spread the Word.

MELANIE: I don't want to become the next Billy Graham. No way. Besides, anyone can do that. You can do that.

ERICA: You're the one who's in marketing. You know how to sell a message. You know about TV, radio, the newspapers. This Message has to get out.

MELANIE: No.

ERICA: What's the matter? Isn't this the biggest client you've ever had?

MELANIE: I'd never thought of it like that, but—

ERICA: There's no buts about it, surely. *(Erica picks up a page of the new Bible.)* "And the First Angel shall tell the Message to the Peoples of the World that the New Messiah will come." That's you.

MELANIE: Me?

ERICA: Yes.

MELANIE: I'm the First Angel am I?

ERICA: I'd say so.

MELANIE: Oh boy.

ERICA: It'll be great. You'll be doing exactly what you want to do. You'll have the whole world as your canvas.

Pause

MELANIE: You are very good.

ERICA: What?

MELANIE: I almost believe you. But you keep forgetting there's one tiny difference between us.

ERICA: Which is?

MELANIE: I like my life. No wonder you have no problem with the idea of being the mother of the New Messiah. If I was a mother of three with a gambling problem—

ERICA: —I don't—

MELANIE: —then of course I'd want a change. Any sort of change—even a celestial one. *Especially* a celestial one. (*Pause*) Look, the thing is there's no choice in the matter. I didn't choose to be an angel. You didn't choose to be Mary #2. From what I can tell—and admittedly I'm no scholar in these matters—the choices women have had over the centuries are pretty limited: mother, angel, whore, saint, and nun. What else?

ERICA: Can't you stop thinking of yourself for once and just think of what others might need?

MELANIE: God doesn't need me. He's doing fine without me. I don't know why he chose me at all. He could have just told you directly.

ERICA: Don't you get it?

MELANIE: What's to get? I don't need God.

ERICA: But I need you.