
SHORT STORIES
FROM SCATTERED
PARTS OF THE PLANET

TWISTED

TALES

“An awesome read. Well crafted stories.”

--- Martin Krige - The Evening Telegraph

short stories by
BRIAN HANCOCK

10/10/2023

10/10/2023

TWISTED

TALES

short stories by BRIAN HANCOCK

Scan the QR code below with your
phone to see all of Brian's books
or visit www.greatcirclepress.com





Copyright © 2024 Great Circle Press

A division of Great Circle Enterprises

33 Waterside Road

Marblehead, MA 01945

Tel: 339-338 0740

www.greatcirclepress.com

For Emmet - my Grandson

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without written permission from the publisher, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in a review.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN: 9798387146046

Hancock, Brian

More Twisted Tales - Short Stories from Scattered Parts of the Planet

Printed in the United States of America.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

STORIES

SUNFLOWERS	1
SHOAL OF SAND	21
WHEN ONE IS NOT ENOUGH	37
PIRATES	45
THE BACKPACK	55
MIRANDA	73
THE SHIPPING FORECAST	93
IPI NTOMBI	115
GINA	129
MR. SMITH	143
THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY	155
THE SOAP GIRLS	165
NANTUCKET	173
THE NULLABOR	193
VICTORIA'S LITTLE SECRET	219
LILACS AND ROSES - Story 1	237
Story 2	255
Story 3	277
GINGER BRANDY	303
ELEPHANTS NEVER FORGET	319
THE COMRADES	335
PINK MARTINI	353

“Superbly crafted stories from a master storyteller.”

Bill Baxter - Author - Notes from a Small Planet

“A fun read. Each story had its own twist, most I never saw coming.
All equally satisfying.”

Skip Novak - Author and High Latitude Explorer

“If it's summer and you are looking to treat yourself to a good book,
treat yourself to this one.”

Jacques Swart - Newsplus

SUNFLOWERS

WE STOPPED AT the Brickhouse Cafe for a milkshake on our way home from the movies. We had recently divorced, Hazel and I, and were trying to patch things up. I thought that going to a movie together might be a good idea. I had once loved her but I can't remember exactly when that was. It must have been a long time ago. And I can't remember when it all went sour, but the last few years had been hell and that was long before her lawyer hit on me but that's a completely different story. Going to the movies actually helped despite the fact that in the end, once the divorce was settled, I had lost just about everything except the cottage in Provence. And that was only because I had bought it in an old girlfriend's name.

Three months earlier we had walked out of the Old Bailey Courthouse into London traffic. She raised her arm and the cabbie stopped. She turned to me and said, "Do you know Jeremy we could have made it work if you weren't such an asshole." I had nothing to say in return. She was probably right. She got into the taxi and then, surprisingly, gestured for me to join her.

"Let's go to my place for one last fuck." I knew that I was making a mistake and I was still mad at her but she let her skirt slip just enough so that I could see her panties and she was wearing the ones with sunflowers, the ones that she knew I loved. I was screwed, well to be more precise, I knew that I was about to be screwed. It happened again the night before I left for Provence.

Note: If you would like a customized BOOKPLATE for your copy of Twisted Tales please contact brian@greatcirclepress.com

Hazel was a complete bitch but she had an ass that made grown men weep and legs that went almost all the way up to her tits. She also had a mean streak and knew how to use it. It was just getting light when I left her apartment the next morning; the apartment that had been mine just a few months earlier. I took a taxi to the shitbox that I had rented, grabbed the last of my belongings, and called my friend Pete.

“I was wondering if you were ever going to call me back.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “My phone died. I’m ready if you can still take me.”

Pete grunted. “I will be there in five.”

We drove slowly to Heathrow. I was going to be early for my flight and that was fine by me. Pete had to be at the coffee shop where he worked by six. My flight wasn’t until nine. There was a light drizzle when we took off. The plane banked to the south and I left London behind. It was wet and quite sad. Maybe it was just me that was sad. I dunno. Flying out of Heathrow always had a way of making me feel sad.

I never sleep on planes. I always find it a bit awkward to nod off with my mouth open and spit drooling down my chin. That’s one of the reasons why I don’t want an open casket when I die. People will say, “oh doesn’t Jeremy look great?” They would be talking about me and I would be a corpse with my mouth sewn shut and a double scoop of makeup plastered on my face. No, none of that for me but I think that I was a bit shagged out after my night with Hazel and I slept all the way. I hoped that no one noticed and I only woke when the plane landed with a gentle bump in Marseille.

I rented a car, a tiny Peugeot. I knew where to go and I also knew where the first roadside cafe was. I pulled in and topped off the gas tank. There was hardly any space to park but

I finally found a spot on the lawn and went in. The place was jammed and I was greeted by the heady smell of tobacco and garlic. Luckily there was one place left at the counter. I ordered a glass of red and a plate of escargot with some eggs on the side. I know. Escargot for an early lunch might not be everyone’s idea of a good time but for me it has always been a slice of heaven. I chased it with a large glass of pastis and left feeling happy. Hazel and my life in London was a thing of the past; Provence and the small cottage on the farm would be my future.

It’s only an hour’s drive to the farm and a very pleasant one at that. A lot of it is farmland and farmland always gives me a sense of peace. The gate was a bit rickety but opened ok and I drove right up to the front door. The place smelled of rats. And damp. Not a good combination. It had been shuttered since my last visit and was in desperate need of a through breeze. I left the front door open and opened the back door. The windows were jammed shut. It was the best that I could do.

It was surprisingly chilly so I lit a fire. There was some wood left over from my last visit. I needed to leave the doors open to get the musty smell out but I was happy about it. The fields were yellow from an early spring blossom which stretched as far as I could see. I popped a couple of Zyrtec to deal with my allergies and started to unpack.

Sunsets in Provence are a thing that inspires poetry as well as good art and music and my first night there didn’t disappoint. It came in waves until a damp darkness descended. That was when I reached for the wine bottle. I had stocked my cellar previously and, well, me being me, I had meticulously labeled each bottle. What I hadn’t expected was the shaking.

I reached for a 1975 Chateau Lafitte and it started to shake. The bottle started to shake, not me. At first it was just a slight tremble but then I noticed the other bottles trembling. I watched

them shake for a few minutes not sure what to think. I grabbed the Chateau Lafitte by the neck. I may have held it a bit too tight because it stopped trembling for a few moments until I pulled the corkscrew out of the drawer by the sink. The bottle went still. It hung limp in my hand but the others in the cellar started to rumble. It was a sad rumble, you know the kind that resonates deep in your gut. I looked around the old cottage. Maybe I was just jet lagged even though we were in the same time zone, well pretty much the same give or take an hour or so. Maybe I was sad about my marriage ending. It had been a long day. I took a knife and split the wax seal. That was when the rest of the bottles really started to make a noise. I was spooked. I left the Chateau Lafitte on the kitchen counter and reached for the bottle of vodka instead. There was an audible sigh from the cellar.

The fire had long since gone out and a chilly wind blew through. I had dozed off on the couch and dragged myself to bed around midnight but as soon as my head hit the pillow I was wide awake. I tried to sleep in but all the possibilities woke me early and I was up just as the sun lit the flowers outside my window. I rolled over onto my good side; the other side had been damaged by some shrapnel, but that's also another story for another day. The windows needed cleaning but through them I could see someone on the far side of the field scattering what looked like seeds.

I was trying to fall back asleep when I heard a sound. A slight meow. There was a kitten. A tiny one. A ginger one. It was on the end of my bed staring at me.

"Salut l'ami," I said. My French was rusty. I figured that she didn't speak English. The cat opened her mouth but nothing came out. Just some kind of grunt. I looked at my phone to see what time it was and there was a message from Hazel. "We had fun yesterday," she wrote.

I needed coffee. Hazel's message pissed me off. It was too late to make up. The last thing I did before leaving London was to sign the divorce papers, and well, you know, the other thing. I pulled back the sheets. Ginger grunted again and then made a run for it. My jeans were on the floor and they were cold. I pulled them on, found my keys, and drove slowly up the lane. I was on a mission to get coffee. The rented Peugeot wasn't happy and spluttered most of the way. I was almost at the turn when I saw her again. She had her long auburn hair pulled back and tied with a simple string. I knew that she had seen me, but she didn't wave.

The coffee was stale which was a bit of a bummer. The croissant, however, was amazing. Actually I had the pan-chocolate, the one with chocolate in the middle. Gosh, how much I loved being back in France.

When I drove back to the cottage the girl was gone. The heat of the day was just starting to settle in. I needed to clean the place and started with my bedroom. Ginger peeked around the corner clearly not sure what to make of things. I found some leftovers from the roadside diner and chopped them up. Ginger seemed grateful.

By noon I was famished. And thirsty. There was some old pasta in the pullout. That was about it. "What the heck?" I thought. Lunch is Lunch. I went down the stairs to grab a bottle of wine. It was dark and dank and then I heard the shaking. The bottles were rattling again. I had replaced the Chateau Lafitte and it was shaking the most. "Hmmm." I was not sure what to do.

My lunch was dry, the pasta old. I needed to go shopping. My car was hot from sitting in the sun. The nearest village was just five miles over the hill and the road along the perimeter of the property was bumpy, to say the least. I was almost at the corner when I saw her again. This time her hair was loose. I waved. She waved back. I felt a little turn in my tummy but kept on driving.

The store was well stocked. I got five different kinds of cheese, some pancetta, a dozen eggs and some bread. Well, yes, I also bought some liver, for Ginger of course.

There was a message on my phone. It was Hazel. "I think that we might have made a big mistake," it read. I flicked my screen and hit Delete.

Ginger was there at the door to greet me. She was hungry. No big surprise there. I chopped the liver into small chunks and gave it to her in a bowl. It was like she had never eaten. There was a quiet knock at the door. "Hey Ging you just enjoy that," I said. "I need to answer the door." She was there. She had a bag with some cheese and a baguette and a small bouquet of sunflowers.

"Bonsoir Monsieur," she said. "Welcome to Cavallio. I have something for you." She handed me the flowers. I could smell her. There was a faint smell of lilac. "Merci Madame," I said. I heard Ging meow, well grunt to be more precise. She was still hungry. "Oh I see you have found my pussy," she said. "My little pussy cat." She giggled in a French sort of way. "This one likes to go from farmhouse to farmhouse looking for food. She likes to, how do you say, scavenge?"

"Oui," I said. "My name is Jeremy. I think that I have seen you before but we have never met." Even as I said the words I felt inadequate. Like a schoolboy trying to chat up the sister of his best friend.

"Oui," she replied. "I knew that you would come back. I saw you before when you first bought the house. I could see your spirit. I hoped that you would come back. I secretly hoped but months went by." Her words hung in the air. Awkwardly.

"I came back. This is my house now. Ma maison." Ging meowed again but barely. She was trying to meow but not much came out. Just a simple grunt that could have been in either French or

English, I couldn't tell. She bent to pet her but Ging turned, her tail straight up and walked toward the food bowl. As she bent to pet Ging I could see her cleavage and my heart skipped. "My name is Delphine," she said. Delphine, not Dolphin." She giggled a little at her own joke.

I stumbled over my words, as usual. "Please come in," I said with more flair than necessary and showed her into the kitchen. Ging looked up hopefully. Her bowl was empty.

"Would you care for a glass of wine?" I asked. Delphine nodded. "Oui, juste un peu. Just a little." I went down the stairs to the cellar. The bottles were still. I took a very nice Sauvignon Blanc off the shelf. There was a little murmuring but no real fuss. The wine was cool. I slipped the cork and poured two glasses. There was a slight pop and the bottles in the basement clinked.

Delphine was outside sitting on the stone wall. My outdoor chairs were still in storage. Her dress had a floral print, mostly roses. "Merci Monsieur," she said as I handed her the glass. The late afternoon sunlight caught the amber liquid and for a moment, it sparkled. "Je vous en prie. You are welcome." The rest of the evening was just chit chat but the bottle of Sauvignon "went down singing hymns," as my late father liked to say. I opened another. The cellar was restless. There was some fluttering when I took the '85 Jadot Pouilly Fuisse but things soon settled down.

"How long are you staying this time?" she asked.

I sighed. "I am going to live here now. I want to grow grapes and sell them. I want to have a small vineyard and make wine." I heard some shuffling from the cellar. The bottles were clinking.

She said, "You are a romantic aren't you?" I thought about the hasty sex that I had had with Hazel just a day earlier and replied. "Oui je pense que je suis un romantique." I could see the flush in

her face rising. Her cotton dress was not enough for the cold air that was dropping in from the mountain behind the farm and she said, "I think that I need to leave."

Ginger was at the foot of my bed when a milky morning light lit my bedroom. She was hungry. No big surprise. I got up and fed her the rest of the liver. She tried to meow but all that came out was a grunt. Maybe she didn't speak French - or English for that matter. Maybe she didn't speak at all. My phone was on the charger. I looked at it and there was a message from Hazel. "I'm in bed and thinking of you. I was so horny that I rolled over onto my hand which just happened to be there." She added some emoji's which I didn't really understand but I kind of got her drift.

I deleted the message.

It was Saturday and I wanted to get some fresh veggies and hopefully some fish from the farmers market. Saturday was Farmers Market day. I must admit that I kept glancing at the field hoping to see her but there was just a cow whose name I learned later was Matilda. The market was cranking. In the corner were the farmers; the hard drinkers. They had been there since long before dawn and had lain out their produce. They were digging into what one might call a hearty breakfast of blood sausage, eggs, bread fried in the blood sausage grease and more than a touch of red wine. I really wanted to join them and was on my way when I saw her. She had a loose fitting skirt; and if you can believe it, the pattern was sunflowers. I truthfully felt my balls constrict. I quickly hid but she had already seen me.

"Monsieur Jeremy," she said. "I was hoping to see you here. Tu dois venir rencontrer Bernard." Bernard was apparently the best fishmonger in the area. He really was. His stand was stacked and Delphine took me by the hand. "You just have to have his prawns," she said.

"I will only buy prawns if you will join me for lunch," I said, a little too cavalierly if you ask me, but my balls were still in a knot and I was not thinking straight.

"Oui Monsieur," she said. "I can bring some wine."

We sat outside under the almond tree. I had dug out the table and chairs and lit the small barbecue to grill the prawns. When Delphine arrived she was still wearing the dress with sunflowers. I couldn't help but notice that when the sun caught it just right that I could see her legs through the thin fabric. My heart skipped a beat.

The food was beyond excellent. The bottle of wine that Delphine brought went down easily. I went to the cellar to find another. There was some general consternation, some rattling if you will. I went for the '69 Grenache. It was not a good choice, or so I figured from the rattling. Instead I took the Blue Bordeaux rose and things quietened down.

Delphine was napping when I came back. "Sorry," she said, "I had an early start. I always help Bernard with his stand. He's the best but he also likes a little 'raisin' if you know what I mean." I knew what she meant. Monsieur Bernard liked a drop of wine with his breakfast. I was thinking of leaning in for a kiss when my phone beeped. It was Hazel. "I know about the place in Provence. I am coming for a visit."

"Fuck."

Delphine could sense something. "I must be going," she said.

Two days later Hazel showed up. She looked like she had been dragged down a flight of stairs; feet first.

"The fucking flight was a disaster," she announced. "A fucking disaster from start to finish. RyanAir no longer serves booze and the bitch at the car rental place hardly spoke a word of English."

She plonked herself in the same chair where Delphine had been sitting just two days earlier. “Do you have any wine? I meant to stop and get some, but forgot.”

“Yes,” I said, “Just give me a moment.” I went down the staircase and was nowhere near the bottom stair when I heard the bottles rattle. There was no way that any of them were giving themselves up. I hesitated a moment and then remembered that I had a five euro Pinot Grigio in the fridge. I poured Hazel a glass. I poured myself a glass of vodka and pretended that it was water.

“It’s so nice to see you,” she said.

I could hear the bottles in the cellar rattling.

“It’s nice to see you too. I’m sorry about the flight and the car rental.”

“Yea fuck’em. It was pissing with rain in London. This place is actually quite nice.”

“I can get used to it.”

“You must be wondering why I am here.”

I concentrated on a small bee that was making himself available to the pollen on my lavender bush and didn’t reply.

“I think that we should get back together.” I heard a loud clicking from the cellar. “Yes, divorce was a mistake. We are meant to be.” I could tell that the wine had already kicked in. “We have always been meant to be Jeremy. You are me, or should I say, Moi now that we are in France?” A small bit of the Pinot Grigio spilled onto her blouse. I looked over her shoulder and Delphine was in her field spreading seeds. I so hoped that she wouldn’t drop by.

Delphine dropped by. Hazel was drunk. It didn’t go well mostly because Hazel was drunk and Delphine could barely understand a word she was saying.

“I have to go to sleep and I have to take a piss,” Hazel announced. Delphine said, “je pense que je dois y aller. I will see you tomorrow.”

Hazel passed out on the couch. I needed more wine but when I went down to the cellar the rattling started. I knew enough to know that it was vodka or nothing. I retired to my bedroom. Ginger was already there tucked up on my pillow. She was annoyed to see me but happy when I added the leftover prawns to her bowl. The vodka helped me sleep and I woke to another milky dawn.

Hazel was still on the couch. She was horny. I knew that she was horny. I had seen that look in her eyes for the most part of a decade. “I meant what I said last night,” she said.

“Would you like some coffee,” I asked. “And maybe a little wine to soak up the alcohol?” Hazel laughed. She spread her legs, just a little, and I saw the sunflowers.

“I’m going to the market. I can pick you up some pain pills if you like.”

“I’m OK. I will rub one off while you are gone. That always helps with a headache. Cheaper than pain pills.”

She was asleep when I got back but lifted one arm and waved. “This might have been a mistake coming to see you,” she said. I heard the bottles in the cellar rattling.

“It’s ok.”

The bottles rattled louder.

“What’s that noise?” she asked.

I closed the door to the cellar. “I dunno. I think that there may be rats down there.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this place? I knew about it all along. Michelle told me, back when we were friends. She turned on me, you know that right?”

"Everyone turned on you Hazel. Even I turned on you. Even your mother turned on you."

"You are an asshole," she said. "Always have been. A right pucker prick. I should never have come here. I thought that we could make up and patch things together but nooo. You have always been a prick."

"Then why did you come here? And why didn't you tell me that you knew about this place?"

"I am a woman," she replied. "Women always need to have a little extra when it comes to negotiating. This was my extra. If you had tried to pull that shit about the boat I would have played this card, but I didn't have to so I let it slide. I let you keep this place and by the way I am selling the boat."

I had to leave the room. I grabbed my coat and headed for the door. "Tell me that you are not fucking Delphine," she yelled. "She would be the lucky one." I heard some rattling in the cellar.

"You need to go home," I said over my shoulder. "When I get back you need to be gone."

"Ferkoff you jerk off," she said but I had already closed the door and couldn't hear her.

Delphine was in the field. She waved and beckoned me. "I need you to meet my cow Matilda." She looked amazing. It was as if she knew that I liked her hair down. Matilda was friendly. She nuzzled my hand. I think that she was hoping for some dandelions but I took it as a sign of friendship. Just then a small Citroen pulled up.

"Ah," Delphine said. "This is my friend Freddie. She comes every morning for milk and eggs." Freddie stepped out of the car. I wondered to myself, "how are all these French women so beautiful?" Freddie had a strong grip and a very definite twinkle

in her eye. "Hello," she said and then fluttered her eyelashes. "I am Frederique. You may call me Freddie."

"Hi Freddie," I said. I could feel the flush go to my eyes. Freddie petted Matilda for a bit and then headed to the house. "She knows where the eggs and milk are kept." I was at a loss for words so I rubbed Matilda's nose and said, "I have to go."

When I got back to the house Hazel was still there. She had been touching herself and wanted me to know it. "My lawyer, I just called her, she said that it's not too late to bring this home up in front of the judge. You withheld evidence. That's a crime you know?"

"Any chance you would like a glass of wine," I asked.

"No, not a glass. Bring the bottle."

I made the mistake of going down to the cellar and there was general disagreement. The bottles were rattling. Luckily there was another Pinot Grigio in the fridge. I poured Hazel a glass and disguised my vodka as water but I knew that she knew and I didn't care.

"I will go away," she said. "But only if you promise me that you are not fucking Delphine." The bees were still enjoying the pollen on the lilacs. I stared at them for a while and then said, "I wish."

Hazel left the following morning. I didn't hear her get up and I didn't hear the Uber come and go but I figured as much when Ging jumped on my bed looking for breakfast. She nuzzled my cheek and then walked toward the door, tail raised, looking over her shoulder to make sure that I was following. I found a can of 'salmon in oil' and opened it. It stank. Ging loved it.

I tried to make escargot for breakfast but it didn't turn out that great, as in, it turned out crap. I knew that the roadside

place in town had escargot and decided that I would go there in celebration of Hazel leaving. There were a few people at the bar. Most just nodded when I sat down. They were well into their coffee and eggs and croissants and blood sausage and I could tell they were not ready for conversation and I could understand that, but I needed to tell someone that Hazel had left. The waitress feigned interest and topped up my mug. “Voudriez-vous un verre de vin pour accompagner vos oufs?”

“Oui, juste un peu.” She gave me a huge carafe of the house red.

“Tu ressembles a quelqu’un qui pourrait utiliser plus qu’un simple verre.”

“I know,” I said, “my ex wife just left and I think that I am already in love with someone else.” The waitress, and you know how they are, very clever in my opinion, left it at that.

I was well into my carafe and eggs when she walked in. No, not Hazel and not Delphine, but Freddie. I know that I looked uncomfortable. She saw me, “Bonjour cheri,” she said with a wave.

“Hello,” I replied. “Come and sit.”

Now, I am just an ordinary white man but even white men can pick up a scent. Her scent was sunflowers. Faint and simple but sunflowers nonetheless. I felt a little awkward, almost as if I was cheating on Delphine. Freddie said, “May I have a little of your vin?”

I tried my best to make conversation but too much had happened at once. Hazel had surprised me. Delphine had introduced me to Matilda, and Freddie. Pete had texted me to say that his puppy had been run over by some guy riding an ice cream truck, and Freddie was touching my foot under the table. I ordered another carafe.

I am not sure if I remember these details clearly. We stayed for lunch and then we stayed for dinner. Freddie took me home, she tucked me into bed, and, with a light, soft kiss, she left. “I think that you may have a fever,” she said. I was pretty sure that I didn’t. I think that it was just a Hazel Hangover. I had had many of them but when Freddie kissed me I knew that things were going to be alright.

Ging was at the end of my bed when I woke. She was hungry. I was hungry. I made myself a cheese and tomato sandwich and gave Ging the crusts. She was not impressed. She sniffed it and her tail went up, clearly not impressed with her breakfast. I had stowed some mushrooms in the cellar next to the eggs that Delphine had dropped off for me. I cracked the eggs for an omelet and fried the mushrooms. I must have been hungrier than I thought. The ladies in the bottles were not thrilled. There was a general rumbling. “Sorry girls,” I said. “I’m cheating on you. I have an ’85 Chateau de Beaucastel Chateauneuf-du-Pape. You have not met her yet and you probably never will. There was much consternation, a lot of rattling, but I didn’t care. I was getting tired of vodka and tired of my life being run by some old bottles of wine.

The smell was amazing despite my allergies. Spring flowers floated in on the breeze and Freddie was on my mind. Actually, if I am to be perfectly honest, so was Delphine. The wine was awesome and I dozed in the late afternoon sun and only woke when Ging nudged me. She was hungry; another big surprise. My mind was in a fug. I can usually drink a few glasses of wine with lunch but a whole bottle? Hmm not good. I fed Ging and she went off happy with her tail held high. All was quiet in the cellar. I knew that they were sulking about the ‘85 Chateauneuf-du-Pape.

Delphine came by with some fiddleheads. “These are in season,” she said. “Just steam them and add a little butter. She wouldn’t stay.

“Non monsieur, ma mere a besoin de moi. My mother needs me.” I sat there feeling a little sorry for myself until Ging jumped onto my lap. I tried to pet her but she was not having any of it. Instead she licked my hand and then left. The sky was being painted like another Monet and I dozed off. I woke around eight. There was a message from Hazel. “I know that you are fucking Delphine and I want you to know that I don’t care.” I swiped the screen and hit Delete. Her mean streak was coming in loud and clear.

Night came quickly as it usually does in Provence and I was cold. I lit the fire and thought about a glass of red but the ladies were not having any of it. They started to tremble, then shake, and then clink and then I knew that it was only a big glass of vodka that would set me free. I passed out in my chair. The fire died to just embers. I could hear an owl, or at least I thought that it might have been an owl, but it was far away and I was more than a little drunk. I didn’t notice Freddie come by. I said that I didn’t notice her but somewhere, somewhere, far far off I smelled sunflowers. I tried to open one eye but it wasn’t happening. Ging meowed, well grunted to be more specific, and I tried to open my eyes again. Sitting on the bench beside me was Freddie. She leaned over and kissed me just lightly on my lips, and then smiled and said, “I will come back later.”

She did come back later and so did Delphine. I was asleep with Ging cuddled next to me. I never heard the door open. Not the front door nor my bedroom door but suddenly they were both on my bed. Ging stirred and I snorted. How embarrassing. Then I farted. It was loud enough to wake me up. I heard one of them laugh. Sometimes I wish that I wasn’t me and this was one of those times. I heard the laughter and sat bolt upright. Ging fled. Delphine and Freddie were sitting there looking at me. They were both naked. Well that’s not exactly true. Delphine was naked; Freddie was wearing something. I think that it was a thong but I

couldn’t be sure. Delphine had the bottle of 1975 Chateau Lafitte in her hand. It was limp, the bottle that is, not Delphine and definitely not me. Then Hazel came through the door. She was wearing nothing but her sunflower panties. Ging came back. He gave me a look that said, “watch out.” I went limp and then fell back asleep.

There had been a lot of rain during the night and the morning was washed clear and clean. I needed more coffee and cranked up the Peugeot. I had been meaning to call the rental place to tell them that the car was a piece of crap, but the days seemed to fade into nights effortlessly and I hadn’t quite got around to it.

The road was slippery. I was trying to concentrate when I saw Matilda; and Delphine. She was pruning her rose bushes and waved. I waved back and she went back to her pruning. The waitress at Cafe Paris knew me by now and dropped off a cup of stale coffee and a pan-chocolate. I was flicking through the translate app on my phone trying to find the French word for ‘Jackass’ when Freddie walked through the door.

“Bonjour,” she said. “I was hoping to find you here.” She pulled up the seat next to mine. “I had a really good sleep last night. Really good. My boyfriend too. He was sleeping with a smile on his face. That always makes me nervous but then he farted and it woke him up.”

I said, “would you like some coffee?”

“Non,” she said, “I have to be going. I have to see my dentist and I don’t want him to know that I drink coffee.” She kissed me again just lightly on the cheek, both sides as the French like to do.

Ging was starving as usual but I had anticipated it and had bought another slab of liver which settled her for a while. A low

mist hung from the mountain behind. I really wanted a glass of wine; I was getting sick of vodka, but the ladies were having none of it. Each time I went into the cellar there was a loud trembling. I noticed that the Clairette de Die AOC was shaking the most. "Well screw it," I thought. "I'm going to show these bottles who's the Boss, but I couldn't bring myself to open the Clairette. Instead I brewed a pot of tea.

Freddie came in around midnight. I had been dozing in my chair trying to watch a movie on my phone. The cell reception was crap and it kept cutting out. I was getting the spinning ball from hell. She didn't knock. She just walked in and took me by the hand. "We have a saying in French," she said. "La Saint-Valentin n'arrive que lorsque vous le souhaitez aussi. St. Valentine's Day only comes when you wish it to. Today is the day." She led me to my bedroom. The cat bolted.

This time neither Hazel or Delphine showed up. "I'm a bit nervous," Freddie said. "Can I please have a glass of wine?" I was beyond nervous myself. I knew that the ladies would have something to say. I crept down the stairs and then down into the cellar. All was quiet. Disturbingly quiet. I turned the light on. It was on a dimmer so I turned it low. There was no noise, just a quiet hum. The 1975 Chateau Lafitte was humming the loudest. I took her gently. The wax was off where I had carelessly cut it a couple of months earlier. When I reached for my corkscrew the hum got a little louder. When I twisted it into the cork I could swear that the humming got even louder. As the cork slipped the bottle I heard an audible sigh.

My phone pinged. It was Hazel. "I have found some tosser to marry me so you won't hear from me again." I swiped the screen and hit Delete. She always did have a shitty side to her.

Freddie and I have been together for seven years now. Our

vineyard, Maison Lafitte recently won the Grand Cru award for 'Best In Class' for a Rose. The ladies in the cellar have all been spared. I visit them often. Occasionally there is some trembling, but as they age the trembling gets less and less, a little bit like me I guess. They seem satisfied with my choice and Freddie seems satisfied with hers. She loved the bedspread, the one embroidered with sunflowers. I gave it to her for her birthday the first summer I was in Provence. Delphine, well, she is still spreading seeds and milking Matilda. Sometimes in the morning when Freddie and me are making love I look out the window and can see Delphine in her field and wonder what might have been.

SHOAL OF SAND



MY PARENTS bought a slim sliver of land in Maine. The home was pretty much a ruin, the ceiling leaked, the pipes rumbled, that sort of thing, but it was waterfront property and my younger brother and I loved it. We would only go there in August when Maine had finally warmed up after a long cold winter, and, as my Mum liked to say, “before these bloody leaves change color and the snow starts again.”

Summer in Maine is fleeting. I think that’s what makes it so special.

I was always a loner which actually meant that I had a hard time making friends. I am not sure if it was all just about my height. I was 6’ 2” by the time I was twelve. In the Maine house I had to duck to get through the front door, but there was nothing that I could do about it. I usually tried to hide my feet; they were each the size of small tennis courts and I knew that girls would find them a little off-putting. I couldn’t blame them. They kind of freaked me out too.

During my junior year I tried to fit in, I really did, but the friendships all felt so insincere. We would be friends for a while but then I would say something stupid, or someone would notice the size of my feet and the friendship would end. Maine was where I felt most like myself. I think that it was the birds that helped; and later, Maggie.

The shoal of sand was shaped like a banjo. At low tide it was shaped more like a flat balloon but when the tide came in there

was a circular area attached to the mainland by a long, narrow peninsular and it reminded me of a banjo. I would study the tide charts and plan my day around it. The birds nested at the end of the peninsular where their eggs were safe from predators at high tide when the neck of the banjo was underwater. High tide lasted around three hours in the day and three hours during the night, depending on the moon's cycle. I timed my day so that I could get out to the nests just as soon as the tide receded enough, and make it back home before the peninsular flooded.

There were a lot of birds that nested there, plovers mostly, but terns also. At first the terns were mean and would dive bomb me protecting their nests but after a while they got used to me being there. I guess they saw me as a friendly giant. I wasn't there to harm any of them. I just wanted some friends and the birds slowly, and over time, came to recognize me, and in a bird sort of way, they became my friends. They also helped me find my first love.

That summer was extra special. It was my last year in Middle School. I had asked a girl to the end-of-year dance and she had said yes and we had a good time and she even let me kiss her but we left for Maine a little earlier than usual and her family was moving so I knew that I would never see her again. Maybe that was why she let me kiss her.

"Let's spend the whole bloody summer in Maine," Mom said, and Dad agreed, so we arrived at the house in early May. It was still cold but I could not wait to get out to the shoal. Usually, when I got there in August the eggs had long since hatched and the chicks fledged. This summer was going to be different.

As soon as we got to the house I quickly unpacked, stuffing my clothes into a small chest of drawers. My bedroom is in the attic which I am very happy about. The old knotty pine roof had so many knots I could see some pretty strange faces in each of

them. When I wasn't on the shoal I would lay on my bed and read and stare at the knots and make up stories about each face. This time I didn't stop to stare; the tide was just right and I went straight to the shoal to see what the birds were up to.

Right on cue the terns attacked me. They came in low and fast and would swoop by my head before banking around and doing it again; and again. I knew enough to wear my Boston Red Sox cap and had even added a little padding in case they pecked at my head. The tide had already turned and I knew that I would only have an hour or so to see what treasures the shoal of sand held. I wasn't disappointed. Long before I got there I could see dozens of nests. I could see the plovers sitting patiently on them. The sky was filled with terns squawking and dive bombing. I managed to duck them except for one tern that hit me square on. Even through the padding I could feel her sharp beak and feel the weight of a mother protecting her eggs. I was determined to see what I could see so kept on moving. This caused a ruckus. The plovers were getting restless. They shifted nervously from side to side on their nests but I think that some of them recognized me. They would have been chicks the previous summer.

I approached cautiously and sat quietly near the nests, not too close but close enough that I could see the mothers sitting on their eggs. There were some gulls wheeling overhead looking for an opportunity to snatch an egg. The terns were still swooping at me but their squawks were less urgent. I think that they sensed that I might be a friend. I lay on my back and listened to bird calls and for the first time since the school year started I let the mess and stress of being a teenager seep out of my bones. I thought of that first kiss and smiled. It was not so much about the actual kiss but her smell that had me smiling and feeling a little giddy on the inside. The plovers sensed it and they stopped fretting and sat quietly on their nests occasionally glancing my way. I dozed

off hearing the lapping rising tide. Reluctantly I left and headed across the peninsular to the house. Mom had finished unpacking and was starting to make dinner.

"This bloody stove isn't working," I heard her say. I heard my Dad grunt from the living room. "I can make a fire," he said. "We can chuck those steaks we bought at Hannaford's on the grill and pull together a salad. Don't stress yourself my love." My parents fought a lot but as soon as Dad called Mom 'my love' I knew that all would be good in our world.

"Hey Coop," Dad said, "come and help me gather some firewood." It was just getting dark when we finished dinner. There were a pair of loons calling, one close to the house and the other across the bay, and their mournful lilt connected deep inside me. I closed my eyes and took in the heady smell of a campfire and the crisp cool night air of a late Maine spring.

I was up early the next morning, hoping to catch the last of the low tide. There was a light mist that tangled around the low branches of the birch trees. I made my way to the waters edge. There was just enough of the peninsular showing for me to make it out to the shoal. I knew that I would have to be quick. I approached the nesting ground slowly. The birds were still asleep. There had been a truce during the night and the seagulls were napping at the water's edge. As soon as they saw me they took flight and the battle began.

The gulls were first up closely followed by the terns. The gulls shrieked; the terns dive bombed; the plovers woke sleepily and looked around. They saw me and shuffled on their nests. I saw one put her head under her wing again and I knew that she must have recognized me. I sat still. The mist closed in and for a moment I couldn't see anything. I heard the odd squawk and some general clucking and then there was a light breeze and the mist floated out to sea like a ghostly apparition. The birds

were all still there. The seagulls took flight; the terns fussed a lot but not as much as before. I saw the water lapping over the peninsular and decided to call it quits.

Mom had breakfast going. "I got this bloody thing to work," she announced. I saw that there was gas under the plate of scrambled eggs and the toast was browning. "Whose hungry?" she asked. I was starved. Dad came down sleepy-eyed and plonked himself in a chair in the living room. "Any coffee?" he asked.

"Yes there is but you can get it yourself," Mom replied. "This is not a bloody restaurant you know."

"Coop," Dad yelled. "I need coffee and I need it now." I had just sat down to a plate of scrambled eggs but I knew my place and poured him a cup. He likes one packet of Splenda and a splash of milk. Dad grunted when I set it down on the coffee table and I went back to my eggs.

"How are the birds?" Mom asked. I smiled. Mom was good with my bird obsession. Dad not so much.

"I think that the plovers recognized me. They would have been chicks last year but they seemed to know who I was."

"I'm sure that they did my dear," Mom replied. My brother grunted just like my Dad.

"Yea sure," he said. I ate the rest of my eggs in silence.

I was up early the next morning. High tide was a little later so I knew that I would have more time on the shoal. There was a stiff wind blowing across the sound and most of the birds were up and out searching for food, except the mothers on their nests who were braving the chilly wind. I noticed that one of the nests was empty and I could see the eggs. They were a creamy yellow with some brownish black splotches. It didn't take more than a few moments before the gulls moved in. They landed next to

the nest and cracked open their breakfast. Neither parents were anywhere to be seen and within less than a minute the eggs had been devoured. I couldn't blame them; they must have been hungry.

For the next couple of weeks I followed the tide trying to spend as much time with the birds as I could. Then one morning the first one hatched. It was a thrilling moment. I had the shoal all to myself and I couldn't believe how lucky I was to bear witness to such an amazing event. I felt as if I was watching the birth of my own child, well sort of.

Then I saw her.

The beach in front of the house is usually empty but this morning I saw a lady beachcombing. Every now and then she would stoop and pick up some shells. I couldn't tell how old she was but she was wearing a pink shirt, untucked, a pair of blue jeans and what looked like a cowboy hat. I watched her for a while but then went back to my birds. I could see the chick's head popping out from the shell and the mother watching. She was watching both the birth of her babies and the sky above, watching for predators. Then another chick broke through. She had four eggs in her clutch and soon all four had hatched. I was so absorbed that I didn't notice that I had a visitor.

"Hi," she said. I turned around a little startled. "It's quite special isn't it? I come out here in the spring and watch them hatch." I was at a loss for words. For a start girls rarely talk to me and she was hardly a girl. She was a woman. I guessed that she was around 35 or so but again I am not very good with things having to do with the opposite sex. In fact I'm fairly shite with women and girls in general, well except for that one kiss. I was really proud of myself for making that move.

"How many have hatched?" she asked.

"Just the one nest. There are four chicks."

"There will be more," she said confidently. "As soon as you get one hatchling the rest seems to sense that it's time to get out of their eggs and soon they will all hatch." She had a slow Maine drawl but I liked it. "My name is Maggie," she said, extending her hand.

"Coop," I said taking it. She sat next to me and for a minute or so we both watched as another clutch hatched. "It's magic isn't it? You know that in just a few hours those baby birds will leave the nest. The Mom's work is done and they will be on their own. Some will survive, many won't, there are predators on the mainland that will get them if they are not careful. So will the seagulls. They love to feast on baby chicks."

I nodded. I had Googled it and knew that seagulls were their main predator.

"The birds nest on the shoal so that for at least part of the time their eggs are protected from the raccoons and skunks but, you know, it's the circle of life."

I smiled and said, "I had no idea that anyone other than me came out to this shoal. How come I haven't seen you before?"

"I only come here in the spring before my boat gets launched. Once the Maggie May hits the water I am full-on for the summer. I'm a lobsterman, or lobsterwoman if you like. I have been working these waters for fifteen years, since I was 20." I did a quick mental calculation and was quite pleased with myself that I had guessed her age right.

"We had best be going," she said, "the tide is coming in and it's a full moon. The tide always rises faster during a full moon." As we walked back across the peninsular I saw that another clutch was hatching.

"Coop," Dad yelled. "I need you to help me cut this brush." Dad was sweating, hacking at some brambles that threatened to take over the property. I picked up the hedge shears and got stuck in. We stopped for lunch. Mom had made roast beef sandwiches for the four of us. I was hoping to get some rest but Dad had other ideas. My brother had gone shopping with Mom in the morning but he helped out most of the afternoon. I was beat and went to bed shortly after we finished dinner. I fell asleep, secretly hoping that the lady would be there the next day.

I got out to the shoal early but there was no sign of her. Another four clutches had hatched and Maggie was right, the chicks that had hatched the day before were gone. The mother plover looked a bit dejected, or at least that was what I read into it but with birds it's hard to know what they are thinking. That's why I find birds so mysterious. As much as I liked the quiet time on the shoal I kind of, sort of, missed Maggie.

She was there the next morning. "Hi Coop," she said. "Sorry I missed yesterday. The boatyard needed me to sign off on something before they could launch the Maggie May. It's all set now. What did I miss?" I couldn't believe she had apologized to me.

"A bunch more chicks hatched. You were right. The ones that hatched yesterday are already gone." Maggie sat next to me and for a while we watched the frenzied activity of the plovers, gulls and terns all going about their day. Then Maggie said, "we are launching my boat tomorrow. Do you want to come and watch? I had the yard do a new topside job as well as a few coats of antifouling on the bottom. She looks the best that she has ever looked."

I nodded. "Yes I would love to."

"It's ok. They can only launch at high tide. You won't miss anything here."

I knew where the boatyard was. Mr. Lyman ran Yankee Boatyard. We saw him around town occasionally. He always wore a very old baseball cap and smoked some kind of cheroot. The few times that I got close to him he smelled of smoke, salt water and something else that I couldn't quite put my finger on. Might have been aftershave. I was hoping that he wouldn't be there for the launching. If I am to be honest, I have always been a little scared of him.

He was the first person that I saw when I arrived at the yard. The Maggie May was already in the travel-lift and looked spectacular. The sun caught the newly painted topsides and sparkled. Maggie was there too. She was all business. It was as if she owned the yard. She was directing everyone, even Mr. Lyman. They lowered the Maggie May gently into the water where she settled on her lines. Maggie jumped on board and fired the twin diesels. "Come on Coop get on here." I climbed down the wrought iron stairs and jumped on board. The boat listed slightly with my weight but quickly settled. I joined Maggie in the cockpit with two of the yard workers. They released the travel-lift straps and we backed out, or should I say Maggie backed out. Even though I am very naive about boats I could tell that she knew her stuff. We motored out to a mooring where five other lobster boats were tugging at their moorings. The yard workers left. Maggie said, "Let me show you around."

We headed down a narrow companionway. There was not much below. On the right hand side, well the starboard side as Maggie corrected me, was a small galley with a kettle secured by two metal braces. "That's so that it doesn't fall off," Maggie explained. There was a stowage area on the port side and upfront a V-berth with a light blanket and pillow. "This will be my home for the summer," Maggie said waving her hand over her domain. I rent my house during the tourist season. Those pompous pricks from Boston will

pay a fortune. What I make from rent and lobstering during the summer is enough to keep me going through the winter."

I nodded, not sure what to say.

"Well I don't want to keep you. I have some things to do on the boat. I will row you ashore and if it's OK I will join you on the shoal tomorrow. I just can't wait to see what those plovers are up to. She rowed me gently to the dock and I waved goodbye. I could hardly wait until the next morning. Mom had lunch ready when I got back to the house. "Your Dad has a headache," she said. "He's taking a lie-down. I made tomato soup and grilled cheese for lunch."

"Thanks Mom," I said. We sat down at the table by the window where the sun shone the strongest. My brother had found a friend and they had gone into town for ice cream. It was just Mom and me. For the first time I noticed how pretty she was. The sun caught her blond hair and her eyes had a quiet intensity as she dug into her sandwich.

"This may be a strange question Mom," I said, "and I should probably know this, but how old are you?" Mom glanced up from her lunch. She gave me a quizzical look. "I'm 37 Coop. How's your sandwich?"

"It's good Mom," I said.

"Are you going out to the birds this afternoon?"

"No Mom, the tide's not right. Tomorrow morning."

"It's supposed to be stormy tomorrow."

"That's Ok," I said. "I will bring my raincoat."

"Where did you go this morning?"

"I met a lady who has a lobster boat. She was launching it at the Yankee Boatyard. I went to watch them launch it."

"That's nice. Did you see Mr. Smelly there?" Mom chuckled at her own joke.

"Yes he was there but I didn't get close enough to smell him." I chuckled. "I tried to avoid him."

"I know what you mean," Mom said. "I have always been a bit afraid of him."

"You and me both Mom."

I spent the afternoon looking at the knots in the pine ceiling and trying to get Maggie out of my head. I had never met anyone interested in birds like I was. I dozed off and it was dark when I woke. Mom was knocking on my door.

"Dinner's ready," she said.

The next morning I felt the rain whipping against my window. Every now and then the house would shudder as a gust slammed it. I rolled over, not sure what to do. High tide was at six; there would not be much time to see the birds but Maggie had said that she would be there and I knew that I had to go. Dad had been up early and there was a pot of coffee on the stove. I poured it into a go-cup, grabbed my raincoat and bush hat, and headed out. Mom wasn't kidding. It was more than a little stormy. It didn't take me long to get to the peninsular and I slowly made my way to the shoal. I was halfway across the peninsular when I saw her. Maggie had brought along a stool and was huddled against the wind in a set of yellow foul weather gear and had a black Sou'wester hat pulled down low. She didn't see me until I was right next to her.

"The birds are all grounded," she said. "They can't fly in this wind. Well they can but it's not easy. It's like a Sunday to them. They take the day off." Maggie peeked out from under her Sou'wester and looked at me. "You are drenched. Don't you own any foul weather gear?"

"I don't mind being wet," I said, shivering, hoping that Maggie wouldn't notice. She noticed. "I don't think that there will be much to see here today. How about we go to the Maggie May and I will make us some breakfast?"

I nodded, grateful for the invite. Just then a really strong gust hit and the birds were almost knocked off their nests. I followed Maggie across the peninsular and we walked the stony beach to the boatyard. I didn't really have the right shoes and my feet hurt but I was not about to say anything. We found her dinghy tied to the dock. "Let me pump the water out first," Maggie said. "It gets a little unstable if there is water sloshing around. Give me five." Maggie grabbed her bilge pump from under the seat and started to pump. I stepped back and walked down the dock a little watching the wind whip the Sound into a frenzy. When I turned around I noticed that she had named her dinghy 'Goodnight Moon'.

Maggie tossed me a towel to dry off. "Pancakes?" I loved pancakes.

Maggie said, "I have a friend who taps his own maple trees. I trade him lobsters for maple syrup. I think that it's a good deal." I agreed. Maggie had the heat going in the cabin and the portholes steamed up. I polished off two plates of pancakes and a cup of tea even though I don't like tea. I'm a coffee drinker, like my Dad.

Maggie was cleaning up when I found myself staring at her ass. I tried to look away, but there was a strange feeling in my gut, one that I had never felt before. Then Maggie said, "You are looking at my ass aren't you?" I swallowed hard and then said, somewhat sheepishly, "Yes I was. How did you know?" Maggie tossed her hair to the side and said, without looking at me, "I could hear your breathing change. That, plus I know that I have a great looking ass." I was about to reply when a sudden gust of

wind slammed into the Maggie May. The boat shuddered. Maggie kept on washing up. I said nothing.

"How were the pancakes?" she asked. She turned slightly so that she could see me squirm and then said, "I have no underpants on. That's why my ass looks so good."

I felt my balls do a 360.

"I should probably get going," I said. I noticed that I was sweating. Maggie said, "don't go. I like to serve dessert after breakfast." I saw her reach behind and grab at something under her blouse. She pinched her fingers together. I had no idea what she was doing but I knew, at some teenage level, that things were going to get interesting. I was terrified.

Maggie said, "you don't have a girlfriend do you?" I shifted uncomfortably. "I had one," I lied, "but her parents moved away."

Maggie pulled her sleeve over her hand and reached inside her blouse. I saw her fumble with something. She did the same to the other side. She pulled up her blouse and pulled out her bra. "You guys are lucky," she said, tossing the bra onto the spare cans of diesel. "These things are so uncomfortable." I tried to laugh but it caught in my throat.

"It's OK Coop," she said. "Just let me finish up this last pan. Would you like more tea?"

I tried to answer but it was no use. Maggie turned and smiled. Just then there was another gust followed by a loud crack of thunder. "I think that I need to go," I said. Maggie smiled and said, "there is no way I will be able to row you to the dock in this kind of weather. It's time that you had a little fun in your life Coop. You've never been laid have you?" My heart was in my throat. My breathing was so shallow that I thought that I might just pass out. "It's OK," Maggie said. "Just look at me and it will all end well."

She slowly took off her blouse. I saw one of her boobs pop free closely followed by the other. Her nipples were dark and hard. Her breasts were large and a little saggy but who was I to judge?

"I will make you a deal," Maggie said. "If you take off your shirt I will take off my pants." I felt the boat rock a little and then the rain started to pound down. It came down long and hard, so hard that I barely heard what Maggie had said so I asked her again.

"If you take off your shirt I will take my pants off," she repeated. I was kind of trapped, in a nice sort of a way, but all I could think about was my Mom. She was Maggie's age, well a couple of years older but pretty close. I reached behind and pulled my shirt over my head. Maggie leaned in and kissed me square and hard on my lips. There was something that happened in the downstairs region that had only happened a couple of times before, once when my parents were out and my brother was still at school, and the other time after the end-of-the-year dance.

"Don't you feel much warmer now?" Maggie asked. She knew exactly what she was doing.

"You kept your side of the deal, I will keep my side." She undid the top button and let it hang there in the air. Maggie leaned in and kissed me again. "This is only a rain squall," she said. "We usually get a lot of thunderstorms this time of year." Maggie slowly unzipped and then, looking me directly in the eye, she took her pants off. I could hardly believe what I was seeing. I had never seen a naked woman before, well other than the ones in my Dad's Playboy Magazines. I was sure that he left them out for me to find. They didn't look anything like Maggie in the flesh. Maggie was about perfect and once her jeans dropped to the floor I knew that it was all over.

I blush when I write this and don't want to go into too many details but let's just say that the day slid by as if I was in a dream. I have no clue if Maggie was any good at sex; I had no reference point but I didn't need one. I did the best I could to keep up and at one point Maggie told me that I was doing great. I took it as a compliment. Then, just as quickly as it had started, it ended. The storm that is. The rain stopped pounding down and the wind stopped completely. I heard some lapping on the hull and slowly tried to extricate my arm from under Maggie's neck. She had fallen asleep. She murmured a little and I got my arm free. I tiptoed up the companionway and into the cockpit. The water was flat calm and there was a slight break in the clouds. A milky sun shone through. Just then I heard a slight noise from behind. It was Maggie. She was wearing my shirt and I expect nothing else. "I will row you ashore now," she said, not offering to give up my shirt.

I nodded. "Thank you." I put on my raincoat and found my shoes. Maggie rowed slowly and very deliberately and soon we bumped into the dock. I clambered out being careful to not tip Goodnight Moon. I didn't dare ask for my shirt and waved as I left the boatyard.

Mom was in the kitchen frying some tilapia. "Where have you been Coop?" she asked. "That was quite a storm. Your Dad will be back in fifteen minutes. We can eat then."

I didn't answer. "Shake off your raincoat outside," Mom said, but I ignored her and went straight to my bedroom. I found a clean shirt and put it on. I sat for a while on the edge of my bed until I heard Mom calling for dinner.

"Are you OK Coop?" she asked. "You look a little lost in your thoughts."

"I'm OK Mom," I replied.

Dad said, “something about you looks different.”

I excused myself and went up to my room. The late light seemed to animate the knots in my ceiling. I could hear the loons calling. I fell asleep with a smile on my face. The next morning was still and I took a to-go cup with me to the shoal. The birds were happy that the storm was over and there were more hatchlings scurrying around trying to learn how to fly. I kept looking for Maggie but she never showed.

She never showed the next day or the one thereafter. I walked to the Yankee Boatyard and the Maggie May was gone. I was about to leave when Mr. Lyman sidled up next to me. “She goes to Bar Harbor for the summer kid,” he said. “She won’t be back until the middle of October.” He put his hand on my shoulder, which took me by surprise. “It’s OK kid,” he said. “You weren’t the first one and you won’t be the last.”

WHEN ONE IS NOT ENOUGH

J EAN PIERRE HAD A JOB flipping burgers in a bistro in Maisons Lafitte, an affluent suburb on the outskirts of Paris. He didn’t mind the work. The head chef was a bleached blond who ran her kitchen like a military boss, but when the doors closed she came to him sweet and tender until the early sky colored Paris in all shades of pink. Jean Pierre was sure that he loved her until one day they hired a new waitress from Iceland. Her name was Nurgis and she had an ass that reached for the sky, but tits that sagged a little from breast feeding more than a few kids. This was when Jean Pierre, or as his friends called him JP, started down a path that did not have a happy ending.

JP was a bit of a player. He was born in New Orleans and for a short while had worked as a costume designer for John Zeringue, the top designer who was most sought after for his costumes for Mardi Gras. It was a good job and paid well but ended abruptly when JP was found, as they say in French, in flagrante delicto with Mr. Zeringue’s wife. Well it was actually worse than that. JP had invited a friend to the party and the three of them were hard at it when John walked in.

He left New Orleans in a sulk. He didn’t think that he had done anything wrong but it didn’t take too long before he was blackballed in town and decided to move to Boston. That was where he met Brittany. She was blond and quite pretty and was mad about his accent, which was a fake between French and German even though he was American. Brittany didn’t know the

difference, she was from California and hadn't traveled much. JP needed someone. It was as if he could not be happy without a woman who was there for him. Brittany was always up for a little fun and they lasted two years. It all went south when his boss found them in a broom closet. It was not the sex that annoyed the boss, if truth be told he had also enjoyed some time in the same broom closet, it was that there were paying customers waiting for their dinners to be served.

I met Jean Pierre when I was busking tables at the same bistro in Maisons Lafitte. He seemed worldly to me, like someone who had made a name for himself and was just flipping burgers because he didn't need the money. We weren't friends right away because I thought that there was something shady about him but after a while we got to be, well let me say, acquaintances. I would have been a good friend to him but he spent too much time bragging about his many conquests, which, by the way, included a few men which I don't have any problem with. I guess the problem that I had with him is that there was no need for everyone to know about his sex life. Sometimes things are just best kept to yourself and stored in your memory bank.

Or maybe I was just envious.

The one person that stuck in my mind was Nurgis. She sounded exotic. She was from Iceland. "How many people even live in Iceland?" I wondered. JP had apparently had done the intimate thing with her and was more than a little besotted. To be honest I was not sure if I could even find Iceland on a map.

Then one day JP came to me and said, "I have invited Nurgis to come over to France, well Maisons Laffite to be exact. She is going to live with me. We are going to see how it all goes. She's kind of sexy and I think that you will like her."

Nurgis came a week later. She really did have an ass that

reached for the sky; I was not sure about the tits but never mind, they were her business, not mine. She moved in with Jean Pierre and seemed to enjoy Paris. Jean Pierre worked the noon to nine shift and Nurgis would come in around eight and enjoy a burger or some moules marinières. In addition to being a good burger flipper JP could make a mean bowl of moules marinières. He told me once that it was the broth and that he insisted that the mussels be harvested within a few hours of being served. He also added few tablespoons more garlic than the recipe called for.

I liked Nurgis. She was sweet and was clearly in love with JP. And clearly in love with Paris, or at least the idea of living in Paris. She had a hard time with some of the food which I found a little odd given that in Iceland they eat shark that has been buried for nine months and apparently Nurgis liked it and could eat it by the bucket load but only if chased by Brennivin, a pretty rough clear alcohol that could kick like a pissed off camel in Saudi Arabia.

One evening just as we were prepping for the evening service JP came to me and said, "I have met someone." He let the words dangle in the thick fug of a beef consomme.

"What do you mean you have met someone? I thought that you and Nurgis were pretty tight." JP gave me a look that I would start to notice was his trademark. A bit suspicious if you know what I mean?

"Her name is Flavie. She is one of the architects involved in rebuilding the Notre Dame Cathedral. You probably don't remember but the Cathedral caught on fire and was almost burned to the ground." I did remember that part of the story. It wasn't me who set the fire but I know who did and I am not telling, but I digress. I just nodded and JP carried on.

"It's a bit tricky because I think that Nurgis might suspect something. I keep telling her that I need to work much later

after the restaurant closed and she would leave to go back to our apartment but the other day she was looking at my pay slip.”

I was barely paying attention to what JP was saying. Sometimes I just have to tune him out.

Nurgis said to me. “It doesn’t look like you are getting paid for the extra hours that you working.”

JP shrugged and said, “I think I was pretty cool about it. I just asked if she would like a glass of wine and the whole thing kind of blew over, but I am a little worried.”

I was chopping some celery trying to act interested but for some reason, and I am not sure why, I asked, “how are you going to work this one out?”

JP looked at me and said, “well I am not sure. It gets worse.”

I kept on chopping. I wished that I hadn’t asked.

“How much worse?”

“My wife is coming to Paris tomorrow. She wants us to get back together.” I stopped chopping.

“Wait, what, you have a wife?”

JP looked down and nodded. He looked down on purpose. I knew that he could not look me in the eye.

“I am JP, you know that right? Her name is Brittany and she is my wife. We were married but things were difficult and I came to Paris but we are still married.

“Legally?” I asked.

“Yes technically legally, but I never thought that she would hold me to it.”

“What do you mean hold you to it? Were you actually married?”

“Yes, by a judge in lower Manhattan. So I guess that I am still

married, but I did meet this other beautiful woman. Her name is Jezebel.” JP smacked his lips and went back to tending the beef consomme. I kept chopping the celery.

“This might be a fun ride,” I thought.

It was a fun ride because Brittany came into the restaurant at the same time Flavie was enjoying some buckwheat crepes with creamy leeks. JP had added a soft boiled egg as a little extra. He greeted Brittany like a long last friend and showed her to a table far from where Flavie was seated. I could tell that this was going to be a bit of a tricky situation. Flavie didn’t seem to notice anything and Brittany was jet lagged. I was waiting for Jezebel to walk in.

“The flight was crap,” was all Brittany said. “Plus no one at the car rental spoke English.” JP gave me a look that said, “I have this.”

He somehow talked Brittany into an Airbnb for the night. Luckily Nurgis was away on a short stay in Iceland visiting her mother. Flavie only wanted a quicky and left early; early being relative for a French chef. JP poured himself a Pastis and a glass of ice cold water and settle in for the evening. “I have this,” he thought.

If nothing else the guy had balls, but the balls came off a few weeks later.

Brittany did not like the food in Paris and was more than a little pissed off that JP had girlfriend. JP tried to explain that Flavie was nothing more than a fling, but he didn’t do a very good job of explaining it and Brittany kept the Airbnb for a couple more nights.

“I thought that we might have been able to patch things up,” she said. “I still love you, you know.” JP shrugged. It was his only line of defense.

Nurgis came back from Iceland and that was when things became a little icy. Her mother definitely wasn't doing well and she suspected that JP might not be as faithful as he said he was. Remember now that JP is quite clever at playing the field, so to speak. He was also good at juggling; literally. On some Sundays he juggles at the 123 Marche for a little extra cash.

Things seemed OK until Nurgis looked at his phone while he was in the shower.

"Who is Flavie?" she asked as JP stepped out of the shower, wiping his hair with a thin towel. He acted, like most men do when they are busted and said, "I don't know who you are talking about."

"Who the fuck is Flavie. And who the fuck is Brittany and who the fuck is Jezebel?"

JP hesitated again and said. "I don't know who you are talking about." Now Nurgis was no fool either. "Flavie texted you while you were in the shower," she said. JP fidgeted with the zip on his jeans and did what most men would do best in a bad situation, he denied everything. "I don't know who you are talking about."

"Well I happened to notice that there were a few juicy texts from someone named Jezebel and also it seems as if you have a wife. You told me that you were divorced."

JP shrugged. It was his only line defense.

"You can sleep on the couch tonight," Nurgis said. JP shrugged. "On s'en fout, who cares?"

"I care. I care a lot. I actually love you if you can believe that? Well at least until now." Then there was a knock on the door. It was Brittany.

JP tried to make the best of a bad situation but halfway through the argument he knew that he was not going to talk himself out

of this one. He stormed out of the apartment. His car was in the basement. He drove around Paris for a while listening to Jacques Brel on Apple Music and then had an idea. He was driving down Avenue Bosquet when the thought came to him. It came suddenly and in full clarity.

JP sped up a little as he entered the tunnel under the Seine. He reached over and turned the music up louder.

He sped up more.

For a brief moment he looked down at the speedometer. It was reading 95 miles per hour. He clicked his Apple podcast and the song switched to Au Survient, a beautiful Ballard.

JP slowed down for a moment and then decided to do it.

He had no idea how he would go back home again. He flicked the Apple App the Edith Piaf who was singing *La Vie en France*. JP turned it up even louder and hit the accelerator.

He was not quite sure which post had killed Princess Diana but he had a pretty good idea and that was when he hit the accelerator with full force.

The car was more than a mangled piece of metal. They came with the jaws of life but it was hard to find JP. It was as if his body had simply disintegrated.

PIRATES



MY FRIEND GERRY and I were sailing off the coast of Africa; the east coast, the coast where there are real pirates. They have pirates on the west coast too but they are lazy and only pick off easy targets whereas the pirates on the east coast are hard working, brutal, and show no mercy. I know this because they boarded us.

We were sailing off the coast of Zanzibar on a little jaunt from Durban to Mombasa. It was a paid gig but the boat was a clunky old Cheoy Lee 50 and, well, let me be generous here, a little on the slow side. We had decided to take the inside route between Zanzibar and the mainland. There would be a following current and I figured that we could use all the help that we could get, but as it turned out, it was a mistake. We had been warned that there might be a chance of being boarded by pirates off the coast of Africa but me, being ever optimistic, figured that it would never happen to us.

It was a little after three in the morning when I noticed a set of lights following. I had my VHF radio tuned to Channel 16, the emergency channel and the one used to make initial contact with another vessel. There was just some crackling and a little hissing, the occasional pop, nothing interesting and nothing to be worried about. Gerry was off-watch and asleep. We were plodding along at four knots, two of which was from the current helping. The lights stayed the same distance astern. I nipped down below and flicked the radar on. I picked up the landmass of Zanzibar on my

starboard side and the African coast to port. I changed the zoom setting and after a bit of fine tuning I picked up the boat trailing us. It was a half-mile astern and remained there until the first fingers of a pale dawn lit the eastern sky.

They gave us a warning but I have no idea what good it might have done us. The VHF crackled. "Mashua, Mashua, Mashua, Sailboat, Sailboat five miles off Tele Island heading north. Tunaingia ndani. Tunaingia ndani. We are coming aboard." They were speaking Swahili but I got their gist. I knew that it was us that they were targeting and that we were going to be boarded. I crossed my fingers and prayed to Neptune that they were just some friendly local officials but I knew in my heart that they were pirates. I woke Gerry. He was half asleep and coming out of the companionway when a small skiff roared up. There were three men brandishing guns. They clearly weren't government officials. Their skiff banged against the hull as the first man boarded. He clambered over the lifelines pointing his gun at us. Now, I am no gun aficionado but it looked like a Kalashnikov to me and not a new one at that. He was missing two front teeth and that was the least of things. His eyes were bloodshot and if I was a guessing person, I would have guessed that he was high. High or not he had a gun and he was pointing it at my head. He also had a knife. The skiff backed off and then came charging up again banging into the hull a second time. The second guy boarded. He was short and swarthy. "Rudisha nyuma. Back up," he yelled. Gerry and I had our hands raised. The boat was on autopilot. The skiff roared off.

"Piga magoti. Get on your knees." They tied Gerry to the stern railing and me to the mast and then started to ransack the boat. I could hear them down below yapping like dogs and banging into things. There was not a lot to find. We were traveling light. They were below for a while. Every now and then one of them

would come on deck to check that we were still there and that the boat was on course. It seemed that they had found our rum stocks. We had been lucky. The delivery crew that had sailed the boat up from Cape Town to Durban had provisioned well with Zulu Rum, one of my favorites, and while we had done some damage to the supply in the two weeks that we had been at sea, there were at least a dozen bottles still in the bilge. Two Missing Teeth Man came on deck with a half bottle of rum in one hand and his Kalashnikov in the other. The pirates had been helping themselves and it was obvious. They were clearly stoned when they boarded; now they were stoned and drunk. Not a good combination, especially as I was neither but instead being held hostage by pirates. Two Missing Teeth Man started firing into the air and yelling at us. I have no idea what he was yelling but it was clear that he was unhappy about the lack of stuff to steal. He came to me at the mast and put his knife against my throat. I could smell the rum on his breath. With dramatic flair he made like he was going to slit my throat, but then laughed when he noticed that I had peed my pants.

A light trailing wind picked up and there was a dark cloud astern. I knew from experience that the squalls would soon start. We were in the tropics after all and squalls like to greet each new day, probably to wash it clean to start afresh. I noticed the water behind us getting darker. The sky to the south also turned black and ominous. The first flurries of a new wind started, the water getting rippled and the sails starting to billow. Two Missing Teeth Man let off few more shots into the sky just for good measure. He took a long hit off the rum bottle and then went below to continue ransacking.

It was just luck, this I have to admit, but I had grabbed the autopilot remote and stuffed it into my pocket moments before we were boarded. The rope that had me tied to the mast was tight

but not so tight that I couldn't reach into my pocket and find the remote. This was going to take some careful planning but I knew what I was going to do.

The squall was approaching with some intensity, the boat picking up speed, the hull starting to hum. Two Missing Teeth Man came back on deck. He was well lit from the rum. He stood on the mid-deck waving his gun and yelling at the sky. He fired off a few more rounds. I slowly reached for the autopilot remote and found the dial. I didn't want to attract any attention. Two Missing Teeth Man was more interested in the rum bottle and his theatrics and didn't notice anything. The wind was really picking up and there was a spattering of rain. The front edge of the squall. Two Missing Teeth Man quickly dived for cover shutting the hatch behind him. I very slowly turned the dial on the remote. I could feel the boat start to respond. Looking aft I saw the wake curve to starboard. I dialed in a few more degrees. There was more rain but not enough for any real concern. Gerry noticed what I was doing. I gave him a look that said, 'we only get one chance at this.' Then I saw my opportunity. A strong gust of wind came from the west. I started to yell and Gerry started to yell and the Two Missing Teeth Man appeared on deck. He stood looking around trying to figure out what was happening. The rain was now coming down in sheets. I dialed the remote all the way over. The boat lurched and the boom came flying over as the boat gybed. It caught Two Missing Teeth Man on the side of his head and he went flying into the churning water. I saw him bob in our wake. He was clearly dead. You can't get hit by a 22-foot aluminum boom with all the force of a misguided missile and survive.

The boat was on its side shuddering. The other pirate was trying to clamber up from below but not having an easy time of it. The mainsail was flogging and the headsail backwinded, forcing us over. Gerry was half underwater but he knew what I

had done and gave me a look of respect; not terror, just respect. I reached into my pocket and dialed the remote. At first the boat just heaved and groaned and then the rain doubled in intensity. It came down pounding warm and moist stinging any exposed skin. The boat heaved again but still lay on its side. I could hear the small motor on the autopilot strain and complain but the boat was stubborn and flopped hopelessly while waves crashed over the starboard side. The short pirate was going crazy. He came out of the companionway and fired a few shots into the sky before losing his grip and falling below. I heard him crash against the oven and I heard some loud cursing in Swahili. To the west I saw that the sky was clearing, the wind dying down. The boat responded to the autopilot's commands and slowly, like a giant Leviathan, it corrected itself, found its course, and gybed back. Almost ethereally the wind stopped blowing, the sails stopped flapping, and we were back on course; one pirate down.

Short Swarthy Man was half crazed. He could not find his friend. He had no idea what we had done but that didn't matter. He grabbed Gerry by the hair. "Yuko wapi rafiki yangu?" he yelled. Gerry was calm. He looked Short Swarthy Man right in the eye and said, "your friend fell overboard mate and you are next."

"Yuko wapi rafiki yangu?" The pirate pulled his knife out and stuck the tip into Gerry's neck drawing a little blood. Gerry remained calm. Short Swarthy Man went below searching for his friend. Luckily we had lost the skiff that had been trailing us in the squall. Then the wind died completely and we drifted slowly north with the current. This was not good. The waters west of Zanzibar are littered with small islands and hidden reefs. Short Swarthy Man was standing in the companionway trying to get a measure of things. He downed the last of the rum, threw the bottle over the side, and started yelling. I don't understand a word of Swahili but I knew enough to know that he was slurring

his words. There was a small island to starboard and we were heading directly for it. I yelled at the man and pointed toward the island. He just smiled and then shot off a few more rounds. Then it dawned on him. If we ran aground the boat would sink and he knew that he couldn't swim.

I made a noise like an engine being started and turned my hand as if I was turning a key. I pointed to the island and mimicked starting an engine. Through the fog of rum and pot the short swarthy one seemed to understand. He went below looking for a key but he had no idea what he was doing. The sails flapped listlessly in the non-existent breeze. We drifted closer to the island. We were just a half mile off when Short Swarthy Man panicked. He untied Gerry and, with a gun to his head, motioned him to find the keys and start the engine. Gerry was calmer than I had ever seen him. He raised his hands and went below. The key was in the navigation station. The engine panel was in the cockpit. Gerry opened the lid on the nav station and grabbed the key. Short Swarthy Man nodded. He was sweating profusely, clearly nervous and clearly distressed that he had lost his friend and in no mood to run aground. Gerry motioned to him that he needed to go back up the companionway. The man seemed to understand and gestured for him to go first. He still had the gun against his head. Gerry, and I have known him for forty years, was not about to do anything that might get his head blown off. He climbed the companionway and very slowly and deliberately inserted the key in the engine panel. It was a diesel engine which meant that first he had to heat the glow plug. Short Swarthy Man was getting frustrated. Gerry held the glow plug in for a full 60 seconds and then cranked the engine. It started right away. Gerry leaned over and flicked the autopilot off. He took the wheel and turned to port. I could see the waves crashing onto the rocks no less than two hundred yards to starboard.

The boat was safe; I was not too sure about Gerry, or myself for that matter, and if I was to be honest I was pretty sure that we were both gonners. Short Swarthy Man was clearly not a sailor and was swaying back and forth. He tied Gerry to the stern railing again. I thought that I saw the skiff on my port beam but it turned out to be just a pod of dolphins. There was a small freighter heading toward us. I was trying to find a way to signal them but Short Swarthy Man was not having any of it. He had his gun and knife at the ready. Just to make a point he walked over to me where I was lashed to the mast and stuck the knife in my neck. I could feel the sting of the blade and watched as a trickle of blood run down my neck and drip onto my pants.

Gerry was steering with his foot. This is how it went for a few hours. The squalls had long since moved out and the tropical sun beat down. My ties were starting to chafe. Gerry was hanging in there, every now and then glancing my way. Short Swarthy Man was most definitely not a sailor and his back up plan, the man in the skiff and Two Missing Teeth Man were no longer around. He was going to have to figure it out on his own but between the pot, the rum and the sun he was fading fast and starting to get desperate.

I still had the remote in my pocket.

The current had turned against us and we were making very slow progress. Short Swarthy Man was sobering up. He had found a can of sardines and some crackers in the galley and was munching on them. Every now and then he would come over to either Gerry or me and stick the knife in our throats but I could tell that his heart was not in it. Even pirates have feelings. He had lost his friend.

A few years earlier I had done the same trip with a girlfriend and knew pretty much where we were without having to look at a chart. We were almost past the northern tip of Zanzibar. Once we

cleared Tumbatu Island we would be back out on the open ocean. The sun set spluttering and sizzling as it dipped into the ocean to the west. It suddenly got very dark. Gerry was still driving with his foot. There was no wind. I noticed that Gerry had eased himself over to the autopilot control panel. It was right next to the engine and generator panel. He gave me a glance. I read his mind. He handed the autopilot controls back to me. I rotated the dial just to be sure that I was in control. The bow of the boat moved ever so slightly. I had full control.

Short Swarthy Man went below and found another bottle of rum. I was craving a shot but he was not sharing. He was clearly distressed. He went aft to where Gerry was lashed and started to berate him, pointing his Kalashnikov at his head. He was threatening to shoot but both Gerry and I knew that it would be a mistake on his part. The guy clearly had not clue how to sail. Pretty soon the evening squalls would kick in. That would be when things would get interesting. I had a plan.

Short Swarthy Man pulled a bong out of his pocket and lit it. He was drinking right out of the bottle and every now and then shooting into the dark night sky. We motored steadily north. I could see the lighthouse on Tumbatu Island. We passed it to starboard and the sea started to get choppy. We were out of the lee of Zanzibar Island and a slight breeze picked up. The sails started to fill. I reached into my pocket for the remote and dialed in a course for Matumbini Island. I had stopped there once before a few years earlier and had done some diving off the reef that dominated the west side of the island. In fact I had spent three weeks there and knew the reef like the back of my hand. It was just fifteen miles ahead.

Gerry had fallen asleep. Short Swarthy Man was high as a kite and drunk like my landlord's ex-girlfriend on a Saturday night. I could see the outline of the island. It was not well lit and the

night was dark. Short Swarthy Man came over to me. He stuck the knife in my neck and said, "usicheze nami." I had no idea what he was saying but learned later that he had said, "don't fuck with me." A pod of dolphins joined us. Short Swarthy Man ran to the front of the boat to watch them surf the bow wave. He was delighted by their antics as he watched them chirp and jump and I almost felt sorry for him. I knew that he had a family to feed; so did I, and I was prepared to murder anyone to make sure that my children would get fed.

The dolphins went away. Short Swarthy Man passed out on the bow of the boat and that was when I saw my opportunity. We were getting close to the reef. I had snorkeled there quite a few times. It was shallow. The night was really dark. There was a thin sliver of moon just peeking up behind Matumbini Island but not shedding much light. Gerry knew what I was going to do. I could see some cars on the island and remembered a place I had rented. Just a small bamboo shack overlooking the bay. I knew that we were less than a few hundred yards away from it. I started to scream. Short Swarthy Man woke up in a panic. He was completely out of it. Gerry gunned the engine and we hit the reef. Head on. The boat slammed and came to a complete standstill. Short Swarthy Man had been trying to stand but as soon as we hit he was flicked overboard. I saw him go in backwards. I used my remote to spin the wheel. Gerry was close enough to the gearshift to back it into reverse. Short Swarthy Man was in the water. I could hear him yelling in Swahili. I dialed the autopilot all the way right and soon felt the propeller start to grind. It was a heaving, churning sound, the sound that you get when you have accidentally picked up a lobster pot. The engine moaned and then bits of Short Swarthy Man started to surface. He was cut into pieces. The moon shed a little light and I could see bits of black skin on the surface of the water. I flicked the remote all

the way over to the left, Gerry hit forward, and we sailed away from the reef.

We were still in a bit of a pickle. The pirates were gone but I was lashed to the mast and Gerry hog-tied to the transom. We made our way slowly north. I veered way off course to avoid any reefs and soon there was another downpour. Gerry was managing the engine with his foot. I was steering with the remote in my pocket. I saw some lights trailing us from astern. "Fuck," I said out loud. It had already been a long day. Then I saw colorful lights; Christmas lights. It was a party boat sailing out of Mkoni. The passengers were drunk; the captain and his crew were not. He trained his spotlight on us and pulled alongside. He only spoke a little English but said, "I see that you have been attacked by pirates." It was an understatement and he knew it. One of the crew untied us. The captain asked if we needed a tow, but I declined and they took off like a merry circus.

"What do you think Gerry?" I asked.

"I will clean up below. You take the helm and navigate. We've got a boat to deliver. Can I get you a rum?"

THE BACKPACK

THE MIST IN SCOTLAND is quite unlike any other place on earth. Well maybe in Norway, but in the Scottish Highlands it twists itself into ghostly apparitions and wraps around All Creatures Great and Small, as the author James Herriot once wrote. His name, actually, was James Alfred Wight but he wrote under the pen name James Herriot. I think that I might need to change my name if I want to become someone famous, but I digress.

My Dad and I were enjoying a pint of bitter in The Clachaig Inn. We had enjoyed a 10 kilometer hike, or a ramble, as they like to call it over here. We had started out fairly early, actually it was dark but I was eager to get up and get out and Dad was OK with the plan. We had a thermos of coffee that Mum had made and some cheese sandwiches for our breakfast. Turns out getting up early was a good idea because we were treated to a spectacular sunrise that slowly washed the far side of the mountain into a pink hue followed by a pale orange glow that quickly turned into sunshine and with it came the warmth that all early risers crave.

We didn't really have a plan, other than to make it to the pub by around noon. We knew that we could have a few cold ones and that Mum would be coming home from shopping in town around two and could pick us up.

Dad was pretty fit for a 65 year old and if I am to be perfectly honest here, and I can because this is my story, there were times when I was having a hard time keeping up with him. I blamed it on my asthma but if truth be told, my years working as a banker

in London had packed on more than a few pounds. I had quit my job with the thought of returning to Scotland and moved back into my parents in-law apartment while I got my bearings.

Dad and I stopped around eight to enjoy the thermos and a sandwich each although I kept half of my sandwich for later. I tucked it into a small pouch that I wore. Dad always made fun of me about the pouch.

“You do know that thing that you are wearing is called a fanny pack right?” He would say.

“Yes Dad, I know.” Dad would smile. I knew what was coming. “And you know what a fanny is right?” I knew what a fanny was. Even though I had heard it a hundred times I loved to see the glint come into his eyes. He couldn’t bring himself to say the actual words but he would point down to the general area between his legs and say, we don’t have a fanny but your mother does.”

I was aware that my mother must have a fanny otherwise I wouldn’t be here.

Dad always carried a small backpack, not a fanny pack. In it he had a raincoat that had once been his fathers, a small knife, not unlike a Swiss Army knife. It was a gift from his mother and a keepsake. He also kept a rabbit foot stuffed in a side pocket for good luck. Let’s just say he was getting a tad eccentric in his older age.

We hiked/rambled through some quite spectacular scenery until in the far distance we could see The Clachaig Inn. We had been there a few times during the summer. It wasn’t much of a place, but they had recently renovated and white washed the outside. That was what we could see. A bright white oasis. I had read a very short piece in the Glasgow Times that they had renovated the hotel and restaurant, but left the pub as it had been for well over four hundred years. I liked that. Why mess with a

good thing? I had also read that on Wednesdays at lunchtime they had live music.

Just as we were getting closer to the pub there was a sudden change in temperature. The Scottish Highlands are known for this kind of abrupt change and we knew that with it would come a slow, creeping mist and sure enough a light, damp fog started to roll down the hill and before long we could no longer see the pub. That made the prospect of lunch even more exciting. Luckily the path led straight to the front gate and we could see a warm light and hear the sound of a fiddle solo coming from within. It was Wednesday.

Dad said, “The first pint is on me. The second one is one you. We can arm wrestle for the third.” I knew that I would lose so I said, “Why don’t you buy the beers and I’ll buy us lunch?”

“Deal,” Dad said. It was the same deal we struck at each pub that we visited.

The place was warm and smelled a little of spilt beer and last night’s fire. I ordered a pint of Harviestoun’s Bitter and Twisted, and yes it tasted as good as the name suggests. Dad went for a more traditional glass of Tennant’s. Tennant’s, by the way, is often touted as ‘Scotland’s Best Selling Pint’ and has been brewed continuously since 1885. I used to drink it but, well, I have always thought of myself as a bit of a beer connoisseur. I like to try other brands to try and impress my father but, quite frankly, he never noticed and if he did, he never gave a shit.

The violinist in the corner was joined by four other musicians. Two of them had guitars, one had a flute and one came with just his voice. Man, the guy could sing. He had ‘finely tuned lungs’ as the local saying goes. The band was far enough away so that Dad and I could hear them, but not too close that we couldn’t hear each other. I looked out the windows and could see that the mist

was swirling even thicker and the windows had become damp. The publican lit a fire.

I also I fancied myself as a bit of a foodie and noticed that they had elver eels on toast as an appetizer. Now that might not sound good to most people but let me explain. There is this thing in the south of England called the Severn Bore. It's a very unique phenomenon where a sudden rising tide on the River Severn causes a small tidal wave. There is something about the way that the river curves that increases the height of the wave and at times it's above six feet. They call it the birthplace of river surfing. It also brings with it a bounty of elver eels. These tiny fish once used to be considered poor man's food, but had recently become a delicacy mostly due to a review that Frank Bruni, a critic for the Daily Mail wrote, where he had expounded on their delicate flavor.

I told my Dad, "I'm going to get the elver eels on toast for a starter and then a steak and kidney pie with chips." Dad looked at me and said, "Fuck that, I'm going for the cottage pie." Big surprise there; Dad always got the cottage pie no matter what pub we were in.

The eels were great, the toast nice and crispy and the eels did have a delicate, almost sweet flavor. Dad raved about his cottage pie and we were well into our third pint when Dad suddenly noticed that his backpack was gone, as in missing and presumed gone. I knew that he had it when he came into the restaurant because his wallet was in the backpack and he had placed it on the table very deliberately as a way to signal that he was good for the beer tab. We looked everywhere but it was gone. Suddenly our great meal turned sour. Mum would be coming in 20 minutes to pick us up.

Dad said, after talking to the bartender who mentioned that there were a few shady characters that sometimes came into the

bar, "I am going to report this to the cops." I groaned.

"Dad, it's just a shitty old backpack. Let it go." Dad was having nothing of it.

"That backpack and the raincoat used to belong to my father. And the knife was a prized possession that my mother gave me. I am going to report this to the constabulary. They have to know that there are crooks and thieves out there."

"Dad, that's what they do for a living. They know that there are crooks and thieves out there. That's what keeps them in a job." Just then Mum walked into the pub. The music stopped. It might have been just a coincidence but then again Mum is quite a looker.

"You boys ready to go?" she asked. Dad looked despondent. "We have to go to the police station to report a crime. My backpack has been stolen."

Mum looked at him. "Seriously? That smelly thing was a piece of crap. Thank goodness it's gone."

Mum drove us home and handed Dad the keys. "You boys deal with it. I have afternoon tea with Belinda planned and don't have any time for this kind of nonsense." Just as we were leaving Belinda drove up and I knew that she and Mum would soon be tucking into a pot of afternoon tea with scones with clotted cream. I wished I didn't have to leave.

Dad and I drove to the police station. The lady at the front desk tried to feign interest but I could tell that she wasn't interested. She seemed distracted. I could see in the background a few cops hustling back and forth; furtively. Most of them had a look on their face as if their grandma had just kissed them on the cheek and her stale perfume had left a lingering smell. Dad was trying to fill out the report and the front desk lady was trying to help. I could tell that there was something else going on in the back

office. Turns out I was right.

A short cop came out to the front area and said, "Mary, you have got to come and see this." Mary left and Dad and I were stuck trying to fill out the report. The short cop came back and explained the furtive hustling back and forth.

"You see," he said. "We got a call from the vicar this morning." He hesitated, not sure if he should say anything more but then, against his better judgment, he explained. "It seems," he said, "that someone posted a porno VHS through the vicar's wife's letterbox this morning. The boys in the back are going over it, sifting for evidence if you know what I mean." I knew what he meant.

Dad was never going to get his backpack back.

He got it back a week later, no thanks to the cops. We were going on our last walk of the summer and had left very early as usual, but had taken a different route that wasn't working out that well. The morning had the promise of a beautiful sunrise, but not long after we set off a light drizzle settled in and before long we were drenched.

Dad said, "I could use that raincoat about now." I said nothing. The path was slippery. We were heading for a different pub; The Mole and Stew. We had eaten there a few times and had the stew but as far as I could tell, there were no moles in it. Just stew. I switched my drink of choice to a pint of Guinness. Dad, of course, was having a Tennant's, very carefully poured so that there was no froth, not that bitters have froth. They are known as a 'no froth' beer but Dad insisted that it be poured very slowly and very deliberately.

"Nectar of the gods," he said as he downed his first long and very deliberate sip. "Nectar of the bloody gods, whoever they are."

I was not really paying attention to what he was saying. Instead I perusing the lunch menu and looking around. I liked the pub. It

was a little seedy but then I kind of like seedy. Adds character in my humble opinion. Basically the menu had fish and chips, liver and onions, cottage pie, or a plowman's lunch. And the mole stew of course. Dad said, "I'm having the cottage pie." I ordered the plowman's lunch. That was when I noticed the backpack under the glass cleaning station. I didn't want to say anything right away. I wanted to be sure that it was Dad's backpack before I said anything. Dad went to the bathroom. I asked the bartender about the backpack.

He told me. "There was a man that came in here last week. He ordered a pint of Budweiser. That stuff is piss if you ask me and usually tells me a lot about the customer. He downed the beer but couldn't pay for it. Instead he gave me his backpack and said that he would be back to pick it up when he had enough money to pay for the beer. Haven't seen him since." The bartender seemed genuine enough.

I said, "do you mind if I take a look at it?" He handed me the backpack. It was most definitely Dad's. The knife was gone but the raincoat was still there as was the rabbit's foot. Just then Dad returned. "Hey that's my backpack," he said. I explained the situation. Now, Dad has always been a simple man with simple needs but he started to tear up. "I never thought that I would ever see this backpack again. Can I have it?" The bartender hesitated and said, "If you want to pay for a pint of Budweiser and never get to drink a drop of it you can have it."

We finished our lunch and beers and waited for Mum to pick us up. Our conversation had lagged a little and I was looking out the window at the rugged, rocky countryside hearing the occasional shrill call of an osprey. "Mum should be here any minute now," Dad said. "Let's wait for her outside." We were just getting ready to leave when a slightly disheveled man walked into the bar. He saw me and Dad and quickly turned around. Dad said, "there is

something familiar about that man.” The publican came over and said, “that was the man who left the backpack.” Dad was about to ask if he was sure when the phone behind the bar rang and the publican answered. “Are you Mr. Quentin Jackson by any chance?” he asked. Dad looked surprised and answered that he was indeed Mr. Jackson. The publican handed him the phone.

“It’s your wife.”

Dad took the call. Turned out that Mum’s car had crapped out and that she would not be able to pick us up. We would have to walk home. We left the warm pub and headed out into a light drizzle. I can’t be sure but I thought that I might have seen the backpack thief duck behind the side of the pub. I didn’t say anything to Dad because, to be perfectly honest, it was hardly worth making a fuss over and Dad had his backpack back.

We were slipping our way along the narrow path, Dad cursing the weather and the fact that Mum’s car had crapped out, when an osprey flew in close and landed on a branch right in front of us. It gave us a long look and didn’t fly off. It must have been less than six feet away. That was when I got a strange feeling and for no reason at all, turned around. The backpack thief was following us. He ducked behind some brambles when he saw me look back. I didn’t mention anything to Dad. He was in a lousy mood anyway. Hiking pre-lunch and pre-beers is one thing. Not so much fun when you have cottage pie and three pints of Tennant’s bitter sloshing around in your gut. We trudged on. The osprey took flight and landed on a rock right in front of us. This time even closer. The osprey looked me right in the eye and I knew in that moment something life changing was going to happen.

We were almost back at the house when I decided that it was time to see what the man was up to. I had glanced back a number of times and he was still there. There is a long bend in the path just before heading down the hill that leads toward our house.

I told Dad, “I need to stop and take a pee. I will catch up to you at the house.” Dad just grunted and kept on trudging in the rain. He rounded the bend; I hid behind a large boulder. I was only there for two minutes at the most when the backpack thief walked past me. He was skinny with a mop of hair hanging in his face. Obviously the rain didn’t help his looks. He didn’t notice me and soon I was trailing him. The rain stopped briefly but the path was a mess. As we crested the hill I could see Dad going in through the back door. Mum’s car was in the driveway. The thief stopped for a moment and stood surveying the house. I think that he might have noticed that I was no longer with Dad. I could tell that he was hesitating but then he carried on.

He was just a couple hundred yards from the house when I jumped him. He had slid on a particularly steep part of the path and as he lost his balance, I grabbed him from behind and dropped him to the ground. Surprisingly, he barely resisted.

“I have been following you for months now,” he said. “You and my brother, always going to the pub for drinks while I got nothing.” I was sure that I had misheard him.

“Yea,” he said. “I bet that you didn’t know that your dad had a brother then did you?” That bit of news was news to me. Dad had told everyone that he was an only child. The thief didn’t struggle. He just lay there looking quite pathetic. I had absolutely no idea what to say so I said nothing.

“Your Dad is a bit of a wanker. He knew about me but never tried to contact me. He got all of our mother’s estate and all I got was a lousy knife.” I pulled the man up but still had him so that he couldn’t make a run for it.

“We should probably go and talk to my Dad then.” I had him by the arm and he wasn’t resisting. He also wasn’t talking. The drizzle had turned into steady rain by the time we got to the back

door. I kicked my boots off in the mud room and told the man to do the same. I offered him a towel to dry off, but he just shook his head. Mum was on the phone talking to the local garage trying to get someone over to look at her car. Dad was nowhere to be found. I offered the man a cup of tea but he shook his head and stood waiting to talk to Dad.

I called upstairs and Dad came down. He was a little shocked when he saw the man from the pub standing in our lounge. "What's he doing here?" he asked.

I said, "let's sit and chat for a bit." Dad sat in his easy chair. The man stood. I sat and said to Dad, "this man says that he's your brother." Mum hung up the phone and came into the room.

"What's all this then?" she asked. "Who is this?" She turned to the man and said, "would you like a cup of tea?" The man nodded and Mum went into the kitchen to put the kettle on.

Dad let out a long sigh but didn't say anything, well not right away. After about a minute of awkward silence Dad said, "sit down Sid. We need to talk." The man sat down. The three of us sat there in awkward silence until Mum came back into the room with a pot of tea and some biscuits. They were my favorite biscuits but I had no appetite. I wondered how Dad knew his name.

Dad said, "sit down Monica," and Mum sat in her usual chair looking a little perplexed. Dad didn't say anything, Mum didn't know what to say, and I kept my mouth shut, for a change. Sid said, "so we meet again?"

Dad sighed and looked at Mum. "This is my brother Sid." Mum looked startled. "You never told me that you had a brother. You told me that you were an only child and your mother, before she died, never mentioned that you had a brother and for that matter neither did your father. Now you are telling me that you have a

brother." Sid had tried to take a sip of the tea but quickly placed the cup back on its saucer and placed it back on the side table.

"It's a long story," Dad said.

"I bet it is," Mum replied. Sid said nothing.

"Sid is my brother," Dad continued. "We have the same mother. His father was Lord Bantembury of Glasgow." Sid shuffled his feet and tried to take a sip of his tea but his hands were shaking too much so he placed the cup back on the side table.

"A couple of years, maybe three years before I was born and not long after my parents got married my mother had an affair. I don't know exactly how long it lasted but the result was a baby boy. Sid. She told my father about the affair and she agreed to give the baby to his father, the Lord, and never see him again. In return she would get a fairly decent monthly payment. Hush money. She never told me how much and I never asked, but when she died the payments continued getting directly deposited into a savings account that I set up. It was quite a substantial amount."

"I didn't know that you had your own savings account," Mum said.

"There is a lot you don't know Monica."

Dad continued. "When I was around eighteen we had a family meeting and that was when they told me that I had a brother. This was just a few years before my father died." Dad looked at Mum. "The gist of the meeting was that I would receive the payments after my mother died and that I was to spend some of the money to take care of Sid, who by that time was in an institution. Sid has severe bipolar, or as they called it back then, manic depression. All they had for treatment was lithium salt and an institution, sometimes a straight jacket. There was one condition for the payments to continue was that I could never tell anyone about Sid."

Sid grunted and looked like he was about to say something, but instead tried to take another sip of his tea and ended up spilling some of it on the side table. Mum got a mop-cloth. Dad continued. He looked at Mum and said, "I lied to you and I am sorry. I told you that the money was part of my inheritance and in a way it was. I never told you about my brother because I was sworn to secrecy. I kept the money. I did try to find Sid but he had been discharged from the asylum. Thatcher's government slashed funding and they emptied people out onto the streets." Dad looked over at Sid and said, "I did try and find you and I'm sorry, but if I am to be perfectly honest I thought that you were dead and was quite enjoying the monthly payments. So I put the whole mess out of my mind and enjoyed the money."

"Fair enough," Sid said.

I had nothing to say. I was dumbfounded. First I could never imagine my grandmother having an affair. Second, I always wondered how we managed to live in such comfort. Dad had run a successful veterinary practice but we lived a better than middle class life.

Sid managed to get a gulp of tea down and looked at the three of us looking at him. He started slowly. "I was on the streets for ten years after they kicked us out of the home. When Tony Blair came into government there was some money for my drugs. After a couple of years I started to feel better. I feel OK now. Not good, but better. OK I guess. Before our mother died she told me that I had a brother. She told me where you had last lived. She didn't tell me about the money but I figured out that there must have been some kind of money situation. My father was a Lord after all but he had long since kicked the bucket." Sid started to shiver. He was still soaking wet. Mum couldn't help herself. She went to her bedroom, which was just off the lounge, and came back with a down comforter.

Sid continued. "I don't want no money. I have a small place, well it's just a cabin that's paid for by the City Council. I get my drugs from the government. All I wanted was something to remember my mother by." He looked at Dad. Dad said nothing.

"I only saw my, well, our mother that one time after she gave me up. The time when she told me that I had a brother. It was while I was still in the home or asylum, call it what you want. She came to see me. She looked ill. She said that my father, Lord whatever his name was, I can't remember now, gave her the details of when I was in hospital. I liked to think of it as a hospital or a home and not as an asylum. She only came that once. She told me that I had a brother and that his name was Quentin. She gave me a present. I had never received a present from anyone. It was a pen-knife. She told me that she had given one to you." He looked at Dad.

Sid continued, "she told me that we were both cut from the same cloth. When us inmates," he laughed at his little joke. "When us inmates were tossed out on the street by her highness, Maggie Thatchroof." He laughed again at his own little joke. "When Maggie Thatchroof had us thrown out onto the streets I lost my pen-knife. I must have cried for a month. I loved that knife but sometimes when I don't take my meds I lose things, not that I had much to lose but I lost the knife. The only present that I had ever received."

Mum said, "please eat a biscuit," but Sid shook his head. "I don't eat biscuits," he said. "They are too rich for me."

Dad looked very uncomfortable. The three beers had long since worn off. This had all come as a bit of a shock to him. Sid was rocking back and forth in his chair, still shivering. Dad got up and chucked a newspaper and some kindling into the fireplace and lit a match. He was buying time. The fire took immediately.

"I have a nurse that comes around once a week to check on me. She told me that she knew you and knew where you lived." He looked at my Dad. "She told me all about you in fact. She used to work as a receptionist in your office before she got her nursing license. Do you remember Cheryl?"

Dad nodded. "Why did it take you this long to try and contact me?"

"I was happy. My father, well I barely knew him, never told me who my mother was but I believed her when she came by the asylum to give me a present and told me that she was my mother. Cheryl did some investigating and voila." Sid laughed again and said, "I bet that you never knew that I could speak French. Well voila, Cheryl discovered that you lived less than a mile up the hill from my cabin. She told me this about a year ago. My meds were doing ok and I was able to get out of the cabin every now and then and I started to watch you. Cheryl told me that you had sold the practice and were semi-retired, well at least you took the summers off."

Dad was starting to get agitated. "What do you mean you watched me? Where were you?"

Sid sniffed. "Up on the hill behind your house. When you and your boy here started walking to the pubs I followed you. I didn't mean anything by it. I just wanted to know you better. I didn't mean no harm, but I did notice that you always had the same backpack with you wherever you went."

"And that's why you stole it? Is that why you followed us to the pub and stole it?" Sid looked at his hands and nodded. I didn't want all of it. I just wanted some of it so I took the backpack. I didn't know what I would find in it but I didn't care. Something of yours would be a connection to my mother. I couldn't believe that there was the exact same knife in your backpack. The same one

like I used to have. So I took it. I wanted to return the backpack, but didn't know how. I saw that you and your boy here, what's his name, would sometimes go to the Mole and Stew so I went there and ordered a beer. A Budweiser, my favorite beer and made like I couldn't pay for it and left my backpack there. I told the man behind the bar that I would come back for it and pay for the beer when I came back. I followed you there today. When I walked into the bar I saw that you already had the backpack so quickly ran away. I liked to follow you. It gets me out of my smelly cabin."

Dad didn't say anything for a while. Mum was still in a bit of shock. I had no clue what to say so I didn't say anything. Sid finished his cup of tea which by now was cold. Dad sighed. "His name is Dougie," he said. "My boy's name is Dougie. He's our only child, but you probably already know that." Mum filled his cup with more tea. Sid said, "would it be OK if I had some sugar?"

Dad was going to say something but Mum came back and put her hand on his shoulder. "Don't say anything," she said, "not a single word." She handed Sid the sugar and looked Dad squarely in the eye. Now Mum is not one to be messed with and Dad knew that. Sid stirred his tea and tried a biscuit but quickly returned it to the plate.

"Now Quentin, is this all true?" Dad shrugged. "It's all true," he said. "All of it. I didn't know that Sid followed us. I had no idea where he was. Well that's not exactly true. Cheryl came by the office about a year ago. At first I was happy to see her until she brought up Sid. I told her that I had a dog dying of a tumor that I had to deal with and she left and never came back, but she did leave an address with the front office. I drove by the cabin a few times and felt terrible. It's falling down."

Sid interrupted, "I don't have much heat so it gets really cold in the winter." Dad got up and chucked two kiln-dried logs onto

the fire and stoked it with the baffles. He watched the flames curl slowly and disappear up the chimney. After what seemed like a very awkward minute, he turned and said, "what do you want from us?"

Sid managed to get a sip of tea down. Then he took a gulp before speaking. "I don't want anything. I just wanted to say hello and to tell you that if you ever need anything, just ask. But I do want to keep the pen knife. That's all."

Sid moved into our in-law apartment a week later. I had an eye on a place just up the street and talked to the landlord about moving in early so when I moved out, Sid moved in. Dad had tried to talk Mum out of it. "He's happy where he is," he insisted. Mum knew better. "There is no discussing this Quentin," she replied.

The surprising part of this story is still to come, well at least it took me by surprise. Cheryl, Sid's nurse, came by Mum and Dad's house once a week to check on him. When Sid mentioned that he had a nurse come by I imagined a frumpy, elderly lady. Cheryl was actually a real looker and I started to make a point of it to be over at the house when she came by. Eventually I worked up the courage to ask her out. We went to The Clachaig Inn and had a very pleasant meal. The elver eels were out of season but that had been expanding their range of beers and slowly, over good food, good beer and great conversation, Cheryl and I fell in love. We celebrated the one year anniversary of Sid moving in by getting married in a small churchyard on the outskirts of Glencoe. Cheryl moved in with me and it didn't take long before Tory was born. She was a sweet little bundle of love.

Dad said, "here's my advice for you sonny boy. Don't feed her. They only grow and pretty soon you will have a teenager on your hands and teenagers are trouble."

"Good advice Dad, thanks, I will mention that to Cheryl."

Sid loved Tory and other than Mum and Dad he was her principal babysitter until one day he was taking her for a walk and let her baby carriage go by mistake and Tory went down the hill at a rapid pace, picking up speed before crashing into a tree. She was OK; the baby carriage, not so much. I was mad but understood. Mum was forgiving. Dad was not forgiving. Mum told me later that he yelled at Sid the night of the accident. The next morning they noticed that Sid had not opened his curtains. By lunchtime Mum was getting concerned and told Dad to go and check on him. He was not in the apartment and his bed had not been slept in. The police found him face down in the creek just beyond his old cabin.

Dad paid for a burial plot, a good one I might add, and he had the pen knife bronzed. It's mounted on his tombstone. Tory and I go by often. She likes to rub the pen knife but she doesn't know why. I will probably never tell her.

MIRANDA



THE BUS PULLED slowly out of the Downtown Greyhound Station in Calgary. It was jammed but I had been dropped off early and found a seat and a place to stow my backpack. I took the window seat as I had planned to sleep. My stay in Calgary had been hectic. I was visiting my sister who had recently moved there from South Africa and they were living on a farm in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Her husband was a farm manager and he had me up and out of bed early each morning to help feed the cows. It was my first experience with real cold weather, as in brass monkey cold, and my wardrobe was far from adequate. I was heading for Vancouver but instead found a detour that would change my life; forever.

When I arrived two weeks earlier the landscape was dry and brown and stretched as far as the mountains which were covered in snow above the treeline. It didn't look like a very inviting place to live but overnight everything was transformed. It snowed and it snowed a lot. I woke to a winter wonderland. My first time ever seeing snow. My brother-in-law had let me sleep in since it was my first morning in Canada and I sat at the kitchen table while my sister plied me and her two boys with pancakes. My brother-in-law came in around 9. He had been up for five hours and was famished.

"Well the roads are all plowed and the cattle have been fed." He turned to me and said, "The snow is not a problem. It's the cold. Their water freezes and I have to chuck out the frozen

chunks and refill their troughs with water from the truck. Problem is when it's this cold the cows only have a half hour at the most to drink before it all freezes again."

"How cold is it?" I asked. It was nice and warm in the kitchen. The wood stove in the corner saw to that.

"It's not too bad. I think it's around minus 10 centigrade. It usually warms up a little before a big snowstorm."

"You call -10C warm?" I had just flown in from St. Barths in the Caribbean and my blood was thin. The captain of the boat that I was working on had given me a month off while the yacht was in dry dock. My brother-in-law looked at me and smiled. "It's going to be minus 25 tomorrow morning and I am going to need some help with the cows."

So each morning for the past two weeks I had been up at four and out on the back of the hay truck cutting the strings on bales and shoving them off the back of the truck while my brother-in-law sat nice and warm in the cab. Every half hour we traded places until all the cows had been fed and their water changed out. It was exhausting work but I got stuck into it and grew a new respect for both my sister and brother-in-law. They had moved from sunny South Africa to freezing cold Canada; sight unseen. My sister was not letting her boys be drafted into a senseless war that the South African government was waging in Angola.

I dozed off before the rest of the passengers boarded and felt the rumble of the engine as the driver started to pull out of the bus terminal. I watched the snow covered streets of Calgary pass by my blurry window and dozed off again. I woke just as we were entering the foothills of the Rockies. The lady in the seat next to me started to say something but instead glanced down at her book.

"How can you read on a bus?" I asked. "Don't you get car sick?" She looked at me through a lop of blond hair that had fallen in

front of her eyes and replied. "I used to," she said. "But I take a dramamine. I love to read, especially when we have a long trip ahead of us."

"That we do," I said. "I wish that I had thought of that. I am reading a good book but I didn't dare try to read. It always makes me sick." The lady scratched around in her duffel and pulled out a package of dramamine. "Here take one of these. Give it ten, fifteen minutes to kick in then try reading." She handed me a bottle of water. "Don't worry, I don't have germs." She laughed at her own joke and flicked the hair off her face. She was stunningly beautiful. I reckoned that she must be around 35 or so.

"What are you reading?" she asked.

"It's a book called Dove written by a California teenager who was the youngest person to sail single-handed around the world. He was just 16 when he set out and sailed from Los Angeles through the Pacific and Australia. I am at the part where he loses his mast and has to rig a jury mast in order to make it to Madagascar. It's an awesome book."

"What's the name of the author?"

"His name is Robin Lee Graham." I handed her the book. "This looks really interesting," she said.

"What are you reading?" I asked. Her book had been flat on her lap so I had not been able to see the cover. "It's nothing that will interest you," she said. "It's called The Feminine Mystique written by a lady by the name of Betty Friedan. It's a book for women. It's good. I like it."

The road wound up through some spectacular mountain passes and the scenery was unlike anything I had ever seen. We were above the tree line and the snow was deep, the trees hanging heavy from a storm that had passed through in the night. I was amazed that the road was passable until I saw some large

machinery in front of us. Four massive snow plows were working in tandem to clear the road and we had caught up to them.

"This happens all the time," the lady said. "I have done this trip a few times and we always get bogged down with snow. I try to avoid traveling in the winter but my Dad is not well and I am very afraid of flying so I take my chances and take the bus."

I looked at her. "I have never met anyone who's afraid of flying."

She said, "Let me tell you a story. I once flew into Sao Paulo in Brazil. It was a long flight from Miami and very bumpy the whole way. I was stuck in the middle seat in the last row of the plane. The men on either side of me were chain smoking. I think that they had a premonition of what was about to happen. We came into Sao Paulo in thick fog. This was at the old downtown airport. They are building a new one now but this one was right downtown and I am not really sure if it was just bad luck or if the pilot was an asshole, but we hit the ground really hard and the plane skidded off the runway and crashed into an overpass. I can't remember now but I think ten or twelve people in the front of the plane were killed along with the pilot, his co-pilot and two of the flight attendants. We had to evacuate and I got down the slide OK and have never set foot on a plane again."

I looked at her in a little disbelief. "How did you get home from Brazil?" I asked, rather naively, but then I was new to traveling and only 20 years old at the time.

"I took the long way home," she said. "The very long way home. I had been going to Brazil to see my boyfriend but took the whole plane crash as a bad omen, especially as he wasn't there at the airport to meet me. The airline put us up in a nice hotel for a few days while they interviewed all the passengers and I tried calling him but he never answered so when the free

hotel accommodation ran out I started to make my way back to Canada. I didn't do it all at once. It took me almost five years to make it home."

I took another long swig on her water bottle. "That's quite a story." Then stupidly added. "Did they ever pay you any money for the crash?"

She took my hand and said, "You don't really know how the world works do you?"

I swallowed hard. "No, I guess not." I noticed that it had started snowing again and the plows ahead of us were moving slowly.

Let me properly introduce myself, the lady said. "I'm Miranda. Single, never married, no children." She was very serious about all of it. I, kind of pathetically looking back on it, said. "I'm Basil." I have always hated my name and was a little embarrassed by it but quickly added, "my friends call me Bas."

We sat in silence for a few miles. It almost felt like we had both given too much away. The light snow had stopped and the plows were on the move and moving snow and the bus was moving. "How far are you going?" I ventured.

She replied, "Vancouver eventually, but for this trip as far as Kamloops. How about you?"

"I'm also going to Vancouver. I heard that it was a beautiful city and wanted to see for myself." There was a car that had slid off the road and one of the plows had pulled over to help the driver. Our Greyhound stopped. The passengers were getting restless. Miranda said, "It's the same every time. People expect a smooth trip and usually it's not, especially in the winter. This is Canada after all, not Barbados."

"How did you get back from Brazil?"

"It's a long story but since this is going to be a long trip I have time to tell you. I hitchhiked first through Paraguay and then into Bolivia. That was the easy part. When you are a young, blond Canadian girl it's easy to get a ride. Most of the troubles were people trying to get into my pants in exchange for a ride. I spent a year in Peru, well just under a year. I met a man. He was ever so handsome and owned a ranch about a hundred miles from Lima. Farmed alpacas for their milk, and once they got old, for their meat. He caught the timing just right on the meat. People were looking for an alternative to beef and alpaca meat is lean and very tasty. It didn't work out though. He had a wandering eye, if you know what I mean."

I knew what she meant.

"I spent some time in Machu Picchu. It was my spiritual awakening. Actually I don't think that I have ever told anyone else this but I spent a couple of nights there. You go on tours and at sunset everyone has to leave. I stayed. I hid behind one of the ruins and when everyone had left I laid out my blanket and slept under the stars. I was fasting so food was not an issue and I did find some water which was good. It was a magical experience; a perfect way to get over a relationship gone wrong."

"What, you are not allowed to camp at Machu Picchu?" I asked, very naively.

"No, in fact there are signs that strictly forbid it. But they were in Spanish and I figured that I would deny knowing that I did anything wrong because I didn't speak Spanish. Good plan huh?"

"Yea, you are quite smart." Now I hate to admit this on paper, but I was slowly getting more than a little attracted to this beautiful blond lady.

The snow had stopped and the roads were clear, relatively speaking. The Greyhound wound its way higher and higher and the views were amazing. I felt like I was living in some National

Geographic TV show. Miranda said quietly, "why don't you think about staying over in Kamloops. I have a room."

I almost had no choice. The bus pulled into Kamloops. Most of the passengers were wiped out from the trip but I was invigorated. Miranda said, "we can check into my hotel later, let's first get something to eat. I'm buying." We found Jacob's Noodle and Cutlet, a Japanese place and got stuck into some chicken cutlets and miso soup.

"So where did you go after Peru," I asked.

"I hopped a bus to Quito in Ecuador. It was a hell of a trip. I had caught some kind of stomach bug in Peru and had to have the driver stop every hour or so so that I could squat alongside the road. It wasn't that much fun and I was really dehydrated and when I got to Quito I was kind of out of it. Do you want some lychee ice cream?"

I had never heard of a lychee but said yes and it was delicious. Miranda continued. "Quito was crap, I mean it was a nice city and all but my stomach issues never went away. I was there for three months crapping through the eye of a needle, if you know what I mean." I nodded. I knew the feeling.

"The food there was good but the Ecuadorians were nowhere near as friendly as the Peruvians. Maybe I was just being biased but I found the whole place to be a bit too much on the take. Luckily I got a good ride to Bogota in Columbia but that was where the wheels came off. The guy giving me a ride was part of some kind of cartel and I don't mean a fishing cartel, I mean drugs."

The waitress came over. "Can I get you anything more to eat or drink?" Miranda said, "just the check please."

We took a cab to the hotel that she had booked. It was a bit seedy but I didn't care. I was four sake's in and life was looking

good for a young boy from Africa. We got a seat at the bar and ordered a couple of Molson's.

Miranda turned to me and said, "what I am going to tell you next is just for you and me. You can't mention it to anyone, not even your mother." I thought of my mother back in South Africa and figured that whatever she was about to tell me would be safe with me. My Mum was usually well into her cups by noon.

"I lived with a man named Adam. I know it's not a typical Colombian name but I looked it up once and it's a Hebrew name that means 'son of the red earth'. Funny thing about that. It should have meant 'son of the white stuff'. Adam was a cocaine dealer and not a small one. Our home, well really his home, always had a fine dusting of white powder on everything. He was good in bed and I was broke so we came to an agreement. It was fun until the Federales came looking for Adam and I was caught up in all of it. Is my story boring you?"

She had to be kidding. I was on the edge of my seat. I ordered another Molson.

"So here's the thing. Adam had been quite clever with his estate planning, well if you can call it that. He probably knew that one day it would all catch up to him and it did. He was arrested and so was I. It was a kangaroo court and he got a life sentence and I got two years. As far as I know he's still inside. I served six months in a real shithole, but when I got out I dipped into Adam's estate. He had given me the coordinates of a box that he had buried in the foothills of Pico Cristybal Colyn, a mountain in Columbia. He had actually slipped it to me right in front of the judge who was too preoccupied in her own political career as a prosecutor to notice. Adam gave me one last glance and I never saw him again."

I ordered another Molson.

"I thought of going to see him when I got out of jail but

then thought that I would let sleeping dogs lie. I followed the coordinates and found the package that he had buried. It was five bricks of cocaine, neatly packaged. We ordered another round of beer. I was hoping that she was paying because I was not sure that I had enough to cover the tab.

"Now to be honest I was terrified. I had just got out of jail. I had no money but I did have close to a million dollars stuffed into my backpack. I actually asked my parents for a loan so that I had some cash on hand to get back at least to the States and then hopefully home to Canada. Luckily I looked like a penniless bum and after I got the money from my parents I started to make my way to Venezuela. I had heard from some kids that I met in a cafe that there was a way to get smuggled into the US for not much money. I didn't need to be smuggled. I had a valid Canadian passport but I wanted to get the bricks to Miami. It was not an easy road from Columbia to Venezuela; it was riddled with scam artists and drug dealers but they never suspected me. I had to shag one guy just once to get through into Venezuela but it was worth it. The sex was crap. The guy hardly knew his dick from his tonsils but he made sure that I made it safely to Caracas. He introduced me to some of his friends and through them I found the boat smugglers."

I was now starting to feel the effect of the beers and sake. Did I mention that I was only 20? I asked Miranda, "When exactly was this?" She smiled at me and said, "You are trying to figure out how old I am, aren't you?" I looked sheepishly into my glass and said, "Yes."

"I'm 55, almost 56." I was floored. Now it's sometimes hard for a young person to figure out how old babies are and it's just as difficult for us to figure out how old, old people are, not that 55 is old. I had her pegged at 35 max.

"Let's try and find our room," Miranda said. I could see through

the window of the hotel bar that it was still snowing. I had already checked that my ticket from Kamloops to Vancouver was still valid for a full week and followed Miranda to the room. It had a faint smell of cigarettes but otherwise OK and reasonably clean. Miranda flopped onto the bed. I had a feeling that I was about to get schooled in what it meant to be a good lover. I had been laid a few times so it was not new territory, but I also knew that I was way out of my depth.

Miranda kicked her shoes off and patted the side of the bed. I knew what was going to happen and it did and I did ok and Miranda seemed happy and we both fell asleep. I woke around midnight to pee and saw that it was still snowing and the cars in the parking lot were just mounds of snow and I went back to our bed. Miranda was farting and snoring, just a little. I looked at her for a while. She was really beautiful. I could not believe that she was 55. I snuggled up “in the lee of bum island” as my friend Gerry Downton used to refer to it and we both slept until 8:30.

The hotel had a breakfast buffet and the centerpiece was a waffle maker with all the fixings. We didn’t have waffles when I was growing up. It was pancakes and syrup, that was it, but in Canada I guess it was waffles with however much you could slather on it from M&M’s to gummy bears and everything in between. Miranda seemed to enjoy watching me eat and I was enjoying the food and limitless coffee. To be perfectly honest, I needed to refill the supply chain, if you know what I mean. Miranda took me by the hand and walked me back to our room and said, “I hope that you had enough to eat. I’m horny.”

We didn’t have sex right away. There were warnings on the radio about a blizzard that was supposed to hit around sunset, which by the way comes very early in Canada in winter, and Miranda wanted to make sure that we were well stocked for the storm.

“You never know,” she said. “I’m good with a good blizzard but I am not good without a decent stock of booze. How about a quickie and then we will head out to stock the larder, so to speak?” The quickie was quick, mostly my fault because of my inexperience but Miranda didn’t complain and we found a Save-On that was open. They were starting to close because of the storm and the shelves were almost bare. Miranda picked up some canned goods, cheese, milk and coffee. “You never know,” she said. “Even hotels run out.” Almost as an afterthought she chucked in a pack of candles. We stopped by Lansdowne Liquor Store and Miranda bought out their vodka and beer supply, well almost. By the time we got back to the hotel the snow was piling up. There was an old TV in the corner of the room and the weather man was going on about the enormity of the storm that was approaching.

“We here in Canada know snow, but I think that this time we are going to get some snow and a lot of it, eh. The storm will start around six this evening and as it looks right now from the models, and we are using all the models at hand, both the UK and the US, it looks like this is going to last two full days. Please, if you still can, stock up and hunker down.”

I am being truthful here because this is my story. The first time I ever saw snow was in the distance as we drove into Calgary. The white lacy stuff that decorated the rocks above the tree line in the Rockies was 50 miles away. I had never seen snow up close and personal and I was about to get the full understanding of what a blizzard was. It started with the wind; and a Bloody Mary; and another quickie. Miranda was relentless and I was loving it. The weather man was right. At around six in the evening the snow started, again, quite light at first, small flakes, but by eight it was starting to really pound down. The wind had picked up and funnily enough, the snow, in some places, was going up, not down. I sat by the window, Miranda was reading her book and

she had shut the TV down and put on some classical music. I was watching the snow on the street lamps across the parking lot and for the most part it was horizontal but it was still piling up. By midnight there was around two feet on top of the three feet that had already accumulated.

Miranda said, "Let's go to bed unless you want another Bloody Mary."

"Another please. I just can't get enough of this snow. Also I want to know how you got from Caracas to the US." Miranda gave me a long look and said, "OK I will tell you but it's a bit of a rough story. I was introduced to a man that went by the name Il Duce. In case you are wondering, it means Dictator. He had all the connections. He acted pretty smart but I don't think that he was as smart as he thought he was. I played the 'poor little Canadian girl that just needs a ride' card. He never thought to look in my backpack and for very little money he had me on a fishing boat going to Grenada. It was an easy crossing. There he had me meet an Italian skipper who was sailing his catamaran from Grenada to Saint Maarten. He was a really nice guy and all he needed was an extra hand to help with the deck work. From Saint Maarten it was easy, well sort of. The Italian guy hooked me up with some fishermen who fished the waters near Puerto Rico. Sometimes they crossed territorial waters into Puerto Rico and there was a quick transfer to one of their fishing boats and a little money changed hands. Not much. I was actually still borrowing from my mother."

Once we got back to Puerto Rico, which took two days and two thousand or so pounds of wahoo and tarpon and one poor tuna that got hooked by mistake we docked in San Juan, right in front of the authorities. They did squirrel me off the boat as soon as we landed and I found a small place in the old town that was good for room and board for a week for a couple of

hundred bucks. I stayed a month until I was sure that no one suspected anything. Actually if truth be told I was in love with the food there and didn't want to leave. I got addicted to Pasteles. They are a kind of tamale stuffed with anything you like. I liked them stuffed with bacalao which is a salted cod. Man were they delicious. I am getting hungry just thinking about them."

I looked out the window and thought about a bacalao but instead decided on some trail mix and another Bloody.

"Once I was in Puerto Rico I was practically in the US. They do have sniffer dogs at the airport but I managed to get past them. We landed in Miami and that was where the fun really started. I had street value close to a million bucks in my backpack. That plus a few undies and a lot of hope."

Miranda was glowing as she recounted her travels. "I was way out of my depth." Miranda continued. "I only knew one person who did drugs and luckily enough he lived in Ft. Lauderdale, not far up the coast from Miami. All I had for him was an old phone number of his girlfriend, but in Florida everyone is on the make and she knew that there might be a few bucks in giving me his number. I called him. His name was Rex. He knew his way around town, if you know what I mean. Very long story short. I sold the cocaine for seven hundred K in cash. It's my retirement fund. I eventually made it back to Canada but sadly my Mom had early onset Alzheimer's and barely knew me. I guess I have been on the road ever since."

Now there are two reasons why I am writing this story. One was obviously about Miranda's story and the snow and the other about the sex, but there is a third part to this story which will come later. In the meantime Miranda and I got a little sloshed and the snow kept pounding down. I sat by the window for as long as I could until I noticed that Miranda had fallen asleep and I knew that it was safe to go to bed. She was snoring and farting

and looked absolutely beautiful. I pulled the covers over her and cuddled up in the lee of bum island. The snow kept on pounding down. I knew that we were going to be stuck for a few days.

We were stuck for a few days. The lights had gone out overnight and we ate breakfast by candlelight. It was quite romantic even though my head was pounding from all the Bloody Mary's but I was still enchanted. There was a note slipped under our door that read, "Due to the current weather there will not be a full breakfast service but there will be hot coffee in the lobby."

"I'm going to get us some more coffee," I announced. There was only a front desk lady and one other person in the lobby. "This is a bit of a hoolie," the front desk lady said as she helped me find the half-and-half.

"I wouldn't know," I replied, almost smugly. "I am from South Africa. We don't get snow there." The girl looked a little ruffled. I guessed that she might have slept in her chair. She was quite attractive and after all the sex that I had had in the last couple of days I couldn't help but look at her ass as she walked away from me. I followed her to the front desk. "How are you even working with weather like this?"

"I dunno," she said, "I get off in 15 minutes but don't have anywhere to go. Well I do have an apartment but there is no way that I will be able to get there and I am pretty sure that Tracy, the girl that is supposed to relieve me won't be coming in even though her boyfriend has a plow on his truck. He's probably picking up some side work and good for him." She looked a little wistful.

I said, almost too cavalierly, "We are in room 202. You are welcome to stop by. We are well stocked with wine and vodka so swing by if you like."

Miranda had fallen asleep; I was wired. The snow was amazing

and I knew that the front desk lady would come by. I waited for Miranda to wake up before I told her.

"We may have a visitor," I said. "The front desk lady. She can't get home so I invited her for a drink." Miranda gave me a look that I had never seen from any woman before and I knew that I was in trouble.

Front Desk Lady knocked quietly. Miranda answered and invited her in. I could smell the air change. Miranda offered her a Bloody Mary and then another. I was watching all of this from afar. Miranda was working her magic. Now I am not going to go into detail here because I know that my sister might read this, her husband too, and there are some things that a sister doesn't need to know. I think that I did OK; Miranda did most of the heavy lifting and it was dark when the three of us fell asleep in each other's arms.

I woke to a brilliant blue sky. The storm had moved on to bother someone else. I was a little sad. It had been a magical experience. I looked over at the Front Desk Lady and Miranda who were flopped out naked and still snoring. I sat by the window and gazed out at a featureless landscape. What had used to be cars were just mounds of snow. What had been a road was nowhere to be seen. I could hear some snow plows in the distance and saw flashing lights and figured that they would have us dug out by noon. I was right about noon, but wrong about the day. Miranda and I spent the day in a fug. The Front Desk Lady left and the two of us sat for a while.

"I checked and the Greyhound is leaving tomorrow at four in the afternoon. The one going to Vancouver. I plan to take it. Are you coming?" I nodded and we found a couple of seats. The trip was spectacular. The trees hung heavy and the landscape was almost like we had landed on another planet. Miranda didn't say much; she slept most of the way and when we got to the

Greyhound Station in Vancouver she woke, grabbed her bags, and left without saying goodbye.

I was a little startled but noticed that she had tucked a phone number and an email address into my jacket. I must have been asleep. Her email was lifeistooshort@aol.com. I smiled.

I am writing this almost 30 years later. I ended up going back to South Africa but it was not as I had remembered; it never is. I married Liz, my childhood sweetheart and she gave me two children, a boy and a girl. Every month or so I emailed Miranda and she was pleasant with her replies. Liz didn't know about the emails. They were a sweet connection to my past. Miranda changed her email to a Yahoo address which she gave to me and I took it as a good sign, but life has a way of getting away from you and my furtive emails, out of sight of Liz, were only happening every two months, if that.

My children grew up strong and healthy and before I knew it they were grown and gone. Liz was what one might call a perfect mother; she cooked and cleaned and loved her family and loved me, but I always yearned for something more. I wasn't sure what it was but in the back of my mind it might have been the blizzard and a front desk lady. Just one more time.

I was working as a civil engineer and we had a contract to build a dam on the Limpopo River. It was a tricky project and my boss did some research and decided that it would make sense for me to go to Canada. They had built a similar dam under similar conditions, well except they had snow to deal with. "Go and talk to those engineers and try to learn from them."

Two weeks later I was in Toronto. I had, at first, no ulterior motive, but I did know that Miranda had moved to Toronto and was living there, still single. We exchanged a few emails and my heart skipped a beat when she agreed to meet. We planned to get

together at the Windsor Arms, an old boutique hotel in the center of town. Now, in my defense, I had not really noticed the passage of time. I was in my fifties and had kept myself in reasonable shape. I had even run a few marathons. Miranda agreed to meet me in the Tudor Room for afternoon tea. I checked the hotel website; they were known for their afternoon teas.

Full disclosure here; I was nervous in fact I was, as they say in a saying that I don't really like, I was shitting my pants. I got to the Tudor Room early and ordered tea. And some finger sandwiches. There was just one other couple in the place and they were scoffing down cucumber sandwiches. My Earl Gray tea was getting cold when Miranda rolled into the room. Literally. She was in a wheelchair with an oxygen tank hooked to the side. She looked tiny and frail. I was not sure if it was her but she said, "hello Bas. You look good." I wasn't sure what to say so I didn't say anything. She knew that I was fumbling.

"How are the sandwiches?"

I smiled and said, "not as good as the waffles in Kamloops." She smiled and turned to her helper. "Please push me closer." There was a man hanging back. He was a bit of a suit, holding a briefcase. He looked uncomfortable.

"Let's talk," she said. Miranda settled onto the couch. Her helper helped her move. The suit stayed back a little.

"Bas," she said. "I am an old lady now, in case you haven't noticed. I'm 87 and riddled with cancer and the twat docs tell me that I am not long for this world. I am not sure where I am going but I want to leave this world clean." She gestured over her shoulder and motioned for the suit to come closer. "Jimmy here will lay out things for you. Turns out I was not a very smart blond and made some mistakes, but I was quite good with investments."

The suit came closer and said, "she was really good with her

investments and the money that she got from her mother has grown quite a bit. She is leaving it all to you.”

I mouthed the words, “Your mother?” Miranda smiled and I think that she blushed but I couldn’t be sure.

“Yea fuckit,” she said. “I don’t have any children so you get my mess, whatever it’s worth.” I looked at the paperwork. It was worth seventeen million, US dollars, not Canadian dollars. “There is one caveat,” Miranda said. “You need to find the Front Desk Lady and give her five percent.”

“Now kiss me,” she said. I leaned in and she took me by the hand. “Don’t fuck this one up Bas. Find her. Give her the money and remember me fondly.” That’s all I ask out of this life. I was trying to say something when her handler swung her around and wheeled her away. She was just at the door when she turned to me. I remembered her look from thirty years earlier. “I would love a fuck,” it said, “but I am just too tired.”

I never saw her again.

I called my wife and lied to her. “I need to go to Kamloops. They have a more interesting dam there and I need to consult with the engineers.” Liz just said, “Do what you need to do my Love.”

The spring flowers were rocking it as we drove into Kamloops. I was in a rental this time and there was no snow. I found the hotel where we had stayed. They had added another large wing onto it and an outdoor pool. I had no idea where to start. I didn’t even know her name but figured that the front desk would be a good place to start. There was a young and quite pretty lady working the check-in. To be honest I felt a bit foolish.

“I was here thirty years ago,” I said, “and stayed through one of the worst blizzards in BC history. I am trying to find a young

woman who worked the desk here back then. I have no idea where to start so I thought that I would start with you.”

The pretty lady was busy printing some stuff but when she came back to the front desk she looked at me for a long time and then said, “Are you Bas?”

“Yes. Yes I’m Bas. How did you know?”

“My mother has spoken about you for 30 years. More than 30 years. Long before I was born. Something happened and she has been obsessed with it. To be honest it has been annoying but here you are. My mother is the manager of this place. I can page her if you like.”

Front Desk Lady came to the front desk. She took one look at me and said, “Well hi Bas.”

“How did you even know my name?”

“It’s our job to know everything. It’s nice to see you again. You look good.”

I was a little taken aback and said, “Can we talk?” She took me into one of the conference rooms. “Bas, I have been waiting for you. Have you seen Miranda? I saw her a few years ago when she came through here. She acted like she had never met me. I remembered her but she looked right through me.”

I said, “first I need to know your name, well let me take that back. First I need to tell you that it was one of the most memorable days of my life.”

“I’m Sandy,” she said and offered, “yes it was memorable.”

“I saw Miranda last week,” I said. “She’s not doing that good. You look like you are doing OK. Your daughter is beautiful.” Sandy gave me a long, thoughtful look. “We are doing ok except that she has a rare blood disease and I don’t have the money to get our medical insurance to pay anything towards it but not that it matters, why are you here?”

Sandy had not held her figure. She was a tad on the plump side but still pretty. As she leaned in I could smell the hotel room from 30 years earlier and knew in that moment that I was screwed.

I said to Sandy quite clumsily, “well it looks like I have come to the right place.” I dug into my backpack and pulled out some papers. “Here, take a look at these,” I said. I pushed the papers toward her.

“I told you that I saw Miranda a few days ago. She was with her lawyer. These are for you.” Sandy glanced at the papers. “I’m not sure that I understand.”

“Sign the paper and you will be a millionaire, well close to one,” I said. “Miranda is dying. When she dies you will get this money.”

How do you describe the emotions of a person who has just won the lottery? And I am talking about me now, not Sandy. I remembered that snowy day all those decades ago and for the first time in a long time knew that life was going to work out just fine. For all of us. For me and Sandy, and her daughter. Probably not so good for Liz and my children. Miranda died a month later. Her lawyer contacted me just as Sandy and me were moving into our new apartment on the south side of Kamloops.

THE SHIPPING FORECAST

AS A CHILD I SPENT most summers in Cornwall. We had a cottage in St Just in Roseland, a small parish on England’s southwest coast. It was stunningly beautiful. A narrow country road led to the edge of town where a tangle of blackberry bushes greeted you. My Mum would let us walk up the hill to guzzle as many blackberries as we could. My sister and I would come home with hands and faces stained black, our bellies full, our hearts overflowing. It was a magical time but what I remember most of our years in Cornwall was the Shipping Forecast.

My bedroom, if you can call it that, was a small space under the stairs. There was enough room for a pullout bed and a bedside table. That was it. I had to crawl to get into bed, but I loved it. To me it felt like being back into the womb, or at least how I imagined a womb would feel. At night, after we ate dinner as a family and sat and played cards or board games, I would climb into my bunk, find my little transistor radio, and listen to the Shipping Forecast.

A very British voice would give the weather forecast for the coastal waters of Great Britain. “*Jersey, southwest four, visibility one mile, slight drizzle. Barometer 1023, now falling.*” I just loved to know that the islands off the coast of France were experiencing the same weather as we were in Cornwall. I would listen intently but where it got really exciting was when the BBC announcer moved up the coast. “*The area north of The Isle of Man and south of the Mull of Kintyre, gale force winds Force 8 gusting Force 10 at times. Heavy rain. Visibility less than twenty meters.*”

I would snuggle under the covers and imagine being on a ship in those kinds of conditions. After a while I would fall asleep but the Shipping Forecast would go on all night. Sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night. *"North Sea and the area from Southwold to Margate, Southeast force two, diminishing. Visibility good. Barometer 1025, now rising."*

One night I overheard my Mum talking to my Dad. "Don't you think that Tommy is a little strange?" she asked. "He has no friends and he's always listening to that damn transistor radio. What's he listening to in the dead of night?" I could hear Dad roll over and I knew that he was trying to avoid the conversation. "Leave him be Betty," he said. "He loves listening to the Shipping Forecast."

"What the heck is the Shipping Forecast?" Mom asked.

"You know. The BBC broadcasts the weather for the waters around England and I think Scotland and Ireland as well."

"Why would a ten year old boy be interested in the weather forecast?" I heard my Dad sigh. "I dunno Betty," he said. "Maybe he wants to be a ship captain when he grows up."

I loved Cornwall. It was so different from our home in Boston. During the school year we would have to conform; in Cornwall my parents let us run free. My sister was a little bookish but I loved to walk the cliffs overlooking the English Channel, especially on windy days, the days when the wind against tide whipped the waters into a messy cauldron of spindrift and crashing seas. Mum would pack me a marmite sandwich and a flask of sweet tea and I would be gone for most of the day. When I returned I would have bramble thorns stuck to my socks and mud caked to my boots. I could not have been happier.

Then one night it all changed. I had gone to bed early. Mum and Dad and my sister were playing canasta. I was never very

fond of the game and besides I was exhausted from all the walking. I fell asleep to the Shipping Forecast. *"Scilly Isles, Force four. Barometer dropping. Visibility two miles. Milford Haven. Calm. Light fog. Visibility less than one mile."* Something woke me around two in the morning. The house was dead quiet but I could hear the wind howling. Every now and then it came in blasts and our old stone cottage would shudder. I had missed the forecast for our area. My radio was still going but I knew that it would be a while until they came back around to Cornwall. I tried to go back to sleep but the wind was buffeting our home and the wind chime that my Mum had hung from a branch outside my bedroom was going crazy. Finally, around two, the Shipping Forecast got to our area. *"Falmouth to Plymouth. Gale force winds. Barometer dropping. Winds expected to increase. Visibility less than 100 meters."*

I have always loved storms. Mum told me that I was born during a blizzard in Boston and that might have been the reason, but I think that it had more to do with atmospheric pressure. I read once in the Encyclopedia Britannica that people's bodies respond differently to atmospheric pressure. I rolled out of bed and pulled on my wellies. My cap was where it always was on the hook on the back of the door. My coat was hanging in the closet. The house was still except for Smokey, our gray cat with piercing green eyes. He had heard me and came to investigate. "Wait here little buddy," I said. "I am just going out to feel the wind." Smokey meowed. I think that he was probably hungry but then he was always hungry.

It was a bit of a challenge opening the door but I finally got it open and stepped out into some kind of minor maelstrom. The trees at the end of our yard were bent double. What I really wanted to see was how the ocean looked and made my way along a little path that led to the cliffs overlooking the English Channel. I was getting pummeled by the wind but mercifully there was no

rain. I approached the edge of the cliff cautiously. I only weighed eighty pounds back then and I was worried that the wind might just blow me into the ocean. The sky was mostly dark storm clouds, but every now and then the pale three quarter moon would peek through and shed its light. I could feel every fiber of my body being thrilled by the experience. I sat for a while in the lee of a large rock and watched the ocean churn itself into some kind of hell. Then I saw a light. At first I was sure that I was seeing things but then I saw it again. There were two lights; one red, the other green. I rubbed my eyes but the lights were still there and they looked to be getting brighter. Then I saw a bright white light coming from the town dock just below where I was huddled. It seemed to be flashing some kind of code. The red and green lights were definitely getting brighter. The white light flashed insistently. I made my way to the narrow staircase that led down to the dock. I had to hold on really tight. Every now and then a gust would hit and I could feel the flaps of my jacket vibrate. As I got closer to the dock I could hear men shouting. I swore that I recognized one of them but it was hard to tell above the noise of the wind.

The men on the dock had a wagon that was hitched to a truck which I recognized as one belonging to Mr. Wootton, the innkeeper. His inn and pub were less than a half mile from our house. On Sundays, after church, Mum and Dad would take us there for a ploughman's lunch, essentially a platter of cheeses and breads and sometimes some salami. Mum would have a beer shandy and Dad a pint of bitter. My sister and I would each get a coke.

The red and green lights were almost at the dock but there was a serious backwash which would make landing difficult. I could hear that the men on the boat were speaking French. I know this because my Mum had once hired a tutor to teach French to my

sister and me. I crept closer. The dock was awash but the red and green lights kept on coming. Mr. Wootton was yelling but it all fell on deaf ears. The small boat surfed a wave and came alongside, the men on board chucked their lines ashore. It was mayhem but there was a job to be done and they got right to it. I could see barrels being unloaded onto the dock and then loaded onto Mr. Wootton's wagon and truck. None of it looked safe to me. The boat was heaving at its lines, the men trying to stand without being washed into the water. The barrels kept coming. The angry clouds had moved out and the moon shone a milky light. Then just as suddenly as they had arrived the French men jumped back on board and set off into the night. This time all I could see was their white stern light until it faded. Mr. Wootton and two other men clambered into the truck and took off up the narrow road. I scampered up the stairs and watched as they drove toward The Ships Arms, the pub attached to the inn that Mr. Wootton owned.

The next morning Cornwall was washed clean. There were some downed limbs, but not enough to write home about. Mum made breakfast of fresh farm eggs and fried potatoes. My sister was complaining. "Don't you know that I am on a diet?" She clutched her belly, which was barely there, and stated, "I need to lose all this fat before I go back to school." Mum sighed. "Just eat your breakfast," she said. Dad was reading the newspaper. "Do you know that they have doubled the duty on imports from France? This bloody government is going crazy. England is already one of the most expensive places to live in Europe and now those clowns in Parliament are going to make it even more expensive to live here."

I was exhausted. I hadn't been able to fall asleep after my night out and faked it when Mum came to wake me for breakfast. I was anxious to go and explore. My marmite sandwich and flask of tea were on the edge of the counter and Mum said, "be a good

boy Tommy and be careful and don't get into any trouble." My sister snorted. "What kind of trouble can Mr. Dimwit over there get into?" I ignored her. Mum said, "you be nice Alice."

I packed my sandwich and thermos into a small satchel but this morning, instead of heading along the coast, I walked inland. I was really nervous but I wanted to investigate Mr. Wootton's pub. It didn't take long for me to get there. I took the shortcut clambering over a couple of gates and crossing the fields that were between our home and the pub. Some of the cows gave me a disapproving look but I didn't care. They had not seen what I had seen in the dark of night.

There is a small hill at the back of The Ship's Arms and some scrub where I could hide. Mr. Wootton had a pasture adjacent to the pub and he had six very well fed cows grazing on some lush grass. The pub was mostly quiet. It was still early. They only opened for lunch on weekends. I saw Mr. Wootton come out and dump a bag of feed in the trough. I had not noticed that he also had pigs and they came running over, snorting and kerfuffling. I remembered a sign in his pub that read, "We have the best pork sausages in the whole of Cornwall." Now I knew where his ingredients came from.

All was quiet for a while. I watched a robin digging for worms. He, or she, I couldn't tell, would hop along the verge of the hill and tilt its head to the side listening. Then with deliberation poked its beak into the dirt coming up with a worm and scoffing it all in one gulp. I noticed an old Bedford truck coming down the lane heading toward the pub. I noticed it because there were no windows in the back of the truck and the front windows were tinted black. The driver slowed and turned into a small alcove opposite the pub. He slowly backed toward the side door of the pub. Mr. Wootton was there. He waved his hand coaxing the truck driver until he was just a few feet from the side door. The driver

and someone else jumped out. Mr. Wootton had two helpers and between them they loaded fifteen barrels into the truck. They were talking among themselves but I couldn't hear what they were saying. Even though I was only twelve I knew that there was something amiss.

I desperately wanted to tell someone but I knew that Mum and Dad would be mad that I had been out at night and my sister, well she had her own issues. I skipped out after dinner. "Are you alright Tommy?" Mum asked. "Why don't you play games with us anymore?"

"I'm just tired," I said. "I want to get some sleep, but I knew that I was lying and I think that my Mum knew it too. I had a plan and also wanted to listen to the Shipping Forecast. *"Plymouth and North Biscay, variable three or four. Occasionally five or six in the far south. Fog patches at times with occasional drizzle. Barometer rising."* I loved it. The announcer sounded so informed. I set my alarm for two in the morning.

I was awake long before the alarm went off. Smokey greeted me at my door and I fed him a few snacks before heading out. The night air was cold. I glanced at my parent's bedroom to make sure that their lights were off. The house was dark. For a change there was no wind and I made my way along the narrow path to the edge of the cliff. I waited, shivering a little when an occasional gust of wind blew. Nothing. I was dozing off and after a while decided to head back home. A light fog had settled on our corner of Cornwall and it was no longer chilly; it was freezing. I stood and stretched. The ground had been hard. I turned toward home when I heard what I thought might have been a seagull calling. Then I heard it again. I knew what it was. Once my Dad had taken me out with a friend on his fishing boat. A heavy damp fog had rolled in and the captain started to sound his foghorn. I wasn't sure why but I liked the long, almost forlorn sound that

it made. I knew that the sound that I had heard was a foghorn. Reluctantly I returned to the cliff's edge. The sound of the horn got louder. Then I noticed the beam of a spotlight coming from the dock. The fog quickly swallowed up the light. The foghorn grew louder and more insistent and then suddenly, out of the night came the same boat as I had seen the night before. They quickly unloaded the barrels and the van drove off toward The Ship's Arms.

Dad was eating breakfast, reading the newspaper. Mum had made him some kippers and a poached egg but he had not touched any of it. My sister was giving me the stink-eye especially when Mum had her back turned. "You know Love," Dad said. "I think that this bloody government has taken leave of its senses. Not only have they doubled the import duty on goods coming from France, but they are now imposing an embargo on imports of oil and gas from Saudi Arabia."

"Where's Saudi Arabia?" I asked. Dad shrugged me off. "It's a place over there where we get our petrol from. Don't you worry your silly little head about it though." This morning Mum had allowed me Rice Krispies for breakfast. She didn't do it very often. "Too much sugar in those cereals," she would always say. I went back to eating breakfast. Mum had sliced a banana into the cereal bowl and it was delicious.

My hike that day went back to the same hill overlooking Mr. Wootton's pub. The same robin was there searching for worms. Tilt, poke, scoff was the routine. About an hour before lunch the windowless van showed up and Mr. Wootton and his crew loaded fifteen barrels into it. I lay on my tummy watching it all unfold. I knew that something was definitely not right. There was too much scurrying around for it to be legal. The van drove off.

It was the same routine the following night and the one thereafter. The boat with French sailors on board would dock

around three in the morning, offload their barrels and then head back out to sea. Mr. Wootton would be there with his van and wagon and later that morning they would load the barrels into the windowless van and it would head off into the countryside. I had to find out what was in the barrels.

It was a Monday night, a week before we were due to head back home to the States. I was pretty sure by now that there would be a transfer at the dock but instead of going to the cliffs edge I hid on the hill overlooking The Ship's Arms. I saw Mr. Wootton's van pull out at around 2:30 in the morning. The night was still. As soon as I saw him drive down the lane toward the dock I crept in the shadows until I was at the side entrance to the pub. My heart was pounding. I had brought a small flashlight but it was pretty useless. The dark night quickly swallowed up the light.

The side door was unlocked. I looked around before opening it. My measly flashlight found a light switch and I turned it on to get a quick look around. The place was empty except for a dumpster in the corner. I had to get a stool to be able to see into the dumpster but when I was able to raise the lid and look in I saw that it was filled with empty beer and wine bottles. I had seen enough for now. I removed the stool and headed back home. Smokey was there to greet me. He was hungry, as usual.

Mum was worried. I had decided to not go out for a walk. "Tommy," she said. "Are you really not feeling well?" I faked a headache. "No Mum I don't feel that good. I want to rest today." I was indeed tired from being out at night, but this was not about that. I wanted to rest up before going out later. I wanted to see what was in the barrels. I turned the Shipping Forecast on low and dozed most of the afternoon away. *"Trafalgar, easterly five to seven, occasionally gale eight. Otherwise variable three or four. Fitzroy, clear, five to seven. Barometer falling. Expect some*

coastal fog.” I loved the presenter’s voice. He seemed so sure of himself.

I joined the family for dinner and even stayed to play a hand of canasta but my mind was elsewhere. “It looks like you are feeling a bit better Tommy,” Mum said.

“I feel OK Mum,” I said. “Just a little tired. I think that I am going to go to bed early again tonight.” Mum looked worried. “OK son get some rest. Sleep tight. Don’t let the bed bug bites bite.” I smiled. Alice huffed. Dad said, “Goodnight Tom.” I liked that he called me Tom and that Mum called me Tommy. Dad had taken to smoking a pipe which was a bit weird but then when you are twelve your parents are weird, no matter what they do. I set my alarm for midnight and for a change I turned off the Shipping Forecast. I wanted to get some sleep but sleep didn’t come easy. I tossed and turned looking at the clock every twenty minutes or so. By midnight I was wide awake and slipped out of bed. I had heard my parents go to bed at around 11. I hoped that they would be asleep but I knew that my Dad liked to read into the wee hours. Smokey was right there the second I opened my bedroom door. He was hungry. Big surprise. I fed him as quietly as I could. The marmite sandwich that Mum had made for me earlier in the day was still on the counter. I ate it slowly, listening to hear if my parents were awake. Smokey meowed and I gave him a corner of my sandwich. “Shhh,” I said. The night was quiet. The Shipping Forecast for our area was for light southerlies. A perfect night to smuggle goods ashore.

I slipped out the front door. The moon was almost full and its light cast long shadows. I had the thermos of tea with me. After no more than ten minutes of walking I was on the hill overlooking The Ship’s Arms. All was quiet. Around two in the morning I saw a light click on in one of the upstairs rooms. A shadow passed in front of it and then the light went out.

Moments later a light came on downstairs. I could see a shadow moving. Far in the distance I could see a set of headlights coming our way. Most of the time the lights were behind hedges but they were getting closer until they pulled up in front of The Ship’s Arms. Whoever was driving had thought to cut the lights about a quarter mile from the pub. I saw a man get out. He was smoking a cigarette. He stood alongside his car until Mr. Wootton came out and signaled him. They were both wearing long trench coats. They hopped into Mr. Wootton’s van and took off toward the water. This was my moment. I finished my tea and left the thermos in the grass.

I made my way to the side door looking over my shoulder every couple of seconds. My heart was beating and if I am to be perfectly honest, I was trembling. This time I had brought a more powerful flashlight. I opened the side door carefully and peered in. The place was deserted except for the dumpster at the back. I needed the stool to get up inside the dumpster and I was worried that someone would notice it. There was a rake leaning up against the back wall. I grabbed it and the stool and then without much thought climbed into the dumpster. I could smell the stale beer. The bottles made a noise and I was scared. I used the rake to flick the stool away and then tossed the rake to the side. I found a place in the corner and waited.

It didn’t take long before I heard some noise outside. I could hear Mr. Wootton talking in hushed tones. Through the slit between the lid and the side of the dumpster I could see that someone had turned the lights on. I didn’t dare move. “Alright then, alright then, let’s offload the goods.” I could hear some shuffling. I so badly wanted to look but didn’t trust the bottles. I was sure that they would make a noise if I moved so much as a finger. It didn’t take long before things started to quieten. I could hear someone banging on one of the barrels. “OK come on then you can get out

now,” I heard a voice say. I held my breath and sat rigid until I realized that they were not talking to me. I heard some shuffling and some new voices that sounded like children’s voices. I didn’t understand what they were saying. Mr. Wooton said, “Ok bkdeng be. Em κ sibκ werin cem te.” I thought that he might be speaking in tongues. I learned later that he was speaking Kurdish. There was a lot of chatter going on and I took the chance to move. The bottles rattled a little, but not much. I lifted the lid of the dumpster just an inch and looked out. There were at least a dozen or so children sitting on the floor. The barrels had their lids off and Mr. Wooton was there handing out sandwiches and bottles of water. “Ok,” Mr. Wooton said, “em κ di 3end saetan de vegerin. We will be back in a few hours.” He and his friend left, turning the lights off as they went. I could hear a key in the lock turning. “Damn,” I said to myself. I had not thought this through carefully enough. I was locked in.

DAD ALWAYS GETS UP FIRST. It’s a bit of a ritual. He makes Mum a cappuccino and takes it to her in bed. For the rest of the day Mum did everything but this was his one sweet gesture to start the day off on the right foot. He noticed that my bedroom door was open and looked in. He could see that I wasn’t in bed. Dad looked around the house calling my name softly. “Hmmm,” he thought. Smokey was there making himself available in case Dad wanted to feed him. Dad made a cappuccino for my Mum and one for himself. He handed Mum her coffee and sat on the side of the bed. “Aren’t you coming back to bed?” Mum asked. “No Betty, I’m a little worried. Tom is not in his bed and not in the house.” Mum shrugged it off. “He’s probably gone for a walk.”

“At six in the morning. It’s barely light out.”

“Did you look to see if he left a note?”

“No, I will go and check.” There was no note. I had planned on being back in bed long before dawn but here I was locked in a room with a bunch of children speaking a strange language.

By ten my parents were getting really worried. “Do you think that we should call the police?” Mum asked. “No,” Dad replied. “They won’t report a missing child until at least 24-hours have passed.” They decided to go looking for me instead. Alice wasn’t interested in helping. “I have almost finished my book and just getting to the best part,” she wailed, but Mum made her participate. Dad went off along the path that I usually took. Mum walked inland and Alice, with a lot of huffing and puffing, walked toward The Ship’s Arms.

She sat on the hill overlooking the pub and watched people coming and going. The chef was the first to arrive. Alice recognized him. Then a couple of waiters arrived. They had carpooled. She was just getting up to leave when she noticed something shiny in the grass. Alice kicked it with her foot. It was my thermos. She picked it up and ran back to the house. An hour later both my parents arrived at the same time. Alice showed them the thermos and told them where she had found it. Mum said, “That thermos was on the counter when we went to bed last night. I know that it was because I meant to wash it but forgot.”

At around 11 in the morning, well I wasn’t really sure what time it was because I was stuck in the dumpster but I knew that around 11 Mr. Wooton would be back for his barrels. I heard the door open and then I heard his voice.

“Werin ser zarokan. Ez hewce dikim ku hын vegerin bermolκn xwe.” I peeked out and saw the kids climb back into their barrels. Mr. Wooton placed the lids on them and he and his friend loaded the barrels into the windowless van. He closed the door. I listened carefully and there was no lock click. I heard the van drive off. I

waited a while until I was sure that the coast was clear and then slowly lifted the dumpster lid. The room was empty. I shimmied over the edge and dropped to the floor.

Mum, Dad and Alice were in The Ship's Arms asking if anyone had seen me. I didn't know this at the time. I opened the door. There was no one around and I bolted. I was over the hill and back at our cottage in no time. Then I remembered my thermos and was walking back toward The Ship's Arms when I saw my parents and Alice. "Where have you been?" Mum asked. "We've been looking for you," Dad said. Alice said, "see I told you he would come back." I was not sure what to say. I knew that they would be worried but I didn't want to tell them what I had seen. Not yet anyway.

"I was out for a walk," I lied. "I just went for a walk." Mum was so relieved to see me that she couldn't be mad. Dad was a little mad. "Next time leave us a note. We were worried." Alice said, "It's probably because he can't write."

I knew that we would be leaving Cornwall in less than a week and I knew that I had to say something to somebody but I didn't know who. I didn't want my parents to be mad at me for being out at night. I decided that I would tell Alice. I should have known better. She listened to my story and then said, "I'm telling Mum and Dad that you are a big fat liar."

My parents called a meeting. Dad started. "Tom," he said. "Alice said that you made up a big fanciful story about where you were the other morning. I am not sure why you would do that. You know that we have always trusted you so long as you tell the truth." I looked down at the ground and shifted from one foot to the other. Mum took me by the hand. "Tell us the truth Tommy. Where were you? And what's this about children in barrels?" I was painted into a corner so I told them. I told them about the first night I had gone out in the storm and watched Mr. Wootton

meet the boat from France. I told them that I had gone back for a few nights in a row and seen the same thing. Alice huffed at the thought. I told them that I had watched Mr. Wootton unload the barrels into a room on the side of his inn and I told them about the windowless van. Dad nodded. Mum sniffed. Alice huffed. I told them that I had hid in the dumpster and waited until Mr. Wootton came in the early morning with more barrels full of children. I told them that I was locked in the room with the children who spoke some funny language that I didn't understand. I told my parents everything. "I don't believe you," Dad said. Mum took my hand. "I believe you," she said. Alice said nothing.

"What are we going to do now?" Mum asked.

"I am going to go and have a word with Mr. Wootton," Dad said.

"I'm telling the truth," I said simply. "If you don't believe me then come with me tonight and I will show you." Dad nodded. "OK son," he said. "We can go together tonight."

I set my alarm for midnight. I also checked the Shipping Forecast. The BBC announcer was optimistic about the overnight conditions. "*Falmouth to Plymouth. Southeast by east. Barometer 1020 rising. Visibility good. Chance of patchy fog in some areas.*" I dozed for a while and must have fallen asleep because when the alarm went off I jumped. Dad was in the kitchen with Mum. Smokey was also there. They were drinking tea. "Here Tommy," she said. "Have a cuppa." I smiled to myself. Mum always sounded very British when we were in England but as soon as we got back to the States she went back to being American. "Thanks Mum," I said. Dad got his hat and coat.

"Let's go."

The moon was on the wane but it was still bright. The sky, cloudless with a million stars. Dad followed me to the edge

of the cliff where we could look down on the dock. It was all quiet. We sat for a while. Dad puffed on his pipe. Then we heard the sound of an engine. I knew that it was Mr. Wootton. Sure enough five minutes later there was a bright white light flashing some kind of signal and out of the dark came the French boat. They threw the dock lines and tied up alongside. It didn't take long for them to unload the barrels. Dad had tapped out his pipe on the ground and watched in silence. "Let's go," I said. "We need to get ahead of them so that we can watch them unload the barrels." Dad and I scurried back along the path and we were soon on the hill overlooking The Ship's Arms. In moments Mr. Wootton pulled up in his van. He and his friend started to unload the barrels into the side room. "Well I'll be damned," Dad said. "I'll be damned."

We went back to the house. Mum was waiting up for us. Dad told her what we had seen. "What are we going to do?" she asked.

"I don't know. I want to watch them load the barrels in the morning but for now I am going to try and get some sleep. Tom you get some rest." I was too excited to sleep. I listened to the Shipping Forecast. *"Thames, Dover, Wight. West or southwest five to seven. Occasionally gale eight. Showers. Thundery at first in Thames. Visibility good at first but then deteriorating."* I fell asleep and only woke when I heard Mum in the kitchen. "Come and sit Tommy," she said. I'm making crumpets for breakfast."

"Crumpets? Mum you mean pancakes right?" Mum giggled a little. She did that when she was tired. Dad was still in his pajamas. "You know Tom I have been thinking. If we can prove that there are children in those barrels we can go to the police and they will arrest Mr. Wootton." I looked at my Dad. "First," I said, "there are children in those barrels. I saw them with my very own eyes. They were small children. Small enough to fit into a barrel. They spoke a funny language. I don't think we need to go to the police

just yet. We need to follow the windowless van to see where the children are being taken." Mum nodded eagerly. "That's a good idea Tommy," she said. "Good thinking."

Later that morning the four of us lay in the grass on the top of the hill and watched the windowless van arrive at the side entrance to the pub. We watched Mr. Wootton and his friend load the barrels into the van. "Let's go," Dad said. We scampered down the path back to the house. The car was ready. We would sit off to the side of the road until the windowless van passed by. We hadn't been sitting for more than a few minutes when we saw the van. It was trundling along the narrow country road going quite slow. Once it got to the A390, the main road into Plymouth, it sped up. Dad was very clever about tailing the van. He never let it out of his sight but always tried to keep at least one car between us. We nearly lost them once we got into the thick traffic in Plymouth. After fifteen minutes or so the van pulled up to a warehouse. We parked just out of sight and Dad and I walked to a place where we could see them unload the barrels. Dad noted the address and we drove home back to St Just in Roseland. Dad was quiet on the drive. I think that he knew what we had just witnessed. I was too young to understand but Dad is an avid reader and he had a suspicion.

We went out that night again and saw Mr. Wootton guide the French boat alongside. We watched them unload the barrels through the side door and the following morning we watched the windowless van come and collect the goods. We followed the van a second time and it dropped the barrels off at the same warehouse. Dad had enough to go to the Police but first he wanted to see the children for himself.

Dad and I sat on the hill overlooking The Ship's Arms until we saw Mr. Wootton drive off at precisely 2:30 in the morning. It was another beautiful night. Dad scampered down the hill and

I watched him enter the building. There was nothing I could do but return to the house. Mum had the kettle on and we sat in silence drinking our tea. I barely slept. I was worried about my Dad. The Shipping Forecast had bad news for mariners off the coast of Scotland. *"Hebrides from the Isle of Mull to Dunvegan. Gale force 11 gusting 12. Sea state very rough. Visibility less than a hundred meters. Barometer 960. Dropping. Mariners should proceed with caution."*

Dad got locked in just as I had. The next morning Mum, Alice and I lay on the hill watching for the windowless van to arrive. At around 11-o'clock we saw it coming down the lane. The driver turned into the culvert and backed up to the side door. It didn't take long before they had loaded all the barrels and the van drove away. Mr. Wootton pulled the door closed and walked to the front of the pub. The three of us sat holding our collective breath. Fifteen minutes went by until we saw the door open, slightly at first, then all the way. Dad came out, quietly shutting the door behind him. He looked our way but I don't think that he could see us. When he did his face was somber.

"Let's go to the kitchen and talk" was all he said. Mum put the kettle on while Dad described what he had seen. It was pretty much what I had seen but Dad noticed one thing that I hadn't. The kids were all girls. Dad estimated that they ranged in age from 8 to 12, maybe 13. Dad was pretty sure that they were from Syria. Then Dad said to Mum, "Betty I know what's going on." Mum tilted her head. "I have done some reading on this. Those girls are being trafficked for sex. There has been some speculation in the Plymouth papers about a Gentleman's Club, and I use the word gentleman lightly. Some talk of a place in Plymouth where girls are first abused before they are sent to London where there is a much bigger operation." Dad took a sip of his tea. "I am going to the constabulary in St Mawes. Tom you can ride along."

I rode in silence beside my Dad. I could see his knuckles white on the steering wheel. The lady at the front desk was very polite and led us to a small room in the back. "Constable Crabtree will be with you in a moment," she said. We sat quietly until a very large man came into the room. "Constable Crabtree," he said extending his hand. I thought that he was going to crush my hand. "So what's this about then?" Dad explained everything while the police officer sat in silence taking notes. He took our phone number at the cottage and promised to call.

Dad sat anxiously by the phone waiting for it to ring. We were just about to sit down for tea when it rang. Dad answered. "Yes, yes," he said. "That won't be a problem. It's probably best if you come by the house around midnight. My wife will have the kettle on." He gave our address and then turned to us. Constable Crabtree is coming over tonight. He wants to witness the boat coming ashore and the transfer of barrels to The Ship's Arms. I didn't ask him," Dad said, "but Tom you are coming with us tonight.

Crabtree arrived promptly at midnight. He sat and enjoyed a cuppa and some biscuits that Mum had baked. Around one in the morning we set off. We were blessed once again with great weather. There was a high pressure system over southern England. I had listened to the Shipping Forecast and the BBC announcer gave a thumbs up, figuratively speaking of course, for the area between Plymouth and Falmouth. At around two we heard Mr. Wootton's truck coming down the lane to the dock. Moments later, out of a dark night a red light appeared followed by a green. The French boat was right on time. We watched them dock. We watched them offload the barrels and then load them onto the wagon and truck. We quickly scampered to the hill overlooking The Ship's Arms. My heart was pounding. I noticed that Constable Crabtree moved surprisingly quick for a man of his size. Right

on cue the truck pulled up to the side door and the barrels were offloaded. "OK," Crabtree said. "I guess I'm spending tomorrow night in a dumpster."

The raid came three days later. Dad had pushed back our return to the States. We were allowed to watch but only from a distance. Crabtree had five men with him. They had scoped out The King's Arms looking for places to hide. Crabtree had even gone to the pub in civilian clothing looking to get a bead on Mr. Wootton, and have a pint of course. By midnight his men were in place. Dad and I would join Constable Crabtree at the cliff edge waiting for the French boat. It arrived right on schedule and the transfer was made. We went back to the hill overlooking The Ship's Arms and waited for Mr. Wootton's truck. It showed up just as expected. Constable Crabtree waited until they had offloaded the barrels before he gave the signal. The five other cops emerged from their hiding places and stormed the inn. One of the cops was carrying a large spotlight which he shone directly into Mr. Wootton's eyes.

"Freeze and put your hands up," Crabtree yelled. Both men froze and raised their hands. Mr. Wootton's friend tried to make a run for it but he was quickly taken down and handcuffed. Crabtree radioed for a police van. He ordered Mr. Wootton to open the door. Dad and I crept closer. The door was ajar and we could see the girls sitting on the floor. We could almost smell their terror. Constable Crabtree shoved Mr. Wootton into the police van closely followed by his friend. He stayed with the girls while waiting for the child services to arrive. It was just getting light when they pulled up at the side door. The girls were loaded and the van drove off just as beautiful sunrise lit the eastern sky. Dad took my hand and squeezed it.

The same five cops were there when the windowless van arrived at eleven. They had not allowed Mr. Wootton to make

any phone calls. He had not been able to tip them off. They gave up easily as did the three people that managed the warehouse in Plymouth. Constable Crabtree told us later that there were around a hundred girls being warehoused there waiting to be transported to London. A select few were being used in a small brothel in Plymouth but the main goal was to get them to London as quickly as possible where the child sex trade was a booming business. Crabtree coordinated things with his counterpart in France and they were on hand to detain the French boat and arrest the sailors.

Dad and I watched from the cliff above.

Two days before we were due to fly back to the States we got a visit from Constable Crabtree. Mum put the kettle on. Crabtree outlined what the police had uncovered. Their investigation had led them to the child sex ring in London. They had arrested 20 people and taken over 300 children into child services. They were all from Syria. They had been promised a better life in England but they had all been forced into prostitution. Constable Crabtree leaned back in his seat. "And here is the kicker," he said. "The London police got hold of the computers that were being used to run the whole operation. They got the names and details of all the customers that frequented the child sex house and don't mind if I tell you that there are some pretty high up people in Tony Blair's government on that list. Plus, I'm sad to say, a number of prominent members of Her Majesty's Police Force."

Crabtree took me by the hand, his massive paw making my little hand look like it was from a doll. "This is all because of you little buddy," he said. "The police have been trying to crack this ring for more than three years. If you hadn't gone out onto the cliffs that night they would still be trying to figure it out. The boys down at the station want you and your family to come down tomorrow. They may have a little surprise for you." I looked at Dad and he nodded. That night I lay awake listening to the

Shipping Forecast. *"Biscay northwesterly five to seven but mostly four or five in south Biscay. Fair. Visibility good."* I faded before midnight and only woke when I heard Mum in the kitchen. "Rice Krispies for you this morning," she said. "We have to use up the last of the box. Alice wants crumpets so it's all yours."

Constable Crabtree had asked that we come to the station around noon. Mum, Dad, Alice and me climbed into the car and made the short trip to St Mawes. Crabtree was there to greet us. He led the way through the front of the station to a large room in the back. There must have been a dozen or so cops there and they gave me a standing ovation, well I guess it was for me and my Dad and probably my Mum too, but not my sister. They presented me with an authentic radio controlled police car and a gun belt, without the gun of course. Mum was beaming. Dad was smiling. Alice was pouting, but only a little so I knew that she was faking it.

We returned to Cornwall every summer. The Ship's Arms had been sold and the new owner knew the story. The cokes were free and on the house until I turned 18 and that was when he presented me with my first beer, well the first one that my parents knew about. I joined the army. I enlisted because I wanted to serve in Iraq.

The army was very strict about what personal gear we could bring along but by then I had an iPhone and had downloaded 50 hours of recorded Shipping Forecast's. Most nights after a brutal day patrolling the streets of Kabul, I would plug in my headphones, flick through my phone and tune in. *"Shannon. West backing southwest force five or six decreasing to three or four for a time. Rain later. Visibility good with occasional rain later. Barometer 2010. Rising."*

IPI NTOMBI

IPI WAS WALKING a slow, winding road in the foothills of the Drakensberg Mountains. He was herding a few scrawny goats, flicking a light willow stick and whistling commands. Sometimes, when the goats were not paying attention, he would make an urgent clicking sound and they would snap back in line. It was his job to take the goats to a grazing ground a couple of miles from where he lived in a stone hut with his Mom and younger sister. His Dad would join them on weekends, if the bus was not broken down which happened a lot. He worked as a gardener for a family in Howick and they had a small room where he could stay during the week. Of course the room was not in the house; white people would never want a black person living that close to them. His place was at the end of the garden attached to the garage.

Ipi would stay with the goats all day and then herd them back home just before it got dark. He was seven when I first met him. I was also seven. Our family took vacations in the Drakensberg Mountains. We had a small cottage and would spend most of our summers there, and, well not that unlike Ipi's situation, my Dad also had to work and would join us on weekends. He didn't have to worry about the bus though. He drove a brand new Valiant Charger. I watched Ipi and his goats pass our house in the morning and return in the evening. I usually hid so that he couldn't see me.

One morning I thought that I would follow him to see where he went during the day. My Mum didn't mind; she was usually

well into the wine starting right after breakfast and continuing throughout the day. Funny thing about my Mum. At sunset she would announce that it was time for a little sundowner. She thought that we didn't know that it was wine in her coffee cup, not coffee. As the sun slowly set in the east Mum would get out the silver tray, fill the glass ice bucket to the brim and pour herself a large brandy. She also liked classical music and would fire up the tape player. Mozart mostly. "Ah this is the life," she would slur. "I love living in Africa. Don't you kids agree?" We would dutifully nod our heads. It was the same ritual every day except when my Dad was there. She would white-knuckle it during the day and sit with Dad in the evening for sundowner's.

"Ah this is the life." She would toast my Dad and say, "I love living in Africa. Don't you kids agree?" We always agreed. We also loved living in Africa.

I followed Ipi a few times. I saw where he let his goats graze. He would lean against a rock and play some kind of game with sticks and stones. Around lunchtime Ipi would open a small pouch and eat something. He never seemed to have any water. I made sure that he never saw me spying on him, but one day he noticed me. He waved and smiled. I crouched behind the rock that was my cover and hid out of sight, at least I thought that I was out of sight. I was just about to scamper home when Ipi peeked over the rock. He smiled and his teeth were bright white against his dark skin. I thought that I might just make a run for it but Ipi spoke. "Sawubona mngani," he said in Zulu. "Hello friend." I had no idea what he was saying so I said nothing. Ipi smiled that brilliant smile again and beckoned me to follow him. We went back to his favorite rock and he patted the ground next to him. I sat. He pointed to himself and said, "Ipi." I had no clue what he was saying. He pointed to himself again and said, "Ipi." Then he pointed to me. I shook my head. I didn't understand. We

sat in silence for a while. Ipi played with his sticks and stones. I watched the goats graze. Then I figured it out. I pointed at my chest. "Me Jed." Ipi smiled. He pointed to himself and said, "Ipi." Then he pointed to me and said "Mejed." I shook my head and laughed and pointed to my chest and said, "Jed." Ipi flashed his brilliant smile and pointed to his chest. "Ipi." He then pointed to me and said, "Jed." I nodded. It was the start of a friendship that would last a lifetime.

For the rest of the summer I would join Ipi when he passed by our house. He would flash his brilliant smile and we would herd the goats in silence, except for Ipi whistling and sometimes making his clicking sounds. We didn't need a common language; we had an understanding and would spend the day playing with his sticks and stones and laughing and every now and then we chased each other around. On weekends my Dad would usually insist that we all go on a hike up into the mountains. I would rather have spent the day with Ipi, but my Dad insisted. "Summer is not going to last forever. Soon you are going to be back in school." My three brothers, my sister and I would groan. Just the thought of having to put on shoes and proper clothes was more than we could bear. At the end of that summer when I first met Ipi I would be going to a 'proper' school for the first time. I would be in Class 1 and would have to wear the school uniform. Ipi would not go to school for at least another year; he had his goats to take care of.

I couldn't wait for the school year to pass. I was anxious to get back to the Drakensberg to see my friend. Finally school ended and we moved into the cottage. Mum announced, "I think that I will have a drink to celebrate the start of our summer holiday." She poured herself a large brandy and sat in the shade of our prized Protea tree. The tree had just blossomed and looked beautiful. Mum said to me, "hey Jed did you know that the Protea

is the national flower of South Africa?" I shook my head. I had no idea what she was talking about.

"Well it is you know," she said.

I couldn't wait for the afternoon to pass so that I could see Ipi. I sat on the ground next to my Mum throwing stones at lizards that scuttled by. Then late in the day I saw goats coming our way and took off running. Ipi was not there. It was a little girl herding the goats and she looked nervous to see me. I followed her and after fifteen minutes or so we came to the small stone house where the girl lived. Ipi had once shown me where he lived and I recognized the place right away.

"Ipi?" I asked pointing to the house. "Ipi?" The girl shook her head. "Ipi no?" The girl shook her head and then ran into the house. Moments later she came out holding the hand of a tall woman. The girl pointed in my direction.

"Ipi?" I asked. The lady looked at me. "Ipi hospital," she said. "Ipi hospital." She pointed to where her appendix would be and repeated "Ipi hospital." I learned later that his appendix had burst. He had been with his goats when he felt a sharp pain. He tried to stand but the pain was intense and he was bent over. Luckily for him a farmer passing by noticed him on the ground and stopped to check on him. He carried Ipi to his truck and set him on the passenger seat. Ipi couldn't speak. He was just moaning. The farmer knew that it was an emergency and swung his truck around heading toward the clinic which was ten miles down the road. There was a long line of people waiting to be seen but the farmer knew the woman that ran the place and she took Ipi in right away. She suspected that it was a burst appendix and said that if Ipi didn't get operated on soon he could possibly die. The only place for an operation was the hospital in Underberg, 20 miles away. Ipi was moaning in pain. The nurse gave him a sedative and the farmer piled him

back in the truck. The nurse called ahead and they admitted him right away.

For the first half of our summer holiday I sat glumly tossing stones at lizards. My Mum kept her usual routine topping up her coffee cup waiting for the sun to set so that she could have a real drink. My Dad's business was bidding on a big construction project and he told Mum that he would stay at the house in Durban and work through the weekends. He would be too busy to join us for a while.

Then one morning there was a call from the road. It was Ipi on his way home from hospital. He was sitting up front with his Dad. They were in a borrowed pick-up. Ipi was beaming his wide smile. I had forgotten how white his teeth were. His Dad spoke some English. "Oh, so you Ipi friend? He talk about you all the time. He was very sick and nearly died but now he strong boy and now all fixed up. Like car with new engine. Like race car. Tomorrow he starts with goats again." I was so happy and ran to tell my Mum but she was passed out under the Protea tree, her head flopped to the side, coffee mug still in hand.

I waited anxiously the next morning and soon saw Ipi and his herd. I joined them and we walked to the grazing area, neither of us having anything to say, both of us having everything to say. Ipi was beaming. Once he let the goats go he pulled up his shirt and showed me the scar. He was really proud of it. I decided that we should put our time together to good use and I started to learn Zulu and he started to learn English. We began with the easy ones. Tree:umuthi. Goat:imbuzi. Rock:idwala. By the end of the summer we each had a 100 word vocabulary. Ipi would be going off to school for the first time and I would be going into Class 2.

Dad had stayed away for a month and when he came back I could tell that something was different. Mum looked sad and was starting her sundowners mid-afternoon when the sun was

still high in the sky. Most nights she would pass out in her chair with a book in one hand and a glass of brandy in the other. We packed up the cottage, I said goodbye to Ipi and we drove home. Only this time my Dad didn't stay. He sat us kids down and told us about his new 'girlfriend'. "Your Mum and me are going to live apart for a while," he said. I knew then, even at the age of eight, that my Dad had not been bidding on a big construction project on the weekends when he could have joined us in the mountains.

For the next few years Mum took us on holiday in the Drakensberg. She no longer had to white-knuckle it on weekends and spent most of the summer in a drunken haze. Ipi had learned English and I had learned some Zulu from our maid. Our maid, by the way, had a boyfriend whose name was Tap Tap Makhatini. A very famous boxer. Google him.

We were almost teenagers when Ipi told me, "I am going to become a surgeon like the man who saved my life." I still had no idea what I was going to do with my life so didn't answer. Ipi's sister had taken over the goats but after a while they sold the herd. They did keep one goat and the year Ipi and I turned 13 they slaughtered it and we had a big party. We all went, my Mum, my sister and my three brothers. Mum got really drunk and Ipi's Dad had to drive us all back home.

We were packing the cottage up to leave when Mum called a family meeting. "Take a last look around kids. This is going to be our last holiday here. We have to sell the cottage." She had waited until the end of our holiday to tell us, I guess so that the news wouldn't ruin things. Little did she know how the news would change the rest of my life.

"I won't be able to see Ipi," I wailed.

"Jed you can write to Ipi," Mum said. "They have a mailbox just down the street from the schoolhouse."

"But what about in the summer when he's not at school?"

"We can figure it out," Mum said. "Now kids get in the car. We have to leave." I had already said goodbye to Ipi but I didn't know then that it was to be the last time for a long time.

I got a letter from Ipi on my 18th birthday. He had enclosed a card. The letter had great news; he had been accepted to St. George's University of London on a full scholarship. South Africa, under Nelson Mandela had worked out an agreement with a number of Colleges and Universities around the world to set up scholarship programs for kids from the rural areas. Where Ipi lived was definitely rural; they still had no running water, no electricity and no telephone. His house was on the 'other' side of the street where black people lived. On our side, where black people were not allowed to live, we had indoor plumbing and electricity.

My oldest brother had just passed his driving test and had bought an old beat-up VW beetle with a sunroof that leaked. I persuaded him to drive me back to the Drakensberg. I wanted to see Ipi before he left for England. It was a somber drive. Neither of us wanted to see the cottage again. There were so many memories. Mum had been unfit to drive for the past few years and Dad was always away on some business trip. They were still married but Dad was living with his girlfriend. We rarely saw him and he was not interested in going back to the mountains. He had moved on.

We turned off the main road onto a dirt road that would take us up to Ipi's home. Two miles along we passed a small boy herding goats. I felt a prickle in the back of my eyes. I was anxious to see Ipi but also filled with trepidation. What if it would be the last time that I would ever see him? I also wondered if he was even going to be there. There had been no way to contact him. By the time a letter got to him he might already be in London. We

passed the place where Ipi used to graze his goats and then we passed the cottage. It looked the same. There were some young kids playing under the Protea tree. They reminded me of me. I pretended to look out of the window so that my brother could not see me cry, but when I looked back I saw that he was also crying. Further up the road was Ipi's family home. They had added to it. The place looked deserted. I looked at my brother. "What do you think? Should I go and knock on the door?" He nodded. I opened the gate and walked slowly to the door. I felt like I was trespassing. I knocked. There was no reply. I knocked again. Nothing. I peered through the tiny window. Someone was still living there but there was no sign of anyone.

We sat in the sun gazing at the beautiful mountains. After an hour my brother said, "you wait here. I am going for a drive." I knew that he was probably going off to smoke a joint. I sat on a rock and waited. Some farmers drove by in their pick-up trucks kicking up red dust which settled on everything. Then a car pulled up and stopped. The windscreen was caked with dust so I couldn't see who was inside until I saw a flash of white. It was Ipi. He still had that brilliant white smile. I felt tears well up again. Ipi had to be at least six feet tall. He ran from the car and hugged me. Neither of us could speak. He held me for a long time and when he let me go I could see that he had also been crying. He wiped a tear and said simply, "thank you for coming. This means the world to me. Did you get my letter and card?" I nodded, still unable to speak.

"My manners," Ipi said. "I need to introduce you to my friend and mentor. This is Puck Healey. He's the farmer who drove me to the hospital when my appendix burst." I took his hand. It was hard and calloused. "We have been in touch ever since. Puck has a farm about five miles up the road from here." Just then my brother came back. Ipi invited us in. We sat on a log in the

front yard. Ipi went into the house and came back with some warm lemonade. "Sorry that it's not cold," he said. "We have been trying to get the electric company to string some wires on our side of the road but so far nothing." I felt a twinge of guilt. Ipi laughed, flashing his electric smile. "Puck here was the one who encouraged me to apply for the scholarship. I didn't think that I would get it but a month or so ago I got a visit from my high school teacher. She told me that she had received a call and that I had qualified. I told Puck and he immediately offered to pay for my airfare. This whole thing is a miracle."

"When do you leave?" I asked.

"Tomorrow morning. Puck and me were coming here to pick up some extra clothes. My Mom got a job cleaning houses in Underberg so it's just my sister and me these days. After tomorrow it's going to be my sister all alone." My brother said, "Jed we need to get going. It's getting late." I knew that it was coming and dreaded his words. I shook Puck's hand and embraced Ipi. "This is only a goodbye," he said. "It's not a forever." I turned quickly. I didn't want anyone to see me crying. We left, driving slowly along the dirt road. The lights in the cottage were on and it looked cozy. There was a kid staring out of the window as we drove by.

Ipi and I talked often. Phone calls between London and South Africa were expensive so we kept them short. He was a top student and had chosen trauma surgery as his major. My parents finally got divorced and my dad married his girlfriend. She gave him a girl and she gave me a little sister. I was no longer the youngest member of the family.

I had been working for a construction company in Durban. We were building luxury houses along the coast, places that only the very rich could afford. One day my boss called me in and told me that he was leaving and that he would recommend to the

board that I take over running the company. To be honest I was stunned. I had worked hard and knew what I was doing but I was only 25. "I think that you are the one to take this business to the next level," my boss said and a week later it was formalized. I was the CEO of one of the most prestigious building companies in Natal.

I was extremely busy, as was Ipi, and we seldom called until one day I realized that it had been almost a year since we had last spoken. I tried to call him but the number just rang out and then a week later it went dead. My cell phone had ended up in a concrete mixer and I had not backed anything up. I got a new phone which came with a new number. My connection with Ipi was finally broken. I knew that I would never see him again. I was OK with it. I still had my memories but I missed my friend with his flashing white teeth and ready smile.

Mum died suddenly. She had given up drinking wine during the day and was sticking only with brandy; straight up; no ice. She didn't want anything to dilute the effect. She had been living alone when she fell down the stairs. I had been trying to get her to wear a life alert system but she just waved me off. "This is Africa," she said. "We don't need that bloody crap here. We have each other." She had a system going with her neighbor across the way. They both had curtains in their kitchen windows. Mum explained the system to me. "First thing I do when I get up in the morning is I open the curtains. Same with Mavis. If either of us haven't opened the curtains by lunchtime then the other would go and investigate." Mavis found my Mum on the floor with her head cracked open, a bottle of brandy in her hand and a smashed glass on the floor.

At Mum's funeral Dad pulled me aside. "I heard that the old cottage is on the market. A friend of mine from work was driving up that way and saw a For Sale sign. You have the money." He

left it there dangling in the breeze. I was too upset to think but told my girlfriend Sara what my Dad had said and two days later she took my hand. "We need to go to the Drakensberg. Take a day off work. I will come with you." I knew that she was right.

The cottage was empty. We walked around and looked in the windows. It was a lot smaller than I remembered. The only thing that was bigger was the Protea tree. It must have doubled in size. I started to get a prickle behind my eyes when I remembered Mum enjoying its shade.

We had to drive back into town to get cell service. I called the real estate agent and she agreed to meet the following morning at 10. I made a cash offer and a month later the deal closed. I had tried to explain to Sara about the memories that the place held. She had tried to understand but memories from your childhood are imprinted on your heart and my heart was full. Sara would never truly understand.

After meeting with the Agent we had driven to Ipi's house but there was a new family living there and they had no idea where Ipi's family had gone. I also took Sara to the field where Ipi used to graze his goats. The rock we leant against was still there; the only thing different was a large housing development that had been built a quarter mile away. I knew that it wouldn't be long before some developer bought the field and built houses on it. I hated the idea but then that was precisely what I was doing for a living.

Sara was a writer and loved to spend time in the cottage. When she was on a book project she would spend weeks at the cottage. Some weekends she would come to Durban to visit; other weekends I would drive up into the mountains. The only way for her to reach me was to drive into town where they had cell service. I had added a fireplace. As kids we had only been there in the summer. I had no idea how cold it got in the winter but we found out our first winter there. One night snow came

pelting down and we woke to a freezing cold winter wonderland. I stoked the fire and made Irish Coffee's for breakfast.

On one visit I had just turned off the main road onto the dirt road when I saw a little boy herding goats. I slowed so that he could shoo his goats to the side. As I passed by I noticed that the boy had a cell phone glued to his ear. He kept talking and waved. I smiled. I wondered what would Ipi make of this?

My company was doing a big development in Umhlanga Rocks, a trendy town just north of Durban and I had been working long hours. I wanted to see Sara and against my better judgment, I decided to drive up on a Friday evening. I could have gone on Saturday but that would have meant spending less time with her. I left the office late and it was almost midnight when I approached Underberg. The turnoff to the dirt road was 10 miles on the other side of Underberg and I was more than ready to get to the cottage. I had been playing music really loud and sticking my head out the window trying to stay awake, but it wasn't helping. I thought about stopping for a quick nap but I was close so pressed on.

The truck coming toward me had his lights on bright. I flashed mine at the driver to let him know, but he just kept barreling my way. I squinted to see what was going on and when I realized that the truck was in the middle of the road it was too late. I swerved to miss but the road had no shoulder and as soon as my front wheel hit the gravel the car started to flip. I could feel that we were airborne and then we hit. I learned later that I had crashed into the only tree for miles. I went through the windshield and glanced off the tree, landing on a fence post. I don't remember anything of it but that's the scenario that the police wrote up in their accident report.

There was a small hospital in Underberg. The car driving behind me called emergency services and within ten minutes I was

strapped down in an ambulance speeding toward the hospital. I was losing blood as fast as they could pump it in. I don't have any memory of this. I sort of remember some commotion and bright lights but mercifully not much. Luckily there was an available operating room. Sara told me later that I was in there for 15 hours according to one of the nurses. I had broken a leg, my collarbone, punctured a lung and had some deep lacerations on my chest where the fence post had taken its toll. Luckily, and probably miraculously, no head injuries.

They kept me sedated for three days. I could hear the nurses come and go and I could almost tell night from day; it got quieter at night, but that was about it. Then one of the nurses shook me gently. "Jed we are going to bring you back. Things are going to look a little strange at first as the drugs wear off but within an hour you should be able to see us." I tried to nod but I'm not sure how well I did. Everything was a blur but it slowly started to get better. I could see the nurses but they were upside down walking on the ceiling. A while later they were right side up walking on the floor and my eyesight started to clear.

"Jed can you see me?" I heard a voice ask. "Nod if you can see me." I nodded. She held up three fingers. "How many fingers can you see Jed?" I squinted and said, "three."

"Okay this is great news. Just take it slow. The surgeon will be in to see you shortly." I looked around my hospital room. I could see another patient in the bed next to me. His leg was in a sling and he was farting every minute or so, that much I do remember but I was tired and closed my eyes. I felt a warm hand on my shoulder.

"Jed I need you to wake up," a deep voice said. The voice sounded vaguely familiar. It must have been the drugs. "Jed open your eyes," the voice said. I opened one eye and tried to focus. I opened the other eye and saw a black face close to mine. The

man smiled. His teeth were bright white. He stepped back so I could read his name badge. It read Dr. Ipi Ntombi.

GINA

I WAS ASKED TO CREW on a boat sailing in a regatta in Italy. I was new to sailing but they needed someone with broad shoulders and an open mind. I guess I had a big smile and an easy laugh although I never thought of myself that way. The Captain, Mr. Keyworth, told me that we were up against the big guns. Mr. Kilroy had brought his brand new Kiaola IV and had flown in his A-team. The legendary Woodie Carr was among them. Bob Bell had Condor there. The boat was a plywood build but had upwind speed like you couldn't believe. Bell had once driven a taxi in London but made his fortune when he went back to Australia. The Swedes were there in the recently refit Midnight Sun. It had a brand new paint job which looked like a Gay Pride flag even though I'm sure that was not their intent. Their crew were tall and blond and very muscular and looked like they meant business but they were quite far back in the overall standings. Sardinia was the last regatta in the series and would decide the Maxi World Championship. We were in second place behind Kialoa IV.

Our boat was designed by a naval architect out of Rhode Island. He had come up through the ranks, first working as an apprentice at the prestigious New York design firm, Sparkman and Stephens, and later opened his own studio. He once told me, "the secret to fast boats is to make sure that they are beautiful boats," and Nirvana was by any measure, a beautiful boat.

I walked the docks feeling important. This was way above my pay grade, which by the way was nothing except room and board

and a T-shirt that read “We Are The Champions.” Freddy Mercury and Queen had just played Live Aid in London and the owner of the boat, Mr. Green had gone to the concert. I guess that he was inspired.

I was at the end of the pier in front of the Yacht Club Costa Smeralda when I saw this funky looking boat sail into the harbor. A small crowd gathered. There was a lot of commotion. Yacht club employees were all scuttling around in their whites and baseball caps. One took the lines and the boat pulled alongside. I saw a small man directing things. He had a shock of white hair and was clearly in charge. I was hanging back trying to figure out how I even got to be there when the crowd parted. A tall man was heading for the boat. “It’s Ted Turner,” someone whispered. “And I think that’s Jacques Cousteau on board.” It was Cousteau and it was Turner and they embraced. There was a brief press conference at the yacht club. Ted Turner had sponsored a new green energy initiative and the salty old Cousteau had stopped by to show it off. It was heady stuff for a 21 year old from a small town in South Africa.

Mr. Keyworth came by. “Aren’t you supposed to be in the gym. You are not here for your good looks you know. We need you to be ready tomorrow. The forecast is for 20 plus. The wind on the back side of the island can gust 30 plus. You are going to be working those grinders until you bleed.” I left quickly and headed to the gym at the club. Most of the other crews were already there. They had missed the Turner Cousteau press conference but I am sure that half of them would have no clue who either man was. I did. I fancied myself as an environmentalist.

The first race was at 10 sharp. We got a clean start and headed to the right hand side of the course. Keyworth saw a dark spot on the water and we headed for it. It was a right-hand shift and we rounded the top mark well ahead of Condor. Kialoa IV had some

sail problems and they were near the back of the fleet. Our brand new white and green spinnaker went up and we pulled further ahead. We won the race by a decent margin. Number one was in the books.

That night there was a formal reception at the yacht club. His Highness, the Aga Khan was there to welcome us, a scruffy bunch of globe trotting sailors. I listened to his speech doubting much of what he said all the while angling closer to the buffet table. That was when I saw her. She was older, as in like maybe 50 or so but I learned later that she was actually pushing 70. She had her hair loose, her jeans extremely tight and a smile that lit up the room. She was leaning heavily on the Aga Khan and hanging onto his every word but I could tell that she was surveying the room looking for a better opportunity.

I am most definitely an introvert. I was in good shape but no catch for someone who looked like she just might be a goddess. I was getting ready to leave to go back to the boat and sleep when I tasted a light smell of rosemary. There was a tap on my shoulder and I turned. It was her. She had the end of a cigarette in her mouth but wasn’t inhaling. “Non partire cosm presto,” she said, “Don’t leave so soon.” She had a glass of pink Prosecco in her hand and she took a long sip. “I only just got here and the night is still young.”

Now, I am a country boy from South Africa and I am a bit naive, but I am no fool so I leaned in closer to smell her. It was definitely rosemary despite the acrid smell of her cigarette. She said, “my name is Gina.”

I said, “Jannie, as in Jannie from South Africa.” She smiled. “I have never had a South African.”

I dumbly said, “well we taste quite good.” I felt really stupid moments after the words left my lips.

"Well, you might be the first one." I took a sip of my beer and tried to say something but nothing came out.

"Are you going to the pig roast tomorrow? My friend owns the farm. She has been fattening up the pig for the last two months. You should come."

"I will," I said, a little too quickly. I thought that the pig roast was for skippers and navigators only but when I got back to the boat Keyworth and some of the crew were sitting in the cockpit and he told me that it was open to everyone.

We lost the next day to Midnight Sun which was a bit of a disappointment. We had dominated the start and the first leg to the windward mark, but Keyworth wasn't on his game and we got into a little scuffle with one of the other boats and before we knew it Midnight Sun had taken the lead and we were in fourth place. Our nemesis, Kialoa IV was in second. It was a best of six series and if I am to be perfectly honest, I kind of blamed our bad result on Keyworth but it may have been my fault.

I had Gina on my mind.

The crew bus picked us up at six. We were told that the dress code was casual which suited me. Ha ha, pun intended. I have never owned a suit in my life. The pig roast was at a farm that overlooked the Mediterranean. I knew as soon as we pulled up that it was quite special. There was a long winding driveway that led to a house, not quite the size of Downton Abbey, but not far off. The other teams were there, most of them in their crew uniforms. Keyworth had told us to dress casually and we did, including Marvin, the owner, but I think the other teams all dressed up was a bit of an intimidation tactic on their part.

The spread was magnificent. I am a big fan of cheese; the smellier, the better, but I soon discovered that I was in for a bit of a challenge. The cheese table was laid out with just about every

kind of cheese one could wish for, but front and center was a putrid looking mess of something that resembled a bucketful of puss. I learned later that it's called Casu Martzu which literally translates to rotten cheese. It's a traditional Sardinian sheep milk cheese that contains live maggots. Keyworth and some of the other crew egged me on to try it and since I was essentially the new nipper on the boat I felt obliged to try it.

There were some plain crackers in a bowl alongside the Casu Martzu. I figured out quickly that there was no need for flavored crackers. Any flavor would be overwhelmed by the star of the show. Keyworth said, "Get in there Mugsy. It looks delicious." I looked closely and couldn't see any maggots. Some of the other guests, they all looked Italian, were digging in. I reached for a cracker. Keyworth said, "no crackers. Straight up." I put the cracker down and found a spoon. The rest of the crew had gathered to watch the green South African eat maggots. I couldn't see anything wriggling. I scooped a bit but Keyworth said, "Not enough."

I scooped a full teaspoon and decided to just go for it. It was surprisingly good. A bit rancid but I never shy away from rancid. It was nice and creamy and I thought that I would feel the maggots as they went down, but nothing. Then she was beside me. I hadn't noticed her even though I was looking.

"You know that cheese is an aphrodisiac," she said. That's why Italians have so many children. They blame it on the Catholic Church but it's this cheese. I was sure that my breath smelled terrible. The Nirvana crew melted into the background. I think that I heard Keyworth say, "good luck Mugsy" but it might have just been my imagination.

She said, "I am here with the Aga Khan but will be free later. He uses me as eye candy. Makes him feel important. I will come looking for you. Good job on the cheese. Most non-Italians won't

touch it." With that she was gone. Woodie, the tactician on Kialoa IV came over. "Do you know who that is?" he asked.

"No and please don't tell me." He told me anyway. "It's Gina Lollobrigida, you know, the actress." I had never heard of her. "Good luck," Woodie said. "You are going to need it." I took another spoonful of cheese and it was really good in a smelly, pungent, foul, disgusting sort of way.

There was some Italian pop band in the yard and they started playing. They were not very good. I walked to the edge of the garden and sat on a bench overlooking the ocean. I could sense her long before she sat next to me. "Sembri cosm solo," she said. "Sorry I forgot that you don't speak Italian. You look so lonely."

"I'm OK," I said nervously. "Sometimes I just like being by myself." I could smell the rosemary again. It hit me pretty hard. As I said before, I may be a South African farm boy but I was picking up her drift. She reached into her jacket and pulled out a box with a colorful design. "Do you smoke?" she asked. She opened the box and there were some very slim smokes packed neatly inside.

"I'm OK," I said. "I don't smoke." She lit the cigarette and said, "I have to go. Hussy will be looking for me. He's so insecure. You would think for a man of his stature that he would be more sure of himself. I will find you later Darling," she said. I swallowed hard and said, "I will be here."

The sunset was spectacular. I stayed on the bench frozen with my thoughts. I knew that she would find me and she did. She looked amazing. "Come with me," she said, taking my arm. "I will introduce you to the Aga Khan." I felt my heart sink. Meeting the big man was the last thing that I needed, but I went along anyway. The Aga Khan was surrounded by people but Gina pushed her

way to the front. "Hussey," she said. "I want you to meet my good friend." She turned to me. "I don't even know your name."

"It's Sam," I said, "but most of my friends call me Mugsy."

"Hussey, this is Mugsy, my friend." The Aga Khan took my hand and used the kind of magic that all good politicians have. He looked me squarely in the eye as if I was the most important person in his life and said, "Welcome to Sardinia where we have the best food in the world and the most beautiful women in the world."

"You do have good cheese, that's for sure."

Gina stepped in. "He had the Casu Martzu. And loved it." The Aga Khan looked at me. "Now I have respect for you. You have to be Italian to like that cheese. Personally I don't like it but I know many who do. Don't tell anyone." The people around him all laughed. "You know that it's an aphrodisiac." Everyone laughed again. Gina took my arm. "I will get Hussey to bed and then I will come looking for you." There was nothing I could say so I just nodded. I went back to the bench. The tide must have come in because I could hear the ocean crashing on the rocks below. Keyworth came and sat beside me

"Woodie told me that you had a crush." I didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say so I said, "I don't even know who she is." Keyworth laughed. "She's only one of the most famous actresses in the world. Did you ever watch Hotel Paradisio? She was more than a little smoking hot in that movie."

"Never heard of it," I said. "it's probably better that I don't know."

"The bus is leaving in a half hour. Tomorrow is a lay day, no racing, but I expect you in the gym by 11 at the latest." Keyworth left and less than a minute later Gina sat down next to me. "I heard what your friend said. Let the bus go. You are coming with

me tonight. I will make sure that you are at the gym by 11 but I am not sure if you will have any energy left to lift the weights.”

I let the bus leave without me. To be perfectly honest I was terrified. I had no idea what to expect and it was a long walk back to the boat and frankly I had no idea where I was let alone where the marina was.

The Aga Khan left with great fanfare. The Italian pop band played some kind of rousing music and he was ushered into his limo. Moments later I smelled cigarettes and rosemary and sure enough Gina was back at my side. “I have asked my driver to be here in 15 minutes. My villa is not far.” I swallowed hard. I still had no idea who she was but I knew that I was in a heap of trouble and it was the kind of trouble that I liked.”

Her ‘villa’ was more of a mansion and it was set on the side of a cliff overlooking the ocean. There were spotlights strategically placed to highlight the cliff face and the crashing ocean below.

“Can I offer you a limoncello Darling,” she asked. “I like the fruity lemon taste. It always gives me energy. I might need some extra energy tonight judging by your shoulders. You look quite fit.” I said that I would take a limoncello. Now, and I am being perfectly honest with you here, I have only had sex, made love or whatever you call it, with one person. It was with my high school sweetheart. I was not what one might call a ladies man. Not even close. There had been one other time in the backseat of limo in Qatar. We were racing a regatta there. It was more of a fumble in the dark than sex.

Gina returned with two ice encrusted glasses. “For you,” she said, handing me a glass. She had taken off her formal clothes and was in a light pink slip. “If you don’t smoke I won’t smoke,” she said. Then added “follow me.”

We walked through the grand entrance hall, through what

looked like some un-lived in living room to the french doors overlooking a spectacular fountain. Truthfully, in my 21 years of existence I had not seen anything quite so spectacular. The yard looked like it had been lit by some movie set designer. Gina took me by the hand. “Let’s swim,” she said. She dropped the pink slip and walked toward the fountain. Now I am not an expert and the boys on Nirvana made fun of me later, but her ass did not look like a 70 year old ass. I fumbled with my pants feeling more than a little awkward and followed her in.

“So you are from South Africa then?” I felt a little more secure with the cover of water. I did notice that her breasts floated and tried to look away but I knew that the game was up. Gina leant in and kissed me long and hard and square on the mouth. She downed her limoncello and said, “I will go and get us another.” I think now looking back on it that she had her light person do it just right so that when she walked toward the house she was lit so perfectly that her naked body looked like she might have been thirty or so.

You know where this story is going, don’t you? We finished the bottle of limoncello and most of the next one and ended up in her bedroom. This is where the smell of rosemary came in. She must have had some kind of obsession with rosemary. Her room was full of rosemary plants and when she opened the window that overlooked the ocean, there was a strong scent of rosemary and salt. “Come to bed,” she said. I don’t know a good way to say this but let me at least say that Gina Lollobrigida was quite possibly the best fuck I have ever had. I write this now as a fifty year old married man with three children, but I digress.

Gina had her driver take me back to the Yacht Club Costa Smeralda in time to make the gym. I could barely walk, let alone push weights. At noon Keyworth came in for a pep talk.

“Ok guys,” he said. “We have two more races. Kialoa is ahead by three points. We can still win the series. If we win tomorrow,

which should not be that hard, we need to win again on Thursday. I have checked out the course they are going to set. The wind will be from the south with a lot of upwind work. This will favor Condor but I heard from Woodie, who heard from one of the guys on Condor who had had a bit too much to drink at the pig roast the other night, that their hydraulic system is not working properly and they can't get anyone in to fix it. Without hydraulics their rig won't be tensioned enough and their upwind speed will be compromised. So here's the thing, we need to put at least one boat between us and Kialoa IV. It's not going to be easy. Those guys are very tough competitors."

We nodded. I felt like crap. It was probably the limoncello or it might have been the fact that I fell asleep long after the sun was up.

Keyworth continued, "now Marvin may or may not have offered the owner of Midnight Sun a little incentive to throw the race if need be, but let's just keep that between us." I was starting to learn how business was done.

The next day I felt a lot better. We motored out to the start. We had to win this one. The wind was light and shifty. Marvin was at the wheel; Keyworth calling tactics. I could sense that they were nervous. We were late for the start but only by a few boat lengths. Kialoa IV hit it just right. Jim Kilroy was looking very dapper and very confident. He had campaigned a series of boats named Kialoa and brought his analytical mind as an engineer to the game. Marvin was sucking down Tab, his favored beverage. I wished that he would put it down and concentrate. Then we got lucky. Keyworth took credit for it but I say that it was mostly luck. There was a cloud over the island and it was moving our way. I saw it and nodded to Keyworth. He saw it. "Marvin, we need to keep going to the right hand side of the course. Just keep going until I tell you to tack."

It looked like a foolish thing to do. The rest of the fleet was heading offshore. Kialoa IV had a sizable lead but there was not much wind on their side of the course. Our cloud was getting closer. I was on the grinders with not much to do. We were also in light winds. Keyworth spotted the dark spot on the water and said, "OK guys get ready." It didn't take long, maybe a few minutes or even less. The cloud was overhead and we started moving fast. Marvin was grinning. We hit the shift and that was the end of it. We won by almost a quarter of a mile. Kialoa IV was second. We were still two points down.

There was a fancy gig at the Yacht Club. Gina was there but she didn't acknowledge me. I saw her chatting with Woodie. Every now and then she touched his arm. I must admit feeling a little jealous. The club was turning it on with an endless champagne bar and a chocolate fountain. Keyworth came over, "Mugsy," he said. "I need you in good shape tomorrow. I talked with Marvin. He talked with Lars, you know, the owner of Midnight Sun. They will throw the race if it comes to that. I barely heard a word he said. Gina had Woodie by the arm and was steering him toward the buffet table.

She did stop by on her way out. "I think that you will win," she said. Nothing more. I saw her and Woodie getting into her limo. Keyworth noticed it as well. "She just might be our secret weapon," he said. I wondered if he knew something that I didn't.

The wind was from the south. I saw Woodie hanging onto the backstay. He was calling tactics. From my vantage he didn't look that good. The sea was building and even though Woodie is a black guy he was starting to look a little green.

Keyworth called the start. We were clean but a little off the pace. Kialoa was at the leeward end. Kilroy, of course, got the best start. They were heading for a dark patch of water where there would be more wind. Condor was right on their hip. Marvin

was sucking down Tabs like no man's business. We were off in a tight battle for the series. Crunch time.

The dark patch didn't work out for Kialoa IV. It was all puff and no breeze. We crossed just behind them. I was probably the only one that noticed but Woodie was not looking well. We were third at the top mark. Condor led, Midnight Sun very close behind with Kialoa IV right behind us. The downwind run towards Corsica was tricky. The wind was puffing pretty hard and we were holding on tight. Marvin gave up the helm to Keyworth and we started to make progress on Condor. I was working the grinders but I had two bits of information that I was sure would serve us well once we got around the mark. Condor had backstay problems and Woodie on Kialoa IV was shagged out; literally. I knew the feeling. We rounded the mark off Bonifacio. Condor had the lead. Kialoa IV picked up some lucky breeze and pulled into second place. Midnight Sun was in third. The rest of the fleet was way behind.

We expected Condor, well let me change that, everyone expected Condor to dominate going back upwind but most of our crew knew about their hydraulics problem. They looked good at first but then I could see that their speed was not what it should be. Kialoa IV moved into the lead, Condor second. Midnight Sun was in third, we were just hanging onto fourth. There was a team from the Czech Republic that was hunting us and we were feeling the pressure.

I was thinking of Gina.

When I left her place in the limo she had kissed me hard. "Eri el migloiri. You were the best," she said. "I will take care of things." I wasn't sure what she meant.

The forestay on Cndor let go. The crew had been trying to fix the hydraulics and pumped too hard and the pin at the base

of the forestay bent and then slipped out and the top of their mast buckled. They were out of the game. With Keyworth at the helm we started to catch Kialoa IV. We were close to Midnight Sun. Then we got some extra wind and we passed them. It was just Kialoa IV and us but we needed to get a boat between us to win the series. The wind was really starting to gust and the sea between Sardinia and Corsica built. We were hanging right off Kialoa IV's hip when I saw Woodie head for the leeward rail. He was throwing up. Too much limoncello. I smiled to myself.

The Swedes on Midnight Sun came in for the kill but we got there first. I saw Jim Kilroy look over his shoulder as we also came in for the kill. It was going to be close. As we got into the lee of Sardinia the wind lightened a little and Kialoa IV pulled ahead. They changed out Woodie as tactician but it was too late. We had found a left hand shift and so had Midnight Sun. The gun went off. We had won but it was all about second and third place. Midnight Sun had the best position for the run into the finish but they screwed up their tack. Kilroy was in Kilroy mode. He wanted to take them out, kill them if you will, but it didn't happen. Lars was driving and he drove right over Jim Kilroy. The gun went off and we had won. Not just the race but the Series and the Championship.

That night was a big affair. Gina was there. So was with the Aga Khan. He was there to hand out the prizes. Actually the prizes were quite good. There was a crystal bowl, a check for a hundred grand even though the money didn't mean much to the billionaire yacht owners, and a new sail sponsored by some obscure company named Great Circle Sails.

I smelled rosemary. She said, "you can thank me now or you can thank me later." I turned. It was Gina.

"What do you mean?" I asked. Gina looked me squarely in the eye and said, "I fucked Woodie so long and hard last night

that I knew that he would barely be capable of walking let alone winning any race. I wanted you to win.” She smiled, just a little, and then said, “tonight you will pay me back. My limo will be here at ten. The limoncello is already on ice.”

MR. SMITH

MY PARENTS were obsessed with the Obama’s. My Dad was a Precinct Captain in our small hometown in Ohio and worked tirelessly to get Barack elected. Obama won the district by a large margin; both times. It was near the end of his second term that my Dad announced that we would be getting a dog, a Portuguese water dog, the same breed as the one enjoying all the privileges of the White House. I was thrilled. I had been bugging my parents about getting a dog and now that day had arrived.

We picked him up from a breeder in Cincinnati. The moment I set eyes on him I knew that his name would be Barack. Dad agreed and we took Barack home with us. At first he was a bit skittish but the trainer had warned us ahead of time. “Just be calm and he will soon calm down. Don’t get into any family fights. That will upset him.” I snorted. My parents never fought. I always thought it strange that they never even raised their voices at each other.

Barack soon settled into his mid-western life. We were a Brady Bunch home, a blended family if you will. My Mom had died in a car crash and my two sisters’ Dad had run off with a transvestite. We were happy with the way things turned out except that I missed my Mom terribly. I was hoping that Barack would fill the void.

Each morning I would walk him in the neighborhood. He was very social and stopped to pee on every lamppost and fire hydrant and chat with every person that happened by. For the

first summer we had a routine; walk, breakfast, walk, nap, walk, lunch, walk, dinner and then if I wasn't too tired we would go out for one last walk and one last pee.

One morning I noticed an ambulance outside of Mrs. Higgins house and saw them carry her out. I learned from the chatter in the neighborhood that she didn't make it and the house stood empty over the winter. I walked Barack most days during the winter but the first one we spent together was particularly brutal. The snow was piled high. I made Barack some booties, not so much for the cold, he could handle the cold, but the salt was tough on him and his paws started to crack.

The last of the snow was melting when I noticed lights on in Mrs. Higgins house. There was a man at the window. He watched me walk by. I waved and smiled but he didn't wave back. The next morning he was sweeping the driveway and glanced my way when me and Barack walked by but didn't say anything. It went on like that for a few weeks until one morning he stopped me and asked, "What kind of dog you got?" I noticed that he had a funny accent.

"It's a Portuguese water dog," I replied.

"Nice looking dog." He went back to sweeping.

We went to a cottage on Lake Michigan that my parents had rented for a couple of weeks during the summer. When we got back the man remarked, "I can see that you have been in the sun. You need to wear more sunscreen. You wouldn't want to get burned."

"I will Mister," I said and kept on walking Barack. Then one day he asked me my dog's name. I told him that his name was Barack, that we named him after Barack Obama. I think I heard him say, "Bloody Socialist," but I can't be sure. The man said, "OK now I know your dog's name, what's yours?"

"I'm Tony."

"Nice to meet you Tony, my name is Jack Smith but you can call me Jack."

"Nice to meet you sir," I said.

Mr. Smith was ever so nice. He was very old, a little hunched over and had the thickest eyebrows. Barack liked him and would get excited when we got close to his house. He always had treats. I noticed that they were beef and sweet potato treats. Barack loved them. One morning Mr. Smith invited me to sit for a while. "Come on boy," he said. "I'm just an old man looking for company." He asked me about how my summer was going. I told him about our trip to Lake Michigan and that my dad caught lake perch which we had every evening for our dinner. He seemed interested. I have never had many friends so enjoyed my time chatting with Mr. Smith.

I made it a habit of stopping by his house on my morning walks. Once he knew that I liked iced tea he would always have a pitcher on hand. There were other dog walkers in the area but he didn't pay any attention to them. I thought it a little strange but on the other hand I liked getting all of his attention.

I told my Dad, "That man, Mr. Smith, is really nice. He's very friendly. Always has treats for Barack." My dad raised an eyebrow but didn't reply for a while. He was peeling potatoes. Finally he said, "it's good for him to be friendly and it's good for you to be polite, but please don't go into the house, at least not until I have had a chance to meet him." I gave my dad a strange look but he never noticed. He had gone back to peeling.

Now, as a kid I was quite observant for a ten year old and noticed the same car parked on the street a few houses down from Mr. Smith's house. I noticed it because the windows were tinted. I tried to look uninterested each time I passed it, but after

it had been there in the same place, day after day, for two weeks I became curious. One morning the driver's side window was down and I noticed two men sitting in the front seats. One of them was smoking a cigarette. When they saw me looking they quickly rolled the window up. They took off and I didn't see the car again until the following spring.

I was sure that it was the same car. My friendship with Mr. Smith had grown and after my Dad met and chatted with him he told me that it would be fine for me to go inside the house especially as it was winter and Mr. Smith made a mean cup of hot chocolate. We quickly became firm friends. I told him what had happened to my Mom and my Step Mom's husband and he smiled when I told him that he had run off with a transvestite. I was not sure what a transvestite was but Mr. Smith smiled and said, "sometimes you think you know a person but you don't."

I nodded. "I guess so."

One morning the window in the car was down and I saw the man smoking a cigarette. He looked at me and said, "Hey kid come over here." Barack was eager. I think that he thought that he might be getting some treats.

"What's your name kid?"

"Tony."

"You live around here?"

I told him that I lived a couple of blocks down and around the corner. "It's the house with a wooden fence. The one with the red garage doors."

"I know the house. What's your dog's name?"

I said that his name was Barack and the man smiled. "Nice looking dog kid."

"What school do you go to?"

"I was at Village but at the end of summer I am going to the Veterans Middle School."

"You get good grades?" I shrugged. "I guess."

"Well, enjoy your walk. You have a beautiful dog. He's a real looker."

"Thank you sir."

As I was leaving the man rolled the window up but they didn't leave. When I went back later for my after-lunch walk the car was still there. As I got closer the man rolled the window down. "Hey kid, let me ask you a question. Come on over here." Barack was eager to see them again.

"I see you talking to that man in the house with a white fence. What's his name?"

"Jack."

"He seems nice."

"He's very nice. He always has treats for Barack and drinks for me. I like him. He's nice to me."

"Do you know his last name?"

"Yea it's Smith. His name is Jack Smith."

"Thanks kid. We will bring some treats for Barack next time. My dog loves the peanut butter snacks."

I told my Dad about the two men. "This is a good neighborhood Tony," he said, "but be a little careful when talking to strangers." I shrugged and said, "OK."

The car was there for the next couple of weeks but the man didn't open his window and there were no treats for Barack. I tried to look through the window to see if it was the same man and his friend but I could only make out an outline. They didn't acknowledge me.

The leaves were starting to change when the window came down again. "Hey kid. Hey Barack. Come on over here. I have some treats for Barack." It was the same man. "I haven't seen you for a while," he said. "I was in hospital. Back problems." He dug into a bag on his lap and handed Barack some peanut butter treats. I noticed that they had some serious camera equipment sitting on the console between them.

"See you again later," the man said and rolled the window up. I was due to start Middle School the following day and was going to have to cut back on my dog walking so I just waved and said, "see you later."

The first semester we studied the Second World War in our history class. To be honest I am not much of a history buff but I found the class fascinating, especially Germany's role in all of it. Our teacher was excellent. In addition to teaching us the plain facts of what had happened, she always led a discussion into the mindset of people that go to war, or to be more specific, people who are forced to go to war. We talked about the Invasion of Normandy and what the soldiers might have been thinking as they landed on the beach knowing that most of them would not make it to see another sunrise. She also talked about what their mothers and fathers and wives and sisters must have been going through back home not knowing what was going on with their loved ones in Europe. I hate to admit this but I was more than a little fascinated by the concentration camps and the gas chambers. I simply could not understand how men could treat their fellow men so badly. I guess that I was too young to really understand the enormity of what had taken place.

I noticed that Barack was starting to put on a little weight now that his walk routine had been halved and I vowed to step it up. The same car was still there. Barack would run to the door looking for treats but again, there was another man in the driver's

seat and he didn't roll his window down. I always felt bad for Barack. It was like having been given a gift and then having it taken away from you.

Mr. Smith was also starting to act a little strange. "I might be moving houses," he told me. "I have found a place close to Columbus that I like." I was sad to hear his news and Barack could tell that I was sad and he whimpered a little. "I will be sad to see you leave," I said. It occurred to me that Mr. Smith had become my closest friend.

"It won't be for another couple of weeks. There is still time for plenty treats for Barack and interesting conversations with you. How's school going?"

"It's boring," I replied. "Most of my teachers are dorks, especially my history teacher."

"History is interesting," Mr. Smith said. "We all need to learn lessons from the past so that we don't repeat them in the future."

"I guess."

I told my Dad what Mr. Smith had said to me. We were eating dinner at the time. "Well he's completely right," Dad said. "I found history to be my most boring subject but as you get older you come to appreciate what happened in this world before we were born, both the good and the bad, and hopefully learn from our mistakes so that we don't ever repeat them." Dad was never very profound so I was a little taken aback by what he said.

My new routine was to walk Barack as early as possible. That way I could get in at least three walks a day. The car was there early. It was just after six when Barack and I walked by it. The driver's side window rolled down. "Hey kid, I have treats." Barack was ecstatic. He had almost given up on getting another peanut butter treat and sat patiently while the man dug around looking for the bag.

“So this Mr. Smith guy,” the man said. “What’s he like?” I shrugged. “I dunno, he’s nice. He’s moving in a couple of weeks.”

“Really, he’s moving? Did he say where he was going?” The men were really friendly so I didn’t think anything of it when I told them he was moving to a place close to Columbus. I saw the driver glance at his passenger. “OK kid. OK Barack. See you guys later.”

Barack woofed. I said “bye.”

The raid happened in the early hours of a Thursday morning. I just happened to be up getting some milk from the fridge when I saw the blue lights reflecting off the trees down the street. I could not see any cars because they were around the corner. Barack was at my side. “Let’s go boy,” I said. I slipped out the front door as quietly as I could. I didn’t want to wake my Dad and step-mom. We turned the corner and Barack started to growl. There were five squad cars pulled up in front of Mr. Smith’s house. Barack and I approached cautiously. One of the officers recognized me. I recognized him. He was the man from the unmarked car.

“Get out of here kid,” he said. “There is nothing to see here.” I stood firm and Barack growled a low growl. I had never heard him make that kind of sound before. “What are you doing?” I asked.

Then I saw that they had Mr. Smith in handcuffs. He had his head down but looked up briefly just before they placed him into the police cruiser. He looked me in the eye and held it for a few moments, but didn’t say anything. Within a minute all the cop cars were gone. It was just me and Barack standing on an empty sidewalk. I was shaking. “Let’s go home boy,” I said and Barack followed me, stopping every now and then to look over his shoulder.

Dad was up when I got back home. “I thought that I heard the

front door open,” he said. “Where did you go?” I told him what I had seen. He shook his head but said nothing. My step-mom came down to make breakfast.

“I just heard on the news that the police raided a house in our neighborhood. It was on NPR. Just the local news. Dad flicked the TV on. We had a small black and white one in the kitchen. The international news was just ending. Our local broadcasters came on. “We have breaking news,” the female announcer said. “Police have raided a home in east Cincinnati. Details are just coming in but our News 5 reporter has some of the details.” The screen cut to a news reporter standing right in front of Mr. Smith’s house.

“Thank you Jenna,” he said. “Just moments ago the police raided this home. It belongs to a man by the name of Jack Smith, but we have new information just in that Smith was not his real name. His real name, according to sources, is Kurt Profer. He is suspected of being the mastermind behind the Nazi gas chambers. He was the engineer who designed the chambers and personally witnessed the death of tens of thousands of Jews. My dad and step-mom sat in shock. Barack whimpered. I had no idea what to say.

“The police and FBI have been staking this house out for a long time keeping an eye on Mr. Profer. Yesterday they got a tip that Mr. Profer might be trying to relocate and early this morning they decided to move in and arrest him. He has been a fugitive for almost fifty years.” They showed some footage of Mr. Smith being taken into the local police station. He had his head down. The reporters were yelling questions. “Are you a Nazi?” He ignored them.

I couldn’t go to school that day and Dad said that it was OK if I wanted to stay home and watch the news. I sat with Barack in front of the TV and we watched the updates. It was a big story and soon the international news picked it up.

“Mr. Profer was known as the Gas Man of Auschwitz. He answered directly to Adolph Hitler. He was the man who designed the gas chambers that saw so many Jews put to death. Now this has to all be confirmed by a court of law but the FBI put out a statement and I will read it.”

“After almost five decades of intense searching and research we believe that we finally arrested the Gas Man of Auschwitz and taken him into custody. He has been on the FBI’s Most Wanted list. He will be given a fair trial and if deemed guilty he will be extradited to The Hague to face his crimes against humanity.”

I watched in horror. We had just studied World War 2 and the concentration camps. I could hardly believe what I was watching. Barack sat at my feet whimpering. It was almost as if he knew. Dad came home for lunch. “I think it might be true. Harry there from work knows the Chief of Police and he confirmed that Mr. Smith is a fugitive.”

My small dog walking world was shattered. Mr. Smith’s house sat empty. There was no unmarked car on the street and no treats for Barack. The story stayed on as headline news for over a week and then it faded off the front page to the mid-section of the paper. I was depressed. Mr. Smith had been my best friend.

Then one day Dad said, “I know that you are sad Tony. I have an idea. I have asked my friend at work to ask his friend the Chief of Police if he can arrange for you to visit Mr. Smith in jail. What do you think?”

“I dunno.”

“So the thing about life and growing up,” Dad said. “Is that you need closure. It’s a lesson that you will put to good use as you get older. I think that you need to go to the prison and talk to Mr. Smith.”

My step-mom came into the room. “At least do it for Mr. Smith,”

she said. “He was kind to you no matter what he did in his past. History is all about learning from our mistakes.”

I nodded. “OK I will go.”

My dad took me and asked, “do you want me to be there when you see him?” I said, “no.”

The prison was daunting. We had to pass through numerous security checkpoints to get inside. I looked at the fifty foot high barbed fence and thought, “this is crazy. Do they think that Mr. Smith is going to jump the fence?”

We were taken into a small room. It was tiled with white tiles. “I’m OK Dad,” I said. “I want to do this on my own.” Dad squeezed my hand and said, “you are becoming a man.”

An armed officer came into the room and said, “Mr. Smith is ready for you.”

I followed him down a narrow passageway. The man was so big that I couldn’t see around him. He led me into another small room and I saw Mr. Smith sitting behind a glass partition. I think that he smiled when he saw me but I can’t be sure.

The officer said, “You have fifteen minutes. Use the phone.” I noticed the phone after Mr. Smith pointed at it. I picked it up; tentative.

“Hello Tony.”

“Mr. Smith.”

“You didn’t bring Barack?”

I tried to smile. “They wouldn’t let me.”

“I might have had some treats for him.” I saw that he had shrunk a lot and his eyebrows were like small caterpillars climbing across his forehead.

“Are you getting any good food in here?”

“Yes it’s good,” he replied. “Now Tony,” he said. “We don’t have much time. I am who they say I am and I’m sorry if I misled you. I am just an old man running from his past and I know that I will have to pay for what I did and what I did was not nice. In the end life catches up with you. That’s one good lesson I can pass along to you. I can also say, in my defense, sometimes you have to do what you have to do when there is a gun pointed at your head. You are still young and you have your whole life ahead of you, but my advice is to take the gun instead of going against who you are as a person. It has not been easy being me. I wish that the Third Reich had shot me way back then. Instead they let me die a slow death. You are a good boy Tony.”

I had no idea how to reply. He continued. “Dogs have wisdom that we can’t understand. There have been many times when I thought that dogs do actually rule the world. You have a good one there in Barack. Listen to what he says.”

I saw a shadow lurking behind him. “We need to go Mr. Smith.”

Mr. Smith placed his hand against the glass partition. I placed my hand against his. There was nothing more to say.

Mr. Smith pleaded guilty to all charges and was extradited to The Hague. He died in the police car on the way to the airport.

THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY

ONE EARLY MORNING I found myself walking around the streets of Rio de Janeiro. I had landed late the evening before but was so excited to be there that I was up and out before dawn. My publisher had found me a place one block back from Ipanema Beach. I was up with the joggers and men in their Speedos going for an early morning dip in the crystal clear ocean. I was doing neither. Instead I was taking in the sweet air and people watching. I was mostly watching the men walk ‘the walk of shame.’ You know what I mean. Those that got lucky the night before in a bar or wherever and were making their way home in a rumpled suit, probably late for work. Don’t get me wrong. This is a no judgment zone. I have walked ‘the walk of shame’ many times.

My publisher had sent me to a book writers convention. “It doesn’t matter that you can’t speak a word of Portuguese,” he said. “People want to see a face behind the stories.” My four books of children’s stories had recently been translated into Portuguese and they were coming out in time for Christmas.

I stopped at a juice bar and had one of the sweetest and most delicious drinks that I have ever had and just so you know, I don’t like sweet. Personally I am more of a ‘savory in the morning’ kind of person. When I lived in Australia a Vegemite sandwich for breakfast was my kind of heaven. That, or a sardine sandwich.

A rather good looking man took the seat alongside me. He was a bit rumpled but I don’t think that he was walking the walk

of shame. He just looked a bit shagged out. He looked like he had been on the run from something for a very long time. I was just getting up to leave when he put his hand on my wrist. "Don't leave just yet sonny," he said in a perfect British accent. I was surprised. I hadn't expected anyone to speak English. "Sit for a bit," he said. "I will buy you another of whatever you are having."

I sat for a bit. He told me that his name was Ronald. Well he actually said that his name was Ronnie. I told him that I had just landed in Rio. He said that he had lived there for 20 years but had never picked up the language.

"You don't speak any Portuguese?" I asked.

"No. It's a peasant language. I get by just fine in English. Sometimes I get the wrong meal but that's the adventure of life." I was starting to feel my jet lag and tried to excuse myself. Ronnie insisted, "just stay for a while. I need an English speaking friend."

I stayed for another sweet drink. When I left Ronnie asked me to join him in his favorite bar that evening. "It's called the Restaurante Vinhcius e Bossa Nova Bar. Just a few blocks back from here." I thought that Ronnie might be hitting on me and by the way, I am totally straight, not that it matters.

I left with a little bounce in my step. I had made a new friend.

IN 1963 THERE WAS was an incredible, and if I am to be perfectly honest, admirable train robbery in England. It was a Royal Mail train going from Glasgow to London. A gang of fifteen men tampered with the lineside signals and brought the train to a halt. They had planned things very carefully using some inside information from an individual known as "The Ulsterman". His real identity has never been established and has over the years added to the mystique of the entire episode. The robbers escaped with over J2.6 million which in today's money is around J58

million. Quite a bit of spare change if you ask me. The bulk of the stolen money was never recovered.

It was a quick and swift robbery. The gang did not use any firearms but they did whack the driver over the head with a metal bar. He never really recovered. The robbery was a big deal probably because it was carried out in broad daylight and because of the amount of money that they got away with. The news was splattered all over the papers, even in South Africa where I was a small kid at the time but I do remember my Mum and Dad talking about how they could use a couple of extra million pounds.

I MET RONNIE AT Restaurante Vinhcius e Bossa Nova Bar later that evening. I was tired from standing all day at the Convention smiling and trying to look like a writer and feeling terribly inadequate when someone would come over to talk to me. There was a lot of interest in my books and that made me happy.

Ronnie was there at the bar when I walked in. "How was your day?" he asked. "Sell any books?" I laughed. "The Convention is not about selling books, but more about interesting agents and getting some media attention. Hopefully that will turn into book sales but you never know. The publishing industry is a total crapshoot."

Ronnie signaled the bartender. "A caipirinha for my friend," he said. "You have to taste this drink," Ronnie said. "It makes you feel Brazilian after just the first one. After two you will be speaking Portuguese. After three you will be speaking Portuguese fluently." I noticed that he was well into his second one. The bartender came over with a frosted glass loaded with limes.

"This is Brazil's national drink. It's what makes this country strong. It's made with cachaza, a local rum. They put in more than enough sugar into the glass, muddle it with the limes and

then add the cachaza. Go ahead, try it.” The drink was just what I needed and went down cold and smooth. I could feel the rum hit my gut and in an instant knew what Ronnie meant when he told me that it makes you feel Brazilian.

The restaurant was tastefully decorated. Dark colors, lots of well lit bottles of mysterious looking booze behind the counter. It had a small stage in the corner with just a simple chair, a microphone and what looked like an amplifier.

Ronnie said, “Let’s eat. I’m buying. I recommend the fish but if you like meat, let’s have meat.”

I said, “I like meat.”

“Well you have come to the right place. Brazil is famous for its meat.” So here is what happened. We ordered the meat. Ronnie said, “the waiters will come around with all kinds of meat either on a tray or on a stick where they shave off slices. You can have as much as you want, but here’s the thing. They come with the cheap bits first. Offal and the like. Sausages even. They know that you will be hungry and will gobble it up.” Ronnie paused and ordered a couple more caipirinha’s.

“Pace yourself is all that I am going to say.” The waiter came over with the caipirinha’s which was soon followed by a man with a massive platter of all kinds of tasty looking meat. I reached for a fatty piece but Ronnie gave me a look. “Just wait,” he said. He was right. The waiter had noticed that we had not taken any meat off his plate and came back with a tall stick jammed with all kinds of meat. He was also brandishing a very sharp knife. Ronnie gave me the nod. The waiter started to slice off steaming pieces of hot deliciousness. They also offered a smattering of salad and other fillers. The potatoes looked quite good and I was going to have some but Ronnie gave me a look.

“Tonight we eat meat.”

It was quite possibly the best meal that I have ever eaten. Ronnie was right about the meat but wrong about the caipirinha’s. I was well into my second one and still could not speak a word of Portuguese. We ordered another round, well at least Ronnie did. I was stuffed and getting a little buzzed when Ronnie leaned in.

SO ONE OF THE CLEVER things that the robbers did that day in 1963 was that they covered the green light at the railroad crossing and connected a battery to power the red light. The train’s second crew member, a young man by the name of David Whitby, thought that there was something suspicious about the signal lights and jumped off the train to call the signalman from a landline phone only to discover that the phone lines had been cut. When he got back on the train he was overpowered by the robbers.

There were 128 bags of money on the train. The robbers worked in a human chain and managed to get all but eight bags into waiting cars. They had switched out cars in an effort to confuse any possible witnesses and took off down a narrow country lane to a rented farmhouse. They had their VHF radios tuned into the police channel to see how long it would take for the crime to be reported and what the police were thinking about the whole heist.

They arrived at Leatherslade Farm, a bit of a rundown place 27 miles from the crime scene. There they divvied up the cash. The police concluded that the robbers were within a 30 mile radius from where the crime had taken place and ordered a drag-net search of the area. The robbers had planned on staying at the farmhouse for a few days but decided that it might be a smart thing to get out of dodge. They took off, each of them suddenly very rich.

I WAS GETTING A LITTLE more than a bit buzzed when Ronnie leaned in. “You ever hear of the Great Train Robbery?” he asked.

He was also a bit more than a little buzzed. I had no clue what he was talking about. I shook my head. "You never heard of those dudes back in the 60's that pulled off one of the biggest train robberies in history?" I remembered. I remember my parents saying that they could use an extra few million pounds. Ronnie looked me in the eye and said, "My name is Ronnie Biggs."

"Wait," I said. "You are 'the' Ronald Biggs?"

Biggs smiled. "Yours truly." he said. "In the flesh."

"Fuck" was all I could think to say which I know isn't too poetic but here I was with probably the most notorious criminal of a generation. I didn't know what to say so I didn't say anything. Problem was my tongue was starting to feel a little thick for my mouth.

THE ROBBERS LEFT BEHIND one of their mates with instructions to burn the farmhouse down. They had scrubbed it clean of fingerprints but despite trying a few times the place failed to catch on fire. The men fled. Most of them were captured but Ronnie Biggs was as slippery as liquid mercury, but in the end the cops found his fingerprints on a ketchup bottle and three weeks later he was arrested in South London. He was sentenced to 30 years in Wandsworth prison, one of England's most notorious prisons where 135 executions had been carried out.

I LEANED IN CLOSER and Ronnie was just about to open up when there was a strum on a guitar. Ronnie took my wrist. "Just wait up a little," he said. "This guy is good. Actually he's great." I looked over at the stage. There was an old man propping himself up on the chair. He pulled the mic closer and looked around the room but I don't think that he could see anything. His glasses were at the end of his nose. He squinted and then started to strum. And then he sang in English.

*Tall and tan and young and lovely
The girl from Ipanema goes walking
And when she passes
Each one she passes goes, "Ah"*

*When she walks, she's like a samba
That swings so cool and sways so gently
That when she passes
Each one she passes goes, "Ah"
Oh, but he watches her so sadly
How can he tell her he loves her?
Yes, he would give his heart gladly
But each day, when she walks to the sea
She looks straight ahead, not at he
Tall, and tan, and young, and lovely
The girl from Ipanema goes walking
And when she passes, he smiles
But she doesn't see*

I was mesmerized. "The girl from Ipanema" being sung in a small place just two blocks back from Ipanema Beach. I couldn't believe it. Ronnie gave me a look. "I know," he said. "It's quite special isn't it?" I nodded. Ronnie ordered another round of caipirinha's.

Biggs leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, listening to the music. Then he said, "I was sentenced to thirty years but I escaped after 15 months. I chucked a rope ladder over the wall

and climbed it. Stupid fucks. They had no clue. I got out of there and got a boat to Brussels. I sent a note to my wife Charmain to meet me in Paris. I got new identity papers and had some plastic surgery done. There was no way that I was going back to that prison." I sat in silence, listening.

"Did she meet you there?"

"Yes but it was not easy. She had been shagging some guy while I was in jail and got pregnant. I guess that I can forgive her. She figured that I would be in the Big House for 30 years but Charmain, bless her heart, had an abortion. In London back then it was illegal so she went to a back alley doctor and got the job done. She took our two boys and joined me in Paris. Quite the lady she was. I forgave her for the affair."

I was still a little stunned by it all. Biggs continued. "Interpol got wind that I was in Paris. Charmain and me were sitting listening to the radio when I saw some strange cars on the street. I said to her. "I may need to get the fuck out of here." There was a knock on the door and I bolted out the back door and over a stone wall. The neighbor's dogs started barking but I ran like there was a firecracker up me arse and the cops never found me. I learned later that they gave my wife a bit of trouble but by that time I was in Australia. There was nothing to hold Charmain on or the kids. They denied that I had ever been there. A couple of months later they joined me in Australia. That was in '66 I think. It's hard to remember dates sometimes."

"So Ronnie," I said, "how were you able to travel from country to country? You were a wanted man."

"It was a different time. Couldn't do it these days with computers and everything. Back then you could meet some guy under the big clock at Gatwick Airport and buy his plane

ticket off him. You could get on a plane with someone else's ticket. They didn't check ID. If you had a ticket you had a ticket. Like taking a bus." I stared at my empty glass and the waiter came over with a couple fresh caipirinhas. I was four into it and still couldn't speak Portuguese. In fact I could barely speak at all.

"We were living in Adelaide. Nice place Adelaide. Lots of nice people in Australia. Very friendly. I was in a bar in south Adelaide and there was this dark chap, you know what I mean, brown, almost black, and he was playing Bossa Nova songs. I was immediately hooked. I wanted to move to Brazil and that move was facilitated by a sharp knock on my door and three cop cars with their lights flashing on the street in front of my house. Stupid fucks. You would think that by then they would have learned to watch the back door. I was up and out and through the fence and down to a small hotel on the beach. It was a Reuters report that had tipped the cops off. Fucker. Charmain and I had just had our third child. We were living in Melbourne by then. I used an altered passport of a friend of mine and took a liner to Panama. Charmain and the kids stayed in Australia. From Panama it was a hop, skip and a jump to Rio. Been here ever since."

To be honest I was gobsmacked. Here I was, a young kid from South Africa sitting with the notorious Ronnie Biggs having a few caipirinha's and listening to The Girl from Ipanema. I was finally starting to think in Portuguese.

Biggs stood up to go. "Same time tomorrow? We can do the fish." I nodded. I noticed that he had not paid the tab and started to shit myself. The waiter came over. Another caipirinha?" he asked. I looked at him. "Don't worry Mr. Biggs has an account with us. Order what you want." I ordered a glass of water and found my hotel; only just.

RONNIE BIGGS DIDN'T SHOW up the following evening. I paid for my own caipirinhas and did have the fish but it wasn't as good as the meat, probably because the company was different.

I never saw him again.

This story is dedicated to Astrud Gilberto, the beautiful Brazilian bossa nova singer who sang "*The Girl from Ipanema*" and made bossa nova popular throughout the world. She died on June 5, 2023 in Philadelphia.



Astrud Gilberto - 1940 - 2023

THE SOAP GIRLS

HOUT BAY IS a small seaside town on the Atlantic coast of South Africa. It used to be a soft and easy town; but now it has become hardened by the poverty that surrounds it and those soft and easy edges are now hard and crusty. On the east side there is a shanty village with houses made mostly from corrugated iron and salvaged wood. Across the bay are colorful concrete homes, and in-between, along a beautiful strip of white sandy beach, are the homes of the rich white people. I'm by no means rich but I had a house there once back when homes were affordable.

I was sitting at my favorite restaurant overlooking the harbor and fish market. The owner of the place is a friend of mine, a Greek originally from a small island in the Aegean Sea. Stefano knows how to pull a plate of calamari together better than anyone. He knows just how much garlic to throw in, which in my case is a lot. I noticed a small crowd gathering around two pretty girls who seemed to be doing some kind of song and dance routine. Stefano stopped by my table to top up my glass. "Hey Stefano," I said. "What's going on over there?"

"It's the soap girls. They come every day. I'm surprised that you haven't seen them before. They come after school. They live just up the street. They sing and they sell soap for charity. They sell a lot of soap."

"Huh. I will go and check them out." Stefano put his hand on my shoulder. "You need soap," he said. "You need soap."

"It's not me that you can smell. It's all the bloody garlic you put into this dish."

"I know. I know. That's why you keep coming back." Stefano smiled. "Check them out."

I was quite well lit when I left the restaurant. Stefano had been topping my glass off every ten minutes or so. I steadied myself and walked slowly to where the Soap Girls were still singing and dancing in front of a small crowd. They were pretty. I guessed their ages at around 14 or 15. I watched for a while. They were actually quite good and better yet they were selling a lot of soap. I was sorry that I had enjoyed so much wine at lunch. I would have liked to have talked to them but instead opted for a nap. I found my hammock under the two pines that my Dad had planted when he first bought the property some 50 years earlier. Without knowing it he had spaced the trees perfectly to string the hammock that I bought a few years back when I was sailing in Brazil. I slept the wine off.

It was late in the day when I woke up to the loud chirping of guinea fowl doing crossfit on the road in front of my house. My wife was raking leaves. My oldest son was in his plastic pool with the dog. Life was good. "Have you ever heard of the soap girls?" I asked my wife.

"How much wine did you have at lunch?" My wife asked. "It seems like Stefano might have over-served you." I waved her off and said, "he might have, but have you ever heard of the Soap Girls?"

"No."

"It's those two girls from up the road. I think that I might have seen them before. They dress in pink and sell soap on the dock in front of Stefano's restaurant. They raise money for charity." My wife gave me a blank stare. "Maybe you need to sleep the wine off a little longer."

The next day I went to Stefano's for lunch. He heaped the calamari and soaked it in garlic. Stefano had to leave early so I sat and enjoyed the view, missing his company. It was a perfect day. Hot but not too hot. Sunny but not too sunny. Just a little wind, a slight breeze that creased the water where the kiteboarder's were getting in a little exercise. I held off on the wine but did enjoy a couple of cold Castle Lagers. Then the Soap Girls showed up. They were pretty in pink singing their songs and attracting a crowd. They were selling a lot of soap.

I left the restaurant and watched the girls for a while. Their singing was beautiful. I bought some soap. I noticed that the soap was homemade. That night I lay awake. My wife was dead to the world, occasionally farting and talking in her sleep. I thought about waking her up. I had an idea that I wanted to talk to her about but then thought better of it. I had a hunch that she would not appreciate being woken up. After a while I got up and went outside to sit and watch the moon pass overhead. You know what it's like when sometimes you get a feeling in your gut and you are not quite sure why it's there. This was one of those nights. I fell asleep in my chair and woke when I heard the seagulls scavenging on the dock. The fishermen were coming back in after a night out hand-lining for snoek.

It was starting to become a bit of a routine. I would head to Stefano's place for a plate of calamari and then to the dock to hear the Soap Girls sing. They were that good and their soap, by the way, was also very good. I tried to get my wife to join me but she had her hands full with the boys.

A couple of years later I was in London and ran into my old friend Simon Le Bon. He's the lead singer for the rock group Duran Duran. Simon and I had done some sailing together over the years and had kept in touch. It was Simon's idea to hit the pub for a pint. He knew the bartender and without asking two

frothy pints of pale ale arrived at our table. I'm not sure how the subject came up but Simon mentioned that the band was looking for some back-up singers. To be honest I was well into my cups when I suggested the Soap Girls.

"You mean some girls singing on a dock in South Africa might be good enough for the band?" He asked.

"I do," I replied. "They are really good. So good in fact that I will pay their airfare if you and the band would give them a half hour of your time."

"I will talk to the boys. Meanwhile, do you want another pint?"

I finished my business in London and flew home. My wife was skeptical. It's a wife's job to be skeptical but she said, "It's your money. You can do what you want with it." I had really hoped for more buy-in but decided that I would take a chance. When we went to bed that night my wife deliberately had her back to me. I knew that she was not happy with the idea. You see, my wife grew up in a stable home with loving parents. She fell in love with me because of my adventurous spirit but somehow the luster comes off when there are children involved. What she really wanted was for me to get a stable job and stay home to help with the kids. I couldn't help myself. This was a great opportunity.

I decided to run the idea by Stefano. He bought over a huge plate of calamari. "Don't you want to try someone else on the menu?" He asked. "Why always calamari? We have great steaks. Great pasta. Why you always eat calamari?"

"Because yours is the best in the world," I replied. That shut him up. He came back with a bottle of Klein Constantia Sauvignon Blanc. "We have a special on this," he said. "Glass or bottle?"

"I will take a bottle and when you get a moment I have something that I want to run by you."

"What?" Stefano said, "another of your crazy ideas?" I nodded.

"OK let me get the lunch crowd fed and then I will come and talk to you." I leaned back in my chair. The kiteboarder's were ripping it up just west of the break. I saw my friend Jan Peyper heading out on his fishing boat, The Lady Tisha. I knew that he would be out for the night. Jan was getting old but he was still build like a brick shithouse. I finished the bottle and Stefano bought me another. "This one is on the house," he said. I tried to argue then I figured it out. He was going to join me. I outlined my thoughts. Stefano nodded and topped up both our glasses. We were done with the second bottle when Stefano said, "I will split their expenses with you. Now let's go and talk to the girls."

The Soap Girls were plying their trade singing and selling soap for charity. They skipped our way and kept on with their shtick. I bought some soap; Stefano said, "we need to talk."

Simon had arranged a small studio on Abbey Road not far from where the Beatles recorded their final release, Let it Be. The Soap Girls were giggling with excitement. Lillian, the older of the two said, "we brought soap for Simon. Our Mum made a special soap for him and the band. We call it Yasmin Spice. It's named after Simon's wife Yasmin. The spice of course comes from the Spice Girls."

Simon walked in. He was kitted out in full battle gear. Black leather jacket, black leather pants and black leather boots. He had dyed his hair blond. He looked like a rock star. He gave me a hug. I introduced him to Stefano and the Soap Girls. "Sorry the band couldn't make it but I'm here. Let me hear you sing." I could tell that the girls were nervous and I couldn't blame them. This was their first trip abroad.

The sound tech said, "Ok we only have this studio for an hour. Can you girls sing Let it be?" Lillian looked at Lucy and said,

“yes.” They started off slow but after a minute or so they found their stride and started to sing so beautifully. I noticed out of the corner of my eye Simon leaning back in his chair. They followed it up with Ziggy Stardust and then went onto Country Road, one of my favorite songs by John Denver. I noticed that Simon had his eyes closed, he was listening intently. The sound tech knocked on the glass of the booth and signaled that their time was over. The girls giggled. Simon said, “The band has to hear this.” he said. He took Lucy by the hand. “You girls sing like angels.”

The first concert they did was in Boston. The Soap Girls had rehearsed with the band in London but Boston was their first stop on a five week North American tour. Gillette Stadium was sold out. I had been backstage with the band and now was in the audience. The girls looked different. The make-up department had them well tricked out. Lillian had her hair piled on top of her hair; Lucy had her’s pulled back tight. They were both crying. “Enjoy this moment,” I told them. This is no longer Hout Bay. You have made the big time.”

Now Simon Le Bon and Duran Duran can pound it out as good as any rock and roll band. I purposely took a seat in the nosebleed section. I knew that if I was up close that I would not be able to see them through my tears.

The North America tour ended with a sold out show in Los Angeles. I had been getting some heat from my wife to come home to help with the boys but I didn’t care. I knew that we were onto something good. Stefano had flown over for the concert. We sat together in the middle of the audience. “You know,” Stefano said, “when I stopped in Boston I went to this famous restaurant. What’s it called? Legal Seafood? Yes that’s the name. I ordered the calamari. It was crap. Soggy. Not enough garlic. The meal came with this side dish I think they called coleslaw. What the hell is that crap? Just cabbage soaked in mayonnaise? The lights

dimmed. I could see the Soap Girls off to the side. The spotlight was on them. The band took their places. Simon came on stage. The place went wild. The concert was awesome. Every now and then I looked over at Stefano and I could see that he was crying.

A year later the Soap Girls signed their first contract. They had gone a little Goth which I didn’t like. I was never a fan of black but what the heck did I know? I guess I knew enough to know that pink wouldn’t sell in the rock and roll world. Luckily I had been smart enough to engage a lawyer and my first commission check was due to hit my account in a couple of days.

“Stefano,” I said. “Come and sit when you are done with the lunch crowd.” He nodded. “Is today the day?” he asked? I nodded. “Yes their first concert is in Belarus. Did I tell you that it’s a fund raiser for the refugees from Ukraine?” Stefano smiled. “Those girls are good girls,” he said. “Good girls.” He leaned back in his chair and signaled the waiter. “Another bottle of Klein Constantia for my friend.”

NANTUCKET



NANTUCKET IN SPRING is quite possibly the most beautiful place on earth. First to bloom, almost defiantly, are the mayflowers, the Massachusetts state flower. Well, let me backup a little. The first to bloom are the crocuses that push up through the late winter snow as soon as they feel any kind of warmth from above. It's a heroic effort. Once the snow has melted the mayflowers bring it on and they are almost a sign that there really is a God. Their beauty is exquisite. Their tiny, pale violet petals, almost translucent, quiver in the early spring breeze and give off a fragrant, spicy scent. You have to know the scent to know where to find the flower and if you do, you know that Nantucket is coming alive after a long, and usually unforgiving winter.

Mom and I live alone on the west side of the island. Mom's family goes back four generations, I guess making me the fifth if I stayed, but I'm inclined to leave. I want more out of life. You see I have been diagnosed with a rare form of PV. Yes I don't like acronyms either but the full name is a bit of a mouthful - Polycythemia Vera. It's a crappy disease that happens when a single stem cell in the bone marrow develops a mutation and starts to make too many red blood cells. I usually laugh at my condition and say that I had too many bloody cells. That was all fine and funny until the disease started to take over.

Anyway, let me get back to my story. Mom and I live in a small house on the west side of the island. We are blessed in some ways. We are the last to see the sun set in the evening and

if we are lucky we would see the people that lived on Tuckernuck Island coming ashore to do their grocery shopping. We rarely saw them and wondered how they lived. Tuckernuck Island is a tiny island just off the coast. It's a former whaling port and its name means, 'loaf of bread.' There is a ferry service that runs in the summer but in winter it's a little tricky because of the weather and those that live out there live like they are on a boat in the middle of the ocean, meaning you are kind of screwed if you don't stock up properly for the cold, dark months.

I am the one that usually sees them because I have always been an early riser. They come ashore before dawn, not because they were afraid of being seen, but before dawn is when the waters are still and the light reflects magically off the calm sea. It's a challenge to row when the tide is rushing and the wind is on the nose. There is a cubby in the corner of my room and I usually drag my blanket over and sit and watch. We have a ton of birds and Mom has rigged up a few bird feeders. In spring and fall the warblers visit. In summer we have so many sparrows and chickadees and one summer a family of cardinals nested in the eaves just above my window. I got to watch the parents raise their young. It was all part of my magical childhood.

On very rare occasions I would see the rowers come for their groceries. In the spring and the fall there is usually a damp mist that hangs low and they emerge like some apparition from the days when whaling was a bustling business. Very, very occasionally Mom and I would run into them at the supermarket and it was like meeting Martha Washington. They were always cloaked in shawls, their faces covered, their hands grubby. I loved it.

My mother worried about me. I never met my father, well not until much later, but when I was little it was just the two of us and I was an introvert, on steroids; not literally, if you know what I mean. All I wanted to do was huddle and cuddle and watch

and there was a lot to see. My mother was homeschooling me and she was the one who suggested the little notebook. One of our neighbors up the street had built a little library and it was a big hit. People came and went and they either took a book or dropped off a book and there was always a line, well not always but you know what I mean. It was a popular place in town.

Mom's idea was the notebook and she explained it to me this way. "People need a place where they can write their feelings down; anonymously." It seemed like a good idea to me. We asked Chuck, our neighbor, if he would build it and Chuck, always happy to be asked to do anything, was happy to oblige. He might have gone a little overboard. The Little Notebook stand was beautifully crafted.

Chuck said, "There was boat that washed up here some ten years ago, or so. Came crashing onto the beach. If there ever was a skipper they never found him, or her, but I found the bits and pieces and used the wood to build this little stand. I hope that you like it.

It was beautiful. Chuck told me later that the smell was the teak that he had used and the glass door was from Mrs. Havershams chemist shop when she remodeled. After she remodeled her business was never the same and she lost everything, but I digress.

Chuck made a beautiful stand and Mom dug into her savings and bought a hard cover notebook. I really wasn't sure what to do with it.

Mom said, "A notebook is like an empty mind. A blank slate. You can fill it with anything and everything," and I did. I started simply. My first entry read, "Life is a gift. Share your gift with me and I will share it with the world." I knew it was a bit pretentious, especially for a teenager, but a week later someone wrote, "Did anyone else see the sunset last night?"

I replied, “sure did. Woz happy to know that more people than just me got to see it.” I waited anxiously for a reply but it never came. The second entry was a little more interesting. “I am really opposed to the idea of a pathway along the cliffs especially one that is open to the public. You mean anyone can just walk along the cliff? It’s not right.” Now that comment did start a bit of a hailstorm. Some people were all for the path; others not so much and they sure put their feelings down on paper. In my little notebook.

Some days I would hang out hoping to see people open the stand and write, but I never did see anyone. Then one day I got a message that really took me by surprise. Someone wrote in black marker, “Trump is a Nazi.” I took the notebook and showed my Mom. If she was shocked she didn’t show it. “You know Jackie,” she said. My Mom always called me Jackie even though my name is John.

“You know Jackie,” she said. “Free speech is free speech. Some people may write or say things that you don’t agree with and you have to learn to take the good with the bad. The only thing I can say about free speech is that we might need to buy you a new notebook soon. Let’s just wait and see what happens.”

I had heard of Trump but didn’t really know what he was about. I was pretty sure that he wasn’t a nazi. I knew enough to know that Hitler was a nazi and that he had been dead for a while so I calculated that when Hitler was doing all the bad things that he did that Trump must have been just a kid and therefore could not be a nazi. Well, that was quite good logic for a young kid but believe me when I tell you this, there were many people on the island of Nantucket that believed that Trump was a nazi; and pure evil too. There were others that had a different point of view. I had my Mom read the comments and she said, “OK Jackie it’s probably time for another new notebook.”

I started the new one off hopefully. I wrote, “Did anyone else see the mayflowers this spring?” That was a good entry because as it turned out, many people did see the mayflowers. Then one morning I got an interesting entry. All it read was, “I’m hungry.” I showed Mom. She said, “Let’s cook some food and leave it with the diary.” We fried up some fish and added a packet of chips and left it in the stand. By morning it was gone. We cooked, my Mom and I, many meals until one morning my mother said. “Hey Jackie, I have an idea. I need to talk to Chuck about this but what do you think about the idea of adding a little food pantry next to the notebook?”

I wasn’t sure what to think. “You think people will drop off food?” Mom smiled. She had a great smile that lit up her whole face, and later when I was a little older and a bit more aware, I realized that her smile could light up a whole room. “Let’s treat this as a social experiment.” I gave her a quizzical look. I had no idea what she was talking about. “A test,” she said.

Chuck made a little pantry. “Sorry,” he said. “Ran out of teak so this one is mostly mahogany. I did have an old tree in the yard and a few years ago I salvaged some branches and used one of them for the stand. I absolutely loved it and Mom started things off with three boxes of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, two tins of beans and five boxes of Boil-in-a-Bag Rice. She posted a note on the door that read. “This is a free pantry. Give a can if you can, or take something if you are hungry.”

I snuck down to the pantry just before sunrise the next morning. There was a light frost and the ground crunched a little. The pantry was empty. I told Mom. She just smiled and said, “I’m going grocery shopping this morning. I will restock it.” She did. She bought seven bags of spaghetti, seventeen cans of assorted goods. I remember that she added a bag of prunes and a roll of toilet paper but didn’t say why. She also added a lot more rice

and some spices and a few packets of gravy, the kind that you just add water to.

It rained overnight and the path that led to the cliff overlooking Tuckernuck Island was sloshy and I am being kind. It was more than a little treacherous but I really wanted to see if anyone had left a note or taken a packet of pasta.

There was a note. And it changed my life. It read, “my great, great, great Grandfather was aboard the Helen Snow. He died in the Arctic.” That was all. And strangely enough no one had anything to say about it. No comments. It just sat there, almost naked, if you will. I had no clue what to think so I asked Mom. She said, “there is a lore around here about the Helen Snow. It was a whaling ship that was lost in the Arctic. They were talking back then of a thing they called global warming but I think that they should have called it global freezing.” Mom had a misty look about her. I don’t know how to describe it. It was if she had an aura and then she said, “we were all doomed from the very beginning.” Then the phone rang. It was Mr. Jacobs from the grocery store.

“Is that you John?” he asked. I said that it was. He said, “your Mom left two bags of groceries here yesterday.” Then he added in a lower tone, “I’m a bit worried about her. She seems to be forgetting things these days. Yesterday she asked me three times what toothpaste was used for.”

I said, “I will come by on my bike later and pick up the bags. Thank you.”

I sat for a long time in my cubby and looked out at the ocean. If I am to be truthful, and I will be truthful here, this is my story after all, I had also been noticing things about Mom.

The ocean was at its best. The tide between Nantucket and Tuckernuck Island was racing. There was a little wind and the wind was blowing against the tide and the water rippled. Each

ripple reflected the sun and sparkled. I would have sat there for hours if my Mom had not come into the room.

“What did Mr. Jacobs want?” she asked.

I looked up at her and said, “nothing. I think that he called by mistake.”

Mom looked at me and said, “He’s been doing that quite a bit lately. I’m worried about him.”

I picked up the two bags of groceries. Mom was outside reading her beloved poetry when I got back and she didn’t see me stow the cans away. I put the bread in the freezer; we already had five bags of “If Pigs can Fly” rye.

WE TOOK THE FERRY over to the mainland and then a bus to Mass General in Boston. I had my quarterly check-up with Dr. Silverstein. My blood situation was not getting any better and Dr. Silverstein was worried. “We may need more tests,” he said. That part of the visit didn’t worry me. I knew that I would be needing more tests. What worried me most was his occasional glances at my Mom. She was trying but frankly wasn’t making much sense. On the bus ride back to the ferry station she said to me, “Jackie sometimes I feel as if I am losing my mind.” I sat staring out the window. It was snowing lightly and the flakes swirled around the trees. I thought that it was pretty.

The ferry ride back to Nantucket was a bit rough. Winter was fast approaching and the ocean was a slate gray dotted with whitecaps. Mom didn’t say anything and went straight to bed once we got home. I went to the cliffs with two cans of spaghetti and a couple of pens. There was a new message in the notebook.

“The Helen Snow should not have sunk. It was gross negligence. Ask your Mom. She will tell you that I am not crazy.” That was all,

well perhaps not all. It was all in capitals and had been written twice over. I didn't show Mom. She was asleep when I got back to the house. I honestly had no clue what it all meant or what to do about it.

It was dark when Mom woke and she found me sitting outside huddled against a biting wind. I am not sure why I was outside but I think that it was that I needed to feel something. I was shivering when Mom put her arm around me. "Don't worry too much Jackie," she said. We sat like that for a while and then she said, "let's go back inside. I'm getting cold." I followed her in and she made me some scrambled eggs for dinner. I was just dozing off when Mom said, "I was on the Helen Snow when it sunk." I tried to pretend that I was asleep. I really didn't want to face what I had just heard. Then Mom started to tell the story.

She said, "the Helen Snow was a whaling ship out of New Bedford. Actually the boat was registered in Tuckernuck but spent much of the time when it was not at sea in New Bedford. New Bedford had better docks and there were a lot of people there to help with the whales when we got back to port. You will be proud to know this Jackie. I was the first American female First Mate on a whaling ship. I did eight seasons in the Arctic. That was long before I met your dad. I was quite promiscuous in those days, not that you need to know about any of it, but we had a heck of a good time."

I squeezed my eyes even tighter shut. Mom knew that I had heard her. She carried on. "I noticed that each year it became more and more difficult to navigate the ice. There were a lot more icebergs and frankly fewer and fewer whales. The captain of the Helen Show had been in the whaling business his whole life. He used to ship out when he was just a kid. The man was strong as nails and ran his ship like he was running a navy, but by god we caught a lot of whales and the owners made a lot of money with very little risk on their part."

Mom got up and shoved a few logs into the fireplace. I opened one eye and looked at her. She had her back to me. "Don't worry about all this Jackie," she said. "At some point it will make sense to you." Mom turned and she saw that I was awake.

"Oh good Jackie," she said. "I'm glad that you are awake. I was a little worried about you. You were so cold outside. I think that our visit with Dr. Silverstein went quite well today didn't you?" I nodded. Mom said, "I have some pumpkin soup that I can heat for you if you are hungry."

I said, "that would be nice." The house was warm. Mom went into the kitchen and came back with some toast and soup. "I already ate," she said.

"So did I," I said. "Did you forget?" Mom gave me a look. I think that she had forgotten that she had already made me scrambled eggs. Mom yawned, "I'm turning in," she said. "It has been a long day. Sweet dreams." The house was suddenly very quiet. I noticed that the wind had died down and when I looked out the kitchen window I saw that a little snow had accumulated, just enough to make it look clean and serene.

I was up early the next morning. I wanted to see if anyone had taken the Spaghettios or left a message. The cans of Spaghettios were still there and there was no new message. I thought it all a bit interesting; there were footsteps in the snow leading to and from both the food pantry and the notebook stand. They looked like they were quite small feet but it was hard to tell. A light wind during the night had obscured things. Mom was on the phone with Dr. Silverstein when I got back to the house.

"OK I will get him back up to Boston next week. Your news is a little concerning." Mom heard me open the door and quickly said her goodbyes, but I had already heard what she said. "Oh Jackie. Did you go to the pantry? Do I need to buy more food?" I

nodded and went up to my room. I wished I had a cat or a dog or someone I could talk to. I did my school work and read a book for a while. It wasn't a great book but I didn't care. I was trying to distract my mind.

A week later we went back to Mass General. Dr. Silverstein looked worried. He said, "I have consulted some experts on this and we have concluded that we need to carry out a venesection. Now I know that's a big word but here is what it means." Mom looked worried. I am sure that she was thinking about me but I also knew that she was thinking about the cost.

"It means that we need to take your blood, once every week or so, and replace it with blood that has the normal number of red blood cells. We will have to do this once a week at first but then after that maybe only once a month." Mom nodded, then Dr. Silverstein said, "I have organized a grant that will cover the cost so that you don't have to worry. It will also cover transportation. Your gas and ferry costs if you know what I mean. You just have to file an expense report." I could see Mom perk up a little. As usual I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing.

"Now Mrs. Baxter," Dr. Silverstein said. "This is none of my business and I am not your GP but I am your friend and as your friend I want to tell you that you are not looking very well." Mom shifted uncomfortably.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"You have lost a lot of weight and that's understandable given your concern about John here, but there is a pallor to your skin. And you seem to be forgetting things." Mom fussed with her hair and said, "It's nothing." But I knew that it was something. I had seen the same signs.

Winter came in strong and hard. The Nor'easter's came in quick succession and Nantucket was buried. I like winter; it gives me

time to think and time to read but I missed going to my notebook stand and I worried about the food pantry. I had a transistor radio tuned to GBH, our local NPR station. I love GBH by the way, but I digress. The local news came on after the weather; these days it comes on before the weather and I was waiting for the latest report on the snow. The newscaster read some news that shook me.

"A small girl was found washed up on the beach in Nantucket. Police found splinters from a rowboat near her body. They also found some cans of Spaghettios." Earlier in the day I had seen blue lights reflecting off the snow but didn't think anything of it. The cops come to our side of the island quite a bit. I'm not sure why but I think that they like the view and before I have seen them drinking coffee and hanging out. Mom was asleep otherwise I would have told her the news but lately she had been acting strange. I noticed that the snow was really starting to pelt down and pulled my blanket up tight and fell asleep.

Mom came to me that night in a dream. It was brief but I remembered it when I woke. Usually I forget my dreams but this one stuck with me. Mom had said, "Long before I shipped out on the Helen Snow I drowned off the beach. I was trying to get food for my family but it was rough out and my boat was wrecked."

I woke in clammy sheets and tried to go back to sleep but my mind was not having any of it.

I usually get up early and put the coffee on for Mom. She has a certain way she likes it. The water has to be hot but not boiling. "If the water is too hot it burns the beans," she always said. "They get bitter. The water needs to be just right to bring out the flavor." I used my pinky to test the temperature and then added it to the beans. A small froth appeared and the smell was amazing. Mom had told me that I couldn't drink coffee. She said that it was bad for my PV.

I took the cup up to Mom's room and immediately knew something was wrong. She was lying naked on the floor huddled in a fetal position and it looked as if she had been crying. There were salt stains on her face. She waved me away when I told her that I had her coffee. I left it on the side table.

THE HELEN SNOW was legendary in her time. She hunted and caught more whales than any other boat shipping out from either the United States or Canada. Most of the Canadian boats came out of St. Johns in Newfoundland; most of the US boats came out of New Bedford. The owners lived in Manhattan and one or twice a year they would come up to Massachusetts to inspect things. They never seemed satisfied. Either the paint was cracking or the outriggers were too loose but they were quite happy to cash the checks. Then one summer my Mom was confirmed as First Mate just before they shipped out. Back then, on a small island like Tuckernuck there was always a farewell party. Much of the island depended on how well the whalers did during the season and many looked hopeful and many were relying on Mom and Captain Bainbridge and the crew to deliver. It was a big deal. Out of all the whalers working the Arctic waters only one other boat had a female First Mate; the Julie K out of New Brunswick, Canada. Her name, ironically enough, was Julie Klein.

That year the trip north was easy. For a change the ocean was calm and the Helen Snow motored north making good progress. They passed Newfoundland and noticed a few other whalers sharing their water but didn't care. Captain Bainbridge knew his stuff. They would let the other whalers go first. Some would founder on the rocks. Much of the coastline in the Labrador Sea was not very well chartered. Captain Bainbridge would bide his time and go in when he thought that the time was just right and he was right every time until 1907 when it all went wrong.

The masters in Manhattan had been on his case about the bills. Truth be told he was drinking a lot and not paying much attention to the bills. His wife had moved in with the town doctor and his kids didn't want to know him. He was eager to prove to them all that he was still one of the best. His ego was his downfall. They went too far into a fjord in Greenland. It was OK at first and they caught and slaughtered 16 whales. The boat was well stocked and the captain and crew enjoyed a few glasses each evening. They went deeper into the ice and caught two more whales. That was when they noticed that the ice behind them was crackling and it closed in pretty quick. Mom was the first to notice but it was too late. A front moved in from the Arctic and pretty soon they were locked in; no other whaling ship in sight.

MOM CAME DOWN for breakfast and asked if I had made coffee. It was after 10 in the morning and I told her that I would make a fresh pot. She slumped into the easy chair and said, "Jackie, I have been having the strangest dreams." I looked out the window and noticed that the crocuses were starting to come up. It was a hopeful sign.

Every other week we had been taking the ferry over to the mainland and going to Mass General Hospital for my treatment. I felt good. Maybe the treatments were helping. The grant that Dr. Silverstein had arranged for us was definitely helping. Mom was relaxed about the trips until one day on the way back from the hospital she said, "I heard from your father yesterday." I sat in silence. To be honest I had no idea what to say. "Yes, he called me and asked how you were doing." I looked at Mom; she looked down and said, "I hung up on him." We drove the rest of the way in silence.

IT HAPPENED PRETTY QUICK. Once the Arctic freeze set in and the ice hardened, the Helen Snow was trapped. At first Captain

Bainbridge denied what was happening. Mom noticed that he seemed more than a little 'over the limit,' so to speak, when he gave his orders. None of them actually made much sense but because he was so well respected no one thought to question them; except Mom, but by then it was too late. The ice stretched as far as they could see and almost imperceptibly there was a grinding deep in the hull of the ship as the ice contracted and the steel hull buckled. Not much water came in at first and despite the fact that his ship had been breached Captain Bainbridge was still in denial. Mom took over. She ordered everyone off the boat. She was the First Mate and had no authority, but Captain Bainbridge didn't argue. The crew took all they could off the boat and placed it on the ice. It didn't take long for the Helen Snow to list and two days later, the ship sank. Mom and the crew were stranded. Captain Bainbridge was drunk. He knew that the end was coming and he was not about to go out sober. He didn't. When the ice that they were stranded on capsized he was well into a bottle of brandy and they all went down. Those that didn't drown immediately were crushed by the ice.

MOM TOLD ME THAT SHE wasn't sure if her dreams were dreams or hallucinations. I had no idea. I suggested that she mention them to Dr. Silverstein but she just shrugged. I was ready to open the little pantry and get a few more people to add to my notebook. Mom bought me a new one and I left the first page blank to see what people would write. It took a few days for anyone to notice that we were back in business and the first entry read. "THAT LITTLE GIRL SHOULD NOT HAVE DIED." Yes it was all in capitals and when I compared the handwriting against the previous entry it looked as if it had been written by the same person. I was looking at it when Mom walked into the room and I quickly hid the notebook.

Jackie, did someone write in the notebook?" Mom asked. She had noticed. Mom's are like that.

"Yes." I handed her the notebook. Mom looked at it for a lot longer than it took for her to read the entry and said, "yes that should never have happened. I was too young to be rowing to the mainland to get food." She handed me the notebook and left without saying another word.

THE SINKING OF THE HELEN SNOW was big news. At first when the boat didn't return to New Bedford, and the following season when some of the other whalers found debris washed up on a rocky beach in Greenland. Captain Bainbridge was a legend but it was Mom who made the headlines; and not in a good way. All the Boston newspapers had a field day with the story. The Boston Advance headline was, 'FEMALE FIRST MATE CAUSES BOAT TO SINK.' The Boston Herald's headline was even worse. 'LADIES AND RATS SHOULD NEVER BE ALLOWED ON SHIPS.' It was only the Boston Globe that was somewhat reasonable. They did run a photo of the debris of the Helen Snow that had washed up on the beach but their headline read, 'CAPT. BAINBRIDGE WENT A BRIDGE TOO FAR. FEMALE FIRST MATE A DISASTER.'

MY FATHER CALLED AGAIN. Mom was in her increasingly usual funks and was on the couch trying to nap. She answered the phone. "It's your father," she said handing me the phone. "He wants to talk to you." Now, just for reference, my Dad was long gone way before I was born. I knew that his name was Harry and that was about it. I hung up the phone. I wasn't interested.

Spring was in full bloom; the mayflowers were out and the notebook was cranking. The messages were mostly positive, a bit like the feeling of spring itself. There was some chatter about the

public pathway that they were thinking of building but mostly the comments were about the weather and the ocean and a little about the girl that had drowned in the winter.

I was doing ok with my appointments and Dr. Silverstein told Mom that I didn't need to come once a month, that once every two months would be OK, and that I was responding really well to the treatment. That part is the good news; the bad news was that Mom was not doing well. She was sleeping late and before she had had two or three cups of coffee in the morning, she wasn't making any sense. One morning she told me that if the ice had not capsized that they could have made it. "We had plenty of food and if the Cap'n hadn't drunk all the grog, we would have had plenty grog to last us all winter."

Another time she said, "I could have made it back to Tuckernuck Island with the Spaghettios if the tide wasn't running so strong. I should have known better. It was a full moon." I let these outbursts slide. What else could I do? Other than what she was saying she seemed perfectly normal.

Mom was on the other side of the island visiting a friend when there was a gentle knock on the door. I put my book down and opened it. There was a slight man dressed in khaki pants and a faint floral shirt. I thought that he might be a salesman until he asked, "are you Jackie?"

I said, "yes." The man looked at his shoes and said, "I'm your father." Now when you live on an island you get to expect the unexpected but this was completely unexpected. I wasn't sure if I should invite him in or punch him out so I did neither. I looked at my shoes and wished that I had polished them.

The man said, "is your Mom home?" He was looking over my shoulder.

"She's on the other side of the island and won't be back for at

least a few hours. You can come in." It was awkward. For a start, I have always been an awkward kid with the situation made worse by me being homeschooled. My father sat on the edge of the chair and hesitated at first, but then said, "first of all I am sorry that I have been a crappy Dad." I thought to myself, "you haven't even been a Dad," but I didn't say anything. My father shifted a little in the chair. He was skinny and I figured that he had no meat on his bum so the seat must have been uncomfortable. He said, "I won't stay long but I wanted to tell you that your Mom was aboard the Helen Snow. It's a true story."

I had no idea what to say so I offered him some tea but he said, "I have to be going." As he walked toward the door he said, "the Helen Snow should never have sunk. It was gross negligence. And that little girl should never have drowned." With that he was gone. He was so slight that it was almost as if he was swallowed up by the wind.

Mom came home late in the afternoon. She asked if I had done my homework and then made me some scrambled eggs. I wasn't hungry but tried to eat them but for some reason they tasted slimy. Mom had been dressing a little flamboyantly lately and she was wearing a pink scarf. She said, "Jackie, does this scarf make me look gay or happy." I looked at her. She seemed to have shrunk in the last few months. "Mom you have always been gay to me." Mom laughed and went upstairs.

It wasn't long after when her dementia really kicked in.

I reached out to her friend on the other side of the island but she was in denial. "Oh your Mom is just a little eccentric. Give her some space." I thought that she might be right until Mom mistook a lampshade for a hat.

The summer went by so quickly and sadly the food pantry lay empty. Mom was in no mind to shop. The notebook seemed to

have run its course. There were very few entries and most were banal. Someone complained about the fries at Cookies Diner. Another asked if anyone had any blankets to spare for the winter but didn't leave any contact info. One afternoon, just as the first flick of a winter wind blew in across the island, I took a walk. It looked like they had started to clear brush for the new footpath and it made my walk to the notebook stand easier. I was on the cliff edge just above the stand when I saw a man opening the door. He was small and had his back to me. I saw him reach in and take the notebook. He reached for the pen and seemed to be writing something. He was the first person that I had ever seen write in the notebook, or take food out of the food pantry, for that matter. It was only when he replaced the notebook and turn that I recognized him. It was my father. He took a moment to look at the ocean and then walked the path away from where I was huddling. My heart was pounding. I waited until he was well out of sight then scampered down to the stand. I looked around before opening the door and looked around again before taking out the notebook. I tentatively opened it to the most recent entry. There, in capital letters, he had written. "YOUR MOM IS GONE. SHE IS COMING WITH ME." I was stunned. I quickly replaced the notebook and stumbled back up the path. I so wished that I had a dog that I could talk to. I had no one. The wind had picked up and was blowing in my face. It was biting cold.

Mom was asleep when I got back home. I sat shivering in the cubby in my bedroom where I could see the ocean. There was a light chop but the wind was with the tide and not against it and the water was relatively calm for the amount of wind blowing. I fell asleep against the cold windowpane but didn't feel anything until the morning when the fingers of sun lit the first snow of the season. An inch or so had fallen overnight. I noticed that there were some footprints leading down toward the water. The wind

had covered them but I could still see their outline. I pulled on a heavier pair of pants and the heavy wool socks that Mom had knitted for me a couple of years earlier. My winter jacket was in the closet by the front door. I didn't think to look in on Mom; she had been sleeping late most days. I saw that the coffee pot had not been readied but thought nothing out it.

The wind had died down overnight and it was cold out but not that biting cold that comes with windchill.

I noticed that the footprints led from our front door and I knew where they were heading. As far as I can recall Mom had never visited the notebook stand, or the food pantry. She always said that it was my domain, my project, if you will. I pulled my jacket in closer and followed the footprints. I had a funny feeling in my gut. Funny, not as in funny haha but as in funny peculiar. Most of the birds had headed south but there were a few sparrows searching for food. I made a mental reminder to fill up the bird feeders when I got back. I was on the edge of the cliff overlooking the ocean down toward the notebook stand when I saw them. Mom was dressed only in her nightgown; Dad was wearing the same khaki pants and his faint floral shirt. Neither had jackets on. They didn't see me. I didn't know what to do. Just then I saw a snowy owl land on the limb of a tree right next to me. Snowy owls are the only owls that sleep at night and hunt during the day.

I saw my father take Mom's hand and they walked toward the edge of the cliff. There was a hoarse croak from the owl and I looked its way. The bird gave me a piercing stare and held it for what felt like a minute but it was probably just fifteen seconds.

When I looked back my parents were gone.

It's interesting to note that the Boston Globe ran two stories the day of Mom's death. Purely by coincidence I think. A fishing

boat out of New Bedford had found some human remains on a beach in Greenland. A forensic team had matched the teeth to those of Captain Bainbridge. Strangely enough there was a second skull on the same beach. There was no match for it and the only thing that the coroner said was that it may have come from a female, a young female.

The second story that the Boston Globe ran was that Governor Baker of Massachusetts had started a food relief program for the people that live on the outlying islands along the coast of the Commonwealth. The young girl in the rowing boats death had sparked an outrage.

There was no mention of my parents jump into the cold ocean between the mainland of Nantucket and Tuckernuck Island.

THE NULLABOR

WHAT I REMEMBER MOST was the dust. Well Bill and Belinda and Meggie too. And that damn kangaroo. We will get to them but my immediate concern was the dust. It was a thick red dust that settled on everything. It got up my nose, into my eyes and on my clothes and that first night when I readied camp, I noticed that the dust had seeped through the zipper on my backpack and stained my new jacket. I didn't mind. I had left home looking for adventure and was finding it in the Outback of Australia.

I had arrived in Fremantle as part of a yacht race from South Africa. I was a pimply kid with a shock of blond hair and thirst for something that I couldn't quite define. I just had to go and see a world that I knew was waiting for me. My parents must have been nuts to let me go but if truth be told, I had already left. I had been drafted into the army and for the better part of two years I was a Guest of the Government, as we liked to say. I was away crawling through some mud or shooting my tank; yes at the tender age of 18 I was a tank commander. I could barely see over the steering wheel. When I look at those photos of Governor Michael Dukakis when he was running for president of the United States trying to look macho in a tank, they remind me of myself. A steel helmet too big and my eyes just appearing above the rim of the gunners station. But I digress.

We had been minor celebrities when we arrived in Australia. We had won the race and they trotted us out in front of huge

crowds and introduced us to captive audiences. At least they clapped but I thought that it was all a bit foolish. We were just barely washed sailors. It was at one of those receptions that I had a brilliant idea. I thought that I might hitchhike to Sydney. For those of you geographically challenged Sydney is on the other side of the country; some 2,500 miles away. In-between is a desert. The great Nullarbor Plain, a vast treeless expanse that covers much of the Australian continent. It seemed like a good idea at the time and I was a naive kid with an overly optimistic attitude. Plus I had received a letter from my friend Frizzle asking me to join him for a race to Hobart. When Frizzle calls, you go.

When I left Fremantle things looked good. It was hot but not too bad and I had arranged for a ride as far as Northam. It was a good start except for the traffic in Perth. That was a bit of a nightmare but soon we were out of town and on our way. My friend Dirk said to me, "You know it's a long way to Sydney don't you? Most people take a plane." I laughed at him at the time but I soon found out that he was not wrong. It was a long way just to get out of Western Australia. Dirk dropped me off on the side of the road and wished me good luck.

"You're going to need it," he said as he drove off. I didn't care. I had some cans of bully beef and a few bottles of Fireball in my backpack and was just thrilled to see the whole of Australia in front of me. It was hot and there was no shade anywhere to be found. There were no cars either. I stuck my thumb out when a tractor went by. The guy pulled over. "I'm only going five miles up the road mate but you are welcome to hop a ride." I climbed on and we trundled down the road until we got to a big gate with a sign that read 'Shenandoah' and he turned to me and said, "This is as far as I'm going but if you don't get a ride, walk up the road. There are two houses, ours is the one on the left. You are welcome to stay. I shook his hand and it felt like a huge pile of calluses.

I stood for two hours but there were no cars so I thought that I would take the man up on his offer. It was just getting dark when I knocked on their front door. A slight lady answered. "Ah," she said. "We were expecting you for dinner. Come on in. We even have a place set for you. There are very few cars this time of year. Bill will be down in a moment. He's just brushing off the dirt of the day."

The house was modest and cool. There was a through breeze. "I'm Belinda." She led me to the porch out back. "We farm mostly wheat here but we do have some fields with barley and canola and oats. We also have a pig pen but that's for our freezer."

Bill came down. "Ah," he said. "We were expecting you. There are very few cars this time of year and Sydney is a long way away. Come and sit." He pulled up a chair. "Lemonade, beer or something stronger?"

I said, "Just a lemonade thanks."

"You sound South African. You are not from New Zealand are you? They have a terrible accent. We love South Africans don't we Belinda?"

"Yea our neighbors two farms over are from South Africa. I think that he was some kind of muckety-muck in the government during apartheid. We don't talk about it and I think that he prefers it that way."

"I'm from Durban," I said.

"What are you doing here? Are you lost?" I told them about the race and that I was heading to Sydney to join a boat called Bumblebee for a race from Sydney to Hobart."

"Heard of it," Bill said. Belinda brought over a pile of pork chops. "This was Emma. She was ever so sweet but you know when your time is up, your time is up and her time was up." Emma was delicious. So was the salad and the potatoes that had

been lathered in bacon fat. We ate in silence. Bill was scoffing down his dinner with Belinda watching closely. Bill used a crust of bread to soak up the last bit of gravy.

"Well that wasn't bad for a last supper," he announced. Belinda smiled. I was confused. "What time will Dr. Haggis or Haggy or whatever his name is going be here tomorrow?"

"Your appointment is for seven. Dr. Haggy said that he needed a half hour to set things up."

"OK that sounds good," Bill said. "I think that this calls for something stronger. What is your name anyway son?" I told him my name was Vladimir but that my friends called me Skip.

"Then Skip it is," he said. "Can I get you something stronger than lemonade? I have a good American bourbon. I have hardly touched the bottle but I think that I might need a little to help me sleep tonight."

"Sure," I said. I will keep you company." Belinda said, "me too, but make mine just a half glass." Bill left. Belinda turned to me. "He's been a good man," she said. "We have three wonderful kids who will be here early tomorrow. He always provided but his time has come."

Bill returned with three glasses. He sat and placed one in front of me, the other in front of Belinda. "To a new future," he said as we clinked glasses. "You see Skip, my time has come and it's time to go. Belinda can run this place. If I don't take things into my own hands it's just going to be a mess. I'm going to be dead in a couple of months anyway."

That got my attention. "Yup Dr. Haggis or whatever his name is, is coming by tomorrow to do the dirty deed. Just like Belinda said about Emma. When your time is up your time is up. My time is up. This time tomorrow they will be burying me out near that haystack over there. I'm riddled with bloody cancer. Started in my

lungs. I used to be a heavy smoker. But now it's everywhere. The good Doc gave me a couple of months and that was a couple of months ago and so Belinda and I think that my time is up. This Haggis guy, whatever his name is, he's coming with the good stuff. I want to smoke a last cigar before I go. It won't kill me." Bill laughed at his own joke. I didn't find it funny. I was still a bit confused.

Belinda took my hand. "You don't have to stay if you don't want to. The kids are coming. They all live close by. One of them can give you a ride to the road so that you can keep on hitchhiking. For tonight though we have a lovely guest room. Bill and I used to entertain a lot but not so much anymore. I'm not sure why."

Bill got up. "Just getting myself another glass. Anyone need a refill?"

"I'm OK Love," Belinda said. I stuck out my hand. I was going to need a stiff one after that conversation.

Bill said, "can you put a little Mozart on? I need some Mozart right about now." We sat in silence for a while listening to Mozart's symphony No. 40. The beautiful music carried into the still night air. Bill had his eyes shut while he listened. He had a slight smile on his face. Then suddenly he said, "I'm turning in Pet. We have a big day tomorrow. Can you show Skip his room before you come to bed? I will be waiting for you." Belinda nodded. I could see a tear forming in her left eye but she quickly turned away. "I think that it's going to be a full moon tonight," she said. Bill had already gone upstairs. I sat with Belinda for a while and then she said, "Let me show you to your room. I need to get some shuteye. It's going to be a busy day tomorrow."

The room was comfortable and I had a good view of the moon rising behind a stand of Eucalyptus. I knew that I was not

going to be able to sleep. This bit of news had really taken me by surprise. What I heard next took me even more by surprise. I wasn't sure that I was hearing things right. It sounded like a headboard banging against a wall. Then I heard Belinda moan. Then the headboard banging got more intense and Belinda moaned more and then it all went quiet. I lay awake for a while. The moon had risen above the house so I couldn't see it anymore and I finally fell asleep.

There was a soft knock at my door. The sun was just rising and I heard some dogs barking in the distance. "It's Belinda. The kids are here. Bill is up and Dr. Haggy will be here in a half hour or so. There is breakfast if you want."

I pulled my pants on and dug a clean T-shirt out of my bag and went downstairs. It had a little red dust stain which I tried to brush off but Australian dust is quite persistent. Bill was dressed in a suit. There were two men and a lady at the table. They were tucking into some scrambled eggs and bacon. Bill said, "I'm surprised that I still fit into this thing. I haven't worn it since our cow Bessy won an award at the town fair and that was more than a few years ago. That was back when we kept a few cows." I wasn't hungry. Then far in the distance I saw some dust rising. It was a car approaching. I knew that it would be Dr. Haggy. The kids noticed it too and all conversation stopped. The car got closer and then pulled up in front of the house. A rumpled old man stepped out. He had a bag that looked like it was from the sixties. He knocked on the door. Belinda opened it.

"Aaah," I heard Dr. Haggy say. "Just need to know where to set up."

Belinda was all business. "Bill wants to go out on the deck in the back. There is a chaise lounge there. He wants to be able to see his wheat fields." She directed Dr. Haggy to the deck. "Can I get you anything?" She asked.

"A cup of tea would be nice. I presume Bill is up and ready."

"He's ready. He's out back smoking a cigar. I will get you a cuppa."

The kids were feeling a bit awkward. Neither Bill or Belinda had explained my presence and I was feeling more than a little out of place. I thought that I should leave. Bill came out onto the deck. "Belinda would you mind cooking up a few pikelets. I'm hungry."

Belinda returned a few minutes later with some tiny pancakes. "I have strawberries and some sour cream."

"Thanks Pet," he said.

Dr. Haggy said, "almost ready. Just finish your pikelets and I will finish my tea and then we can get on with it."

"I'm sort of not hungry anymore," Bill said. "Let's just get on with things."

Dr. Haggy had a contraption set up next to the chaise lounge. "Right," he said. "The signed documents have all been filed with the court. We are good to go. Just take a seat and we can get cracking."

The kids and Belinda gathered. I felt like a spare wheel, or to be more precise, an intruder into a very personal family matter. Bill said, "Does anyone mind if I loosened my belt and top button. I guess I don't really fit into this suit anymore."

No one said anything. Bill slipped a couple of notches and undid his top button. "That's much better, now let's get on with things."

Dr. Haggy cleaned the veins on his left hand off with some kind of alcohol and inserted a needle. "OK," he explained. "None of this is going to hurt. Bill you won't feel anything. Your Dad will not feel any pain. Now this might be a good time to say your

goodbyes. His daughter kissed him on the lips. "Sail away Daddy," she said. His oldest son took him by the hand. "Go in peace Pop. You were an awesome father. We could not have asked for anything more." The youngest was reluctant. He kissed him on the forehead but could not say anything. It was all caught up in his throat and his tears dropped onto his Dad's forehead.

"It's OK son, I know that you all loved me and your Mum. My time has come and it's time for me to ride that red rooster into the sky. Belinda can you please put on some Mozart?" She left briefly and the sound of Mozart's 42nd drifted in on the early morning breeze. Belinda took him by the hand. "You were a good man Bill. You loved me, you loved the kids, you even loved that mangy cat. You loved the land and you loved your country. Ride that red rooster and look down on us and keep us safe."

Dr Haggy twisted the button and I could see the clear liquid starting to flow. Then Belinda said, "Skip did you want to say something?" I was brushing tears away and really didn't want to say anything but I took him by the hand and said, "It was a privilege to know you sir." Bill closed his eyes. Belinda took his hand. We were all crying. Dr. Haggy turned up the dose and Bill went off on a rooster to wherever people go when they die. It was one of the most humbling experiences of my life. Less than 24 hours earlier I had been a wet-nosed kid bumming a ride from some old guy on a tractor.

We sat for a while until Haggy said, "I had better be going. Anyone need a ride?" I needed a ride but didn't say anything. Dr. Haggy left and we watched the thin trail of dust follow him until he rounded the corner at the end of the property. We sat in silence until there was another car kicking up dust approaching the house. It was the coroner. Belinda met him at the front door.

"Saw Dr. Haggy on the way. He gave me the time of death

as 8:05. I just need to confirm that he's dead and have you sign a few papers. We have it cleared with the town that he can be buried on his property just as soon as I file the correct papers. He winked and said, "no one is going to come out here and check so if you want to drop him in the hole sooner rather than later it should not be a problem."

I was in shock. The children were crying. I was trying not to cry. Belinda was still all business. She led the coroner to Bill who was lying peacefully on the chaise lounge and he looked for a pulse. "Yup he's dead," he announced. Just let me get you some paperwork and I'll be off." Belinda offered him some ice tea but he was gone as quickly as he arrived.

"I have notified the neighbors," Belinda announced. They will be here at noon. I'm going to need some help getting Bill to the gravesite. You boys can probably manage it but Skip, if it's OK with you we might need another person. Bill put on some weight at the end."

Bill had built his own pine coffin. It was fairly basic. He had also used his backhoe to dig the hole. The oldest kid went to the barn to get the coffin. "Dad did a good job with this," he said. "It seems a shame to bury it. Maybe we should just stick Dad in a bag and keep this box for storage. He would never know."

"Now that's not funny," Belinda said. "Come on you guys help me with your Dad." I took his left arm. He was still a little warm but I could tell that rigamortis was starting to set in. We lifted him and was just about to place him in the box when Belinda spoke up. "Your Dad hated that suit. I guess we never thought it through carefully enough. It's the last thing that he would want to be buried in. I'll get his favorite T-shirt. You boys are going to have to undress him. Sissy you need to look away. Come with me, I will make us some tea. Skip you can help." I could hardly believe where I was and what I was doing.

It was starting to get hot. The boys had his pants off and somehow managed to get rid of the jacket and shirt and put on the T-shirt. I took his socks off. He looked very peaceful. The two sons and me lifted him and lowered him into the coffin. We closed the lid and placed his boots on top. "Dad always wanted to go out with his boots on," Simon said.

"Wait," Jack said. "Open the coffin. He needs a little Mozart to take with him." Jack grabbed the LP from the turntable and placed it in his Dad's hands. "Anything else?" Simon asked, "how about the rest of that bourbon. You know how Dad liked a little drink every now and then." Jack grabbed the bottle. I looked down. Bill was there in his underpants, a stained T-shirt, a bottle of bourbon in his hand and an LP of Mozart's Greatest Concerto's for Piano under his arm. It was time to close the coffin for good.

Jack lowered the lid. He crossed himself. I found myself doing the same even though I'm an atheist but it felt like the respectful thing to do. Simon put a nail in all four corners and the three of us carried Bill to the gravesite.

People started to show around 11:30. They were all farmers. Strong men with calloused hands and tough women with lines in their faces. Not much was said. Belinda thanked everyone and then asked Sissy to go into the barn. I helped Jack and Simon lower the coffin into the grave. It was getting really hot. I could still not believe what I was doing. Then, from inside the barn, came the faint strains of Waltzing Matilda. Belinda threw the first bit of dirt onto the coffin followed by Simon, who was the eldest, then Sissy then Jack. "Get some dirt under your fingernail," Belinda urged me. "Chuck some dirt in there."

There was a little reception in the barn but most were working farmers and they had things to do. I talked to one man who had come all the way from Tamminn, fifty miles up the road in

the direction that I was going. He offered me a ride. I said my goodbyes and we left.

JIM DROPPED ME on the side of the road. "Sorry Mate," he said. I wish I could drive you all the way to Sydney but the missus might just miss me and shack up with some other bloke while I'm gone."

"I'm fine," I said. "Thanks for the ride." Moments later a car came by and I stuck out my thumb. The car pulled over. It was a young couple with two small kids. I squished in the back seat between two car seats. They were going fifty or so miles in the right direction then turning right. They dropped me off just as it was getting dark. What a day it had been.

It was starting to get cold. The thing about a desert is this. People always assume that it's hot and it is hot during the day, but at night it can get really cold. I gathered some wood and lit a fire. The night animals were starting to make themselves known. I had one of those new sleeping bags with some kind of magical synthetic stuffing. It promised to be warm and it was. I had found a nice clear spot and the fire was warm. I was still bothered by Bill's death. I could not imagine how one could just decide that their time was up and go ahead with it. I don't think that I would have the courage no matter my prognosis.

I opened a can of bully beef and one of the smaller bottles of Fireball and listened to the night sounds. To be honest Bill had taught me a lesson. Life is short. I thought of where I was just 24 hours before, sitting with Bill and Belinda enjoying dinner and some bourbon and Bill saying "this time tomorrow I will be in that hole next to the haystack." And there he was, in the hole, boots on top of his coffin, covered in dirt, his last resting place. His kids had left before I left and I wondered how Belinda was doing.

The Fireball kicked in and I fell asleep. I could hear dingoes in the distance and tossed some more wood on the fire. The last thing I needed was a dingo munching on my toes.

It was just getting light when I saw a small red convertible coming belting down the road. I jumped up and ran and waved and the car pulled over. "I'm trying to get to Sydney," I said. I hadn't noticed that the driver was an immaculately dressed stunningly good looking blond.

"You're a mess mate but get your kit and I can get you a couple hundred miles up the road. My name is Meggie." I kicked out the last of the coals and grabbed the rest of my gear. Meggie waited patiently. She could not have been more than 20. The top was down so it was hard to talk but I had a very pleasant time looking down her blouse which was flapping open. She wasn't well endowed but there was more than a mouthful there and we ate up the miles. It was another hot day.

Meggie said, "this is my turnoff. I can drop you here or you can come to my place. Problem is my Mum and Dad are home. I'm not sure if I can get you up the stairs and into my bedroom without them noticing. That plus my bed creaks. I thought for a moment and then said, "You have a barn on your property right?"

"Why yes we do," Meggie said. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

I said, "Let's go." Meggie giggled and gunned the engine of her Corvette and in five minutes we pulled into a small farm. Meggie said, "I need to drive slowly now. Dad will see the dust and know that I'm home. Luckily the barn was near the main road. We keep our horse in it but he will be in the field now.

Meggie drove slowly and she parked her car behind the barn where her Dad would not see it. "My Mum is away visiting friends," she said.

Meggie took me by the hand. "I have never done this before but I like you. Well I have had sex before, just a few times, but you seem mysterious. What I meant was that I have never had sex in a barn before. With horses."

I knew that I was going to get lucky. The barn had been recently mucked out and smelled of fresh hay. Meggie led me. "I only have a horse blanket," she said. "It smells a little of Trigger but I think that it will be OK. My Dad usually takes a nap after lunch so we should be good. Meggie started to undo her bra. I think that she was more anxious than I was and I was pretty anxious. She slipped the bra out of her left sleeve and kissed me long and hard on the lips. She laid out Trigger's blanket and said, "I'm going to be on the bottom so don't worry about that."

Meggie took off her top. Her tits pointed skyward. She slowly removed her pants. I had no clue what to do. A day earlier I had seen Bill die; now I was seeing a beautiful woman remove her pants. Life could not be more strange; or more interesting, depending on how you look at it.

I fumbled with my shorts and had them around my ankles when Meggie said, "Is that a South African flag you're wearing?" I had been to the Rugby World Cup and in a moment of patriotism I had bought some underpants with the South African flag on them.

"You had better get those off before I lose interest. The Springboks had thumped the Wallabies, the Australian rugby team and had won the World Cup. I dropped them and stuffed them under Trigger's blanket, safely out of sight. We were just getting started when two chickens flew up onto the partition between the stable and the pig pen. They were staring at us, clucking while we were fucking, if you will. It sort of unnerved me and I felt my performance starting to lag. Meggie said, "don't mind them. Concentrate on me. I was just getting back into the swing of things, so to speak, when Trigger appeared at the door. We were

using his blanket and he was none too pleased. He let out a loud harrumph and I started to lose my rhythm again. Meggie said, "Just ignore him and keep going." I kept going and was almost there when I heard the clink of a bucket. Meggie said, "Fuck it. We have to make a run for it. It's my Dad coming to feed the pigs. Luckily there was a back door. I grabbed my shirt and pants and Meggie grabbed her skirt but she forgot her knickers on the floor. She was about to turn back when her Dad said, "Meggie are you in there?"

We hid behind the stable and could hear her Dad talking to the pigs and chickens. "Let's just hold on until he leaves, then we can get back into the stable and out the front. "I think that it might be best if I run you back to the road so that you can continue on to Sydney," Meggie said.

"I agree." The mood had passed anyway. We heard her Dad talking to Trigger and then closing the stable door. "Quick," Meggie said. She opened the back door just a little and peeked in. The coast was clear. I heard her Dad walking along the side of the shed. The buckets were clinking. I slipped into the stable right behind Meggie and closed the door behind me. I noticed that Meggie's undies were draped over the stall door. Meggie grabbed them and we were out of there. She was going to drop me at the end of their driveway but decided that it might be best if she drove me a few miles up the road. She kissed me long and hard and then left. I was alone. Luckily there was a cool breeze, well sort of cool. There were no cars so I set up camp and cracked another can of bully beef and eased the top off of a nip of Fireball.

I WAS JUST WAKING UP when I heard the whine of a truck. In the distance I could see an orange Bedford truck coming my way. I hastily put on my shirt and ran to the side of the road and stuck

my thumb out. The truck slowed and then stopped a hundred yards or so past me. I heard some crunching of gears and the truck started to back up.

"Where you going Mate?" A very Australian man had rolled down the driver's side window.

"Sydney," I said.

"Hop in. Get your clobber and hop in. This is your lucky day. We are also going to Sydney." I ran back and picked up my backpack and sleeping bag and jumped into the rear of the cab. The driver extended his hand. "I'm Croc and this here is Dingo." I shook their hands. Croc and Dingo? They had to be shitting me.

"Yea we are musicians. We played a few gigs in Perth and Fremantle and are heading home to Sydney. Our stuff is in the back there. If you are thirsty there's beer in the esky. I looked behind my seat and there were three coolers. They were all full of beer.

"Don't leave the lid open too long. The truck doesn't have AC and it's going to get hot later. I'd like to keep the ice for as long as possible." I grabbed a beer and looked at my watch. It was 8:05. I thought of Bill. For many years after at 8:05 I would think of Bill.

The two were not very talkative and I nodded off to sleep. Suddenly there was a loud bang. "That's another one," Croc said. "There will be plenty more." I looked behind and there was a dead kangaroo in the road.

"We fit the truck with a roo bar. You may have noticed. It's shaped like a triangle. These stupid animals have no clue. They always jump in front of the truck. The roo bar deflects them. Quite ingenious actually. What do you think Dingo? I guess that we have probably run over close to thirty kangaroos since we left Sydney." Dingo nodded.

"Maybe more than that," he said. "The fuckers are everywhere. You know Skip," he said. "If the truck breaks down you need to get under the car. There is no shade out here. The only shade is under the car." I opened another beer.

"We play Appalachian hillbilly music. That's why there are so many banjo's back there. Funnily enough the Aussies love it even though there is only one real mountain in this whole bloody country. Ayres Rock. You ever been there?"

"Nope, this is my first time in Australia."

"Yea don't bother. The place is crawling with tourists."

Croc said, "You are forgetting about the Blue Mountains." Dingo waved his hand. "I told you about the Rockies didn't I?" He turned to me. "I once booked a gig in Longwood, Colorado. This was before Croc and me were an item. They said that they would cover my plane fare and chuck in a few hundred bucks for my time. They didn't know that I lived in Australia but it was too late when they found out. The contract had already been signed. I had a blast. I got a tour of the Coors Brewery and did a little gambling. Real nice people those Americans. Have you ever been to America?"

"Nah," I said. "Not yet anyway."

The truck did break down but lucky for us it was in the middle of the night. We were just pulling into Kalgoorlie when the engine started to splutter. "Fuck," Croc said. "I think the old lady might just be shitting the bed."

"You are such a pessimist," Dingo said. "This old girl has plenty of life left in her." We made it into town. I was completely deserted. "There is nothing that we can do until morning. Let's get some rest," Croc said.

I grabbed my sleeping bag and stumbled out of the truck. It had been a long day and I had had more than a few beers;

and nothing to eat. I found a grassy area and climbed into my sleeping bag. It only took seconds for me to fall asleep but before I did I thought of Belinda; and Meggie. Adventure is where you find it.

The sun had barely broken the horizon when I felt a wet slobbering kiss on my mouth. It was a dog and a very mangy one at that. I could barely focus but could see at the end of the chain was some wrinkled old man.

"You'd better be getting up mate," he said. "If the cops find you here they will put you right in the clink." I pulled myself up onto one arm and tried to focus.

"Get up and I will make you a cup of tea." The dog started to bark. It was an Australian Ridgeback but it was hard to tell. His face was all puffy and there was some puss oozing out its cheek.

"Shaddup," the man yelled. "There is no need for bad manners." He swung the chain and hit the dog right on its bad cheek. Puss splashed onto my sleeping bag. I clambered out of bed and started to roll up my bag. I glanced over and saw that the bedford was still there.

"Follow me," the man said. "And Bert, you be a good dog ok?" I followed the man. His house was a lean-to made out of corrugated iron. All around were broken household items. "I fix other people's shit," the man said. "Come inside." I followed him into his shelter. There were flies everywhere. The place was a mess. "Tea or coffee? I have both."

"Tea please." He gave Bert some water. I could see that the wound on his face had been laid open. Bert whimpered. The old man plugged his kettle in. "I always leave my kettle unplugged. That's how the government spies on you, you know that right? They listen in through your kettle." Now I was starting to get a little worried. I could see that Dingo was up and was taking a piss

on the back left wheel of the Bedford. The old man tipped some dirt out of a cup and poured in the hot water. He immediately unplugged the kettle. "Those fuckers are not going to know my business, no siree. I used to work for British Intelligence and boy would they like to know what I know?"

The tea had some weird stuff floating on top. I was trying to be polite. My Mum had always insisted that manners were a virtue.

"You hungry?"

I said, "no."

"You must be hungry. Look how skinny you are. You are just a bag of bones, right Bert?" The old man cackled.

"I have plenty of grub. You need to eat. Go on, help yourself. There is plenty in the fridge." I saw that Croc was up, also taking a piss. I hoped that they wouldn't leave without me.

The old man was insistent. "Yer must be hungry." When he had his back to me I tipped my tea out onto the dirt floor. I was actually getting a little hungry. The scrambled eggs that Belinda had made for me and her children was the last meal that I had eaten, well except for half a can of bully beef.

"Look in the fridge. It's full." The fridge, probably a repossession from someone who couldn't pay their bill, was struggling against the building heat. It shuddered every now and then. I thought that I would be polite and opened the fridge door. The old man cackled. He had removed all the racks and sitting there, skinned from head to toe, was a full grown kangaroo. I looked closer and saw that the right arm was missing. That was when I realized why there were so many flies. The right arm was on the counter stuffed into the meat grinder. Most of it had been ground down but there was a little of the forepaw sticking out.

I ran. The old man cackled. Croc was just firing up the truck.

"We thought that we had lost you," he said. "We are getting this old girl to a service station."

It was not a big deal and they fixed the Bedford in a couple of hours. Meanwhile I managed to score seven bags of ice and some egg salad sandwiches for the three of us. The beer was cold and the sandwiches excellent. There was just over two thousand miles between us and Sydney.

We drove through the day passing through The Dundas Nature Reserve until we got to WagaWaga, a small outback town. Croc said, "Let's stop for some beers." I thought that he wanted to fill the coolers but he wanted to find a bar and hit it hard. We all hit it hard. Apparently on the way over they had done a gig there and the payment was in booze. Dingo unloaded part of the equipment and set up a stand in the corner. He was on guitar and vocals. Croc was on drums and banjo. They were actually quite good and by midnight the place was rocking. I was more than a little in the tank when I made a request.

"I need you to play a song for my friend Bill. Can you guys play Waltzing Matilda?" Croc gave me a look. "Of course, but only the banjo version."

"This song goes out to Bill," he announced. I knew that Belinda would be happy. They rocked it and I have to tell you, there was a tear in my eye when they finished. I could not imagine the courage it took to pick the last moment of your life. I understood and respected Bill, but was hard pressed to imagine if I could do the same thing. I guess it might be an age thing. I had barely started my life; Bill was nearing the end of his no matter what his cancer had in mind.

We left early the next morning. Croc and Dingo had a gig in Sydney. I was still hoping to make it in time for the Sydney to Hobart Race but the clock was ticking.

We hit another kangaroo; the tenth since they had picked me up. It had been hopping along quite happily alongside the Bedford when it suddenly decided to make a sharp left. It clipped the roo bar but instead of being deflected, it got flicked into the air and landed on the roof of the truck. "Fuck," said Croc. "That fucker had better not of have dented my truck."

We pulled over. There was just some blood, quite a lot of it in fact, but no dent in the roof. We hauled it off and dumped it on the side of the road. "What, do the vultures come and get this?" I asked.

"Nah, Croc said, "we don't have vultures in Australia. The dingos will get most of it and I am not talking about my mate Dingo here. What they leave the eagles will make themselves available and when they are full, the bugs will take out the rest. This guy will be nothing but dirt and shit in two days."

I noticed that there was less dust and some trees. "We are going to be going up soon," Dingo said. "The Blue Mountains. The pride of Australia, well except for Olivia Newton John of course. Things are going to get real pretty really soon." Dingo was right. We wound our way through a eucalyptus forest stopping briefly in Katoomba for a quick lunch. "If the old girl holds up we should be in Sydney by daybreak." He patted the steering wheel. "You keep on going old girl. When we get to Sydney you can have a long rest."

I had been doing some of the driving while the others slept but Croc wanted to drive us to the finish line. It was just past dawn when we crested the Blue Mountains and could see Sydney in the far distance. There was a thick haze and I smelled smoke. "Fuck," Dingo said. "Fucking bushfires." He tried to get a Sydney radio station but instead picked up one in Parramatta.

"The fire is starting to gain ground," the announcer said matter-of-factly. This one is a doozie. Parts of the M4 are closed.

Officials are trying to divert traffic but this fire is spreading fast. "Fuck," Dingo said, "we are not going to make our gig." Croc nodded. "That's what you get from living in Australia," he said. "Merry fucking Christmas."

The next day would be Christmas Day. The Sydney to Hobart yacht race started the day after, Boxing Day. I knew that Frizzle, the skipper of Bumblebee would hold my spot open until the last minute but I also knew that there would be a ton of up and coming kids gagging for a ride on the boat favored to win. We got closer to the flames and the traffic started to back up. We were picking up a radio station out of Sydney and they were reporting the same as the radio station in Parramatta. The M4 would be closed indefinitely. We could see the red lights of the fire trucks and see the helicopters overhead dropping buckets of water on the flames. The esky that had been full of beer when Croc and Dingo picked me up was sadly empty.

"What if we take the A6?" Dingo offered. "We might be able to get around this thing."

"That's more than ten miles ahead. We won't get there until New Year's eve."

Dingo said, "turn around. I used to live out here. You knew that. I know a backroad that will get us to the A6. The wind is blowing from the north. The fire is spreading to the south. If we can get around the north side we might be able to get into Sydney. Skip, what do you think?"

"I have no clue," I replied. "You are right about the north wind but what if it changes direction?"

"Then we will be well and truly fucked." Croc swung the truck over and we drove a few miles back from where we had just come from. Dingo said, "take the next right." Croc took the next right. We were driving through some of the outer suburbs of Sydney

when the forecaster on the radio announced that the fire had changed direction. The wind had swung to the east and the blaze was headed right down the A4 corridor. We learned later that over twenty people had been trapped in their cars and had died. Dingo had been right suggesting the A6 and we finally crossed the Sydney Harbor Bridge. "That's the Opera House," Croc pointed out. "One of these days me and Dingo will play a concert there. We are destined for it." That was when they kissed. I never saw it coming. Dingo looked back at me on the back set and winked. The traffic had backed up a little and Croc leaned over. "We made it," he said.

THEY DROPPED ME OFF at the Cruising Yacht Club of Australia. I told Croc and Dingo that I owed them everything that I had in the world and searched my pockets for loose change. Croc said, "no worries Mate." He really said that. Dingo said, "Fair dinkum. We don't need your money. Good luck with the race."

I knew that the yacht club would be where the Bumblebee crew would be. I had been to enough regattas to know that the night before a big race there would be a big piss-up at the hosting yacht club. I wasn't wrong. The crowd was in a jubilant mood. An easterly wind meant a bit of a tough slog out of Sydney Harbor but once the fleet had cleared the heads it would be a Nantucket Sleighride to Tasmania. For you non-sailors a Nantucket Sleighride is all about perfect sailing conditions.

Frizzle was at the bar holding court. He caught me out of the corner of his eye. "Skip you made it," he said. "I was just about to give your spot away. Have a beer. There is plenty of steak and yes, there are a lot of shrimp on the barbie. I got the crew hotel rooms for the night but you can stay with me and my missus in the spare room. Sorry if we don't have any christmas presents for you but the girls will be happy to see you."

I had met Frizzle and his wife and two young daughters during Cowes Week in England a year earlier. The girls took to me immediately. Frizzle showed me to my room. "Just so you know the girls will be up early tomorrow."

"I know," it's Christmas. "How do you manage without a chimney?"

"I never believed in that chimney crap," Frizzle said. "It's too hot here in Australia at Christmas. Our Santa swims across the pool with the presents strapped to his back. He leaves them by the pool filter."

We had an outstanding Christmas Day. It was as hot as all buggery and I was the girl's main Christmas present, well except for matching bicycles, each with a pink bow. Mrs. Frizzle was in top form and happy to see me.

There was a crew meeting at six. "We start tomorrow at noon. There are going to be a shitload of boats out on the water," Frizzle said. "By noon most have been drinking for five hours at least. We need to get a clean start. Skip will call the start from the bow. Skip you need to not fuck this up. The start is everything. Now I want you all to get off the piss and get an early night." I could see and smell the bushfires getting closer to Sydney. The wind had changed direction and was now out of the south.

I had a hard time sleeping that night. I was thinking about Bill, and Belinda and Meggie and Croc and Dingo and the race and I was thinking about Christmas and how much I missed my family. Christmas in South Africa is always a beach day. Dad used to pack a cooler and us five kids and Mum would spend the day in the rock pools and eating sardines hot off the grill that Dad had caught. I dozed off and was woken very early by some lorikeets outside my window. They were fussing and making a lot of noise. There was a milky sun out my window and the air smelled of

smoke. I got up and went downstairs looking for coffee. Frizzle was at the kitchen table studying the latest weather faxes.

"It looks like we are going to get the shit kicked out of us," he said. "At least for the first 24-hours." The wind switching to the south had changed the Nantucket Sleighride forecast to a bit of a wet bucket. Frizzle said, "There is a high pressure system building over the Blue Mountains. If it drifts south we may lose the breeze. Basically it's up to you to call the start. No pressure."

"I can manage," I replied.

I rode with Frizzle to the dock which was teeming with crew and spectators. The Sydney Hobart is a big deal in Australia, in fact all over the world. Frizzle chuckled me a T-shirt. I took a look at it and thought that it was a bit lame. There was a big Bumblebee on the back with the slogan, "We got a buzz on." I didn't say anything.

"It's crew uniform," Frizzle said. "You need to wear it for the start at least. It was the owners idea."

The start was off the Opera House. The wind was gusting but nothing too serious. Bush smoke was thick in the air. Frizzle had the crew in line and fully pumped. I was pumped, maybe a little too much. My adrenaline was soaking directly into my veins. I called a good start. Not brilliant, but good enough.

"We are heading for Milk Beach," Frizzle yelled. "There is less counter current there." It was a good call. The wind was 'up the chuff,' as they say in sailing lingo and the boat was a little on edge. There were spectators everywhere and Frizzle was right, most of them seemed to have had more than their fair share of beers. We were about to gybe when a small powerboat accelerated right in front of us. Frizzle threw the helm over and the boom came across. It caught me with a glancing blow on the side of my head as I was heading back to the cockpit. Now understand this, the boom is

twenty feet long made out of extruded aluminum. I was not quick enough and it catapulted me into the water. If a glancing blow to the head wasn't bad enough, and it was pretty bad, the prop that cut my feet was worse. I felt myself being sucked under. My feet were on fire. That was about when I passed out. Luckily we were close inshore when I went overboard and most of the fleet and spectators were in the middle of the channel otherwise I would have been completely ripped to pieces. A chopper airlifted me and made a beeline through a thick haze of acrid smoke to the the Royal Prince Albert Hospital.

I am still in hospital as I write this. My feet healed after a couple of months. My head not so much. I can remember arriving in Fremantle and I clearly remember the wildfires in the Blue Mountains. The bit in-between is a bit hazy. I think that there was a man by the name of Bill who was married to Belinda and they had three children; Jack, Simon, and a daughter. I can't remember her name. Sassy or Sissy I think, I can't remember. I also seem to remember somehow, and I may have this wrong, that Bill died. There was also a girl. She was pretty. I can't remember her name but I remember the name of her horse. I think that it was Trigger, or Tigger, but again, I'm not really sure. I think that Croc and Dingo are real and the many kangaroos that we hit crossing the Nullabor were definitely real.

One of the nurses brought me a map of Australia and showed it to me. She asked, "did you really hitchhike all the way from Perth to Sydney?" I took her soft sweet hand in mine and said, "I started in Fremantle. They have black swans there, you know? It's a long way across the Nullarbor but I'm not sure if any of it was real."

VICTORIA'S LITTLE SECRET



I DROPPED MY BOYS off at the airport. They went in with their suitcases stuffed with contraband. I parked the car in the short-term parking lot and found them at the check-in counter. Eli was six; Tom nine. They were both smugglers with almost twenty-six thousand dollars worth of merch between them. Tiny, lacy merch. I am not sure if they knew what was in their bags and that was probably a good thing. It was better that they didn't know. The check-in counter lady printed out their boarding cards, took their bags, and told them to wait. "Someone will be along soon to take you to the plane," she said. They knew the routine and it was a perfect system. I hugged them goodbye as they walked toward the gate. Icelandic Air had assigned a chaperone and they were in safe hands. So were their bags. It was all good; until it wasn't.

A year earlier I had been cruising the flea market in Reykjavik. I was there on a bit of an undercover mission when I ran into an old friend who went by his nickname Heppe.

"Hey," Heppe said. "What brings you to Reykjavik?" I didn't want to tell him. My bosses had been very secretive about it all. They had asked me to find some new markets for their goods and thought that Iceland might have a good black market. My wife had been born there and so I was a natural pick for the assignment. I even spoke a little Icelandic.

"I am taking some time off," I told Heppe. "Everywhere I go I am on some kind of schedule. This time I'm just enjoying myself." Heppe knew that I was lying. "Come with me," he said. "Let me

buy you a coffee or would you prefer something stronger?"

"I will take both," I replied. We made our way to a small cafe at the back of the flea market. There was one open table and we took it. "You look good," Heppe said. "It looks like life is treating you well."

"I'm OK," I replied. "Just OK. To be honest I am bored. I never knew that raising children would be so much work. The little buggers eat, in fact they eat every day. I told my wife that we are not going to feed them anymore. All they do is eat and grow and their sweet innocence is slowly being replaced by surly indifference."

"I know," Heppe laughed. "I know. My oldest is 16 now. He is working at the hot dog stand downtown. He loves it but I think that he is eating more hot dogs than he is selling."

"I love that place," I replied, "in fact I was going to go there next to get myself some lunch. I will look out for him." The waitress came over, "Hvap get eg nad e fyrir big?" she asked. Heppe looked at me. "What would you like?" he asked in English. "Oh I'm so sorry," the waitress said. "You look Icelandic. What can I get you?" It was still fairly early but I was in the mood to get drunk. "I will take a coffee please," I said. "With milk, no sugar, and a triple Black Death, just with ice." Heppe looked at me. "Black Death before lunch. Respect."

I smiled. Iceland is known for a lot of things but their decomposed shark and Black Death are the two food staples that get them the most attention. The real name for Black Death is Brennivin and it comes with a long history. My second wife, Sigrun, had given me the gist of it on my first visit to Iceland a few years earlier. "It's Iceland's signature drink," she had said. "It has to be ice cold when you drink it and it goes best with shark that has been buried for nine months." That got my

attention, but I thought that she was kidding. We stopped off at the Blue Lagoon on the way from the airport to our hotel. The Blue Lagoon is right off the highway and you can see the steam rising from miles away. After soaking for an hour we found a small bar on the outskirts of Reykjavik. Sigrun was anxious to freak me out. She ordered a plate of Hakari and an ice cold carafe of Brennivin with a tumbler of ice on the side. I was all pink and relaxed from the time I had spent in the hot sulphuric water, but as always, up for some fun.

The waiter dropped off the Brennivin and told my wife that he would be back with the Hakari. I had no idea what Hakari was but it didn't matter. I took a sip of the Back Death; it was quite good. "You know Iceland started brewing this stuff after prohibition," Sigrun told me.

"I thought that prohibition was just an American thing," I said, but she assured me that Iceland had also suffered 20 long years. I could tell that it was a strong drink, a bit on the moonshine side of things, but with a hint of licorice and some other spice that I couldn't quite place. Next came the Hakari. It smelled foul before I even tried to smell it. What the hell is this stuff?" I asked. "It smells really bad." I remember Sigrun giggling. "Go on, give it a try," she said. On a plate in front of me were a number of slimy pale yellow cubes. "What is it I asked?"

"Hakarl," my wife replied.

"What the heck is Hakari? It smells terrible." My wife leaned over and poured herself a glass of Black Death. "OK this is how you do it," she said. "First you take a piece of Hakari. You must have the Black Death ready and it must be ice cold. You pop the Hakari into your mouth but here is a warning. Do NOT breath in. You must breath out as you are about to take a bite." I gave her a look. "You will understand why," she said. I figured that she was just screwing with me. "Here, let me get you a glass of Black Death." She poured

a full shot and added an ice cube for good measure. "OK now, take a piece and pop it into your mouth. Don't forget to breath out and then chew it and then chase it with the shot."

"You go first," I said. Sigrun tossed back the pale yellow slimy cube and chased it with the Brennivin. She scrunched her eyes and exhaled. "That tastes like home," she said. "Now you go." I have to admit to being a bit nervous. I have always fancied myself as a bit of an adventurous eater, but the smell was otherworldly. "Remember to breath out. Do not inhale." My wife started to giggle again. "I'll show her," I thought. I grabbed a piece of the pale yellow slimy stuff and immediately forgot to breathe out. The ammonia hit me in the back of my head. I had breathed in instead of out and the pungent smell had gone right up my nose. I started to choke, but then, foolishly, I tried again. This time I breathed out before popping the cube into my mouth. It was quite possibly the worst thing that I have ever eaten. I gagged but swallowed and then chased it with the shot of Back Death. The combination was explosive. "What the hell was that?" I asked. "That was disgusting. The Black Death was OK but that other stuff. What was that?"

Sigrun laughed. "Rotten shark," she said, "It's an Icelandic specialty."

"I thought that you were kidding," I said. "That was shark? It tasted like an eraser that had been soaked in ammonia."

"Yes, we bury the shark for nine months. At first it rots and then it rots some more and then it rots even more and then it starts to take on a rubbery texture and then after nine months we dig it up and serve it. What did you think?"

I wasn't sure what to say.

"OK, Sigrun said. It's an acquired taste. I bet if you try it again you will quite like it."

"I doubt it," I said, "but I do kind of like the Black Death. Can I have another one without the shark?"

"Yes, but I will make you a deal." I had never liked her deals. They never worked out in my favor. "You can have an additional Black Death between bites but in order to get more Black Death, you have to eat more shark."

"Don't keep calling it shark," I said. "That stuff does not even resemble a fish, but OK, top me up and I will try again." Sigrun leaned over and topped up my glass. The Brennivin was actually quite good but clearly strong. I could already feel my head starting to ping and the room was getting bright. Then I figured out what the other flavor was; pumpernickel. I tentatively reached for another slime cube. People in the bar were looking at me. I had to do it to save face. I exhaled, popped the rotten fish into my mouth, chewed on it for a couple of seconds, and then chased it with the Brennivin. The second time wasn't so bad; at least I knew what to expect. The couple at the table over started to clap. The funny thing was the more Brennivin we drank, the more I liked the rotten shark. That was until I puked up the sour mix. Sigrun just laughed.

"You have to be strong," she said. "Icelandic Strong."

I LEFT HEPPE at the cafe. He had also ordered some Brennivin but I could tell that he was not in the mood to get hammered. Luckily it was a short walk to the hot dog stand. Actually for me it was longer than normal as I stumbled from side to side trying to focus on the next ten steps ahead. I needed some gut luggage.

The hot dog stand in Reykjavik is legendary. There is a sign in the window that reads, "President Bill Clinton ate here." I had been there many times before and just waved to the guy at the counter. "Make it the way you like it," I said, trying to not stumble over my words. "I will take two." Then as an afterthought I said,

“vinsamlegast.” I was trying to say please in Icelandic but it came out sounding as if my tongue had been tied into a figure of eight and stung by a thousand bees.

I tried to find out which one was Heppe’s son but in my current state, where there should have been four people working there, I could see eight. I managed to pick up my hot dogs and sat on the sidewalk to eat them. “Maybe that fifth shot of Brennivin had not been such a good idea,” I thought. The seagulls were hovering. I tossed the end of my bun to them and found my hotel room to sleep it off.

The next day I went back to the flea market. Heppe was there. He had a small corner stand selling Victoria’s Secret undies. There was a line at their table. Iceland has the most beautiful women and I mentally started undressing them, picking out a perfect thong for each. Heppe noticed me staring. “Stop bothering my customers,” he said, smiling. “I didn’t tell you about this yesterday because my wife was running the stand, but we close down in fifteen minutes. I will buy you a coffee. No Brennivin judging by how you look. I will explain the business model.”

We grabbed the same table and this time I stuck with coffee and water. “I fly to the States once a month,” Heppe said. “Mostly to Boston but I have tried other cities just for variety. I go to the malls and fill a shopping cart with Victoria’s Secret undies. The damn things are the size of a box of matches when packaged tightly. I pack them into my suitcase and bring them back to Iceland. You see, if I import them there is 200% duty; if I smuggle them. No duty.” He looked pretty pleased with himself.

“What if you get caught?” I asked stating the obvious. “Well that’s my problem,” he said. “I think that the customs people are starting to suspect something. It’s early when the flight from

Boston lands at Keflavik Airport and most of the custom’s agents are half asleep, but every now and then one of them starts to ask some difficult questions. Until now I have been able to bullshit my way through, but I think that my luck might soon run out.”

“Hmmm,” I thought, “I dunno but I may have an idea. Let me sleep on it. I will meet you here tomorrow. Thanks for the coffee.”

SIGRUN AND I HAD split up a couple of years earlier, you know, general weariness. The parts were getting old and wearing out and if I was to be honest, I was running out of steam. She was thinking of moving back to Iceland and part of my trip was to see if my boys should live there with her, or stay with me. I had a nice place just outside of Boston, small but comfortable, if you know what I mean. I cruised past a few of the addresses that Sigrun had given me. Potential rentals. They all looked quite nice. They all had a decent view of the ocean. “I could go along with this,” I thought, but I knew that I would miss my boys. How could I possibly see them more than once every couple of months? Then it hit me. I texted my Boss. “Sorry for the short notice,” I typed. “But I am giving you my two week notice.”

I met Heppe at Cafe Paris downtown Reykjavik. I had recovered sufficiently from my run-in with Brennivín and almost went for another one, but instead I ordered a beer to go with my coffee. Iceland has great coffee by the way and Cafe Paris is the place to have it and the place to be seen. The beer came in a tall glass with a nice frothy head. “I have an idea,” I told Heppe. “Just hear me out.” Heppe took a long pull on his smoke. He liked to smoke cigarillos which I thought was a bit pretentious but didn’t say anything. “I have two boys,” I said. Heppe nodded. “Yes you told me about them.”

“They are coming to live in Iceland with their mother. Things

did not work out between me and her and she wants to move back to Reykjavik. She says that she wants to spend more time with her mother who is getting on a little." Heppe took another pull on his cigarillo and said, "go on."

I finished my beer, called the waitress over, and tapped my glass. "So here is what I am thinking," I told Heppe. "My boys can each check-in one bag on Iceland Air and I can pay a small charge for a second bag for each of them. The maximum weight for a suitcase is forty pounds. By my calculation that's one hundred and sixty pounds of luggage between the two of them."

"Yes that sounds right," Heppe said. The waitress placed the beer in front of me and I continued. "The thing that is brilliant about this plan is that Victoria Secret undies are quite possibly the tiniest, lightest things ever invented." Heppe saw where I was going. "How many thongs do you think we can fit in a forty pound suitcase?" I asked. Heppe took an extra long pull on his cigarillo. He leaned back in his chair. "That's absolutely bloody genius," he said. "You are a genius, that's what you are. Your beers are on me. Have as many as you want. Let's figure this out."

We were well into our fifth beer when Heppe said, "OK we have a deal." We would split the profits. The basic costs would be purchasing the thongs, the cost of two extra bags and two round trip air tickets for my boys. Iceland Air charged \$70.00 for a chaperone but it was well worth it. I knew from previous experience that the chaperone would whisk them through customs. Who would ever think to check what small boys were carrying in their bags? It was quite a clever plan even if I say so myself.

I FIGURED OUT Victoria's Secret online ordering process and started to fill an empty closet in my guest bedroom. There were

thongs of every kind, every size and every color. I did a test run filling up a suitcase and found that I could fit well over a thousand undies in each bag. The beauty of the plan was that the smaller the thong, the more expensive they were. Heppe assured me that he would have no problem unloading the goods his end

MY BOYS AND THEIR MOM moved into a small apartment on the north side of Reykjavik. They enrolled in the local school. Their Mom was ok with the situation. I had made sure that she knew about it and that keeping quiet was a prerequisite for me allowing the boys to leave the country and live with her in Iceland. We had started off slowly. Once a month they would come back to the States and visit me. I would load them up with undies and take them to the airport on Sunday evening for their flight back to Iceland. Heppe met them at the airport and took the bags. They were bringing in a lot of merch. The boys were now on a first name basis with not only the check-in ladies, but also with the flight attendants. They used their charm to get extra food and as many cokes as they wanted.

Heppe and his wife expanded their table at the flea market and the lines got longer. Iceland was awash in pretty pink and yellow thongs. One year in Heppe was talking about opening a brick and mortar store. "These things are flying off the shelves," he told me. "Can you find any more kids?" I had not thought of that but told him that I would talk to my neighbors. They had two boys the same age as mine. I saw their Mom walking the dog up the street and sidled up next to her. The dog barked at me but quickly settled down. "So Beth," I said, "how are things? I saw that you and Tony had downsized the family car." Beth looked at me. "Tony got laid off," she said. "We had to sell the car. It was either that or the kids could not go to summer camp."

“Ugh I’m so sorry to hear this,” I said. I was putting on a bit of an act. I had already heard that Tony had been laid off from our neighbors on the other side. We walked over the hill before I brought it up. “I have an idea how you can make some extra money,” I said. Beth looked at me. “I’m all ears.”

I recruited their two kids and their cousins and before long there was a regular supply chain providing all the beautiful women of Iceland with as many thongs as their hearts desired. Once a month Heppe would send me an accounting and Venmo me my share of profits. I would cut Beth her portion of the profits. To be honest I was a little nervous about his idea of opening a brick and mortar store but Heppe was confident that he knew what he was doing. “We now have the biggest stand at the flea market” he yelled down the phone. We are making a fortune, but my customers want some of that Victoria Secret perfume and eye masks, that sort of thing.

“I can get that stuff,” I said, “but it’s heavy when compared to thongs.”

“That’s OK,” Heppe said, “we can bundle things and double the price.” I started buying Victoria’s Secret Bombshell Eau de Parfum and their Very Sexy Orchid Eau de Parfum. By now I was getting a deep discount from Victoria’s Secret. I was one of their better customers and they never asked any questions; they seemed thrilled to have the business. Every now and then they would throw in a free gift. One time I got a cold gel eye mask and sent it to Heppe. He quadrupled the price and sold it in the first five minutes. He texted me, “we need more of those eye masks.” By the end of the second year we had ten kids recruited and a full array of products. Heppe opened up a quaint store right in the center of Reykjavik and business started to boom; all of it on smuggled merchandise.

His store was doing great until the Icelandic financial crisis hit. Three of the country’s major commercial banks defaulted and

like a house of cards, it all came crashing down. Home mortgage rates that had not been indexed to the US dollar skyrocketed and people were losing their homes. Most, if not all of the citizens were in a panic. The hot dog stand lowered their prices for the first time since they originally opened in 1958. Then things got worse. I had been doing a couple of trips a year and they seemed to go OK, but one morning as I was dragging my bags through the Duty Free heading toward Customs when I noticed an agent pointing at me. He was conferring with his friend. I tried to look cool and bought some Toblerone chocolate and a sling of Brennivin but at some point I was going to have to clear customs. They found the undies stacked under a couple of token T-shirts. They took me aside and led me to a small room.

“Why do you have so many pairs of underwear in your bag?” the fat one asked. “I stammered and said, “I’m embarrassed to say this but I have a fetish for women’s underwear. I like to dress up in them.” The customs officer was not buying one bit of what I was selling. “Are you in any way connected with the Victoria’s Secret shop in Reykjavik?”

I stammered and then denied knowing anything about a Victoria’s Secret shop. The fat one smirked. “We are confiscating your bags and fining you one hundred and fifty thousand krona for not declaring them. I did a quick calculation in my head. That was well over a thousand dollars. They took the two bags, handed me the fine, told me that I had 30 days to pay it, and then showed me the door. At least I was out of there.

I found Heppe folding T-shirts in his store. He had a place in town that could print up knock-off Victoria’s Secret clothing, T-shirts mainly, and he bundled some of them with his perfumes and thongs. He could not keep them on the shelf for more than a few hours. Iceland was awash in Victoria’s Secret. People drove from the north of the country to shop there. I pulled him aside,

"Heppe we might have a problem," I said. "I got stopped by Customs. They took the goods and fined me, but worse yet they asked if I was associated with your shop. Of course I denied it but I'm worried." I could see Heppe turn visibly pale. His wife came out from behind the counter.

"What's going on?"

Customs might be onto us," Heppe said. "They confiscated two of his bags at the airport this morning." I saw his wife swallow hard. "I knew that this day would come. You see," she said looking at me, "because this is an illegal business built on smuggled goods we have never paid any taxes. We figured that because we were doing this in plain sight that the authorities would presume that we were a legitimate business. Heppe we have to do something." There was a customer at the counter with a bag full of undies and perfume waiting to be checked out. She had overheard our conversation. "My brother is in the police," she said. "Let me know what I can do to help. I simply could not live without this store." She jotted her name and number on a post-it note, paid for her goods and left. She was almost out the door when she turned and said, "He's the chief of police in Reykjavik. I was serious when I said that I can't live without this place.

My boys were in school. This trip was a surprise. I told Heppe that I needed to be there when they got home and we made a plan to meet up at Cafe Paris around 5-o'clock. Their Mom was at work but I always had a key to get in. I drove to their place with a lot on my mind. The apartment was on the second floor and I let myself in. There was a strong smell of pot in the air. I found a man lying on the couch watching Judge Judy. He was startled to see me. "Who are you?" I asked.

"Who are you," he replied.

"I am Tom and Eli's Dad. Who are you?"

"I'm their step-father. Their mom and I got married last week." I put my computer bag down and slumped into a chair. "What else could possibly go wrong?"

"My name is Siggi," he said extending a damp hand. I took it. I could see that he was stoned but what the heck, it was none of my business. "You want a puff?" he asked. "No thanks, I don't smoke but I will take a beer if you have one." Siggi flicked the TV off. "We have a six pack of Kisi Pale Ale in the fridge. It's local. I will get you one." I felt drained. With the time change it was only just past seven in the morning by my body clock time and I had not slept on the plane. Siggi handed me a beer. It was cold and actually quite good.

Siggi said, "so you never heard that we got married?"

"Nah, we only usually only communicate about the boys."

"You have great sons by the way," Siggi said. "I'm surprised that they didn't mention it to you."

"They are just kids and I'm sure that they didn't want to get involved."

We talked for a while. At first I thought that Siggi was just a bit of a bum but three beers in I realized that he was actually quite smart. He had run for local office a couple of times and lost, but he knew everyone who was anyone in Icelandic politics. I was tempted to bring up the customs issue but decided that it might be wise to leave it for now. I heard a scuffle at the door and Tom and Eli walked in. They seemed to grow each time I saw them. They were more than a little surprised to see me and a little embarrassed to see me hanging with Siggi. "We would have told you Dad," Tom said simply. Eli said nothing. He had a quarter moon shaved on the left side of his head. The right side was still long. It was the beginning of his love of tattoos and symbols.

I had to leave to go and meet Heppe. He was in a full-on flop sweat when I got to the Cafe Paris. It was obvious that he had been there for a while and had started on the beers. "What the fuck are we going to do?" he asked.

"I have some ideas," I replied but if truth be told, I had no darn clue.

"Do you think that we should close the shop?" Heppe asked. "Not yet," I replied. "Not yet. Let me have a think on it." We drank a few more beers and then I had to leave. I was exhausted. I usually slept on the couch at the boys apartment, but I didn't want to go back there. It just wouldn't feel right with me there with the boys and the new husband. I found an Airbnb on a side street near the parliament building and fell asleep a few seconds after my head hit the pillow.

I was up early. I had a plan. I called the girl who had left her name and number on the post-it note. She was all ears. I waited until I was pretty sure that my boys were at school and their mom had gone to work and then stopped by the apartment. Siggi was stoned lying on the couch watching Judge Judy. He seemed pleased to see me. He grabbed me a Kisi Pale Ale without even asking if I was thirsty, and flicked the TV off. We sat in silence for a bit then I asked him, "are you really well connected in this town?"

"Not only this town, this country," he said. "I know everyone."

"OK," I said, "I may need a little help. Siggi took another hit on his bong and sat up straight. "I can help," he said. I explained the business. He told me that he already knew about it and that he thought that the idea was brilliant. "I wish that I had thought about doing something like that," he said. I told him about the customs situation. "We are going to have to move fast," Siggi said. "Customs will report what they suspect to the police. The police

will investigate. Once they investigate there will be a trail that is hard to wipe out. If I can get to my friend who runs Customs at Keflavik Airport before they file something with the police we can stop this. Let me make a few calls." I downed my beer. "Thank you Siggi," I said. "I will call you later."

It was clear that Heppe had not slept at all. "What the fuck are we going to do?" he asked. "We owe tens of thousands in taxes. Plus we have had some girls working here and I paid them under the table. They are going to be in the shit as well."

"It's OK Heppe," I said, "I have a plan." Just then Siggi called. "I talked to my friend in Keflavik. He knew about the situation and told me that he thought that his deputies may have already filed a report. Once that goes to the cops there is very little he can do."

"Thank you Siggi," I said. "I really appreciate it. I will get back to you." Heppe was gagging for information but I needed to make a call and there was no time to waste. I called the post-it note girl. "OK I need your help," I said. I explained the situation to her and she said that she would get back to me as quickly as she could. I explained the state of affairs to Heppe. He looked hopeful. Then my phone rang. It was the post-it note girl.

"OK so here's the thing. I talked to my brother. He has received the documentation from Customs and was planning on sending over some officers to take a look at the Victoria's Secret shop. He told me that Heppe and his wife need to lock the place up, shutter the windows and take the sign down. It's only temporary. The cops will get there, find the place shuttered and then they will leave. That's where the trail will go cold. He can report that he sent officers to investigate and that there was nothing to see. He will report that the place was shuttered and looked abandoned and that will be the end of it."

“Let me talk to Heppe,” I said.

Heppe was pale and clearly nervous. I outlined a plan. “You guys shutter the place up. That window there where there is no blind, hang a towel or something. Anything to make it impossible for the police to look in. I will get the sign down.” Heppe and his wife were frantic. I found a screwdriver behind the check-out counter and started to unscrew the Victoria’s Secret sign. I had the Victoria part unscrewed and stashed when I noticed a cop car coming our way. I hopped through the door and slammed it behind me. Heppe locked it.

“The cops are on their way. OK we need to be dead quiet,” I said. There was a sudden, loud bang on the door and someone rattled the handle. Heppe, his wife and I hid behind the counter. It wouldn’t have done any good really if you think about it. Either the cops would get in and find us or they would go away. It didn’t matter if we were behind the counter or not, but somehow hiding made us feel better. I could hear someone knocking on the window, their shadow silhouetted against the towel that Heppe had hung. I could hear our collective hearts thumping.

We huddled for what seemed like a long time and it was. The cops circled the building a couple of times before leaving. I peeked out a gap in the window and their cruiser was gone. “Let’s just sit tight for a bit longer,” I said. “Then I think that we should get the heck out of here for a couple of days. I will make some calls.” Heppe started to get some color back in his face. “Do you think that this is going to work?” he asked.

“I dunno,” I replied. “I really don’t know.” After an hour we slipped out the front door, carefully locking it behind us. I found my rental and drove back to the Airbnb. I was barely in my room when the phone rang. It was the post-it note lady. “I talked to my brother,” she said. The cops returned to the station and reported that the shop was called ‘Secret’ and looked abandoned. They

might try again but more than likely they will move on to the next issue. By the way did you hear that customs busted a huge cocaine ring? They were smuggling the stuff in coffee makers of all things. They were filling the coffee makers with drugs and having Amazon drop-ship them. It was only when one of the boxes broke open and they found the drugs that they had a lead and this morning they arrested the person who they think has been behind this whole thing. Would you believe it but it’s no less than the President of Iceland, Gupni Jyhannesson. I wouldn’t worry if I were you. The cops here in town have bigger fish to fry, that’s a saying in English, right?”

“Yes, yes and thank you. I will call you when the store reopens. You can have as many free thongs and as much perfume as you like for as long as you like.”

I went down to Cafe Paris and called Heppe. “I told him the whole story. “Let’s just hang low for a week or so,” I said. “Put a sign on the door that says it’s closed for renovations. Maybe rearrange some things so that when customers return they will notice something different. You don’t need to do much. They are there for the thongs, not the ambiance. We can reopen the supply chain in a couple of weeks.”

Heppe sighed. “Thank you, he said. “Thank you.” I hung up the phone and standing there right in front of me was my former mother-in-law. She had always held a special place in my heart. We used to visit Cafe Paris each time I came to Iceland. I kissed her and she sat. “Would you like a beer AmmaGunn?” I asked. She took my hand and said. “I can’t drink anymore. It’s horrible getting old. But I will join you for a coffee. I heard that you were in town. Anything interesting been happening in your life these days?”

LILACS AND ROSES

STORY 1



OUR HOME when I was growing up was a small ranch on the outskirts of Macon, Georgia. I say that it was small even though at the time it seemed quite large, but then from the perspective of a four foot boy everything seemed supersized. My Dad worked as a locksmith; Mom had part time work stacking shelves at the local 7-Eleven. I have two younger sisters and life was idyllic, until it wasn't. It was in that hot summer of '68 when my Mom left us. She left without warning and we never saw her again. Well that's not completely true. She resurfaced, so to speak, in 2003.

Dad, his name was Billy Scott but everyone called him Billy Lock, I guess because he was a locksmith. He was a quiet man, never said much. It was clear that he loved his wife and he loved his children. It was also clear that he loved smoking his pipe and drinking his one beer a day. Dad left for work promptly at 7:45 every morning and was back through the front door at 5:15. It was a short drive from our home to the locksmith business, fifteen minutes to be exact. Mom, Shirley to her friends, would have a bottle of Schlitz and his pipe ready. It was the same routine during the week; weekends were strictly for family and God. We were Southern Baptists and very devout. I loved the word of our Lord and was a devout and firm believer until Mom left us. That was when I started to have some doubts.

We had a series of hot summers but '68 was a real scorcher and Dad suggested that my sisters and I go off to stay with our aunt and uncle. They had a cabin on a lake where we could swim

and stay cool. I couldn't wait to learn how to fish. Uncle Cleave drove down in his Chevy and picked us up. When I kissed Mom goodbye it was the first time I remember smelling her. I had never noticed before but she smelled faintly of lilacs.

Uncle Cleave let me ride up front probably because I was the oldest but I'm guessing, since it was the deep south, the main reason was because I was a male. The two girls rode in the back. We stopped at Howard Johnson's for an ice cream and the four of us shared a large order of fries. Aunt Blanche was waiting for us at the front door. Uncle Cleave and Aunt Blanche had been high school sweethearts. Uncle Cleave was my Dad's brother and in fact he was the one who introduced my parents.

The stay at the cabin on the lake started off great. Uncle Cleave showed me how to bait a hook, how to cast, and how to use the net to capture the fish. He even showed me how to gut and cook the fish.

"Remember this," he would say. "It doesn't take long to fry fish. Make sure that the oil is hot and you must have the flour and breadcrumbs and egg ready beforehand. Cover the fish in flour, dip it into the egg. The flour is what makes the eggs stick to the fish and the egg is what makes the breadcrumbs stick. Place it gently into the oil and always place it away from you otherwise you are going to get splashed."

I loved his soft, soothing voice and I think that was probably where my love of cooking started. Uncle Cleave said the same thing each time while the fish was frying. "The secret to being a good cook is to treat the food with respect and with love. God put that fish in that pond just for you to catch, no one else, only you and you need to love God for his gift." I thought that it was pretty cool that God had sent a fish specifically for me to catch.

The cabin was very basic. I think that it had been in Aunt

Blanche's family for a couple of generations. There was no TV so we played cards in the evenings. Then in early August Uncle Cleave had to go into the city for work and was gone for two nights. When he came back there was something different about him.

"Boy it sure is hot in Macon," he said when he walked into the cabin. He looked a bit disheveled and went straight to the fridge and popped the top off a Schlitz which was unlike him because he rarely drank.

"Is everything OK?" Aunt Blanche asked. "Did something happen at work?"

"Everything's fine my dear," Uncle Cleave said. "I'm just hot, that's all."

We sat down to a dinner of fried fish and Uncle Cleave remarked at how well I had done fishing while he was away. All in all things were shaping up to be one of the best summers ever. Until that Sunday night when the phone rang. Uncle Cleave took the call. I could tell right away that something was wrong.

"What do you mean she went away?"

I could hear my Dad speaking but I couldn't make out what he was saying. Whatever it was, it wasn't good. Uncle Cleave sat on the edge of the seat and listened.

"She took her clothes and everything? Did she take the car?" I could hear Dad trying to explain things.

"Well if she didn't take the car how did she leave? Nothing makes sense. Did she leave some kind of note?" I heard Dad explaining.

"She took all her jewelry?" I heard Dad explaining. "OK I will tell the kids and we will drive down in the morning. Perhaps she will be back by then."

We sat in silence until Uncle Cleave finally spoke. "It's probably nothing," he said, "but it seems that your Mom has left your Dad. She has taken her things and gone. She didn't tell him and she didn't leave a note of any kind." My two sisters started to cry. I didn't know what to do so I just sat there. Aunt Blanche hugged the two girls.

"Don't worry girls, we will get to the bottom of this." She turned to Uncle Cleave and said, "did you see them when you went into town?" Uncle Cleave shrugged and lied, "no," he said.

We left the following morning. Aunt Blanche was with us so I was jammed in the back seat between my two sisters. We drove straight through. None of us were interested in an ice cream stop. Dad had taken the day off work. Aunt Blanche gave him a hug but he didn't hug her back. "Ok, you kids go out and play," Dad said. "Get some ice tea out of the fridge. The place didn't feel the same without Mom there. I noticed that Dad had been doing some yard work behind the house and had spread some grass seed. After a while Aunt Blanche came out to sit with us.

"I'm sure that there is just some kind of misunderstanding," she said. "Your Mom and me, we were best friends and she never said anything to me. She never said that she was unhappy or anything like that." I went back into the house to get more ice tea. Dad and Uncle Cleave were talking quietly. I stood by the door so that I could hear them. I heard Dad say, "let's give it a month before we notify the police. We need some time for things to settle if you know what I mean." There was a pause. "Do you want a Schlitz," Dad asked.

"Yes."

They drank a couple of beers and then Uncle Cleave and Aunt Blanche left to drive back to the cabin. "We will come back for

you kids in a couple of days," Uncle Cleave said. "You need to spend some time with your Dad."

"I took tomorrow off work and then it's the weekend," Dad said. "We can do some fun stuff." All these years later I still remember what he had said.

"We can do some fun stuff." There was nothing fun about not having a Mom.

For the first time in as long as I can remember we didn't go to church on that Sunday. I didn't ask why and my sisters never said anything. I could hear them crying themselves to sleep the first night that we were back in the house. I was trying to hold back tears. Every now and then I could hear my Dad open another beer. It was late when he came into my bedroom. I could feel the bed sink as he sat on the end and tried to pretend that I was asleep.

"Johnny, are you awake?"

I tried to fake it and then said, "yes."

"OK, I just want you to know that we will find your Mom and bring her back home, but in the meantime I need you to be strong for the girls." I could smell the beer on his breath. "This is not going to be easy for any of us but I think that things will work out OK."

"OK Dad," I said, "but they didn't work out OK." We went back to the lake cabin for the rest of the summer and tried to act as if nothing had happened. Dad called every other day and Uncle Cleave would talk to him but the news was always the same. My Mom was gone and was not getting in touch.

One night I heard Uncle Cleave and Aunt Blanche talking in the kitchen. Aunt Blanche was clearly agitated. "Billy has to contact the police and file a Missing Person Report. He has to do

it.” I had noticed that Uncle Cleave had also started to have more than a few beers with dinner each night.

“It’s his business Blanche,” he said. “We need to stay out of his business.”

“That’s absolute rubbish,” Blanche said. “It’s my business too. Our business, and the children’s business. They need to know where their mother is.”

“Listen Blanche, I know that you know this. Billy is a very devout man. He’s in good standing with the church and would be devastated if the church members found out that his wife had left him. He just can’t do it. If he goes to the police they will start an investigation and word will get out and he will have to face all the people at church. I say let’s give him another week. We need to take the kids back in a week or so and we will talk to him then. I’m sure that she will show up.

“I hope so,” said Blanche.

“For a start she has no money. Bill told me that she had taken some of their savings from the Tupperware that they kept under their bed and you know that she doesn’t have a bank account or credit card that she can use. Just you mark my words, she will run out of money and come running back home.” I heard Uncle Cleave get up and quickly nipped back to my bedroom.

The next day there was good news. Dad called all excited. Uncle Cleave, per usual, took the call. I heard him say, “That’s great news Bill. Is there a return address on the envelope?” There was a pause while Uncle Cleave listened. Dad read the contents of the letter. “Well, I’ll say that’s good news. She will come around. I will tell the kids now.”

Uncle Cleave was beaming. “Your Dad got a letter from your Mom. She didn’t say where she was. The letter said that she was sorry that she didn’t say goodbye and that she would be in

touch. She sends her love to you all.” My sisters started crying. Aunt Blanche comforted them. I wasn’t sure what to do so I just sat there. We had been eating burgers for dinner. I hadn’t felt much like fishing in the last couple of weeks. I wasn’t hungry anymore.

“Eat your burger,” Aunt Blanche said but I excused myself from the table and went to my bedroom. I cried for the first time. I think that they were tears of happiness but I can’t be sure.

Mom never came home. She sent a letter every six weeks or so but there was never any return address. Sometimes the time stamp that the post office used would have a name but Dad never tried to look up where it was. He had gone back to his job at the locksmith and hired a babysitter to take care of us after school. In the summer he sent us off to the lake cottage which was fun and while we were there Uncle Cleave gave me cooking lessons.

“Did I ever tell you that I worked as a cook at Little Camp Shot for a few summers?” he said to me. “That was long before I got the job at Nyntrex.” Uncle Cleave was a chemical engineer in real life. He was high enough up in the company to get his summers off.

“You worked as a cook for a living?”

“Only in the summer, but I was considered one of the best cooks that they had ever had.” After he told me that I looked at Uncle Cleave with new respect. Maybe cooking ran somewhere in our blood.

Aunt Blanche did go to the police but didn’t file a Missing Person report. The front desk cop said that he would have someone go over to the house and talk to my Dad. It was a young police officer that came to the door. He asked Dad about what had happened and Dad showed him the letters from Mom

and he left satisfied. “Years later when I got a chance to look at his report it was pathetically written and stamped “NO FURTHER INVESTIGATION NEEDED.”

Dad took us back to church. It was a little uncomfortable at first but over time people got used to it just being the four of us and stopped asking about Mom. Dad went back to being a prominent member; I was starting to lose interest. I simply could not understand how God would let Mom just leave like that. If he was the same God that sent me fish to catch up at the lake cottage then he could have made Mom stay home and still be a part of our family.

A few years after Mom left, Dad came home with a big announcement. We were getting a young boy to come and live with us. Dad sat us down and said, “I have a friend who is a single Mom. She’s struggling to make ends meet and I offered for her son to come and live with us for a while. Let’s call it Christian Charity. His name is Ziggy.” My sisters and I looked at each other. First of all this was big news that just came out of nowhere but I knew what they were thinking.

“Who names their son Ziggy?”

We had no choice in the matter. Ziggy moved in. I had to share my room with him which I was none too pleased about but it turned out that Ziggy was a lot of fun and soon became part of our family. The letters from Mom started to get fewer and fewer and then dried up. I guess at some point one just has to accept that life can be unfair and deal with it as best as you possibly can. I missed Mom and instead threw myself into cooking, first at some local fast food places in the Macon area, but when I turned 18 I got a job at one of the fancier restaurants downtown. Dad wanted me to go to University; I wanted to take a gap year and Dad reluctantly agreed that I could take the restaurant job so long as I worked and paid my way.

For the last few years he had been distant. He had started to drink heavily and would tell us kids that he was going to the bar for “a couple of pops after work.” A week before I started the new job I was in the area of his local bar and thought that I would surprise him and stop by to say hello. He wasn’t there. I asked the bartender if he had seen my Dad but the bartender told me that he had never heard of my Dad. I thought it a bit strange but put it out of my mind and took the #57 bus downtown. I offered to start my job at the restaurant early and without pay. The manager was impressed and he had me begin right away cutting vegetables and preparing stock. The place was an upscale Italian eatery that moved over a hundred tables a night. I hadn’t been working there long before the manager promoted me to Sous Chef. Now I had some serious responsibility making sure that the food side of the restaurant ran smoothly and that the Head Chef was fully supported.

My gap year turned into two and I found a small apartment closer to the restaurant. I got Ziggy a job bussing tables and occasionally waiting on customers. He would crash on my couch. We had become firm friends; I think that he thought of me as his mentor; even like an older brother. He had never had a father figure and looked up to me. My sisters were getting ready to go off to college.

My manager came to me one evening just as we were finishing cleaning up the kitchen. “Leave that,” he said. “I have someone for you to meet.” I followed him into the restaurant. There was a large man smoking a cigar. He was drinking some kind of smoky liquid. I couldn’t tell what it was.

“Sit kid,” he said to me. I did as I was told. The manager stayed standing. “I have heard good things about you kid,” the large man said. “I want to make you an offer. He waved to the manager and said “sit down Jeff.”

"Do you want a drink kid?" he asked.

"I don't drink," I lied. "I'm only 20 years old." The large man waved to the waiter. "Bring this kid a scotch rocks. Not that cheap shit. Something good. Make that three." The waiter came back with three drinks and placed each of them in front of us. I took a sip. I had only drunk beer before and the alcohol hit pretty hard. I tried to not choke. Luckily there was a glass of water on the table and it put the fire out. The large man laughed, "you will get used to it kid," he said. He leaned back in his chair.

"OK, let's cut to the chase. I am not one for small talk or bullshit. You come highly recommended. I am opening up three new restaurants in Macon. Planning on spending almost twenty million. I need chefs, and good ones. Jeff here," he said, gesturing in the direction of the manager. "He wants to stay here. Family stuff if you know what I mean. I want to send you to work as a Sous Chef in one of my Florida restaurants to train under Mario Carbone, my Head Chef there. You will train for a year and by that time my new flagship restaurant in Macon will be ready and you will run the place. What do you think?"

What I thought was that I needed another sip of whiskey. I took a sip and the second one went down a lot easier than the first. Jeff put his hand on my wrist. "This is a once in a lifetime opportunity," he said. "Take it."

The large man said, "I will find you an apartment to live in and I will pay for it. It won't be fancy but you will never be there anyway." I looked down at my hands and said, "I will take you up on your offer only if my friend Ziggy can get a job waiting tables. And if the apartment is big enough for the both of us."

The large man laughed and said, "You are a good negotiator. You will go far in this business."

I started work at The Flamingo Grill in Boca Raton two

weeks later. At first I was intimidated by Mario Carbone but soon figured out that under all the bluster and bullshit he threw my way he was really a decent man. He treated me and Ziggy well. Our apartment was just a few blocks walk from the restaurant. After a couple of months Ziggy got promoted to the prep area in the kitchen. Every now and then I would look over and watch him work. He reminded me so much of myself. He had a look of determination that could only have come from some kind of childhood trauma.

My sisters came for Spring Break. One evening when I had a rare night off we were sitting outside at a little cafe overlooking the Intercoastal Waterway. Ziggy was there with us. Sue, my older sister, was enjoying a few glasses of chardonnay when out of the blue she said, "I wonder where Mom is tonight?" I was a little taken by surprise but said nothing. Her comment hung suspended in the warm Florida air. "No seriously, I have a feeling that Mom didn't just leave us. I think that something happened to her. I don't know why I think that but I just have a gut feeling." The waiter came with our bill and the conversation ended. It ended that night but it started to get me thinking. Mom had never been far from my mind.

After a year working at The Flamingo Grill I went back to manage the new flagship restaurant in Macon. It was stunning. I had been consulted on some of the design features, the kitchen layout mainly and I had been on-site a few times, but nothing prepared me for the finished product. It was located right downtown overlooking the Ocmulgee River. The architect and interior designers had done a great job using the reflection of the lights off the river to give the place a unique ambiance.

The Large Man was there for the opening. I never did learn his name, well actually I did much later. "So what do you think kid?" he asked. I was speechless. "This is your place, just don't fuck it up," he said.

I didn't fuck it up. The second year that we were open we won an award for the most innovative new restaurant in Georgia. Uncle Cleave and Aunt Blanche were regular customers. They were getting older. They insisted that I drop the uncle and aunt and just call them Cleave and Blanche. It was not easy at first but over time I got used to it. My father never came by, not even once even though I invited him many times. Sue told me that he was drinking heavily and living with some lady whose name was Martha. It made me sad. The restaurant workers became my surrogate family, Ziggy too. One night we were sitting on the restaurant deck overlooking the river. Ziggy had started smoking. I moved my chair so that I didn't get his second hand smoke. I am not sure why I asked this question but I did anyway.

"How come you never see your Mom?" Ziggy took a long pull on his cigarette. He looked up at the stars. "My Mom gave me up. I was in foster homes for a while and they were nice but it's a hard thing to know, even at that age, that your Mom never wanted you."

"Do you miss her?"

"I guess," Ziggy said. "I don't even remember what she looked like. You know I am not sure what's harder. Having your mother walk out on you or your mother give up on you." I didn't say anything. I had nothing to say. Ziggy fumbled with his paper wrappers and rolled a joint. He said, "we should probably go home soon."

"OK," I'm tired. "Tomorrow is Sunday and I am working both the brunch and dinner shifts."

"Me too," Ziggy said and took a long pull on his joint. He handed it to me. I didn't smoke, well cigarettes anyway, but I loved a bit of pot every now and then. It seemed as if everyone in the restaurant business smoked pot. I guess it

helped with the long hours. We sat for a few moments. The pot hit my brain. I said, "Hey Ziggy how come I never knew your Mom's name?"

Ziggy shrugged, "I dunno. Her name is Martha."

The Flamingo Grill was cranking. After three years in business we were turning over 300 tables a night. The local food critics' glowing praise had drawn the attention of the Big Guns and I got a call from the Food Network. Bobby Flay wanted to come and do a show at the restaurant. The Large Man was happy. "Don't forget your roots kid," he said. "Local boy makes good. That's always a good story for the press." Cleave and Blanche came to watch the filming.

"We tried to get your Dad to come and watch the filming but he said that he was wrapped up in work and couldn't make it. I keep telling him that it's time for him to retire but there is something there at the locksmith place that keeps him working."

"It's OK," I said. "I don't think that he has ever eaten one of my meals. I lost my Mom and now I have pretty much lost my Dad." I noticed Cleave look down at his shoes. He didn't say anything.

The Food Network filmed for three days. Bobby Flay wanted to do a little Fried Green Tomato throwdown, which he won. I thought that it was a bit rigged but didn't care. It was good publicity for the restaurant. Cleave was more than a little over the limit when he and Blanche said goodbye. I should have said something and suggest that they get a hotel for the night, but it's hard to say something like that when he's your uncle. I was just wrapping things up at the restaurant when the front desk lady found me. "There is a call for you Johnny," she said. I took the phone.

"Is this Johnny?"

"Yes," I replied. "Who is this?"

"This is Officer Barone, Georgia State Police. There has been an accident and your Aunt Blanche is in the Emergency Room. Your Uncle Cleave wanted me to call you. We will take him into custody later. He was well over the limit but for now I think that it's important for him to be at his wife's side. It doesn't look good."

I was stunned. A couple of hours earlier they were clapping and mugging for the camera. I raced over to the hospital. Cleave was there. When he saw me he started to cry. "She's gone," he said. "She's gone and it's all my fault."

"What happened?"

"I hit the guardrail and the car flipped."

I couldn't believe it. One of the rocks of my life was dead; Aunt Blanche. Cleave was sobbing. He kept repeating, "it was all my fault."

Uncle Cleave was charged with manslaughter. My father didn't come to the court hearing. He didn't show up at Aunt Blanche's funeral either. It was like he had dropped off the planet.

I did what most grieving people do. I threw myself into my work. The episode that I did with Bobby Flay was one of the highest rated Food Network shows; I still think that it was rigged, but it didn't matter.

Life is a truism; when one goes the other goes soon thereafter especially when they have been together a long time. Cleave started to lose his health. He wasn't eating and had sold the lake cabin. If I had known that it was for sale I would have bought it. The Large Man paid well. I tried to keep in contact but the restaurant was demanding. I had promoted Ziggy to Sous Chef and he was doing an amazing job. We were a great team.

Then one afternoon I decided to pay my father a visit. I knew that I should have done it years earlier but I was so tied up with my career and starting to think that the man was a real prick. He could have at least come by the restaurant just once to see what me and Ziggy were doing. I knew from my sister Sue that he was still in the same house, and I knew that he knew about my Food Network gig.

OUR OLD STREET looked the same but when I pulled up in front of the house it looked dilapidated. There was an old Ford in the driveway. Mom's carefully tended roses were in a mad tangle and it looked like the lawn had not been mown in years. There were dandelions everywhere.

If I am to be honest I was nervous. It had been a long time since I had last seen my Dad and I had never met Martha. I tried to peek in but the shades were down. I knocked tentatively. Nothing. I knocked again. Nothing. I walked around back and saw my father and Martha lounging in the shade under the pecan tree. Dad looked old. Martha may have once been an attractive woman but time and a lot of sun had not worked in her favor. I was just about to leave when Dad saw me. He had a startled look.

"Is that you Johnny?"

"It's me Dad." I felt a lump in my throat. The lump was not there for my Dad but for the old times and what we had once had. The old times when Mom was gardening, singing to herself, the times when my sisters played in their sandbox and Dad would come home and smoke his pipe and drink a beer.

Dad walked over. "You can come in," he said but ignored my outstretched hand. "This is Martha. She's a friend that's just visiting." I knew that he was lying. Either that or Martha had come for a visit and stayed for ten years. She took my hand.

"Nice to meet you Johnny," she said. I noticed at least a dozen empty Schlitz bottles. I looked at Martha; there was something familiar about her. I couldn't quite place my finger on it.

"Dad, I am not here to cause any problems," I said. "I just wanted to say hello. I haven't seen you in a long time and I wanted to meet Martha. Sue told me about her."

"So you have become a big shot chef," Dad said. Martha put her hand on his. "It's OK Billy," she said. "Johnny has done well and I am sure that you could be proud of him if you just looked beyond your own ego." Dad didn't look happy. Martha said, "we watched the Food Network show. You were great. I am not a foodie but I think that you should have won that contest. I think the show is rigged." In that moment I liked Martha. There was something really familiar about her.

I left after an hour. I had to get back to the restaurant. The afternoon had gone better than I had expected. My father had been very standoffish but every now and then I saw some softness behind his eyes. Not much, but it was there.

Fall in Georgia is marked by a sudden change in color. The heat of the summer wanes and almost overnight the foliage gets a soft edge and the leaves turn red and yellow. I had started a relationship with an elderly woman. Her name was Blaise. She was a regular at the restaurant and well, might I say, she was a real looker; for her age anyway. Ziggy made fun of me. He was shagging anything with a skirt. He had learned that being in the restaurant business is a good way to pick up women.

"Why don't you just have some fun?" Ziggy asked. "Try all the produce that's out there, so to speak."

"I am having fun," I replied, a little too defensively. Then the phone rang. I wasn't going to take it but Blaise insisted that I do. The kind lady on the other end asked if my name was Johnny.

She also had some other questions but I don't remember them. She told me that Uncle Cleave had asked for me. The kind lady told me that Uncle Cleave wanted me to visit him in the hospital. I had no idea that he was even in hospital so that came as a bit of a shock. I hadn't seen him in at least six months. Blaise came with me. We arrived at the front desk. They were expecting us and after we had our name tags attached we were ushered to a small waiting room.

A nurse came in. "Are you Johnny?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Please come with me." Blaise and I followed her down a brightly lit corridor. She scanned her ID and the door buzzed. The nurse pushed it open. She turned to us and said, "your uncle had a priest in there earlier. He knows that he's going. He wanted to see you." I was still in shock. Blaise said, "I think that you had better go in by yourself."

The room was badly lit, well by restaurant standards anyway, and there were a lot of beeps going off. Uncle Cleave was on the bed. He didn't look good and was asleep when I entered the room. The nurse said, "he's in and out. Out mostly but he did ask for you. Just sit and wait. He will wake up at some point. Can I get you anything?" I shook my head.

Uncle Cleave was hooked up to so many machines it looked like they could launch the space shuttle. I could see from the breathing monitor that his breath was shallow, very shallow. I could tell that even without being a nurse. I sat for a while worried about Blaise. After a half hour Uncle Cleave opened his eyes. It took him a while to focus on me. I could see that he was trying.

"Johnny, is that you?"

"Yes it's me Uncle Cleave."

“Call me Cleave,” he said. “Didn’t I already tell you that? Look Johnny,” he said. “I am pretty much a gonner. This cancer has me by the balls.” His voice was weak. He nodded off for a bit and then woke and said, “when you fry fish, always place them away from you in the oil. That way you won’t get splashed.” I took his hand. It was old and wrinkled and almost translucent. He had aged so much since Aunt Blanche died.

“I will,” I said. He fell asleep again. I sat for a while.

The nurse came back into the room . She was checking the machines and I think may have increased his morphine.

“Johnny,” Uncle Cleave said, “come closer.” I leant in. “Closer,” he said. His voice was faint, his eyes closed. I could barely hear him. He gave my hand a slight squeeze. “Your Mom did not leave you,” he said. “Your Dad and I murdered her. She’s buried in the back...” He gasped for air. The machines were buzzing. He opened his eyes one last time and said, “Ziggy is your brother. Martha is his mother.” And with that he was gone.

THERE WAS NOTHING more that we could do, the nurse said. “He held on until you got here.” I looked at Cleave and his face had softened. I know that this might sound like a bit of a cliché but it was almost as if he had gotten something off his chest and his mind was at ease.

“You can sit with him for a while if you like. There is no rush.” I looked at her gratefully. I was still stunned. I was sure that I had heard him right but those kinds of words are hard to digest.

“Your Mom did not leave you. Your Dad and I murdered her. And Ziggy is your brother and Martha is his mother.”

Blaise was still in the waiting room. She had been there for five hours. She looked a little startled when she saw me. “How is he?” she asked.

“He’s gone,” I said and then added a little more forcefully than necessary. “He’s gone to meet his maker and he has a lot of explaining to do.” Blaise took me by the arm. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m really sorry. I know that you loved him.” I looked at her square in the eye and said. “I loved him an hour ago; I don’t love him anymore.”

I called into work and told them that Ziggy was going to have to run the place for the night. I trusted him fully and knew that he could manage while I was gone. I needed a drink and some time to think. Blaise looked concerned but didn’t say anything. “Can I buy you a drink?” she asked.

"Yes, I am going to need a few drinks. I have a lot to tell you."

We went to The Rookery, a dive bar out near the Costco on Mt. Zion Road. Blaise let me sit in silence on the way over. The place was very dimly lit. There were a half dozen people at the bar nursing their drinks. The barmaid came over. "What can I get you?" she asked.

"A noose and a strong place to hang it from." She laughed. Blaise looked at me and then said, "I think that my friend here needs a whiskey, make that a double and make that one for each of us." I took her hand.

"Thank you Blaise," I said. "Thank you. I am probably going to need the whole bottle."

I sat for a while not saying anything. I was still trying to digest what Uncle Cleave had said and how to tell Blaise. The barmaid came over with the two drinks. Blaise said, "Can you get another couple of these ready?" She nodded.

"Ok Mister," you need to tell me what's going on. We have all lost friends and relatives. I lost both my parents in the same week. I know that it's tough but you seem more agitated than sad. What's going on?" I stared at my drink. "OK," I said. "I am going to start with the easy one, well if you can call it that. Cleave had some final words for me. I'm sure that was why he summoned me." Blaise took my hand. "Tell me what he said."

"I downed the rest of my whiskey and said, "He told me that Ziggy is my brother and that Martha, the lady that Dad is living with, is his mother."

"Hmmm," that's definitely some interesting news. "I wondered why you two looked so much alike. He has the same mannerisms as you. The way you both touch your chin with a spoon before eating anything hot."

"I know, I had noticed that too. Ziggy has always felt like a brother to me and I guess now I know why. But there is something else."

Blaise knew a little about my mother leaving. It had been so long ago and to be honest her memory and her place in my life had dimmed a little. I felt guilty but that's kind of how life works. Then I told Blaise about the murder.

"Christ," she said. "Hey barlady are those next two drinks ready?" She turned to me. "He said that he and your Dad murdered your mother? What exactly did he say?"

I waited until the barmaid left. I could feel the first whiskey rolling around in my gut. I downed the second on banging it on the counter for effect. Blaise signaled the bartender. "One more," she mouthed.

"He said that my mother did not leave us. That he and my Dad had murdered her."

"Did he say why?"

"He didn't say anything more. He started to say where she was buried but fell asleep before he could get the words out."

Blaise sat for a while before saying anything. She took a sip of her drink. "What are you going to do?" she asked.

I shook my head. I have no fucking idea." My mind was reeling. All those years that I had wondered where my mother was. All those years I had missed her with every bit of my being. And then I remembered the letters that she had sent. "Blaise," I said. "This all can't be true. My mother sent letters every month. Maybe he was just delirious. How could my mother have sent us letters every month if she was already dead?"

Blaise said, "do you want something to eat?" I knew that she was buying time.

"No thanks, I'm not hungry."

"You know," she said. My ex-husband was a detective in the FBI. I never told you that. The reason we split was because he was away all the time. We are friends now. I think that this might be something that he could help us with.

My phone rang. It was Ziggy. "I can manage tonight" he said, "but Jenny said that you sounded stressed. Is everything OK?"

"Yea, sort of. You can run the place tonight but tomorrow, I think that we need to talk. Nothing serious. Just something that has been on my mind."

I was seriously drunk when we left the bar. On a scale of one to ten I was more than a nine-and-a-half. Blaise took me back to her place because it was closer. I tried to sleep it off but my mind was racing. "How was it even possible that Dad and Uncle Cleave had murdered Mom? Maybe they had not murdered her the night she disappeared. Maybe they tracked her through her letters and murdered her at a later date."

I tossed back two Advil while Blaise fixed breakfast. "You look like crap," she said.

"I feel like crap. I need to talk to Ziggy."

"I will call him for you," Blaise said. "Do you want me to come along or do you want to be by yourself?"

"Let me just talk to him one-on-one."

"OK."

I met Ziggy at a cafe downtown. "Are you OK," he asked. "You look like shit."

"I'm OK." I ordered a double espresso macadamia nut mochachino. I had never had one before and it was surprisingly good. Ziggy said, "I am sorry about Uncle Cleave. I know that you and him were really close. You once told me that he was the reason that you got into cooking."

"Thanks," I said. "Ziggy, one of the things that Uncle Cleave said to me as he was dying..." I hesitated. Twenty four hours earlier Uncle Cleave had still been alive, if only just. "One of the things that Uncle Cleave said to me as he was dying was that you were my brother."

Ziggy looked down at his coffee and said, "I thought that you already knew that." This was the third bit of news to come my way in the last 24 hours.

"What?"

"Didn't Dad ever tell you? There's a reason why I call him Dad. He's my Dad. He screwed my Mom and here I am."

"I thought that you called him Dad because he had become a father figure to you. Wait what? You knew all this time and never said anything?"

"I thought that you knew."

"Fuck Ziggy, I had no clue." Then it dawned on me. OK I am a good chef but in other areas I am not that smart. "OK. OK. Do my sisters know?"

"No, I don't think so. I never brought it up with them. They may have known, I'm not sure." I sat for a while. "Hair of the dog?" Ziggy asked. "The restaurant is closed tonight."

"I think so. I could use a good Bloody Mary right about now."

I paid for the coffees and we went to a new, rather upscale bistro on the corner of Main and Dalling. Ziggy ordered the Bloody's. He liked his spicy. Me, not so much. We didn't say anything for a while then Ziggy spoke. "I'm sorry," he said. "I thought that you knew."

"There is a lot I don't know, or didn't know." The Bloody was kicking in and I was getting a little angry. "I didn't know that you were my brother and I didn't know that my Dad, our Dad I guess,

murdered my Mom with the help of Uncle Cleave.”

“Fuck, what?”

“My thoughts precisely.”

“When did you find this out?”

“Moments before Uncle Cleave told me that you were my brother and seconds before he died.”

“Cleave told you that he and Dad murdered your mother? That’s unfuckingbelievable.”

“It sure is.” I was having a hard time thinking straight, possibly because of the enormity of what I had just discovered but more probably because of the Bloody Mary’s.

“Fuck,” Ziggy said. “This is starting to make sense now.” He didn’t say anything more, just that it was starting to make sense. We sat for a while. The bartender brought over another round. “These are on the house,” he said. “You two look like you have just seen a ghost.”

“Thank you.” Blaise joined us but I was already four Bloody’s in and starting to fade. “Let’s get you home my friend,” she said.

There was a message on my phone when I woke up. Blaise had long since left for work. The message was from The Large Man and read, “You are being nominated for a James Beard Award. Well done. Call me. I can pull some strings.”

Blaise called me, “my ex will help us get to the bottom of all of this. Don’t worry Johnny, we will figure it out.” I wanted to tell her about the James Beard Award nomination but I was too tired. I fell asleep and Mom came to me in a dream. She used to come to me quite often but over the years, as my memory of her faded, she came less and less. This dream was vivid. Mom was in her garden weeding under the rose bushes. I could see someone in the background. I didn’t know who it was. This is where things

got a little blurry. I had had this dream before and always managed to wake myself up but this time I guess that I was still more than a little drunk from two nights of hard drinking. The blurry figure in the background seemed to have something in his hand. I could make out that it was a male, but that was about it. Then a second figure appeared. It was another man. I tried to wake myself up but it wasn’t happening. Then I saw the brick. It was one from the side of the house, or at least I thought it might have been. We had a brick walkway between the front and the back of the house. My dream got very strange after that. Suddenly my Dad was at the locksmith. His Boss Mr. Smith was yelling at him. “I am pretty fed up with your performance Bill,” he said. “Pretty fed up.”

I have always been quite level headed and in control of things. You need those skills as a chef. When the kitchen is hopping and the orders are coming in fast someone needs to be in control and that was always me. Suddenly I felt as if I had no control; over anything. Years later when I finally saw a shrink she told me that this kind of reaction was normal after some devastating news. To learn that my father and Uncle Cleave had murdered my Mom was devastating, to say the least. The bottom line was that I didn’t know what to do.

I took Ziggy’s word for it that he was my brother. I would dig deeper into that going forward but it was slowly becoming obvious. There were still some other issues to sift through. My father had cheated on my mother at some point before she died. OK for now, I am going to make the leap from she went missing to she died; at first I simply could not say that she had been murdered. That was a bridge too far. And murdered by my Dad and Uncle Cleave was another bridge that I was not yet ready to cross.

Blaise arranged a meeting with her ex. I wasn’t thrilled but had few options. His name, if you can believe it, was Bert. Who

names their kid Bert? Anyway it turned out that he was quite a nice man and very willing to help.

"First," he said. "Not a word of this to your father. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Your uncle might have been a little deranged. That happens when people are dying." I wanted to believe him but at the same time it turned out that he was right about Ziggy being my brother so I suspect that his mind was not too far off kilter.

"There are a couple of avenues we can take," Bert said. "Usually murders are an inside job so it most definitely could have been your father or your uncle or both. That's not unusual. There has to be some kind of motive, however. Can you think of anyone that might have been interested in having your Mom killed?" I shrugged.

"It was a long time ago. More than thirty years. I barely knew my mother. All I remember was that she was sweet and kind and very loving. Ask my sisters."

"I will," Bert said. "What about your Dad's workplace? Was there anyone there that might have held some sway over either your Mom or Dad?" Truthfully I had no clue. This all happened so long ago and the news that my father had murdered my mother was still pretty raw.

"I get that Uncle Cleave said that he and my Dad killed my mother but I don't really believe him. How could my mother still have been sending letters long after she was supposedly dead?" Bert was still for a moment. He was thinking. Then he said, "do you still have the letters? I'd like to see them."

I had no idea but was willing to see if my Dad still had them. I had no clue how to go about it. It's not like I could just ask him. First of all he would deny having them. That would be if he even took my call in the first place. "If my Dad still has them

I have a pretty good idea where they will be. He always kept a Tupperware under his bed. It has money and jewelry and other stuff. My Dad never believed in paying for a safe deposit box. "I can try and see if he has them but I will have to get into the house when he's not there. Are you really sure that you need them?"

"Yes," Bert said. "It will be a start. There is going to be a lot to uncover before we can point any fingers. Is there anything else you can think of that might be useful?"

"I can't think of anything right now," I said. "I will try and think but again, it was a long time ago."

"Let's start with the letters."

I asked Ziggy to take more control of the restaurant while I staked out my fathers house. He had retired from being a locksmith and spent most of his days at home with Martha. I noticed that they liked to go out in the late afternoon and walk around the neighborhood for a half hour or so. I took a chance when I saw them leave late one day. They were definitely going for a walk. As soon as they turned the corner I made my move. The front door was locked, so was the back door.

"Crap." I had expected them to be locked. My Dad was a locksmith after all. A window on the side of the house was ajar and I managed to shimmy it open and climbed through. I made quick time and was soon digging around under my Dad's bed. This all felt more than a little strange although this whole past week had been more than a little strange. I found the Tupperware and dragged it out. It was stuffed. The letters were there; so was a bunch of jewelry. There was an envelope full of money. I grabbed the letters and jewelry and an old photo album and fled.

Blaise and I were having a cup of coffee before I was due to relieve Ziggy at the restaurant. The letters were on the table along with the jewelry. "I have no idea if this was my Mom's jewelry.

I was too little to remember what she had worn.” Blaise sifted through it all. She picked up one piece. “What was your Mom’s name?”

“Shirley.”

“Hmmm. Here is a piece with her name on it.” It was a simple brooch with the name Shirley engraved. Somehow I vaguely remembered it. I sat for a while without saying anything. Too much had happened too soon. My mind was reeling. I distinctly remember the conversation that Uncle Cleave had had with my Dad at the lake cabin. Dad had told Uncle Cleave that Mom had even taken her jewelry when she left. Maybe she just took some and the rest of it was left and hidden in the Tupperware. I felt like I had been kicked in the gut.

“I have to go to work.” Blaise took my hand. “I know that this is hard Johnny. Let’s just take it one day at a time.” Blaise left and I started to flip through the photo album. There were a lot of photos of my Mom, some I don’t remember ever seeing. She looked so young and pretty. There was one with my Dad. It looked like they were going out somewhere fancy. It rarely happened unless it was a church occasion. The picture was not framed very well. I’m guessing that one of us kids must have taken it. Mom was all decked out. I looked closer and I could see that she was wearing some ornate earrings. I dug out the earrings from the box and there they were. They were definitely Mom’s earrings. Dad had lied. I had proof.

The restaurant was humming and The Large Man was there. “Hey kid,” he said. “Come on over. We need to talk.” I had forgotten to return his call. I didn’t want to join him but he was the boss so I pulled up a chair next to him. He signaled the waiter. Two doubles please.”

“I shouldn’t drink. I have to work,” I said.

“Don’t worry kid. I won’t fire you if I find out and besides most people cook better with a couple of whiskeys in them. That may be true but it wasn’t me.”

The drinks came. The Large Man said, “I am pulling some strings.” He leaned in. “Money talks, bullshit walks. I have spread some money around. You are a shoe-in for the James Beard Award. It will help your career and we can add a few bucks to each meal we serve here.” I wasn’t sure what to say so, as usual, I said nothing. I really didn’t want a whiskey but decided that it would be better to drink it than leave it. I downed it and said, “Thank you sir. I have to get to work now.”

We were well into the third seating when my phone rang. It was Blaise. I was hesitant to take it. I never take calls when I am in the middle of getting orders out and Blaise knew it and knew not to call me which made me pick up. It had to be something urgent.

“Johnny,” she said. “We can talk about this later but Bert says that the letters are suspicious. Too many different handwritings. No consistency. He asked me to ask you if you had anything in your Mom’s handwriting.”

I got home at two in the morning. Blaise was still up. I needed a drink; badly. The restaurant had been extra busy. From the kitchen I could see The Large Man and he stayed until well after midnight. At some point he was joined by two shady looking men and had ordered a \$2,000 bottle of whiskey. I sure hoped that he was paying for it.”

Blaise stood and asked. “What’s your pleasure?” I took her hand. “If we still have vodka in the fridge can you make me a dirty martini?” I was exhausted but the martini went down smoothly. “Look,” Blaise said, “You need to trust me on this. Bert is one of the best and he has had one of his handwriting guys look at your

Mom's letters. They concluded quickly that they had been written by different people. Too many errors, if you know what I mean. They asked for a sample of your mother's handwriting. I know that it's a long shot but..." Her voice trailed off. The martini sloshed around and I felt that warm comfort and a slight buzz. I had samples of her handwriting. All the years of my childhood before she died Mom had written me long notes on my birthday card. I had kept them all. Well Mom had kept them for me and after she left I couldn't bear to get rid of them. They were in a binder in my filing cabinet. I found them along with a diary that I had kept that first summer at the lake cabin. I tossed the diary onto the kitchen counter and handed Blaise the cards. She flipped through them, stopping every now and then to read a little.

"Your Mom really loved you," she said.

"I know. She was a kind woman. That's as much as I remember about her." I badly wanted to talk to my sisters about all of this but they lived hundreds of miles away and none of this was something that should be talked about over the phone. I told Ziggy about the handwriting. He was equally worried about all of it. His Mom was still alive, or so he presumed, but his Dad had been fingered as a murderer. I knew that he was suffering as well.

Blaise came back with the verdict from the handwriting specialists. The letters from my Mom were bullshit. Not one of them matched her handwriting. The story that my mother had been sending letters every few weeks was a total red herring to distract us kids and it was probably a plot to fool the police so that they didn't look too hard into things.

Bert suggested that I hire a private investigator, someone trained to sniff out a rat; the rat in this case being my father. Ziggy said that he would split the cost. We were at an outside bar where chefs congregated in the early hours of the morning once their restaurants had all closed. Most of us got there around one

in the morning. The place was officially closed but the owner of The Riptide knew where his bread was buttered, so to speak. About 20 of us got together most nights after work and drank as hard and as fast as we could until the sun lit the eastern sky. Most mornings I would get back to the house just as Blaise was waking up and we would have quickie before she left for work and I went to bed. It was a good arrangement.

"So what do you think we should do if the PI guy points the finger at Dad with conclusive evidence?"

"I dunno," I said. "One part of me says let sleeping dogs lie. But on the other hand if Dad killed my mother and lied to us all these years then he has to pay some kind of price. You know he never told us that he was your father. He said that he was helping out a single Mom who was down on her luck."

Ziggy met me at The Riptide around 2:30 in the morning. He had had his eye on a young blond sitting at the bar all night. By now I knew the look in his eye and so did she. She didn't leave when the barman called for the last round. She waited for Ziggy and I saw them leave.

Ziggy looked a bit disheveled. "I'm not getting any younger," was all he said. He grabbed a beer. "What's up?" I waited while he lit his smoke.

"Something has been on my mind for a while and I wanted to talk to you about it. My brain has been scrambled eggs these last few weeks and this detail slipped by."

Ziggy took a long drag on his cigarette. "Go ahead," he said.

"I remember that you told me that you never knew who your Dad was. When did you find out that our Dad was your Dad?" Ziggy looked thoughtful. Sometimes I wished that I smoked. Taking a drag always allows you time to get your thoughts together. Ziggy paused for a moment and then said. "First of all I thought that

Dad had told you and the girls about all of this. We were young and it's not the kind of thing kids talk about. We just take shit for granted especially when it comes from our parents. When Dad took formal of custody of me, before I moved in with you guys there was a meeting with I think some kind of social worker and a lawyer. He was definitely a lawyer because he conducted the meeting. My mother was there as well. I hadn't seen her in years. The lawyer explained that the man sitting next to me was my father and that he wanted me to come and live with you guys. I was really happy with the idea. The foster homes were OK but I wanted somewhere permanent. A place that I could call home."

"What was it like to meet your father for the first time?"

"Weird, and even more weird when my Mom hugged me. It was a strange day. I left with Dad and never saw my mother again." We sat in silence. Ziggy lit a joint and handed it to me. I took a long puff and then it dawned on me.

"Didn't you say that your mother's name was Martha?"

"Yes."

"I think that I know where she is." I now knew why when I met Martha at my fathers house that she looked familiar. "Ziggy," I said. "You mother is living with Dad at the old house. I went by to pay Dad a visit. It was very awkward but he introduced me to a woman by the name of Martha, said that she was just visiting but it was a bullshit story. She looked familiar and now I know why."

It was Ziggy's turn to look dumbfounded. "You know I have only seen Dad a few times in the last eight or nine years. I would offer to come over to the house but he always insisted that we meet at some coffee shop or place like that. He knew that I would recognize my mother. The lousy fucker. He's really a worthless piece of shit."

I tried to make light of it and said, "Yea he's our worthless

piece of shit. Lucky us." We finished the joint and I headed home. I was early for a change and Blaise was asleep. I climbed in next to her. She mumbled and said, "You are home early."

"I know. I couldn't wait to see you."

The announcement came a couple of days later. I had won the James Beard Award for the most innovative cuisine in the South. The ceremony would be held in Washington, DC. Vice President Dick Cheney would be there. Blaise came with me. She looked stunning in a tight fitting sequin dress with a black shawl. The ceremony had just started when my phone rang. It was Ziggy. "Johnny I have to talk to you," he said.

I had seen a few missed calls on my phone from the PI.

"Johnny," Ziggy said. "Dad was never a locksmith. That whole business was just a front. The front office did some locksmith business; the back office - apparently - was part of the Macon Mafia. Dad worked in the back office."

I was stunned. Again, all my life my Dad had been an upstanding member of our community, an elder in the church, the pillar of our family, and a fraud if this was true. How could it possibly be? He left for work at 7:45 in the morning, every morning, and came home at 5:15. We are talking about my father now. The "live by the word of our Lord" father. The man who took us to church every Sunday and said grace before every meal. I was stunned. I accepted the James Beard Award in complete shock.

Things started to happen fast after that bit of news. Bert was working closely with the PI. It quickly became clear that some really bad monkey business had taken place. Uncle Cleave was also part of the mafia. As kids we didn't know this but he had once been indicted on racketeering. I remember one summer when he wasn't at the lake cabin. Now I knew why.

Ziggy and I got together to lay some cards out. Blaise joined

us. We were at a new coffee shop that had just opened. Ziggy said, “the PI wants more money. He needs to hire some help. I’m in if you are.”

“How much more?”

“Another 5K.”

“Well we have come this far and besides I just happen to know where there is 5K stashed. Under Dad’s bed. He can pay for himself to be investigated.”

Blaise said, “are you sure that this is a good idea?”

“It’s brilliant,” Ziggy said. “Once we figure all of this out we are going to need a lawyer and that won’t cost nothing.”

Blaise said, “you guys won’t win if you can’t find a body.” She was right. I staked out my Dad’s house again and when they went for a walk I slipped in through the back door. They had forgotten to lock it. The shoebox was right there where I had left it. The wad of cash was in an envelope. I grabbed it and stuffed it down my pants. Just as I did I heard the front door click. They were home; early. Now I know that this might sound a little hokey, but I hid in the closet. I heard my Dad say, “OK I have them. Yours is still a little wet from yesterday.” The front door slammed and they were gone. I slipped out of the back door and hesitated for a moment. It had started to rain. I looked around the yard. Something wasn’t quite right but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

We paid the PI another 5K. There was only just under 4K in the shoebox so we chipped in the rest and split it. The next bit of news came as a real shock. Blaise and I were enjoying a greasy breakfast. It was very rare that we ate badly, but sometimes desperate times call for desperate measures. The PI wanted to meet in person. We finished our meal. I called Ziggy and we all met at the PI’s office on Lynn Street. Bert was there.

They both looked concerned. “OK this is not going to be easy,” the PI said. I looked at Ziggy and he looked at Blaise and Blaise looked at Bert. “You told me that your mother used to work stocking shelves at the 7-Eleven, right?” I nodded. The PI continued. “That particular 7-Eleven was also a front for the mafia. I went back through the records that my Dad kept, he was also in the PI business by the way. There had been numerous charges against the store. They never made the big ones stick but there were plenty of small ones that stuck and it’s clear, the place was a racket happening right in front of everyone’s eyes. That’s how they do it. Robbing people in plain sight. But that’s not the only thing I found out. Thanks to Bert and his connections at the FBI we found out that your mother was not stocking shelves, she was also part of the mafia.”

I sat there for more than a few minutes not saying anything. Ziggy took a long swallow on his water bottle and Blaise held my hand. Finally Blaise said, “you sure?”

The PI nodded. “I’m sure.”

My sisters came back to Macon for a family meeting. They had both grown into beautiful women. I had us all together in a small private area in the restaurant adjacent to the bar. The Sous Chef was running the place. Lunch was easy. Ziggy was there along with Blaise. I told them everything. Everything. As you would expect they sat in shocked silence. In disbelief, if you will. Finally Sue said, “if this is all true what are we going to do?”

The question was clearly directed at me. “I dunno,” I said. “Maybe we should just let it all slip into the history books.”

Sue said, “are you fucking kidding me? I always knew that there was something wrong with the picture. I remember clearly once Mom told me, I think that I was around eight at the time, she said, “life is not always as it seems. I never forgot what she

said, I don't know why. It seemed a strange thing to say to an eight year old I guess."

"Life is not always as it seems."

Ziggy said, "Ok she was not my Mom, but our Dad is our Dad and I have a stake in this. Dad never treated me very well. I think, looking back, that he might have been trying to shield me from the truth. If you want my vote I vote to go after him and find out the truth. We were never close." My sisters sat in silence. They were stunned. Sue said, "Johnny, you are the oldest. Whatever you say I will go along with it."

The PI said, "we don't have a lot to go on with yet. We need a body. Until we find a body we don't really have much of a case. Let's just take this slowly. "My Dad always told me, in the PI business information always comes to you if you are patient enough to wait. Also what was just discussed in these four walls needs to stay between us and only us. Things can slip out quicker that you can imagine."

I was driving by the old house a week later when I saw a For Sale sign out front. Dad was selling. I called the realtor. I didn't give her my real name. I asked about the property and she gave me the price. She also added, at the last minute, that a full price cash offer would be preferred. I had the money; in cash. Well not right away but I could dissolve some investments. I am not sure why I wanted to buy the house. It seemed a little overpriced but I have always listened to my gut and my gut told me to buy it. I talked to Blaise about it.

"I don't want my Dad to know that it's me that's buying the place. I talked to a lawyer. He said that I could set up an anonymous trust but there has to be a name on it for the house transaction. Can you be the upfront person?"

Blaise took my hand. "Yes of course."

I figured that the house would be a decent investment. It was certainly a fixer-upper not that I had time to fix it up, but I did have the money. The lawyer handled everything and in six weeks Blaise had bought the house. We went over a day after my Dad and Martha moved out. It felt really strange. It had been swept clean but there were memories that could never be erased. I saw my Mom everywhere. I mostly saw her tending her precious roses which had become an overgrown, tangled mess.

The PI dug a bit more. Turns out my Mom was not just a lowly member of the mafia, there because my father was already in. Turns out that she had some real clout. The PI said, "I wouldn't be surprised if she had ordered the hit on a few people. By the way she didn't go by Shirley, she went by Sheila. Her nickname was Sheila the Keeler." The spelling was off but I knew what he meant. At this point I was having a real hard time digesting all of it. It was almost too much. From Uncle Cleave dying to the news about Ziggy and the murder of my Mom, and now this?

Ziggy was there, so was Blaise when the PI said. "I think that we have taken this as far as we can go. We can get the cops and a lawyer involved and we can try and put forward a case on circumstantial evidence, but in Georgia it's very hard to get anything done without a body and or at least some hard and firm DNA evidence.

Ziggy said, "maybe we should all just move on with our lives." Blaise agreed. I agreed reluctantly. "This has already cost a lot of money and it's only going to cost a lot more." My sister Sue had told me that Dad and Martha had moved into a Retirement Home. She had actually visited them there. She said that the atmosphere was hostile, not the Retirement Home but in the room with Dad and Martha. I wasn't surprised.

Blaise was in charge of renovating the house. We were just going to fix it and flip it. She had a good eye for design and

detail. We put in a modern kitchen and added a bathroom. Paint and floor sanding had transformed the inside but outside was still a mess. The landscaper had cut things back and overall it looked much better. Blaise and I were sitting on the newly built back deck when Blaise said, "You know what this place needs?"

"No clue."

"It needs a lap pool. Just a small one, one that's easy to maintain but where someone could exercise and stay cool at the same time. They are really becoming a thing these days. I read an article in Good Housekeeping that an investment in a lap pool would double what you spent on it when it comes time to sell the house. People love them."

"Let's do it then," I replied.

The digger came the following Thursday. They had barely scratched the surface when they found Mom, well what was left of her. She was in a heavy plastic bag in an even heavier hessian sack. I got the call at the restaurant and went right on over. There was not much left, just bones and some hair; and some jewelry. The police came and her remains were taken to the morgue. The coroner's report was quite detailed. There were a lot of chemical compounds in the bag, some that they were still trying to analyze. The thought didn't slip my mind; Uncle Cleave had worked for Nyntrex, one of the biggest chemical producers in the region.

Mom had been dead for 35 years. She had been chucked in a shallow grave with her bag filled with chemicals that were supposed to dissolve her body. Uncle Cleave was apparently not quite as smart as he thought he was as a chemical engineer. It was time to make my father stand up for himself. I filed a petition with the court. I knew that it was going to cost me some money but I needed justice for my mother no matter what she had done as part of the mafia.

The DNA results were clear even though DNA was a relatively new science. I had not only kept the birthday cards that my Mom had given me, I also kept the envelopes and they had her DNA in the spit used to seal the envelope. My sisters were on board with the whole idea. I reengaged the PI and hired one of the top lawyers in Georgia. The lawyer had some sway with the police department in Macon and asked them to keep things on the down low for at least a few weeks.

Then things got trickier than I could have ever expected. The PI, Pete Davis is his name by the way and I highly recommend him if you need someone of character and integrity. Pete called me and asked for a meeting. We met at his small office. The lawyer that we hired, Greg Morgan, couldn't make the meeting. He had a previously scheduled deposition. Pete Davis said, "I hate to throw the cat among the pigeons here so let me come right to the point. Your boss, the guy that owns the restaurant where you guys work, he's the head of the Macon Mafia."



FUCK, I SAID. I couldn't think of anything else to say. "Ziggy said, "You have to be kidding me. Sue said, "this is getting more absurd by the day." My younger sister didn't say anything. She just sat there dumbfounded like the rest of us.

"With your permission I will talk to the DA's office. They will already know about the body. The coroner has to report any dead body. But they won't know the backstory to any of this unless me or someone else tells them. Sure they will investigate but I think that it's best we set the narrative. The DA has been working with the FBI for decades to take this lot down but they always pay off politicians and often the police. They have found dead bodies before but it's hard to pin stuff on them especially when there are some people on the inside working against the best interests of the DA's office and frankly many of the witnesses are now dead. What might make this case different is we have you guys, we have quite a bit of evidence, but most of all we have a pretty good idea who murdered your mother. Furthermore, Ziggy, as far as we know your mother was not involved in any of this. She may know what your Father did for a living, but maybe not. It seems that he was very good at hiding who he really was. In cases like this we can put some pressure on Martha to spill the beans, to save her ass so to speak. If she knew about all of this and didn't report any of it to the police then she is on the hook for multiple crimes. So do I have your permission to talk to the DA's office?" We all nodded

in agreement. "OK I will brief Greg Morgan and we can plan the next step."

The next step came a week later. I had handed over the photo album from when we were kids to the police and they had positively identified some of the jewelry found in my Mom's grave with some that she was wearing in the photos. At some point they would need a statement from me stating that I had found the photo album as well as the other jewelry under my father's bed.

Blaise and I were having a nightcap before heading to bed. The restaurant was closed the next day and Blaise had the day off. She had cut back her hours to be able to spend more time wrapping up the house renovation. Then it hit me. I have no idea why it hadn't occurred to me before, probably because of all the turmoil and the pressure of running the restaurant. "Blaise," I said, "I dunno why I didn't think of this before but there was a witness to Uncle Cleave's last words. There was a nurse in the room. She came in just before he died to check on things. She was on the other side of the bed but she must have heard him say that he and my father had killed my mother."

Blaise looked at me. "That's not quite a smoking gun but it's pretty close. I am sure that the hospital will be able to find out which nurse was on duty that night and hopefully we can get her to testify."

It wasn't hard to find the nurse and she agreed to meet with Chris Davis. Her name was Jacqueline Presscot and went by Nurse Jackie. They met, for their first meeting, in the hospital dining area. Nurse Jackie was petite and had the bubbling enthusiasm of someone born to be a nurse. Chris Davis came right to the point. "I understand that you were the attending nurse when Mr. Cleave Scott passed away."

"Yes I was."

"Do you remember him?"

"Yes I do."

"I presume that you have been there at the time a lot of people die. How are you so sure that you remember Mr. Scott?"

"It's because of what he said to his nephew moments before he passed away."

"Go on."

"First you have to know that people say a lot of strange things as they are dying, but it's usually when they have been heavily sedated or have been on their way out for quite some time. Mr. Scott was sedated but he was in full command of his faculties right up until the end so I don't think that he was just mumbling deliriously. I remember clearly what he told his nephew because while I had heard some weird stuff in the past, I had never heard a bedside confession quite like his. He said something about frying fish. I didn't pay any attention to that because I was monitoring the machines. But then I heard him say "Your Mom did not leave you. "Your Dad and I murdered her."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes I'm sure. I told my colleague Nurse Sally what he had said. I was so shocked."

"And what did his nephew say after he heard the news?"

"Nothing. He just sat there. I think that he was stunned."

"Thank you Nurse Jackie," Chris Davis said. "You know my Dad died in this hospital. It was a long time ago, probably long before you started working here."

"I'm sorry," Nurse Jackie said and then left to go back to her shift.

Chris Davis called me, "I spoke to the nurse and she remembers

the conversation as clear as if it was yesterday. She also repeated what she had just heard to one of her colleagues. That will help a lot. Your father has a lot to answer for.”

“He sure does,” I said.

“I relayed this bit of news to Greg Morgan and he thinks that we have enough to convict. He said that he would speak to the DA’s office to see if we can’t get a judge to appoint a Grand Jury. I think that we have enough evidence now to arrest your father on murder charges. That will be the first step. The bigger picture, of course, and why the DA is all over this, is that they are looking at this as a stepping stone to cracking the mafia. If your Dad played a part in it for almost four decades he will have a lot to offer. Once he’s in custody they will start to put the screws on him to cough up some evidence of what really went on in the back office of the locksmith and as much as he knows about the 7-Eleven operation.

The restaurant was really hopping, luckily, and it took my mind off things. Ziggy and I would get together after work at The Riptide and talk things through. “This is pretty much a wait and see game,” he said. “I know that this is a cliché but the wheels of justice do move slowly.”

“I know. I placed my hand on his arm and said, “We will get through this. I am still in disbelief about it all.”

“Me too.”

The wheels of justice might move slowly but in this case they moved quite quickly. The judge agreed to a Grand Jury and they convened. Greg Morgan presented what evidence they had and what evidence they would be able to gather. They were convened strictly for the murder; not the mafia. After a week the Grand Jury gave the go ahead. None of us were notified. I guess that it’s the way things are done. The element of surprise is important. Only

the police were notified. They already had everything planned out in advance. They didn’t want to take my Dad in front of the other residents of the Retirement Community. It would be too traumatic for them, but once a week Dad went to an off-site physiotherapy session. The cops trailed the transport van and pulled them over. It all happened pretty quick, or so I was told. They had Dad in the police car in less than a minute and sped off to the local precinct where he was fingerprinted and booked. That was when Greg Morgan called me.

“They have your father in custody,” was all he said. I was at the restaurant. Ziggy was working as my Sous Chef for the evening shift. “The shit is about to hit the fan.” Ziggy gave me a quizzical look. We had just had an issue with a customer who returned her meal twice and Ziggy’s mind was on customer service.

“They have Dad in custody.”

“Fuck. OK.”

The front page of the Macon Gazette had the headline. “LOCAL MAN ARRESTED FOR THE MURDER OF HIS WIFE 35 YEARS AGO.” Someone had tipped off a photographer and he had captured a photo of my father entering the police station. His head was down and he looked bewildered. Ziggy and I got together and we called our sisters. Sue, never one to mince her words said, “I hope that the fucker rots in hell. Let’s just say Dad and I were never that close.”

The arrest was big news for a week and then dropped off under the fold and a couple of days later was off the front page. Greg Morgan called a meeting in his office. It was just Ziggy, me and Pete Davis. “OK,” he said. “I have been in touch with the DA’s office. This is going to take some time. They are putting a lot of faith in what Pete has uncovered about your father, and well your mother too I guess, about them being a part of the Macon

Mafia. Your father is apparently being very tight lipped about things but the way this works is they always start from the bottom and work their way up. Both you, Johnny, and Ziggy will be called in. They may or may not bring in your sisters. The fact that they live so far away may mean that only if they don't get enough info from you two they might have them go to a local precinct in their area for an interview." By the way they are taking Pete off your payroll and putting him on the DA's payroll." Pete had been worth every cent that I had paid him but it was still a relief to have one less expense.

I looked at Ziggy and he looked down at his hands. "The next one they will bring in will be Martha. It's pretty clear that if she knew anything about what your Dad was up to that she has broken more than a few laws and the police have a number of ways to put pressure on her. Let's just be clear here. Your father is not their top goal. They will probably get him and negotiate with him for reduced prison time in return for dirt on the mafia. What they really want is for him to squeal, that being the mafia vernacular for talking. Some bad shit went down and the DA is gagging for a big case. He's up for reelection in less than 18 months."

When I got home Blaise was there with a chilled dirty martini. Ziggy had offered to run the restaurant for the night. I was truly grateful to him. I knew that he must be suffering too. None of this was easy. Blaise said, "I know that you have a lot to talk about but the reporters have been over here looking for you. They have pieced things together." I took a long, hard more than a sip of my martini and said, "that's what I was worried about. It's not that I worry about them knowing my connection with my father and my connection to the restaurant. I just don't want The Large Man to get wind of anything."

"I think just say 'no comment' for as long as you can get away with it," Blaise said.

"I can't do that. I have won a James Beard award. Whether or not I like it that makes me a big deal and the press will be all over it. They are looking for ways to keep this story alive for as long as possible. I think that we should invite them to the restaurant and I will talk to them, give them a few glasses of wine. I would be surprised if The Large Man even knew about my fathers involvement in the mafia. I'm willing to take a gamble that he didn't. As my Mom used to say, honesty is the best policy. Ironic isn't it?" For now, the only story is the 35 year old murder. I downed the rest of my martini and handed Blaise my glass.

There was a bigger crowd than I had expected. Once the media put two-and-two together they were all over the story again. It went from the middle of the paper back onto the front pages of most newspapers and on many of them, above the fold. A James Beard award winning chef whose father had been accused of murdering his wife 35 years ago was juicy news. Greg Morgan had briefed me. "Don't be evasive, the press will smell a rat, but for now anyway paint your father as a good God Fearing man who loved his family and the church and say how stunned you are by all of this. They will buy it for a while but people don't get into that business without having a keen mind and an even keener sense of the truth."

The Southern Baptist Church, by the way, put out a statement shortly after my Dad's arrest. It read essentially that Mr. Billy Scott was an occasional member of their church and they were shocked and surprised to hear of his arrest. They faked concern and hoped that would be that. Some of the press talked to other parishioners and they were shocked to hear of the arrest. They also seemed a little surprised to hear that the official statement from the church stated that Billy Scott was an occasional member. As one parishioner put it, "Mr. Scott was one of the elders of the church. He never missed a Sunday." This kind of comment was

red meat to the media. They started to put some pressure on the church for clarification of their statement. The church offered a spokesman who gave them platitudes without any substance. It was clear that someone was covering up something.

News crews camped out in front of the church and after four days the Head Deacon, Deacon Dante Marino relented and faced the cameras. He looked like a deer in the headlights. TV-7 had an exclusive for the first ten minutes then it was open season to all the other media outlets. TV-7's top reporter was a pretty blond who went by the name Sage Mulrooney, although we all knew that her real name was Heather Sackett. I know this is a bit cheesy to bring this up here since this is a serious situation but she was known around town as Heather Suckit. She had used her ample talents to make it to the top reporters job.

Sage started off lightly. "Was Mr. Scott a member of this church?"

The Head Deacon nodded. "Can you please give me a yes or no answer."

"Yes."

"How many years has he been a member of your church?"

"I'm not sure. Quite a few I think, but I'm really not sure."

"OK, we looked into it. He was a member of the church for 48 years. What kind of man was Mr Scott?"

"A very nice Christian. A very devout man. He was a man who we could tell loved his wife and family."

"I talked to one of his daughters. She told me that Mr. Scott had been estranged from his family for years, that all his children have. In fact he has not seen his youngest daughter in fifteen years. I don't call that being a good family man who loved his children."

She then threw him a soft one. "Well I have heard that your

church does good work in this community and you must be devastated by the news of his arrest." Sage was a good interviewer. I could see Deacon Marino's shoulders relax a little. Clearly he was a man not used to having his authority challenged.

"Yes, that's our primary mission in the community. It's to spread the word of God and to uplift not only this community, but the State of Georgia and the whole of the United States. The message from our Lord is clear; people need to follow his word. They need to have their sins forgiven and they need to praise him."

Then Sage came in for the kill. "Do you understand Deacon Marino that Mr. Scott is accused of murdering his wife? He's accused of placing her in a bag and filling it with chemicals concocted to dissolve her body, and burying her in their backyard where he lived until recently. This is a heinous crime if he's found guilty. At first your church put out a statement that he was an occasional member of the church. You, as head of the church, you knew that this was a lie. He was in fact a high ranking member in the church, one of the elders if you will. Why would you lie about this? What are you all trying to hide?"

Deacon Marino was visibly sweating. I was watching it on TV with Blaise and we could see the beads of sweat popping out on his forehead.

"We are not hiding anything," he replied. "We are here to serve our community and to bring our people closer to God."

Sage drilled down. "This discovery has rocked our community. I think that the people of this community would have expected their church to be a calming influence and not spew a pack of lies. I think, well we in the media think that you are covering up something and we will get to the bottom of it all."

The other media outlets jumped in and the questions were

much along the same lines. Why did the church put out a false statement? Deacon Marino was visibly shaken by the time his ordeal was over. An aide led him away.

I turned to Blaise, "There's a lot more there than meets the eye." Blaise agreed. "The church is covering up something that's for sure. Why would they lie? How stupid of them. They could have put out a simple statement about what a sad state of affairs it all was, wait for the story to fade, and then move on," Blaise said.

"OK I've got to get ready for work." I kissed Blaise and she held me for a few seconds longer than normal. "I'm here for you Johnny," she said. "It's going to be a rough couple of years." At the time neither of us knew just how rough it was going to get.

Ziggy and I went in for our police interviews separately. The only bit of new information that I was able to offer them was that I had kept a diary that summer that Mom went missing. The police asked if they could see it and I handed it over. Then came the first shock; Martha had done a runner. Well that was the first of two bits of shocking news, the other being that Martha had another son. He had apparently been visiting her and my father at the Retirement Home and after Dad's arrest he apparently stopped by quite often to visit his mother. They had an arrangement with the Retirement Center for the two of them to go into the nearby neighborhood on Wednesdays for ice cream. One Wednesday they left and never came back. Martha was slated to talk to the police the following Monday.

The Retirement Home notified the police of a missing resident. They were aware that Martha was due to talk to the police the following week but they didn't know what it was about and didn't put two and two together. The cops already had quite a bit of information on Martha, but none on her son and for the first week that they were on the run they did everything in the son's name. Hotel reservations, credit card transactions, that sort of thing.

Then Martha made a mistake. Martha kept her weekly phone call with Billy at the prison. The police traced the call to a payphone in Montgomery, well on the outskirts of Montgomery to be exact. They alerted the local police with an accurate description of Martha and a somewhat vague description of her son and they found them in a diner eating barbecue. They had very little reason for taking them in; Martha was a private citizen free to do what she wanted and so was her son, but she had failed to show up for a police interview and they pushed that point. While they were chatting in the BBQ joint the cop in the car ran a background check on the son. There was an outstanding warrant for his arrest. That was the end of their joyride.

Martha's little escapade did not help her case. She was obviously trying to get out of her police interview and that heightened suspicions about what she knew. The interview didn't go very well; for Martha. It went well for the police. Playing the good cop bad cop routine they slowly softened her up over the course of two weeks. It was clear that she knew a lot. The bad cop summed things up by saying, "You knew a lot about what your friend Mr. Bobby Scott had done in his past. You might not have known that he murdered his wife although we suspect that you did and if we have to we will prove it in a court of law. But there were other murders that you knew about, some that your boyfriend participated in. The laws in Georgia have changed recently. Failure to notify the police of these incidents could be a felony and most felonies result in prison time."

Martha had tried to be evasive but it suddenly became clear to her that the police knew more than they were letting on and that they meant business. She felt sick to her stomach.

The good cop said, "we have no beef with you personally Ma'am. We do, however, have a beef with your boyfriend. You have been very cooperative and we appreciate that. We have

more than enough evidence to convict him for the murder of his wife so we don't really even need your cooperation but I think that it's in all of our best interests that we get to the bottom of this. We thank you for your time. I will have the lady at the front desk call your son to pick you up."

We were on our third seating at the restaurant when I saw The Large Man walk in. He was carrying a fairly large attache case which he placed on the seat beside him. He took a seat at a corner table and ordered an expensive bottle of whiskey. I had a gut feeling that this moment would be coming. Ziggy had noticed him as well. The large man was well into the bottle when he summoned me. He didn't take my hand when I extended it but instead said, not unkindly, "Sit kid." I sat. He poured me a large glass of whiskey.

"You never told me that your Sous Chef was your brother."

"Actually when you hired us I didn't know that he was my brother," I said. "I only found out later. We have the same father but I didn't know that until a few years ago."

"Aah your father yes. I was thinking of sending you a condolence card when I heard that he had been arrested. They say that he murdered your mother. Is that right?"

"Yes sir," I said. "That's what the charge is. I have spoken to the police and they have some pretty strong evidence, at least that's what they tell me. When she left the family he told us that she just left but it turned out he may have murdered her." The Large man took a long swig and then refilled his glass. "Well I'm sorry kid," he said. "That's a tough break. I hope that all of this is not a distraction from your work here."

"I can compartmentalize," I replied. "Compartmentalize, not compromise."

"That's good," The Large Man said. "I think that they might

need you in the kitchen. I left feeling a little rattled. He had been too nice. Ziggy came over, "how did it go?"

"I dunno. He was almost too nice." I had only seen The Large Man once since being told that he was head of the Macon Mafia and he had not bothered me. I, most certainly, didn't bother him.

This whole experience brought Blaise and me closer together and I asked her to marry me. She didn't hesitate. "You know that there won't be time for a honeymoon," I said. Blaise kissed me and said, "living with you is like being on honeymoon every day. I couldn't have loved her more. Ziggy was a bit mystified by the news. He was still shagging everything that moved but he did buy us a nice bottle of champagne and got a card.

Chris Davis called a meeting. Greg Morgan was there along with myself, Blaise and Ziggy. Bert was also there. He wanted to update us on what other information he had dug up about my mother. Greg was there to update us on the police investigation. Chris started, "OK, this information may help some. It seems as if your mother, even though her nickname was Sheila the Keeler, was never involved in any actual killing. We got it wrong, well I got it wrong I suppose, when I presumed that Keeler was a euphemism for killer. Turns out a keeler is a shallow tub. She, apparently, came up with the idea of waterboarding anyone who crossed the mafia. She didn't participate in any of it, as far as I can tell. It was, however, a very good tool for getting people to talk and so her nickname stuck." I was relieved. It had been eating at me that my mother might have actually murdered someone. Having them tortured in such a horrible way somehow seemed much more palatable.

Greg Morgan gave a brief update on the investigation. "There is good news," he said. "Martha has agreed to cooperate fully in return for full immunity. She has been spilling her guts. Apparently Ziggy, your step-brother has been advising her and she has sat for

a number of depositions. She knew a lot about the back operation at the locksmith and the police now have all, well a lot of the information that they need. Some serious shit went down and your father was knee deep in most of it.”

Ziggy was looking down at the table. He had not been happy to find out that he had a brother. Blaise held my hand. Morgan continued. “They have started to put some pressure on your father to talk. He has not confessed to the murder; yet. There is one little thing more to add. The police read your diary Johnny and it seems clear that the weekend that your Uncle Cleave left the lake cabin was the same weekend that they murdered your mother. It’s just a small point but will be useful in building a case. Unfortunately Cleave Scott and his wife Blanche are both now deceased so much of this is moot, but many cases are built small piece by small piece.”

“So my father hasn’t confessed yet,” Ziggy asked.

“Not yet anyway, but here is the most interesting piece of information. Your father, perhaps as a way to ingratiate himself with the police, has hinted that the Macon Mafia operation went way beyond a locksmith and 7-Eleven front, he hinted that it went all the way to the top of the Southern Baptist Church.” He let that bit of news dangle in the breeze and then added, “only time will tell.”

That night was one of my rare days off. Ziggy was running the restaurant. Blaise and I were outside sipping cold beers. “I don’t want to say that I knew it,” Blaise said, “but I knew it. Deacon whateverhisnamewas was sweating too much for the church to not be involved on some level. I bet that we find out that this shit goes all the way to the top of the church.”

I took a sip of my beer.

“I think that you just might be right. Only time will tell.” We

talked a bit more about the case and then Blaise said, “I think that we need to rent the house rather than try and sell it. The fact that there had been a dead body in the back yard for 35 years is not a big selling point. That plus once your father goes on trial there is going to be a curiosity factor and people will be coming by the house to see where the murder took place, assuming that it took place on the property. Certain things freak people out. If we rent for now we can get some income and once all of this settles down we can place it on the market.”

“Makes sense,” I said. “You know, one thing that has really bothered me. How could my father have lived in the same house for all those years knowing full well that my mother was buried in a shallow grave in the back yard? I am sure that Martha knew even if she denies it. They both just went on with their lives as if nothing ever happened.”

“I know, people are strange. Both you and Ziggy could have turned out to be terrible people but you both seem well adjusted and very loving and caring.” Blaise kissed me long and hard and we set our beers aside and headed for the bedroom.

A week later I got a call from Greg Morgan. “We need a meeting as soon as possible. There is big news.”

“OK. I’m at work. Ziggy has the day off. Let’s meet here at the restaurant. I will get Blaise in as well. Do we need Peter and Bert?”

“Yes, can we meet in a couple of hours?”

“Perfect,” I said. “I have some time between the lunch and dinner shifts.” I reached Ziggy as he was about to head into a matinee movie. “Any chance you can make a meeting at three at the restaurant?”

Ziggy replied, “if we can make it 3:30 I will definitely be there. I am on a date and don’t want to bugger it up. She’s smoking hot.”

"See you then."

We met in the small meeting room adjacent to the bar. Greg Morgan came right to the point. "Your father is going to confess to the murder of your mother. He's also going to confess to the murder of three other people. He's also going to expose the Southern Baptist Church's involvement in all of this. The church has apparently acted as a shield for the Macon Mafia for decades." We all sat in silence. What was there to say? We were all pretty sure that he had killed my mother but to hear the news that he was going to come clean sat like a rock in my stomach.

Morgan looked around the room. "This is going to be part of a plea deal. He will get a reduced sentence but frankly a full sentence or a reduced sentence still means that he will die in jail no matter what. It seems that some of the church's teachings did rub off on him and he wants to go to his grave with all of this stuff off his chest even if it implicates his beloved church."

Bert said, "the system does work. Start at the bottom and work your way up to the rat at the top or, in this case, the rats above him. You will get them all in the end if you hang the prospect of jail time in front of them."

Morgan continued. "As part of the plea he is going to have to describe all of his murders and also tell the police where the bodies are buried. It's up to you to decide if you want to read the report or not." I wasn't sure and said that I would think about it. Blaise squeezed my hand.

I called my sisters and gave them the news. My sister Sue said, "I'm going to read the bloody report in full detail." My younger sister said, "you read it and tell me the details without too many details, if you know what I mean."

Two weeks later Morgan called me into his office. "What I have here is a copy of your father's confession. I also have

the report of what happened the night of the murder. These are copies. Take this and decide what you want to do. At this stage of the game there is nothing that will change anything. He signed the confession and the report." He slid the file over to me. "Good luck," he said. "It's not easy reading."

The file was in a sealed envelope. As soon as I got into the elevator I was tempted to tear the envelope open and read but I knew that I needed Blaise with me; Ziggy too. We both needed to work the restaurant that night but the following day was our day off. I called Ziggy. "I have the report about what happened that night. I need you with me when I read it. You need to read it, I think, but that's entirely up to you. It wasn't your mother that was murdered but it was your father that killed her. My father too."

Ziggy said simply, "I will be there. Tell me when and where."

My place, mid-morning tomorrow if that works for you. Blaise has the day off as well.

I (stupidly) placed the envelope on my night stand. I was exhausted when I went to bed but couldn't sleep. I kept waking up and looking at the envelope. After three hours of tossing and turning Blaise said, "move the bloody envelope." She was right. I climbed out of bed and took the envelope to the kitchen and left it on the counter. When I got back into bed Blaise put her arms around me. "Sleep my Love," she said. "You need to sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a difficult day."

The confession was fairly brief. In essence my father confessed to being a member of the Macon Mafia for 44 years. He confessed to the murder of my mother and three other people. He implicated Uncle Cleave in two of the other murders. He confessed to a number of other less heinous crimes. In all, his four plus decades as a gangster was summarized in a few short paragraphs.

Ziggy read the confession and then handed it to Blaise. None of us said anything for a while. I thought back to the Ozzie and Harriet life that we had led as a family when we were kids, how my dad would go off to work at precisely 7:45 each morning and return right on time at 5:15. I thought back to my father smoking his pipe and drinking his one bottle of Schlitz while Mom prepared dinner. I remembered my sisters doing crafts at the kitchen table before Mom moved them so that she could set the table for supper. I simply could not imagine that it was the same man who wrote the confession. Dad didn't go to work as a locksmith. Sure he went to the office, but that was where the similarity ended. He was in the back office and I guess that was where he got his marching orders for the day. Thinking back on it I kind of wondered how my Dad's car got beat up so quickly if all he was using it for was a short commute to the office. Now I knew.

"So what do you think?" Ziggy asked. I didn't know what to think and said so. It was all a bit much to take in. Blaise said, "Can I get anyone a beer?" I wasn't thirsty and I certainly didn't need a buzz on at eleven in the morning, but I needed something to steady my racing mind. Blaise came back with three cold Michelob's.

I took a long hit on the bottle and read the report of my mother's murder. It was long so I will paraphrase it here. There was no particular motive for the murder other than my father and Uncle Cleave had been ordered to kill her to show their loyalty to the mafia and to the church. My Dad had been having an affair with Martha for years and the whole good father, good upstanding member of the church was all just a charade. Total bullshit in other words. That part I could live with, I guess. What I read next horrified me to my core.

Mom was home from work tending her roses. Since us kids

were away at the lake cabin there was no need for the charade of a single Schlitz and a pipe while she fixed dinner. She was humming to herself when my father and Uncle Cleave pulled in. They had obviously stopped at a bar somewhere and had a few. Mom waved at them and they went inside to find more beers. It was just getting dark when my father hit her on the side of the head. He approached from behind with a brick in his hand. She was just turning when the brick connected. My father stepped back and Uncle Cleave hit her three more times knocking her unconscious. That was when my father slit her throat and dragged her behind the rose bushes so that no one from the street could see her. Cleave left to prepare the acid mix. He had a container of hydrofluoric acid in his car. As soon as it got dark Dad dragged my mother into the backyard and began to dig a shallow grave. He was panicking and with the adrenaline in his veins had the hole dug in no time, apparently.

What happened next completely disgusted me. They needed proof that she was dead and Dad went into the house to get the Polaroid camera that Mom had given him for Christmas a few years earlier. Because it was dark Uncle Cleave had to rig up some lights and between them they staged things. By the way, long after all of this was put to rest, so to speak, the police found the polaroids. I think that they were in the other Tupperware under my Dad's bed. I had never thought to look in it and I'm glad that I didn't.

Cleave and my father managed to get Mom into the heavy plastic bag and then into the hessian bag. Cleave poured the hydrofluoric acid into the bag and they sealed the top. They were of course wearing gloves and heavy plastic overalls in case some of the acid splashed on them. They rolled my mother into the grave and tossed the dirt back in. Dad raked the area and then spread some grass seed. He set up the sprinkler to water the new

grass. I can almost remember noticing the new grass in the back yard the day we returned from the lake cottage after we were told that Mom had left us and thinking that it was a little strange. My father never did yard work.

I called my sisters. They were appalled. Sue was pissed. "That lousy fucker," she said. "That lousy fucker." My younger sister sobbed and said nothing. I was just about to hang up when I saw an unmarked sedan pull up in front of the house. A young man with a notepad stepped out, closely followed by an equally young man with a half dozen cameras strung around his neck. They came to the front door and knocked. Blaise answered. "May we talk to Johnny Scott please?" Blaise closed the door. "It's about to start Johnny," was all she said.

The reporter was from the Macon Gazette. Someone had leaked the confession. I was hoping to get ahead of the game when I saw a TV-7 news truck pull onto our street. It was too late. Right behind them were three more cars and another TV truck. "Have you read your fathers confession?" Someone yelled.

"Yes I have," I said. This was not what I had expected but I should have known better. In the back of my mind I was hoping beyond hope that they didn't know about the church's involvement. It would tip them off. I tried to answer questions as politely as I could and I thought that I was doing well until someone asked, "is there any truth that your father might have been part of some kind of mafia?"

I may have hesitated too long for my answer to be believable, but I denied knowing any such thing. "I have no idea what you are talking about," I said. The reporter seemed satisfied with my answer. Luckily for me reporters and TV people have deadlines and they had to leave to file their stories. As quickly as they arrived, they left, except for the reporter that had asked about my fathers connection to the mafia. He persisted. "There are rumors

that your father was connected to the Mob. Do you have any comment on that?" He was just a young kid earning an honest buck. "Look," I said. "Give me your card. If I hear anything you can get an exclusive but don't mess it up by printing something that is just hearsay and may not be true." He seemed satisfied and left.

The story went back to the front pages above the fold. MACON LOCKSMITH MURDERS HIS WIFE AND DISSOLVES HER BODY IN ACID. There was another one. MURDER ON MAIN STREET 35 YEARS AGO. MAN CONFESSES. We hardly lived on Main Street but I got their point which was to sell newspapers. I scanned the articles not wanting to read any of them but looking to see if there was any mention of Dad's connection to the Macon Mafia. I didn't see any. I was just putting the papers aside when I got a call from Sage Mulrooney asking for an exclusive interview. I checked first with Blaise and she wasn't sure what to do. Then I called Greg Morgan. "It should be OK," he said. "The dogs are going to persist until you say something. You might as well tell your story to Sage but ferchristsake don't mention anything about his Mob ties.

Sage scheduled the interview for the following evening in Prime Time. I had Ziggy run the restaurant. Blaise came with me and sat to the side of the set where I could see her. Just before we went on the air I got a call from Ziggy. He wished me good luck and then added. "I have a reservation for a Mr. Bob X. Do you have any idea who he is?" I said that I didn't know who he was; but little did I know I was about to find out. The interview had just started. Ziggy had it playing on the TV in the bar. Mr. Bob X walked in. It was The Large Man and he had two shady looking people with him. The waitress showed him to his table. He placed a fairly large attache case on the seat beside him and ordered an expensive bottle of whiskey. Ziggy was nervous. He

turned the TV down and turned it away so that it would not be in Mr. X's line of sight.

The interview was going OK. I thought so anyway. Sage was making me out to be a victim and I was fine with that. She asked about our childhood. She asked about my James Beard Award. She did not ask about any mafia connection. I guessed (fingers crossed) that part of the story was still under wraps.

The Large Man, Mr. Bob X was just about to tuck into his escargot starter when the FBI came in with a full SWAT team. Mr. Bob X had seen them coming in the door. He reached into his attache case and pulled out a small Glock. He fired, hitting the first FBI agent square in the chest. The man reeled backwards, breaking a table and sending plates and glasses everywhere. He took another shot which missed the second FBI agent but blew through the bottles hanging above the bar. People screamed and hit the ground. Ziggy hit the ground. Mr. Bob X didn't get a chance to fire off a third round. The FBI had him and his two guests on the ground and handcuffed. Within minutes they were dragging them out the door.

Sage was asking me about my sisters when my phone rang. It was Ziggy. I daren't take the call. Then I noticed Blaise answer her phone. She turned her back to the stage to take the call and when she turned around she was as white as a sheet. I saw her approaching the stage, almost in slow motion. I also noticed that the Executive Producer of the show was talking into his phone. He came right on set and interrupted the interview. "There has been a shooting at Mr. Scotts restaurant," he said. "We are going to have to cut away from this interview. We have a news team already on their way to the scene." Ziggy came on. He was clearly shaken. Behind him I could see some carnage in the restaurant. The bar was a mess. Broken bottles everywhere. They were just starting to interview Ziggy when the Executive Producer interrupted again.

"We are breaking away from this to go to the Southern Baptist Church," he said. "They have arrested Deacon Dante Marino." The footage swept from Ziggy at the bar to Deacon Marino being led away in handcuffs. Four other members of his clergy were also in handcuffs and being led toward a police car.

The focus was off me for a moment. Blaise came over and hugged me. "They got those fuckers," was all she said. "Your Mom did not die in vain."

I'm writing this sitting in a small thatch cottage on a beach in Antigua. Blaise and I rented it for a few weeks. We needed a break and had a very pleasant routine. Blaise always wakes me with an espresso and a glass of guava juice. We take a long walk to the end of a stunningly beautiful white sand beach and when we get back to the cottage we swim. The water is turquoise and occasionally small sea turtles drift by. Blaise makes breakfast, usually just fruit and a Ting. What's a Ting you ask? A Ting is a slice of the Caribbean. It's Jamaican grapefruit juice that is both sweet and tart and it gets my day off to a good start. I have found writing about what happened cathartic hence this story. I have to tell you that a lot has happened since the FBI stormed the restaurant.

First of all, they busted the Macon Mafia wide open. Deacon Dante Marino was the head of things but only in a titular way. The man behind the day-to-day operations was Mr. Bob X. His full name was Robert Xaferiaus, a Greek born immigrant. He immigrated to the States with his parents in '57 and they settled in Macon. Young Bob, as he was called back then, had a knack for business and a certain charm. He was building his small empire of restaurants when he ran into some zoning problems when the City Council wouldn't let him build a fast food restaurant on a vacant lot. This seems to have been the turning point from his life as an upstanding businessman to his life as a criminal. In the end he was convicted of cold blooded murder for the

execution of the FBI agent that stormed his table. His other crimes were noted but the prosecutors found it easier to get him on the one crime that was blatant and carried out in front of a hundred witnesses. The Large Man, Mr. Bob X, Mr. Robert Xaferiaus, call him what you want, was sentenced to death but will likely never see his sentence carried out. Georgia has had the death penalty since 1973 but most of the condemned wait out their sentences with appeals until they eventually die in prison. I read somewhere that prisoners on death row get better treatment than those in the general population so it's kind of an incentive to kill someone.

Ziggy and I formed a partnership and we bought the restaurant. We named it "Lilacs." You remember why don't you? In case you don't the last smell I had of my mother before she died was of Lilacs. We changed the food to be more modern and just before Blaise and I left to come to the Caribbean I got a message that we might be in line for a Michelin Star. Ziggy is running the place now while I am lazing in my hammock writing. Blaise just came over with an ice cold Michelob. She is already beginning to show.

Six months, or thereabouts, after the shooting I went to visit my father in prison. It took some negotiating because he didn't want to see me. I guess in the end he was all about going to his death with as clear a conscious as possible. It was an awkward meeting to say the least. They hustled me into a small waiting area. There were other people there but there were cinder block partitions between us. I sat on an uncomfortable stool until they brought my father in. He had withered to almost nothing and had a five day stubble. In a single word, he looked like crap. The guard pointed to the red phone on either side of the thick glass partition. I picked it up and gestured for my father to do the same his side. I saw

that his hand was shaking as he reached for it. Surprisingly he said, "hello son."

"Hi Dad. How are they treating you?" I knew that it was a platitude.

"I'm OK. I don't really want to be here. I am missing the sing-a-long back in Cell Block C. They have a sing-a-long every Tuesday." His mind was gone. There wasn't and will never be any sing-a-long's in prison.

"You look OK," I said. Dad tried to smile. "I look like crap and you know it. I agreed to meet with you because I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry and I want you to tell your sisters the same." It looked like he was falling asleep and the guard came in and took him away. He died two weeks later. I guess that he finally got it off his chest just like Uncle Cleave. The thing is when you get shit off your chest you put it onto someone else's chest and my fathers remarks landed squarely on mine. I did call both my sisters and relay Dad's final words. Sue laughed. "Yea the fucker can rot as far as I'm concerned." My younger sister cried. None of us were there when he was buried in an unmarked plot behind the prison.

Both my sisters are married now. Sue and her husband came back to live in Macon. My younger sister and her wife moved to New York City. I never saw this coming but she's making her living as a street artist. People commission her to paint murals. She can take a derelict building and paint a facade to look like a street bar in New Orleans.

Before I forget, I did give that young reporter an exclusive, the one who asked about my Dad's ties to the mafia. I heard somewhere, and I might be wrong here, that he got a title promotion after that.

Blaise has lunch ready so I have to go. It's red snapper that

came off the fishing boat this morning. She always serves mango as a side. We are not sure if we should find out the sex of our baby. I'm thinking not but Blaise might have other ideas. I will go along with whatever she wants.

GINGER BRANDY

I LEARNED HOW TO SKI under the influence of ginger brandy. Yes I know that's a little unorthodox but here we are. I had never seen snow before but somehow found myself in the mountains of New Hampshire on a cold snowy day. My friend Tim had skied once before and thought himself an expert. He said, "Just drink this." He handed me a hip flask with some murky looking liquid in it. "Drink this now. This will help. When you get to the top of the mountain you just have to point your ski's forward. Try and keep them together. When we get there you have to get off the ski lift so let your skis touch the ground, lean forward, lift your arse, and slide down the slope. It's that easy."

By the time we got to the top of the mountain the ginger brandy had started to kick in. I was not worried, it sounded simple enough. Tim raised the safety bar, I leaned forward, lifted my arse, and hit the ground badly. Well not that badly in terms of body damage but my fragile ego took a bit of a pounding. I managed to get my feet on the ground but made that fateful mistake of hesitating. The lift seat hit me fair and square on the arse and I took off down the slope that Tim had promised would be waiting for me and hit a snowbank; head first.

Tim pulled me out. I could swear that I could hear chuckling from the others on the slope, but maybe not. Tim swung me around. "OK not a good start," he said, "but let's go." I looked down the slope and it looked daunting. There were signs for different trails. Tim said, "Let's take the green one. That's for beginners."

I said, "I'll follow you." Now I have watched a lot of skiing on TV and it looks easy, but I am here to tell you, it's most definitely not as easy as it looks. For a start even the green trails are quite steep and, as many of you might know, snow is slippery. I started to follow Tim but it quickly went bad again. I wished that I had not taken that hit of the ginger brandy. My skis kept crossing. They were very unruly and I hit the ground a few times. Tim said, "You will get the hang of this. It's not that difficult. Here, take another sip."

I perfected a method. I started to ski across the mountain, very slowly. When I got to the edge of the trail I flopped onto my back, lifted my skis over, dragged myself up and skied back across the mountain.

"You are not making much progress," Tim said. I looked back up the hill and realized that we were still well in sight of the top and I had been at it for an hour. Tim had already skied down to the lodge and came back to find me hopelessly flopping around.

"Here take another hit of this. I filled it up at the car. I wasn't keen on the taste of the ginger brandy but I was starting to like the effect. Tim said. "Keep your knees together. When you turn put the weight on your inside leg, lift your outside leg and let it kind of follow you around." I had no clue what he was talking about. He might as well have been speaking Greek."

Then Tim gave me an incentive. "If you make it down the mountain they have a great steak special at the lodge. Plus it's warm there. I will buy you lunch. I felt like a bit of a baby and tried to pull myself together. I was just about to get a grip on myself when a tiny kid blew right by me. I was determined. I pointed my skis straight down the mountain and took off, completely out of control and more than a tad terrified. Things quickly started to look bad. My speed was picking up and worse yet there was a

turn ahead. Tim was skiing right next to me. "You're doing great," he yelled, but all I could hear was the wind, and I think my heart about to leap out of my chest.

I hit the first mogul and that was it. Luckily there was no ice. I hit the powder and face-planted. Tim pulled up next to me. "You were doing so good," he said. "Now you know why I insisted on the hat. It keeps the snow out of your ears."

Needless to say I made it down to the lodge otherwise I wouldn't be writing this. And Tim kept his promise. The steak was amazing and the view helped. A view always helps. I was once in Tierra del Fuego, sailing of course. There is a drink there that they call a Pisco Sour. The locals make it with some kind of clear alcohol, you know, the moonshiny kind. They mix it with the egg whites of two goose eggs, add some lemon and a splash of simple syrup and then shake it. If you are gazing at the Andes Mountains with the Strait of Magellan below with a stiff wind blowing nothing tastes better than a Pisco Sour. Oh, and it's best served with glacial ice.

I tried to make the drink back at my home in the States. I found some Pisco in a Peruvian market, got some chicken eggs and ice out of my fridge, added some sugar because I didn't have any simple syrup, and shook it. I sat on my front porch, no mountains in sight. It tasted just like you might imagine it would; disgusting.

Tim and I met up a year later in Oregon. He had moved to Australia but had business in Portland. He had sent me a letter. "Why don't you try and meet me in Portland? We can try that skiing thing again." I wrote back and said that I would meet him there. I was a bit nervous about the skiing thing. My first time had not gone well. Tim had booked a seedy motel on the outskirts of town. When the taxi dropped me off the driver said, "Good luck," with a tone that rang a bit ominous. Tim had a cooler full of beer

ready and then, with a bit of fanfare, produced a bottle of ginger brandy. "For tomorrow's lesson," he said.

We took his rental car to Mount Hood. It looked daunting. Tim said, "do you need a little fortifying?" He handed me the hip flask. I shook my head. I was going to try this completely sober. I was no better. I managed to dismount kind of gracefully but noticed that Mount Hood was a tad steeper than Mount Sunapee, the one we had skied in New Hampshire, and I use that term skied loosely. I tried to go down but things quickly got out of control. After three wipe-out's Tim handed me the flask of ginger brandy. "Drink this," he said, "all of it." I looked around. I was a fool on the ground with all sorts of sporty people flying by in the brightest snow suits. I watched a lady go by, she might have been fifty or so, she was ripping down the mountain, her long blond hair flowing like the tail of a race winning horse. I drank the whole hip flash, steadied myself and then took off. There was no problem. I had somehow miraculously figured out how to turn. I slowed each time I saw a bump in the road, and after a fair amount of time made it down to the lodge. I bought Tim a beer; he, meanwhile, went to the car and topped up the flask with you-know-what. By the end of the day I was skiing almost as good as Lindsay Vonn, well almost.

Tim and I decided to celebrate at a pizza place and we found this funky spot on the main road called 'BBQ Bill's Pizza and Good Eats.' The theme was western barbeque, but all they sold was pizza. To give them credit, one pizza did come with BBQ buffalo chicken and pineapples. We didn't care. We had something big to celebrate. I had made it down a green slope, all the way, without falling on my arse, not once.

We ordered the Margherita pizza and two pitchers of beer. There was a forlorn looking chappie in the corner playing Bruce Springsteen covers, well at least he was trying to play them. He

was doing about as well as my first attempt at skiing. We didn't care. Tim and I were celebrating and doing it in style. We scoffed the pizza down and then ordered another two pitchers of beer. The chappie in the corner started to sound a little better but it might have been the beer.

The waitress was middle aged with a tad too much make-up on and I think that she was flirting with Tim. Each time she came over I noticed that she had slipped open the top button on her blouse and leant in close. To my knowledge Tim had never been laid, even though he told me once that he had tried. I could tell by the flush under his eyes that he had also sensed that he was being hit on.

"Let's make a run for it," he said. "Screw the check. I need to get out of here." I looked at him and said, "we should at least pay the bill."

Tim was more than two pitchers in and said, "I am going to take a piss. There is a window that I can get out of. You need to act like you are paying the bill. When that waitress comes over tell her that I am good for the tab and walk out of the restaurant like nothing's amiss. He slurred a little when saying amiss."

"I will meet you back at the motel."

I was more than a tad skeptical but remember that I was also more than two pitchers in. I signaled the waitress. "Where's your friend?" she asked.

"He just went to the bathroom. I think that he likes you." I could see her blush even through her make-up.

"Well I sort of like him," she replied. I get off at 11."

"His name is Tim. He's going to pay the bill. Give him your number or make a plan with him. I don't think that he has ever been laid."

The waitress smiled, "Do you boys need another pitcher? I can get this one on the house."

"I'm OK, I think that I will walk back to the place where we are staying."

"OK I can get Tim home safely." I sauntered out the restaurant fighting the urge to run. When I turned the corner I saw Tim a hundred or so yards ahead bolting down the road as fast as he could. Now the only time I have ever run out on a tab was once in Uruguay. I was pretty broke and had had a few glasses of red and the bill came out to be a lot more than I expected, so I made a run for it. I was not a half mile down the road when I remembered that I had left my wallet and backpack in the restaurant. I went (very sheepishly) back to the restaurant and paid the bill. They seemed ok with it but no one there spoke a word of english so I may have been wrong with my assumption.

Tim was exuberant when we got back to the motel. "We did it," he said. "A meal on the house." I didn't feel good about it all. "You know," I said, "I spoke to the waitress after you went to the bathroom. Her name is Beatrice, by the way. You were definitely going to get lucky tonight if you had just stayed around. She was hot for you. Didn't you notice that she unbuttoned her top every time she came over to our table?"

"I noticed. I thought that maybe she was hot."

"She was hot, that's the thing, both hot as in for you and hot because they had the heat well cranked up. Even I was hot."

"What should I do?" Tim asked.

"You can go back and make up a story about leaving your wallet at the Motel and pay the bill and hope that she is not too pissed to want to make out with you, or we can just sit here."

"Let's just sit here." I could see that Tim was thinking long and hard about his decision. "Ah fucket," he said. "There are some beers in the fridge. Do you want one?"

I said, "no thanks. I am a little wiped out. I'm going to sleep." I rolled over and felt a pizza and two pitchers of beer slosh in my belly.

The next day we were late getting up on the mountain, nothing to explain there. We had a few lackluster runs and went back to the motel. I took a nap, Tim fidgeted and tried to read his book. At around eight Tim said, "I'm getting hungry. Do you want to go out and get a bite?" We left the motel and walked around town for a bit. It slowly started to dawn on us that BBQ Bill's Pizza and Good Eats was the only place in town to eat out. We were screwed. We found a gas station open and picked up a couple of mushy day-old sandwiches. For the rest of the week that we were at Mount Hood skiing we ate in our motel room eating gas station sandwiches. Tim flew back to Australia still without ever having been laid.

Tim and I met up again in Gstaad, Switzerland. We had both worked for the same boat owner and he had invited us to go skiing. I was terrified at the prospect but Tim urged me on. "When will you ever get another chance to go skiing in Switzerland? He asked. I had nothing to say in return. I knew that he was right. "When would I ever get another chance to ski in Switzerland. I knew the answer and replied that I would meet him at the airport in Geneva in a month's time.

Tim was already three beers in at the Heineken Bar, a sports bar right at the airport. He was watching a Manchester United and Arsenal soccer match. Arsenal was getting hammered. We stayed for a few more beers and then found our rental. The lady at the counter asked us if we had been drinking but I said no. I told her that it had just been a long flight.

We left the airport and drove along the banks of Lake Geneva. “You know Tim,” I said. “I have been to Geneva before. I ran the Geneva marathon. We ran right along the lake’s edge. You can see that path there? That was around mile 22. I can barely remember it I was so fucked.” I hadn’t noticed that Tim had dozed off and not heard a word.

We drove through Lausanne, finding the traffic a bit of a challenge but soon we were approaching the mountains. Tim wanted to stop for a coffee. I needed one too. The shops were simply stunning. It was as if someone had polished every apple and orange before they put it out for sale. Everything was immaculate and the people were friendly and they all spoke perfect English with a lovely lilt. Tim said, “give me a moment.” He took off and was gone for a good half hour. When he got back to the car he was smiling a smile that I had seen before. He had a brown paper bag in his hand. “Guess what I found,” he announced. I shrugged. Tim reached into the bag and pulled out a bottle of ginger brandy. It was a big one, enough to last for at least a week’s worth of skiing in the Swiss Alps. As we got closer to Gstaad the scenery just got better and better. It was more than a little spectacular.

“You want to get an early dinner?” Tim asked. “George isn’t expecting us until after dinner and I don’t want to put them out.

“Let’s do it,” I said and we stopped at a small place called Restaurant Time Out. We both had schnitzel and shared a bottle of wine. At around six we followed the directions that George had given us up a winding road until we had one of the most spectacular views of the small town. The lights were on in George’s house and he welcomed us with a huge smile. “We have been waiting for you. Sandy cooked a big dinner for us all.” I glanced at Tim and he nodded. “Thank you, I’m starving,” I said. I was actually stuffed from the dinner but I, or rather should I say

we, didn’t want to be rude. We sat down with George and Sandy and their two daughters and stuffed our faces. It wasn’t easy.

“The forecast for tomorrow is perfect for skiing,” George announced. “We can take the gondola right to the top of the mountain. Tim looked at me and I looked at Tim and we exchanged glances. It’s quite possible that we had overstated our skiing ability. Tim excused himself to go to the bathroom and whispered two words into my ear. “Ginger brandy.”

We were out early which was a bit challenging with the jet lag but George was adamant. “We need to make first tracks, you know, be the first to cut the new snow. It always snows overnight here and there will be light powder. At the base of the mountain there was a lift station and we took a heated gondola up the mountain. There was a halfway stage and we got out and got into a second gondola to take us the rest of the way to the top. I have to admit that I was shitting myself. We kept on going up and up. When George wasn’t looking Tim passed me the hip flask. “You are going to need this.” I sank the whole flask in two swigs and was starting to feel a little better about things by the time we reached the summit. Luckily this time there was a heated terminal and not a sudden bit of downhill. I took my skis and we embarked.

I pulled George over and said, “I may have overstated my skiing ability. Maybe you and Tim should go for it and I will meet you at the lodge.” I was thinking when and if I ever get there. Tim had been doing some skiing in New Zealand and I guess he had vastly improved. George said, “we can wait for you if you want.”

I said, “please go and let me catch up to you.” George nodded. I did catch up to them in the emergency room of a small hospital on the outskirts of Gstaad. They left me at the top of the mountain where I tried to summon the courage to take off down the slope. They had no green slopes, just some kind of black diamond signs.

I knew that I was screwed but by nature I am what one might call stubborn and decided to give it a go. The ginger brandy helped until I got to the steep part. There was about a foot of powder which covered black ice. I hit the patch and then hit the tree. I felt my knee let go and that was about all I remember. Mountain Ski Rescue strapped me into some kind of inflatable gurney. They were talking among themselves in French but talking to me in English. I had bumped my head but not too badly. "The helicopter will be here soon," the lady with long blond hair said. At that moment, as silly as it sounds, I wished that she would marry me. I was thinking of asking her when the chopper arrived. It didn't land, well I guess looking back on it the helicopter probably couldn't land. Instead they lowered a cable which they hooked to my stretcher and before I knew it, or could protest, I was being air-lifted out of there. The chopper took off with me dangling below.

At the base there was an ambulance. I was crapping myself. I knew that choppers and ambulances didn't come cheap and I was broke. I had spent almost all of my savings on the air ticket to Switzerland. The nurses in the Emergency Room were nice and I was whisked in. A very young doctor came in to examine me. You are going to need some stitches," he said. "Your knee is out of joint but I think that I can get it back into place without too much trouble. Let's deal with the knee first. They had already cut off my ski pants and I could see a bulge sticking out the inside part of my left knee. The doctor took my leg and slowly started to manipulate it. It hurt like buggery. They had given me some pain killers but what I really needed was a hit of ginger brandy.

It took about 15 minutes before I felt a sharp pain and heard a pop. "Ahh, there we go," the doctor said. "I will let the nurses stitch you up. After that you will be as good as new." I felt anything like good as new.

George and Tim had done a couple of runs before they started

to get worried. They had seen a helicopter fly overhead but thought nothing of it. George said, "I am going to check in with the Mountain Patrol." He left Tim at the lodge and made his way over to the ski patrol area. After ten minutes he came back, "we need to go," he said. "We need to get to the hospital. He's there."

They rolled me out on a gurney and I met Tim and George in the waiting area. "You look like you have just shagged a mountain goat," Tim said. They eased me off the gurney and handed me some crutches. "Keep the weight off that leg for at least 48 hours," the pretty nurse said. And come back next week so that we can take those stitches out."

"What the heck happened?" George asked.

"I got a speed wobble," I said. "A bad one and I hit a tree. I'm OK but my knee is a little screwed. It was out of joint but the doctor managed to get it back in place."

"It looks like the tree might have come off better than you," Tim said. "Well you will be off your skis for a couple of days anyway."

I said, "I think that I am going to stick to sailing for now."

Sandy made us a huge dinner. She had made some canapes with smoked salmon and avocados as well as some pancakes. I was stuffed before she brought out the main course. A huge cheese fondue. She laid out a platter of breads and sausages and other cuts of meat and told us to dig in. I wasn't that hungry. We had chased the canapes with a peppery kind of schnapps and George pulled the cork on a couple bottles of chilled wine to go with the fondue. Even though I wasn't that hungry I tucked into an amazing meal.

I asked George and Sandy, "How come I never received a bill when I left the hospital? I was dreading it.

"We have social medicine here. The Government pays for it, well we as citizens pay for it through our taxes but we believe that healthcare is a priority if we are to be a civilized country so you got the care you need and no worry about a crippling bill to pay. Unless, of course if you go for the high end specialized medicine. That can cost a small fortune."

I scooped a bit more fondue and said. "That's incredible. That plus they were all so nice there. But what about the helicopter ride?"

The mountain has insurance for that sort of thing. When you bought your ticket they made you sign a form. No one ever reads it but if you took the time to read the small print they state that any accidents on the slopes will be taken care of by their Ski Patrol including getting you to a hospital if necessary. It also stated that you would not be able to sue them. That's kind of the gist of it."

"Wow, what a great country."

Tim said, "It's pretty much the same in Australia. The government does its level best to take care of the people who live there. They even take care of undocumented immigrants."

Sandy came back with desert. It was a cherry pie. "This is a classic desert for our region but don't be surprised. The cherries are not sweet like you might be used to. They are a little tart but we add some sugar." It was delicious. Sandy asked, "How's your knee?"

"It's fine until the pain killers and the white wine wear off." Sandy brought coffee. I was just taking a sip when George offered. "You know if you like I am good friends with a doctor who is the official doctor for the Swiss ski team. I can see if I can get you in there tomorrow. She specializes in knee issues, as you can imagine."

"That would be great," I said knowing full well that I had enjoyed a lot of wine and pain killers.

My room in the loft of Sandy and George's chalet had a spectacular view. I could see the lights of Gstaad below and traffic winding its way along the main road. "Switzerland sure is a beautiful place," I thought as I dozed off to sleep.

When I woke my knee hurt badly. I took some of the pain meds that they had given to me in the hospital. At breakfast George said, "Good news. I talked with Mia, you know, the doctor that I told you about. "She can fit you in at ten this morning. Tim and I are going skiing but Sandy will take you."

"Thank you George, and Sandy. I'm sorry if I am being a bit of a burden."

Sandy dropped me off at a very fancy office building. There was a sign on the front that read, "Official hospital of the Swiss Ski Team." Sandy knew the lady at the reception. Her name was Clara. Sandy introduced us and then left. "Clara will call me when you need a pick-up."

Clara was very nice and professional. Dr. Blaser will see you in five minutes. I sat in the expansive waiting area until I was called in. They took my blood pressure, etc, you know the usual and after a minute or so this stunningly beautiful woman walked in. She dominated the room.

"OK let me see what you've got," she said. I lifted my pants and she started to press around on my knee. It hurt; a lot. "OK we can fix this," she said. She turned to her assistant. "Get me at least a dozen needles." The assistant left. I felt just a small bit of trepidation. "What you need to do is relax, Dr. Blaser said, "and by the way please call me Mia."

Her assistant came back with a tray of extremely thin, kind of weird looking needles. Dr. Blaser said, "OK let me see that knee of yours again." She took one of the needles and jabbed it into my knee just above my kneecap. It didn't hurt. She then proceeded

to stick needles all around my knee and even one behind my ear. I had no clue that she might be an acupuncturist. “Good,” she said, “just lay back and relax. I will be back in an hour.” With that she left.

I lay back and thought of Tim and George up on the mountain. The room that I was in was nice enough but it wasn’t those spectacular mountains with a view as far as Italy. Dr. Blaser, Mia if you will, came back after an hour and removed the needles. She walked me to the front desk and told Clara, “I need you to book ten appointments for Mr. Hancock. Same time every day for the next ten days.”

“See you tomorrow,” she said to me. By now I was completely shitting myself. If she was the doctor for the Swiss Ski Team and her offices looked like that could be a part of a Las Vega attraction, I was well and truly screwed.

George insisted that I could stay for as long as I liked. I went every day to see Dr. Blaser. She stuck needles in many of the same places and I lay on the bed thinking about how I was going to pay for it all. The one good thing I could sense that Clara had a little twinkle in her eye for me.

Tim left to go back to Australia. We had a rousing dinner, thanks to Sandy. Well to George as well. They had been such gracious hosts. I still had four more treatments. When the taxi came for Tim he handed me gift wrapped in the shape of a bottle. I unwrapped it and it was, you guessed, a bottle of ginger brandy. He whispered in my ear, “by the way, I did get laid. More than once.” With that he was gone.

Mia came in for my last treatment. “So you should probably not ski for a while. It takes time for these things to work. I have given Clara the afternoon off. You work things out with her.” With that she was gone. I went to the front desk to see what my bill

might be. I was terrified. I was truly terrified. It was going to be well into the thousands and I simply had no money to pay it. Clara gave me a smile and then clicked on the billing program on her (by todays standards) very antiquated computer. She fussed with it for a while not quite sure if she was looking at the right invoice.

“Just one moment,” she said. Clara left and went into the back offices. When she came back she had a kind of stunned look on her face. She fumbled with her computer and then walked to the printer. She handed me the invoice. It was for \$20.00. Clara looked me square in the eye and said, “I have been in this job for almost fifteen years. No one has ever walked out of this place for anything under ten thousand dollars. You must be some kind of magical bean.”

I handed over my credit card and crossed my fingers that it would go through. It did. Then Clara gave me a look. “I talked to Dr. Blaser.” Clara blushed. “I talked to Dr. Blaser. She gave me her credit card and told me to take you to lunch. What kind of food do you fancy?”

I dated Clara for a year. She had a small apartment but we didn’t need much. Just a bed if I am to be perfectly honest. It got complicated when her mom died suddenly and that was when it ended. Couple of things. The acupuncture did less than fuckall to help my knee. To this day I am still having problems. Second thing. For the year that I lived with Clara the bottle of ginger brandy sat on the mantle above the fireplace. I still have it.

And one last thing. I have never tried skiing again.

ELEPHANTS NEVER FORGET



MY DAD ALWAYS had a fascination with Angola, especially the highlands where the land is moist and the vegetation lush and verdant. I think that it might have had something to do with his childhood in Scotland, but I can't be sure. I have never been to Scotland. We planned to go once but my younger brother took ill two days before we were due to leave, and sadly he passed away. It was a night that changed all of our lives.

We had been living in South Africa at the time. Dad was an engineer and worked for the government. We lived in a small suburban home. Mom raised us along with a few maids who did most of the work. Then one day Dad came home from work and said, "we are moving to Angola." I saw Mum look down and, for a moment, I saw pain in her eyes. I knew, like she did, even though I was only nine at the time, that Dad was running from his pain; and his guilt, if truth be told.

We packed everything we owned into a small sedan with a trailer hitched and drove the 2,000 or so miles to Angola. Our maids were waving and crying and laughing all at the same time. I was jammed in the back seat between my brother and sister and the last memory I have of South Africa is red dust curling around the face of our Number One maid; Constance. She had been like a mother to us and I could see her anguish as we were being torn away from her. My Dad gunned the engine. I did notice him glance for second in the rear view mirror and then we were gone; gone to a new life in the highlands of Angola.

I NEVER FOUND OUT where Dad got the money but we bought a small coffee farm not far inland from Benguela. The cold current off the coast created a perfect climate for growing the precious beans; it also left us chilled to the bone when we got caught unprepared as a sudden cold mist rolled in from the Atlantic and enveloped the entire region. It was the mist and elevation that created perfect conditions for growing coffee and the farm prospered.

I loved living there but missed South Africa and the warmth and the animals and the red dirt. I also missed my brother. He was two years younger than me when he died and I knew that we would be best friends for life, but life often has a way of sending in curve balls.

We were packing for our trip to Scotland when Mum noticed a red rash on Dale's body. He had been complaining that his skin was itchy but we were all so excited about our trip that no one really paid much attention; until Mum took his temperature. And then took him to the doctor. It turned out that he had contracted Rubella. Later when I asked them, both Mum and Dad swore that he had been vaccinated but there was never any record of it. For Dale it was a perfect storm. The doctor told Mum that she may have been infected when she was pregnant with him and that the virus had lain dormant, but when it emerged it emerged with a fury and it came at the same time as a nasty flu took hold of our town.

Dad, of course, canceled our trip to Scotland. Dale was in intensive care and I think that it came as a shock to the doctors and nurses at All Saints Hospital when he died suddenly. Dr. Peckham told mum that he had been doing well, "but," he said, "in the early hours of the morning his heart rate slowed and then suddenly he was gone." I am an adult now looking back on all of this and I can't help but call bullshit on it, but those were different

times back then and Dale was a victim of those times; and of the poverty in Africa. It was not long after his death that Dale started to appear in my dreams. At first there was just a rough outline of him. It was almost as if he was backlit. The edges were crisp and glowing slightly; the rest pretty much a blur. In fact the only way I knew that it was Dale was his voice.

The first four years on the farm were magical despite our sadness. My older brother and sister and I were let loose; loose to climb and hike and on quite a number of occasions, fall. I think that was where my take-no-bullshit spirit was formed. We all tried to put Dale out of our minds. We had buried him in a small plot in Winterskloof. "At least he has a good view," I remember my mother saying. I also remember thinking that it was a bit silly because I knew that my brother was dead and would not be able to appreciate the view, but again, as you get older you start to understand things and I understood that it was Mum's way of processing her grief. Dale was still appearing in my dreams and I guess, looking back, his visits were my way of processing my own grief.

Things all changed again on my thirteenth birthday. Mum and Dad liked to take us on camping holidays in the winter. It was cold in the highlands and I think that we all missed the warmth of South Africa. We would drive to the plains near the border of Namibia and pitch a tent. It was pretty rudimentary. We brought most of our food and water with us and our toilet was a shovel and a roll of toilet paper. During the day my brother and sister and I were allowed to explore. I had made a catty, a slingshot if you will. I had used an old inner tube from my bike and a forked stick that I found. It was perfect for hunting birds and I shot many. We would make a small fire and cook the birds but they were disgusting even though we told ourselves that they were delicious. On my birthday Mum promised us a fine meal of

roasted veggies and some chicken to celebrate me turning into a teenager, but we never got to eat it.

My older brother, sister and I were out scouting for things to kill when there was a tremendous roar, a painful roar, and we heard gunfire. We had seen elephants in the area before but suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, there were more than a dozen elephants and they were stampeding. They were being shot at. The matriarch, well at least I guess it was the matriarch, was trumpeting and screaming in an awful guttural way. To this day I can't get the sound out of my head. Five elephants fell right before our eyes. The three of us hid in a thicket. Men with rifles were in hot pursuit and they quickly took out the rest of the herd. Moments later we saw two safari trucks arrive. The men with the guns were white; the men in the safari trucks were black and they came with chainsaws. We huddled together, barely able to breath. The massacre had not taken long. The tusks removal took less than an hour and just as the sun set in a coppery sky the men drove away leaving a killing field that was already starting to take on that acrid smell of death.

My sister and older brother made a run for it heading back to our campsite. I hung back fascinated by what we had just witnessed. Some of the elephants were not dead. They were moaning and crying in pain. I was in shock and approached one of the carcasses. It looked like a young female, although I wasn't sure. She was smaller than the rest and somehow I had the feeling that she must be a female. I knew that I should head back to our camp; I also knew that the night animals would soon come out scavenging for a free meal. I was definitely in shock and tried to cry but nothing came out. I just stood there leaning against the elephant trying to sob; but nothing.

There is barely a sunset in Africa. It goes from daylight to dark night in an instant. There was no moon. I knew that I should try

and make my way back to camp but couldn't move. There was still some anguish among the elephants and I could hear them crying. That was when I saw the baby. She must have been hiding during the massacre. At first I heard a scuffle. Then a low rumble. The baby elephant came around the carcass and saw me. The rumble started to get louder but the baby didn't back away. There is something primordial in an elephants rumble and it connected with me instantly. She came closer to me all the while sniffing the dead carcass. I suspected that it was her mother. I stood still. She stood still. I offered my hand and she came closer until I could reach out and touch her forehead. I swear I saw a tear fall from her eye but I may have been wrong because my own eyes were suddenly filled with tears.

Then I heard my fathers voice, "Malcolm," he called out. "Malcolm." I wanted to reply but I also wanted the baby elephant to know that I cared so I didn't say anything. I just stood there and then the sobbing started. What my sister and I had witnessed was nothing short of genocide. The baby elephant stood in silence, her head swaying from side to side. The night was black and I heard the first giggle of a pack of hyenas. They had caught the scent of death on the wind. I should have run right then and there but instead I put my arms around the baby elephant and hugged it, awkwardly.

I heard my Dad call again. "Malcolm where are you?" This time I ran to him. I felt foolish for sobbing, I was now a teenager after all, but I couldn't help myself. That night I didn't sleep. Dad built the fire up extra high and he and Mum took turns making sure that it burned hot all night. The hyenas and other wild animals had plenty to eat but you never know. Fire was our only defense. Dale came to me in my dreams again. That's how I know that I must have fallen asleep at some point.

We returned to the killing field as a family the following

morning. It was clear that more than just the hyenas that had had their fill. Dad said, "it looks like the lions moved in and stuffed themselves as well." He pointed to some large paw prints in the dust. Then we saw them. It was a pride of about eight or nine and they were lazing in the shade of an acacia tree, clearly stuffed full of elephant meat.

I looked for the baby elephant but she was nowhere to be seen. The smell of elephants rotting hung heavy in the air. Mum looked tired and I did notice her wipe a tear. "We have to go and inform the authorities," Dad said, "but first we have to pack up camp. We are not supposed to be camping out here and I don't want to get into any trouble." Our camp wasn't much and it didn't take too long to pack things up. We put most of it in our old Ford truck. Dad said that he and my older brother would drive to Matala, the nearest town, and file a report with the authorities. They left Mum and my sister and me sitting on a couple of old beach chairs. My sister was playing with some sticks in the sand. Mum dozed off. I decided to go exploring.

Of course I went back to the killing field. I was looking for the baby elephant. There were still some hyenas milling about and the vultures had descended. They were sticking their gross long necks into the carcasses pulling them out covered in blood but with some kind of tasty morsel as a prize. I stood near the same thicket where we had hidden and watched for a while. The lions were still lazing under the acacia tree. Then I saw her. She was under a tree across from where the lions were lounging. I wasn't scared of the lions, I knew that they were full, but still, I was a skinny white African boy that might have looked like a good Chicken McNugget to some animal. I edged my way closer to the baby elephant. She was sleeping. My heart went out to her. Can you imagine losing not only your parents, but your whole community all at once?

As I got closer I started make some clicking noises. She didn't stir. I scooted a little closer until I was just a few feet from her. I clicked some more and saw one eye, the eye closest to me, start to flutter. I sat still, just clicking lightly. She opened her eye and shook her head a little. I knew that she had seen me. She closed her eye again and appeared to doze off. Then without warning she suddenly stood up and looked directly at me. Her trunk was swaying from side to side. I clicked and held out my hand. She didn't sniff it right away but when she did I knew that my smell would forever be imprinted on her soul. I named her Lucy.

We sat for a while in the shade of the tree watching the animals feast on her family. She let me lean up against her and after a while I dozed off. I woke to the sound of trucks coming our way. As they got closer I could see that they were from the wildlife center in Matala. I could see my Dad on the lead truck pointing the way. The baby elephant got scared. It must have been the sound of the engines that brought back memories of the previous evening when her whole world had been shattered. She got restless and I could tell that she was anxious. So was I. I didn't want my Dad to see me. The convoy of trucks stopped at the first dead elephant and Dad and the officials walked around examining the corpse. I stood and so did the baby elephant. For a moment she looked me directly in the eye, her long eyelashes giving her a wistful look; then she turned and ran.

IT'S STRANGE HOW LIFE goes in swings and roundabouts. I was born in South Africa but after three years of living on the coffee farm my whole family became citizens of Angola. My Dad explained later that it was a tax issue. Citizens of Angola got an incentive from the government to export and so it seemed the logical thing to do; that was until South Africa declared war on Angola over a tiny sliver of land called the Caprivi Strip. Well if

I am to be honest it was more complicated than that. Namibia is a large country that borders South Africa, Botswana and Angola, and the people were fighting for independence from South Africa. It was an alphabet soup if ever there was one. Namibia was a colony of Germany until World War 1 when it was invaded by South Africa and according to the South African government at the time, it was now a fifth Province of the country. South Africa held some sway with the League of Nations, which later became the United Nations, and so for a while all was well; all was well, that is, unless you were from Namibia.

I was in my last term at High School when I got call-up papers from the government. I was to attend basic training and after three months I would be deployed to the border to fight against my former countrymen. It was bound to be a mess. Angola was pretty much broke and hardly had an army. South Africa had money because of their gold and diamond reserves and they had a well trained military. That was when I started to have more vivid dreams about Dale. As a family we had, sadly, moved on. No one spoke about him anymore and it made me sad but I didn't want to bring him up because I didn't want Mum to be upset. Now almost every night Dale would show up. He was no longer backlit and his edges no longer glowing. I was starting to see his face clearly. Some nights he was still a small boy, just as he had been when he died. Other times he was a grown man.

I remember one dream so clearly. Dale said to me, "I am South African. I am not from Angola. When you shoot at South Africans you are shooting at me Malcolm." I had woken up in a pool of sweat. I hadn't shot at anyone yet and I really didn't want to but there was no way around it. Dad was adamant about me serving. He loved Angola as his adopted country and nothing was going to change his mind. "You will go and fight for our coffee farm," he told me. "I have the fighting spirit of a Scot in my blood." It

didn't escape my attention that it was just me and my brother that went off to fight for the coffee farm.

Basic training was easy. I was a farm boy from the highlands after all, and nothing fazed me. After three months I was sent to the border to fight. It was all so ridiculous. The Angolans didn't have enough soldiers to fight a war so Cuba sent over some men to fight alongside us, but Cuba was broke so the Soviet Union chipped in some cash to pay them and away we went, a bunch of baby-faced, barely wet-behind-the-ears soldiers fighting a war against an army made up of soldiers that used to be our friends.

I dreaded going to bed each night. Dale would be there. Some nights he would dress in a military uniform, either in his fatigues or in full-on military garb with medals to boot. His message was always the same.

"When you shoot at a South African you are shooting at me."

By this time I had been shooting at South African's. I am not sure how many I hit but that wasn't really the point. Well I guess it was; we were in a war after all.

Every three months or so I would get a break from the border and go home to the coffee farm. Mum, Dad, my sister and I would sit out on the stoep in the evenings and listen to the night noises. My older brother was on the border in a different unit than mine. One night my Dad said to me, "you know Danny they caught those bastards who killed those elephants that night. You remember that night don't you?" Of course I remembered that night.

"It was a large poaching syndicate funded by Chinese money, or so they wrote in the papers."

"All this killing is senseless," I said. I could see that my Dad pulled harder on his pipe when I spoke. He had been born in Scotland, and had spent most of his life in South Africa, but

Angola was his home now and he wanted me to defend it no matter the cost.

"I will do my duty Dad," I said. "But no more." I wanted to tell him about Dale in my dreams but I knew that it would only upset him and Mum too. My sister said, "I have been thinking of moving to England. There is too much bloodshed in this country." Mum took a long hit from her wine glass and offered, "they hanged the leader of the poaching gang and quite rightly so." My sister said, "there is too much death in this country. I want to sit on a stool in a pub in London and drink a Campari and soda and not worry about a war or the senseless slaughter of elephants."

Dad said, "since when do you know about Campari and soda?" My sister huffed. "I'm going to bed," she said.

I returned to the border a few days later. My unit had moved east toward the Caprivi Strip. We were going to fight over a barren slice of no-man's land. "This is all bullshit," I thought. Each night, when we were lucky enough to make it back to base camp and find a tent to sleep in, Dale would visit me in my dreams. One night shortly after I had returned to the front line Dale led me by the hand. He took me out of the tent and led me to a small grassy area. "Look at me Malcolm," he said. "Look at me." The sergeant in charge had let us infantrymen have a few beers that evening and I was not sure what I was looking at. I was sure that it was the fug of a couple of beers talking; not Dale.

"Look at me," Dale said. I tried to focus. On the edge of the grassy area was a man standing beckoning me to join him. He looked like Dale. I wanted to go back to sleep. There were plans for the following morning to raid some huts where intelligence had told us some South African soldiers were hiding out waiting for the right time to ambush us.

"Look at me," Dale said, this time with a sharp edge to his

voice. I tried to focus. "Come closer," Dale said. I walked toward him and there he was. It was Dale, dressed in fatigues. He had a rifle over his shoulder and a water bottle hooked to his hip. I could hardly believe what I was seeing. "It's me," he said. "Your brother. I didn't die. I just moved to a different plane. There are many different levels you have to go through before you eventually die. I was in level three for a while but now I am back in level two and that allows me brief visits back to real life. It's me Malcolm. I'm here. Your brother."

Dale walked toward me, put his arms around me, and gave me a hug. "I have been watching you for years. I know that it sounds creepy but that's how it is when you're dead. I can't stay long but I need to tell you that you are in danger and I can't help. My Level One Clearance allows me to be seen, but I can't save you. Be careful tomorrow. Just in case you doubt that I can see you I know that Dad smokes a pipe these days and Betty wants to move to London and drink a Campari with soda." With that he vanished and I fell back into a fitful sleep.

"MANNE,MANNE,MANNE hands off your cocks and onto your socks. We have a war to win." It was the sergeant waking up his troops. "We eat at five. We shit at five-thirty. We head out at six." My hand had not been on my cock. I was still fuzzy about the night but pulled on my socks, fatigues and boots and headed slowly to the mess tent. It was the usual oatmeal with honey and a weak sweet tea. I was really disturbed by what had happened during the night.

The village where the soldiers were hanging out was right on the edge of the Caprivi Strip. It was a dangerous area, mostly because we had planted hundreds of land mines there and so had the South African's. The local villagers had a network of paths that they stuck to. Every now and then a dog would stray off

the path and get blown to pieces. The sergeant gathered us all around. "OK manne," he said. "We will camp here and observe. The higher-up's tell us that the Saffa's are in the village there plotting against us. We need to watch and wait and try to decipher their pattern." I was surprised that the sergeant even knew the word decipher.

"We need to think like animals," he said. "We need to lay low and move slow. I will check things out and when I think we have a plan we will have a plan." I remembered what Dale had told me the night before. He had told me that I was in danger. The sergeant was an affable guy but that was about it. Not-So-Smart-Clark was how we troops referred to him, behind his back, of course.

We lay in the thick scrub for most of the day. I could see the villagers tending their goats and going about the day. I did not see any South African's. In the distance, behind the village, I watched as vultures circled and knew that they were on a kill. We were still deep in the African bush and the day animals and birds were hustling for food and looking to get laid. It was late in the afternoon when I smelled the peppery smell of elephant dung. I knew that there must be a herd nearby.

Behind us was a kopjie, a small hill. I knew from my basic training that we were vulnerable. They had drilled it into us; "you always take the higher ground." Sergeant Not-So-Smart-Clark had his binoculars trained. "I think that I may have a plan," he said. "A very good plan."

Just then the gunshots started; from behind us. We were being ambushed. Ahead was a village with innocent women and children, say nothing of an area littered with landmines. Behind us were the Saffa's intent on killing us. We were sitting ducks. Just then I heard a trumpet. No not that kind. Elephants. They were moving toward the open area between us and the kopjie.

There must have been 15 of them and they were on the move. For a moment the shooting stopped. The elephants had given us cover. I crawled forward and rolled down a small embankment. I saw Gert, my tent mate, do the same. Sergeant Not-So-Smart-Clark stood and fired; indiscriminately. The elephants panicked. Then a sharp shooter took Sergeant Clark out with a single bullet. He fell not too far from where I was pressed against the ground. It didn't take long for him to die, in fact I am guessing that he was probably dead before he hit the ground.

The elephants were panicking but not going anywhere. I was panicking and couldn't go anywhere. We were basically fucked. I tried to blend in with the grass, but I don't think that I did a good job of it. A few bullets flew not so far from my left ear. I could feel the heat as they went by. For a bit all was still. Our men were too scared to shoot back in case it gave their positions away. Then I saw her; Lucy.

She saw me at the same time although looking back on it I know now that she couldn't possibly have seen me. She had smelled me. Despite the fear and adrenaline Lucy had picked up my scent. She had grown into a mature female. Her tusks were still small but her spirit large. Lucy had seen her family destroyed by guns and she was having none of it. She roared at the top of her lungs and the herd stopped for a moment. I knew that it was her. She waved her trunk trying to pick up my scent over the smell of gunpowder. The fighting stopped completely. Lucy came my way swinging her trunk. She was looking for an answer. I had no idea how to answer. Instead I stood and walked toward her. I knew that at any moment a sniper's bullet could take me out. Lucy lowered her head and walked slowly toward me. Sergeant Clark gurgled in the dirt beside me.

There was a deafening silence. I know that's a cliché but after all the gunfire it seemed eerily quiet. Lucy came right up to me.

She was sniffing the air. Behind me I could hear the villagers banging pots to scare the elephants away. They knew what a herd could do to their crops and they were not having any of it. Lucy stopped a few feet from me and looked me directly in the eye. Her long eyelashes made her look sad but there was a twinkle in her left eye. She pawed at the ground for a moment and that was when the South Africans left their hiding places and walked toward us. I stood, first raising my arms in surrender. Lucy kept swinging her head from side to side. She reached out her trunk and sniffed me. She probably sniffed me for just a couple of minutes but it felt like an hour. The rest of the herd stood in silence.

Now I have read about the Christmas Truce of World War 1. The time when the British forces and the German forces stopped shooting at each other on Christmas Day and shared some secret brandy and played a game of soccer. This may not have been a Christmas truce but it was quite special nonetheless. I was surprised at how many of my comrades had been carrying liquor that day. Same with the Saffas. We sat for a while drinking and telling stories of home. Lucy stayed close. The rest of the elephants were browsing on the acacia trees. It was suddenly dark. The Sergeant on the South African side said, "well fokit," he said. "This is all bullshit. We are all brothers. I am not fighting anymore." He took my hip flask of brandy and downed it, shook my hand and said, "Let's go home men."

Lucy raised her trunk and made a noise that I have never heard an elephant make. Slowly the herd moved off. I never saw her again even though I tried to find her for many years after the truce.

The war ended a few weeks later. South Africa ran out of money, Cuba ran out of men and the Soviet Union fell apart. It was all just a load of crap. We had been pawns in a stupid game.

Our platoon withdrew to a safe spot in Angola and the Brigadier in charge let us enjoy an impala on the spit and a few kegs of beer. We had shot the impala a couple of days earlier. That night of the official truce I slept the sleep of the dead. That was until Dale showed up just before dawn. "I can go now," he said. "We each need to do something good before we can move to the next level of death. I think that we did something great. We stopped a senseless war." My brother had my hand in his. "It's OK Malcolm," he said. "It's OK. Let my hand go. I will come and visit occasionally."

"No Dale," I said, "you can't go."

"Give my love to Mum and Dad and Billy and Betty. I hope that she gets to enjoy that campari and soda in a pub in London. When I move back to Level Three I won't be able to watch over you anymore. It's time for all of us to move on. Keep me forever in your heart Malcolm. Forever."

And with that he was gone.

THE COMRADES



I USED TO HAVE A propensity to drink, perhaps a little too much. It might have been the fact that I lived below a pub in Dublin. I used the excuse that the noise from the pub would keep me up at night and I went with the logic, “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.” My landlord, Mr. Moodley was the Publican and he knew that I was broke most of the time so he poured a generous pour and charged me half. “Pierre,” he would say, “how does a Frenchman drink so much Guinness? I thought that the French only drink wine.” I would laugh at his lame excuse for a joke because I knew that he would top off my glass if I did.

I was what one might call, with a little irony given my weight, a starving artist. I busked on the streets during the day and played a small part in Macbeth most evenings at the Abbey Theater. Neither job paid much but it was enough to pay my rent and keep me in Ramen Noodles; and Guinness.

One day I was busking on the corner of Marlborough and Sackville Place outside a pub called Pipers Corner. It was a local music spot where a lot of the talent of Ireland came to play gigs. I was hoping to get discovered. I was well into my routine and my guitar case showed more than a few shillings; it showed a few pound notes as well, when I saw, out of the corner of my eye, a small kid lurking near the back of the crowd. I noticed him because of his dark eyes. Maybe it’s just the theater in me but he looked like the character Fagin in the Charles Dickens novel, Oliver Twist. I kept on with my gig, the crowd would come and

go, but the kid stayed. The owner of Pipers Corner would come out every so often and hand me a pint.

"You'll make it one day kid," he said as he handed me the beer. He liked the fact that he had free entertainment. Most of the crowd passing by that stopped to listen to me play, would step into the pub for a cold one. Then the kid made his move. He darted in, grabbed my guitar case, and bolted. I had been chugging my beer and was slow to react. He ran down Marlborough and turned left onto Abbey Street Lower. I ran after him. In my defense I had already drunk three pints and was what, well one might say, a little overweight. OK let me be more honest with you here. I was getting close to the edge of the qualification, morbidly obese. The kid got away with the cash; and my guitar case. I only made it a hundred yards or so before I was spent.

I played that corner gig for the better part of a year until one afternoon, probably because of the heat, I fainted. I was halfway through 'Cotton Eyes Joe' when I felt a little dizzy and hit the pavement. The next thing I knew I was in the back of an ambulance heading to St James's Hospital. They hooked me up, pumped in fluids, and after a couple hours I was ready to see the doctor.

"Mr. Guillaume," he said. "We need to talk."

His words hit like a bag of bricks being chucked over the side of a fishing boat.

"I know," I replied. "I know."

He was a kind man in his mid-fifties and the gist of what he said was that I needed to lose weight and get some exercise. I already knew that but he added, "we have a chart here at the hospital that we use to measure life expectancy. If you carry on the way you are going you will probably not see fifty.

Now that got my attention. My full attention.

My landlord was from India and was concerned. He had heard that I had fallen off my stool. "So Pierre," he said. He was looking out of his top floor window as I was about to enter my basement apartment. The pub was sandwiched in between. "I heard about your little incident today. I am coming to talk to you. I groaned. All I wanted to do was hit my couch and find the remote. I had just slouched onto the couch when Mr. Moodley was at my door. "Can I come in?" he asked. I waved him to the other couch and flicked off the TV.

"I heard that you were taken in an ambulance. That's quite serious, you know. Did you see a doctor?"

"Mr. Moodley," I said, "Yes I did see a doctor and I'm fine. Maybe a bit dehydrated, that's all."

"What else did he say?" Mr. Moodley asked. Well he more than asked, he insisted.

I looked around at the empty fast food packages in my apartment and replied, "he said that I might need to lose some weight."

"Oh no, you are a fine specimen of a man. You just need to reapportion your weight. I have an idea. For one month let me and Mrs. Moodley cook you dinner. I'm not sure how you will feel about this arrangement but let me put it out there. Start by walking one mile a day. We can increase it gradually. If you walk, we will cook."

I looked at him blankly and said, "If I walk you will cook. What about the pub?" Mr. Moodley smiled. "We might just need to cut back on the Guinness a little. I think that it's time we got you in shape my friend."

I was horrified at the idea but I knew that he was right. When I looked down I could barely see my knees let alone, well, you know what. "OK," I said, reluctantly.

Mr. Moodley clapped his hands. "Come now," he said. "We will drink some Oolong tea. In India it's one of the best methods for losing weight. Plus it lowers your blood pressure. I see over there on your counter a prescription for Lisinopril. I used to take it myself to lower my blood pressure. I don't need to take it anymore."

I followed Mr. Moodley to his apartment. I had never been invited in and was surprised at how stark it was. For a man who ran a pub I expected more. The walls were white and there was a large framed picture of the Ganges River above the fireplace. Mrs. Moodley greeted me. She said, "Namaste. You are welcome in our home."

Mr. Moodley said, "Can you please put the kettle on. We are going to drink some Oolong tea."

The next morning I got up early, well earlier than usual. Around ten. I had bought some trainers a few years back but they didn't fit. My feet, seemingly, had also gained weight. I walked around the block; twice, in my work shoes. When I returned to the apartment Mr. Moodley was looking out of his window. "Tonight we will eat lentils. Dinner will be ready by five. I have to be at the pub by seven."

I busked in a different place for the next couple of weeks. I set up outside Mulligans, a good bar and eatery on the corner of Tara and Poolbeg. There was not much action and by mid-afternoon I went home and took a nap. I was exhausted from my morning walks. I was just dozing off when there was a knock on my door. It was Mr. Moodley.

"Pierre," he said. Tonight Mrs. Moodley is making a special Indian dish. It's chicken in a light marsala sauce served with some basmati rice. You will love it."

I enjoyed the dinner and skipped the pub. The next day I

went to SuperValu. They had just started to carry trainers and I bought one of their cheaper pairs. I was not sure how long this health kick was going to last and didn't want to blow my savings on something that would just sit in the cupboard.

It was raining but I still managed four times around the block. I was drenched when I got back to the apartment and, against my better judgment, I did a few push-ups.

I'm not sure if it's because of my cheap nature that I took advantage of Mrs. Moodley's cooking, or if I was really starting to get into exercising more. I had extended my walk into a walk-run thingy. I would walk for five minutes and then run for one. The running part was not easy. There were bits flopping all over the place and there was more than a little sweat running down my butt crack.

After three months Mr. Moodley said to me, "You are looking good Pierre. You look like you have lost some weight." I had not dared weigh myself but when I went back to my apartment, I weighed myself. I had lost 22 pounds. I missed my friends at the pub but it was OK. I was starting to feel good about myself for the first time in a very long time.

Then I met Amelia. I was back busking at Pipers Corner when I noticed a very pretty girl with the longest red hair you have ever seen. She was swaying gently to my songs, her eyes closed. Every now and then she would look my way and smile. I think it was when I sang Brown Eyed Girl that we connected, even though I noticed later that her eyes were green. She came up to me afterwards and said, "Can I buy you a beer?" I think in that moment two decisions were made; I was going to marry Amelia and I was going to try and quit drinking.

We didn't sleep together at first and if I am to be honest, it was harder quitting drinking than I had imagined it would be,

but two months in we did the dirty deed and I took my last swig of Guinness. I had lost 50 pounds and was now running for five minutes and walking one. That was when Amelia put an idea in my head. "Why don't you think of running the Emerald City 5K?" I know that you can do it." I was so besotted with her that I said that I would but I was nothing less than scared shitless by the idea of running a 5K race.

I started slow, well slow by my standards which was pathetically slow by most standards. Amelia was there to cheer me on and I made it; only just. I was starting to feel a little dizzy at the 4K mark but the crowds and Amelia egged me on and I made it. Some pretty lady at the finish line draped a medal around my neck and handed me a pint of Guinness. I handed the pint off to Amelia who found someone to give it to who was thirstier than both of us.

By the end of that summer I was running 10K a day. I had lost 70 pounds and was promoted to the part of Macduff. The Abbey Theater had recently received a big grant from the Government to expand their facility and my new part in Macbeth came with a fairly decent pay raise.

Amelia and I were still living under the pub and Mrs. Moodley was still cooking dinners for us. Sometimes Amelia helped cook but Mrs. Moodley had taken me on as a project and she was not about to give it up easily.

"You have the sexy time with him," she told Amelia. "I will feed his heart and Mr. Moodley will feed his mind." It was true. Mr. Moodley was starting to suggest longer races and had come up with some kind of concoction for me to drink before each race that included turmeric and honey. It tasted foul but really helped.

I kept on running through the winter and that winter was one

of the coldest on record. Amelia would run with me part of the way but she was more into pilates at the local gym than hitting a road covered in ice.

In January, after we had taken the Christmas tree down, Mr. Moodley stopped by. "I have an idea," he said. "I read about a half marathon in Belfast. I think that you can do it. It's a hilly course but I think that you are ready."

"What, are you my trainer now?" I asked. Mr. Moodley smiled lightly.

"If so, you are a very good one."

Mr. Moodley looked at me and said, "I am a Publican and your Life Coach. I believe in you." I wanted to hug him but was not sure if it was an acceptable thing to do in Indian culture.

I ran that half marathon. It was brutal. The course was beautiful and it was hilly and the crowds were awesome but I almost died, well that's how it felt anyway. By mile ten I was stuffed but then I saw Amelia waving and yelling, "You can do it." I did it and took home another medal and a bag of swag.

On the drive on the way home Amelia said to me, "I'm so proud of you," and that more than made my day, in fact it made my whole life up until that day. I had never felt better or been happier. Then out of the blue, and I swear I have no idea how this happened, Amelia got pregnant. Baby Billy was born right on time on his due date. Mr. and Mrs. Moodley threw a huge party for us but as far as I can remember both Amelia and me and Baby Billy slept through most of it.

We were out walking with Billy strapped in tight. I said to Amelia, "I don't want to make a big deal out of this but why don't we get married?"

She kissed me for a very long time and then said, "I always

imagined an elaborate church wedding but a simple ceremony will fill my heart.” It took a couple of days to fill out the paperwork before she could become Mrs. Amelia Guillaume.

We were at the pub drinking lemonade when Mr. Moodley said, “I have a friend who manages the Geneva Marathon. I think that he owns part of it. I had seen a fit looking guy in the pub recently and wondered who he was. “His name is Mark,” Mr. Moodley said, “and he said that he would comp you an entry fee. I will pay for the ticket to Switzerland. What do you think?”

I looked at Amelia and said, “I’m not sure I can run that far.” Amelia took me by the hand and said, “I will be there for you, every step of the way. I have already bought my plane ticket.”

“You have already bought your plane ticket?”

“Yes Mr. Moodley told me about the race. We bought two plane tickets so that we could sit together on the flight. I didn’t know if I should be angry that I had not been consulted, or if I should laugh, or cry. I decided to laugh.

The race was hell. It started way outside the city and for the first few miles we ran through fields of sunflowers and pastureland. I felt good and still felt in reasonable shape until we got into the city. It was flat but I was stuffed. My legs were cramping and I was definitely dehydrated but I kept on keeping on and finally made it across the finish line. Amelia was there and she caught me in her arms. That was when I cried. We had left Billy with Amelia’s Mom. I so wished that he was there to make one of my life’s most important achievements just that little bit more special.

Amelia didn’t know this but I had started to sneak up into the pub when she was asleep and when Mr. Moodley wasn’t working. I started with just a half pint of bitter. The guy working the bar was new and didn’t say anything. I wasn’t proud of myself but the

stress of a new baby and less than enough money coming in was starting to get to me. Then one day Amelia walked in and caught me downing a fresh pint. “I knew,” she said, “I could smell it on your breath. It’s your life and you can do with it what you want but you have a baby now. Don’t ever forget that.”

I was ashamed of myself and never set foot in the pub again. To this day I have not touched another drop. I was still running but my enthusiasm had lagged until Mr. Moodley said to me, “Don’t you have family in South Africa?”

“Yes, my sister lives there now. She married a South African. They live in Durban. I haven’t seen her in years.”

“Well OK,” Mr. Moodley said, “I have an idea.”

That was where things changed for me. His idea was a little race that went from Pietermaritzburg to Durban. “It’s called the Comrades Marathon,” he said. “It’s a bit of a challenge but I think that you are up to it.”

Mr. Moodley didn’t know that I had been visiting his pub. Well looking back on it I suspect that he might have known hence his suggestion of the Comrades. That night, after Amelia had fallen asleep with Billy on her boob, I Googled the race and was horrified. Their slogan is, “The Ultimate Human Race.” I looked at the course. It was a very hilly 54 miles from Pietermaritzburg to Durban. I was horrified at the idea but looked over at Amelia and our baby asleep on the couch and hit the “Where do I sign-up button.” I knew before they asked for my credit card information that I was going to give it a go.

The next morning was Sunday. I always made us a proper English breakfast on Sundays. Eggs from the lady up the streets who has a flock of chickens in her backyard, bacon and blood sausage, fried tomatoes and some mushrooms. It was the only day that I strayed from eating healthy. Amelia had Billy on her boob

and was enjoying her breakfast. We had Classic FM playing in the background.

"I have something to tell you," I said. Billy must have sensed what I was about to say and he let the boob go with a pop. He looked at me. I pulled my chair closer. "Amelia, I signed up for another race. I think that I might have been a little crazy last night. I signed up for an Ultra-marathon."

Amelia popped Billy back on her breast and asked, "where?"

"In South Africa. It's called the Comrades Marathon. It's 54 miles. I think that's around 90 kilometers. Amelia released Billy from her boob and burped him before she spoke. "I'm proud of you for taking on such a challenge," she said. "But how the heck are we going to afford a trip to South Africa?"

"I have no idea," I replied, "but we are going." Just then Mr. Moodley knocked on our door. I let him in. He was beaming. "I saw on the website that you had signed up for the race," he said. "I am so proud of you. Amelia, your man just signed up for one of the toughest sporting events on the planet."

Amelia looked at him and shrugged. "It's all well and good but I have no idea how we are going to get to South Africa. We can barely afford our rent let alone some air tickets."

"Don't you worry about that," Mr. Moodley said. "I will come up with a plan." And he did. Later that day I got a call from Mr. O'Sullivan the Proprietor of Pipers Corner. "I talked to Mr. Moodley," he said and I also talked to Mr. Jacobs from the Abbey Theater. Between the three of us we are going to help you raise money for your trip to South Africa. I have already been thinking about it and Mr. Jacobs agrees. From now on you are going to be the full-time in-house talent at Pipers Corner. To kick it off we will hold a concert and advertise it far and wide. All ticket sales and a portion of the bar will go toward your trip. I haven't decided on

what the portion will be but it's going to be plenty, I can assure you of that. Also, when I spoke to Mr. Jacobs he agreed that they would hold a special Pierre Guillaume evening at the theater with a minimum of half the proceeds going toward your Comrades Marathon fund. Also, Mr. Moodley is going to hold a poker night fundraiser at the pub and he will donate half the bar take toward your travel expenses. If that does not bring in enough money we will do it again until there is enough money for you and Amelia and Billy to fly to South Africa and run that race."

I was floored. Not only had I just secured a full time job, but my friends had noticed and were willing to help. I told Amelia that night.

"Pierre," she said, "people love you. You have always underestimated yourself. You have a beautiful singing voice, you can play guitar as good as the best, and you are an inspiration. Pierre when I first met you, let's just say that you were a tad overweight, but look at you now, you are still a little on the heavy side but I think it's your heart that adds all the weight. Your heart is so full that it's overflowing. I will support you every step of the way."

I kissed her and kissed Billy on the forehead. "Thank you," I said, holding back tears.

I started training right away. Billy was up early each morning looking for a boob and Amelia would do her part. Instead of going back to sleep I dragged myself out of bed and pulled on my trainers. I had upgraded them to a fancy pair from the Nike Outlet. The race was still a few months away. The streets of Dublin were quiet at that time of day and all I could hear was the slap slap of my feet on the pavement and the pounding of my heart. I headed for Phoenix Park. I passed under the R805 and entered the park on the north side. Each time I passed through the gates I would be blown away by its beauty, even in the pitch dark. I had read

once that Phoenix Park is twice the size of Central Park in New York. My favorite part was running by the Dublin Zoo. The path went right past the tiger enclosure and usually they were still asleep at that time of day.

When I first started training for the Comrades it was still dark out but by early May it was light when I ran past the tiger enclosure and I would stop to say hi. At first just one of them would open a sleepy eye and look at me. A month later it seemed, to me at least, that there was a welcoming committee. Most of the tigers would come to the fence to greet me.

The first fundraiser was at Pipers Corner. It was a packed house, in fact it was an overflowing crowd. Mr. O'Sullivan had anticipated a crowd and had set up a large screen on the street. He had applied to the city for dispensation to sell beer and wine from a pop-up bar. They turned him down on the liquor which was fine by him.

"We make our money on beer and wine. There is not much mark-up in liquor."

We raised well over eight thousand pounds, more than enough for the trip to South Africa. The gig at the Abbey Theater raised just under four thousand pounds and Mr. Moodley put in another three to bring the total to close to fifteen thousand. I was completely blown away. "I hope that I finish this bloody race," I said to Amelia.

I talked to Mr. Moodley. "This is too much money. We don't need this much money, but he already had an answer for me. "I talked to O'Sullivan and Mr. Turner. We agreed that whatever money that's left over can go into a fund for Billy to go to University. I have a friend who is a banker and he can help grow the money. You remember Jack from the pub, right?"

"You mean that old guy that always sat at the end of the bar?"

"Yup that Jack. You wouldn't know it but he was one of the most successful bankers in Ireland. The man is worth millions. You wouldn't know it by looking at him but he's smart as a whip."

"He looks like a bum."

"I know but anyway, he will manage the money. Spend what you need to spend and he will invest the rest."

We landed at the OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg. Billy had been great on the plane, well to be honest, Amelia had let me rest and had taken him for walks up and down the aisle. The South African air was thick and smelled different. We weren't outside for very long because we had to catch a domestic flight to Durban. The Comrades this year was what they call a 'down run,' from Pietermaritzburg down to Durban. On alternate years there would be the 'up run' from Durban to Pietermaritzburg. I had read on the website that the down run was tougher. I know that sounds counter intuitive but most runners will tell you that it's the downhill that kill your quads.

Our plan was to stay two nights in Durban to get over the jet-lag and then make our way toward Pietermaritzburg. We would follow the race route, backwards if you will. Mr. Moodley had booked us a place at the Elangeni Hotel right on the beach. To be honest I was starting to shit myself. I couldn't believe that this French kid from Ireland was in South Africa planning to run 54 miles. I hid my nervousness but Amelia sensed it. "You can do this Pierre," she reassured me more than just a few times.

We had the route mapped out and left for Pietermaritzburg quite early in the morning. The scenery was stunning. Once we were out of Durban we were into lush countryside. It was beyond beautiful. Small mud huts, which we later learned were called rondavels, littered the countryside and African children stood by

the roadside with their hands cupped. We had been told to bring sweets and Amelia had stocked up. We stopped by each group of children and handed out candies.

“You know that this area is called The Valley of a Thousand Hills?” Amelia said.

“I saw that on the website. I thought that they were kidding. This is insane. Back in Ireland we call these mountains.” Amelia took me by the hand. “You can do this Pierre,” she said.

“Did you know that the Comrades Marathon was founded by a chap by the name of Vic Clapham? In 1921 he ran from Pietermaritzburg to Durban as a tribute to his fellow soldiers, or comrades if you will, who didn’t make it back from the war.”

“Can you imagine?” Amelia replied. “All that way in shitty shoes.”

Billy started to fuss. “He’s been so good,” Amelia said. “I think that he’s nervous for you.” We were just approaching Pietermaritzburg and the city lay before us. All the way from Durban I had been thinking, “this is a fucking long way to run.” We checked into a charming Airbnb on Boom Street. I found the Race Village and picked up my number which was ironic. It was 1-24-75, my birth date. I had been really nervous until I saw the other runners. The elite runners had their separate section. I was surrounded by ordinary people that had, at some point, decided that this was a good idea and made a decision to enter. They were tall and short, black and white and a lot of Indians and some foreigners but mostly just everyday people.

Amelia had my clothes laid out and my water bottles ready to go. They would have water stops along the way but Mr. Moodley had concocted some kind of mixture for me to drink along the way. The only problem was that the water was heavy. Amelia had been watching the TV. “I hate to tell you this Pierre but the

forecaster’s are calling for rain late tomorrow.” I had read the forecast at the Race Village and planned to not tell her in case she worried.

“I know. C’est la vie.”

I hardly slept. Billy must have sensed something and he fussed for much of the night. Amelia did her best to calm him. The alarm went off at 3:30. It was not far to walk from our Airbnb to the start in front of the City Hall. I looked out the window and could see runners already making their way there.

Amelia cooked up a hearty porridge with a side of pasta. Billy, thankfully, had fallen asleep. We sat quietly while I tried to eat but I had no appetite. I knew that I had to get it down so methodically shoveled it in. “Don’t over-hydrate now,” Amelia said. “Pace yourself, it’s going to be a long day.”

“No shit.”

I kissed Amelia goodbye and walked slowly toward City Hall. Thousands of runners were already there. We would start in stages. I had been assigned to the Group G corral which was quite far down Chief Albert Luthuli Street. Adrenaline was cranking. I needed to pee. Luckily Amelia had thought of everything and I slipped the paper cup under my running shorts and tried to relax. I chucked the full cup into the waste bin and checked my watch. It was five minutes to six. Then I heard the strains of Chariots of Fire coming from City Hall. It was followed by Nkosi Sikelel’ Afrika, the South African National anthem, and then I heard Max Trimborn’s famous ‘cockcrow’. That was when the tears started. I thought back to when I almost broke the stool outside Pipers Corner because of my weight. “Mr. Guillaume you have come a long way,” I whispered softly to myself. The gun went off and we started running.

Most of the first three miles we walked because there were so many runners and the street was narrow, but once we got past

Hayfields things opened up a little and I started to run. It was just getting light. I thought of Billy and Amelia. They would be packing up to leave to drive to Durban. We had a plan that they would try and meet me in Drummond, the halfway point. I was running good through Ashburton but then I hit the Valley of a Thousand Hills and the wheels started to come off. "Fuck," I said to myself, "this is too early." I drank some of Mr. Moodley's secret potion and started to feel better. The crowds were amazing and I sucked in their energy. A young black kid was running alongside me. "Hey Mister," he said, "You know how you get through this race? One step at a time." He didn't look older than nineteen. "This is my third Comrades," he said. "If I can do it, you can do it."

Amelia and Billy were at Drummond. She was screaming madly; Billy looked bewildered. I kept on running. Only a full marathon left to go. I stopped at the medic tent at mile 42. My legs were cramping. They rubbed a thick coat of Ben Gay on them and told me to keep on keeping on. "Easy for them to say," I thought.

There is a 12 hour time limit. If you don't make it in time you don't make it and you can never call yourself a Comrades Marathon finisher. It was getting late in the day when I ran, or rather ran-walked through Pinetown. It's the town just before Durban. I had thrown up a couple of miles earlier, well more to the point, I had dry heaved. Mr. Moodley's concoction was all gone and I was well spent. The crowd was going crazy. They knew that we were pushing the time limit. Then I noticed the storm clouds. They moved in quickly and in less than a few minutes we were getting soaked. Luckily it didn't last long but that was when the chafe really started. My flimsy running shorts suddenly felt like pieces of velcro rubbing against my crotch and the blood from my nipples stained my vest.

The sun came out and I noticed one lady just ahead of me had shit her pants and it was running down her left leg. People had

stopped to remove their shoes and were piercing their blisters. The medics had one lady strapped to a stretcher. There was less than an hour before the cut-off time. I kept walking, trying to run, but my legs were cramping and my heart was not really in it anymore. I tried to conjure up images of the concert that I gave at Pipers Corner and the performance that I had given at the Abbey Theater, but those memories had been used up before Drummond. Then I thought of the tigers at the Dublin Zoo. They helped for the next couple of miles before I started to envy them laying around in the shade.

Pinetown gives way to a gentle slope into Durban. In the distance I could see the Indian Ocean. Time was running out. Someone handed me a Coke and that helped a little and then someone pulled me over and gave me a shot of Soy Sauce. "Just do it," she insisted. "Just like it says on your shoes." I had nothing to lose and downed the Soy Sauce. The salt flipped me and I started to run again. Slowly at first. Someone yelled, "You have two miles to go and 25 minutes to get there." I was mostly incoherent. Then I saw them; all of them. Amelia had made a plan. Mr. and Mrs. Moodley were both wearing the green of the Irish. Mr. Jacobs was wearing some short running shorts which looked totally ridiculous on him, and Mr. O'Sullivan was waving a South African flag. Billy had been dozing off in his snugly but woke with a jolt when Amelia screamed, "You can make it Pierre." Ahead I could see The Moses Mabhida Stadium. The crowds were yelling. I felt my legs moving one step at a time, one foot in front of the other if you will. I remembered the advice that the kid at mile fifteen had given me. "One step at a time Mister."

There is a grand entrance to the stadium. The crowd was going crazy and as I turned the corner I knew why. The countdown clock had started. I had less than a minute to run the last two hundred meters. I couldn't do it. I collapsed halfway to the finish

line. My head had given up. I felt the dirt hit my face and I didn't care. I didn't feel the two runners grab me under the arms and I didn't feel them drag me but I heard the crowd and ahead I could see the big Finish Line banner. The three of us collapsed just a few feet past the official timer pad and that was when I heard the gun go off.

Now, it's kind of a brutal tradition with the Comrades. When the gun fires a group of men lock arms to create a barrier. If you don't make it in 12 hours you don't make it. I was completely out of it but looked up to see people collapsing just feet from the official finish line. My two helpers were done as well. They lay there gasping for air. One was a young Indian man and the other; an older woman. "Befok," she said. "That was brutal." I could not have said it any better myself even though I didn't know what befok meant.

I was in the medical tent when Amelia and Billy came in. There were no words. I could see that she had been crying. "We all made it to the finish in time to see you cross the line. Mr. Moodley had it all planned out."

"Wait what?" I said. Mr. Moodley is here?" I had no memory of them in Pinetown. "Yes, so is Mrs. Moodley and Mr. Jacobs and Mr. O'Sullivan. His wife is also here. They have been taking a holiday in Durban. I never told you because I didn't want you to feel any extra pressure. Billy was suddenly awake and smiling. He reached out his hand and said, "Dada run." They were the first two words he ever spoke.

PINK MARTINI

I MET THE INVISIBLE MAN in a bush bar on the outskirts of Gaborone. I didn't realize that he was invisible until I noticed that I was the only person in the place who could see him, at least I thought that I was the only one. He pulled up a stool next to me, lit a smoke, and ordered a pink martini. He took a long pull on his cigarette letting the smoke drift upwards, curling like a blue snake until it disappeared into the thatch ceiling above. He looked my way for a brief moment and then downed his martini. When he placed the glass back on the counter I noticed that his hands were pale and his fingers unusually long.

I thought that his choice of drink was a little different in a place that sold mostly beer to a scruffy bunch of hunters, so I asked him, "hey my friend I couldn't help but notice that you ordered a pink martini. That's an unusual drink, especially in a place like this." He smiled mysteriously and said, "It's the grapefruit that keeps me visible."

I was not sure how to reply but it turned out that I didn't have to. He said, "I know that somewhere, someone in your family has farmed grapefruit. It's in your blood and that's how you can see me when others can't."

I wished that I had not brought it up. My great grandfather had farmed grapefruit on his farm in Mpumalanga in Southern Africa. His vast orchards spread all the way to the border of Swaziland. He had mostly abandoned his family but that's another story. How could the invisible man have known?

I turned back to my beer and took a sip. Earlier in the day I had watched a herd of elephants wallow in the muck of the last waterhole for ten miles. I was parched and the beer went down ‘singing hymns’ as my late father loved to say. The invisible man leant over. He tapped my beer glass and said, “there is a reason I drink here. The bartender has a small grapefruit orchard in his backyard. He can see me.” I nodded, not sure what to say. The bartender caught my eye and winked. I ordered another Castle Lager. The invisible man stood to leave. He placed his hand on my shoulder and said, “if you ever need me, drink a pink martini.” Then he was gone. Back to being invisible.

I finished my beer and stepped out into a black night. To the east I could hear the hideous giggling of a pack of hyenas. They were far away but their sound carried on the damp air. I had only been back in Africa for a week and the hairs on my neck started to tingle. I felt at home for the first time in almost three decades.

I GREW UP IN THE AFRICAN BUSH, but a longing to see the world and a chance meeting on a dock in Durban soon had me sailing across the Atlantic to a new life living on the lip of an ocean swell. I became a sailor for hire and my spirit of adventure took me all over the world; but I missed Africa. What I missed most was the smell; the peppery smell of elephant dung. The spring flowers in Namaqualand whose scent carries on the breeze to announce that summer is just around the corner. I missed the salt air that drifts across the aloe plants in the early morning when the surf pounds the yellow beach and washes everything clean for a new day, an African day, the kind that seeps into your soul; the kind that stays with you for the rest of your life.

One morning, on a whim, I booked a ticket to Johannesburg. My wife understood. She had grown up on a farm in Pennsylvania

and understood longing. Our children were grown; I was semi retired. I needed a fix.

The Qatar Airlines jet landed with a slight bump at the OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg. I had just enough time to catch a small commuter plane to Gaborone. I had once lived there with a girl and while I never quite admitted it to myself, I secretly hoped that I might run into her. I had heard through a mutual friend that she was in the diamond business but he didn’t have any contact information for her, and she was not on Facebook. She had been a real looker back then and I was curious to see how well she had worn an extra 30 years.

I rented a room in a quaint lodge on the edge of the Mokolodi Nature Reserve and spent most of the day relaxing by the pool. I returned to the bush bar that evening but there was no sign of the invisible man. The bartender looked my way and nodded, “the same?” he asked.

“Yes please and thank you,” I said. He poured a pint of Castle Lager into a chilled glass and placed it in front of me. I looked around the bar. The same characters that had been there the previous evening were in their same seats drinking the same drinks, or so I guessed. The only difference was a man in the corner strumming a beat up guitar singing Johnny Cash covers. He occasionally did a couple of Willie’s songs. The bartender sauntered over. “Are you a believer?” he asked. I looked at the twinkle in his eye and said, “if you mean in the Almighty then no, not really.”

“No, I was not talking about the Almighty. I was talking about the invisible man.”

“I dunno,” I said. “I hadn’t given it much thought.” It was a lie and the bartender knew it. If truth be told I had thought of very little else since our chance meeting. He turned and walked to

where the liquor bottles were hanging upside down. There was a carved sign in front of a mirror that read, *'This is a drinking bar with a hunting problem.'*

I saw him grab a glass and fill it with ice. He held it up to the bottle of Absolute pouring a perfect tot, and then he splashed in some vermouth, just a little. He leaned under the counter, found the grapefruit juice, and filled the glass to the brim. He shook the drink before pouring it into a frosted martini glass. He had noticed me watching him and walked back to where I was sitting. He slid the drink along the counter. "This one is on me," he said. "Give it a try."

"Seriously?"

"Yup. Give it a try. He won't show up until the drink is half empty. If it's an emergency it needs to be a double shot of vodka. This is not an emergency."

"You are taking the piss out of me," I said. I was skeptical but took a sip anyway. It was surprisingly refreshing. "This is good. You mix a mean cocktail."

"Thanks. I will be back." He left to wait on some of the other customers. The man in the corner playing guitar clipped on his harmonica and covered Bob Dylan's 'Simple Twist of Fate.' I took another sip. I was about a third of the way when I felt numbness on my lips and was halfway done when I heard the door open. There was a little bell that rang to alert the bartender that he had a new customer. I turned around and saw the invisible man walking toward me. He was wearing a wry smile. He sat on the bar stool next to me. "Hey barkeep," he said, "can I get a pink martini?"

The bartender sauntered over. "I have it ready," he said. "I knew that you were coming." He shook the drink and poured it into a martini glass. No one other than the bartender and me had noticed him. He clinked my glass and said, "To future adventures."

He downed his drink, put his hand on my shoulder, gave it a little squeeze, and a few seconds later he was gone.

MY THIRD NIGHT at the bar we didn't speak of the invisible man, at least not right away. The bartender seemed to be working the other end and barely acknowledged me. My Castle Lager wasn't cold and it left a sour taste in my mouth. I nursed it, sipping slowly. I was just about to leave when the bartender came over. "How long did it take for the numbness on your lips to wear off?" I had forgotten about the numbness.

"I dunno," I said.

"The numbness starts when he is on his way. It goes away the second he leaves. You will get used to it." He leaned in closer. "You know it was me who summoned him two nights ago. I needed a friend, someone to talk to. When I saw you walk into the bar I had a sense that there was grapefruit in your lineage. And now I know that I was right. And I know that summoning him was the right thing to do. I don't really know why but you can thank me later."

I didn't know what to say so I didn't say anything. Then I had a thought. The bartender was just about to leave when I grabbed his arm. "This is a bit of a long shot," I said. "Maybe a really, really long shot, but do you know a lady by the name of Tshepang Moutloatse?"

"You know Faith?" he asked.

I felt my heart leap. "Yes, from a long time ago. A different time in my life. Do you ever see her?"

"She comes in here every now and then. That's perhaps all I should say. I don't know you well enough to tell you anything more."

INSTEAD OF GOING BACK to my room in the lodge I went for a walk. The same pack of giggling hyenas were hunting on the plains to the east. Then I heard a lion roar, the first I had heard since sailing away from Africa almost three decades earlier. I heard a reply from the same general direction. This time the tingle that I had felt on the back of my neck went right down my spine. I knew that I was finally home again.

After walking for a half hour I returned to the lodge. I lay awake most of the night thinking about Faith. I knew that I shouldn't but I couldn't help myself. The memory of her sun drenched black skin as smooth as velvet rubbing against mine had been hard to forget. Just before dawn, as a pink hue lit the eastern sky, I fell into a fitful sleep.

Faith had always been ambitious. She wanted the finer things in life. Personally I could give a crap about the finer things in life and that was probably where our relationship fell apart. We had been madly in love. She was adventurous in bed and liked to take risks like the time we did it on a blanket in the sun with a pride of lions asleep under an acacia tree less than 50 yards away. "They won't bother us," Faith assured. "Can't you see, they have just eaten?" We also did it once on a raft floating down the Okavango Delta. Every now and then a hippo would surface, but they never bothered us. It was the crocodiles that scared me the most. Faith called them flat-dogs. They had prehistoric eyes. If you looked deep into them you could see the entire passage of time since dinosaurs roamed the earth.

I knew that I had to see Faith just one more time

I returned to the bar earlier than usual. The bartender, whose name by now I had learned was Sello, was washing glasses and prepping for the evening crowd. He looked up when he saw me. "The same?" he asked. I nodded and moments later an ice cold Castle Lager appeared in front of me. "I'm sorry about the beer last night," he said. "I had to switch kegs just before you came in

and the new one had not had enough time to chill. But I am going to make it up to you."

"Free beers for the next week?" I joked.

"No," Sello said. "Something even better." He lowered his voice and leaned in. "I talked to Faith. She wants to see you. She will be here at nine." I felt my tummy turn. "You are welcome," Sello said and then added, "this may come as a little surprise but she told me that she is still in love with you." I took a long pull on my beer. This had all come at me pretty fast. I downed the rest and held out my glass. "I thought that might be your reaction," Sello said. "Another cold one coming up. The bar can absorb this."

I managed to pace myself on the beers but kept glancing toward the door. At nine-o'clock on the dime the little bell rang and in walked the most beautiful lady I have ever seen. It was Faith dressed to kill wearing a colorful yellow and green dress, long loopy earrings and high heels. Her skin was jet black, darker than I remembered. She did not look a day older than thirty but I knew that by now she must have been pushing sixty. "Hey you," she said to me, "I knew that one day you would come looking for me. I would love a drink and then we can go back to my place for the night." Sello had been watching out of the corner of his eye. "The usual?" he asked, but Faith shook her head. "No, tonight I am in a celebrating mood. A bottle of good champagne and two glasses." She turned to me and said, "you look good, even if you are a little pink."

When I had left my home near Boston there had been a foot of snow on the ground. The harsh Botswana sun had been unkind and I felt more than a little pink in my pinkness. Faith kissed me directly on the lips and held it for a few seconds. I knew in that moment that I was screwed, and that I was going to get screwed. There was no getting out of it. For a brief second I thought about

my wife back home but then that familiar smell of sun drenched skin filled my head and I followed her out the door.

The sex was as good as I remembered. The only thing that messed with my head was my Catholic guilt. I had tried to put it out of my head but it was not easy and Faith sensed it. "Don't worry," she said to me afterwards. "I will let you go back to your family but not until I have had my fill of you. And after that, only maybe."

THE INVISIBLE MAN had once led bush safaris out of Maun, mostly in the Okavango Delta but occasionally in the Kgalagadi, a sparse desert area to the south. He worked for an outfit there for almost a decade and loved the work, but his boss died unexpectedly and new management came in. They put the boot down, tightened up the hours, and reduced pay. The invisible man was only working to support his true love which was playing classical piano, so he quit.

He took on a few odd jobs playing piano in bars, but Botswana, like most of the rest of the world, was feeling the squeeze from the recession and the tips were poor. When he got home, no matter the time, he would play a little Mozart for the bush animals. It seemed, to him at least, that as soon as he started playing the night noises would stop. It was as if all the animals were taking a break from killing and eating to listen to some beautiful music float by on the dewy night air. Then one day he put his precious Baby Grand into storage and headed south looking for a new life. He had never been married; in fact he wasn't even that interested in girls. He preferred to be footloose or at least that was what he told himself. That was until he met Bill at the Scottsville Race Course in Pietermaritzburg, a sprawling city in the KwaZulu province on the east coast of South Africa. Bill was dressed in a pink shirt and sported a bowler hat and bow tie. The invisible man was dressed in khakis and a bush hat. They both saw the

magic in each other and the attraction was instant. The invisible man had no idea that he might be gay and it came as a bit of a shock when Bill invited him to his cottage in the foothills of the Drakensberg Mountains, and even more shocking when he found himself accepting. It was a tumultuous three years that involved a lot of drinking, a lot of stinking, and a lot of going naked.

Bill was a professional gambler and liked to play the horses, mostly, although he was quite good at the card table too. He was clever at what he did and it afforded him a lavish lifestyle, but he had a dark, sinister side to him. He had loaned the invisible man some money, quite a lot of money if truth be told, but it all went wrong when Bill came home one evening and found the invisible man in bed with one of their best friends. Bill might have been all pink and poufed when they were at the racetrack, but he had some dark connections and he was going to make sure that the invisible man would pay for his transgression.

The invisible man fled, heading north, first to Pretoria and then to Polokwane, the provincial capital of the Limpopo Province. The invisible man had friends there, former clients from his safari days. Things were quite for the first month and he thought that he might have escaped, but one day a man came to the door asking for him. The invisible man told the stranger that his name was Jason and he had no idea who he was asking about. The man left. The invisible man told his friends that he was going to move further north toward Louise Trichard, a key grapefruit growing region. The invisible man had always had a love of grapefruit and hoped that he could find work there to lay low for a few months.

He found a job picking grapefruit. It was menial labor and despite the harsh conditions he felt reasonably happy and somewhat safe. That was until there was a loud knock on the door of the small hut that he was renting. Bill was there with two

thugs. There was no time for negotiation. They dragged him out into one of the orchards, out of sight of the other workers, and beat him badly. (I would have said that they beat him to a pulp but that would have been a little corny.) When the thugs thought that he was dead they stuffed a grapefruit in his mouth. As the invisible man slipped into unconsciousness he heard Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20 playing. Seconds later he was gone, but not completely. He had just become invisible.

FAITH LOOKED AT ME through slanted eyelids. "You were always the best fuck," she said. "Since you left I have dined with kings and done some stupid things, but I have never let you out of my mind. I want you back." I rolled over and looked at her black, almost opaque skin and said, "I have a wife; and children." Faith pulled down the covers so that I could see her breasts. They still pointed north. She said, "I have Africa in the palm of my hands." She kissed me on the mouth and said, "just think about it."

We went back to the bush bar. Sello came over. "You both look like crap. Bloody Mary's?" I nodded and we were well into our third Bloody Mary when Faith said, "I have to tell you something." I felt my heart sink.

"I am in deep shit," she said. "The Cartel is after me."

Faith had been smuggling diamonds out of South West Africa for two decades. She only hired women. They had two holes and the condoms filled with diamonds were shoved in their vaginas and, well, you know, the other place. It had been a very lucrative way to make more than a few dollars, but now the big dealers in Johannesburg were gunning for her. She had poached some of their customers.

Faith spent some time explaining what she had been doing and how it all worked, how she had managed to pay off the

politicians in Swakopmund to make them look the other way. She said that poaching the Cartel's customers had all been a big misunderstanding but I could tell that she knew that I didn't believe her. Faith was sure that living in Gaborone lent her some kind of anonymity, and it had done so until she had a knock on her door a week before I arrived back on the scene. Two men demanded that fifty thousand Botswana Pula be paid immediately. Faith, ever the negotiator, talked them off the ledge and told them that she could raise the money within two weeks, but the two week deadline was rapidly approaching and she didn't have anywhere near that in her account. Neither did I, otherwise I would have tried to find a way to loan her the money which might have been a tad tricky since my wife and I shared a joint bank account and she had always been a stickler about loaning money.

"My brother lives in Johannesburg," Faith said. "I am sure that we could stay with him until I can either raise the cash or until things quieten down." She knew full well that things would not quieten down and that she could never raise the cash. If anything, things would likely get worse.

THE INVISIBLE MAN finally found his niche in death. He had returned to Botswana, busted his Baby Grand out of storage, and set it up on the banks of the Gaborone Dam. He would sleep most of the day away, but at night, just as the sun was setting and the night calls starting, he would begin to play. He would start out with something light. "Twinkle twinkle little star," he played and sang as the first stars appeared in a moonless night sky. He would pick it up around nine in the evening when the bush sounds were starting to echo in the hills. The animals were getting restless and the invisible man knew that he would smell death in the air before too long. One time, while he was playing, a pack of Cape

Hunting Dogs plowed through his campsite. They stopped for a moment to listen to the music, the alpha male in charge. When he stopped, they all stopped. They listened to him play a little ditty by Bob Dylan; Nashville Skyline Rag, and then moved on.

They say that music sounds better in an old roman cathedral where the acoustics are pitch perfect and the notes reverberate off the ancient walls, but it's not true. In the open bush, when the air is still and warm and moist, and with the night creatures playing back-up, the sound of his piano carried across the dark savannah and echoed off Kgale Hill, a rocky outcropping that stood guard over the city. There was no need for a Roman cathedral. The invisible man had his own cathedral.

By midnight the invisible man was well into Tchaikovsky. He loved to play his piano Concerto No. 1 in B minor. Just before dawn lit the sky to the east and the night animals, finally satiated, went to find a place to rest to sleep it off, the invisible man would end his concert with Mozart's Symphony No. 40, the sublime notes hitting just the right mood to end a night and start a new African day.

On most Saturday nights he took some time off to find himself a place to drink. It wasn't easy. Getting groceries had been easy. He just walked into a supermarket and helped himself; he was invisible after all. He had delayed going to a bar but he had long suspected that it was the grapefruit that made him visible to others. He tried a few bars but no one could see him and ordering a drink was a challenge when no one could see you. Then one Saturday night he walked into a bush bar on the outskirts of Gaborone. As soon as he walked in he had a good feeling about the place. There was a man in the corner with a very old guitar playing Johnny Cash covers. The place was packed but there was one stool left at the bar. He took a chance, crossed his fingers, and ordered a pink martini. The bartender nodded and filled a glass with ice. He held

it up to the bottle of Absolute and then splashed in some vermouth, just a little. He leaned under the counter, found the grapefruit juice and filled the glass to the top. He shook it before pouring it into a frosted martini glass and brought the drink over to the invisible man. "Here you go my friend," he said, "enjoy."

That night there was more than the usual bloodshed on the plains outside of Gaborone. The night creatures were screaming and you could smell the stink of death carry on the dank wind.

I TOLD FAITH that I would be there for her no matter what. She smiled and said, "there is a reason why you came back to Africa. Let's say that we go back to the bush bar and have Sello pour us a few drinks. He does a mean screwdriver."

Her eyes were misting. She said, "I'm scared. I could use some place familiar to relax. They would never think to look for me there." I nodded, "let's do it. I'm buying."

We got to the bar just as the lunch crowd was leaving. There were a few stragglers but mostly it was just me, Faith and Sello. We started talking, the screwdrivers kicking in. Sello had been coming up with a plan to buy the bar. The owner lived in Villefranche on the south coast of France and barely paid any attention to it. So long as Sello showed a positive balance he was happy.

Sello said, "I know that this may sound a little crazy but I want to buy this place and step it up a notch. Clean things up if you know what I mean. Try and attract a crowd that doesn't only drink beer. There is a lot more money in mixed drinks." Faith nodded and looked at me. I smiled. Boy she was beautiful. The smell of her sunburnt skin had me smiling like a cat.

"I like Dave, you know, the guitar player, but I can't listen to any more Johnny Cash. I just can't. I have always loved opera and classical music. I was thinking of hiring Dante." Faith looks

at him. "Dante? Who the heck is Dante?" Sello looked at me. "He knows." I had never known the invisible man's name, but now I did. Dante. Huh?

"We can set his piano up in the corner. We can tell the customers that it's a pianola."

Faith asked, "what's a pianola?"

Sello replied, "it's a piano that plays itself." I could see that Faith was not registering. Sello glanced at me and smiled. "Don't you think that Dante would be a great addition to the bar? I nodded. "Well it's settled then," he said. I will let Dave know that we no longer need his services. He was a pretty crap guitar player anyway."

"I liked his harmonica," I said in Dave's defense.

Sello left to tend the other end of the bar. "I'm lost," Faith said. "Why would Sello hire Dante to play piano when the piano plays itself?" I took her hand. Dante is an invisible man. I don't know how any of this happened but somehow only people with grapefruit in their background can see him. My great grandfather farmed grapefruit in South Africa. Somehow that allows me to see him. Sello has a grapefruit orchard in his yard and he can see him. To the rest, he's invisible.

"Those screwdrivers sure have screwed with your brain," Faith said.

Sello had cleaned things up, the floor especially. It had been a mix of spilled drinks and floor polish; not a good combination. The tables needed some help as well and Sello covered them with black, white and blue tablecloths to mimic the Botswana flag. He built a small stage in the corner and installed Dante's Baby Grand. The following Saturday was going to be the big reopening.

"I'm nervous," Faith said. "We need to get the hell out of here but I don't want to miss the reopening. I held her close. "It's

going to be OK baby," I said. Every time I called her baby my Catholic guilt whacked me, but I was in love; again. I had tried to justify it by telling myself that my wife was a crappy lover but I knew in my heart of hearts that she was not and that I was just a lousy human being.

"I talked to my brother," Faith said. "He's expecting us anytime."

"Let's leave Sunday morning. We have to stay for Sello's opening bash." Faith nodded and kissed me.

We arrived early. Sello was hanging lights and dusting. The Baby Grand had some colorful lights strung around it. It looked majestic, almost like a Grand. The customers started to arrive. They were not thrilled. "No one likes change," Sello said.

"What time is Dave showing up?" a man with a strong Afrikaans accent asked. Sello ignored him and handed him a drink on the house. Faith was at a loss for words. The place looked amazing. Sello had transformed it. She still not sure who Dante was.

"Can I get you a drink?" I asked.

"I will have what you're having," she replied.

"I'm going to have a pink martini," I said.

Sello said, "let's make that three."

The sun was setting and the night animals were restless. A pride of lions were roaring in the east. The hunting dogs were quiet. The pod of hippo were grunting. The impala fidgeting. I could feel my lips starting to get numb. Then the doorbell chimed. In walked the invisible man. He was wearing a fine hand-sewn tuxedo. His shoes were immaculate. How he made it from the dirt parking lot to the bar without getting a spec of dust on them would remain a mystery. Faith looked at me. "Are you seeing what I am seeing?" I hugged her and said, "yes." You must have grapefruit in your lineage.

Dante started off slow. He played 'twinkle twinkle little star' but the crowd was not buying it. "We need some Johnny Cash," someone yelled. I could even stand a bit of Bob Dylan but what? Twinkly, twinkly whatyoumaycallit?" The invisible man played on. The bar filled up. The air was thick with smoke. The invisible man moved on. He went for another Tchaikovsky tune but it fell like a lead balloon. A chant started, "we want Dave, we want Dave, we want Dave." Sello came over to our table. "What do you think?" he asked.

"Stick with it," I said. My lips by now were completely numb. "You know what you are doing." Sello was no fool. He did want to upgrade the place, but he also knew his crowd. It was just getting a little out of hand when in walked Patricia the Stripper. She stopped by the bar and picked up her complimentary six pack. The crowd recognized her and started to cheer. Dante upped his game. He had been mostly classically trained but he knew vaudeville and as he played, Patricia started to strip.

"You see God made me a sinner," she sang, "just to keep fat men thinner and I am the best stripper in town." Dante was having a hard time keeping up with her. She sang, "then she took off her draws to tremendous applause, and with a swing of her hips she undid all the clips and then as the last piece of clothing fell to the floor..." there was a loud banging on the door. The Cartel men were not being discreet. Instead of knocking or just entering, they banged.

"We need to get the fuck out of this place," Faith said. She grabbed me by the hand and started to run, but it was too late. We crouched behind the bar. The Cartel men broke the door down. It was a bit overdone. They could have just opened it like most people but they were on a mission and not thinking straight. Dante stopped playing. Patricia looked a little bit out of place standing naked on the small stage with a dimly lit spotlight

shining on her naked tits. The Cartel men had their guns drawn but they were not quite sure what was going on. Faith and I crouched behind the bar. I could feel her shaking. She was biting her lower lip and there was a trickle of blood running down her chin pooling on her blouse. "My lips are numb," she said. "I can't feel them."

Sello yelled, "get out of here you bastards."

One of the men said, "we want Tshepang. We know that she is here."

Sello said, "Fuck off." Then the music started. Dante started slow with a little Shostakovich - Piano Concerto No.2 in F major. The bar crowd stopped drinking which was very unusual for them. I could hear Faith's heart pounding. She was shivering. The invisible man started to play The Battle Hymn of the Republic. The crowd started drinking again. The invisible man played God Save the King and the Cartel men lost it. They shot a few rounds into the thatch ceiling. The dust settled on the bar. The invisible man carried on playing.

I grabbed Sello by his trouser pants. "I need a pink martini, make that two and make them both double shots. This is an emergency." Sello was cool. He walked to the bar keeping his hands where the Cartel men could see them. He grabbed a glass and filled it with ice. He was about to fill it with Absolute when a gunshot rang out and the bottle of Absolute exploded. "We need Tshepang," the shorter of the two gunmen yelled. Sello moved to the left and filled the glass with a cheap local vodka. He added a splash of vermouth. The guys in the bar went silent. Sello leaned under the counter and found the grapefruit juice. He poured it into the glass and shook it. One of the Cartel men asked for a beer. Sello told him to fuck off. He shook the drink and then poured it into a chilled martini glass. He handed one to me and the other to Faith. They were double shots; emergency drinks. I

downed mine. Faith did the same. My lips were really numb. In the corner we could see the invisible man starting to take on a new dimension. He reached under his Baby Grand and found the gun. The Cartel men saw something happening. They were not sure what. They were intent on finding Faith and could not see the invisible man. All that they could see was a gun hovering above the Baby Grand. They never saw, or even heard the shots ring out. They were both dead before they hit the ground.

Dante blew the smoke off his gun. He had seen that done in the movies. He looked at the gun and sucked in the smoke that was dangling at the end of the muzzle. He was not sure if it was a good idea but he was dead anyway so how bad could it be? He sucked again and the crowd cheered. Grapefruit made him visible to only a few; gun smoke made him visible to all. The bar crowd erupted. He began to play Handel's Messiah, starting slowly as if to settle the crowd, but quickly increasing the tempo. Patricia the Stripper started gyrating again. The invisible man kept on building, pounding his piano, his long pale fingers crushing the keys on his Baby Grand. The crowd was starting to go wild. The two men lay dead on the floor, blood pooling. Outside I could hear the pack of giggling hyenas hunting on the plains to the east. A lion roared, but it was faint. There was no reply. Faith kissed me long and hard on my lips. Then I saw my phone ring.

It was my wife calling.

BOOKS BY BRIAN HANCOCK

all titles available at www.greatcirclepress.com

MEMOIRS

Two Bricks and a Tickey High - Adventures on Land and Sea

Lapping the Planet - A Memoir of Inspiration, Perspiration and Betrayal

NOVELS

Cinnamon Girl

Brooks

Murder at your Convenience

SHORT STORIES

Twisted Tales - Short Stories from Scattered Parts of the Planet

More Twisted Tales - Short Stories from Scattered Parts of the Planet

CHILDRENS STORIES

Fat Cat - Young and Restless

Fat Cat and his Magic Carpet

Fat Cat - International Cat of Mystery

Fat Cat and the two Naughty Chickens

TECHNICAL

Maximise Your Sail Power - The Complete Guide to Sails, Sailmaking and Sail Performance

POETRY

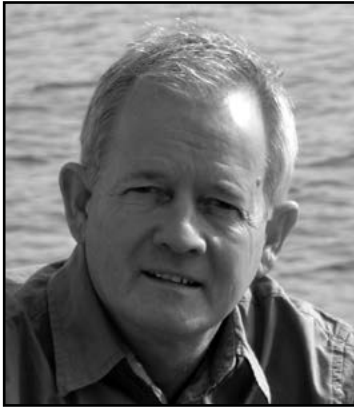
Dipping my Toes

COFFEE TABLE

Winning Spirit - The Global Challenge 2004/2005

Chasing the Dawn - (with Nick Moloney)

Living Life - The Ocean Globe Race story (coming December 2024)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BRIAN HANCOCK is an acclaimed author, adventurer, and expert in the world of offshore sailing. His extensive experience on the open seas and deep understanding of the intricacies of sailing have made him a respected figure in both the maritime community and literary circles.

Born in South Africa, Hancock's fascination with the ocean began at a young age, leading him to a life that would be defined by exploration, challenge, and a relentless pursuit of adventure. Hancock's sailing career spans several decades, during which he has accumulated over 300,000 sea miles including three Whitbread Round the World Races which is considered one of the most grueling and prestigious sailing competitions in the world.

His first-hand experience with the trials and triumphs of ocean racing lends a palpable authenticity to his writing, allowing readers to feel the wind, waves, and raw emotion that come with a life spent on the high seas. As a writer, Hancock has a unique ability to translate the complexities of sailing into

compelling narratives that resonate with both seasoned sailors and avid readers alike.

Brian is the author of 12 books including two memoirs (Two Bricks and a Tickey High and Lapping the Planet), a murder mystery (Murder at your Convenience), two novels (Cinnamon Girl and Brooks), two books of short stories (Twisted Tales and More Twisted Tales) and four children's books in the Adventures of Fat Cat series. He also authored the definitive guide to all things sails and sailmaking (Maximize your Sail Power). In addition Brian has written for numerous magazines around the world and is a heralded public speaker.

Brian lives in Marblehead, Massachusetts with his wife Sally and their cat Ziggy. Their five children and a grandson stop by every now and then for a free meal and a warm bed.





From the highlands of Angola to the vineyards of France and places between, True Tales is a collection of short stories loosely based on Brian Hancock's life. It's a rollicking romp through some of the strangest twists and turns of a life lived to its fullest. It's a must read for anyone with a little adventure in their hearts.

TRUE TALES

"Superbly crafted stories by a master storyteller."

--- Jake Akenklaus - Newsmax

"A fun read, Each story has its own twist, most
I never saw coming. All equally satisfying."

--- James Novak - People

**GREAT CIRCLE
PRESS**

A DIVISION OF GREAT CIRCLE ENTERPRISES



9 798387 146046

USA \$16.95 Canada \$22.95