

The Hitch Hiker

I had been standing on the roadside for hours and was beginning to feel desperate. This wasn't turning out as I had hoped. I had this romantic idea that I would take to the road and free myself from all my worries. It would be like starting a new life, leaving all my old baggage behind. But the reality was beginning to confront me. The sun was no longer intense and was starting to set like a fiery red ball descending slowly behind the distant hills. Then I saw it, a vehicle approaching just visible in the twilight. It was my last chance before darkness descended and I didn't want to spend another cold night on the road.

The cloud of dust signalled that the car was travelling fast. I craned forwards as it came nearer. I could make out the driver a heavyset man with a beard and a ponytail. I furiously signalled him down. The truck skidded to a halt. He wound the window down. A deep mid-west voice called out.

'Where to?'

'Anywhere?' I replied.

'Climb in,' and without another word we set off, the truck shuddering as it gained speed. On the way he held out his hand.

'I'm Jake.'

'I'm Philip, they call me Phil.'

At almost sixty years of age, I was still reasonable fit. I played tennis in foursomes and liked to work out. I was a non-smoker and an occasional drinker. I was not the brightest of people, more a plodder. When I was young I was so envious of the bright ones, those kids who grasped complicated ideas quickly. It always took me a long time to catch on but I was good at figures. Give me a list of numbers and I could add them up in seconds while the bright boys struggled.

I had reached a crossroads in my life. To the casual onlooker I was a success, a leader. As CEO of a large company, I had progressed from office boy to controlling the corporation. I had all the attributes of a successful man, a loving wife, two grown up children, a million dollar palatial home in Auburn East Lane, Iowa City; a member of the prestigious Finkbine Golf Course and money in the bank, what more could a man want? I should have been happy, but I wasn't. That was the problem I wasn't happy.

Every morning, I would wake with a feeling of melancholia. It was a deep nagging ache, a sense of hopelessness as if life had lost its purpose. In the beginning it had come on gradually, so that I was hardly aware of it. As it became more unrelenting, I began to

question it. Was it real or just an indulgence something that my lifestyle encouraged, always wanting more, more money, more luxuries, a bigger car, fancier clothes, the list was unending. My wife Brenda noticed it. She picked up things quickly. She always knew when I was off colour or struggling with a problem. She began to question my silences at breakfast.

‘What’s wrong Phil? You don’t seem to be yourself.’

At first I tried to brush it off.

‘I’m fine just a little tired I didn’t sleep well,’ I would lie. But she was right; I wasn’t myself and hadn’t been for a long time. Waking early I would see my wife sleeping peacefully, our initial passion now replaced by affection and I would stare up at the chandeliers, recalling that we had bought them in Venice on our honeymoon. Then my brain would click in; surely I am not going to just tick along like this until I die? There must be more? I am still a young man; I feel that there is so much more in life.

At the club, I would look around and see my contemporaries, bored and growing fat, their conversations inane. So much so that I had stopped going as I would come away feeling despondent. They had lost the pleasure of living, each day passing like the previous one; lunch, Golf, TV, sex occasionally and sleep. It was not an

enviable life. I could see myself getting like them, living the same rut.

My thoughts were interrupted.

‘Where you from?’ asked Jake.

I didn’t hear him at first with the drumming of the diesel engine drowning out his voice. He repeated the question. I turned to answer and for the first time looked closely at him. About fifty year’s old, his face was gray and wrinkled like crushed tissue paper from the wear and tear of heavy smoking. He had his white hair done up in a plait like an aging pop star. When he smiled, he showed a row of tar stained teeth. His hands were large with thick fleshy tobacco-stained fingers. His nails were crudely cut with dirt ingrained in them. He was wearing a cowboy shirt with a bandana around his throat above a pair of tattered jeans.

I hated the question because it made me feel uncomfortable; I hadn’t yet got a simple answer. I began,

‘I was born in Northern Ireland in Dunfanaghy a small fishing village. I was one of eight children. They had big families in those days,’ I laughed.

I am always a bit embarrassed by that. I then paused to let the words sink in. It seemed such a long time ago.

‘By the way I didn’t mention that I was going to Des Moines, Does that suit you?’

‘Yes that’s fine.

‘Sorry I didn’t mean to interrupt, please go on you’ve got a great history.’

‘Where was I? Oh yes, my father was a market trader and I was brought up with business in my blood. He and I didn’t see eye to eye. He was a heavy drinker and when drunk used to beat my mother. I often tried to stop him but he was too big for me. One time I had to go to hospital I was so beaten up.

‘Didn’t the social do anything?’

‘They didn’t know. When I was ten my parents split up and I went to live with an aunt and uncle in Belfast but I didn’t get on with them either and I ran away.’

‘Wow, you had a bad time when a kid?’ He turned and looked at me, I think he felt sorry for me.

‘Yes I couldnt settle and in the end I managed to stowaway on a merchant ship and skipped the vessel in New York harbour. I slept rough for a few days until I was picked up by the police and taken to a refuge. I had no documents and they threatened to send me back but a lady called Mrs Harman had pity on me and asked to adopt me.

‘You know nothing about him,’ the officer said ‘Are you sure you want to do this, to take the risk? A child is for life you know?’

‘Yes I know,’ she retorted angrily, ‘I know what I am doing.’

Mrs Harman was like a mother to me. She had two children so I acquired two new siblings. It was a very happy time and I shall never forget her kindness. She died a couple of years ago in her nineties.

‘That’s an amazing story, it would make a good film?’

It was now dark and ahead I could see the lights of a small motel and garage. The truck began to slow and then stopped in the parking area behind the building.

‘This is where I stay for the night, Phil. You should be able to get a room at the motel over there. I’ll be leaving at 6 in the morning if you want a lift.’

‘Thanks,’ I said, ‘have a good night, I’ll see you in the morning,’ and I walked off towards the lights of the Motel entrance.

The reception was unoccupied when I entered. I waited and then a man appeared. Well into his seventies, he had a smoke stained beard, unusually deep wrinkles, large ears and large gnarled hands.

‘Sorry I didn’t hear you; the bell on the door doesn’t work. Can I help you?’

‘Yes I would like a single room for the night.’

‘Just one night?’

‘Yes just one.’ He turned and fumbled with some keys.

‘Room 26 is vacant, that will be 35 dollars.’

I made my way along a poorly lit corridor to room 26. The key was stiff in the lock and for a moment I thought that it wouldn’t release and then it clicked and the door gave. I was met with a whiff of stale air, which cleared once the windows were opened. I pulled my wheelie into the room and fell onto the bed. It was hard and creaked as I moved. Within minutes I was asleep.

When I awoke it was pitch dark and I fumbled to find the bedside lamp, which I managed to tip onto the floor, luckily the bulb didn’t break. I glanced at my watch, it was eight am, damn I’ve missed my ride. That was stupid I’ve got to be more careful, I can’t just mess up like that.

I was hungry. I made my way over to the diner, its welcoming lights showing me the entrance. It felt warm and friendly. Glancing around I saw it was almost deserted with one or two diners only. I stood for a moment and then an attractive waitress showed me to a table.

‘Good evening Sir, my name is Jasmine,’ she said handing me a menu. I ordered a standard Hamburger with fries. The food arrived in minutes and I ate hungrily, taking large mouthfuls. Noticing I

had finished she returned to remove my dishes.

‘Any desert?’ she asked.

‘Do you have key lime pie? I know it’s not a local dish but...’

‘Yes sir we certainly do, it was made fresh today. One key lime pie coming up.’

When she returned with my dessert, she lingered as if she wanted to talk and we got into conversation. She told me that she was from the Philippines and then, I must have gained her trust, she whispered,

‘I’m illegal, I came here as a student and didn’t go back. I want to be an American. I love your country. People are so kind. I am hoping that Obama will get the five-year rule passed and then I will apply, I already know the national anthem and the Declaration of Independence.’ I watched her as she spoke her dark eyes sparkling with excitement.

‘I think you are wonderful,’ I said, ‘you are just the sort of person this country needs.’ Then she told me how she rarely goes out because she had no papers.

I paid the bill and gave her an extra large tip. As I was leaving to go to bed she touched my hand and in a soft voice said,

‘I can see you are on your own. You must be lonely. Let me come to your room and make you happy.’

‘Thank you so much, I’ll be OK. You go to bed I am sure you have an early start in the morning.’ It took me a long time to get to sleep. I lay awake thinking of that young woman and her kindhearted offer. I felt sure it was not only for money.

I had set my alarm for 5.30 am, but when I awoke it was already 7.15 am. I peered through my misty window. The truck had gone. Damn I thought that was stupid. I sat trying to decide what to do and then figured I’ll make the most of this and have a full breakfast. The thought of the meal made my spirits rise. There were a number of people already in the diner when I arrived and I sat by the window looking out across the highway. Within a few minutes Jasmine, I recognised her from the night before, arrived carrying a menu and a jug of coffee.

‘Hidee!’ She said, how was your night?’

‘Fine slept like a log thanks,’

‘What would you like this fine day?’

‘Do you have the full breakfast?’

‘Yes sir, all day.’

‘OK, I would like two eggs easy over, hash browns, two sausages, crispy bacon, some beans and toast, brown well done.’ Within a flash a plate brimming over with food was set down in front of me.

‘Ketchup is on the table,’ she said and left.

I eyed the feast. I couldn’t remember the last time I had had such a meal full of cholesterol and sugar. But I was going to enjoy it. I buttered a slice of toast and slid the two eggs on top of it poking the yokes to let the liquid run into the bread. I was having a wonderful time gulping down large mouthfuls of food with no one to tell me to eat more slowly or put less in my mouth. I was not in a hurry so I downed two or three more cups of coffee by which time the café was almost empty.

Collecting up my few things, I walked across to the roadside and waited. The road was empty that morning and after an hour, I decided to contact Jake.

I had taken his phone number and rang him.

‘What happened to you?’ He asked. ‘I waited ten minutes but as you didn’t turn up, I had to leave.’

‘I overslept I’m afraid, I’ve got no excuse.’

‘Where are you now?’

‘I’m still at the motel.’

‘OK, if you can hang around for a few hours I’ve got a load to collect near you so I can pick you up. I want to hear the rest of your story.’

Just after 11 am the truck pulled into the parking area and a cheery Jake shouted out of his window,

‘Hi Phil, lets go! I’m late.’

I scrambled into the passenger seat and we set off.

‘Where to this time? I shouted back.

‘I got a load to deliver to Des Moines.’

We had been going for about ten minutes when Jake turned to me.

‘Let’s hear the rest of your story.’

‘Lets see,’ I began,’ Mrs Harman adopted me; I never knew her first name. She treated me like a son. I was one of three children that she had adopted. We lived in a tumble down house in the Midwest, cattle country. I grew up amongst the livestock and horses. She was a remarkable woman and I loved her like a mother. She later married a successful businessman.’

‘What about your own parents, what happened to them?’

‘I don’t know I never saw them again.’

We lapsed into silence each with our own thoughts,

‘What about you Phil, what’s your story?’

‘I was born here in Iowa City the youngest of four boys. Two of my brothers were killed in Vietnam. My mother never got

over it and committed suicide. Dad brought us up.'

He stopped talking. I could see that he was struggling with the memory.

We sat in a comfortable silence, two strangers sharing time together. I thought about his life on the road, a lonely life but one that obviously suited him. Perhaps it was the death of his mother that made him a bit of an outcast. I wondered if he blamed himself, I had read that children often do. I thought of broaching the subject but decided against it, he might think I was being nosy. Mothers are so important we don't realise it until we don't have them or we lose them. Then there is a large hole in our lives. We had now arrived at the outskirts of Les Moines

'This is my stop,' I said. Thanks for the ride and the company.'

'Good Luck, I enjoyed talking to you,' said Jake.

I was ready to face the next part of my journey. I had to get through the town to reach the motorway on the far side so I set off towards the centre of the town. I had been walking for a short while when I came upon the Pappajohn sculpture Park. Occupying about 4 acres, it contained 24 World class Sculptures donated by John and Mary Pappajohn, local philanthropists. I was

strolling among the works of art admiring some and puzzled by others when I came upon a man who was sitting on the grass. He was not more than thirty, unshaven with dark eyes and a forlorn look.

As I approached he put out a begging bowl. Now beggars shame me, they disturb me and I don't know how to deal with them. My immediate response is to ignore them after all welfare is available to them, but I know that is too easy an excuse.

Thinking about the beggar on the pavement, I asked myself, what responsibility do we have as individuals to ensure that we can live independently, able to earn enough money to feed and clothe ourselves and others whom we chose to befriend or love and not be a burden to society? Can we just opt out and expect society to look after us. I guess some people do and we resent them but maybe it's not their fault.

I decided to speak to this man and find out.

'Good morning! How are you?'

'Sorry are you talking to me?' The man said. He spoke with an educated accent that surprised me.

'Yes I wanted to greet you and ask you how you found yourself in this unfortunate state?' At first he didn't seem to hear me or just ignored me so I repeated the question. He turned and looked at me,

although not old, his movements were that of an old man with stiff painful joints.

‘It’s a long story. I’m hungry, buy me something to eat and I’ll tell you.’

I helped him to his feet and we walked slowly across the road and down a side street to a small diner. He was dragging his left leg and I made a note to ask him about it later. We settled ourselves at the back of the room at a small table. The waitress a pretty Afro-American young woman clearly didn’t like what was happening. She stepped back to avoid the stench coming from him and I could see her pondering whether to ask us to leave but I interrupted her thoughts and asked him.

‘What would you like to eat?’

‘Breakfast, a full breakfast I haven’t eaten anything solid for days. I ordered a full breakfast for him and I had a coffee. I resumed the conversation. The waitress left quickly to get the order.

‘Why don’t you start at the beginning?’

‘OK, it’s all rather boring I’m afraid. I was born 34 years ago in Baltimore.’ I was watching his face as he spoke. He looked tired and dejected.

‘I am an only son of a comfortable family. My father was the manager of a supermarket. I went to the local school and got good grades. I wanted to be a lawyer but

my father couldn't afford to pay the fees so I left school and worked with him in the supermarket.'

'What happened then?'

'I became ill with asthma and pneumonia and couldn't work for three months. During that time my father died. My world fell apart as I was very close to him. My mother and I were also very close but after my father died, she began drinking and over a period of two years she became an alcoholic. We began to argue over her drinking until I couldn't bear being with her even though at one point I was drinking with her. That was the beginning of my downfall. I lost my job and my home and began to live in a hostel at night and roam the street during the day looking for work but my clothes were filthy and I stank. No one wanted to employ me.'

As I listened I realised how close we all are to being like him. An illness, a death, an addiction and our lives fall apart. This man was an intelligent articulate person whose life had become impossible through no fault of his own. How many more people have found themselves in a position like his, I wondered? We sat in silence while he ate ravenously stuffing large portions of food into his mouth. Finally when he had finished the plate I ask him tentatively.

‘If you could, what would you do about people in your position?’ He thought for a while and then muttered,

‘It isn’t easy. It’s facile to assume that our circumstances are never of our own making and that we are not responsible for our misfortunes.’ His answer surprised me. I thought that he would repeat the well-worn excuse, bad luck, in the wrong place at the wrong time but no he actually suggested that the individual played a significant part in his own downfall.

‘I am surprised by your answer,’ I said.

‘Most people are. I often talk to my fellow beggars. Yes I’ll use the word but I don’t like it. Most of us are simply trying to get enough money to survive. They always blame some one other than themselves and hate it when I say I don’t agree.’

‘What makes you hold such a different view?’ I asked.

‘Well, if I look back at my own life, I see moments when I had a choice and made the wrong one. I can’t blame any one else.’

‘Give me an example.’ I said.

‘Well, when I lived with my mother and she began to drink, I shouldn’t have joined her. I should have sought help for her. Instead I kept her company so to speak and so began my own downfall.’

‘Don’t you think you’re being very hard on yourself?’

‘Yes of course but then the truth is usually tough. We all know what is right and wrong but we rationalize; we make excuses; we justify; anything other than face it.’

I sat taking in what he was saying. My own life could have been like his. My days living rough in New York could have been my future had it not been for my adopted mother. It was she who dragged me off the streets and gave me the opportunity, making my life so much easier than his. I hadn’t been faced with the decisions that he had faced. Maybe that is the crux of the matter. It is how we deal with the challenges and clearly some have easier ones than others. I guess that’s what we call luck. I suddenly remember his limp and decided this was the time to ask him. I began,

‘I hope you don’t mind me asking you about your leg, your limp.’

‘Oh that,’ he replied, ‘it was broken in a fight.’ I waited for him to continue.

‘I was going to my usual doss house in central Baltimore. It was late when I came upon this fight in an alley, a man was hitting a young woman. He was much bigger than her and she kept begging him to stop. I wanted to get on and say it was none of my business but of course it was. I couldn’t just stand by and ignore what was happening so

I went over to them and told him to stop. He turned on me and told me to mind my own business. It is my business I told him. What he was doing was wrong, I shouted. Then suddenly he let the girl go and came for me. I became concerned for my own safety. I put up my hands to protect my face when he kicked me very hard. I felt the bone crack and fell to the ground screaming in pain.

‘That’ll teach you to mind your own business.’ I heard the girl shout,

‘Help him you’ve broken his leg, call an ambulance!’ The man pushed her aside and ran off. I lay there unable to move when I heard the girl on her mobile, calling for an ambulance. The last thing I remember before I passed out was her quietly spoken, ‘thank you.’

I watched his face while he told his story. A calm satisfaction came over his worn features. I could see that he was proud of what he had done.

‘Look mate, I know you mean well and I appreciate you stopping and buying me a meal but I’m OK. I’ve got to find my own way out of this. No one can really help me.’ We shook hands and I left him near a bench in the park.

I hadn’t noticed how late it was. The city lights were coming on and the rush hour traffic was building. I needed to find

somewhere to stay. I thought I would go into a comfortable hotel and spoil myself but my clothes were dirty and I wanted to experience the discomfort of poverty.

Coming around a corner I almost bumped into a policeman. He was in full gear, helmet and goggles, flak jacket, heavy loaded belt with handcuffs, a truncheon and a Taser. I felt I had entered a war zone.

'Excuse me Sir,' I said in my most polite manner. 'I wonder if you could help me?'

'Waddar ye want,' he barked, clearly with other things on his mind.

'I'm looking for some where to stay tonight.' Without seeing me he said, pointing to his right,

'There's a flop house on the corner over there, that should suit you'

I found it, a four storey building possibly an old abandoned bank that had been commissioned by the local social services. I climbed the white polished steps and entered a gloomy foyer. At first I couldn't see anything, when a voice loomed out from the dark,

'Hi, are you here for the night?' By then my eyes had accustomed themselves to the gloom. I could see a heavily built man with an unkempt beard and beady eyes standing behind a small reception area.

'I'm Pete,' he said, 'welcome. Where you from?'

'Iowa City.'

'You haven't come far?'

'No I'm just beginning my journey.'

Later that night when things had quietened down Pete and I sat and talked over a cup of coffee. He spoke slowly with an Irish accent. He had a tremor, which he attempted to conceal by holding his hands together and picking up the cup with both hands. I tried not to notice it.

'My people came from Dublin during the famine. I was born here in Iowa and have never been beyond. I couldn't get on with school and grew up hiding away. The social were very tolerant and over the years, I began to work here at the centre. Now I am the receptionist. It's a good job, I am doing something worthwhile.'

As he spoke I could see the pride in his eyes. He had made something of himself despite his difficult up bringing. At ten o'clock we parted. It was time to go to bed. I made my way to the dormitory a large room divided by shoulder high panels into separate cubicles just big enough for a single bed and a small wardrobe. I was in no 201. The light was low when I unpacked my few things. I went to the communal bathroom

and then settled for the night. It was an uncanny feeling lying so close to so many people. I could hear their groans and snoring and occasional shouts. I lay awake for hours, my mind unable to calm down.

By the morning Pete was no longer at the desk.

'He works at night,' said the day man. We never met again. It was going to be like that time and again intimate conversations with strangers, never to meet again.

I was back on the road with my knapsack on my back containing the most basic of things. I have never felt so unencumbered. Why did I surround myself with so many items, more suits than I could ever wear, hundreds of ties, dozens of shirts and a cupboard full of shoes enough to supply an army? I swore then that when I got back, I would downsize dramatically, giving everything to the charity shop.

The day was bright, the sun not too hot and I felt at ease for the first time in months. Still on route 6, I was leaving Iowa and making my way across Nebraska. I was planning to stay at Omaha, the largest city in Nebraska. Standing in the shade of a blue spruce I reviewed my progress. The melancholia had gone. I hadn't even thought about it until now. I had so many other things to concern me, so perhaps that's why it has

gone? I can say that I am happier although I am certainly much less comfortable. Living in insecurity is unfamiliar to me but not knowing from day to day is both invigorating and scary. What will today bring I wondered?

The traffic was light and so far no one had stopped. I knew not to give up. An inveterate hitchhiker had told me that you only need one ride a day so statistically things are on your side. As I was going over this in my mind a white Ford Fairlane slowly came to a halt and a female voice called out, 'Where are you going?'

'West,' I said.

'I am going to Omaha.'

'That's will do me,' I said bundling my stuff into the back seat and climbing in beside her. I hadn't seen a Fairlane for many years, it was a bit noisy and the shocks needed renewing but I was not complaining. She was older than her voice suggested, in her sixties I guessed with short almost white hair and a lined tanned face. She must have been very handsome in her youth and still had that clean-cut look with high cheekbones and grey-brown eyes.

'Where are you from?' she asked.

'Iowa city,' I replied and she immediately looked surprised.

'What's an educated man like you doing, hitchhiking?'

'I suppose I could ask you, what is a woman like you doing, picking up a stranger?'

'Touché.' She smiled. 'I'm interested in people and you looked a very unlikely person to be hitchhiking certainly not the usual that I see.'

'You are very perceptive even from a distance. You're right. I am not. I'm on the road because I think I am having a mid life crisis. I couldn't think of any better thing to do.'

'Do you have a family?'

'Yes,'

'What do they think about what you are doing?'

'I am not certain, my wife thinks I'm crazy and my children think it's cool.'

'That's enough about me,' I said suddenly. 'Tell me about you.'

She was watching the road ahead when she began.

'I was an editor in a Woman's magazine In New York. I had had a row with the owner over an article I had written and lost my temper. It was stupid but once I got started I couldn't stop everything came tumbling out. He was a sexist; all he wanted was girly pictures and sexual explicit articles. It didn't start like that, the former owner and I got on well but when the new man took over,

a lot younger, everything changed and I wasn't prepared to knuckle under.'

'Then things fell apart when my husband died. We had no children so there was nothing to keep me in New York. I came back to our old family house where I was born and looked after my elderly parents until they died, one after the other, over a year ago.'

'You are a very brave woman,' I said, 'What a sad but courageous thing you did.' I sat silently thinking about what she said and then glanced outside. We were passing through open country, miles of flat prairie with few trees mainly bushes. An hour passed in a comfortable silence then she said something that surprised me.

'Where are you staying tonight?' I looked at her.

'I don't know probably in a cheap lodging place, the police usually tell me where they are.'

'I've got a spare room; you would be very welcome to stay the night.'

'Are you sure? It would very good of you.'

'Yes it would be no trouble, I would welcome the company, I don't see many people these days.'

'I think we should introduce ourselves, I'm Philip but they call me Phil.'

‘I’m Isabella, after my mother and grandmother. We always call the first daughter after her mother. I think we have some Spanish blood in the family.’

Isabella stopped the car outside a large single storey house with a wide verandah in the front. The house was set in a circle of trees and beyond could be seen several barns and fields under cultivation.

‘This is it. It’s been in the family for more than three generations. I’ll lead the way.’ Glancing at my bag she said,

‘You don’t have many belongings?’

‘No, I decided that I had to travel with the minimum.’

The wooden verandah creaked as we walked on it towards the front door.

‘I’ve been meaning to get it fixed but never seem to get round to it.’

I followed her into a large front room simply furnished with a settee and two armchairs placed around an open fire, which was made up but not lit. Isabella saw me glance at the fireplace.

‘I light it when it gets dark, it’s very cosy. I’ll show you to your room, it’s my old room when I was a child. Now I have the front room, which was my parents’. She led me to a room at the back of the house.

It was so unexpected this chance meeting and now I had been invited to stay overnight. I threw my few things on the bed.

‘There’s plenty of hot water and you’ll find soap and a towel in the shower.’ I didn’t need any encouragement. Trying to keep clean on the road was a real challenge.

I could smell something good as I dried myself in front of the window looking out across the open fields. I could understand why Isabella came back here. The calm was almost palpable filling every crevice.

To Isabella it must have felt a million miles from the bustle of New York?

‘Foods ready,’ she called out and I followed her voice into the kitchen. A table for three had been set near the back window. The third place puzzled me but I didn’t say anything. Suddenly Isabella opened the back door and called out.’

‘Dinner’s ready wash your hands.’ I heard the sound of footsteps and running water and then a young man no more than sixteen appeared.

‘Hello,’ he said shyly.

‘Joshua, shake hand with Phil. I met him on the road.’ We shook hands, his were warm and rough, the hands of a workingman. I was embarrassed by how soft my hands must have felt to him.

Isabella served him first with a dish I had never tasted. As I was eating mine, I asked her casually what it was?

‘It’s called Indian Taco, a favorite dish in these parts. It’s made of hot fresh fried bread topped with ground beans and beef with sides of lettuce, tomato, onions, chilies and sour cream.’

My plate was brimming over. Looking at it, I wanted to remember this moment. Joshua sat quietly eating his meal, having difficulty with his knife and fork. At one point he picked up his food with his hands and I could see Isabella frowning. When we had finished Joshua collected the plates and took them to the sink.

‘You can leave them Joshua. Now go to your room and finish your homework. Say good night to our visitor and I’ll come in later and tuck you up.’

When he had gone I turned to Isabella, who was finishing her meal and said,

‘What a polite young man?’ I was curious about their relationship and hoped that I would hear more.

Later, sitting in front of the roaring fire with a beer in my hand, it seemed that life couldn’t get any better. Isabella joined me and I could tell that she was itching to ask me something.

'You left your family at home?' she began.

'Yes my wife, the children have grown up,'

'How did she feel when you decided to take to the road?'

'I guess surprised and confused. She thought it was her fault that I was not happy. I tried to reassure her that that was not the reason.'

As I spoke I realised that I was still uncertain why I chose the road. I could have selected a number of different escapes. I had thought about a singles world cruise but I didn't like the idea that I was stuck on a boat for weeks on end such a long way from home. I could have sailed my 30 ft motor yacht with a crew? That was very tempting. Meanwhile I was itching to ask about the young man but Isabella beat me to it.

'I guess you're curious about Joshua?' She said.

'I was surprised when he joined us for dinner. He seemed a very polite and well-mannered young man.'

'Yes he's great. I adopted him about five years ago. He's the son of one of the families that worked on the farm. Joshua was five when sadly his mother died of cancer and his father committed suicide. He was about to be taken into care. I had an almighty job convincing the adoption

authorities that I was able to take care of him. I don't know how I didn't give up in the middle. You would have thought that I was being investigated as a criminal. Anyway I bit my lip and got through it. He's been a tower of strength. He works hard at school, he goes to a local school in Omaha, Ashland Park Robbins. I have a rota with a neighbour.'

As we talked the fire was beginning to burn out. The logs had been reduced to smoldering ash causing the room to darken. I looked at Isabella her serene face glowing in the embers. She smiled at me,

'Time for bed,' she announced. 'What time would you like breakfast?'

'When you have it.'

'OK about 7, it will be light then.'

I entered the bedroom to find the room bathed in light, reflecting off the mirror and the polished cupboards and casting moonbeams into the far corners. Through the window I could now see the full moon high in the sky, its radiance lighting up the fields and ponds with a cool white glow. Several cows were wandering in the field, their shadows moving slowly with them. It was a moment to cherish, one of those magical happenings never to be forgotten.

I had hardly lain down when I was asleep. Sometime during the night, I was

conscious of a movement beside me, and a warm body snuggling up against my back. I woke as the sun rose; aware that something had occurred but not certain whether it had been a dream. Coming out of the shower, I smelled the familiar aroma of frying bacon, a shared recollection of many other breakfasts in countless hotels and diners.

Isabella was humming as I joined her in the kitchen.

‘You sound happy,’ I said.

‘Yes life is good. How did you sleep?’ she asked.

‘I had a wonderful night and you?’

‘Slept like a log,’ she said. Neither of us mentioned the brief interlude during the night.

‘Over breakfast I casually asked, ‘where was Joshua?’

‘Oh! He’s gone to school. He said good-bye to you. I told him what you were doing and he wished you a safe journey.’

The time to leave was approaching fast. I busied myself with packing and tidying my bed. When I came downstairs. Isabella was in the kitchen.

‘I think I will be off now,’ I said casually.

‘Yes, OK it’s been real nice having you. You are continuing to Colorado?’

‘Yes, look I don’t know how to thank you for all your kindness. It’s been really great to have stayed with you and enjoyed your wonderful hospitality.

I would like to give you my contact details. If you or Joshua ever need any help, please don’t hesitate to contact me, I will always remember you.’

I stepped forwards and hugged her. I could feel her body shaking.

Once I got to the end of her drive I turned and waved, She was standing there a forlorn figure in the sunshine.

The dew was still on the fields as I walked towards the main Route 6. It was empty not a vehicle in sight. Glancing at my small compass to make sure I was going in the right direction, I set off towards the west looking back every now and again to check whether a car was coming.

What I hadn’t realised when I planned this trip was that I would have an awful lot of time to think, something I had rarely done in the past. I didn’t find it easy. I was very proud of my position in the company and often bragged about it and although I did start from the bottom I carefully avoided admitting that it was my adopted father who started it. I love my wife dearly but I shirked reminding myself that it was in fact an arranged marriage between two families, not

love at first sight as I often boasted. My two children were not mine biologically. We had tried for some years and eventually I had a test, which showed that I was sterile. Apparently the attack of mumps I had when I was eighteen had affected my fertility. I had struggled with my pride but in the end agreed to AI from an anonymous donor. The kids are wonderful and I am very proud of them.

It was at that moment, that I saw a puff of dust in the distance a car was coming. I stepped up to the curb and waved at it. The driver saw me and hesitated, then had second thoughts. The car braked some distance ahead and then began to reverse. A young man was sitting at the wheel of a classic Mustang. He was in his mid twenties with a close hair cut, a ring in his right ear and jewelry on his fingers. He was wearing torn jeans and a T-shirt with the word 'Shit' written on it. I saw an acoustic guitar in the back seat.

'Where you going dad?' He called out.

'Sterling in Colorado if possible.'

'Hop in, I'm going all the way.' It's about a six-hour drive.'

I had just settled myself in the front seat clipped on my seat belt when we set off.

'Hold on,' he shouted.

With screeching wheels, the car leapt forwards in a cloud of dust. I thought for a moment we would take off, there was such a thrust into my back.

‘Wow!’ I screamed, ‘this is living. What model is this, it looks very different from the 1960’s model that I had?’

‘Yeh this is the new design. Ford introduced it in 1994. It’s the GT coupé.

‘I am not a car freak but this is an amazing car.’

‘Yep, she’s a beauty.’

‘What’s her spec?’ I asked.

‘She has a manual gearbox with five speeds, a 3.8 Litre, 6-cylinder engine with rear wheel drive. You’ll notice front and side head air bags.’

‘How thirsty is she?’

‘Depends on the speed, I can get from 18-27 mpg.’

As I listened, his enthusiasm for his car almost amounted to love. Yet I couldn’t help thinking that it was probably made from recycled scrap metal glass and plastic. I daren’t tell him that, it would be like saying that his girl friend was a pumped up plastic copy. By now the car had settled into a regular rhythm eating up the miles when the driver spoke again.

‘By the way my name is Quentin; I think I was named after Quentin Tarentino,

the film director. My mother had a real crush on him when she was a girl.'

'I'm Philip but they call me Phil.'

'Please to meet you Phil, what are you doing on the road? You don't look the type.'

I was getting fed up telling the truth and decided to create a new persona, so I told him,

'I had some bad luck and fell on hard times. I'm on my way to the west coast to sort out my affairs.'

'Well, I hope it all turns out OK.' He said.

'Quentin, what takes you west? I noticed a guitar in the back, are you a musician?'

'Yes but not a very successful one. I'm waiting to break into the big time. My parents were both on the stage. They have retired now but they infected me with the bug.'

'So are you working at the moment?' I enquired.

'I'm part of a small group, we call ourselves 'The Mustangs'. We have done a few local gigs but not anything worthwhile.'

'What would you need to get to be known?'

'We need publicity, to be played on local radio or to have a DVD contract.' As I

listened to his dreams, I remembered that my company used a publicity service. They may be able to help but I would need to hear his group just in case they were rubbish. I thought I wouldn't say anything and see what happened. We drove on in silence, the drumming of the engine lulling me to sleep. I woke suddenly as I felt the car swerve and stop.

'Where are we? Why are we stopping?' I asked.

'I need some gas and I am picking up some friends, the other members of the group. We're doing a gig tonight in Sterling. You might want to come along?'

I got out and stretched my legs and walked around kicking up the dust. The gas station was the only building on this otherwise empty road, which stretched ahead, and behind as far as the eye could see. On either side, fields of grain extended almost to the distant hills. The sky was cloudless with the sun beating down mercilessly.

I could have been in a set from a Wild West shoot out expecting Jesse James to come riding along the road. While we were waiting a small truck spewing black smoke arrived and three people jumped out, a girl and two men. Within minutes, it had driven away. They were the friends, Quentin was

expecting. As I watched they greeted each other warmly.

‘Come and meet my group,’ he shouted. We shook hands. ‘Emily our vocalist, John on the drums and Peter on the double bass.’

Once back in the Mustang, I had a chance to look at the newcomers. The girl was about twenty with long blonde hair, which looked like a wig. She was wearing thick eye make up which made me think that she had been in an accident. She was dressed in a tight lame top with the obligatory torn jeans. The young men wore T shorts, jeans and decorated boots. Emily was the first to speak.

‘Hey Mister, you don’t look like a regular hitch hiker?’ I couldn’t help replying,

‘No, what does a regular hitch hiker look like?’

‘A lot younger than you,’ and they all burst out laughing.

‘Shut up you lot,’ shouted Quentin. ‘We have a lot to do before tonight so let’s get serious.’ I then listened as they began to plan the programme.

Suddenly it was as if they were different people. They talked in great detail about the tunes and how they were going to arrange the music. Each suggesting what part his instrument could play. Emily showed a wide

knowledge of modern and country style music as well as what I presumed were their own tunes. Peter seemed to be the organiser, controlling the discussion and taking copious notes in an A4 exercise book as they proceeded to run through the performance. My initial reservations about them were rapidly being dispelled with a growing admiration for their professionalism. In the course of their discussion I heard them mention the Best Western Sundowner Motel in Sterling, apparently the gig was going to be there. When there was a pause in the discussion, I asked Quentin whether he was serious when he invited me to come to the gig.

‘Yes sure, we want you to come. You’ll probably be the oldest person there if you don’t mind that?’

It was another two hours before we arrived at the hotel just off Interstate 76. We had followed a number of signs directing us to it. It turned out to be a two-story building with an impressive frontage and a large foyer. As Quentin brought the car to a stop he said, ‘I suggest you all get out here and take your instruments. I’ll park the car round the back and join you in reception.’ The group trundled their gear into the foyer with Peter needing help with his double bass. They then made their way downstairs to the

entertainment room a large open area extending the whole length of the motel. Meanwhile I approached the reception desk. I stood waiting patiently while a young man finished a cell phone call. Looking up embarrassed he said,

‘It was my mum,’ she was worried about me.’ I suppressed a desire to be angry. He must have known that he shouldn’t take personal calls when a customer is waiting. Instead I said in a fatherly manner,

‘Parents do get worried when they don’t hear from their children, it’s normal.’ He nodded. Then he adopted his professional demeanour,

‘Sir, welcome to the Best Western Sundowner, do you have a reservation?’ I shook my head.

‘No I came here with the group.’

‘Oh the Mustangs, are you their manager?’

‘No just a friend.’ He stood waiting.

‘I would like a single room for the night.’

‘We only do a double sir? Would that be OK?’

‘Yes fine.’ He looked down at his computer screen and began to press some keys. He was about twenty-five, with short hair combed close to his head and long side burns a sort of Elvis Presley look. I noticed

slight fuzz on his chin as if he had been on duty all night. He looked tired periodically wiping his watering eyes.

‘I guess you are ready to go off duty,’ I said making conversation. He didn’t hear me. Looking up he said,

‘I have a nice bright room on the first floor at the back, room 214.

It overlooks the car park but it has double-glazing so you shouldn’t be disturbed. Take the lift,’ he added passing me the key card. I handed him my credit card and he swiped it.

‘I’ll hold this and let you have it back when you leave. Have a good day Sir.’

I don’t like lifts and the room was only on the first floor so I decided to walk. Once up the stairs I looked for directions. I found two numbered panels with arrows pointing in opposite directions. It seemed that I could get to my room in either direction. How confusing? I thought. With patience I found the correct door and inserted the card. The light remained red. I tried it again still no luck. Then I examined the card, I must have put it in the wrong way. I inserted it again getting decidedly irritated. Why on earth don’t they make these things easier so that a duff like me can make them work. I had almost given up when a room maid passing by saw my dilemma.

‘Let me help you sir,’ she said sweetly with a touch of sarcasm.

‘You do it like this.’ I watched as she inserted the card and while it was still in the lock, she turned the handle, the door opened silently.

‘There you are Sir, have a nice day.’ I watched her walk away. I could almost see a grin on her face. I was fuming. How was I to know you had to turn the handle while the card was in the lock?’

I entered the room. It was in darkness. Where was the switch I wondered? I found one by the door and pushed it, nothing happened. I tried it again. Have the lights fused? I couldn’t believe this was all happening.

It seemed like an ordinary day when I woke earlier, what was going on? I appeared to be jinxed. There was enough light from the window to allow me to struggle to the telephone. I looked for instructions on the dial. There were none. I wanted to phone reception. In desperation I tried O and with relief heard the ringing tone.

‘Good afternoon Sir, may I help you.’

‘Yes please, I am in room 214, the lights don’t seemed to work.’

‘Sir, have you put the card in the slot by the front door?’ she said patiently as if she had said it a thousand times before.

‘The slot by the front door?’ I asked confused.

‘Yes you will see a small holder by the front door. If you put the card in there, the lights will work.’

‘Thanks,’ I said embarrassed. I put down the receiver and walked to the front door. Sure enough there it was. I put the card in and the room was flooded with light. I walked around like a schoolboy gleefully switching the lights on and off.

I had arranged to meet the group for an early dinner before they began their programme and had about two hours free. So I decided to shower and have a rest. No sooner had I, that I knew, from previous experience, that the shower would tax my ingenuity. I had learned the hard way that there was no uniformity with shower controls. Each designer had made it his or her life’s work to ensure that his shower taps were devised in a different way to any other. Thus the hapless customer would struggle to reveal which combination would provide a safe and comfortable shower not blistering hot nor arctic cold. I approached the shower with some trepidation. Having undressed I stepped into the bath and examined the controls. I was looking for an H and a C or a red and blue display. I found none.

Now it was a matter of trial and error. Leaning back away from the showerhead I

tentatively turned the tap to the right and waited. Water began to fall. It was initially cold but it got warmer and then very hot. I turned the tap back a little and the water-cooled. I stood fiddling with it until it was the correct temperature and got in. The water cascaded over me, off my head onto my shoulders and arms, prickling my skin. What a pleasure it was. I stood luxuriating in the tumbling water reluctant to turn it off. But someone must have turned on a tap elsewhere because suddenly the water became icy cold. I turned it off and jumped out rapidly, wrapping myself in a towel, which had been warming on the radiator.

I lay on the bed and was soon asleep. My alarm woke me and I dressed rapidly. We had arranged to meet in the dining room at 6.30. They were all seated when I arrived.

‘How was the set up?’ I asked.

‘Fine, the acoustics are good and the lighting is OK so if we get a good crowd we should have a lot of fun,’ said John.

‘OK let’s order,’ I said. The waitress had seen us sit down and came over with some menus.

‘Good evening folks, what will it be, anything to drink?’

‘Yes, beers all round,’ I said, Emily gestured to me

‘No thanks I’m teetotal,’ I was surprised, somehow I didn’t expect that answer.

‘Coke?’

‘Yeah, low cal please.’

The waitress then took the food order. Everyone wanted a hamburger trimmed to his or her taste. I ordered a mixed salad feeling a bit sheepish. The conversation was all about the gig to come and I could feel they were getting nervous. When the food arrived they attacked it like hungry wolves.

‘We haven’t eaten all day,’ apologised Quentin, his mouth crammed full. Suddenly he looked at his watch,

‘We must get going, see you later Phil.’ I sat alone thinking about them, their immense enthusiasm and their fearless confidence. I wondered if I was like them at their age.

The gig was due to start at 8 and as I sat, people began drifting in ones and twos. They were mainly young but I noticed a number of older couples. By the time I went downstairs the room was packed. A small stage had been set up at one end and the group was already in position tuning their instruments. There was an air of expectancy as Quentin began a soft low melody on his guitar. Peter on the double bass joined in with a muted rhythm. Slowly John the drummer introduced

a syncopated beat and as the lights were dimmed, Emily in a white clinging dress began to sing in a deep sultry voice. By now the audience was silent, their eyes glued to the stage and the vocalist. No one dared breathe; the Mustangs had their audiences in the palms of their hands. Wave after wave of cheering and clapping followed each song, many of which the audience knew and joined in.

I sat at the rear totally riveted. I suddenly thought of my children and how when they were younger we all went to a jazz festival. The group's music reminded me of that time. The gig was a resounding success. They made over a thousand dollars profit as well as a contact for another gig at the same venue at Xmas. It was well after midnight before the last reveller departed. The musicians were planning to go on to a nightclub and invited me to join them. Reluctantly I had to refuse, I was on my knees and needed sleep badly. We said goodbye in the car park with hugs and promises to keep in touch. I made a note to contact my publicity company when I got home; they were a group that was going places. I watched them drive away, saddened by the need to part. We all had to go our own ways and mine was to continue on my journey.

I awoke to a dull overcast day, which dampened my otherwise buoyant spirits. The dining room was now almost empty apart from a few diners. I downed a cup of coffee but had no appetite. I walked downstairs into the hall now in half darkness and tried to recapture the energy and excitement of the evening before but the moment had gone. I made my way back to my room collected my few belongings and headed for reception to settle my bill.

Back on the road I checked my itinerary. I was heading for Logan in Utah and I needed to find the Route 1-80 N. I was beginning to feel I should ring home and make sure all is well but I was uneasy. I had originally decided not to contact them had left my younger brother in charge and I knew I could trust him. We had agreed that he would ring me if I needed to come home, so far so good. I am beginning to like this life plenty of variety and uncertainty, an ideal mixture.

It was after noon before I got a lift. Plenty of traffic but no one would stop. It was beginning to get serious when suddenly I heard the deep roar of a motor bicycle, a Harley Davidson ridden by a man about my age. I would know the sound anywhere, the bike with the light shining on its chromium frame, the wide handlebars and the lay back

seat almost like a lounge slowly came to a halt and the driver peered at me.

'What the hell are you doing on the road old man? You should be in a nursing home.' I roared with laughter.

'I could say the same of you, I guess we're about the same age.'

'Well what's the answer?' he repeated.

'If you give me a lift I'll tell you.'

'Where you going?'

'I'm aiming for Logan in Utah.'

'OK, I could go that way. Hop on.'

It was easier said than done. The bike was quite wide and I struggled to get my leg over.

'I don't drive fast,' he said, 'so relax.'

By the way I'm Tom.'

'Pleased to meet you Tom, I'm Phil.'

'Likewise Phil.'

Tom set off leisurely, quietly humming a tune.' Sitting behind him I was able to study his appearance. Heavily built and wearing standard leathers and a helmet he appeared to be a giant of a man. I tried to hold on around his waist but he was too broad and I settled for hanging onto the handle.

'I had expected a torrent of questions but he said nothing. After a while I asked him about the bike. I shouted into his ear over the roar of the engine.

'How long have you had it?'

‘About 15 years, it’s everything to me. Do you know anything about Harleys?’

‘Not really only that I would recognise one anywhere, they are so iconic.’

‘Yes that’s the right word; here’s a few facts. The company celebrated 100 years old in 2003. But its history goes back to 1901 when William Harley designed an engine to go into a motorcycle; two year later in 1903 he and Arthur Davidson establish the company, which was initially set up in a 10 x 15 foot shed in Milwaukee. By 1907 The Harley Davidson Company was incorporated with stock shared by Harley and the three Davidson brothers.

‘What happened then,’ I roared

‘Five years later the company was exporting to Japan and had more than 200 dealers across America. Few people know that almost a third of the company’s production was sold to the army in the First World War.’

I tried to follow what he was saying but the engine noise made it difficult.

He must have guessed from my silence, because he said,

‘I guess you’ve had enough of me wittering on. Let’s stop for a drink and you can tell me your story.’ About a mile further on, he pulled off the road into a parking area in front of a diner. Sitting down without his helmet and leathers, I was able to see him

more clearly. He had a heavy jowled face with bushy eyebrows and a gray beard and mustache.

‘What will you have?’ I asked.

‘Coffee and a blueberry muffin,’

‘That sounds good, I’ll have the same.’ I went to the counter and ordered. When I was seated I asked Tom where was he going.

‘I’m aiming to attend an H & D conference. If you have the time you might be interested to tag along, we are holding it at Logan. We expect several hundred riders.’

That sounds fun, I thought. Once again, fate had dealt me an interesting hand. How much longer could my luck last I wondered?

The next few hours sped by. It was like sitting on a flying cushion the shocks were so good. We had another stop for lunch, this time at a Mexican take away. We ordered tacos filled with cooked peppers and cheese, a local specialty. He ate two, woofing them down in large mouthfuls.

But the more I got to know him the more I was beginning to regret travelling with this man. His habits were gross and his language was peppered with F-words. As the day wore on and the air heated up he began to smell. I guess he hadn’t changed his clothes for days or longer. Now I was in a

fix. How was I going to get away without offending him? I needed a strategy. I decided to face it front on. The opportunity came when we had a comfort stop at a Motel.

‘Look Tom, I think I would like to stop here I’m tired. Why don’t you carry on? It’s been good travelling with you.’

‘Phil, that’s no problem. I’ll hole up here and when you’ve rested we can continue.’ Standing at the John, I realised that it was not going to work. I had hoped he would continue on his. What am I going to do now? I tried again,

‘Listen Tom, I don’t want to inconvenience you I might be many hours.’

‘That’s OK, just have a good rest I’ll hang around.’

It was getting very difficult and I realised, I had to grab the bull by the horns.

‘No Tom, I don’t want to travel with you any more.’

I don’t understand, you wanted a lift, you’re hitch hiking?’

‘I know, but I don’t like you. I don’t like your language. I just want to go my own way. I don’t want to spend any more time with you.’

As I was speaking I realised what an appalling thing I was saying. I had never

before spoken to a fellow human being like this.

'You pumped up bastard, I stop and give you a lift and you tell me that?' he said, standing with his feet apart as if he was about to give me a good beating.

'Look I'm sorry'.

'It's too late for sorry,' he said. 'I'm off then. You fucking bastard, I hope you get stuck here for days.'

He turned, mounted his bike and roared off in a cloud of dust.

I stood watching him disappear in the distance. I felt dreadful, what an idiot I was. Somehow being alone on this trip had freed a side of me that I didn't recognize - I could be really nasty - the thought shook me. I thought I was a nice guy. Where had it come from? I didn't believe in original sin like my father, a domineering intolerant bible punching Roman Catholic. He firmly believed that I came into this world bad and it was his mission to cleanse me.

From my earliest memory I was smacked, struck, hit, slapped, spanked, thrashed and wacked. I received every form of physical violence familiar to my father. As I look back I realise that he taught me the lesson of

violence and intolerance. Unknowingly he had instilled in me a vicious streak that had lain dormant for fifty years only to appear without warning. But my stepparents in New York were totally the opposite. They taught me that love was the only punishment. If I was naughty they would cuddle me and tell me not to do it again. Being bad was no fun so I learned to love. It was therefore a surprise that anger and intolerance still lurked deep inside me. As I thought more about it. I began to feel very odd, was I two people? a sort of split personality. The one that I thought I was, caring and loving and the other vicious, vindictive and judgemental. The more I thought about it the more it seemed possible.

Tom had somehow touched a nerve and I had exploded. I had to take control of the situation and bury my alter ego. Now that I knew it was part of me maybe it would not emerge again. But now in the calm of the day, I felt nothing but guilt and shame. I needed to apologise to him, to tell him that it was nothing to do with him, that it was my inner anger welling up and he was the unsuspecting victim. But I couldn't, I didn't have his number and I knew that there was no way of contacting him, or was there? I suddenly remembered he was going to a meeting in Logan. Perhaps I could bump into him and tell him how sorry I am.

I went to bed confused and unhappy and it took me a long time to get to sleep. I kept running through the argument. I couldn't seem to put it into perspective. Was I making too much of it? Finally I slept fitfully, waking early and watching the light gradually filter into my room. I had no inclination to lie in bed and approached the shower with much more confidence than the day before. Fortunately no one else was using the hot water at that time so I was able to indulge without the fear of a sudden dousing of cold water.

My life seemed to have suddenly become more complicated. The optimistic outlook had disappeared and been replaced by introspection and guilt. It was in that frame of mind that I went downstairs into the diner.

A heated discussion was going on at a table by the window. Four local men were deeply engaged in an argument. They were all roughly the same age dressed in colourful shirts and jeans. They were watching the news on the TV screen above their heads. The announcer was reporting a recent execution at the local jail. A twenty-six year had been killed by firing squad
The conversation was heated.

'He deserved what he got,' said the first, 'I have no sympathy for someone who

rapes and kills a woman, he's a monster and we need to get rid of him.'

'Why do we need to kill him and with bullets it's inhumane. Aren't we being as bad as the murderer himself?

'They've had to drop the lethal injection as the drug firms have withdrawn them, they don't want their products to be used to kill people so they now use a firing squad,' said a second man

'An eye for an eye that's what I believe,' a third said.

'What about killing the wrong man?'
Asked a fourth.

'That used to be a problem but since DNA, that's like a finger print, each of us is different there's no mistake with that.'

The arguments went too and fro, each man having a different take on the issue. After a while I had to butt in, I leaned over and said,

'You know almost half our states don't have the death penalty. Are they all wrong?

'Listen mister, we here in Utah like to run our own affairs. We don't have to follow others let them follow us.'

'That's all very well taking a high and mighty approach but aren't we supposed to be civilized or are we just animals?' I asked.

'Where you from Mister?'

'I am from Iowa. We don't have the death penalty there.'

'You sound like a pacifist.'

'As it happens I am.'

'So you wouldn't have fought the Japs?'

'Yes of course I would, we couldn't ignore Pearl harbour but there we had no choice. With the death penalty we do. We can put them in jail and try to re-educate them. That is unless you think they are beyond help?'

The conversation had run its course we were all getting a bit bored with it. Suddenly one of the men asked me.

'What are you doing in these parts?'

'I'm on the way to Logan to meet a friend.' I had decided in that moment that I had to make it up to Tom.

'I don't see your car outside, how are you going to get there?'

'I'm hitch-hiking.' They all pricked up their ears and like a chorus said Incredulously.

'Hitch hiking you? At your age, what is the world coming to?'

'It's a long story' I may as well ask, are any of you going to Logan?

'Yep mister, I am,' said Josh. I'm from those parts if you want a lift.

'Thanks that's great, I was getting a bit worried that no one was going my way.'

I climbed into the passenger seat of his beaten up pick up truck. It had seen better days. I could see that the vehicle had been originally red but much of the bodywork was now rusty with some parts missing altogether. The rear tyres were flattened because of the heavy sacks of grain from his farm that he was carrying. Lowering myself in the lumpy seat, I wondered what the journey was going to bring. The engine turned over a few times before starting with a cloud of black smoke emerging from the exhaust. He looked at me sheepishly.

‘She’s OK, just needs a bit of coaxing and she behaves like a dream.’ Some dream I thought more like a nightmare. We lurched forwards several times like a reluctant horse and then as if accepting the inevitable, the engine began to tick over and we were off.

‘You see,’ he said without prompting ‘she never lets me down.’ I thought he was tempting fate but resisted saying anything. Then as if talking to himself he said,

‘It’s a rum old world, a man like you, educated, hitch-hiking it makes no sense.’ I didn’t reply, there was no point he wouldn’t understand. We settled into a comfortable silence.

In his mid-thirties with a mop of bright red hair, unshaven with small dark eyes and a misshapen nose he looked the part, a rough tough farmer used to the hardship of physical work. Then, as if he’s heard my thoughts he began to tell me about his life.

‘I’ve worked all my life on the farm. I was born there and know nothing else. It’s a good life, secure, not like some of the town jobs. I feel sorry for them never certain about the future struggling from job to job, must be soul destroying.’

I was gripped by his down to earth philosophy. So matter a fact, no frills no moaning, just accepting his lot and getting

on with it. How different from the constant grouse of the white-collar workers I knew, always wanting more money for fewer hours. Josh could tell them what life is really like. But I guess you have to be born to it as he was.

We slowed down as he drove off the highway into the yard of a farm.

'I'm just dropping off a few sacks for Mrs Grady. She's a widow farming a smallholding.' A middle-aged woman wearing an apron welcomed him. She was wearing a bonnet tied under her chin.

'Hi Josh, you're early.'

'Had a fast run from Sterling. Made good time.'

'In that rust bucket, I don't know how you trust it. It should have been crushed years ago.'

'Go on with you. She's like you, good for a few years yet.'

'Off you go' she called, laughing as we drove away.

'She's one of my regulars, tough as nails. She runs the whole place on her own since her husband died two years ago, they had a boy but he was simple, brain damaged they. He's in an institution.'

It was about eleven when we stopped for a break. I needed to go badly, he seemed to be like a camel able to travel forever. I wanted to ask him about his private life, was he married? Did he have any kids? But the opportunity didn't arise. We parted outside Logan. He was going north which would have taken me out of my way. I was committed to finding Tom. I needed to get it off my chest, but where to start. I was looking around trying to decide which way to go when, I couldn't believe it, a Harley Davidson approached I shouted and waved my arms.

'Hey stop I need some help.' The surprised driver drove towards me cautiously as if I was a wild animal. Wearing the full gear, I didn't realise that it was a woman until she spoke,

'What's the trouble,' she asked in a southern accent.

'I'm trying to find Tom. Do you know him? He's one of your group. He's come here for the rally. I need to speak to him. Please are you going to the rally? Could you take me there?' I was babbling like a child.

'Whoa Mister slow down. I don't know a Tom but Im going to the rally so I could take you there if you like?'

Twenty minutes later we entered a large square in the centre of the town. It was blocked with bikes. I was amazed how many H-D's there were, I guess more than a hundred. I thanked Lucy my driver and set off towards the middle of the group. My idea was to ask for Tom as I was going along; someone was bound to know him. I had got almost to the centre of the square when I saw him talking to someone. I was nervous, I couldn't believe it. I was feeling sheepish at approaching him when he looked up and saw me.

'Hi so you got here?' he said without a trace of resentment.

'Look,' I began, 'I'm... '

But he didn't let me finish.

'It's OK. I've forgotten it. Don't give it another thought; don't beat yourself up over it. It's gone; it's a new world.'

I was stunned. I expected a tirade of abuse and had prepared myself for it. I was going to beg his forgiveness, offer to buy him dinner anything to free myself from the guilt I felt and here I was speechless, astonished at his reaction. The incident was completely forgotten he had said with a smile.

'You must go to the Rodeo; it's just out of town. It's the biggest one in the county

and has just started. Several of us are going, you are welcome to join us.' Was he rubbing salt into the wound to show me what an ass I had been? I swallowed my embarrassment and climbed on behind him. About two dozen bikers set off in pairs keeping to the speed limit.

I could hear the rodeo long before we got there, a mixture of honky tonk music, cheering and shouting. We sidled into the already full car park and parked by a wall. There was an air of anticipation as roars and clapping erupted from the arena. After a struggle we found some seats on a wooden bench by the ringside with a open view of the paddock. I could feel myself getting excited by the crowd who seemed to be mainly older men and some women.

'Where are the youngsters?' I asked.

'They don't seem to be interested, most of them can't even ride.' Having asked about Rodeo, I was handed a small handbook entitled 'Rodeo what it's all about?' and between contests began to read.

It started as a reaction to the cattle herding and ranching in countries as far apart as Canada, South America and Australia. The cowboys and girls needed some challenges to test their skills so they evolved the various competitions based on

skills required for the job. These included bareback riding, roping, and steer catching. Over time a number of others have been added including Barrel Racing. As the sport became more popular, a number of schools were setup to teach the professional and the sport then became big business.

We arrived just in time to see the event of the day, the contest between the world champion from Canada and a local hero. It had attracted an enormous crowd. There was not a single seat to be had and many spectators were hanging from trees of leaning over from balconies. The two men entered the ring and stood facing each other. The crowd went quiet; there was an air of expectancy. Fathers stood holding the hand of his sons. You could have heard a pin drop.

The Canadian, 'Canada Bill' almost two meters in height had shoulders and thick muscular arms. His bearded face was craggy and tanned. His long white hair was tied in a plait, which hung down his back. He was dressed in a leather jacket decorated with maple leaves. He stood defiantly turning slowly to eye the crowd many of whom hissed when his eye caught theirs.

The local man, 'Logan Loner' was much smaller and of a lighter build. He was dressed as a cowboy with a multi-coloured

shirt, a pair of leathers over faded jeans and a red bandana at his throat. His outfit was completed with a broad rimmed Stetson on his head. The crowd loved him, shouting his name in great waves of sound echoing around the arena. The two men so different in appearance circled each other. They seemed to be riling each other up but the applause drowned out their words.

‘Make the most of it titch, you won’t be around much longer,’ said Canada Bill.

‘Don’t be so sure, remember David and Goliath,’ retorted Logan Loner.

Then a third man joined them carrying a microphone. He was the referee. He gestured to the crowd to be quiet and then he began to speak.

‘Ladees and Gentlemen, we now come to the highpoint of the day, a three event competition between on my right from Canada, the famous, the legendary ‘Canada Bill’ and on my left our local man, Giant slayer ‘Logan Loner’. They will compete in three events. Steer wrestling, Bull riding and Bare back riding. If there is a tie we will repeat the Bull riding event. Now gentlemen any questions?’

I watched their faces closely, neither man spoke. Canada Bill turned and spat a gob of phlegm into the sand.

‘OK gentlemen who will call?’ A coin was spun into the air and as it landed Canada Bill called out,

‘Heads.’

‘Heads it is, your choice to start,’

Canada bill snarled out the words

‘Steer wrestling.’

‘It’s an event in which his weight could be an advantage,’ whispered Tom, ‘wait and see.’

The arena was cleared and the two men went to their places ready for the competition. The audience was by now almost hysterical. The combination of cheap beer and the promise of a fight to the death competition had fired them up. Now a hush descended on the crowd as the first steer a big black giant of a bull ran into the ring. Within seconds, Canada bill had leapt from his horse and wrestled the animal to the ground.

‘Six seconds,’ called out the Referee. The number was written in chalk on a large overhead board.

The second steer was released. He was even bigger than the first tossing his head and pawing the ground. Logan Loner

on a piebald was soon onto him forcing him to the sand.

'Five seconds,' the voice boomed. The crowd erupted flinging their hands into the air and shouting,

'Loner, Loner.' Canada Bill's face looked daggers. There was a pause and then the second clash began.

'Bull riding' shouted the Referee. One handed, the rider hangs on to a thick rope with a cowbell attached. He is disqualified if he touches the animal with the other. The challenge is to stay on for eight seconds or more. It is marked out of 100.

Canada Bill was seated on the bull when he signalled for the chute to be opened allowing the bull access to the arena. Suddenly the animal burst into the open space and despite his weight, Canada could be seen to be struggling to stay on. The steer bucked and reared and shook its body trying desperately to rid itself of its unwanted rider. Canada rope in hand was being thrown here and there, his head jerking upwards and sideways like a wooden puppet. But he was determined to stay on. The minute hand of the big clock was creeping to eight when with a sudden explosive jerk Canada was unseated and fell heavily. He lay there gasping for breath. Quickly someone came to his assistance

and he was supported off the arena. The announcer called,

'Seven seconds only, disqualified.' A cheer went round the crowd they could sense blood. A slow handclap began as they impatiently waited for their hero. Then the crowd hushed as a bucking animal entered the arena with Loner; a diminutive figure perched high on its back. He seemed to read the movements of the steer and roll with them, leaning forwards, arching backwards, his supple weight allowing him much more freedom to flow with the rhythm of the beast. The crowd began to shout out the seconds,

'Six, seven, eight and he had completed the challenge. With a broad smile he acknowledge the crowd who rose as one to cheer him. There was pandemonium. People tried to invade the arena but were held back by the security officers.

The Referee raised his hands and silenced the crowd.

'Wait, we now have the final challenge and then we will know who's the winner. It's Bare back riding.'

I read that it was the pinnacle of rodeo, the riding of a bucking bronco. The rider must have both spurs touching the horse's shoulders as he enters the arena. All agree that it is the most strenuous act, putting the rider's joints under enormous strain often leading to rupture of ligaments.

Canada Bill entered first. Seated on the horse he waited impatiently for it to be released from the chute. With a signal from the referee the gate was opened and Canada Bill perched on the neck of the bronco and burst into the ring. The crowd held their breath as he wrestled with the animal that kicked and reared, bucking and straining to unseat him. He kept his spurs high on the neck of the wildly thrusting writhing beast matching its every movement. Despite all its effort the horse could not dislodge him and soon gave up, standing motionless under his will. It was an awesome demonstration and even the hostile crowd recognised his skill by clapping with shouts of 'well done'.

Could Loner match that display? I was impatient to find out. Once again the gate was opened and now Loner perched high on the neck of a huge horse hurtled into the arena. All eyes were upon him as his every movement was scrutinized. The crowd, so intent on observing each effort sat in an eerie silence. All that could be heard was the snorting of the animal and the grunting of Loner as he endeavored to control it. The battle seemed to go on forever, time stood still as man and beast engaged in an ancient tussle. But the man gradually gained the upper hand and the

animal sensing it, lost the battle and became still.

Raising his hand the Referee spoke to the crowd,

‘The shortest time wins.’ It seemed ages before the times were ratified. Then the result was posted on the board. Canada Bill 16 seconds, Loner 15 seconds. The crowd seeing victory for the local man could not be restrained.

The final event of the day was Barrel Racing. It was to be competed by the Cowgirls. A cloverleaf pattern of three barrels was set up in the arena. Each driver enters the ring at full speed rounding the barrels and exiting. There is a five second penalty if a barrel is knocked over. As we waited the names of the three competitors appeared on the board. Nifty Nell, Speedy Sarah and Hasty Helen. Dressed in cowgirl gear with a large shapely hat on her head, Nell came hurtling into the arena, her blonde hair flying loosely behind her.

‘Yee haw,’ she was shouting as she sped around the barrels. Next came Sarah a bright red head. She was riding a white horse making a striking combination. Her time was better than Nell’s. Finally the crowd’s favourite Helen came careering into the arena struggling to stay on. A loud repetitive shout of ‘Helen, Helen,’ grew in

strength as she skirted the butts flying swiftly around the three in the best time. She was greeted with massive yelling from the crowd.

I sat as the final crowd dispersed. I was thinking about the spectacle that had totally absorbed me. I had read about the rodeo but could never have imagined what it would have been like. It was an experience that would stay with me for the rest of my life. In that three or four hours I had shared the life of the community and had experienced the energy and enthusiasm of the people. They had come together in a traditional event that had grown from the day-to-day chores that they undertook in their working lives as cowboys and cowgirls, herdsman and cattle ranchers.

I was about to leave when a couple sitting next to me spoke,

‘We can see that this must be your first time at a rodeo. You’re not from these parts? What brought you here today?’ The man asked in a Scottish accent. I turned and saw an older man with sparse hair, a round face and a ruddy complexion sitting beside a slender grey haired woman.

‘It’s a long story but from your accent, you are also not from here.’

‘No, we came here about twenty years ago from Edinburgh in Scotland. Our children had grown up and we needed a

change. We are both keen gardeners so we bought a small property with land and the rest is history. My name is Alastair and this is my wife Fiona.'

'I am Philip but they call me Phil.'

'Look if you aren't doing anything, why don't you join us for a cup of tea at our place, it's not far.'

I followed them to the car park. He was walking with stick and she held his arm as we crossed the road to get to their car, a Ford Country Squire. I hadn't seen one of these for some years.

'Nice car, one of the great oldies, real style,' I said comparing it my recently purchased Ford, waiting back home. 'This was so much more solid.'

'Yes,' said Fiona, 'it's the love of his life. I think he would rather do without me than the car.'

They insisted I sat in the front seat. I looked for the seat belt. Alistair saw me searching and said,

'I don't believe in seat belts, they do more damage than good.'

I was tempted to argue with him but I knew it would make no difference.

'There's no point in telling him. He doesn't want the facts to interfere with his prejudices; it's like his smoking. No matter

how many studies show how bad it is for you, he just shrugs his shoulders and says, 'the scientists have to have something to publish'. I get so frustrated by him.'

I couldn't help smiling to myself. It all sounded so familiar. It could have been my wife speaking about my love of candies or my addiction to salt. After about twenty minutes we drove off the main road onto a rough track, which seemed to be leading into the countryside. Fiona must have seen my look because she said,

'It won't be long now. We are just at the end of this path. Suddenly the path opened up and ahead was a smallholding, a bungalow with a number of outhouses stables and barns.

'Home sweet home,' sang Alistair. 'I still get a kick out of coming along this lane and seeing our place suddenly appear as if by magic.'

'He's such a romantic,' whispered Fiona sarcastically.

The house had a neglected air about it. The paintwork on the verandah was peeling and the boards creaked as we walked on them. Alistair went ahead to open the front door and struggled with the lock cursing beneath his breath. 'Damn this lock I must get it

seen to.' Fiona heard his promise and said angrily,

You've had weeks to fix it and you haven't, just whinging and swearing.' He turned on her angrily,

'You haven't bothered have you?'

'It's a man's job, I don't expect you to do the shopping or cooking do I?' Then she stopped, I guessed not wanting to embarrass me. Suddenly the door yielded and opened. We entered the front room, which was in darkness.

'We keep the curtains closed when we're not here, the sun is so strong it bleaches the coverings,' said Fiona going across and opening the curtains to let the light in.

'That's better. Please sit down. I'll put the kettle on.' Meanwhile Alistair was rummaging in a cupboard.

'Where's the house photos?' he shouted

'There in the cupboard by the window,' Fiona called from the kitchen. 'He won't want to see them, let him relax.' Alistair took no notice of her and pulled a large photo album from the cupboard and brought it to the settee. 'Have a look at these,' he said. 'You'll be surprised. They are prints of this place when we arrived.' I perched the book on my knees and began

examining the pictures. The first page showed some pictures of an open field with some cattle.

‘This is a field,’ I said. ‘Where’s the house?’

‘Exactly, there wasn’t one. Somehow the agent had got things mixed up. The pictures he sent us were not the property we bought. You can imagine the surprise when we got here. I must say Fiona was very philosophical. After our initial shock we realised that it was a unique opportunity. The agent apologised profusely and managed to get the price halved. This gave us enough money to build.’

At that moment Fiona shouted from the kitchen,

‘Are you telling Phil about the house we didn’t buy?’

‘Yes!’

‘I can laugh about it now but at the time...’

‘You were very good. I remember you were very matter a fact about it. I was surprised.’

‘What could I do? Sit down and cry that wouldn’t have helped.’

I continued to look at the photos, which showed the foundations being laid out then the building gradually emerging. It was very interesting. At that moment Fiona appeared

with a tray laden with tea things including some buns, butter and jam. I hope you like scones? They are a Scottish specialty.' I knew them as American oat biscuits but thought it better not to say,

‘No I haven’t, they look delicious.’
‘You must try them with butter and jam?’

It was beginning to become dusk and I was getting concerned where I would sleep for the night. Fiona must have realized I was getting concerned,

‘Phil where are you staying tonight?’
‘I thought I would go to the nearest motel. There is bound to be one near here.’

‘That’s not necessary. We would like you to say here, wouldn’t we Alistair?’

‘Yes yes, what a good idea,’ he stammered obviously surprised by her invitation. Fiona showed me to a small room in the attic. Although the house was a bungalow, they had made an extra room in the roof space. It was quite large with its own picture window overlooking the fields and its own bathroom and toilet.

‘I’ll be very comfortable here,’ I said thanking her.

‘Would you like to see the rest of the farm, we have some time before dinner?’

said Alistair. It was now quite cool as we left the house and walked towards the outbuildings.

‘Let me take you to Fiona’s pride and joy, the tunnel.’ Behind the workshop was a large polythene tunnel. It was full of plants, flowers, and vegetables. I recognised early tomato plants, peppers, aubergines, a grape vine and many more. It was effectively a kitchen garden under plastic.

‘I am very proud of Fiona she looks after this place all on her own. We have one farm hand but he deals with the animals. Lets go to the cowshed.’

It was small building with pens for 10 animals. John the farm hand was at work mucking out when we arrived. He stopped what he was doing. ‘Hello John,’ said Alistair, ‘this is Phil he is staying with us.

‘Hi John,’ I said. ‘How are you?’

‘Fine, he replied showing a row of even white teeth. I guessed he was in his early twenties, tall and tough looking.

‘Sorry to disturb you John, I just wanted to show Phil the cow house,’ said Alistair.

‘No problem let me know if you need anything.’

‘Great chap, he’s been working here for about two years, he’s like a son to me.’

We left the cow house and began to walk towards the workshop.

‘You must be wondering where the cows are?’ said Alistair.

‘Yes I was a little puzzled.’

‘They’re out in the field. John will bring them in before it gets dark.’

At that moment we heard Fiona’s voice,

‘Alistair please come in, dinner is ready.’ Once seated, Fiona announced,

‘We are having a typical Scottish meal especially for Phil our visitor.’

Alistair clapped his hands.

‘Goodie, I haven’t had a good wholesome meal for ages. We must have more guests,

‘Shut up Alistair, go and wash your hands.’ Phil I don’t know if you have had a Scottish meal. They tend to use the most available products. I hope you will like it. We are starting with Leek and potato soup followed by Haggis with champit tatties and bashit neeps, that’s mashed creamed potatoes and turnip/swede to you and me and we will finish it with bread pudding.’

It was a feast. I couldn’t believe how much food was put out on the table. Alistair attacked his with a vengeance but I had more difficulty. I didn’t want to leave anything so I had to take it slowly. Despite her size, Fiona put hers away without any trouble.

Slowly the mountain of food diminished until nothing was left on our plates. Fiona was evidently delighted. She clapped her hand in glee.

‘You guys certainly did justice to the meal.’

It was late when we decided to retire to bed. We had sat watching the moonrise, drinking Scotch whisky until we could hardly keep our eyes open. Fiona got up first.

‘We have really enjoyed having you Phil, but I must go to bed, see you in the morning.’

‘Fiona, I’ve had a wonderful time. I can’t remember the last time I ate so much and laughed so whole-heartedly. Alistair seemed very quiet and when I looked at him he was snoring gently.’

‘Leave him,’ said Fiona, ‘he’ll make his own way to bed.’

Lying in bed watching the moon moving slowly across the pitch-black sky, I realised that I had come a long way since I left my home many weeks earlier. Not in terms of miles but in my understanding of who I was and what really mattered. It had come about because of the many people I had met who had touched me, each of them were finding their own way of navigating this life, each with a different set of qualities and born into

a different world, yet sharing so much in common.

After a lavish breakfast I bade farewell to Fiona and Alistair thanking them for their kindness and promising to keep in touch. Alistair drove me to the 1-15S Interstate Highway and I began the next stage of my journey.

My destination was Las Vegas, the crowning glory of Nevada. But before that I wanted to visit Bolder Dam and the Grand Canyon in Arizona, places that I had read about and dreamed about but never visited.

But I had never been abroad in my sixty plus years. What did that say about me, that I have no curiosity? Didn't I want to visit countries whose history is more than five times longer than my own, the birthplaces of my beliefs, and the origins of my language? I guess I had never thought about it. I was too self-satisfied about my life. So I made a vow that when this trip was over, I would travel abroad.

I had a long journey ahead and I needed to get started. The dew was still on the fields on either side of the road, as I took up my position ready to hail a passerby. I was getting quite used to this life, no longer feeling shy or reticent. After all they didn't

have to stop or if they did and didn't like the look of me they could drive on. It was as simple as that.

I didn't have to wait long before I saw the first car far in the distance. I prepared myself, raised my right arm and waved it down. He didn't stop. I waited and another car passed by without stopping. Then a third and a fourth, it was becoming monotonous but as before I sustained myself by the fact that I only needed one ride. Then surprisingly a gas tanker came to a shuddering stop and a voice from the cabin shouted,

'Where to?'

'I am trying to get to Bolder Dam.'

'OK climb up.'

It was a curious feeling sitting in the passenger seat of a gas tanker hurtling down the highway. After a while I couldn't resist asking the driver how he felt about driving a potential bomb. He didn't seem surprised by the inquiry. 'Everyone asks me the same question,' he replied, 'and I always answer in the same way. Every vehicle is a potential bomb; it is made of inflammatory material and carries gas. OK I am carrying more gas than the average car but it is only a matter of degree. Now we've got that settled let's get back to common sense.'

‘Tell me, why do you want to go to Bolder Dam?’

‘I’ve never seen it and I know that it is a wonder of the world, not one of the seven perhaps but a wonder nevertheless.’

‘You’re right it is an extraordinary triumph. I have seen it many times but it always takes my breath away. My Grandpa helped to build it.

‘You can’t be serious?’

‘I am.’

‘When I was a kid, my ma used to tell me stories about the dam.’

I learned that my driver’s name was Bill O’Connor a fellow countryman. He was born in Boulder long after the Dam was completed but it was in his blood, he knew the story backwards.

I watched him as he spoke his whole being was focused on the road ahead but he was able to reminisce as he recalled certain details.

‘Yes it was an amazing story of human achievement against all odds.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Well at every level the project was doomed. They tried a bunch of times but had to give up. The Colorado River was a source

of irrigation water to the dry surrounding land. Around 1906 the local railway spent over 50 million dollars to stabilise the waterway after a breach that filled a long dried up sea.'

'But the dam was built?' I said.

'In many ways it shouldn't have happened. The country was in a real bad way, horrific unemployment. In 1922 there were plans to build the dam but it took nearly six years before President Coolidge signed the contract. By 1931, the tenders were out and six companies united to raise the money but by that time the depression was in full swing.

'So did they stop the project?'

'You would think so but thousands of unemployed workers came out from all over the states. The original plan was to build a city to be called Boulder to accommodate the workers and their families but President Hoover ordered the work to start before the town was ready, so bunkhouses were built quickly along the riverbank.

We had been traveling about three hours when we came to a small township.

'Lets break here,' he said, 'I need a comfort visit.' I alighted and sat on a bench under a tree waiting for him. I was beginning to miss home and my comforts. Sleeping in different beds every night and eating café

food wasn't agreeing with me and what was worse was I could feel that I was putting on weight just the opposite to what I had hoped would happen. It was the lack of choice, little fresh fruit or vegetables too much fried food with chips, which I couldn't resist.

Sitting in the cool breeze with the sun warming my face, I began to feel sleepy and must have dozed off. My family must have been in my thoughts as when I awoke, on an impulse I decided to phone home. The phone rang for a long time and then my wife answered,

'Hi honey, it's me,' I said. I heard her draw in her breath.

'It's about time you phoned, I was getting worried.'

Then I heard a man's voice say,

'Who is it?'

'Who's that speaking?' I asked, there was a pause.

'It's David.'

'David! You mean my number two?'

'Yes.'

'What's he doing there?'

'He's staying here.'

'In my house, I don't understand.'

'We love each other. I want a divorce.'

'Divorce? You're not serious? I'm coming home immediately.'

'I've made up my mind.'

'You can't do this to me. I won't let you. I love you.'

'It's too late. When you decided to go on your trip, did you discuss it with me? What did you expect me to do, to sit fiddling my fingers? Well I won't, I have a life to live just like you.'

'I thought you were in agreement. You never said anything.'

'I did but you didn't hear, you were only thinking of yourself.'

'That's not fair.'

'Well did you ask me what I thought about your trip?'

'Yes I think so, didn't I?'

'No you didn't, you just told me you needed to go. I saw it as you needed to get away from me.'

'That's not right. It was nothing to do with you. How can I convince you I love you?'

Suddenly I felt my shoulders being shaken. I stirred.

'Wake up we must get going.'

I opened my eyes.

'You fell asleep? Are you OK?'

'Yes I think so.' I was still a bit bewildered.

Back in the cab I struggled to understand what had happened. I was still confused. Was it a dream or did I really speak to her?

We were now travelling along an almost deserted motorway. On either side the hills, wind swept over generations, rose up almost blotting out the sun, We were in a broad primeval river bed carved out millions of years ago by glacial movement. I imagined I could hear the scraping and grinding as trillions of tons of ice, moving imperceptibly, scooped out the bed rock so that years later a modern motorway could be laid along the valley floor. While looking ahead, I glanced at the dashboard and saw a compass. Bill saw me looking at it.

‘I’ve only had it a few weeks. I like to know what direction I’m heading, you can’t tell from the road. You see we are now travelling due south.’

‘Phil I’ve talked a lot about me, tell me about you.’

Over the next hour I explained why I was on the road and how it had changed my whole perspective on life.

We had been on the road about three hours when there was a sudden jolt and the truck began to slither across the road.

‘Hold on,’ shouted Bill, ‘I think we’ve got a puncture.’ Steadily he began to turn the steering wheel sharply to one side and then the other, using his gears to slow the massive vehicle down. Slowly it came to a

halt, half slewed across the road blocking one lane. Bill was remarkably unruffled whereas I was visibly shaken. I had visions of us plunging down the side of the road totally out of control.

‘Are you all right Phil you look terrible?’

‘I am OK, a bit shaken. That was an amazing bit of driving, has that happened before?’

‘No luckily not, but part of our training is to learn how to control the truck when she loses grip on the road. I’ve had to practice on an oiled slippery surface. Hold on Phil, I need to phone the office and get some help.’

I couldn’t hear what the operator was saying but when he had finished Bill turned to me and said.

‘Phil it looks like I am going to be here several hours, maybe you should try a get another lift?’

‘Are you sure. I’m happy to wait. I’m not in any hurry.’

As I sat I realised that perhaps I should have taken his advice. It could be hours even over night and I didn’t fancy sleeping in the cab although he did have some space.

‘You know Bill, I think I will change my mind I hope that’s OK?’

‘Sure you’d like to get going. That’s all right with me It makes sense.’

We shook hands and wished each other well and I climbed down from the cab. I felt a bit of a deserter but I really wanted to get on my way.

Very soon a car came by and I waved it down. I saw that there were two women in it on their way to Las Vegas. They slowed down, peering at me and I could see from their looks that they were deciding whether to stop and pick me up. Luckily they decided to do so. As they drew along side me the passenger wound down her window.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Las Vegas if possible,’ I said.

As I got in the driver said,

‘You’re lucky we don’t normally pick up men but you looked so tired and we felt sorry for you.’ They introduced themselves,

‘I’m Cathy, the sensible one.’

‘I’m Nancy the fun one,’ she said with a twinkle in her eye.

‘What do you ladies do? I asked.

‘We both work in Vegas on the gambling machines. What about you, you seem an unlikely person to be hitch hiking?’

‘It’s a long story; I don’t want to bore you with it.’

We had been travelling west on the US 93 interstate highway for some hours and arrived at the rim of Boulder Dam on the border between Nevada and Arizona. It was visible from far off, a stark white crescent staring at us. But as the sun began to set behind the distant hills, the harsh outlines of this concrete colossus softened.

I had read about the monument on the top of the Dam and was keen to see it. It was epic sculpture by Oscar Hansen a Norwegian Immigrant.

'Do you mind if we stop and have a look at the Memorial?' I asked. Cathy parked the car and the three of us walked back to the Dam. We stood silently, each in our own thoughts, in front of the two enormous bronze figures perched on six-foot tall cubes of gleaming black diorite flanking a 142-foot flagpole. The whole piece was named "Winged Figures of the Republic", the 30-foot bronzed statues representing "that eternal vigilance which is the price of liberty."

In front of this array was carved a terrazzo star map depicting the celestial alignment from that site on the evening of September 30, 1935, the day President Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicated what was then called Boulder Dam. Nearby was a bronze plaque memorializing the 96 workers who had died during its construction.

An inscription proclaimed, "They died to make the desert bloom." Neither of the girls spoke. I could see that they were visibly moved by what they were seeing. Cathy was wiping her eyes.

'What is it Cathy?' I asked.

'I lost my father in an accident at work. This reminds me of the terrible waste of his life. It's all so unnecessary,' she added.

I tried to imagine the year 1932 when the construction of the dam began. It was the time of the Great Depression. Thousands of men became jobless as the unemployment figures soared. The government, in order to help the situation decided to reconsider the building of the dam. It was originally conceived in 1900 in order to stem the repeated flooding of the Colorado River and to provide a reliable source of water to the surrounding countryside. Six companies bid for the contract and in the end they all united and were called The Six Companies.

In all they employed five thousand men from all over the country. The conditions were harsh with temperatures up to 110 F, and dangerous working conditions. In the course of the construction that took 1800 days (five years) and cost \$50 million, over a hundred men lost their lives. We were

all deeply moved by the beauty yet tragedy of the Hoover Dam.

Without warning a cold wind suddenly rose up.

‘I think should get going if we are to make Vegas before dark,’ said Cathy turning and walking towards the car park. She had hoped that we could have crossed on the rim of the dam itself but had forgotten that in 2010, the O’Callaghan-Tillman Memorial Bridge had been completed so that traffic now had to take the bi-pass.

The bridge itself was a magnificent sight, nearly 2000 foot long, it spanned the Black Canyon about one mile south of the Dam. At its highest point it was 900 feet above the roaring waters of the Colorado River.

Back on the road we continued towards the bridge now the only way south. As we approached it, I felt a distinct queasiness. It seemed so fragile, two slim ribs of metal spanning the river, almost a thousand feet below. Even at this distance we could hear the thunderous roar of the Colorado river hurtling below. I couldn’t look down. I’ve always had a fear of heights and this was a real test of my nerves. I had begun to sweat and felt lightheaded. I must

have shown my fear because Nancy turned in her seat and said,

‘Are you all right Phil, you look a bit pale?’

‘Yes,’ I stuttered. ‘I’m not very good at heights.’

‘Just shut your eyes and we’ll be across in a jiffy, that’s what I do.’ Would you like me to hold your hand?’ I nodded and without embarrassment she reached over and took my hand, hers was warm and firm, mine clammy and shaky. We sat holding hands for a brief moment.

‘You can open your eyes now,’ she said releasing my hand.

I looked up; we were now heading south on a wide freeway. Feeling much calmer and having regained my voice, I asked Cathy,

‘Don’t you feel a bit wobbly when you drive across that bridge?’

‘I used to but now I just keep my eyes on the road ahead and never look down, that’s the secret. Don’t look down.’

Not far from the Dam, we came upon a diner called the High Scaler cafe.

‘Let’s stop there,’ Cathy said, ‘I need a break.’

We entered the small dark saloon. As our eyes accustomed to the gloom we saw that the walls were hung with black and white photographs of the High scalers, the men

who risked their lives scrambling up and down the sides of the canyon to drill holes and insert dynamite. The charge would then be set off. After the explosions, which enlarged the gorge, others followed to remove any loose rocks to provide a solid base for the concrete dam to grip.

We moved silently from photo to photo, paying homage to the men who made the dam possible. One photo showed them swarming over the walls like a myriad of ants, hanging onto ropes and abseiling downwards. There's had been the most dangerous job and accounted for the largest number of fatalities.

The road was now spreading out before us, a wide four-lane motorway carving a passageway through the Las Vegas Valley. I felt an overwhelming sense of freedom as we hurtled along as if we had overcome gravity and were floating. The distant hills, now pale blue in the setting sun were outlining the flat basin. It made a strong contrast between the arid terrain through which we were passing and the cool rushing waters of the Colorado River from which we had come. Now green lawns were replacing the yellow-ochre landscape as we approached the man-made town of Las

Vegas, an oasis that had sprung up out of the desert.

We drove past neat picture card houses with well-mown lawns and two cars parked in the drive. We heard the sound of children playing and a radio turned up too loud. It was a typical middle class neighbourhood yet less than fifty years ago it would have been an arid barren desert hardly able to sustain life.

Cathy's voice interrupted my thoughts.

'Phil, Nancy and I are going on to the Casino. I'll drop you at a motel we know. You can settle in there and if you like come and visit with us later and try your luck.' She handed me a visiting card. It had a picture of Caesar's palace with several phone numbers. On the back was written 'Motel 6 Las Vegas'

'It's a clean comfortable and quiet place, I think you will like it.' After a short drive we stopped outside a smart looking two-storey building with a large swimming pool in front and a car park at the rear.

'This is it, someone will come for your bags,' said Cathy.

I got out and walked around to the drive's side

'Thanks Cathy and Nancy, for the ride and your company, I've had a great time. This place looks fine. I hope to see you later.' I waved as they drove off.

I entered the foyer, which seemed dark after the bright sunshine outside. My eyes soon adjusted and I saw the desk to my right. At first I could see no one tending it and then I heard a voice and a pretty face appeared from under the counter.

‘Good afternoon Sir, have you a reservation?’

‘No I have just come into town for a short stay.’

‘Let me check.’ I could see the screen as she scrolled from page to page.

‘Yes, I’ve a very nice double room on the second floor overlooking the swimming pool. It’s available for three nights.’

‘May I see it?’

‘Of course, David will show it to you.’ I heard a bell ring and a tall young uniformed man appeared.

‘David will you show this gentleman to Room 214 please.’

‘Follow me Sir.’

I followed him along the corridor and we stopped opposite the elevator.’

‘Do you mind if we take the stairs I need the exercise,’ I joked.

‘Sure no problem.’

As I followed him I could see his broad shoulders well muscled arms.

‘I see you work out’ I said casually. He turned,

'Yeah, I like to keep fit. We have a gym here you know?'

'Is this a holiday job you're doing?' I asked.

'Yeah I'm at school studying Aeronautics. I want to work in the aeronautics business.'

'Where's that?'

'At the Embry-Riddle, Las Vegas Campus. I am doing a Bachelor of science in Aeronautics. It's not far from here, do you know the area Sir?'

'No it's my first visit.'

We arrived at my room. David inserted the key card into the socket. The red light turned green and the door opened.

'You need to put the card in here for the lights to work.' David said.

'Yeah I've seen that before.'

The room lit up.

'Let me show you around.'

It was a well-furnished room, bright and airy with pale brown furniture and seemed to have everything I needed even a coffee maker.

'David the room's fine, could you let reception know that I will be staying for three nights?' I gave him a tip and began to unpack my few things.

Standing at the window over looking the swimming pool, I thought about Brenda. I

know I had said that I wouldn't contact her but as the days passed I began to worry a little.

Was she OK? She had said not to ring and I had agreed but now almost three months later, I was having second thoughts. I could Email her and we could Skype? I checked the room and found there was Internet available so I got out my I-pad and switched it on. The charge was low so I connected it to the wall plug above the desk. The screen flickered and settled. I typed in her E address and waited. The page opened and I began to type.

"Hi Brenda, I decided to break silence to find out how you were. I am fine, am here in Las Vegas. Coming towards the end of the trip; have had an amazing journey and feel a new man. Can't wait to hear from you. Love Phil."

I pressed 'Send' and watched as the message disappeared from the screen.

It was about 6 pm. I had arranged to meet the girls at eight so I had time for a rest. I think I must have slept because a ping from my I Pad woke me. At first I thought it came from outside and then I saw the light on my I-pad. Brenda had replied.

Darling Phil, it was so good to hear from you and that all is well. The house is

very quiet without you but I have managed to do several jobs such as re- painting the larder that I knew you thought was unnecessary. The children are fine; both are coming home for Easter. Can we expect you? It would be nice to have the whole family together for a change. That's all my news.

Lots of Love, Brenda.

I sat looking at the message on the screen trying to read between the lines. It was such a matter of fact reply. I don't know what I had expected but I was dissatisfied with her answer. Perhaps I thought she would miss me more and say so, I certainly missed her. I didn't feel like replying right away, I want to think about what I would say.

Meanwhile it was getting late and I had promised to meet the girls at the Casino. Reception gave me a small map so that I could walk to the Strip. On the way I passed David who was sitting by the front door waiting to help the next guest. He caught my eye.

'Good luck at the tables,' he mouthed. There was something that I liked about David. He was so confident, with his clean cut features and an inner strength that shone through. He was a young man on the cusp of his life, full of optimism. He reminded me of myself many years ago when I first joined

the company. I was going to conquer the world. It seemed so simple then, but the reality of life gradually weighed down on me. The long hours, the need to compete with friends, it all took on a sour distasteful feeling. The phrase *rat race* became a reality and I could no longer just enjoy the struggle, there was a desperation about it, a 'do or die'.

I stepped out into the cool breeze of the Strip eagerly anticipating the evening ahead. Once on the sidewalk I found myself almost blinded by the flashing neon lights coming from all direction, promoting the different hotels, restaurants and clip joints. I stood and stared at them blinking at me. It was as if I had landed on another planet, occupied by people each vying to outdo the other.

After a ten-minute walk, my head cleared and I saw it, an enormous fairyland vision. I had seen photos of it but they gave no idea of the size and brashness of the Palace. Built as several towers joined together it seemed to extend forever and shone like a golden orb in the spotlights. I couldn't help but feel excited at the prospect of entering this house of pleasure. The entrance opened into a vast atrium, the floor of which was covered in one-arm bandits, row after row of them. People of all sizes and shapes were sitting in front of them

holding what looked like plastic cups filled with coins.

I watched mesmerized as one by one the machines were fed. They seemed to have a never-ending appetite for money. Suddenly from my left there was a shout and the sound of coins tumbling out into a container could be heard. The other players immediately stopped what they were doing and watched. Then an enormous cheer went up as a woman with a blue rinse hair-do held up a cup overflowing with coins and clapped her hands in delight. It was a moment of victory and all enjoyed it before returning to the serious task of feeding the devices.

I walked on through the rows of machines until I reached the gaming room where I knew the serious gambling took place. It was here that I was to meet Cathy and Nancy. As I entered, the sound was deafening, a combination of human voices, background music, the croupier's call and the public's shouts of delight. At first I wanted to put my hands over my ears to deaden the sound but gradually I got used to it.

I was standing looking around when someone touched my arm. I turned and at first didn't recognise her. It was Cathy wearing a short flared skirt, fishnet tights and an off the shoulder, skintight low cut top in red white and blue. She gave me a hug.

‘Wow, you look amazing, I would never have recognised you. Where is Nancy?’

‘Oh, she’s at the table. I’m on a break. Come over and say hello to her.’

We walked over to a brightly coloured Roulette table. It was very busy with punters some sitting and others standing. There was an air of excitement and expectation. Everyone stopped talking, as Nancy was about to roll the ball. She caught my eye and smiled. She stepped forwards and spun the wheel in one direction and spun the ball in the other direction around the track. There was an in-take of breath as everyone watched it travel past the numbers. Then slowing, it dropped into number eight.

‘Number eight,’ shouted Nancy ‘as all eyes went to the table. She began to collect the counters from all the other numbers leaving the small pile around the number eight and on the even’s spaces. A young woman, with an older man, whooped with joy as she was handed a pile of \$20 dollar chips.

‘Nancy will have a break in about five minutes and we can go and get a drink,’ whispered Cathy. I followed her downstairs to a small bar provided for the staff. There was one or two staff already there. We were soon joined by Nancy who was a bit flushed and breathless.

‘We had a big winner just now, one of the regulars. I don’t know how he does it but it’s good for the table.’

‘How’s that?’ I asked.

‘The word gets round and people think it’s a lucky table and want to play on it. It makes the commission higher,’ she explained. ‘Are you going to have a try?’

‘Yes, sure why not, I’m not usually lucky but maybe tonight.’

The girls had to go back on duty so I sauntered over to one of the tables not tended by them. The croupier was an African American with a deep southern accent,

‘Hi folks,’ he welcomed us, ‘why not change your life with a big win? Lay your bets.’ I had about fifty dollars to burn so I decided to have a go. I bought ten five dollar chips and began by betting on odds. Seven came up and I won 10 dollars. I repeated it and won again. Perhaps I’ll go for a number this time. I chose my lucky number three. I put on \$20. I held my breath as the wheel slowly ground to a halt flipping from number to number. It stopped; I couldn’t believe it at 3 my number. Now a pile of \$5 dollars chips was stacked on the number. I had won over three hundred dollars. It was as if I was bewitched. Now the right thing to do was to cash the chips and walk away, that was the right thing to do, I repeated to myself but

another voice more insistent than the first in a whisper said,

‘Why stop now, you are on a winning streak keep going you’ll make a mint?’

At that moment Nancy appeared,

‘I see you are doing OK.’ Without asking me, she said,

‘My advice is to stop now.’

‘But I am on a winning streak,’ I insisted.

‘There is no such thing. Take it from me, get out while the going’s good.’ She insisted.

‘OK,’ I said reluctantly. I knew she was right. Later she told me she had seen too many people carrying on chasing a dream and leaving with nothing.

I owed my new friends so much and wanted to at least take them out for a meal at a really high-class restaurant but their shift didn’t end until 4 am and that was much too late for me. They were both busy when I left so I wrote a short note and handed it to the concierge.

Hi Cathy and Nancy, Thanks for a great evening. Sorry I haven’t the stamina any more for these late nights. Can we meet at Gordon Ramsey Pub and Grill for lunch say 2 pm tomorrow, Love P

I felt a real sense of regret as I left the building and made my way back to my room. I was still buoyed up by the evening, the energy, the colours and the sounds. It had been as if I had entered another world, a world of indulgence and pleasure and I knew I would never have such an extraordinary evening ever again. It took me a long time to get to sleep. It was as if I didn't want to close the day hoping that it could go on forever.

There was a message waiting for me at breakfast.

We also had a great time see you at lunch. C and N

G R's Pub and Grill was in the Caesar palace grounds. It was advertised as a typical English Pub although when I got there I could see that he had added an American touch, tiled floors and smart tables and chairs. It's very different from the worn out furniture and uneven wooden floors of the replica English Pubs I had seen in New York.

The ladies were waiting when I arrived. They looked fresh and vivacious. Now wearing simple cotton dresses with low heels they could have passed for schoolteachers not croupiers in one of the most sophisticated gaming rooms in the world. We greeted each other with kisses and hugs like old friends.

‘This is nice,’ said Nancy looking around. ‘You know you won’t believe it but this is the first time I’ve been in here although I must have passed it a thousand times. What made you suggest this restaurant Phil?’

‘I chose it because it reminded me of my time in New York as a student. We spent a lot of time in the pubs there and this is very reminiscent of that time. Follow me, I’ve booked a table overlooking the pool.’

The three of us sat admiring the décor when a server appeared handing us menus. I knew what I was going to have, the steak and kidney pie was a favorite of mine but I waited for the girls to decide.

‘You’re the expert Phil what do you suggest?’ asked Cathy. I told her my choice and she nodded approval.

‘I’ll have the same also,’ said Nancy, ‘What would you like to drink?’ Asked the server writing down the meal order.

‘Have the house cyder, chilled, it’s a special brew,’ I said and they agreed. The meal came quickly and was piping hot. The piecrust was crisp and there was a good portion of meat making it a very filling dish. It was served with jacket potatoes and mixed vegetables.

‘This is delicious,’ said Nancy, ‘I would never have asked for it if you hadn’t suggested it Phil.’

‘Good I’m glad you are enjoying it. What an amazing place Caesar’s is.’

‘You haven’t seen anything yet. There’s also a first class hotel and a theatre where the latest shows are put on,’ said Cathy.

We dragged out the lunch but finally we had to say goodbye.

‘I had a ball last night, thanks to you and to come away on top was a real buzz.’

‘It was our pleasure initiating you into the mysteries of the casino. You were lucky but don’t fool yourself we’ll get the money back with interest,’ she laughed.

We hugged and exchanged contact details. I said they must come and visit, the usual things one says and then we parted, promising to keep in touch but in my heart I knew that as time passed other things would occupy me and this irreplaceable experience would fade.

Just before I went to bed, I remembered that I hadn’t replied to Brenda. I switched on my I pad and re-read her last message. There was a coldness about it that I didn’t recognise. Perhaps I should have expected it after all it could be said that this trip was

very selfish. What would I have said if Brenda had wanted to do the same and leave me to run the home and deal with all the domestic issues? I wouldn't have been happy.

Easter was about two weeks away. It would be a real struggle to get back by road, unless I broke my rule and took a plane. I decided to think about my reply and deal with it in the morning. I didn't sleep well. There was a low drumming sound coming from somewhere in the distance probably a late nightclub that disturbed me. It seemed that I had only been asleep for a few minutes when my alarm went off at 7 am.

I remembered that I had promised to meet David in the Gym. For a moment I hesitated 'why do I need to?' but then I brushed those thoughts aside and got changed. He was already on the cross trainer and waved to me. I climbed onto the one next to him and began walking. After about twenty minutes I had had enough and went to do some weights. I said

'I'll meet you in the diner outside at 8.'

I saw him enter. He bounded across to where I was sitting and seemed to glow, slightly out of breath. What a wonderful thing is youth and how quickly we lose it I thought.

'Hi Phil, good to see you. How was the work out?'

'OK, but I am a bit out of fitness.'

'You must go more often, it helps.'

'What will you have? I asked.'

'Orange juice and a fruit salad, that will do me.'

'No coffee?'

'No I've gone off coffee, I think it's no good for you although I do like it. How was the Casino?'

'It was terrific. You know the two girls I told you about, the croupiers, they looked after me and guess what? I won.'

'How much?'

'\$300, I had a run of luck.'

'You're joking.'

'No here's a \$100 for you.'

'I can't take that!'

'Take it, I didn't have it yesterday, take it.'

David sat nursing his juice.

'Thanks Phil that will make a lot of difference, I have some bills I need to pay.' I sat for a moment and then asked

'What's your story David? I know you are studying Aeronautics at the local University. How did that happen?'

He didn't answer at first and for a moment I thought I had said something wrong.

'My father was a pilot he was killed in Iraq.' I was very close to him and I really miss him. He left some money, which is paying for my schooling. I was twelve at the time we did everything together. Mum never

got over it. She tried to kill herself and is now in a home. I visit her every week but she doesn't know me. I don't speak about it much.'

'It's OK David I'm sorry if I have upset you.'

'No you haven't. I need to talk about it, to come to terms with what has happened. I tried a shrink but she kept on telling me what I should feel. How would she know? It didn't happen to her.'

'Try not to be angry,' I said, 'life makes no sense. These things happen for no good reason, it's not your fault.' We sat together in silence sharing a common bond. David suddenly sat up.

'Phil, what are you doing today. I've got some free time why don't I show you my Vegas.'

Suddenly I thought of Easter I must go home I realised.

'That's a great Idea I'll get a flight tonight at 6 pm but I'm free before then, let's see your Vegas, I would like that.'

'OK I'll be your driver and guide, here's the itinerary; we'll start with the Natural History Museum, followed by the Art Museum and end at my campus. Collect your stuff and put it in my car and I'll get you to the airport on time.'

‘The Natural Museum is my favorite. You’ll see what I mean,’ said David weaving in and out of the traffic.

‘What do you like about it?’

‘There is one exhibit that beats them all. It’s the Dinosaur Mummy, Leonardo, the 23-foot-long plant eater from the late Cretaceous period. It was naturally mummified before it was turned into a fossil, so we have the best evidence of what a dinosaur really looked like including its skin.’

‘Is there anything else you like?’

‘There’s an Egyptian exhibition with realistic artifact recreations of the Golden Throne, chariots, the Golden Shrine and the sarcophagus. These replicas are one of only two sets that were authorized by the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities. I find I go back time and again to it unable to believe that over 5000 years ago they were producing such beautiful objects.’

‘What about Chinese?’ I asked, ‘They’ve made some of the most beautiful things in the world and were well ahead of most other peoples.’

I wandered round with David, absorbing his enthusiasm. He could have been my son I felt so at ease with him. We then went onto the Art Museum and finished at his campus. By this time I was getting quite weary. David seemed to be indestructible. Over a drink in

the café I broached an idea that had been brewing in my mind.

‘David I would like make a suggestion. I feel that we have got to know each other and I want to help you.’ David looked surprised.

‘I’m OK I don’t need your help. I’m doing fine.’

‘I know you are and I admire you for that but just listen to what I have to say. Please don’t misunderstand. What I want to suggest is that you let me pay your college fees.’

A look of surprise spread across David’s face. He looked puzzled and confused.

‘That’s an incredible offer but why would you want to do that?’

‘Because you deserve it. You are a fine young man and I want to help you. Is that such a bad thing?’

‘No it’s amazing. I don’t know how to thank you.’

‘You don’t have to, just work hard and have a good life that’s all. Now take me to the airport.’

We parted, exchanging contact details and I rushed to catch the plane. I suddenly realised I hadn’t phoned Brenda and now wouldn’t be able to until I got home. It was all getting very messy. I just hoped she would understand

Landing at the airport, the plane taxied to a halt and I followed the line of passengers into the terminal. Standing there was Brenda and the children.

‘How on earth did you know I was coming? I asked embracing her.

‘We had a phone call from someone called David. He said that he left you at the Airport in Las Vegas and that you seemed a bit confused so he wanted to make sure we would meet you. He seemed a very nice young man.’

‘He is,’ I said, ‘a very nice young man.’

On the way home I noticed that Brenda was very quiet and when we got home, I asked her,

‘What’s wrong Brenda? There seems to be something upsetting you? ‘I’m OK just pleased to see you and that you are well.

We had been married long enough for me to know that she was not telling the whole story. Later on after dinner when the young people had gone out, I raised the subject again but was not prepared for her outburst.

‘Have you any idea what it has been like not knowing where you were, not knowing if you were alive?’ Her face was livid and tears began to run down her cheeks.

‘Brenda I didn’t realise, why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I couldn’t, you were out of contact. You didn’t want me to speak to you Can you envision how I felt?’ she shouted.

I was dumbfounded; this was the last thing I wanted to hear. I thought stupidly that she was coping well but I was obviously wrong.

‘I don’t know what to say, I am so sorry. I feel so stupid.’ I mumbled.

‘I can’t tell you how many times I thought of walking out, leaving the house and not telling you where I was. You would come home to an empty house and worry like I have been. I wanted to give you a taste of your own medicine. But in the end I was a coward.’

‘What are we going to do Phil? I can’t go on like this I need more from you, it’s not all you, you know I have a life too.’

By this time I was desolate, what I thought was something she had agreed to she hadn’t. I now realise It was purgatory for her while I was indulging my psyche.

‘What would you like to do?’ I asked, ‘Anything?’ She paused as if she was unprepared for my suggestion.

‘Let’s take a trip to Europe. Neither of us has been abroad and unless we do it now, it will be too late we will be too old.’

The Last Hanging

I had completely forgotten about the court case and had returned to my job in London. It was the weekend. I had some time on my hands and as I often do I found myself near Foyles in Charing Cross Road. I love the secondhand bookshops and can spend hours rummaging through boxes of paperbacks, documents, old photos; every sort of memorabilia excites me. In the corner of the back room, I came upon a large box of loose papers and placing it on a small table was thumbing through them when I saw what looked like a child's exercise book. The cover was plain and for a moment I was going to ignore it but something made me stop and examine it. It was soiled with the corners bent and the cover discoloured. I guessed that at sometime it could have got wet. It had a musty smell as I opened it. It was some sort of journal written in a child-like hand with big round letters. I began to read:

Day 7

I never thought that my life would end like this. I'm a God-fearing woman. I thought I would be an old woman with my grand children around me growing old gracefully like I have read in the books but here I am in this place.

As I read, something rang a bell. I stood holding it in my hand puzzling over it.

I was happy at home until Mum died and Dad brought her home. She didn't like us from the start always shouting and using a ruler to hit us. I told her I would tell my dad but she said she would kill me if I did so I kept quiet. It was great getting away from home and working in the Pub. I looked forward to getting there in the morning. I felt so free. I knew I looked good so I showed it off. The boys loved it. They made me feel needed for the first time in my life. Then Jack the landlord's wife died and I felt sorry for him so I showed him a bit of love.

Then it all came back to me. What I had stumbled upon was unreal. I couldn't believe what I had found. I had no idea that Mary had written a journal while on death row. I was hearing a voice from the past.

I didn't think he was serious but then he asked me to marry him. I was so surprised, I never thought of him in that way. It all seemed too good. In time I got to like him. At first it was heaven, he gave me lots of attention and treated me really well but the drinking got to him. He used to come home drunk most nights and could be rough

sometimes and he would hit me saying it was my fault. I told him to stop drinking so much and it would be better, He listened for a while and we was OK. But when they put up the price of beer and business slowed down he got back to drinking again.

It's 10 o'clock, lights out. I'm really tired but it was good remembering how it was.

I was hooked. I must have it I thought. The bookseller took it from me and wrapped it in some brown paper.

'What have you found?' he asked casually.

'Nothing much,' I said, 'just an old journal.' I didn't want to show my excitement as he might put up the price. I couldn't wait to read more so after supper I settled down in my small study switched on the angle poise and read on:

Day 6

Breakfast was cold but it doesn't matter. I'll get out on the yard and do some walking and then get back to the journal. I'm enjoying remembering and it passes the time. What am I thinking? I don't want the time to pass I would like to stop the clock but I can't.

Jack's drinking really got to me. He denied it of course but I could see by the

way he spoke his voice all slurred. I would help him into bed as sometimes he could hardly walk. It got really lonely with Jack always drunk.

I was desperate when this fellow paid me attention. He seemed kind and gentle and we began to see each other. He spoke nicely and was gentle. I began to look forward to his visit to the pub. He seemed too polite to be a bobby but he was, you see you mustn't judge a book... One evening he asked me out. I made like I was offended, all that and me a married woman but he took no notice and I agreed. We met by the river and walked and talked. He smelled nice and I felt safe.

He kissed me on the cheek when we said goodbye, a real gentleman I thought.

I was finding it increasingly disturbing to read, to imagine what it would have been like to be on death row and then Mary wrote something that surprised me.

I was settling down for the night when I heard what I thought was Ewan's voice. It was coming from the next cell. He was praying I called out, 'is that you Evan? His familiar voice replied.

'Yes it's me Ewan. I asked to be moved near you so we could talk.'

I was so pleased that he was near. I thought he would be taken somewhere else and I wouldn't see him again. I couldn't help but ask him how he was. I could tell from his voice that things weren't good. Like me he couldn't get his head around what was happening, that we were on death row the very words struck fear into my heart and I know he was feeling the same.

Her words were getting to me. In the gloom of my study with only the pool of light on the paper I tried to imagine how it would have felt. I had to stop reading, it was so real.

Mary continued,

I told him not to talk about it. I couldn't bear the thought that we were going to be parted. But he said that we must face up to what was going to happen it was no good kidding ourselves. But I was more optimistic and said that maybe we would be given a pardon, it has happened to others why not us? No matter what I said to cheer him up he continued to believe that we were doomed. He wondered why I was so calm.

By now I was hooked. I glanced at the time. It was past midnight and I should put it down but I couldn't.

I told him about the believers those who see this life as a test for the next. Maybe they are right and we should be looking forwards to that ideal world. It made me smile to think about it

Ewan must have thought about what I had said. I knew he had been brought up as a Christian, going to church every Sunday. I think it was the church that influenced his decision to become a policeman to help protect the weak and vulnerable. He often talked about it. How after he had been a policeman for some while all that changed. He saw so many things that seemed to make believing in a good God a sham, the terrible things that people did to each other. The Ten Commandments were a farce he used to say. No one took any notice of them any more. It was if they had no relevance in our lives.

Day 5

I feel reassured that Ewan is in the cell next door. Sometimes I hear him sobbing at night. I want to go to him and comfort him but I can't. He's taking it very badly. Is he sorry he decided to support me rather than walk away? I wonder why he changed his mind. I was thinking about the next world maybe it won't be so bad meeting up with all my deceased relatives. I wonder if they will talk to me or shun me as a

murderer. Is there forgiveness in heaven or hell for that matter? I like to watch the other women exercising in the yard I can see them through my window. I wonder if they ever think about me waiting to die. I would like to talk to them but the guards keep us apart and I have to exercise on my own. Just a few words to another women would help.

Day 4

I woke up early and could hear the morning chorus. Then I thought I heard a movement from Ewan and called to him through the wall. He was awake and he wished me good morning. I returned the greeting and waited for the right moment.

There was something that has been troubling me and I needed to know the answer so after a few minutes I plucked up courage and asked him. It was difficult to choose the right words; I didn't want to upset him in his state. I started by saying that there was something puzzling me and I wondered if he could help me to understand it

So I began, 'you know Ewan, after the accident you were so supportive and helped me but when they arrested me you disappeared and deserted me and I wondered why. I felt abandoned by the one person whom I thought loved me.

I waited for his answer I knew it might be difficult and perhaps he wouldn't answer

but after a while he tried to explain, He said that he was confused soon after the accident. He knew he should have arrested me and taken me to the Police station. But his conscience told him to help me. But why did he desert me when I was later arrested after Jack's body was found. I didn't understand. He said that initially he was muddled and confessed that he acted cowardly and wanted to distance himself from me. Then he said something that made my heart crack. He said he loved me and couldn't walk away, that he would be with me whatever happened, I felt my eyes fill up and tears run down my cheeks as I thought about what he had said.

If this is read by anyone in the future, I want you to know that at that moment I couldn't have been happier despite my terrible ordeal. I was overwhelmed and told him how much I loved him. I knew that whatever was ahead I could face it.

Day 3

I woke to a bright sunny morning. I felt at peace with the world. I actually felt happy for the first time in months. I hope Ewan feels the same.

Am getting into a routine, sleeping better despite what looms ahead. I have asked to see the Governor for a special favour. I have discussed it with Ewan and he is in

agreement. Later that day I got a message to say that the Governor would see me at 3 pm in his office. I ate lunch and lay down for a while. Promptly at 2.45 the guards arrived. I was handcuffed behind my back and marched to the office. The governor greeted me politely and asked what I wanted. While in my cell my request seemed straightforward but now asking for it was more difficult.

It was now well after midnight and my wife was calling me to come to bed. Reluctantly I closed the book marked the place and went up to the bedroom. I tried to sleep but the picture of Mary sitting in her cell writing her journal disturbed me. It seemed a travesty to hang someone who could while waiting the hangman write about it so fluently not knowing and I suspect not caring whether anyone read it after her death.

It wasn't until the evening on the following day that I got back to the journal and read on.

The governor was very patient and listened as I explained what I wanted. When I had finished he stood up, turned his back to me and walked over to the window and seemed to be examining the garden. Then

he turned and said it was a very unusual request and he didn't know whether it was permitted but he would make some enquiries and let me know. Unbeknown to me when he went home that night he spoke to his wife and told her that we I had asked to be hung with Ewan side by side.

He reached up to a bookshelf and took down a heavy tome called 'The History of Armley Goal, Leeds'. Thumbing through it he found an entry called Double Hangings and read.

'Double hanging are not common but there have been a number. The first was in 1864 and was held in public. The last was in 1932 when the infamous Tom Pierpont executed two men'.

The Governor closed the book and sat going over in his mind how it could be carried out. Finally he said to himself 'I'll ask the hangman in the morning if he is prepared to carry it out. They would need two gallows side by side.'

Day 2

I was having my breakfast when the message came from the Governor. Yes was his answer. I thought about telling Ewan but decided I would tell him at the final moment. I still hoped that we would both get a reprieve but the reality of the approaching

event is beginning to hit me. I can feel my body shaking and going hot and cold. Perhaps I am going down with the flu so I decided to consult the doctor.

He arrived later that day. He was a young man looking no more than sixteen with fresh young features and a shy manner. I told him that I wasn't feeling well that I was shaking and sweating and feeling sick. He listened patiently and then examined me thoroughly. Finally he said that he thought it was nerves. It made sense after all it was nearly my last day.

'I can give you something that will calm you down, take one three times a day after meals.' He handed me a small bottle with three white tablets. He saw me looking at them.

'I can give you more if you need, I am always available.' After he had gone I took one out and examined it in my palm. It had a small line for dividing it but no other marking. It could be anything I thought, how we trust our doctors. I took it with some water. I waited. At first nothing happened and then I felt slightly woozy and light headed, that must be the tablet I thought. After a while I felt much calmer the hammering in my chest had stopped and the shaking was much less. I lay down and could feel myself slipping into sleep.

Day 1

This is it, I feel so frightened. My thoughts seem clear but my body is out of control. I feel my hands and face trembling.

'I don't want to die', I shouted to the walls, 'I'm too young to die someone help me.' But no one answered. I'm sure Ewan heard me but, like me, had no answer

We have now reached our last day. I realise that there is nothing I can do to stop what is going to happen.

As I finished reading Mary's journal, I thought about my own life and how I had wasted so much of it. I thought of that time so many years ago when I had lost my way, I was drifting; life was passing me by and I needed to find a purpose. I was like a ship floating aimlessly on an ocean of uncertainty. I had spent too many years in the South away from my roots, the things that made me who I was; the open moors, the bleating sheep and the harsh winters when life slowed down and all was covered with a white blanket of snow. These were the things I missed and needed to reconnect with before they became too vague and blurred in my memory.

I decided to take a train from Kings Cross. Standing, waiting in the hall, I was acutely aware of the arching steel girders

that reached across above me to enclose the station. They were marvels of Victorian engineering, the inheritance from such giants as Marc Brunel and George Stevenson, men who had the vision to change the face of the land. I needed to get back to my origins.

It was late when I left the train at Leeds and took the local line. With my haversack on my back I began the long walk to the Moors. As I climbed, the sky seemed to open up and become brighter and clearer and with it my step became lighter. I was nearly home.

By early morning I came up onto the flat terrain of the Yorkshire Moors. I walked all night resting for only a few hours and was welcomed by the sun, still only a pale circle in the sky. The ground was glistening wet with the dew of the morning. I stopped, caught my breath, inhaled the sharp fresh air and looked around at a scene I knew by heart. I could just see the yellow gorse highlighted against the purple moss and in the far distance I could make out some tiny trees but otherwise the view was unbroken. It looked as if it had remained unchanged since the beginning of time, but I knew differently.

I tried to imagine what it would have been like thousands of years before when my forebearers, walked this way. Then it

was a dense forest of oaks, yews and conifers coating the landscape with the rolling terrain hidden from view.

Was this transformation just a natural evolution brought about by the wind and the rain or were there other factors at work I wondered? I thought I knew the answer having spent the last three years studying the area. My research suggested that it was man who brought about the change, liberally cutting down the trees for firewood oblivious of the impact his actions would cause. Over the centuries the bare land, denuded of trees, had been invaded by many low growing plants and mosses, which were attracted by the damp soggy soil. Layer after layer of dead plant life had built up and slowly turned into peat.

Inevitably my gaze was drawn to three mounds, almost imperceptible undulations on the surface of the peat, not recognizable to the untrained eye.

It brought back the memory of my early life as a child living near the moors. Every morning the sound of digging would wake me. I would lay still, the light just beginning to illuminate my room, listening to the regular whack of a spade striking the ground. It was as familiar as the bird song at daybreak. As usual my father Frank was out on the moor cutting turves, which we used for fuel and to improve the soil for cultivation,

a practice that dated back to the Neolithic period almost 5000 years ago.

My father was born in the same house in which I was raised. He was the youngest son of Henry and Matilda Shields a family whose roots go back many generations. He had attended the local school where his teachers described him as 'mediocre'. Leaving at fifteen he assisted his father on the farm tending the sheep and looking after the smallholding. When his parents died he inherited the farm, as his two older brothers had no interest in working on it. As soon as they could they moved to the city where they worked in a factory hoping to open their own. They had their eyes on something more glamorous.

Dad always started digging early just after daybreak when the ground was still wet making the job less back breaking and worked until lunch by which time the land was too dry to dig. I will never forget the day when it happened. I was still half asleep when I was suddenly startled by his shout, 'Come quickly look what I've found.' I pulled on my clothes and rushed out. I saw him silhouetted against the sky still misty in the morning light. He was about fifty metres away and was staring down into the hole he had cut that morning. Breathless I peered over his shoulder.

'Look, he gasped, it's a hand?' In the depth of the hole I could see a white structure still partially covered with peat but visible enough to be a human hand.

'My god! What is? Who is it?' I stuttered. Dad was standing staring at it and then reaching down into the hole, he slowly began to unearth it. Scraping gently with his trowel, an arm attached to the hand and then a body gradually appeared. After digging for about half an hour the whole corpse was exposed in the floor of the pit. Much of the face was rotted away with only part of the skull visible; the remaining torso was almost intact.

'We must tell the police,' I shouted while he was digging but he appeared not to hear me. In the end I grabbed his arm.

'Stop dad we must tell the Police.'

'Yes,' he said his face set in a grim gaze. 'I think I know who this is.'

'Who?' I gasped disbelieving.

'His name is Jack Holmes. He used to live in the town. He was the publican at the George. He disappeared about fifteen years ago.'

The Second World War had been over for some years and things were beginning to return to normal in my hometown of Dearby. The township had a long history. Dating back to the early 18th C,

it was originally the area in the forest where the woodmen had built and lived in small shacks while clearing the old woodland of oak and beech. Men were coming back, some maimed and shell shocked. Almost every one of the fifty families had suffered loss and was struggling to come to terms with what had happened.

It was rapidly returning to a thriving Yorkshire village, boasting a village shop, two pubs and a Doctor's surgery. Life revolved around the pubs each of which was fiercely partisan. Although there were competitions between the two pubs in darts, dominoes and a quiz, the most popular event during the year was the annual soccer match. My dad and my uncle were both in the Crown and Anchor team, my other uncle played for the King George' team. A special attraction of the Crown was the barmaid Mary. She was vivacious and sexy and flirted shamelessly with the younger men. She was married to Jack Holmes the publican.

I was looking forward to the contest, which was due to take place on the first Sunday after Lent. An open space in the centre of the village had been marked out and goal posts hastily erected at each end. Well before the 2pm kickoff, the crowd began to

assemble and warmly welcomed the Crown team, dressed in a red and white trim.

I heard the referee ask one of the linesmen,

‘Where’s the King George’s team?’

He shook his head.

‘I’ll go and find out,’ and he ran off towards the pub.

He arrived to find the team surrounding the coach still receiving a prep talk. He pushed through the ring and shouted,

‘What the hell are you doing, the game was due to start 15 minutes ago?’

‘We’ll be there soon,’ the coach had said, ‘when I’ve finished.’

By now we were getting restless and had begun to sing ‘why are we waiting?’ At twenty minutes past the hour, the King George’s team wearing blue and white trim, ran onto the field to a mixture of boos and cheers. Soon the game began. Within a short while the first foul occurred.

Rapidly other’s followed and it became more a battlefield than a game. I saw the referee struggling to control the violence and soon fights were breaking out all over the field. At first the crowd jeered and shouted but then one or two of the more rowdy ones decided to join in and a free for all ensued. I was enjoying the spectacle not realising that some of the players were

getting badly hurt. Not long after, a siren was heard and four policemen arrived with two dogs.

One began to use a loud hailer exhorting the players to stop fighting. Many players including my two uncles were taken to the Police station, a small single storey building at the far end of the town hidden by a very old oak tree. The six football players who had been charged with causing an affray were lined up in front of Sergeant Bryant and Constable Jones. Even though they were in custody, my uncles continued to abuse each other getting more and more angry. Then one of them mentioned Mary's name and the Constable pricked up his ears. Reflexly he shouted at them,

'Shut up and leave her out of this.'

The Sergeant turned and looked at his junior puzzled by what he had heard. The six villagers were photographed and had their fingerprints taken. They were then cautioned and allowed out.

I was in the pub in the early evening when I noticed Mary reach for her husband's arm as he was walking past her to serve some seated customers.

I heard her whisper. 'I don't feel very well, I think I'll go home early as we don't

seem to be that busy tonight.' He had replied,

'Ok dear, have an early night, I see you later,' and they had kissed.

Jack continued to serve us but gradually as the regulars drifted away he decided to close early. He was a bit the worse for drink when he said he was going to walk home. He added that it was only a short walk to the bungalow on the outskirts of the village. He loved the solitude of the countryside at night with its unbroken view of the moors. The sky was cloudless with the moonlight showing him the way.

When he arrived home, he let himself in and called out to Mary that he was at home. There was no reply. She must be in the bedroom he would have thought making his way to the back of the house. But the room was in darkness and she was nowhere to be found. He called out again but there was no reply. That's odd, he thought, she must have met her sister on the way and stopped off for a chat. For a moment he thought of phoning her but it was getting late so he decided to relax on the settee in the front room and wait for her. He must have fallen asleep when some voices roused him. He heard a key turning in the front door and watched in the moonlight as Mary came into the house wiping her mouth. She didn't see him at first but as he moved she suddenly stopped.

I could imagine their conversation.

'You frightened me sitting there in the dark I didn't know who it was. What are you doing home so early?' For a moment he was confused and then he jumped up and confronted her. Grabbing her by the arms he shouted,

'Where have you been?' Before she could answer he saw that her lipstick was smeared.

'My God, you've been kissing someone behind my back?'

'I haven't, I went to see my sister. I wouldn't double cross you, I love you, please let me explain.' But Jack now blinded by rage and alcohol ignored her pleas.

'I don't believe a word you filthy slut, look at your mouth.' All his pent up rage exploded. He remembered the way she flirted with the customers leaning forwards so they could see her breasts, how jealous he felt but could do nothing.

Mary tentatively touched her swollen lips.

'Yes touch them, who else has touched them, who else?' He pushed her backwards into the kitchen and began to strike her.

'You bitch I turn my back and you deceive me. Who was it? One of those fancy boys in the bar?' Mary began to back away from him but he followed her and continued to push and punch her. She felt stinging

blows on her face and chest and tasted blood. Suddenly she was standing with her back against the dresser. Instinctively she reached behind and felt the drawer. Slowly she opened it and desperately felt for something to defend herself. Her hand curled around a knife and reflexly she pulled it out brandishing it in front of him.

‘Stop it,’ she shouted. ‘You’re drunk, you’re hurting me.’ But he took no notice and continued,

‘You bitch, you fucking bitch. I’ll show you not to mess around with other men.’

Frantic to stop him and fearing for her life, she pulled the knife out in front of her and as he lunged at her, it sunk into his chest. She couldn’t believe how easily it went in between his ribs like entering cold butter. For a moment he didn’t react and then he stopped, a look of disbelief appearing on his face and he began to grimace. Gasping, he reached forwards and clutched his chest, from which a bright red stream of blood was spurting, pouring over his hands. He looked down at them puzzled and with incredulity.

Mary had watched as if in slow motion. No longer afraid, she reached forwards and tried to help him as he slid slowly to the ground, a gurgling sound emitting from his throat. Suddenly he stopped moving; his eyes glazed over, his

body shuddered as he took a deep gasp and then he was silent. The only sound was the sheep lowing in the fields. Horrified she leaned over him and gently touched his face trying to rouse him but he didn't move, he was dead.

At first Mary felt an immense sense of relief; she was no longer in danger but then the horror of what had happened hit her. She panicked, my God! What have I done? I didn't mean to. It all happened so quickly, what am I going to do?

I read the newspaper's report that said that it was very late when Constable Ewan Jones parked his car in his drive. He wondered if she was all right and decided find out if she was in trouble, he thought beginning to stride the short distance towards her house. As he neared it, all seemed strangely quiet and then he heard the sound of moaning. He entered the open front door and followed the sound. He had found Mary sitting on the floor with Jack apparently asleep on her lap.

'Are you both OK?' he called out.

'Thank God it's you, Jack's dead!' The policemen could see a pool of blood congealed on the floor spreading out from Jack's chest.

'My God, Mary what happened?'

'I killed him, I killed him, he was beating me and I had to defend myself.'

Ewan had bent down and slowly lifted Jack's limp body off her and laid it gently on the floor. He saw the kitchen knife sticking out of its chest. He took Mary in his arms and stroked her face.

The conversation would have gone something like this I guessed.

'Tell me what happened?'

'I killed him,' Mary kept repeating, 'I only wanted to stop him hitting me.'

'I know you only wanted to protect yourself,' but Ewan knew that she would never get away with self defence, no one would believe her, she would be imprisoned for life. Realising what he had to do, he whispered,

'Mary, we must get rid of the body and no one will know what happened.'

'But how?' She sobbed.

Ewan thought quickly, he had read about bodies being lost on the moor.

'We must bury him on the moor no one will find him. I will deal with it. You ring the pub and ask to speak to your husband as if you're worried that he hasn't come home then clean up the blood.'

When she arrived at the Police Station, Sergeant Bryant was on duty. Leaning through the grill at the Police Station, he asked,

‘Can I help you Mary?’

‘Yes please, I’m worried about Jack, he didn’t come home last night. I phoned the pub and they say he left them at 10 o’clock. I waited up for him but he hasn’t come back. I’m getting frantic he has never done this before.’

Sergeant Bryant had heard it all before, husbands going off on a spree but he hadn’t expected it of Jack Holmes, he seemed a very stable sort of man although he did become rowdy when he had had too much to drink.

‘Why don’t we leave it a few days and see what happens? Maybe he needed to think.’

‘I don’t understand what you mean? He’s disappeared and I’m worried.’

‘I understand Mary; it must be a worry let me come round and see you. Are you free tomorrow?’

‘Of course, come whenever you wish,’ Mary said. ‘Now I must get to the pub, I’ll need to take over while Jack’s away.’ As she said the words she knew that he would never return.

It was apparent that the Sergeant was not satisfied with her reply and the following day he knocked on the door of her bungalow. Mary had seen him through the front window coming up her path. Her heart was pounding.

‘Hi Mary, thanks for letting me have a word with you, it must be a very worrying time.’

‘Yes it’s three days now and I haven’t heard a word from him. He’s not answering his phone.’ Sergeant Bryant sat down on the settee and took out his notebook.

‘Now Mary, I want you to tell me exactly what happened during the last three days.’ Mary took a deep breath.

‘I’m very sorry Sergeant, it’s very difficult. I am so confused and worried. I came home from the pub early as business was very quiet and expected Jack to return when he closed up once the last customers had left, normally at about 10.30. I usually wait up for him and we have a chat before we go to bed. I waited to well after midnight and he hadn’t returned. I phoned the pub and they told me that he had left just after 10.30, that’s when I panicked. I don’t know what to do? I haven’t heard from him since. He hasn’t answered his phone and no one has seen him since.

The Sergeant listened attentively taking the occasional note and then he got up and began walking around the house ending up in the kitchen. Mary waited, praying that he would find nothing amiss. He returned after a few minutes thanked her and left.

Mary let out a sigh of relief, She thought he might have noticed something in the kitchen but as she had meticulously cleaned the floor and the sideboard, there was no obvious evidence that anything had occurred. She knew that if the forensic people had done an examination they may have found blood but there was no reason for them to be suspicious so she gradually stopped worrying.

Over the next few months, Mary and Ewan began seeing each other openly and soon they had settled down together. Gradually the police slowed down their search for her husband and all seemed to have been forgotten until that fateful day when my father and I unearthed the body of Jack Homes in the peat bog.

Ewan now Sergeant was at the police station. He had heard that a man's body had been unearthed but was not aware of its identity.

It was early the next Sunday when Mary's front door bell rang. Mary still in her dressing gown was in the kitchen making breakfast. She turned off the gas and hurried to open it. She was surprised to see Sergeant Bryant standing there.

‘Good Morning Mary,’ he said. ‘I am sorry to disturb you so early on a Sunday morning, may I come in?’ The sight of the Sergeant surprised her and for a moment she was lost for words.

‘Yes of course, please come into the parlour. I’ve got the kettle on, would you like a cup of tea?’.

‘I’ve some disturbing news to tell you.’ Mary felt her heart miss a beat.

‘What is it?’ she asked aware that her voice was quivering.

‘Your husband has been found,’ he said watching her closely.

‘But that’s impos,’ she suddenly stopped in mid sentence. ‘My husband, I don’t understand. Where is he? Is he OK?’ The Sergeant waited watching her closely. He continued,

‘His body has been found.’ Mary put her hand to her mouth.

‘Oh my God his body? How do you mean?’

‘His body was dug up from the peat bog just outside town two days ago’.

Mary had dreaded this moment. As the years had passed she thought that maybe the body of her husband would never be found. The event settled quietly at the back of her mind. Occasionally in the early years she would wake up screaming with fear but that was no longer happening.

'Mary I am afraid I must caution you, you are under arrest.'
You do not need to say anything. But it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something, which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence. If you do not have a lawyer one will be provided for you.'

Mary listened dumbfounded unable to take in what was happening. She felt tears pricking her eyes and tried to dry them. The Sergeant was still speaking,

'I would like you to get dressed and accompany me to the station.'

After being searched, fingerprinted and photographed, Mary was led down to the cells. It had all happened so quickly that she was hardly able to believe it was real. The sound of her cell door being slammed shut echoed through her head as the cold stark reality of what was happening hit her. She sat on the hard bed in the corner of her cell beneath the small barred window struggling to stop herself from crying out. She had never felt so alone, never so desolate, not since her childhood when her father walked out of the family and she had tried to console her mother. She recalled the feeling of desperation then just like she felt now,

helpless, alone deserted unable to find anything to hold on.

She had expected to hear from Ewan but he did not contact her. She waited for his visit or call but nothing, his silence was the most painful to bear. She fell into a fitful sleep and dreamed that it was unreal and that she would awake and find herself in her house with Ewan.

The sound of keys turning in the cell lock woke her. A plate of food and a cup of tea were placed on the floor.

‘Thank you,’ she murmured.

Mary was dozing when her cell was opened later and a visitor entered. He was tall and lean with thinning grey hair and a slightly bent nose. He wore thick-rimmed glasses and spoke with a slight stammer. He introduced himself. ‘Hello Mary I am James Portage. I have spoken to the Sergeant and I understand that you are accused of killing your husband and burying his body. I have been appointed to act as your defence counsel. My job is to represent you in Court and to make sure that your story is heard. Do you understand?’

‘Yes thank you, I am desperate. Even my partner has turned against me.’

By the end of almost two hours grilling, Mary had told the whole story admitting everything.

‘What do you think Mr Portage, do I have a chance?’

‘Call me James. Yes you have a strong case of self-defense although arranging to bury the body has weakened your position. Now one thing I must insist upon is that you speak to no one about what you have told me, no one! Especially the Sergeant who will try and catch you out. Promise me.’

‘I promise. Thank you James, you have given me hope and taken a heavy load off my mind. I know I did wrong but I was desperate I thought my life was in danger.’

Later that day she was escorted to the Sergeant’s office, a small claustrophobic space sufficient only for a desk and a chair.

‘Please sit down Mary. I would like to ask you some questions. Before doing so I think you should know that we searched your house and found evidence of blood in the kitchen, small drops on the edges of the kitchen table. The blood is being analysed, we think we know whose it is.’

‘Mary can you tell me how the blood got there?’ Mary felt strangely calm, the

interview with her barrister had strengthened her and she was able to answer confidently.

‘I have been advised to say nothing.’

‘I see, won’t you tell me why you killed your husband? We know you did it. Who helped you to carry the body out of your house and bury it? We think we know who it was Mary.’ Mary said nothing.

‘I’m sorry you are being so unhelpful but we will get to the truth I assure you and you will face the full fury of the law. Take her away,’ the sergeant said angrily.

Deep in the bowels of the local hospital an autopsy was being carried out. The body retrieved from the peat bog had lain in cold storage in the morgue for three days. Taken out of the refrigerator it was lifted onto a shaky trolley with squeaking wheels and rolled into the autopsy theatre, a dismal room poorly lit by four yellowing fluorescent tubes hanging at equal spacing from the ceiling. The walls painted off-white were peeling and the floor was a grey composite material, which was easily mopped. Several large fans whirred noisily, wafting the stale air to the outside but they were insufficient to remove the distinct smell of death.

The body was carefully placed on the examination table, an enamel rectangular bath with a central drainage hole. An array of

knives forceps and cutters were laid out on a table nearby.

Dr James Sunway a forensic pathologist dressed in a green surgical gown and wearing a mask surveyed the body. His unruly mop of hair was stuffed into a surgical cap.

'Good morning gentlemen,' he said in a rich Scottish brogue, addressing the small group of students attached to the department. Looking closely at the corpse he began to describe the body speaking loud enough for a microphone suspended above the table to pick up his voice.

'A well preserved male body aged between 40 and sixty. The face is partially denuded exposing the jaw and part of the skull.' A flash suddenly went off from a camera taking photos. He continued,

'The skin is intact elsewhere apart from a 10 cms clean incision over the 3rd and 4th ribs on the left. The cut passes deeply into the body. After removal of the chest wall, it is apparent that there is a broad gash in the left ventricle of the heart. The other organs are normal. Dental records have determined that the body is that of Jack Holmes.

I estimate it has been preserved in the peat bog for more than 15 years. The cause of death was exsanguination due to a

laceration of the heart leading to heart failure.'

Dr Sunway collected the typed report the following day and presented his findings and conclusions to the coroner's court one week later. Its premise was to ascertain the cause of death of Jack Holmes.

On completion of his verbal report the Coroner asked Dr Sunway.

'In your opinion doctor what was the cause of the death of Mr Jack Holmes?'

'Your Honour, in my opinion the cause of death was exsanguination and heart failure as a result of a stab wound through the chest wall which punctured the heart.'

The death was promptly reported to the Crown Prosecution Service that immediately instructed the police to investigate it as a case of first-degree murder.

Sergeant Ewan had carefully avoided any contact with Mary since she was arrested. He hoped by keeping away from her that he would be able to deny any involvement in the murder. He had sold the car in which he had carried the body in the boot and now did not know its whereabouts. When questioned by Sergeant Bryant he admitted that he was living with Mary but

insisted that he knew nothing about the killing.

‘On the assumption that Mary stabbed her husband, how do you think she, a mere slip of a girl, was able to transport the body over two miles to the moors and then to dig a grave in which to bury it?’ asked Sergeant Bryant.

‘She must have had some assistance.’

‘Exactly,’ said Sergeant Bryant, ‘exactly and it had to be someone of considerable strength don’t you agree?’

Yes I agree.’

‘Someone of your build and strength, don’t you agree?’

The news of the trial had created a great deal of interest especially among the farmers who worked on the Moor. They were aware that peat bogs preserved animals, often finding an almost perfectly preserved sheep during their digging. It was no surprise to them that a human body had lain undiscovered for so long.

Hours before the start, the roads around the court were jammed with cars filled with local people trying to get in. Most of them, regulars at the Pub were familiar with the victim and his accused. At ten minutes before the hour the doors were opened and people streamed in rushing to

get a good seat with a view of the proceedings. Mothers with babes in their arms were cautioned to keep them quiet otherwise they would be removed. I was caught up in the excitement and managed to squeeze in to the back of the court. My father was a key witness and I didn't want to miss any of the action.

Promptly at 10 am the Court Officer called out 'Quiet'. All eyes were on the raised counter from which the judge would officiate. A door to the left of the stage opened and Judge Ian Mason QC walked briskly to his desk and sat down. He was short and stocky with a white fluffy mustache and was wearing a small grey wig.

'You may sit,' announced the Officer. A loud rumble followed as people struggled to find enough room to sit.

Then twelve men and women filed into the Jury box. They looked ill at ease and rather self-conscious. I didn't envy them their job, judging a fellow being was no joke I thought, especially when the death penalty was possible.

The court hushed and the Officer continued, 'The crown versus Mrs Mary Holmes, accused of the willful murder of her husband

Jack Holmes and disposing of his body in a bog on the Moors.'

There was an audible intake of breath from the onlookers, one or two clapped.

'Who is acting for the Crown?' Asked the judge.

'I am your Honour.'

I watched as Miss Penelope Liversedge, a tall, slim young woman dressed in a dark close fitting two-piece suit and wearing a trim wig stood up and nodded to the judge. They had faced each other several times in the past.

'And for the Defence?'

James Portage rose taking hold of his lapels and raising himself up to his full height.

'I am your Honour,'

I didn't think he was a match for her, she seemed so much more assured and confident.

'Miss Liversedge will you please read out the crown's accusation.'

'Sir, the Crown will prove that on a date approximately in 1948, Mary Holmes did willfully stab and kill her husband Jack Holmes and with persons unknown bury the body in a peat bog on the moors.'

The judge leaned forwards and peered through his glasses at Mary.

'Mary Holmes, how do you plead?'

The court went quiet. I watched her face as she prepared to reply. There was not a flicker of hesitation as she answered,

‘Not Guilty your honour.’ There was a shuffle around the court.

‘Quiet please’, called out the Officer.

‘Will the Prosecution please proceed with the Crown’s case?’

Miss Liversedge rose again and adjusting her glasses glanced at her notes.

Addressing her remarks to the Jury she said,

‘I call Mr Frank Shields.’

My father a short thickset man with unkempt hair and a five o’clock shadow walked slowly to the witness box and took the oath. He was obviously very nervous and stumbled over the words.

‘Please state you full name and occupation,’ said the Officer.

‘I am Frank Shields. I am a farmer living on the edge of the Yorkshire Moors.’

‘Mr Shields, please tell the Judge what you found in 1973 in the course of your work.’

‘Your Honour, I was working not far from my home on the lower part of the moor. I was digging peat a job I do regularly. On this particular day I had dug a hole about two feet deep when I came upon a protruding hand.’

‘Please continue Mr Shields,’ said Miss Liversedge.

‘I called my son and after further digging we unearthed a body.’

‘What did you do then?’

‘I notified the police who took the body away.’

‘Did you recognise the body?’

‘Yes it was ...’

‘Objection,’ shouted James Portage.

‘Mr Shields is not a Forensic expert.’

‘Objection accepted.’ said the judge turning to Mr Portage.

‘Any more questions for this witness?’

‘No thank you my Lord.’

Miss Liversedge then said,

‘I would like to call Dr James Sunway a forensic Pathologist who carried out the autopsy.’

I had seen him sitting in the court. A plumpish man with his crumpled suit and wrinkled tie. He seemed so out of place. I watched as he waddled to the witness stand, took the oath and described his qualifications.

‘Dr Sunway, please tell the court your findings.’ Dr Sunway proceeded to describe his findings.

‘What were your conclusions?’

‘The man had been killed by a stabbing injury of his left chest which pierced

his heart. His body was buried soon after. It was well preserved despite being buried in a peat bog.'

'Are you able to give a date when this happened?

'I would estimate it to be 10 – 15 years ago. The water-logged peat had preserved his skin and inner organs.'

'Were you able to identify the body?

'Yes Sir, it was Jack Holmes.'

'Finally Doctor could you please explain to the Jury and myself, the way in which peat preserves a body.'

'Yes your Honour, Peat bogs are acidic wetlands –the waterlogged peat holds little Oxygen so microorganisms causing decay cannot survive. Soft tissues and internal organs are preserved but bones are decalcified. The sphagnum moss produces an antibiotic substance that staves off rot in several ways.

First, it binds with proteins on the surface of microorganisms in a way that immobilizes them and removes them from the water.

Second, its highly reactive carbonyl groups can alter the chemicals and nutrients that would be necessary for the decomposition of a piece of organic matter.

Third, the sphagnum moss causes the organic matter to undergo certain chemical changes that make it more

impervious to rot—in much the same way that animal skins can be preserved as leather.’

I listened closely to his description of the effects of peat, a subject I knew well but I could see that he had lost the Jury all of whom had puzzled looks on their faces.

Then the Judge spoke,

‘Mr Portage any questions?’

‘No Sir, I will reserve my questions concerning this issue until later when I present my own expert.’

‘I call Sergeant Bryant,’ said Miss Liversedge.

The sergeant smartly dressed in his pressed uniform entered the witness box and took the Oath.

I hadn’t seen him for some while. He seemed to have aged and looked as if the whole world’s problems were on he’s shoulders.

He began,

‘I am Sergeant Bryant a police Officer attached to the Police Station at Dearby.’

‘Thank you, please tell the court what you did after the body had been found.’

‘I had a strong suspicion who it might be....’

Quick as a flash Miss Liversedge interrupted.

‘Stop Sergeant, just please tell the court what you did, not what you thought.’

‘Yes Ma’am, I contacted Mary and arranged to go and see her at her house. She was very nervous and upset. I examined her kitchen and found blood spots on the edges of the furniture as if the place had been carefully cleaned.’

‘When I told the accused that I had found some blood, she said, ‘Oh yes, it’s mine, I cut myself some while ago, I thought I had cleaned it all up.’

‘Mr Portage any questions,’ asked the judge putting down his pen.

‘Yes your Honour, Sergeant did you have Mary’s blood tested?’

‘Yes sir,’ Forensics later confirmed that the blood was O+ the same as the victim’s.’ A murmur went around the court. Miss Liversedge rose and addressed the witness,

‘Sergeant will you please tell the Court what you found in the garden of Mary’s house’

‘Some weeks after the body of the deceased was found, I decided to revisit Mary’s home. Having checked the house again. I went into the garden. I noticed a number of recently planted bushes not yet in bloom. My attention was drawn to one particularly plant. The soil around it was poorly firmed down and the

recent rain had caused a part of the surface to sink. In the base of the sunken area I saw a rusty object. On retrieving it, I found it to be a long kitchen knife with small brownish stains. These stains proved to be blood group O-ve the same as the deceased.'

'Mr Portage, any questions?'

'Yes your honour,'

'Sergeant did you say the blood was group O-ve.'

'Yes the same as the victim.'

'And the same as Mary's.'

'Yes sir.'

'What did you do then?'

'I cautioned Mary, arrested her and charged her.'

'Mr Portage?'

'No questions.'

'Your Honour I have now completed the case for the Prosecution,' said Miss Liversedge and sat down.

'Mr Portage will you please present the case for the Defence' 'Thank you your honour, I call upon Dr Milt Granger an American Pathologist, an expert in Bog preservation.'

A tall lanky figure wearing Jeans and a T-shirt entered the witness box and took the oath.

'Dr Granger, you have had the opportunity to examine the body and the site where it was found. What is your opinion as

to the date of death? The prosecution said it was about 15 years ago. What do you think? Dr Granger spoke slowly with a southern drawl,

‘Dating a body taken from a bog is notoriously difficult. It depends on a number of factors including the build of the victim, his age, his diet and physical fitness, also the physical characteristic of the bog, which can confuse the ageing process. While it is convenient to age the burial to 15 years ago the time when Mr Holmes disappeared, it would be equally possible to argue that he was killed much later and buried later, as late as five years ago.’ There was a hush in the court. Mary whispered to her barrister,

‘What is he saying?’

‘He is saying that your husband could have been killed five years ago and not fifteen which the prosecution insists.’

Miss Liversedge rose,

‘Dr Granger, I want to clarify your opinion, Are you saying that in your view, the body could have been buried as little as five years ago or as long as 20 years ago.’

‘Yes.’

Miss Liversedge continued,

‘Doctor, do you also accept that the body could also have been buried 15 years ago and that the technology is not accurate to 10 or 20 years?’

‘Yes.’ The judge made a note on his file

‘Thank you Doctor, no more questions.’

Mr Portage continued,

‘I would now like to call Mrs Mary Holmes.’

Mary wearing a pale pink dress looking demure and less than her 32 years faltered as she walked to the witness stand. She took the bible in her right hand, gazing down and in a very quiet and subdued voice, almost a whisper was sworn in. A camera flashed surprising everyone.

‘All photography is forbidden,’ roared the clerk. A scuffle was heard, as the amateur photographer was manhandled out of the court.

The flash startled me and for a moment I thought it was a gun firing. When the excitement had died down the judge turned to Mary who was still standing in the dock looking puzzled.

‘You may sit down,’ said the Judge. Mr Portage began,

‘Mrs Holmes, please tell the court in your own words what happened on that day fifteen years ago.’

‘I killed me husband.’ There was an audible gasp in the court.

‘Please tell the court how you killed him?’

‘I stabbed him with a kitchen knife.’

‘Now Mrs Holmes I want you to think carefully before you answer my next question.’

‘Yes Sir,’ she whispered holding a small handkerchief in her hand and occasionally dabbing her face. The judge noticed it and leaned forwards,

‘Would you like glass of water before you proceed Mrs Holmes?’

‘Thank you your honour,’

‘Now Mary, why did you stab your husband?’ There was a palpable silence. You could have heard a pin drop in the room.

‘I thought he was going to kill me,’

‘Why did you think that?’

‘He attacked me and was beating me. He wouldn’t stop. He was out of control. I thought he was going to kill me. I tried to stop him but he went on. I was desperate.’

‘Why did he hit you?’

‘I’d been out, having some fun and came home and he saw that my lipstick was smeared.’

‘How did you lipstick become smeared?’

Mary looked down and began to cry.

'I'd been kissing someone and hadn't seen he was home otherwise I'd have wiped it off.'

There was a ripple of laughter in the Court.

'Silence please,' called out the Court Officer

'Who were you kissing?'

'I don't want to say,' she said.

'Now Mary it's important for the jury to understand exactly what happened and why.'

Sargent Ewan Jones entered the hall and stood motionless absorbed in his thoughts. He remembered his mother, how she was left alone with three small children when his father walked out. He saw her struggling to keep the family together. He would hear her wracked with tears night after night.

Then I saw him bracing himself. He mounted the marble steps and entered the court building that was constructed during the era of affluence with no cost spared, lofty marble columns, a polished white marbled tiled floor, heavy glass chandeliers hanging from the ceiling tinkled in the light breeze and heavy. Quietly opening the courtroom door he nodded to the usher and stood at the back listening. Mary was on the stand and was refusing to name him. He watched her declining to answer the questions and trying to protect him. Despite all that had

happened between them she was being loyal. He knew what he had to do.

I watched him stride down the central aisle, stop halfway and put up his hand. The Judge looked up from his writing and saw him. Puzzled by this unexpected interruption, he waited.

‘May I say something your Honour?’
Sergeant Jones asked.

‘Who are you?’

‘I’m Sergeant Jones and I need to say something to the court.’

‘This is very irregular,’ said the judge, ‘I need to confer. Will you and the two barristers come to the bar and tell me what you want to say?’

I could see that the onlookers were confused, whispered conversations could be heard, ‘what’s going on? Why are they talking to each other?’

The barristers and Sergeant Jones made their way to the bar and stood in front of the judge. Sergeant Jones spoke,

‘I want to clarify my position, Your Honour I was Mary’s lover and want to explain everything.’

‘I see,’ said the Judge. ‘Miss Liversedge, do you have any objection to this man appearing as a defence witness?’

She looked at the Sergeant, shrugged her shoulders and said,

‘I suppose not.’

Mr Portage resumed his questioning,

‘I apologise for the interruption Mary. May I remind you that you are still under oath. Now Mary I will ask you again, who were you kissing?’ Mary seemed to have not heard the question as if she was thinking about something else. Then in a defiant voice she said,

‘Him’ pointing at Sergeant Jones, ‘him!’

There was pandemonium in the court. People were laughing, standing up and clapping, others smiling to themselves in a knowing way.

‘Silence, silence,’ called the Officer.

‘Now Mary,’ Mr Portage continued, ‘tell the court about your relationship with Sergeant Jones?’

‘I worked in the Crown as a barmaid. Jack, Mr Holmes and I became friendly and we got married. We were happy for a while but he began to drink and would hit me sometimes. I didn’t like it and one day when I was feeling low I told Ewan, I mean Sergeant Jones. He seemed kind and we got on well. We began to meet outside the pub and we, you know, he was very gentle

and loving not like Jack. I think Jack knew but said nothing.'

'Go on,'

'That night I was bored as the pub was quiet and I arranged to meet Ewan. I told Jack that I wasn't feeling too good and left early. Ewan and me met and we had a cuddle, you know.' Mr Portage nodded.

'Mary I need you to answer one more question.'

Mary looked up she felt drained and wanted to get out of the court but she knew she had to concentrate

'Mary one more question?' he repeated, 'did you intend to kill your husband?'

The court went quiet. Everyone was straining to hear her answer.

'No, no, I wanted him to stop hitting me, to stop hurting me. The knife, I thought he would stop and move away but he didn't.' She collapsed sobbing.

'He didn't and I stabbed him, I didn't mean to kill him, it was an accident. Oh! My God what did I do?'

There was a long silence; only the sound of the wall clock ticking could be heard.

'How did you get the body, your husband's body to the Moor?'

Mary seemed to shrink; she curled up in herself as if not wanting to recall the day. Then looking up she pointed at Sergeant Ewan.

‘He helped me.’ She resumed her sobbing with soft moans as she shook her head.

Mr Portage, tight lipped, walked back to his seat.

‘Miss Liversedge any questions?’

‘No your Honour.’

‘I call Sergeant Jones to the stand,’ said Mr Portage.

‘Please tell the court your name and occupation.’

‘My name is Sergeant Ewan Jones. I am a Police Sergeant in North Yorkshire.’

‘Please tell the court your relationship with Mrs Holmes.’

‘We were lovers.’ The crowd shuffled, some clapped others jeered.

‘Please tell the court what happened on the night of the incident?’

‘I was off duty when I had a phone call from, Mary, Mrs Holmes. She said she was bored and could we meet. We met by the Big Oak tree a favourite meeting place and walked down the lane. She looked very sad and unhappy. We hugged and kissed for a while and then I left her at the corner at about 10 pm and she walked home.’

'I went back to my house and did some reading. About two hours later I looked out of my window and saw that her light was still on, I can see her house from mine. I phoned her but there was no reply. I was worried and decided to investigate. When I arrived the front door was open and I could hear sobbing. I followed the sound and found Mary on the floor in the kitchen cradling Jack's head on her lap. There was blood everywhere. I could see that he was dead. She was hysterical, crying and shaking trying to wake Jack.'

'I hugged her and tried to calm her. She told me what had happened. How Jack had been waiting for her, lost his temper and beat her up. I knew that I should arrest her and take her to the station for questioning but I loved her and wanted to protect her. So I helped her clean up the kitchen removing as much blood as possible. We then carried the body to my car, put it in the boot and I drove to the Moor where I buried it.'

There was a strained silence in the court. Some people were crying, others shifting in their seats. No one had ever heard anything like this before.

The judge coughed and said,

'Miss Liversedge any questions?'

'No Your Honour.'

The judge turned to the two barristers,

'It's getting late please be prepared to present your final summing up statements tomorrow at 10 am.'

'Court dismissed,' called out the Court Officer.

I joined the crowds as they left the court and made their way home, the day's business was on every one's lips. There were quite heated arguments about what sentence she should be given if any.

It was a bright clear day when the court reassembled the following day. Once again I joined the swelling crowds, jostling and shoving, hoping to catch the final result. We milled about the entrance straining to get in. We were all eager to hear the final submissions and to find out in due course the Jury's decision. Everybody had a view. Some usually the women were sympathetic and believed that if they had been in Mary's situation they would have done the same. Others usually males wanted justice; an eye for an eye was the favourite judgement.

The case had gained enormous notoriety and had attracted reporters from all the major newspapers, who were impatient to send their reports back to their editors. When everyone was settled the Judge spoke,

‘Miss Liversedge will you please present your summation.’ The tension in the court was palpable.

Miss Liversedge stood up, her face unemotional: she arranged the papers on her desk, adjusted her gown and walked slowly to the centre of the court. She turned her head slowly to face the Jury. She looked from left to right trying to connect with each member. Some returned her look others looked away embarrassed.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury, you have been assembled here today to decide, on the basis of what you have heard over the last few weeks here in the court, whether the accused Mary Holmes sitting with her counsel Mr Portage is guilty of premeditated murder of her husband Jack Holmes, late Publican of the George in the Village of Pearby. That sometime in 1947 she and Sergeant Jones then Constable Jones did conspire to take the body and bury it in the moors and that the body remained hidden for almost 15 years until it was inadvertently dug up by a local farmer Mr Frank Shields. Because of the preservation of the body in the peat bog, the exact date of the murder is not known.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen, do not be deceived by the demure innocent look of the accused. The evidence has demonstrated

beyond reasonable doubt that she knowingly and deliberately killed her husband by stabbing. I have shown that she knew what she was doing and chose a weapon suitable for the act. I will not repeat the sequence of events leading up to the murder except to point out that at that time, the accused was in a clandestine affair with Sergeant Jones who is accused with her as an accomplice.

On the night of the murder, Mrs Mary Holmes was cavorting with Jones unbeknown to her husband who was at work in the pub. Later that evening, he is at home when she returns dishevelled with her lipstick smeared. He like any loving husband is shocked by what he sees and loses his temper. The accused lures him into the kitchen, reaches for a knife that she knew was in the drawer and plunges it into his heart. He dies within in a few minutes. Jones who is waiting at home sees the light and comes to the house. Together they bundle the body into his car and bury it in the moor. The accused reports his absence to the police who set up a hunt but he cannot be found and it is assumed that he has gone away.

Fifteen years later the body of Jack Holmes is removed from the moor by chance. Autopsy confirms that he died from a stabbing wound to his heart. Detailed examination of Mary's kitchen finds traces of

blood belonging to the victim. The knife, the murder weapon was found later in her garden.

In conclusion, Ladies and Gentlemen, the evidence presented to you leaves you without any alternative but to find the accused Mrs Mary Holmes guilty of the first-degree murder of her husband Jack Holmes and Ewan Jones as an accomplice.'

Miss Liversedge stands for a moment and slowly scans the faces of the jury before walking back to her seat.

'Mr Portage, your summation?'

Mr Portage sits for a moment before getting up. He wraps his gown around him, stands up and walks slowly across the floor to face the Jury. He takes a deep breath and reminding himself to speak slowly, begins.

'Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury, you have heard a very well argued explanation of the death of Mr Holmes and you may have been convinced that my client Mrs Holmes was guilty as suggested. But be assured that the persuasive account presented by my honorable friend bears no semblance to the truth. I suggest to you that the facts show that the death of Mr Holmes was a terrible accident and one, which Mrs

Homes mourns to this day. The Holmes had met when Mary applied for a job as a barmaid at the George. She was much younger than him and after the death of his wife; they fell in love and married. It was initially a happy marriage but as time went on the disparity in age became apparent. He liked to sit and drink, she liked to party. She became increasingly lonely and then she met Jones one of the regulars at the George. They fell into an easy relationship and soon became lovers. Many believe that Jack knew about it but looked aside.

On the night of the accident, Mary returned home after seeing Jones. She didn't expect Jack to be home yet but he was and he saw her with her makeup smeared. He had been drinking and lost his temper. He threatened Mary and began to hit her. As she described in her evidence she was frightened for her life and did what anyone would do to protect herself, she found an object, a knife and held it in front of her to frighten him and to stop him from attacking her. Unfortunately he lunged forwards and the knife plunged into his heart through his chest and he died. It was the last thing she wanted to do. She was distraught and panicked. Jones wanting to protect her assisted her to bury the body. She admits she killed her husband but it was in self-

defense and deserves the description of justified homicide.'

Approaching the members of the Jury he lowered his voice,

'This is an ill-fated woman who found herself in a terrible situation by a freak accident. She panicked and turned to the only one she knew who would understand and help her, Jones. He disregarded his profession and assisted her to dispose of the body. You can see from her frail broken demeanour that this is a woman whose whole life has been shattered by this freak accident. She deserves to be treated with understanding and compassion.

Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury I know that you will use your wisdom and arrive at the correct decision.'

Mr Portage returned to his seat.

We had arrived at the critical moment in the trial, the tension was almost unbearable as the judge looked up from his writing and solemnly directed his attention to the jury.

'Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury, you have now heard the submissions of the prosecution and the defense together with the evidence presented for and against the charge. It is now your duty to determine your

judgement. You will retire to a private place where you will not be disturbed and deliberate upon what you have heard. I will accept a judgement of guilty of justified homicide or of first-degree murder. When you have a majority that is, eleven of you have agreed, please you will the court.'

As he spoke I could see the look of bewilderment on some of the Juror's faces.

The twelve jurors stood up, some stretched their stiff joints, and left the jury box shuffling behind the court officer to a room at the back of the building. They apparently remained there almost three days returning to their hotel at night. It was at the end of the third day that the foreman indicated to the Judge that they had reached a verdict.

The jury returned to the court. The judge waited for them to settle into their seats and then addressed the accused.

'Mrs Mary Holmes will you stand please.' Mary was helped to her feet by Mr Portage and stood leaning heavily on his arm.

'Mr Foremen will you please let me have your verdict.' A small piece of paper was handed to the judge and he nodded.

'Foreman please read out your verdict.'

'On a majority of 11 out of 12, we find the accused guilty of first-degree murder.'

There was pandemonium in the court. People stood shouting and cheering. Others sat with their hand in their laps weeping.

I watched Mary as she heard the verdict. It took her a moment to realise what was happening, she was dumb-founded and taken completely by surprise, She turned to Mr Portage with sheer disbelief in her eyes.

'What are they saying? That I am guilty, they can't do that, it's not true. I didn't intend to kill him, it was an accident, tell them it was an accident!'

My Potage took her gently by the arm.

'I'm afraid they didn't believe you. We will appeal.'

The next few days passed in a blur. Mary didn't understand when a week later she was sentenced to death by hanging. It was as if the judge was referring to someone else.

How am I going to get through this? Thought Mary sitting alone in her cell. Deep in thought she tried to make sense of what was happening, it couldn't be true, I am not a murderer. They're making a terrible mistake.

They'll soon realise it and let me go. Lying back on her bed she fell into a restless sleep periodically woken by the sound of footsteps or a bright torchlight shone in her face.

'Guard,' Mary called out. 'I want something.' There was no answer. After about ten minutes a guard looked through her grill.

'What do you want?' he barked.

'Some paper and a pencil?'

The guard looked surprised.

'What for?'

'I want to write something.'

'I dunno I'll see, I'll have to ask the Governor.'

The governor was doing his rounds when he stopped outside Mary's cell.

'Is everything all right?' he asked brightly.

'I'm going to die shortly, I'm as well as to be expected.' Retorted Mary.

'Did the guard tell you what I wanted?'

'No?'

'I want some paper and a pencil?'

'What do you want it for?'

'I want to tell my story.'

In 1964 Mary and Ewan found themselves on death row awaiting execution. They were placed in adjoining cells and could speak to each other. The governor felt sympathy for the two lovers and when they asked to be

hung together he agreed. Mary was calm walking to her fate. Ewan was already standing on the gallows his head in a white cloth bag when she climbed the scaffold. She reached out and held his hand and was heard to say,

‘I love you Ewan. God Bless you.’

‘I love you too Mary,’ he had replied as the two traps were sprung. The lovers were hung side by side by the hangman John Ellis in Armley jail.

One year later capital punishment was abolished in Great Britain.

Vault

This is a work of fiction; the characters are imaginary, any similarity between those living today is purely coincidental.

The city was ablaze with excitement at the forthcoming European games. Hours before the opening, the Lyons Stade du Rhone stadium was jam-packed with people from all corners of the globe converging to take part in an unforgettable occasion. The main buildings in the city centre were bedecked with national flags, but the dominant ones were French and German. Even after the start of the opening ceremony, latecomers were still streaming in and being directed to the rear where standing space only was available. From there they could peer forwards to see the action.

The spectator's cheers rose to a crescendo and ricocheted off the stands as the athletes; visible as diminutive figures began to parade nation by nation before the main stand in which the President and his party were seated. The onlookers had waited patiently for their chosen event to begin. Fathers, accompanied by their sons; groups from athletic clubs sporting their colours and teams of scantily dressed cheerleaders were shouting their favorite's

name as one by one the participants were introduced on the intercom.

During the previous month, television and newspapers had described the forthcoming games as the greatest of the century. They had particularly highlighted the battle between the two main pole-vaulter protagonists as a fight between Gladiators. One reporter even called it 'David versus Goliath' to reflect the disparity between the size of the Frenchman and his German competitor.

In the west stand, Pierre now in his seventies watched impatiently. He saw his son Giles preparing to vault. A lump came into his throat. He had never believed that this moment would come, that he would live long enough to see his son, now eighteen compete at the European Games.

It was while he, with thousands of others, was singing 'La Marseillaise' that his thoughts returned to that day so many years ago, the day when he was arrested. He was twenty-four and had completed his university degree in business studies but hadn't yet found a job. He had decided to help in the family bakery set up by his father many years earlier. It provided bread for the small local community. His father had begun to ail and he had welcomed the help from his son.

Pierre had heard that Germany was on the rise again. Would his country France be their target for a second time? The wireless was warning everyone to be prepared. But prepared for what? He was too young to remember but he could imagine the occupation, the dreaded word sprung into his mind, what would that mean? Vividly he recalled standing in front of the bathroom mirror feeling a knot of fear twist inside him. His familiar features were stained with a grey tinge to his skin; his pulse hammering in his temples as small beads of sweat ran down his forehead. He brushed them away impatiently. Could they really destroy every thing he had built up, a life that he had struggled to make?

The Maginot line, the line of fortresses between France and Germany had been breached and the Germans were advancing. Like most of his fellow Frenchmen, he was stunned by the speed of the German advance. They hadn't felt threatened when the Nazis invaded Poland, the war still seemed a long way away, but they hadn't reckoned with the modern tank. Within two days, meeting no opposition, the Germans had captured Paris and France had capitulated.

Having taken over the bakery, Pierre had never tired of bread making. To him it was like magic. He loved the way in which the ingredients became dough. He handled it lovingly, squeezing, and pounding it. When ready he put it into the oven and then a smile would appear on his face as he inhaled the smell of the newly baking bread. That morning, he had left home just before dawn to go to the bakery, planning to be there before 6am. The customers started queuing at 7 am to wait for their freshly cooked baguettes; pain complet, flute and ficelle to emerge piping hot and crisp from the oven. Walking briskly, his mind was preoccupied with the oven which required priming before it would light. As he turned a corner, two German soldiers were standing with their guns raised, blocking his way.

‘Halt mal,’ they commanded.

He was taken completely by surprise and for a moment it didn’t register. He continued walking. The soldiers forced themselves in front of him and repeated the command. He had stopped abruptly.

‘Wie heisst sie?’

‘Pierre Baston,’ he replied.

‘Ihre ID?’ they demanded. Flustered, he fumbled and produced it. The soldier glanced at it briefly, dismissed it with a nod and then as if he was cattle, prodded him at

gunpoint into the back of a truck already crammed with several others.

'I must speak to my family, they will worry!' he begged, trying to attract the attention of the German guard whose only reaction was to raise the butt of his gun to Pierre's face.

They were taken to a waiting area where several thousand civilians had already assembled, the first of many who would be forcibly detained throughout France to work in the fields and factories. They would provide the Nazi war machine with much needed labour.

Pierre was incarcerated with forty others in a hut no more than 15 ft long, the heavy wooden doors of which slammed shut each night. He had sat up and listened for the key in the lock. One day perhaps they would forget. He had imagined creeping towards the door, his hands trembling and opening it slowly, shaking as it creaked and praying that no one was near. It was too much to hope he decided and lay back on his bed; a wooden stall piled upon another and pulled the thin damp blanket over him. The cold had seeped through the cracks in the wooden walls and crept into his flesh and bones. He tossed and turned, struggling with the memory of the day his life changed.

Sudden shouts from the crowd roused Pierre from his memories. Giles had just completed his vault. He had easily sailed over the bar. Then it was Oscar's turn, at 6ft 4in and weighing 92 lbs. he towered over Giles. As he began his run, Pierre heard a shout in German to his left.

'Gut Gemacht Oscar,' and looked up to see where it had come from. Anyone else would have seen a stranger, a frail elderly man leaping up from his seat with his hands raised. But to Pierre, there was something familiar about his features. He struggled to remember and then it came to him in a flash. He was the Officer in charge of the camp.

The shock of seeing him again suddenly brought to the surface a part of his memory that he had tried so hard to bury. He vividly remembered the bright light momentarily blinding him when the doors of the hut were thrown open each day. He would blink as the first rays of light penetrated the gloom. A shout of 'Raus, raus,' woke him up. Together with the others he fumbled with his clothing as he tried to put on as many layers before the cold blast of northern air hit him.

A Nazi Officer Oberleutnant Hans Schmidt was scrutinizing them. He was dressed in a meticulously pressed uniform with a swagger stick under his arm. A career officer he had joined the Hitler youth in his

early teens. When eighteen, he had been selected for special training. Now 20 he was in line for promotion if he managed the labour problem well.

'You,' he yelled, forcing his stick under the chin of one of the men, 'are privileged. You are going to work for the Fatherland to make it the greatest empire the world has ever known.'

Pierre remembered the cold, the shivering and the hunger groans of his stomach. He had eyed Oberleutnant Hans Schmidt from a distance. Standing apart from the others, the officer's appearance was in stark contrast to the prisoners in their tattered clothes and sunken eyes. He had walked amongst them like an animal stalking his prey, his eyes glinting and his body taut ready to spring. He had looked with disgust at them as if they were vermin. Pierre felt loathing and revolt against all he stood for. The Master race, he had heard the phrase before but never confronted it. Now he felt his stomach contract and bile regurgitate into his mouth, bitter phlegm that he reflexly spat onto the ground. The Officer saw his movement and the two watched the gob splattering against his shining boots.

Schmidt's face screwed into a snarl.

'Come here, you,'

Pierre shuffled towards him. He felt a sharp pain across his cheek as the officer's stick had struck him.

'Take that you animal,' he screamed. Pierre staggered and fell into the reeking mud clawing at the air trying to prevent his fall.

The Officer continued ignoring the man struggling on the ground.

'You are in the centre of a farm. Look around, what do you see? Fields, fields that have been neglected, that are overgrown and producing nothing.' He struck the ground as he said the last word.

'You're here to change that. Each of you will be attached to a team with a leader. You will work the soil to produce food for German soldiers so that they may continue the great work of building the third Reich. Heil Hitler!'

Pierre recalled swaying in the wind hardly hearing what he was saying. His only thoughts were for food; even the morning bowl of luke-warm watery soup with a morsel of dried bread was welcomed. They were lined up in their groups and marched to a field that needed to be dug before the wheat was sown. The soil was clay bound, heavy and sticky. It had taken all of Pierre's strength to force the blade into the ground and turn over the sodden earth. Soon the

older men were collapsing with exhaustion. He had gone to help one man near him who was gasping for breath.

‘Halt, leave him and get back to your work,’ the leader screamed. Pierre watched the man out of the corner of his eye as he struggled to breathe. Then he observed something he would never forget. The Oberleutnant who was some way away had seen the incident and walked slowly towards the scene. He stepped forwards, his legs on either side of the fallen man and began to hit him with his stick, harder and harder, shouting,

‘Get up, get up, you lazy fool.’ He seemed to lose control, his eyes glaring; his mouth clamped shut, as he lashed the man’s head and shoulders with a frenzy of blow after blow. The prisoner attempted to obey, forcing himself to get up, but he was too old and too infirm. Gradually his struggling ceased and he lay still. When the officer had gone, Pierre went to the man whose vacant eyes were staring into the distance. He gently closed them.

Weeks followed weeks as the winter passed and the fields became ready to sow. By spring the crop of wheat was waving gently in the warm sun. Pierre saw in that moment its beauty overshadowing the reality of their lives.

Days merged into days as Pierre lost track of time. By 1944, the invasion of Europe had begun and news filtered through that the allies were sweeping across France.

Listening to a hidden radio the inmates had heard the first account of the German collapse as the US Ninth Infantry Division swept into France and liberated the camp.

One day Pierre awoke to unfamiliar sounds, voices that were not German but English. The doors were forced open and the prisoners staggered out into the light. Rubbing their eyes, a group of soldiers stood watching them.

‘Don’t shoot,’ they cried out, ‘we are French prisoners.’

‘We know. We are your friends, we are GIs. You are free,’ the captain announced, ‘the war is over.’

Pierre wasn’t able to understand what that meant. He walked around touching their guns, their uniforms unable to grasp what was happening. He saw the soldiers speaking, their lips moving but the sounds made no sense. He sunk to the ground struggling to fathom what it all meant. It was all too sudden, too quick. He felt someone take his arm. A soldier watching his confusion came to help him.

‘What is your name?’ He asked. Pierre struggled to reply.

'Where do you live? Pierre shrugged his shoulders; he could not understand the question. He kept repeating,

'I am a baker, I am a baker.'

'Good, we need help in the kitchen,' said the Officer.

At last the American troops were pulling out of the camp. Pierre realised that he would have to decide what to do. He and Bill a GI from Florida had become friends. They began to talk to each other in broken English. Both wanted to return to their homes but Pierre was afraid of what he would find.

He was feeling much stronger and optimistic but there was a nagging thought in his mind.

'I must go to my village to see if my family are alive' he said to Bill one morning.

'Where is your town?' Bill had asked.

'Clichy-sous-bois, fifteen kms from Paris, it's a small community. I have lived there all my life, that is until ...' He couldn't finish the sentence. He wanted to blot out the memory of his incarceration.

A few days later Bill came into the kitchen while Pierre was removing a tray of bread.

'There's a jeep going to the centre of Paris,' he said. 'They could go through your village on the way.'

Pierre had misjudged how long the journey to his hometown would take. He would normally have been there within one day but he hadn't reckoned with the roads some of which were impassable and others were still pockmarked and cratered. On the way he saw the ravages of the war; the villages completely razed to the ground, the burnt out tanks and vehicles strewn by the roadside; the fields unploughed, overgrown with weeds.

He despaired for his country, would it ever recover from the havoc and devastation of the war? Driving into the main boulevard of Clichy, he saw destruction everywhere. People were struggling to clear up the chaos and restore their homes. Bulldozers were working piling up the debris and removing the smashed walls and caved in roofs.

He thanked the driver, collected his small bag of belongings and set off to the bakery, the thought of which had sustained him. He had kept the memory of it fresh in his mind.

'I must try and begin again,' he had said to himself.

The road was blocked by wreckage but he managed to find his way clambering over piles of debris. His heart sank when he saw it; the door was missing, the front wall was caved in and the windows broken. He

scrambled his way over fallen masonry, clearing the rubble as best he could.

'I must find the oven, if that's undamaged I could begin again.' After moving some heavy beams, he located it covered in dust and rocks but it was intact. The oven door opened with a squeak. He was able to examine the flue, which was full of pieces of brick. He managed to clear it so that it was patent.

For the first time in many months he could envision a future, the bakery could open again. It would be for him the sign he needed to rebuild his life. Now he must find the ingredients, flour, yeast, sugar and salt. At first it seemed a hopeless task. Who would have the items he wanted to start again? He had been told that there was an American camp near by and after asking some passers-by found his way there.

At the gate, the Guard accosted him.

'Please, I am a baker and I need some ingredients to start baking bread,' he pleaded. 'The people in the village are starving, can you help me?'

'Stay here I will make some enquiries.' After some minutes, a chef with a tall white hat appeared.

'How can we help you?' he asked.

'I'm a baker and I want to restart my bakery in the town, it was almost destroyed in the war.' The chef thought for a minute.

‘Give me a list of the ingredients you need and I will see what I can do. He knew that if he asked permission from the commander it would be denied so he decided to take the decision himself. He returned shortly carrying several heavy bags.

‘Here you are and good luck. Send us some bread when you’ve baked it.’

It was some days later that the smell of newly baked bread wafted into the street causing passers-by to stop and sniff. Soon there was a queue of people waiting. The opening of the bakery signified to them the beginning of a return to normality. Now he had to find his family.

Hans had been watching the Pole-vaulting when his son Oscar took his turn. As the boy flew over the pole he let out cry in German. Suddenly feeling self-conscious he looked around hoping that nobody had noticed. But as he scanned the rows of spectators, he saw an old man staring at him with questioning eyes. He thought that there was something familiar about his face. Where had he seen it before? Then he remembered and a shudder of panic stuck him. It was the prisoner who had spat on his boots so many years ago.

At that moment of recognition, he felt the same dread that had gripped him when

the camp was freed and he had to flee. He remembered it like yesterday. He had grasped that the war was lost. There were more and more casualties and he then realised that the end was near. He heard that men like him were being arrested and executed as War criminals so he discarded his uniform and donned civilian clothes. He grew a beard and dirtied his hands. Posing as a worker, he sneaked out of the camp after dark when a guard spotted him.

'Halt. Show me your pass?'

'Je suis Francais, un ouvrier, a worker, J'habite au village,' he said pointing to the town nearby. For a moment the guard hesitated then shrugging his shoulders let him go.

As soon as he could, Hans took to the road moving at night and living off whatever he found. As a Nazi deserter, he knew he would be shot on sight. His plan was to get back to his hometown of Cottbus in Germany, a University town in Brandenburg.

It took him almost three weeks of travelling, stealing and begging for food before he saw the outline of his town in the distance. As he entered, he was appalled at the destruction. He couldn't believe what he saw; scarcely a building remained intact. The town hall, a converted 18th century cathedral, the pride of the city had been reduced to a pile of rubble. The main roads

were piled high with debris and were virtually impassable so that he had hardly recognised where he was. Picking his way over broken stones and glass he heard voices coming from what looked like a pile of rubble. Cautiously he stepped down a flight of broken stairs into a darkened room where he could make out a number of figures sitting in the gloom

‘Welcome, have you come far?’ A voice asked.

‘Yes from France, I got out before the Americans arrived.’

‘You’re lucky we’ve had the Russians. I don’t know who were worse; I heard there were massacres by the Americans also.’

As his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, Hans saw that he was in a basement. There was a makeshift counter at one corner on which a kerosene lamp was flaring sending long shadows into the recesses. Straining his eyes he could see a number of indistinct figures seated on makeshift chairs some smoking, others chewing. He flopped down on a nearby cushion struggling to breathe in the smoky atmosphere. The men seemed to know each other and as the conversation continued, Hans soon realised that most of them were like him, Nazis deserters. Finally one man turned to him,

‘Friend what were you doing in France?’ Hans hesitated before answering; it could be a trap, he needed to be careful.

‘I was in charge of a farm producing wheat for the army.’

‘Who were the farm workers?’ asked another. Hans felt trapped, he was being interrogated and decided to bluff it out.

‘Come my friends, let’s talk about something happier, are there any girls around, I haven’t had any pussy for years?’

Pierre tried to concentrate on the drama unfolding before him on the playing field but his thoughts were elsewhere. He reached into his pocket and fondled his gun, a 9 mm MAC 50 a single action pistol carrying nine rounds. He had bought it from a retired French policeman soon after the war ended and had looked after it lovingly, cleaning it and occasionally shooting a target to make sure it was in working order. Ever since he was freed from the camp and had returned to his home, he had carried it, never fully losing his feeling of insecurity. He knew that anything could happen and he wanted to be prepared.

Both Pierre and Hans resumed watching the athletes.

The pole vaulting field had narrowed as one by one the other competitors failed

until finally the two men faced each other the one small and compact like a David the other tall broad and fearsome like a Goliath Only Giles and Oscar remained as the other competitors had been unable to match the height and had been eliminated. The bar was now set for six metres, almost twice the height of the vaulters.

Oscar, Hans' son was watching Giles as he prepared for his run, when his mind flashed back to his early years when he first became smitten with pole-vaulting,

He remembered that first day when he was watching Heinrich, the sports master demonstrating the technique of pole-vaulting to the older boys and was riveted by the intricate procedures required. At first he was put off. It looked so complicated and seemed to happen too quickly, the vaulter started running with the pole and then he was up and over.

When the session ended Oscar had approached the teacher,

'Sir, could you teach me how to vault?' Heinrich had looked at him and seen his tall strong physique.

Oscar was impatient and when alone in the forest, he carved a pole and used it to lift himself over low branches. After school, he would watch the pole-vaulters practice. He learned to hold his make shift pole, to run

with it and plant it in the ground. Soon he was reaching above two metres. Over the months he gained confidence and managed to raise himself over higher and higher branches.

During the summer holidays he again approached the trainer, now with more confidence. He pleaded with him to watch him vaulting. But Heinrich had hardly heard his request before he refused again, saying,

‘Oscar, you’re still too young. You need to be stronger, it is a dangerous sport and you can get hurt. Come back in a few years time.’

Oscar knew the teacher was right but he was bigger than most boys of his age and was impatient to show what he had achieved. He didn’t want to accept the trainer’s advice.

One day after the training session for the older boys had finished, Heinrich saw Oscar sitting alone in the grass watching them and on an impulse called him over.

‘OK Oscar, show me what you can do, but be careful I don’t want an injury on my hands.’

‘Sir, I have never used a proper pole; I made one out of a bendy branch,’ confessed Oscar.

‘No, you must use the proper equipment. Take one of the poles over there.’

Oscar picked up a pole. It was heavier than he had expected. He bent it slowly watching with amazement how it flexed almost to a right angle, much more than his home made one. It was stiffer than he had expected and it whipped straight with great force.

‘What are you waiting for?’ called out Heinrich, ‘we can’t stay here all day.’

Oscar went to the beginning of the run and stopped. He wiped his brow and powdered his hands. The other boys had stopped what they were doing to watch him, ready to laugh at his effort. Terror gripped him as he looked down the runway, he could feel his heart thumping in his chest. Momentarily he went over in his mind, run, plant, bend the pole, take off, swing up, extend with feet upper most and cross above the post. He could feel all eyes turned upon him.

Taking a deep breath he began his run holding the pole level pointing it ahead of him. With his eyes glued on the box, he ran with all of his might and planted the end. The pole bent almost to a right angle and as it straightened, he leapt upwards and was effortlessly swung into the air. He turned his body upside down, with his feet first and glided up. As he came opposite the bar, he rotated and crossed over it before falling down onto the foam base below.

'Bravo!' shouted the amazed coach, clapping his hands. He had never seen someone so young vault so well.

'It was incredible,' the coach said to Hans, later that day. 'I think your boy is a born vaulter. You must let me train him, he could be a world champion.'

Oscar remembered how proud his father was of his achievement but there was a cloud developing between them. Hans was a troubled man. He and his son had reached an impasse. It had happened after they had both watched a film about the last war. It showed the concentration camps and the gas chambers. Oscar had sat silently as the picture unfolded. He heard his father take a deep breath and get up and leave the room.

'Father don't you want to watch the end?'

'No, I've seen too many of these films always demonizing us Germans.'

'Isn't it true then?'

'No it's all lies, we Germans would never do that. We are a civilized people.'

Oscar thought no more about it but some time later, he had enrolled on a history course at school. The teacher covered the nineteenth century and was teaching the 20th C and the two world Wars. Oscar could feel that she was having problems with

answering questions about Hitler. One girl asked,

'Is it true that Hitler started the War in 1939?'

'No! Not at all. After WW1 Germany had some of its territory stolen and given to her neighbours and she wanted it back. She tried to get it returned by negotiation but when that failed we had no choice but to take it back by force. 'That seemed fair didn't it?' The teacher asked the class. Most agreed but Oscar was uneasy. He had read that Germany had invaded Austria and Poland and was very disturbed by the conversation in the class.

Some of the pupils had decided to check what the books said about the Germans and WW2. They came upon a magazine showing the faces and names of Nazis who had evaded capture and were being sought. As they examined the faces, someone noticed the similarity between Oscar and one of the Nazis, a man called Oberleutnant Hans Schmidt. They decided to tease him when he came into class. The following day as he came in someone shouted out,

'Here comes the Nazi's son.' Oscar was appalled at their claim.

'My dad wasn't, he was a German soldier. He fought for this country, he didn't do any thing wrong,' Oscar yelled.

‘Well have a look in this magazine. It’s not what it says here. We found his name. He was Oberleutnant Hans Schmidt, in charge of a concentration camp. He was wanted by the Allies but escaped.’

‘That’s a lie, that couldn’t be my father.’

‘There’s a picture of him, you see,’ insisted the boy. Oscar went over and looked at the page. There was a photograph of a young officer in full uniform.

‘That’s your dad isn’t it?’ Oscar didn’t reply, he could see the likeness but didn’t want to admit it.

‘No that’s not my father, it looks nothing like him,’ and he rushed out of the class in tears. He ran out of the school grounds and along the road, unable to control his anguish.

‘It can’t be,’ he hollered, ‘not my father, no please don’t let it be him.’

He took the magazine home and after supper he went straight to his room and opened it. He was trembling and could hardly read the words.

‘Nazi War Criminals; there was a list of names in alphabetical order. He searched under S and the name Oberleutnant Hans Schmidt appeared. There was a photo of a young man no more than twenty in full Nazi uniform. He looked at it but he was so

young, so many young faces look alike he thought.

He meticulously scrutinized the details. As he stared at it, he imagined the face to be much older. He imagined the skin to be sagging and the eyes drooping.

There staring at him was his father's face including the small scar on his right cheek that he had got when a boy. Oscar sat unable to believe what he was seeing. Several hours passed as he struggled with the truth uncertain what to do. He fell into a fitful sleep waking with the dawn chorus. For a moment he lay there enjoying the peacefulness when he suddenly remembered. He sat up; my dad was a Nazi, he repeated to himself still struggling to accept it.

At last he knew what to do. I'll ask Mum she'll tell me the truth. She'll tell me it's a terrible mistake and he was never a Nazi. After breakfast when his father had gone to work, he followed his mother into the laundry room and while she was filling the washing machine, he broached the subject.

'Mother, was father a Nazi?' For a moment the question had taken her completely by surprise. She froze unable to speak. Regaining her composure and calming her voice, she replied, without turning to look at him.

‘What a strange question, why do you ask?’

‘Because some boys at school have found a photo on a list of WW2 Nazis and it looks very much like dad. The boys are teasing me. Tell me it’s not true, mum please?’

‘You must understand, life was very different then. I think you should speak to your father.’

Oscar sat in his room unable to do anything until he finally heard the key in the front door lock and rushed downstairs.

‘How was your day Oscar?’

‘Dad I must speak to you.’

‘What is it? What’s so important?’

Come into my study.’

‘Dad,’ said Oscar biting his lip, ‘I need to know what you did during the war.’

‘Oscar, you know what I did, I was a soldier.’

‘Yes, but what sort of soldier?’

‘I don’t understand what you’re asking.’

‘Father, were you a Nazi?’ There was silence in the room. ‘Dad were you?’

Hans knew that one day his ghosts would come back to haunt him. He had gone over in his mind how he would react. But now facing his son he struggled to find an answer.

‘Oscar you need to understand that life was very different then. Germany was bankrupt from the depression after its defeat in the First World War. We had nothing, no food, nothing to heat the house. We were desperate. Hitler gave us hope. When he established the Hitler Youth it was like scouts, they were given a uniform and meals. My father thought it was a good idea and I joined. At first I learned about camping, making fires, trekking and sport. When I was eighteen I was forced to enlist in the army and two years later I was made an officer. I was sent to supervise a farm enterprise growing food for our troops.

‘The magazine said you were a Nazi officer torturing prisoners, were you?’

‘No, sometimes we had to punish the workers if they were lazy. I was made to, I would have been killed if I hadn’t agreed.’

‘After the war, what happened? Were you put on trial?’

‘No, I escaped and came back here where.’

‘Why didn’t you give yourself up?’
Oscar persisted.

‘Why should I, I had done nothing wrong.’ Hans was beginning to show his impatience. ‘That’s enough Oscar, I have explained it sufficiently.’

‘No Dad it’s not enough. I want to know that you were innocent. I spoke to

Mum about it and she said the only way to clear your name is to give yourself up and prove you didn't do anything wrong in front of a War Crime's Tribunal.'

'Oscar I can't do that, they wouldn't believe me; I have no evidence to prove my innocence.' Oscar tried to accept what his father had said. It took him a long time but he gradually forgot about it and got on with his schoolwork. Eventually the name-calling ceased as he became more and more successful on the sport's field.

Some years earlier in the small French town of Clichy-sous-bois, a young French athlete called Giles was breaking records. The event was pole vaulting, one that he had fallen in love with when a teenager. Although small for his age, by ten he had become a strong runner and jumper and could outclass all his schoolmates. One day while at the sports ground he saw the senior boys having a lesson on pole vaulting. He watched amazed, as they seemed to fly over the bar like birds, it seemed miraculous. He rushed home and shouted,

'Mum and Dad, I've seen the most amazing thing, boys flying.'

'Giles what are you talking about? How can boys fly?'

'It's called pole vaulting and I want to learn. I want to be the best in the world.'

Now his dream was coming true. He was being hailed as a potential representative for the French International team.

Now the final stage of the competition was beginning. Oscar, 6ft 4 and 92 Kgs was in marked contrast to Giles' slim build, 5ft 10 height and 70Kg. Standing side by side, he dwarfed the younger man and had no doubt that he would win. In the huge crowd seated no more than 10 ft apart were their fathers now both in their seventies.

Giles was the first to vault. He stood at the beginning of the run. He powdered his hands and was adjusting his grip on the pole, weighing up the height of the bar and rehearsing his run. He moistened his lip, unconsciously puffed out his cheeks and then set off and flew clearing it easily. Oscar followed; he had failed once before but succeeded the second time. The bar was raised 15 mm and the men competed again. Giles easily cleared the height. Next came Oscar, he thundered down the track and flew over the bar.

The bar was now at 6 metres. Oscar tried three times and failed. He turned away disappointed with his performance, not wanting to watch Giles vault. But he couldn't help listening. He heard the thump of his adversaries' feet on the ground, then the noise of the pole locking into the vaulting

box. He waited hoping to hear the bar fall but it didn't and then he heard the cheer of the crowd. He had been beaten. He struggled to avoid tears then hesitating he turned and stepped forwards to shake the Frenchman's hand. The crowd went mad. They recognised the moment. The sons of two nations, historically mortal enemies, made peace.

In the stand, Pierre smiled. He was so proud of his son. But he had a job to do, something he had waited for, dreamed about and now it was about to happen. Watching Hans out of the corner of his eye, he saw him struggle to his feet and leave the stadium. He followed him, walking several paces behind. He left the stand and ambled slowly keeping him in view. Once outside, the crowd thinned and he was able to catch up and walk alongside the German. He was within two feet when he called out

'Oberleutnant Hans Schmidt, what a surprise to meet you here.'

The old man was startled and looked in Pierre's direction but feigned recognition. A look of doubt crossed his face.

'You don't recognize me do you? How could you, we were all vermin to you, to be beaten until dead? Do you remember me now?'

The German's face paled. He stammered,

‘You are mistaken I don’t know what you are talking about.’

It was him Pierre was sure, the German Officer who had tortured him and many others so many years ago. He felt a shiver of fear mingled with excitement. At last after all this time, he had found him. He had made himself a promise that if he should locate him, he would kill him.

‘I could never forget your face; it’s etched in my memory, those eyes, that nose and the scar on you cheek. I promised myself that if I ever saw you again I would kill you.’

‘Please, I am an old man. I don’t have many years to live, please spare me,’ Hans begged.

For a moment Pierre felt pity for this wretched creature with his moist eyes and sagging flesh but then he remembered the other old man who had collapsed in the field, and how this evil beast had beaten him to death.

He took the gun slowly out of his pocket, released the safety catch and pointed it at Hans’ chest.

‘This is for all the poor unfortunates that you tortured, killed or left to die. You never gave them a thought.’

‘Father stop,’ shouted Giles as he rushed to his father’s side.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Get out of my way, I want to kill him.’

He knew what he was about to do was wrong. All his life he had respected and obeyed the law. He was a fervent believer in justice by trial. Yet at this moment he had no doubt of the correctness of his action. Chance had given him an opportunity, which would never come again. He knew that if there was a God he would understand.

The police on guard at the other side of the stadium heard two gunshots. Hurrying to the spot they saw the German lying on the ground, blood pouring from his chest. Kneeling beside him trying to staunch the blood was Oscar. They recognised Giles restraining his father who was holding a smoking gun. The sound of a siren was heard and soon Hans was being attended by the paramedics and rushed to hospital. Oscar accompanied him not knowing what to think. He hated Pierre for what he had done but knew that one day his Father’s sins would catch up with him.

Pierre was taken to a local police station accompanied by Giles.

‘Why Father, what were you thinking? He’s an old man, he’s harmless.’

‘We would be interested to know that as well,’ added the police Sergeant.

‘It’s a long story son, I will tell you all about it sometime but now I need to explain to the police.’

The following day the newspapers had a heyday; one headline read ‘French Elephant’ revenges his tortured colleagues.

The case created enormous interest in France where views were divided. Some strongly supported what Pierre had done saying the German deserved what he got. Other insisted that you couldn’t take the law into your own hands and that he should have reported him to the War crime’s tribunal.

The police began to collect evidence. They questioned Pierre.

The detective listened patiently.

‘Do you think it was right to take the law into your hands? What would happen if everyone did that? There would be chaos.’

‘I agree but sometimes in life you can’t wait for the law. It moves too slowly. My life is nearly over so it doesn’t matter if I spend the rest of it in jail

The court convened some months later and it was inevitable that Giles would meet Oscar. They saw each other in the corridor. It was the first time they had met since the shooting. They shook hands.

‘Oscar I am so sorry that it had to happen like this. My father had been harbouring his hate of your father since he was a prisoner during the war. I thought he had forgotten it and would die without doing anything about it. What I don’t understand is that you knew what your father did, why didn’t you do something about?’

‘We did discuss it. I wanted him to surrender himself and face a War Crimes’ Tribunal and he promised to do so but at the last minute he couldn’t. He knew that he would face execution. I couldn’t risk that so it was forgotten.’

Later the following day the police questioned Oscar; he was still very shaken by what had happened.

‘Did you know your father was a Nazi?’

‘Yes I did.’

‘How long have you known it?’

‘Since I was sixteen. Some friends at school showed me a magazine and I saw his picture.’

‘But you did nothing about it? Do you know it is against the law to harbour a criminal,’

‘Yes, but he is my father, he explained to me that he was forced to do it and I believed him.’

Before they could finish their conversation, the ushers called upon everyone to take their seats in the court. They sat next to each other.

Pierre was sitting in the dock behind a metal screen. He smiled at Giles.

The court usher called,

‘All rise.’ Magistrate Vincent entered, he was balding with a shining face, prominent ears and a small trimmed beard.

Two other Magistrates accompanied him, one a woman. Everyone sat.

He began,

‘We are today hearing the case against Pierre Baston a retired baker who is accused of the attempted murder of Hans Schmidt, a retired businessman.’

‘Baston, how do you plead?’

‘Not Guilty.’

Then followed a detailed description of what happened on that day at the European Games. The judge asked Pierre’s barrister if he had any questions. ‘No Sir,’ he replied, ‘I accept the description we have just heard.’

After several days of further evidence from the police, the barrister summed up.

‘My client Pierre pleads not guilty to the attempted murder of Hans Schmidt. He accepts that he tried to kill the man but did so on the basis that the state had failed. He

is someone who had suffered at his hands and believes that he had a prima facie right to do so.'

The Judge then said,

'Before we pass sentence we would like to hear from Oscar, the injured man's son.'

'Your honours, I loved my father dearly. He has always provided me with what I needed in the way of physical and emotional support. I was aware that he had been the victim of an unspeakable regime in Germany under Hitler. He was trapped by that system and believed that he had no choice but to obey orders. While I do not disbelieve what the accused is saying about the cruelty, I have no evidence to support it.'

Suddenly the court was interrupted by a shout from an elderly man, who spoke with an American accent.

'Your Honours, I apologise for my late arrival but I have only just heard about the case against Pierre Baston.'

'Who are you?' Asked the Judge.

'I was the American soldier whom Pierre turned to after his release. He was a broken man and once we had established a friendship, he told me all about the cruelty and inhumanity of Hans Schmidt, then Oberleutnant Hans Schmidt.'

The court went quiet; all eyes were on the bench.

'Will Pierre Baston please stand up. Pierre stood up with Giles by his side. They held hands.

'The court after deliberation on a two to one vote finds you not guilty of attempted manslaughter. On a vote of two to one, guilty of bodily assault. The sentence will be announced tomorrow at 10 am.'

'All rise.'

Pierre returned to his cell. He had a number of visitors and then settled down for the night, He felt a lightness that he hadn't felt for years.

At last I have done something with my life even if it took me so long. I have tried to vindicate the suffering, the pain and the anguish of so many who did not live to see today. I can hear their voices calling out from the grave saying, thank you our suffering was not in vain.

The following day the court reassembled. They rose as the judges entered. The chairman spoke,

'Pierre Baston, will you please stand? My colleagues and I have struggled to find the correct ruling for this crime; a crime without gain, a crime of retribution, a crime committed to counterbalance the crimes committed against others as well as yourself.

While we deplore your taking the law into your own hands, we nevertheless sympathise with your reasons. We have decided that a period of custody is not appropriate. You will be released into the care of a parole officer for a period of six months.'

'All Rise.'

Hans Schmidt made a full recovery but was later indicted for War Crimes.

A year later, Pierre was present to see his son Giles break the world record for pole vaulting, a record that had stood for twenty years.

