

**MARTIN**  **NELSON**



## *Running Away*

By Martin Nelson

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## **Prologue**

A middle aged man, a CEO of a family business, looks at himself in the bathroom mirror. He sees the early saggy of his belly, the beginnings of bags under his eyes and thinning of his hair. He asks himself '*what's my life about?*'

## Hitchhiking

*What am I doing here? Standing on the roadside waiting for a lift, I must be mad. I'm a grown man not a teenager. Surely I can solve my problems without running away? Is this really the best solution?*

*Surely I can do better?*

*Why can't I stop feeling sorry for myself and take a hold, grasp the nettle. Stop moaning, but I can't seem to. I simply take the easy way out, make excuses, blame others.*

*But deep down, I have real doubts. Do I have what it takes to succeed?*

*I see others, so confident, standing tall while all I want to do is hide away- walk by on the other side- avoid eye contact. What's going on? Am I too scared to confront my failures?*

*And here I am doing it again, running away. I need to stop feeling sorry for myself and get a grip. But I don't know how.*

*To add to my discomfort, dark clouds are gathering and it's starting to rain. It's getting cold and I am beginning to shiver. I can't stay here any longer or I'll get soaked.*

Pulling his coat closer, he adjusted his hat and carrying his few small possessions, rushed for cover under a nearby tree. It was dry for a while before rain began to drip through the branches.

He had this romantic idea that he would take to the road; travel to exciting places; free himself from all his worries and leave behind his old baggage. It would be like starting a new life, a pioneer exploring new territories.

But it wasn't turning out as he had hoped. Reality was beginning to confront him. He hadn't eaten or drunk anything for some while. He was feeling light-headed, his throat dry and his hands sweaty.

He remembered at school, how, when sitting at his desk, doing examinations, he was afraid to look at the exam paper as if it was an Ogre about to bite him. He would freeze, unable to move. It would take an enormous will of mind to look at it and start writing.

No cars had passed for hours. Feeling forlorn, he looked up and down the road searching the distance for a sign of a vehicle. But there was none. The road was a white strip in the fading light. By now his initial enthusiasm was beginning to wane. What if no one passed by or didn't stop? He immediately rejected the possibility.

But uncertainty began to nag him. How long would he have to wait for a ride? Would he get a ride? Maybe no-one will stop for a middle-aged man. They would just pass by ignoring his raised thumb. The thought of sleeping rough until the morning light didn't appeal to him.

He hadn't even thought to bring any provisions, he was so buoyed up with hope and presumed he would get a ride very quickly and find a place for the night without difficulty.

Having to return home with his tail between his legs would have been humiliating. He could see his wife standing there, her legs apart, suppressing a smirk as if to say, '*So you can't even run away successfully.*'

He had intended to tell her his plan but at the last minute, he chickened out. She wouldn't understand anyway and would try to dissuade him. He didn't want a long discussion with the pros and cons.

So he took the coward's way out and left her a note, explaining why he needed to get away.

*Dear Brenda,*

*By the time you read this, I will be miles away, standing by a roadside waiting for a lift to take me on a voyage to search for meaning in my life.*

*I need to do this, to make sense of the mess that I feel my life is in. It seems to have lost its purpose; why am I here? What have I achieved? I don't seem to know what I need to do to justify my existence?*

*Please Darling, try to understand, it's my problem and only I can solve it.*

*I love you, stay safe and I will be back before you have missed me.*

Quietly gathering up some clothes and other necessities, he had slunk out of the house in the early hours before she was awake.

The watery sun was starting to set, descending slowly behind the distant hills. He began to shiver and his doubts increased. Was this going to be another of his grandiose ideas gone wrong?

Then he saw it, in the distance, a vehicle approaching, just visible in the twilight. It was his last chance before darkness descended.

It was travelling fast, throwing up sheets of water. He craned forwards as it came nearer and stuck out his hand with my thumb raised, waving it frantically. He was desperate.

He could just make out the driver through the misty windscreen; a heavysset man with a beard and a ponytail. He saw him hesitate and then the truck skidded to a halt. The driver wound down the window.

A deep Midwest voice called out,

*'Where to?'*

*'Anywhere?'* Phil replied, feeling very relieved.

*'OK, climb in,'*

*'Thanks,'* he stammered and without another word, they set off, the truck shuddering as it gained speed.

On the way, the driver held out his hand. Phil shook it.

*'I'm Jake.'*

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

At almost sixty years of age, Phil was still reasonably fit. He played a regular game of tennis in foursomes and liked to work out. He was a non-smoker and an occasional drinker.

He knew he was not the brightest of people, more a plodder. When he was younger, he was so envious of the bright ones, those kids who grasped complicated ideas quickly. It always took him a long time to catch on but he was good at figures.

Give him a list of numbers and he could add them up in seconds while the bright boys struggled.

Now he had reached a crossroads in his life. To the casual onlooker, he was a success, a leader.

As CEO of a large company, he had progressed from the office boy to controlling the Corporation. He 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 Club and money in the bank. What more could a man want?

He should have been content, but he wasn't. That was the problem, he wasn't happy. He would wake every morning with a feeling of melancholia, a deep nagging ache, a sense of hopelessness as if life had lost its purpose.

He would drag myself out of bed and make for the bathroom. Standing in front of the mirror, looking at himself, he saw only failure; someone who had been given every opportunity and had screwed it up.

The feeling had come on gradually. At first he was hardly aware of it, but as it became more unrelenting, he began to question it. Was it real or just an indulgence, a dissatisfaction that his lifestyle encouraged; always wanting more; more money, more luxuries, a bigger car, fancier clothes; the list was unending?

His wife Brenda noticed it first; she picked up on these things quickly. She always knew when he was off colour or struggling with a problem.

It began with her questioning his silences at breakfast.

*'What's wrong Phil, you don't seem to be yourself?'*

At first, he tried to brush it off, making light of it.

*'I'm fine'*, shrugging his shoulders. *'Just a little tired. I didn't sleep well last night.'* He would lie. But she was right; he wasn't himself and hadn't been for a long time.

Waking early, he would see his wife sleeping peacefully; their initial passion now replaced by affection. He would stare vacantly at the chandelier above his head, recalling that they had bought it in Venice on their honeymoon.

Then his questioning brain would click in; surely he was not going to just tick along like this until he died? There must be more to life? He was still a young man; there was so much more to do.

At the Club, he would look around and see his contemporaries, bored and growing fat; their conversations inane. They seemed to have 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.

He could see himself getting like them, in the same rut. So much so that he had decided to stop going as he would usually come away feeling even more despondent.

His thoughts were interrupted.

*'Phil, are you from these parts?'*

He didn't hear the driver at first, with the drumming of the diesel engine drowning out his voice.

The driver repeated the question. Phil turned to answer and for the first time looked closely at him.

About fifty year's old, his face was grey and his skin wrinkled, like crushed tissue paper, from the wear and tear of heavy smoking.

His white hair was done up in a plait like an ageing 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.

Phil hated the question because it made him feel uncomfortable; He hadn't yet got a simple answer.

He began,

*'No, 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,'* He laughed.

Phil was always a bit embarrassed. He 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; sounds like 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. But he and I didn't see eye to eye.'*

*He was a heavy drinker and when drunk used to beat my mother. I tried to stop him but he was too big for me. One time, he turned on me and 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 you were a kid,'* he said, turning to look at me. He must've felt sorry for me.

*'Yes, I couldn't 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 to Ireland.*

*I was waiting to be taken to a hostel when this lady came in. Her name was Mrs Harman. She worked in the office. She was looking at me strangely and then I overheard her ask the officer,*

*'Who is he?'*

*'Ma'am, he's a no-gooder, a stowaway. He is being returned to Ireland from where he's come.'*

*'Officer, may I have a word with him?'*

*'Sure, take him into the Examination Room'*

*I followed her in and we sat at a desk. When I told her I had come from Ireland, she smiled and said,*

*'I was also born there.'*

*Then she took pity on me and asked to adopt me.'*

*'You know nothing about him,'* the officer had warned her.

*'Are you sure you want to do this, to take the risk? A child is for life you know?'*

*'Yes I know,'* she had retorted angrily, *'I know what I am doing.'*

*'Mrs Harman was like a mother to me. She already had two children so I immediately acquired two siblings. I remember it as 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.'*

The rain had stopped and it was now dark. Ahead Phil could see the lights of a small Motel and garage. The truck began to slow down and then stopped in a parking area behind the building.

*'Phil, this is it; it's where I stay for the night. I sleep in the truck. You should be able to get a room at the motel over there.'* He said pointing to its brightly lit entrance.

*'I'll be leaving at six in the morning, if you want a lift.'*

Phil then had an afterthought.

*'Look Jake, what are you doing about food? Come and have dinner with me.'*

*'Thanks Phil, that's good of you but no. I'm OK, I'll have my food in the truck.'*

*'OK, Jake, suit yourself. Have a good night. I'll see you in the morning.'*

They shook hands. Phil collected his few belongings and walked towards the brightly lit entrance of the Motel.

The Reception was unoccupied when he entered. He looked around; it had seen better days. The wall paper was peeling and the carpet was scuffed.

He was uncertain what to do when he saw a bell on the desk. He pressed it and waited. A receptionist suddenly appeared. Well into his seventies, he had a smoke-stained beard, unusually deep wrinkles, large ears and gnarled hands.

*'Sorry, I didn't hear you; the bell on the door doesn't always work. Can I help you?'*

*'Yes, I would like a single room for the night.'*

*'Just one night?'*

*'Yes, just one, thanks.'*

He turned to the keyrack and selected a key.

*'Room 26 is vacant. That will be 35 dollars.'*

Phil paid him in cash and carrying his few belongings, made his way along a poorly lit corridor to the room. The key was stiff in the lock and for a moment it wouldn't release, and then it clicked and the door opened.

Phil was met by a whiff of stale air, which cleared once he had opened the windows. He looked around. It had a double bed, a wardrobe and a dressing table with a mirror and drawers. On one side was a small shower and toilet. It was basic but adequate.

He pulled his wheelie into the room and fell onto the bed. It was hard and creaked as he moved. Within minutes he was asleep.

When he awoke, it was pitch dark. He was disoriented and confused and didn't know where he was.

Turning over, he fumbled to find the bedside lamp, which he managed to tip onto the floor; luckily the bulb didn't break. He switched it on and the light flooded the room. He glanced at his watch, it was already eight pm.

He was hungry and hurriedly made his way to the Diner; its welcoming lights showing him the entrance. It felt warm and friendly.

It was almost deserted with only one or two diners. He stood uncertain for a moment and then an attractive waitress approached.

*'Good evening Sir, my name is Jasmine,'* she said, handing him a menu.

*'Good evening Jasmine.'*

*'Please follow me Sir.'*

She showed him to a table by a window overlooking the empty road..

He ordered a standard Hamburger with fries. The food arrived in minutes and he ate hungrily, taking large mouthfuls. Noticing he had finished, she returned to remove his dishes.

*'Any dessert?'*

*'Do you have any 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 the dessert, she lingered as if she wanted to talk and they got into conversation. She told him that she was from the Philippines and then, he must have gained her trust because, 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.'*

Phil watched her as she spoke, her dark eyes sparkling with excitement. He thought she was amazing.

*'You are just the sort of person this country needs.'* Then she told him how she rarely goes out because she had no papers.

He paid the bill and gave her an extra large tip. As he was leaving to go to his room, she touched his arm 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.'*

He shook his head.

*'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 Phil a long time to get to sleep. He lay awake thinking of that young woman and her kindhearted offer. He liked to think that it was not only for the money.

He had set his alarm for 5.30 am, but when he awoke it was past 7. Jumping out of bed, he peered through the misty window. Jake's truck had gone!

Damn! He thought that was stupid. He sat, trying to decide what to do and then he figured he would make the most of the situation and have a full breakfast. The thought of the meal raised his spirits.

There were a number of people already in the Diner when he arrived. He made for a vacant table by the window and sat looking out across the deserted highway wondering what to do.

Within a few minutes, Jasmine appeared carrying a menu and a jug of coffee. He recognised her from the night before.

*'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 American 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 steaming hot food was set down in front of me.*

*'Ketchup is on the table,'* she said pointing to it, and left. He eyed the feast. He couldn't remember the last time he had had such a meal, full of cholesterol and carbs.

He was going to enjoy it. He buttered a slice of toast and slid the two eggs on top of it, poking the yolks to let the liquid run into the bread.

He was having a wonderful time gulping down large mouthfuls of food with no one to tell him to eat more slowly or put less in his mouth. He was not in a hurry, so he downed two or three more cups of coffee, by which time the café was almost empty.

Collecting his few possessions from the bedroom, Phil walked across to the roadside, stood in the shade of a tree and waited. He could have kicked himself, he felt really angry and disappointed.

All he had to do was to keep an appointment and he failed; and to make matters worse, the road was empty that morning, nothing stirred. It was as if he was the only person alive.

After an hour of kicking his heels, he suddenly remembered that he had Jake's phone number and decided to contact him.

*'What happened to you Phil? I waited ten minutes but as you didn't turn up, I had to leave.'*

*'Yeah I know, 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, Jake's truck pulled into the parking area and a cheery voice shouted out of the window.

*'Hi Phil, sorry I'm late, let's go!'*

*Phil scrambled into the passenger seat, threw his things into the back and they set off.*

*'Where to this time? Phil shouted back.*

*'I got a load to deliver to Des Moines.'*

They had been going for about ten minutes when Jake turned to him.

*'Phil, let's hear the rest of your story.'*

*'Let's see, where was I? Oh yes, eventually 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.'*

They lapsed into silence, each with his own thoughts,

*'What about you Jake, 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.'*

Suddenly he stopped talking. Phil glanced at his face. His eyes were screwed up and moist. He could see that he was struggling with the memories.

They sat in a comfortable silence, two strangers sharing time together. Phil thought about Jake's life on the road, a lonely one, but one that obviously suited him.

Perhaps it was the death of his mother that made him a bit of an outcast. He wondered if he blamed himself, Phil had read that children often do.

He thought of broaching the subject but decided against it. Jake might think he was being too noseey.

Mothers are so important. We don't realise it until we don't have them or we lose them. Then there is a gaping hole in our lives.

## Des Moines

They had now arrived at the outskirts of Les Moines.

*'This is my stop,' Phil said.*

*'Thanks for the ride Jake, and the company.'*

*'Good luck Phil, I enjoyed talking to you.'*

They shook hands.

Phil Was ready to face the next part of his journey. He had to get through the town to reach the motorway on the far side.

Following a sign, he set off towards the centre of the town. He had been walking for a short while when he came upon the Pappajohn Sculpture Park. Occupying about 4 acres, it boasted twenty-four World-class sculptures.

It was donated by John and Mary Pappajohn, local philanthropists. He had read about them. He was born in Greece and came to the States with his mother when he was nine months old, his father having arrived some time earlier.

Having graduated from College, he went into Insurance before he moved into Finance, eventually starting a venture capital company investing in Medical technology, a subject in which he became an expert. On retiring, he became a Philanthropist supporting a wide range of educational and Medical projects.

It was turning out to be a beautiful day and not having anything better to do, Phil strolled among the works of art, admiring some and puzzled by others, when he almost stumbled over a man who was sitting on the grass. He was not more than thirty, unshaven with dark rings under his eyes.

On seeing Phil, he put out a begging bowl.

Now beggars shame Phil; they disturb him and he didn't know how to deal with them. His immediate response was to ignore them, after

all welfare is available to them, but he knew that that was too easy an excuse.

Seeing the beggar, Phil asked himself, what responsibility do we have as individuals, to ensure that we can all 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 always their fault.

He decided to speak to the man and find out.

*'Good morning! How are you?'*

*'Sorry, are you talking to me?'* He spoke with an educated accent that surprised Phil.

*'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 or deliberately ignored him so Phil repeated the question.

The man turned and looked at Phil. 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.'*

Phil nodded, helped him to his feet and together, they walked slowly across the road and down a side street to a small diner. The man was dragging his left leg and Phil made a mental note to ask him about it later. They settled at a small table at the back of the room.

The waitress, a young pretty Afro-American, clearly didn't like what was happening. She stepped back to avoid the smell coming from the man and Phil could see she was pondering whether to ask them to leave but Phil interrupted her thoughts by asking,

*'What would you like to eat?'*

*'Breakfast, a full breakfast, I haven't eaten anything solid for days.'*

Phil ordered a full breakfast for the man and a coffee for himself. The waitress shrugged her shoulders and left quickly to get the order.

They sat for a while in silence while the man devoured his food and then during a pause, Phil asked him,

*'Why don't you start at the beginning?'*

*'OK, yes, the beginning; it's all rather boring I'm afraid. I was born thirty-four years ago in Baltimore.'*

Phil 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.'*

He paused as if trying to remember.

*'What happened then?'*

*'Let me see. Oh yes, 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 hostels 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 Phil listened, he 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 apparently, no fault of his own. How many more people have found themselves in a position like his, I wondered?

They sat in silence while the man ate ravenously, stuffing large portions of food into his mouth. Finally when he had finished the plate, Phil asked him,

*'If you could, what would you do about people in your position?'*

The man 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 Phil. He 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 an individual usually plays a significant part in his own downfall.

*'I am surprised by your answer.'*

*'Most people are. They don't usually agree.'*

*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. We always blame someone other than ourselves and they hate it when I say, 'I don't agree.'*

*'What makes you hold such a different view?'*

*'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 anyone else.'*

*'Give me an example?'*

*'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 from Alcoholics Anonymous, for example. 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 rationalise; we make excuses; we justify; anything other than face it.'*

Phil sat taking in what he was saying. His own life could have been like his. His days living rough in New York could have been his future had it not been for his adopted mother. It was she who dragged him off the streets and gave him the opportunity, making his life so much easier than the man's.

Phil hadn't been faced with the decisions that this man 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.

Phil suddenly remembered the man's limp and decided this was the time to ask him.

*'I hope you don't mind me asking you about your leg, your limp.'*

*'Oh that, it was broken in a fight.'*

*'A fight?'*

He waited for him to continue.

*'I was stupid. I made a stupid decision. I wanted to be a hero but it backfired. I was on my way to my usual doss house in central Baltimore. It was late, when I heard raised voices and came upon a 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 should have carried on and acted as if I hadn't seen it, as if it was none of my business but of course I couldn't. It was my business. How could I just stand by and ignore what was happening? So I went over to them and shouted at him,*

*'Please stop, leave that woman alone.'*

He turned on me.

*'Mind your own f'ing business.'*

*'It is my business. What you are doing is wrong,'* I shouted.

*'Then suddenly, he let the girl go and came for me. I became concerned for my own safety. He was a big man. I put up my hands to protect my face when he kicked me very hard on my leg. I felt the bone crack and I fell to the ground screaming in pain.'*

*'That'll teach you to mind your own business,'* He shouted.

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.'*

Phil watched the man's face while he told his story. A calm satisfaction came over his worn features. He was right to be proud of what he had done.

*'Look mate', he said as he finished his meal. '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.'*

Phil realised that he was right, They shook hands and he left him near a bench in the park.

Phil hadn't noticed how late it was. The city lights were coming on and the rush hour traffic was building. He needed to find somewhere to stay for the night. He wanted to go into a comfortable hotel and spoil himself but his clothes were now dirty and he needed to experience the discomfort of poverty.

Coming around a corner, Phil 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. Phil felt he had entered a war zone.

*'Excuse me Sir,'* Phil said in his 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 somewhere to stay tonight.'* Without looking at him the Officer said, pointing to his right.

*'There's a flop house on the corner over there. That should suit you.'*

Phil found it, a two-storey building, possibly an old abandoned bank that had been commissioned by the local social services. He climbed the white polished steps and entered a gloomy foyer.

At first, he couldn't see anything. Then a voice boomed out from the dark.

*'Hi, are you here for the night?'* By then his eyes had accustomed to the gloom.

He could now see a heavily built man with an unkempt beard and beady eyes, standing behind a small reception area.

'Yes thanks, I would like a room for the night?'

*'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, that was his name, and Phil 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. Phil 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 was 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, Phil could see the pride in his eyes. He had made something of himself, despite his upbringing.

At ten o'clock they parted. It was time to go to bed.

Phil made his way to the dormitory, a large high ceilinged room divided into separate cubicles. Each was just big enough for a single bed and a small wardrobe. He was in no 201. The light was low when he unpacked his few things. He went to the communal bathroom and then settled for the night.

It was an uncanny feeling, lying close to so many people separated only by a thin wooden panel. Phil could hear their groans and snores and occasional shouts. He lay awake for hours, his mind racing, unable to calm down.

By the morning, Pete was no longer at the desk.

*'He works at night,'* said the day man.

They never met again.

It was going to be like that, time and again, intimate conversations with strangers, never to meet again.

## Omaha

Phil was back on the road with his knapsack on his back containing only his most basic things. He had never felt so unencumbered.

Why did he surround himself with so many items; more suits than he could ever wear, hundreds of ties, dozens of shirts and a cupboard full of shoes, enough to supply an army?

He swore then that when he got back home, he would downsize dramatically, giving everything to the charity shop.

The day was bright, the sun not too hot and he felt at ease for the first time in months. Still on route 6, He was leaving Iowa and making his way across Nebraska, planning to stay in Omaha, the largest city in Nebraska.

Standing in the shade of a blue Spruce, He reviewed his progress. The melancholia had gone. He hadn't even thought about it until then. He had so many other things to concern him, so perhaps that's why it has gone? He felt happier than he had been for a long time although he was certainly much less comfortable.

Living in insecurity was unfamiliar. Not knowing from day to day what was going to happen, was both invigorating and scary. What will today bring? He wondered

The traffic was light and so far no one had stopped. He 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 he was going over this in his mind, Phil saw a white Ford Fairlane approaching from a distance. It slowly came to a halt as if the driver was trying to decide whether to stop.

A female voice called out,

*'Where are you going?'*

*'West,'* Phil said.

*'I am going to Omaha.'*

*'That will do me.'*

*'OK; jump in,'* she shouted over the engine noise. Phil bundled his stuff into the back seat and climbed in beside her.

Phil hadn't seen a Fairlane for many years. It was a bit noisy and the shocks needed renewing but he was not complaining.

She was older than her voice suggested; in her sixties he 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.'*

On hearing his accent, she asked,

*'What's an educated man like you doing on the road, hitchhiking?'*

*'I suppose I could ask you the same. What is a smart woman like you doing, picking up a stranger?'*

*'Touché.'* She smiled. *'I'm interested in people and you looked like a very unlikely person to be hitchhiking, certainly not the usual that I see, and now hearing your accent, even more so.'*

*'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 midlife crisis. I couldn't think of any better thing to do.'*

*'Do you have a family?'*

*'Yes, a wife and two grown up children.'*

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

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

*'That's enough about me,' Phil said suddenly.*

*'Tell me about you?'*

She was watching the road ahead and without turning to look at him began;

*'I was an editor on 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 sexually explicit articles with girly pictures.*

*The magazine 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.'*

Staring ahead, she was now talking as if I wasn't there; reviewing her life.

*'When my husband died, things fell apart. We had no children so there was nothing to keep me in New York. I came back here 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. 'What a courageous but sad thing you did.'*

Phil sat silently thinking about what she had said and then glanced outside. They were passing through open countryside, with views of flat prairies, very few trees but many low bushes.

An hour passed in a comfortable silence. Then she said something that surprised him.

*'Where are you staying tonight?'*

Phil looked at her, surprised.

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

*'Look, please don't misunderstand but I've got a spare room; you would be very welcome to stay the night.'*

*'Are you sure? That would be very good of you.'*

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

They travelled on for a while in silence and then Phil turned to her.

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

*'I'm Isabella, after my mother and grand-mother. We always call the first daughter after her mother. I think we have some Spanish blood in the family.'*

They reached a crossroads where Isabella took a right hand turn. Then she continued for about a mile along a country lane until she stopped the car outside a large single-storey house with a wide verandah in the front.

It was set in a circle of trees and beyond could be seen several barns and fields under cultivation.

*'This is it. The farm has been in my family for more than three generations. I'll lead the way.'* Glancing at his bag, she said,

*'You don't have many belongings?'*

*'No, I decided that I had to travel with the minimum.'*

The wooden verandah floor creaked as they walked towards the front door.

Turning to Phil and appearing to apologise,

*'I've been meaning to get it fixed but never seem to get round to it.'*

He followed her into a large front room, simply furnished with a settee and two armchairs placed on either side of an open fire, which was made up but not lit.

Isabella saw him glance at the fireplace.

*'I light it when it gets dark. {t's very cosy. I'll show you to your room. It's my old room from when I was a child. Now I have the front room, which was my parents'.*

She led him to a room at the back of the house.

It was so unexpected, this chance meeting and now he had been invited to stay overnight. He threw his few things on the bed.

He heard her shout;

*'there's plenty of hot water and you'll find soap and a towel in the shower.'*

He didn't need any encouragement. Trying to keep clean on the road was a real challenge. He stepped into the shower and stood allowing the warm water to cascade over him.

Phil could smell something good as he dried himself in front of the window looking out across the open fields.

He could understand why Isabella came back here. The calm was almost palpable, filling every crevice.

To her, it must have felt like a million miles away from the bustle of New York.

*'Dinner's ready,'* she called out and he followed her voice into the kitchen. A table for three had been set near the back window. The third place puzzled.

Suddenly Isabella opened the back door and called out.

*'Dinner's ready, come and wash your hands.'*

Phil 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.'*

They shook hands. His were worn and rough, already the hands of a working man. Phil was embarrassed by how soft his hands must have felt.

Isabella served Joshua first with a dish Phil had never tasted.

He was intrigued and asked her what it was.

*'It's called Indian Taco, a favourite 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.'*

She handed him a plate brimming over. Looking at it, he wanted to remember this moment.

Joshua sat quietly eating his meal, having difficulty with his knife and fork. At one point, he went to pick up his food with his fingers. Phil could see Isabella frowning. He immediately stopped.

When they 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, Phil turned to Isabella, who was finishing her meal,

*'What a polite young man?'*

He was curious about their relationship and hoped that he would hear more.

Later, sitting in front of the roaring fire with a beer in his hand, it seemed that life couldn't get any better.

Isabella joined him and he could tell that she was itching to ask him 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 she was surprised and confused. She thinks it was her fault that I was not happy. I tried to reassure her that that was not the reason.'*

As he spoke, Phil realised that he was still uncertain why he chose the road. He could have selected a number of different escapes.

He had thought about a single's world cruise but he didn't like the idea that he would be stuck on a boat for weeks on end, such a long way from home.

He could have sailed his 30 ft. motor yacht with a crew? That was very tempting.

Meanwhile he was itching to ask about the young man but Isabella beat him to it.

*'I guess you're curious about Joshua?'*

*'I was surprised when he joined us for dinner. He seems like 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 soon after. 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; a local school in Omaha, Ashland Park Robbins. I have a rota with a neighbour.'*

As they talked, the fire was beginning to burn out. The logs had now been reduced to smouldering ash causing the room to darken. Phil looked at Isabella, her serene face glowing in the embers. She smiled at him.

*'Time for bed. What time would you like breakfast?'*

*'When you have yours.'*

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

Phil entered the bedroom to find it bathed in moonlight, reflected off the mirror and the polished cupboards and casting moonbeams into the far corners.

Peering through the window, he could 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 about, their shadows moving slowly with them. It was a moment to cherish, one of those magical happenings, never to be forgotten.

He had hardly laid his head on the pillow than he was asleep. Sometime during the night, he was conscious of a movement beside him, and a warm body snuggling up against his back.

He woke as the sun rose; aware that something had occurred but not certain whether it had been a dream.

Coming out of the shower, he smelled the familiar aroma of frying bacon, a shared recollection of many other breakfasts, in countless hotels and diners.

Isabella was humming as Phil joined her in the kitchen.

*'You sound happy,' he 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 mentioned the brief interlude during the night.

Over breakfast, Phil 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 fast approaching. Phil busied myself with packing and tidying the bedroom.

When he came downstairs. Isabella was in the kitchen.

*'I think I will be off now,' he said casually.*

*'Yes, OK, it's been really nice having you. Are you 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. Let me give you my contact details. If you or Joshua ever need any help, please don't hesitate to contact me. I mean it. I will always remember you.'*

He stepped forwards and they hugged. He could feel her body trembling.

When he got to the end of her drive, he turned and waved. She was standing in the open, waving back, a forlorn figure in the sunshine.

## **Route 6**

The dew was still on the fields as Phil walked towards the main Route 6. The road was empty, not a vehicle in sight.

Glancing at his small compass to make sure he was going in the right direction, he set off towards the West, looking back every now and then to check whether a car was coming.

What he hadn't realised when he planned this trip was that he would have an awful lot of time to think, something he had rarely done in the past.

He didn't find thinking easy. He was very proud of his position in the company and often bragged about it and although he did start from the bottom, he carefully avoided admitting that it was his adopted father who started it.

Phil loved his wife dearly but he shirked reminding himself that it was in fact, an arranged marriage between two families, not love at first sight as he often boasted.

Their two children were not his biologically. They had tried for some years and eventually he had the test, which showed that he was sterile. Apparently the attack of mumps he had when he was eighteen, had affected his fertility.

He had struggled with his pride but in the end agreed to AI from an anonymous donor. The kids were wonderful and he was very proud of them.

## Sterling

It was at that moment that he saw a puff of dust in the distance; a car was coming, fast. He stepped up to the curb and waved at it. The driver saw him, their eyes locked and for a moment he hesitated but then must have had second thoughts.

The car braked some distance beyond him 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 haircut, a ring in his right ear and jewellery on his fingers. He was wearing torn jeans and a T-shirt with the word 'Shit' written on it.

Phil 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.'*

He had just settled myself in the front seat, clipped on his seat belt, when they set off.

*'Hold on,'* the young man shouted.

With screeching wheels, the car leapt forwards in a cloud of dust. Phil thought for a moment that they would take off, there was such a thrust into his back.

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

*'Yeah, 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?'*

*'She has a manual gearbox with five speeds, a 3.8 Litre, 6-cylinder engine with rear wheel drive. You'll notice the front and side airbags.'*

*'How thirsty is she?'*

*'Depends on the speed, I can get from 18-27 mpg.'*

As Phil listened, the young man's enthusiasm for his car almost amounted to love. Yet he couldn't help thinking that it was probably made from recycled scrap metal, glass and plastic. He didn't dare tell him that, it would be like saying that his girlfriend was a pumped up plastic copy.

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.'*

Phil was getting fed up telling the truth and decided to create a new persona, so he made up a story.,

*'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.'*

*'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'm part of a small group. We call ourselves 'The Mustangs', a bit corny I know. 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 Phil listened to the young man's dreams, he remembered that his company used a publicity service. They may be able to help but he would need to hear the group just in case they were rubbish. He decided not to say anything and see what happened.

They drove on in silence, the drumming of the engine lulling him to sleep.

Phil woke suddenly as he felt the car swerve and grind to a halt.

*'Where are we? Why are we stopping?'* He stammered.

*'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?'*

Phil got out, stretched his legs and walked around kicking up the dust. The Gas Station was the only building on an otherwise empty road that stretched ahead and behind, as far as his eyes could see.

On either side, fields of grain extended almost to the distant hills. The sky was cloudless with the sun beating down mercilessly. He could have been on a film set from a Wild West shoot-out expecting Jesse James to come riding along the road with both guns blazing.

While they were waiting, a small truck spewing black smoke swerved onto the tarmac and skidded to a halt. Three young people jumped out, a girl and two men. Within minutes, it had driven off.

They were the friends, Quentin was expecting. They greeted each other warmly.

*'Phil, come and meet my group. 'Emily our vocalist, John on the drums and Peter on the double bass.'*

They shook hands

Once back in the Mustang, Phil 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 makeup which made him 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-shirts, jeans and decorated boots. Emily was the first to speak.

*'Hey Mister, you don't look like a regular hitch hiker?'*

Phil 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.'*

Phil then listened as they began to plan their 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 he 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. His initial reservations about them were rapidly being dispelled with a growing admiration for their professionalism.

In the course of their discussion, Phil 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, he asked Quentin whether he was serious when he invited him 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 they arrived at the Motel just off Interstate 76. They had followed a number of road signs directing them to it.

It turned out to be a two-story building with an impressive frontage and a large parking area. Quentin brought the car to a halt in front of the main building. Turning to his friends, 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 area, a large low-ceiled room extending the whole length of the motel. It was where the concert was to be held that evening.

Meanwhile Phil approached the reception desk. He stood waiting patiently while the young man finished a cellphone call. Looking up embarrassed, he said,

*'It was my mum,' she was worried about me.'*

Phil suppressed an impulse to be angry. The receptionist must have known that he shouldn't take personal calls when a customer is waiting.

Instead he said, in a fatherly manner,

*'Parents do get worried when they don't hear from their children, it's normal.'*

The young man nodded and then adopted his professional demeanour.

*'Sir, welcome to the Best Western Sundowner. Do you have a reservation?'*

*Phil shook my head.*

*'No, I came here with the group.'*

*'The Mustangs; are you their manager?'*

*'No, just a friend.'*

Phil 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.

The receptionist was about twenty-five, with short hair combed close to his head and long sideburns, a sort of Elvis Presley look. Phil noticed a 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,'* Phil said, making conversation.

He didn't hear him. 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 Phil the key card. Phil handed him a credit card and he swiped it.

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

Phil didn't like lifts and as the room was only on the first floor, he decided to walk. Once up the stairs, he looked for directions. He found two room panels with arrows pointing in opposite directions. It seemed that he could get to his room in either direction. How confusing? he thought.

With patience, Phil found the correct door and inserted the card. The light remained red. He tried it again but still no luck. Then he examined the card. He must have put it in the wrong way. He 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?

He had almost given up when a room maid passing by saw his dilemma.

*'Let me help you sir,'* she said sweetly with a touch of sarcasm.

*'You do it like this.'* He 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 night.'*

Phil watched her walk away. He could almost see the grin on her face. He was fuming. How was he to know you had to turn the door handle while the card was in the lock?

He entered the room. It was in darkness. Where was the light switch he wondered? Finally he found one by the door and pushed it; nothing happened. He tried it again. Have the lights fused? He couldn't believe this was all happening. It had seemed like an

ordinary day when he woke earlier, what was going on? He appeared to be jinxed.

There was enough light from the window to allow him to struggle to the telephone by the bed. He looked for instructions on the dial. There were none. He needed help. He wanted to phone reception. In desperation he tried 0 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 seem 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?'* He asked, confused.

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

*'Thanks,'* he said embarrassed.

He put down the receiver and walked to the front door. Sure enough there it was a key slot. He put the card in and the room was flooded with light. He walked around like a schoolboy gleefully switching the lights on and off.

Phil had arranged to meet the group for an early dinner before they began their programme. He had about two hours free so he decided to shower and have a rest.

But he was hesitant as he knew from previous experience, that the shower would also tax his ingenuity. Phil 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 their 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.

He approached the shower with some trepidation. Having undressed, he stepped in and examined the controls. He was looking for an H and a C or a red and blue display. He found none.

Now it was a matter of trial and error. Leaning back away from the showerhead, he 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. He turned the tap back a little and the water-cooled. He stood fiddling with it until it was the correct temperature and got in.

The water cascaded over him, off his head onto his shoulders and arms, prickling his skin. What a pleasure it was. He 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. He quickly turned it off and jumped out, wrapping himself in a towel, which had been warming on the radiator.

He lay on the bed and was soon asleep. Some time later his alarm woke him and he got dressed.

They had arranged to meet in the dining room at 6.30pm. The band was seated when he arrived.

*'How was the set up?'*

*'Fine, the acoustics are good and the lighting is OK, so if we get a good crowd, we should have a lot of fun.'*

*'OK, let's order,'* he said. The waitress had seen them sit down and came over with some menus.

*'Good evening folks, what will it be, anything to drink?'*

*'Yes, beers all round,'* Phil said,

Emily gestured to him.

*'No thanks, I'm teetotal,'*

Phil was surprised, somehow he 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.

Phil ordered a mixed salad, feeling a bit sheepish.

As he expected the conversation was all about the gig to come. He 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,

*'Guys, eat up, we must get going. See you later Phil.'*

Phil sat thinking about them, their immense enthusiasm and their fearless confidence. He wondered if he was like them at their age.

The gig was due to start at eight.

By 7,30, people were beginning to drift in, in ones and twos. They were mainly young. By the time he went downstairs, the room was packed.

A small stage had been set up at one end of the room. The group was already in position, tuning their instruments. There was an air of expectancy.

Suddenly the lights were lowered.

Everyone sat forwards watching the stage as Quentin began playing a soft slow melody on his guitar.

Peter, on the double bass, joined in with a muted rhythm. Slowly John the drummer introduced a syncopated beat.

Then Emily appeared, illuminated in a beam of light. She was wearing a white clinging dress. She walked slowly onto the stage, reached for the microphone and began to sing in a deep sultry voice.

By now the hall was silent; all eyes were glued on her. 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.

Phil sat at the rear totally riveted. He suddenly thought of his children and how, when they were younger, they all went to a jazz festival. The group's music reminded him of that time.

The gig was a resounding success. They made over a thousand dollars profit as well as a contract for another gig at the same venue at Christmas.

It was well after midnight before the last revellers departed. The musicians were planning to go on to a nightclub and invited Phil to join them. Reluctantly he had to refuse. He was exhausted and needed sleep badly.

They said goodbye in the car park with hugs and promises to keep in touch.

Phil made a note to contact his publicity company when he got home; they were a group that was going places.

The following morning, they bid their farewells and Phil watched them drive away, saddened by the need to part. They all had to go on their own way and his was to continue his journey.

He had awoken to a dull overcast day, which dampened his otherwise buoyant spirits. The dining room was now almost empty. He downed a cup of coffee but had no appetite.

He 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.

Feeling deflated, he made my way back to his room, collected his few belongings and headed for reception to settle his bill.

Back on the road, he checked his itinerary. He was heading for Logan in Utah and needed to find Route 1-80 N.

Phil was beginning to feel he should ring home and make sure all was well but he was uneasy. He had originally decided not to contact them.

He had left his younger brother in charge and knew he could trust him. He had agreed to ring Phil if he needed to come home; so far so good.

Phil was beginning to like this life, plenty of variety and uncertainty, an ideal mixture.

It was after noon before he got a lift. Plenty of traffic but no one would stop. It was beginning to get serious when suddenly he heard the deep roar of a motor bike, a Harley Davidson, ridden by a man about his age.

Phil would know that sound anywhere; the iconic bike with the light shining on its gleaming chromium frame; the wide handlebars and the laid-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.'*

Phil 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're 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 Phil struggled to get his leg over.

*'I don't drive fast,'* the driver 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, Phil was able to study his appearance. Heavily built and wearing standard leathers and a helmet, he appeared to be a giant of a man. Phil tried to hold on around his waist but he was too broad and he settled for hanging onto the handle.

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

*'How long have you had her?'*

*'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 its 100th birthday in 2003. But its history goes back to 1901 when William Harley designed an engine to go into a motorcycle,*

*Two years later in 1903, he and Arthur Davidson established 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?' Phil shouted, above the engine*

*'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.'*

Phil tried to follow what he was saying but the engine noise made it difficult. He must have guessed from his 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, Phil was able to see him more clearly. He had a heavy jowled face with bushy eyebrows and a grey beard and moustache.

*'What will you have?' Phil asked.  
'Coffee and a blueberry muffin,'  
'That sounds good, I'll have the same.'*

Phil went to the counter and ordered.

When they were seated, Phil asked Tom where he was going.

*'I'm aiming to attend a 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 sounded fun, Phil thought. Once again, fate had dealt him an interesting hand. How much longer would his luck last, he wondered?

The next few hours sped by. It was like sitting on a flying cushion, the shocks were so good.

They had another stop for lunch, this time at a Mexican takeaway. They ordered tacos filled with cooked peppers and cheese, a local speciality. Tom ate two, woofing them down in large mouthfuls.

But the more Phil got to know Tom, the more he 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 Phil was in a fix. How was he going to get away without offending him? He needed a strategy. Uncertain how to deal with the situation, he decided to face it head on. The opportunity came when they 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, Phil realised that his plan was not going to work. He had hoped that Tom would continue on without him. What was he going to do now?

He 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 Phil realised he 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 he was speaking, Phil realised what appalling things he was saying. He had never before spoken to a fellow human being like this.

He saw Tom's face explode.

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

*'Look I'm sorry.'*

*'Sorry! It's too late for sorry mate. 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.

Phil stood watching him disappear in the distance. He felt dreadful; what an idiot he was? Somehow being alone on this trip had freed a side of him that he didn't recognize. He could be really nasty. The thought shook him. He always thought he was a nice guy. Where did that come from?

Phil didn't believe in original sin like his father, a domineering intolerant bible-punching Roman Catholic. He firmly believed that Phil came into this world bad and it was his mission to cleanse him.

From his earliest memory, Phil was smacked, struck, hit, slapped, spanked, thrashed and wacked. He received every form of physical violence familiar to his father.

As he looked back, he realised that he taught him the lesson of violence and intolerance.

Unknowingly, his father had instilled in him a vicious streak that had lain dormant for fifty years only to appear without warning.

But his step-parents in New York were totally the opposite. They taught him that love was the only punishment. If he was naughty, they would cuddle him and tell him not to do it again.

Being bad was no fun so he learned to love. It was therefore a surprise to realise that anger and intolerance still lurked deep inside him .

As Phil thought more about it, he began to feel very odd. Was he two people, a sort of Jekyll and Hyde; a split personality? The one that he thought he was, caring and loving and the other vicious, vindictive and judgemental. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed possible.

Tom had somehow touched a nerve and he had exploded. He realised he needed to take control of the situation and bury his alter ego. Now that he knew it was part of him, maybe it would not emerge again.

But now in the calm of the day, Phil felt nothing but guilt and shame. He knew what he needed to do; to apologise to Tom; to tell him that it was nothing to do with him; that it was his inner anger welling up and Tom was the irresponsible victim.

But he couldn't. By then Tom had gone. He didn't have his number and there was no way of contacting him, or was there?

He suddenly remembered Tom was going to a Harley's meeting in Logan. Perhaps he could find out where the meeting was and accidentally bump into him and tell him how sorry he was.

Phil went to bed confused and unhappy and it took him a long time to get to sleep. He kept running through the argument. He couldn't seem to put it into perspective. Was he making too much of it? Finally he slept fitfully, waking early and watching the light gradually filter into his room.

Having no inclination to lie in bed, this time Phil approached the shower with much more confidence than the day before. Fortunately no one else was using the hot water at that time so he was able to indulge without the fear of a sudden dousing of cold water.

Phil's 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 he 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 old male had been killed by a 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 needed to get rid of him.'*

*'Why did we need to kill him and with bullets, it's inhumane. Aren't we being as bad as the murderer himself?'* said the second.

*'They've had to drop the lethal injection as the drug firms have withdrawn them. They don't want their products to be associated with killing people so they now use a firing squad,'* said a third man.

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

*'What about killing the wrong man?'* Asked a fifth.

*'That used to be a problem but since DNA, that's like a fingerprint, 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 Phil had to butt in.

He leaned over and said,

*'You do know that 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 civilised or are we just animals?'* He retorted.

*'Where you from Mister?'*

*'I'm 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, 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. They were all getting a bit bored with it. Suddenly one of the men asked Phil.

*'So what are you doing in these parts?'*

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

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

*'I'm hitch-hiking.'*

On hearing the word '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.'*

Later Phil climbed into the passenger seat of Josh's beaten up pick up truck. It had seen better days. He could see that the vehicle had originally been painted 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 into the lumpy seat, Phil wondered what the next journey was going to bring.

The engine turned over a few times before starting with a cloud of black smoke emerging from the exhaust. Josh looked at Phil sheepishly.

*'She's OK, just needs a bit of coaxing and she behaves like a dream.'*

Some dream Phil thought, more like a nightmare. The truck lurched forwards several times like a reluctant horse and then as if accepting the inevitable, the engine began to tick over and they were off.

*'There, you see,'* he said without prompting, *'she never lets me down.'*

Phil thought he was tempting fate but resisted saying anything. Then as if he was talking to himself, Josh said,

*'It's a rum old world, a man like you, educated, hitch-hiking, it makes no sense.'*

Phil didn't reply, there was no point, Josh wouldn't understand. They 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, Josh looked the part; a rough, tough farmer used to the hardship of physical work. Then, as if he's heard Phil's thoughts, he began to tell him about his life.

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

Josh was gripped by his down to earth philosophy. So matter of 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 Phil knew, always wanting more money for fewer hours. Josh could tell them what life was really like. But Phil guessed you have to be born to it as he was.

They 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 had 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 say. He's in an institution.'*

It was about eleven when they stopped for a break. Phil needed the toilet badly. Josh seemed to be like a camel, able to travel forever.

Phil wanted to ask him about his private life, was he married? Did he have any kids? But the opportunity didn't arise.

## Logan

They parted outside Logan. Josh was going North which would have taken Phil's out of his way. He was committed to finding Tom. He needed to catch up with him and get it off his chest, but where to start?

Phil was looking around trying to decide which way to go when, he couldn't believe it, a Harley Davidson approached. He shouted and waved his arms.

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

*'What's the trouble,'* Lucy 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?'* Phil was babbling like a child.

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

Twenty minutes later, they entered a large square in the centre of the town. It was blocked with bikes. Phil was amazed how many H-D's there were, He guessed more than a hundred.

Thanking Lucy, his driver, Phil set off towards the middle of the group. His idea was to ask for Tom as he was going along; someone was bound to know him.

He had got almost to the centre of the square when he saw him talking to someone. Phil was feeling nervous, he couldn't believe it. He was feeling sheepish at approaching Tom when he looked up and saw him.

*'Hi, so you got here?'* Tom said without a trace of resentment.

*'Look,'* Phil 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.'*

Phil was stunned. He expected a tirade of abuse and had prepared himself for it. He was going to beg for his forgiveness, offer to buy him dinner, anything to free himself from the guilt he felt and here he was speechless, astonished at Tom's reaction.

*'The incident was completely forgotten,'* Tom had said with a smile, then;

*'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?

Phil swallowed his embarrassment and climbed on behind Tom. About two dozen bikers set off in pairs keeping to the speed limit.

# The Rodeo



Phil could hear the Rodeo long before they got there, a mixture of honky tonk music, cheering and shouting. They 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, they found some seats on a wooden bench by the ringside with an open view of the paddock. Phil could feel myself getting drawn in by the crowd who seemed to be mainly older men and some women.

*'Where are the youngsters?' He asked.*

*'They don't seem to be interested, most of them can't even ride.'*

Having asked about the Rodeo, Phil 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 the skills required for their jobs.*

*These included bareback riding, roping, and steer catching. Over time a number of others had been added including Barrel Racing.*

*As the sport became more popular, a number of schools were set up to teach the professional and the sport then became big business.*

## The Big Event

They had 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 outside the venue, many spectators were hanging from trees or leaning over from balconies.

The two competitors entered the ring and stood facing each other. The crowd went quiet; there was an air of expectancy. Fathers stood holding the hands of their sons. You could have heard a pin drop.

The Canadian, 'Canada Bill', almost two metres in height, had broad 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 eyes caught theirs.

The local man, 'Logan Loner' was much shorter 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 brimmed Stetson on his head. The crowd loved him.

*'Logan, Logan,'* they shouted 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 but the applause drowned out their words.

*'Make the most of it, titch, you won't be around much longer,'* hissed 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 Bareback riding.  
Now gentlemen, any questions?'*

Phil 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.'*

It landed heads up.

*'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.

Then 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 around the animal’s neck. 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 on the ground, 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 acknowledged 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 Bareback riding.’

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 his 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 burst into the ring.

The crowd held their breath as he wrestled with the animal as it 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 scrutinised. 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 endeavoured 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 they waited, the names of the three competitors appeared on the board.

Nifty Nell, Speedy Sarah and Hasty Helen.



Dressed in cowgirl gear, 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.

Phil sat as the final crowd dispersed, thinking about the spectacle that had totally absorbed him. He felt exhausted. He had read about the rodeo but could never have imagined what it would have been like.

It was an experience that would stay with him for the rest of his life. In those three or four hours, he had shared the life of the community and had experienced the energy and enthusiasm of the people.

They had all 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, into a spectacle of unimaginable excitement.

Phil got up to leave when a couple sitting next to him 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.

Phil turned and saw an older man with sparse white 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.'

Phil followed them to the car park. Alastair was limping with a stick. Fiona held his arm as they crossed the road to get to their car, a Ford Country Squire.

Phil hadn't seen one of these for some years.

'Nice car, one of the great oldies, real style,' he said, comparing it to his 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 Phil sat in the front seat. He looked for the seat belt. Alastair saw me searching and said,

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

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

'There's no point in telling him,' said Fiona.

'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.'

Phil couldn't help smiling to himself. It all sounded so familiar. It could have been his wife speaking about his love of candies or his addiction to salt.

After about twenty minutes, they drove off the main road onto a rough track, which seemed to be leading into the countryside. Fiona must have seen Phil's 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 they 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 Phil. Suddenly the door yielded and opened. They 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.’

Phil perched the book on his knees and began examining the pictures. The first page showed some pictures of an open field with some cattle.

‘This is a field,’ he 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 the house.’

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 of fact about it. I was surprised.’

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

Phil 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.

‘Have you tried scones? They are a Scottish specialty.’

Phil 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 Phil was getting concerned where he would sleep for the night. Fiona must have realised his concern.

‘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 stay here, wouldn’t we Alistair?’

‘Yes, yes, what a good idea,’ he stammered, obviously surprised by her invitation.

Later that night, Fiona showed Phil 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,’ Phil 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 they 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. Phil 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.’

‘Let’s go to the cowshed.’

It was a small building with pens for 10 animals. John the farm hand was at work mucking out when they arrived. He stopped what he was doing.

‘Hello John,’ said Alistair, ‘this is Phil, he is a visitor, staying with us.’

‘Hi John,’ Phil said. ‘How are you?’

‘Fine,’ he replied showing a row of even white teeth. Phil 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’.

‘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.’

They 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 they heard Fiona’s voice,

‘Alistair please come in, dinner is ready.’

Once seated, Fiona announced,

‘We are having a typical Scottish meal especially for you 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 ever had a typical Scottish meal. We 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 bashed neeps, that’s mashed creamed potatoes and turnip/swede to you and me, and we will finish with bread pudding.’

It was a feast. Phil couldn’t believe how much food was put out on the table. Alistair attacked his with a vengeance but he had more difficulty. He didn’t want to leave anything so he 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 their plates. Fiona was evidently delighted. She clapped her hand in glee.

‘You guys certainly did justice to the meal.’

It was late when they decided to retire to bed. They had sat watching the moonrise, drinking Scotch whisky until they could hardly keep their 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.'

Laying in bed, watching the moon moving slowly across the pitch-black sky, Phil realised that he had come a long way since he left his home many weeks earlier. Not in terms of miles but in his understanding of who he was and what really mattered. It had come about because of the many people he had met who had touched him, each of them was 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, Phil bade farewell to Fiona and Alistair thanking them for their kindness and promising to keep in touch. Later Alistair drove him to the 1-15S Interstate Highway and he began the next stage of his journey.

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

And he had never been abroad in his sixty plus years. What did that say about him; that he had no curiosity? Didn't want to visit countries whose history was more than five times longer than his own, the birthplaces of his beliefs, and the origins of his language? Phil had never thought about it before. So he made a vow that when this trip was over, he and Fiona would travel abroad.

Phil had a long journey ahead and he needed to get started. The dew was still on the fields on either side of the road, as he took up his position ready to hail a passing vehicle. He 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 him they could drive on. It was as simple as that.

He didn't have to wait long before he saw the first car far in the distance. He prepared himself, raised his right arm and waved it down. It didn't stop. He waited and another car passed by without stopping.

Then a third and a fourth, it was becoming monotonous but as before he sustained himself by the fact that he only needed one ride. Then surprisingly a gas tanker came to a shuddering stop and a voice from the cabin shouted,

'Where yeh going?'

'I am trying to get to Boulder Dam.'

'OK climb up.'

# Boulder Dam



It was a curious feeling sitting in the passenger seat of a gas tanker hurtling down the highway. After a while, Phil couldn't resist asking ,  
'How does it feel driving a potential bomb?' The man didn't seem surprised by his question.

'Hmm, everyone asks me that question 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 Boulder Dam?'

'Curiosity; 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.

' Your Grandpa? You can't be serious?'

'I am. When I was a kid, my Ma used to tell me stories about the dam.'

Phil's 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.

Phil 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 had tried a bunch of times but had to give up.'

The Colorado River was the main source of irrigation water to the surrounding land. Around about 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?' Phil said.

'Yes but in many ways, it shouldn't have happened. The country was in a real bad way, horrific unemployment. As early as 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 but the project had to wait until six companies had agreed to unite to raise the money before building could begin, by which time, the depression was in full swing.'

'So did that stop the project?'

'You would have thought so but thousands of unemployed workers, undeterred, came out from all over the States. The original plan was to create a town to be called Boulder, to accommodate them and their families but President Hoover ordered the work to start before it was ready, so temporary bunkhouses, in which the workers would live, were built quickly along the riverbank.'

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

'Let's break here. I need a comfort visit,' he suggested.'

Phil alighted and sat on a nearby bench under a tree waiting for him. He was beginning to miss his home and his comforts. Sleeping in different beds every night and eating café food wasn't agreeing with him and what was worse, he could feel that he was putting on weight just the opposite to what he had hoped would happen. It was the lack of choice, little fresh fruit or vegetables; too much fried food with chips, which he couldn't resist.

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

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

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

Then He heard a man's voice say,

'Who is it?'

'Who's that speaking?' Phil 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; just sit fiddling my fingers? Well I didn'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 had nothing to do with you. How can I convince you I love you?’

Suddenly Phil felt his shoulders being shaken. He stirred.

‘Wake up we must get going.’

He opened my eyes.

‘You fell asleep? Are you OK?’

‘Yes I think so.’ he was still a bit bewildered.

Back in the cab, he struggled to understand what had happened. He was so confused. Was it a dream or did he really speak to her?

They were now travelling along an almost deserted motorway. On either side, the hills, wind swept over generations, rose up almost blotting out the sun.

They were on a broad primaevial river bed carved out millions of years ago by glacial movement. He imagined he 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, Phil glanced at the dashboard and saw a compass. Bill saw him 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, Phil explained why he was on the road and how it had changed his whole perspective on life.

They had been travelling several hours when there was a sudden jolt and the truck began to slither sideways 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 Phil was visibly shaken. He had visions of them plunging down the side of the road totally out of control.

‘Are you all right Phil, you look terrible?’

‘I’m 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 practise on an oiled slippery surface. Hold on Phil, I need to phone the office and get some help.’

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

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

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

As the time passed, Phil realised that perhaps he should have taken his advice. It could be hours even overnight and he 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, I understand, you’d like to get going. That’s all right with me. It makes sense.’

They shook hands and wished each other well and Phil climbed down from the cab. He felt a bit of a deserter but he really wanted to get on his way.

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Very soon a car came by and he waved at it. There were two young women in it. They slowed down, peering at him. He could see from their looks that they were undecided whether to stop and pick him up. Luckily they finally decided to do so.

As they drew alongside him, the passenger wound down her window.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Las Vegas if possible.’

‘So are we, get in.’

As he 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,’ the other said with a twinkle in her eye.

‘What do you ladies do?’

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

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

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

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

‘Do you mind if we stop and have a look at the Memorial?’ He asked.

Cathy parked the car and the three of them walked back to the Dam.



It was a short distance to the monument. They stood silently, each in their 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 bronze 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 later to be called Boulder Dam. Nearby was a bronze plaque memorialising the 96 workers who had died during its construction.

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

'Its alright Cathy?' he said, hugging her.

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

Phil 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 resurrect 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. But because of the enormity of the project, it was rejected as impossible.

However later, six companies, including Morrison-Knudsen Co, Utah Construction Co Ltd, J F Shea Co, Pacific Bridge Co, MacDonald & Khan Ltd and a joint venture of W A Bechtel Co., Henry J Kaiser, and Warren Brothers bid for the contract and in the end they all united and called themselves The Six Companies.

Five thousand men, coming from all over the country were employed. The working conditions were harsh with temperatures up to 110 F.

In the course of the construction that took 1800 days (five years) and cost \$50 million, ninety workers lost their lives.

We stood deeply moved by the beauty yet tragedy of the Hoover Dam.

Without warning, a cold wind suddenly rose up.

'I think we should get going if we are to make Vegas before dark,' said Cathy, turning and walking towards the parked car.

She had hoped that they 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 feet 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, they continued towards the bridge, now the only way south. As they approached it, Phil 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, he could hear the thunderous roar of the Colorado river hurtling below.

Phil couldn't look down. He had always had a fear of heights and this was a real test of his nerves. He could feel himself begin to sweat and feel lightheaded.

He must have shown his fear because Nancy turned in her seat,

'Are you all right Phil, you look a bit pale?'

'Yes,' he 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?' Phil nodded and without embarrassment she reached over and took his hand; hers was warm and firm, his clammy and shaky. They sat holding hands for a brief moment.

'You can open your eyes now,' she said, releasing his hand. He looked up; they were now heading south on a wide freeway. Feeling much calmer and having regained my voice, Phil 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, they came upon a diner called the High Scaler cafe.

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

They entered a small dark saloon. As their eyes became accustomed to the gloom, they 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.

They 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.

# Grand Canyon



Phil's next stop was the Grand Canyon, a legendary place that he remembered from his childhood.

He had vague memories of visiting it as a young boy with his parents. It was during the summer holidays. He recalled that it was very crowded. He was holding his Dad's hand and together they walked to the edge. All he can recall was looking down into an enormous hole that seemed to go on and on. It was really scary. For some time after, he had nightmares as if he was falling into it. He would wake up shaking and bathed in sweat.

Now grown up, he was going back to see it again. This time he hoped to bury his fears.

## The Auditorium

Phil said goodbye to Cathy and Nancy, having arranged to meet them the following day and made his way to the Auditorium of the Grand Canyon Museum.

By the time he arrived, there was a large crowd of visitors already seated. An audible hum of excitement could be heard as they waited for the Daily Talk to begin.

Although it was already very crowded, he managed to find a seat at the back. Looking around, he could see that the majority of the visitors were Americans from their clothes' style; loud colours that didn't match. But there were also a significant number of foreign tourists, recognizable by their more moderate dress.

Suddenly the lights were lowered and a tall Ranger, dressed in a smart khaki uniform, mounted the stage. He waved his hands for silence.

*Good Afternoon everyone; welcome to the daily talk here in the Grand Canyon Museum. I am one of the many rangers who supervise your visit to ensure that you have the most rewarding and exciting experience, and remain safe.*

*I will be telling you about the history and origin of the Grand Canyon, one of the most iconic sites in the world. We welcome over six million visitors a year who come and marvel at its grandeur.*

*The canyon was first traversed in 1869 by John Wesley Powell, an explorer, a geologist and ethnologist, who, leading a nine-man boat trip, ran the rapids down the Colorado river. His detailed account of their journey helped to make the Grand Canyon's reputation.*

*But no talk about the Grand Canyon can avoid beginning with the origin of the Colorado river.*

*The iconic River Colorado, named after the Spanish word for 'coloured red', begins in the Rocky mountains at the La Poudre Pass Lake in Northern Colorado near the northern border of Arizona and travels a distance of 1450 miles to the Grand Wash Cliffs near the Nevada state line.*

*For over 50-70 million years, it has been cutting its way through the Colorado plateau, a plain composed of sedimentary sandstone, shale and limestone, assisted by seasonal heavy rain, to carve out one of the deepest canyons in the world.*

*The Canyon lies in the South Western United States and extends 277 miles from its origin at the mouth of the river Paria near the northern border of Arizona to the Grand Wash Cliffs near the Nevada State line.*

*Its greatest depth is more than a mile. Below its rim, its walls reveal an extensive record of geologic events. Unfortunately there are immense gaps due to rock slides so that our knowledge of the evolution of the canyon is sadly incomplete.*

*What we do know is that the cutting of the mile deep Grand Canyon by the Colorado River is an event of relatively recent geologic history that began not more than six billion years ago. It is estimated that the river carried 500,000 tons of sediment a day.*

*A cross section of its walls from top to bottom reveals overlying sheets of black lava and volcanic cones; Mesozoic rocks about 250-65 million years old that have been eroded away; Paleozoic rock strata deposited over 300 million years old; a layer of Proterozoic limestones, sandstone and shales more than 540 million years old and at the level of the river, Archean granite and schist 2.5 billions years old.*

*More recently, 12,000 years ago, we know that the area was occupied by Native Americans.'*

*Finally a word of warning. Many of the walkways are open to the canyon, the ground is rocky and unstable so please take care when exploring the area. We don't want anyone to have an accident.*

As Phil listened to the description of the evolution of the canyon, he was stunned by the time scale making our life span of three score years and ten, less than a second in its life..

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After an overnight stay at a local hotel, he packed up his few belongings ready for the next phase of his journey.

## Las Vegas



The road was now spreading out before us, a wide four-lane motorway carving a passageway through the Las Vegas Valley. Phil felt an overwhelming sense of freedom as they hurtled along, as if they 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 they were passing and the cool rushing waters of the Colorado River from which they had come. Now green lawns were replacing the yellow-ochre landscape as they approached the man-made town of Las Vegas, an oasis that had sprung up out of the desert.

They drove past neat picture card houses with well-mown lawns and two cars parked in the drive. Phil 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 his thoughts.

'Phil, Nancy and I are going on to the Casino. I'll drop you at a motel we know. You can settle there and if you like, come and visit with us later and try your luck.' She handed him 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, they 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. Phil 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.’ They waved as they drove off.

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

‘Good afternoon Sir, Can I help you. Do you have a reservation?’

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

‘Let me check.’ Phil 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.’ Phil heard a bell ring and a tall young uniformed man appeared.

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

‘Follow me Sir.’

Phil followed him along the corridor and they stopped opposite the elevator.’

‘Do you mind if we take the stairs? I need the exercise,’ Phil jokes.

‘Sure no problem.’

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

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

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

‘Is this a holiday job you’re doing?’ Phil 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.’

They arrived at the 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?’ Phil gave him a tip and began to unpack my few things.

Standing at the window overlooking the swimming pool, Phil thought about Brenda. He knew he had said that he wouldn’t contact her but as the days passed he began to worry a little.

Was she OK? She had said not to ring and he had agreed but now almost three months later, Phil was having second thoughts. He could Email her or we could Skype?

Phil checked the room and found there was Internet available so he got out his I-pad and switched it on. The charge was low so he connected it to the wall plug above the desk. The screen flickered and settled. He typed in her Email and waited. The page opened and he began to type.

*“Hi Brenda, I decided to break the 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 like a new man. Can’t wait to hear from you. Love Phil.”*

He pressed ‘Send’ and watched as the message disappeared from the screen.

It was now about 6 pm. Phil had arranged to meet the girls at eight so he had time for a rest.

A ping from his IPad woke him. At first he thought it came from outside and then he saw the light on his 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.*

Phil sat looking at the message on the screen trying to read between the lines. It was such a matter of fact reply. He didn't know what he had expected but he was dissatisfied with her answer. Perhaps he thought she would miss him more and say so, He certainly missed her.

He didn't feel like replying right away, he wanted to think about what he would say.

Meanwhile it was getting late and he had promised to meet the girls at the Casino. Reception gave him a small map so that he could walk to the Strip.

On the way he passed David who was sitting by the front door waiting to help the next guest. He caught his eye.

'Good luck at the tables,' he mouthed.

There was something about David that Phil liked. 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 him of himself many years ago when he first joined the company. He was going to conquer the world. It seemed so simple then, but the reality of life gradually weighed down on him.

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 he

could no longer just enjoy the struggle, there was a desperation about it, a 'do or die'.

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

After a further ten-minute walk, his head cleared and he saw it, an enormous fairyland vision. Phil 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.

He couldn't help but feel excited at the prospect of entering this house of pleasure. Stepping in, he was in 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.

He watched mesmerised as one by one the machines were fed. They seemed to have a never-ending appetite for money. Suddenly from his 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.

Phil walked on through the rows of machines until he reached the gaming room where he knew the serious gambling took place. It was here that he had arranged to meet Cathy and Nancy. The sound was deafening as he entered, a combination of human voices, background music, the croupier's call and the public's shouts of delight.

At first he wanted to put his hands over his ears to deaden the sound but gradually he got used to it.

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

'Wow, you look amazing, I would never have recognised you. Where's Nancy?'

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

They 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 his eye and smiled.

Then she stepped forwards and spun the wheel in one direction and spun the ball in the opposite 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. Phil followed her downstairs to a small bar provided for the staff. There was one or two staff already there. They 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?' Phil 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 soon had to go back on duty so Phil 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 them, ‘why not change your life with a big win? Lay your bets.’

Phil had about fifty dollars to burn so he decided to have a go. He bought ten, five dollar chips and began by betting on odds. Seven came up and he won ten dollars. He repeated it and won again.

Perhaps I’ll go for a number this time. He chose his lucky number three. He put on twenty dollars and held his breath as the wheel slowly ground to a halt flipping from number to number.

It stopped; he couldn’t believe it, at the number three his number. Now a pile of five dollar chips was stacked on the number. He had won over three hundred dollars. It was as if he was bewitched.

Now the right thing to do was to cash the chips and walk away. That was the right thing to do, he repeated to himself but another voice, more insistent than the first, whispered.

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

At that moment Nancy appeared.

‘Phil, I see you are doing OK.’ Without asking him, she said, ‘My advice is to stop now.’

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

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

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

Phil owed his new friends so much and wanted to repay them 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 him.

They were both busy when he left so he 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 for any more of these late nights. Can we meet at Gordon Ramsay Pub and Grill for lunch say 2 pm tomorrow, Love P*

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

There was a message waiting for him 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 he got there he could see that they had added an American touch; tiled floors and smart tables and chairs. It was very different from the worn out furniture and uneven wooden floors of the replica English Pubs he had seen in New York.

The ladies were waiting when he arrived. They looked fresh and vivacious. Now wearing simple cotton dresses with low heels they could have passed for school teachers, not croupiers in one of the most sophisticated gaming rooms in the world. They 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 them sat admiring the décor when a server appeared handing them menus. Phil knew what he was going to have, the steak and kidney pie, it was a favourite of his but he waited for the girls to decide.

‘You’re the expert Phil, what do you suggest?’ asked Cathy. He told her his choice and she nodded in 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,’ Phil 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.’

They dragged out the lunch but finally they 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. Phil said they must come and visit, the usual things one says and then they parted, promising to keep in touch but in his heart Phil knew that as time passed other things would occupy them and this irreplaceable experience would fade.

Just before he went to bed, Phil remembered that he hadn’t replied to Brenda. He switched on his Ipad and re-read her last message.

There was a coldness about it that he didn't recognise. Perhaps he should have expected it after all it could be said that this trip was very selfish. What would he have said if Brenda had wanted to do the same and leave him to run the home and deal with all the domestic issues? He wouldn't have been happy.

Easter was now two weeks away. Phil realised it would be a real struggle to get back home by road, unless he broke his rule and took a plane. He decided to think about his reply and deal with it in the morning. He didn't sleep well. There was a low drumming sound coming from somewhere in the distance, probably a late nightclub that disturbed him.

It seemed that he had only been asleep for a few minutes when his alarm went off at 7 am.

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

David said

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

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

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

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

'You must go more often, it helps.'

'What will you have?' Phil 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.’

Reaching in his pocket, Phil said,

‘No; here’s \$100 for you.’

‘Phil, I can’t take that!’

‘Take it, I didn’t have it yesterday, take it.’

David continued nursing his juice. Phil could see he was uncertain but he needed the money. Finally he said,

‘Thanks Phil, that will make a lot of difference, I have some outstanding bills I need to pay.’

They sat in silence for a moment and then Phil asked.

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

David’s face clouded over and he didn’t answer at first. For a moment Phil thought he 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 to see 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,’ Phil said, ‘life makes no sense. These things happen for no good reason, it’s not your fault.’ They 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. 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.’

'The Natural Museum? Why there, Phil asked, surprised by his choice.

'It's my favourite. You'll see what I mean when we get there,' 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 also an Egyptian exhibition with realistic artefact recreations of the Golden Throne, chariots, the Golden Shrine and the sarcophagus.

These replicas are one of only two sets that were authorised by the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities. I find I go back time and again to it, unable to believe that it was over 5000 years ago that they were producing such beautiful objects.'

'What about the 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 around 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 to 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 his face. He was puzzled and confused.

'That's an incredibly kind offer but why would you want to do that?'

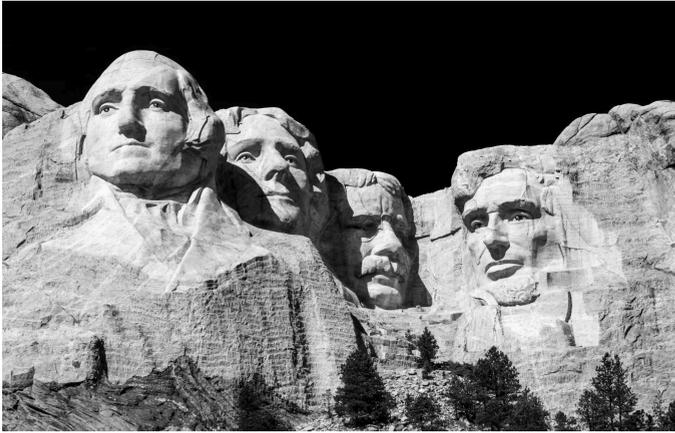
'Because you deserve it. You are a fine young man and I want to help you. Is that such a bad thing?'

'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.'

## Rapid City and Mount Rushmore



'We will soon pass Mount Rushmore and the Black Hills ,' said Bill, a farmer who had picked Phil up on the way to Rapid City.

He had read about it as a child and seen photos of the four Presidents so he jumped at the opportunity of seeing it in real life.

They had been travelling for about thirty minutes when Bill suddenly spoke.

'It's just around the corner on your right. It's become a tourist attraction so we should be able to see it from close up.

Suddenly it was there, four enormous figures staring down, bigger and more impressive than Phil expected.

As we drew nearer Phil could see that a coach had disgorged a number of people who were standing around a man who was gesticulating.

'Bill,' Phil said, ' I think they must be tourists with their guide. Do you think I could join them and hear what he is saying?'

'We can try. I'll stop in the Car Park and you can go over and ask. Don't be too long, I've still got a long way to go.

Phil got out of the car and walked over to the group. The Guide was speaking as he arrived

*'It is called Mount Rushmore after an American Attorney who was involved in its construction.'*

Waiting for a pause in the conversation, Phil asked:

*'Would you mind if I listened in to what you are saying?'*

*'No, sure please join us. Where was I, Oh! yes.'*

*'Thousands of years ago, this mountain was an active volcano that periodically erupted pouring out tons of lava. Over time, it slowly cooled leaving a large plug of magma sealing the vent.'*

*The site became the sacred place of the Sioux nation who called it **Tunkasila Salpe Paha** and came here to pray.*

*In 1868 the US Government signed the Treaty of Fort Laramie giving the Sioux exclusive use of the Black Hills but soon after gold was found and in 1877, the US broke the treaty and reclaimed the land.*

*In 1920, the Lakota tribes sued the US Government for theft. The case remains unresolved to this day although in 1980 the Supreme Court ruled that the taking of the Black Hills from the Sioux required just compensation and awarded the tribe \$102 million. The Sioux said it was not enough and refused the money. The case continues.*

*Now let's talk about who carved the figures. Does anyone know?  
One hand went up*

*In the early history of our country Mountain Men were pioneers who charted the unknown territories opening up the West.*

*'Yes, in 1927, Doane Robinson, an historian at the South Dakota Historical Society, launched a campaign to create and commemorate South Dakota's own Mountain Men, the four Presidents.'*

*A sculptor, Gutzon Borglum, the son of Danish immigrants was commissioned to carry out the work. He had studied Art in San Francisco and then in Paris at the Academie Julian and the Ecole des Beaux Arts.*

*The work began in 1927. By 1930, George Washington's head was unveiled followed by the heads of Thomas Jefferson (1936), Abraham Lincoln (1937) and finally Theodore Roosevelt (1939)*

*Borglum sadly died in 1941 before the work was completed. The remaining work was completed by his son Lincoln Borglum.*

Phil listened to the story of this amazing project but was saddened that it had been achieved on land at the expense of Native Americans.

## Yellowstone

There was one more place Phil needed to visit. A road sign to Yellowstone brought back vivid memories. He was a thirteen year-old at school attending his favourite lesson Geography, taught by a charismatic teacher who managed to bring the subject alive. He remembered the lesson so clearly. On the walls of the class room were blown up photographs of memorable places. The one that always drew his attention was of Yellowstone; a photo of a geyser spewing steam high into the sky. He returned to it time and again.

Then one day; it was the end of term and they had about thirty minutes before the class dispersed for the holidays; their teacher asked, looking around the class.

“Has anyone got something they would like us to talk about before we break for the holidays?”

Phil’s hand shot up.

‘Yes what is interesting you?’

‘Sir, Yellowstone, can you talk about Yellowstone?’

He smiled

‘Yes of course Phillip, gather around.’

We all stood around the photo of the geyser and he began.

‘Yellowstone Park was the first and possibly the largest National Park in the world, established by the US congress in 1872. It measures 63 miles by 54 miles and covers an area of almost 3500 square miles.’

*‘About two million years ago, an underground volcanic eruption blew up, ejecting more than 500 cubic miles of magma (rock and ash) into the atmosphere. As the dome of magma collapsed, it left an enormous caldera, an oval shaped depression in the ground, measuring 30 x 45 miles that now occupies the west central portion of the park and includes part of Yellowstone Lake.’*

*‘In 1976 it was designated a UNESCO biosphere reserve and two years later, a World Heritage Site.’*

*To the South, an 80 mile long roadway, the John D Rockefeller Jr memorial Parkway connects Yellowstone with the Grand Teton National Park.'*

Phil smiled as he vividly recalled that day at school. Now he was on the way to visit it.

.....  
The day had started badly, Phil found myself standing on the road in the blazing sun with no shade. After his experience in the rain, he had bought a small collapsible umbrella and this came to his rescue.

Some hours had passed and the road remained empty. Phil needed to find somewhere to stay and checked his map. There was a town about five miles away not too far to walk so he set off singing to himself.

It was in the early afternoon that he got a ride.

He saw the Buick some miles away and watched it as it approached. As it neared, he hailed it with his thumb requesting a ride. He could see what looked like a family of four with the father driving.

He saw the adults talking and then it slowly came to a halt, The driver wound down his window and called out.

'Where are you heading for?'

'Yellowstone.'

'OK jump in.'

The children in the rear seat moved over and he got in. Once they had set off, the driver called out over the noise of the engine.

'I'm Jack and this is my wife Susan.'

'What's your name?'

'Philip, but they call me Phil.'

'Say 'Hello' to Phil, children.'

'Hello Phil,' a chorus of shouts greeted me.

'That's Penelope and George.'

'Hi Penelope and George, how're you doing?'

'Fine' came the chorus reply.

'Have you been to Yellowstone before?'

'No.'

'It's my first time also.'

'So Phil, what made you take to the road, you don't seem the type?'

'It's a long story, let's say I became restless'.

'It's OK Phil, I know when not to pry. Let's just enjoy the day.'

They pulled into the car park and the family alighted.

'Thanks for the ride, I'll be on my way.'

'Phil, you don't have to leave, why not come along with us. We are all here to see the sights?'

Phil was about to say, no thank you, I'm OK, when he thought, why not? It will be fun being with a family for a change.

'Thanks I would like to.'

The day passed in a flash moving from one amazing sight to another. The children's excitement was infectious.

The most memorable sight was one that Phil had only seen photos of. Now he was seeing the real thing

# Old Faithful



As they approached the rim, they could see the vent bubbling steam.

A guide was talking.

'Old Faithful' is what this geyser was nicknamed in 1870 by a group of explorers. It spouts every sixty to ninety minutes.

They waited as the minutes ticked by and then the countdown began. Sixty five, sixty six until they reached seventy when suddenly an enormous stream of boiling water was thrust high into the sky.

Phil stood transfixed, unable to pull his eyes away from this natural wonder.

A guide was talking to a group of school children. Phil caught his eye, he nodded and Phil joined his group.

As he began to describe the sleeping giant beneath our feet, Phil was back in that classroom listening to his teacher

## Home

As he stood there, Phil knew that it was time. He had found and buried his demons. He was ready to go home.

.....  
Suddenly he thought of Xmas. He realised he hadn't phoned Brenda and now he wouldn't be able to until he got home. It was all getting very messy. Phil just hoped she would understand.

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

'How on earth did you know I was coming?' Phil asked, embracing her.

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

'He is,' Phil said, 'a very nice young man.'

On the way home Phil noticed that Brenda was very quiet and when they got home, he 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.'

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

'Phil, do you have any idea what it has been like, not knowing where you were, not knowing if you, 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 imagine how I felt?' she shouted.

Phil was dumbfounded; this was the last thing he had expected. He thought stupidly that she was coping well but he was obviously wrong.

‘I don’t know what to say, I am so sorry. I feel so stupid.’ he 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 now, Phil was desolate. What he thought was something she had agreed to, she hadn’t. He now realised it had been purgatory for her, while he was indulging his ego.

‘What would you like to do?’ Phil whispered,

‘Anything?’ She paused as if she was unprepared for his suggestion.

‘I know, 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.’

He reached forward and the two hugged as if they had never hugged before. Their tears mingled as they clung together.

‘I love you,’ Phil whispered.’

‘I know and I love you too but promise me you will never leave me alone again.’