



If Only by Chance

a love thriller

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*If Only by
Chance*

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The Ride

The Audit

If Only by Chance

Plays

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If Only By Chance
published by
neverhadaboss.com



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2018
Erik Wallbank
ISBN: 978-0-9862865-3-7

thanks to
George Shearer
for the cover layout

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Produced in the United States

1

"I done some shit."

She was attractive. Even under a grimy wife-beater, she gave off self-containment to the point that even asking her if I could use the folding metal chair next to her would have seemed an imposition. So I just sat down.

I'd ridden all night. I was in Eastern Oregon when I got the call from Dan that Domo was short a crew member for his land speed attempt at Bonneville. Domo already owns the record for the 1350cc class, so he would be going after his own record—somewhere around ten in the morning.

First sparkles skittered off the morning salt when I set my R80gs on the sidestand and walked out towards the staging area looking for Domo's garden-snake green, aerodynamic, aluminum shrouded bike, which I found next to a trailer, from which came muffled snores. As I sometimes do when I'm tired at rest areas, I put my helmet back on and lay down with my back on the salt. I was asleep in seconds.

The most refreshing sleep can come in unexpected places. When Dan woke me around nine, it was as if I'd slept all night. I wouldn't be needed except between runs and there might not be a second run. I was on call and it was beginning to heat up so I went under the canopy that was set up for riders waiting on their runs.

"You making a run?" she asked.

"No, I'm part of a crew. My guy has the record for 1350ccs," I replied with a hint of smugness. "He's trying to break it today."

"What do you do on the crew?" I was going to lie but I didn't.

"They were short a guy so I rode all night to get here. If they make a second run, I'll probably be making runs to Subway."

I liked her look. Not at all my type—a bigger girl—135 or 140 pounds. More handsome than pretty. She was dirty but it wasn't the

kind of dirt that comes with bad habits—it was Bonneville grime—greasy finger nails and shirt stains. Her hair needed a good wash.

"Arlene Dawson—171", came over the speakers. "Arlene, you're up." To my surprise, she stood up and pulled a skin-tight, latex riding suit up over her wife-beater.

"Nice talkin to ya," she said in thick Australian heading out to the bikes.

Dan came over and sat on her warm chair. "What were you and Arlene taking about?"

"Not much. Who is she?"

"You kidding? She's motorcyclist of the year—every year. She has the unlimited land speed record." Some minutes later the announcer came back on:

"Arlene's first mile—321—2 miles an hour above her record. Oh my god! I'd been sitting with a woman who rides a motorbike 321 miles an hour. I was on my feet and moving towards a spot where I would be able to see her return run—out onto the salt to where I could just make her out through the haze. She'd made the turnaround and was accelerating again towards the measured mile—two runs in opposite directions for a combined average. Sixty seconds later came the announcement: "a combined speed of 318.6 miles an hour—three-tenths of a mile off her record."

I walked to where the bikes were parked—nervous. She rode slowly between two rows of bikes and when she saw me, she kept on to the end of the row. But I wouldn't be denied. I caught up to her towards the trailers.

"Arlene." She turned enough to give me a look.

"Arlene, can I talk to you?"

"What do you need?"

"I just want to talk." She turned with a look John Lennon might have given a fan who wanted him to sing 'Yesterday' for his wife. She said nothing.

"I want to take you to dinner?" I felt stupid. She didn't have to say anything for me to know that her afternoon and evening had ended with that second run out on the salt.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"I'm almost 23."

"That like when you tell somebody you're fifteen and a half?"

"How old are you?"

"I'm 28—just plain 28."

"Five years older than me."

"Six years older than you. And a hundred years of experience older than you. You're banging on the wrong door."

"You think you're something, Arlene. Maybe I am 22, but I done some shit," I said, walking away.

2

The first two novels I wrote were fiction—this one's for real.

This was too good—the beginning of a movie could come from what just happened. At least a book! A trashy book in which she would be indelibly recognizable.

Uppity bitch—a hundred years more experience! It was just dinner so why slam me? Then again, she'd just missed a world record by a nudge. But why give me her unhappiness? I only wanted to buy her dinner. Well, not quite. I gotta quit rationalizing? If it's just dinner, you don't get all anxious. She knew that. She's the world's fastest woman and she's been around. Maybe not as much as me... . She knows what I want, but she sees me as a kid. Anyway, I tried, and you don't get no hits without having at-bats.

Dan and Domo were doing something with the bike when I came up. "You left your gear under the canopy," said Dan. "I put it in the trailer." He introduced me to Domo, who I'd neither seen nor met. I kept quiet, listening to their talk about the bike. Domo's run was up in a few minutes. Green wasn't my color but I liked it on Domo's bike. All green except for yellow flames on the cowling

out front and a yellow 199 above a little yellow flame with Dan's name in yellow script as the mechanic.

Domo's 199 was called. I walked towards the bike in case I might be needed and I was in luck. Dan and I pushed, fast enough to bump start, but it sputtered and died. We did it again and it caught. Dan walked back under the canopy while I stayed out on the salt watching Domo, who was lined up behind two waiting bikes. After a few minutes, he went through the first mile, then turned back into the second. When the last timer went off, I headed for the canopy to the announcement that his combined speed was 211. Just like Arlene. Missed it by a nudge.

I was one step into the canopy when I saw Dan, sitting on my chair, next to Arlene—her latex suit again stripped to the waist. I looked away and walked out into the sun. Which was fine because there was some cool shit out there. I headed towards a black bike and trailer pulled by a Rolls Royce—an ensemble that looked to be worth a million bucks. The bike and its black jet-streamed shroud alone looked to be worth a million bucks. I passed by some English accents. They probably paid a fortune just to get that kit across the pond to Bonneville. Whatever they were saying wasn't getting through to me because my reality was back there, in consternation, under the canopy.

It's not easy being a genetic romantic. To most people, matter of fact people, you appear insane. You're the one who hears Miles Davis blowing *I Fall in Love Too Easily* and it never goes away. You know it's stupid, but you can't help yourself because you believe that one day, maybe today, one of those love at first moments will prove true, dispelling any doubt you're a whacko. Until then, I struggle.

Now there was nowhere to go and nothing to do. I was stinging from what she'd said and I wouldn't be initiating anything between us—not again. When I have feelings for a woman and she shuts me down, I'm done. I reached out and she smacked me. How stupid that sounded. Maybe there was no intention on her part to hurt me, but I was done.

Romantic absolutism has made for unease in my relations with women. Sometimes, after a hard bump along the road of love, I can get back to being friends, but from that point, I stay protected. I thought on her remark about fifteen and a half, which described me and her—perfectly. Nothing I could do about that.

3

Punching above my weight

With sweat running down my forehead and into my eyes from a burning sun angling off the salt, with nothing more to see and nowhere to go, I headed back towards the canopy. Arlene was walking towards me, and me wishing she wasn't there. She was right—there was a hundred years between us and I was punching way above my weight! As she approached, I felt the sting of the fifteen and a half thing. At the same time, I was indomitable.

"Hey mate," she quipped, "I can't recall an expression like the one I'm seeing on your mug?" I said nothing. Instead I thought about what I might like to say.

"What's the thinking that goes along with that look?" she asked.

I told her everything I'd been thinking. For a few seconds she said nothing, then she laughed. Slowly at first, then big to where I feared I might laugh.

"I don't mind," she said. "You're definitely the most insecure, reactive man since school, but as long as you're not dangerous...?"

"I'm not dangerous. Only to myself."

"So where do we have this dinner?"

"I don't know? Someplace nice. I'll figure it out."

"I need to work on the bike," she said. "And that may take awhile. You okay if we eat late?" Since I would have crawled to

the mountains to eat with her, it was okay. We traded numbers. She'd text when she was done.

4

Something to look forward to

Dinner was on but I had to be careful. The women I hung with, some were as old as Arlene, but none of them had her assurance. But, what's with the name, Arlene, anyway? Who's called Arlene anymore? Arlene Dawson. I did like the ring of it. I didn't need to be defensive. I could stand on my own with her.

But I needed to get back to Domo and Dan. At the trailer. I told Domo I'd watched his runs. He just nodded. The talk was all about gearing. I didn't get it but I assumed Domo was reaching his maximum speed slightly before triggering the first timer. Which meant that maybe they could change the gearing to get a couple more miles an hour on the top end and still reach full speed before the first timer. This was obviously a game of inches.

I was in a good mood but a bit anxious. I needed to lower expectations about Arlene. The salt flats helped with that. Each step I took away from the vehicles and trailers drew my focus to the salt and its patterns of tiny ridges, as if some infinite flagstone patio under a daunting silence. The sun was sliding, changing color every minute. I wanted to walk out towards the mountains but I needed to work, to be with my crew, to get into my center.

They beat me back to the hotel where they were staying, where they'd set up shop on the street. And they weren't alone. Everyone was doing it. I wondered if the hotels and police would put up with it? Of course they would. Two things made this town possible—gambling and Bonneville. And here I was, the newbie, like a teenager, hoping to be asked to help.

They had exposed the rear of the bike and they were working fast. This was my in—I organized things. I gathered the stainless fasteners into one pile and kept the tools wiped clean and lined up, where they would be accessible. Then I got my big break. They were trying to loosen a large nut holding the rear sprocket in place, using a heavy-duty socket and breaker bar—but it wouldn't budge. Since I was wearing motorcycle boots, Domo sat on the bike with one foot on the brake while pulling the hand brake. Dan held the breaker and socket in place while I stood on the breaker bar with my hands on Domo's shoulders and rocked up and down until it gave (not a totally original idea—Alex had done it in *The Ride* in Mexico).

Waiting for what I could do next, I got a text from Arlene. She was done and hungry. I asked my guys if there was something else I could do? Don said he was ravished—hadn't eaten since yesterday. Would I mind going to Subway? Coincidences like this are far and few between so I texted back what I was doing. She reacted: "Too funny! Thinking how playfulness needs movement—but nothing needs to happen."

"What's the play?" I texted back.

"So far, you tell it just like it is. Not much happening, but things are in motion." Was I understanding? What was in motion? Was something in motion between us? And, honesty had a big part in it.

5

"Tell It Like It Is"—Aaron Neville—1962

I was waiting in the dinner line at Subway with a bunch of high schoolers and one older couple in front of me. I thought about paying them off to let me go first. Finally, I had two sandwiches and rode back with them zipped in my jacket.

"Where's your's?" asked Dan, with a smirk. I was about to ask what he and Arlene had been talking about under the canopy when I thought on my friend Curtis saying that in his business he didn't outsource anything. They invent the technology themselves, as needed. And like Curtis, I would hold my cards close. It didn't matter what Arlene had said to Dan. I'd go to dinner uninformed. Besides, it must have been something good.

She'd chosen the best restaurant at the most ritzy hotel. No worries. I invited her and asked her to choose. This wasn't San Francisco where my Levis, boots, and motorcycle jacket might be a problem. Nevertheless, the guy taking names looked me up and looked me down. Why in the world do people need to eat in a suit and tie? He pointed to a woman I'd walked past on my way in.

No wonder I hadn't seen her. This was not the same Arlene. Her tan, muscular body shimmered in a short white dress, red heels and a red purse. Her clean hair squeaked. She was striking.

"You're quite beautiful tonight."

"Thank you," was all she said. For some reason, all my anxiety was gone and I was simply interested in what this would be. I let the name-taker glide her into a chair. I would have thought her capable of handling it.

"How'd you pick this place?" I asked, almost with a laugh.

"This is my hotel. My sponsors pay my expenses—including my eats. You don't have to pay for this dinner." I knew better than that. This was our first date, she was splendid, and I'd invited her.

"You think I'm gonna let you buy me dinner? You thinking I'm fifteen and a half?"

"I know you're not. I was just giving you a hard time, earlier." She reached into her purse and came out with a copy of my novel, *The Ride*. "I'm about half through this and Dan told me you wrote it. I really want to talk to you about it." I looked for tells. I didn't want this dinner to be about a book. I hate book clubs. I hate book signings—read the fucking book and leave me alone about it.

Women offer tells when they're into you. They run fingers through their hair; they lift their shoulders; they look up rather than down. With Arlene I didn't see any tells.

"Why'd you write a book from the view of a sixty-seven year old man?"

"Dunno, but I'm gonna write this one from the view of a guy whose 22 and a half."

"How do you know it won't be a short story—even an unfinished short story?"

"Maybe it will, but I'm a writer and I can make it be anything I want it to be. Besides, the way it started out is just too damn good. There's a whole chapter in this afternoon. Anyway, as early as they can, men need to realize that women control the action. Whether this friendship begins or ends tonight is your call."

"You believe that?"

"What I'm saying is when a woman has self-worth, and knows what she wants, she's in control." She thought on it for a moment but didn't say anything more.

"Do you have a relationship?" she asked.

"No, the women I tend towards are older. I can't really talk with girls my age."

"How old are the women you go with?" I thought back through a grimace but kept on:

"The last one came to nothing. She was 37. Two kids. She was staying at a friend's. Wasn't ready to go back to her husband. I liked her—bit of a tomboy. We talked for hours. She came up the next day saying how much she liked our talk. We talked about being friends forever. That was the last time I saw her."

"What happened?"

"I don't know."

"Did she go back to her husband? Would you have taken on the role of dad for two kids? How old were the kids?"

"Maybe ten, twelve, a boy and a girl."

"Would you have been their dad?"

"Why not?"

"So, this is what you do on a first date, mate? Tell about unrequited love?" She said it with a wry smile, but...

"Sorry," I said. "That I never saw her again is like having someone disappear, and you did ask. What about you Arlene? Are you in a relationship?" She looked down and peeked back up at me.

"I'm always in a relationship."

My heart skipped a crazy beat and she saw it.

"I'm always in a new one because they don't last long. I'm in two of them right now—actually none—but I've been invited. The salt flats, for a woman, is like living at a marina where there's ten loose men for every woman—fifteen if you count the married ones."

I fought back an assault I was making on my low self-worth.

"Why don't they last?"

"I don't know. Once you go with them, you trade devils. I'm a girl from the Outback. I don't take shit and I'm easily bored. When you spend your days over 300 miles an hour, you don't want to be treated to self-aggrandizement at night. I defy death but I can't stand the wither of boredom. If these guys were sunflowers, they'd all be facing south, bent over seed-pods of undigested self-importance—seeing themselves as unique."

My freedom from anxiety evaporated. I was overcome by Arlene. My spontaneity went missing and I began to wish I were someplace else. Then a strange thing happened—like a man defending himself—getting a surprising confession during cross examination. Peripherally, I remembered how she'd acted when I told her about making subway runs.

"Arlene, sitting talking with you seemed easy. Hasn't mattered to me one way or the other how things go between us. But now I can't think of anything to say that you might want to hear. What you said about the girl from the Outback and the sunflowers was too much for me. You're probably right about the difference between us. Maybe it's in light years."

For a time she said nothing. Then she caught our waiter coming by and asked me what I wanted to drink? My little sleep on the salt was catching up so I decided on a coffee with a shot of brandy. She ordered a whiskey with a beer back. With our waiter two steps towards the bar she called out to make both of them doubles.

"What do you want to eat?" I asked

"Nothing. Not now. Lets have our drinks and go out on the flats. I want to stand on the salt tonight. Maybe we'll eat later."

I didn't know what to say. Each exchange was making its own reality.

"You've got something to think about, like your friends for the rest of our lives girl, I might want you for my friend. I don't know how you do it, but you say exactly what I've been wanting to hear."

6

The plot is always there, waiting to be followed.

When the waiter returned with our drinks, I asked for another cup of coffee, into which, each time I took a drink, I poured half of my coffee with the two shots of brandy. I needed the coffee as much as the brandy.

"Tell me about your book," she said.

"Where are you in it?"

"They've just crossed into Mexico. The cop stopped them."

"What do you want to know?"

"Do you really see them together, Alex and Tara?"

"I don't know. I leave it to them."

"If you don't know, who does?"

"I just follow the plot. First, I make the love impossible—then I make the plot unresolvable. But first I make her beautiful, funny, and willful. And I give him as much advantage as I can. Then I let them go to it."

"You saying you don't write it?"

"I just try to keep up."

"You don't change things that don't go the way you like?"

"I do, but with the understanding that changes come from me. That they're a part of me. When I'm changing things, I'm listening to one voice and denying another,"

"But knowing that, are there things you change, telling that other voice to fuck off?"

"Yeah, for sure. When somebody in me pushed hard for Tara to die, I cursed the motherfucker. To have someone you love die as a literary ploy reflects badly on you. I've walked out of movies, with a why the fuck did they have to do that at the end?"

"Don't you dare tell me what happens to them! But, isn't that the way life goes? Like in the movies? Sometimes it's heartbreak?"

"Yeah, and sometimes you have to, but if you can avoid it... Besides, all those damn movies and books—they just get in the way of my imagination." I was feeling good again. I deserved Arlene.

"I think to be able to write without an outline, you have to be gifted," she said.

"Do you need an outline to ride a motorbike faster than any other person? When we say someone is gifted, it's nothing someone has. The gift comes from the muse. And one's not gifted all the time. It depends on the muse whether one continues to be the recipient of a gift. People are complicated, they're magical, they're fucked up. They're ordinary—they're extraordinary. The best gift, the one that lasts, is grounded in humility. Gifts get lost in arrogance." Arlene began running fingers through her hair.

We didn't get another round of drinks and soon we were out on the salt, in a soft moon. We'd walked out past the canopy to the first timer. It was probably midnight and the whole place had gone to sleep. Under a three-quarter moon, the ridge-line of the mountains was visible against the sky. Set below the mountains, maybe half a mile from where we stood, were the trailers and trucks in muted light like some ancient village, giving up nothing one could put a name to. No dogs, no coyotes—just the occasional eighteen wheeler heading for Salt Lake or Reno along the interstate.

"I don't think I get Americans?" she said. I waited.

"I mean the guys I meet. The young ones have this casual indifference for life, but the older ones, especially the ones who haven't had a real relationship, it's like they're one bible verse away from molesting a child."

I commented. "One place I haven't been is Australia. But I've read the books and watched the movies, and the people there seem as bonkers as here."

"They are bonkers, especially when they drink. Especially if they're from the Outback. Remember, the Outback is huge and those blokes have never been anyplace else. Your West is big, but there's states and cities every so often. In the Outback there's nothing. But there I meet people who are bright and get what's going on. Here, I don't meet many."

"The US of A's dumbed down," I said. "It's on purpose. You can't have a questioning public when you need to fabricate enemies to prop up the dollar. And it gets worse with time. Soon, most Americans won't be able to find the United States on a world map."

"And why haven't you been to Australia?"

"A few reasons. I'm afraid to fly..."

She laughed. "You ride a bike around the world and you're afraid to fly?"

"Yeah, and I make the guy in my books afraid to fly."

"So the guys in your books are all the same guy?"

"Yeah, they're me—I just change the ages and think on what it would be like to be that age."

"How can you do that? You've never been sixty-seven. You can't possibly know?"

"This guy told me one time that if I wanted to be able to sound like Dean Martin when I sang, I needed to get inside Dino's face. See his face as my face."

"Did it work?"

"No, but it's a damn good idea."

"And you didn't answer my question about why you haven't been to Australia? Those other places you've been—some of them you must have had to fly to?"

"I did fly, but Australia has too many animals that scare me. Snakes that come after you and huge crocodiles. I'm not going to those places and I'm not going out across that Nullarbor Plain with all that unknown."

"What's the difference? Central America, South America, Mexico—they kill you for fun. The Russian mafia?"

"I never thought about it back then—I'm older now".

We headed back in the direction of her truck—she asked if I would drive while she took off her stockings that she'd worn through the heels out on the salt. She unsnapped a stocking from a garter belt and put her formidable legs on the dash, one at a time, to peel them off.

"Do you run tomorrow?" I asked.

"Yeah, last day and last chance at it."

"What time?"

"I need to be on the salt by ten."

"You need to sleep," I said.

"I do. I'm going to break that son of a bitch tomorrow. But tonight I got some devils that need trading. But first I need to pee."

Much of what we see ahead is a mirage

She walked onto the salt, maybe thirty feet, pulled up her dress and squatted down, pulled her panties to one-side and peed. I didn't look away.

Some anxiety seeped back, but I was done telling her about it. I couldn't tell whether it had to do with her physicality, our age difference, or the matter-of-factness she had for life. It took me back to a time when I'd watched some porn that really wasn't porn. This bodybuilder woman, I think her name was Renata—she was maybe from Romania. She was at a sex casting where the guy and his cameraman were proceeding cautiously because Renata, chock full of self-worth, could kick both their asses. Anyway, she did take off her clothes and posed—muscle posed. I was mesmerized, thinking how it might be to make love to her. Then she humanized the whole thing, talking about her three-year old and how she used to go for muscle guys until she found out that skinny guys were better in the sack.

We watched a police car cross the interstate, then turn in our direction and come slowly towards us. For thirty or forty seconds I thought about how I was going to deal with this. I might be dead tired, with two cups of coffee and two shots of brandy on an empty stomach, I might even be legally drunk, but we weren't driving,

If this guy wanted to search us or our vehicle without probable cause, I wouldn't wait for him to send for a dog, because he had no reasonable suspicion to mess with us. If he messed with any of my rights, I was going to take it personally. It would be about him—not the cops—him.

Arlene and I didn't say anything or exchange looks. The cop was alone. He stopped on the other side of the turnaround and got out. Giving us a wave he walked out onto the salt where he gazed

about at the stars and moon. Arlene gave me a small push in the direction of the truck. I resisted.

"Let's hang a second. Cops don't go night-gazing when there's people to harass who might be drunk or involved in criminal activity." Arlene showed an *I could care less* look. I watched for his play—he surveyed the heavens for the better part of a minute, then turned and walked straight towards us. I braced.

"How you folks?" he said, offering his hand. "I'm Kyle!" I didn't know what to do so I shook his hand and told him my name. Arlene did the same but with more grace and ease. I have problems with authority.

"How you two doin tonight and what are you doing out here?"

Here it was—here came the questions. He didn't wait for an answer. "I come up to Wendover to check in. I do it once a week, then every two weeks in Reno."

"You're not local officer?" asked Arlene.

"No. I was with the Las Vegas Police for about ten years but it got to where I didn't like it. Vegas isn't as safe as people think. There's a lot goes on that can get a guy killed. And we have a fourteen year old who looked like he might be starting to get into trouble. Missing school at first, then it was smoking pot. That's when I saw this rural job posting and I took it. Largest county in Nevada—maybe the largest county in the country. Just me and the sheriff. Always better to be with the sheriff."

I knew why but Arlene asked.

"It's because the sheriff is elected. The Feds can't tell him what to do. Believe me, they're trying, but so far it's no go. Most important elected official there is. If you have a good one, support your local sheriff. If you don't, get rid of them."

"Are you saying them because the sheriff might be a woman?"

"Yeah, English is tough with the pronouns and all."

"Is the money just as good, Kyle?" I asked, incredulous we were having this conversation with a cop.

"No, the money's way less. I'm making \$1500 a month, but I get this little house and full health care. We get by. I make my son

work for what he gets. He saved up and we went down to Searchlight to get this VW Beetle. He and I are going to rebuild her."

"How big is the county, Kyle?" I was curious about this man.

"Oh, it's big, but there's not many people."

"How long you been doing it?"

"It's two years next week that I drove up to interview. The job was posted for two months. The other guy couldn't even retire until they got someone. But the world's changing. Nobody wants to come way out here to interview and they definitely don't want to live out here and make less money. I jumped on it as soon as I saw the sheriff was a good guy. He's gonna retire in two years and I know most everyone in the county. Some I've arrested more than once."

"Do you want the job in two years?" I asked.

"I don't think there's an option besides me."

"What about those guys you've arrested. They gonna vote for you?"

"They just might. I don't arrest anyone unless there's nothing else that can be done."

"I need to get some sleep," Arlene said.

"I'll let you folks get on your way," said Kyle.

"Can we get together tomorrow and talk?" I asked.

"Love to, but I patrol, two to midnight."

"Where you folks staying?" he asked. Arlene told him where and that she had to get up early.

"Well, I could give your friend here a ride back in a bit if that works for you?" Arlene looked at me with incredulity. It was a precious moment.

"Where would you stay tonight, if you weren't staying with me?" she asked.

"Can't think of anywhere at the moment?" Her expression, I tried reading, but I couldn't.

"I'll leave a key for you at the desk. Room 212. There's a couch. Do not wake me!"

I watched her drive off. What had I done? Was this the absolute stupidest thing I'd ever done?

"Kyle, your car doesn't look like other cop cars?"

"No, she's eleven years old with 170K on her. There's not much of a budget for our county."

What about the sheriff? What's he drive?"

"Well, that's a bit of a different story. He loves *Longmire* and Longmire always drives some kind of Blazer looking 4x4. So, he got the prominent citizens of the county to get him one. Brand new. That's all our vehicles. The sheriff's 4x4 and my old Crown Vicky."

"What about SWAT stuff? I hear the military gives that stuff away."

"The sheriff, no, both of us, hate that shit. No canines, no SWAT, no half-tracks, no fifty caliber rifles. Just a couple of cops, doing it the way it used to be."

"What about weapons? I mean, you're on your own. What do you have to protect you?"

"You want to see?" We walked to the Ford and he opened the driver's door. "Between the seats I have a mounted shotgun." He took a blanket out of the trunk and spread it under the streetlight and sign that told about the salt flats. On the blanket he laid the shotgun. Then he took the Glock from his holster and set it down. From his leg, above his short boot, he removed a snub-nose S&W 38 and laid that down. Then, from the trunk, he unrolled a military weapon from a light cloth. Clip fed, but not an AR-15.

"What is it?" I asked

"It's an M-16. I've had it since I was a kid."

"You provide your own weapons?" I asked.

"I don't have to but I do."

Two hours later, after promising we'd keep in touch, Kyle dropped me at Arlene's hotel. I got the key from the desk and walked up the stairs. I opened the door without a sound. I had nothing to brush with so I crept in and peed. I didn't flush. I lay down on the couch without having turned on any lights and went to sleep.

8

A bird on a wire

I woke up energized, probably the coffee. My phone said ten—no messages. I went into the bedroom. The bed was made and Alene was gone. I called Dan. Domo would run at eleven. I asked about Arlene. She was on her bike, behind three or four others, waiting for her run.

I was out the door and on my bike. I took the interstate to the raceway where I made a quick exit and headed for the salt. Unlike yesterday, I rode out across the salt and headed towards the canopy, opting to not follow the meandering tracks that led to the staging area. Right quick I found out the why for the circuitous route as my front wheel dug in. I leaned way back on the pegs, trying to lift her, but I lost control and went down. Not everyone saw it—but enough did. It had been a long time since I'd been down. I closed the petcocks, left my helmet on the bike and walked out past the canopy.

I heard the announcement. Arlene had made her first run—almost a mile an hour over her record. As she was turning for home, I made a visor out of my hands to better see her through the glare. I saw the first timer go but not the second. The announcer took forever then—319.6. She'd done it. Not by much but she'd done it.

Where did that that put me? Maybe the best I could hope for was that I hadn't scratched up the irreplaceable nine gallon tank on my bike. I thought on my situation. I came to her with nothing. I got the world's fastest woman interested in me. Then I blew her off, but under rare circumstances. If last night was all there was, so be it. She liked me. I knew that. That had completion. That wasn't just an at-bat. That was a hit. A good solid hit.

But I was fidgety. Sure, what I'd done last night could be interpreted as cute but it might be my walking papers. I couldn't just stand here waiting for her so I began writing in my mind, the opening of a play with Hitler as a young boy with an old single-shot BB

gun, shooting birds off a wire. The birds drop one at a time, and the next one doesn't have the sense to fly away. This does not go unnoticed by Hitler.

Later, when Hitler and his buddy Goebbles are ignored by a couple of young Jewish princesses, we see Hitler back, as a seventeen year old, picking off birds, this time with a pump action. Arlene putted between the rows of bikes.

And this time she drew a crowd. Last time, she'd missed the record and I'd approached her. Now I held back as glad-handers surrounded her. She was the world's fastest human—at least on a motorbike. But celebrity is something that comes and goes—mostly goes. Arlene could maintain her status, but for how long? And how would it end? Serious injury, death, maybe just tired to death of the whole thing? I didn't walk away. I wasn't going anywhere.

Soon there were just a few hangers-on who soon moved off. She hadn't looked in my direction but I knew she saw me. Then, she was walking towards me, and here came those fears again.

"How're ya mate?" I just smiled. "You had fun last night?"

"As a matter of fact."

"I'm booked for Sydney in the morning." I looked past her.

"You ever been across Montana?" she asked. I told her I had.

"The sky as big as they say?"

"Much bigger."

"Well, that's where I'm headed tomorrow. On a motorbike. Are ya coming with me?"

"Yes. I'm coming with you."

I stepped to her and held her. I kissed her softly on the mouth—for the longest time. The world was mine.

9

Without giving it all you got, your future will be more of the past.

Arlene helped me get my bike to shiny side up, then I meticulously surveyed it for damage. There was none. That's the way the gods are with classic motorbikes—they protect them. Arlene was smiling a bit much. I asked about it?

"I like that you dropped your bike, hurrying to see me run."

"And I like it that you would rather ride Montana with me than go back to Sydney."

"Did I say that? Maybe I just want Montana more than Australia right now—and I asked you along." I weighed an inscrutable smile. Naw, she was into me. I walked her to the truck and she headed for Wendover, to her hotel, for lunch. She could have opted for lunch alone, but she asked me along.

I rode back into town, without using the interstate—the soft tapping of German valves in my helmet. Top of the world, but I got to be careful. Karen Carpenter got a number one hit with "Top of the World", and it wasn't long before she was dead. Don't assume anything.

Again we were at the hotel restaurant and this time, if Arlene suggested that we let the sponsors pay, I would go along with it. In *The Ride* and *The Audit*, I wrote explicit, sex scenes, but don't be expecting anything like that here. This is for real and what goes on with Arlene and me stays private. It would be fun to describe being in bed with Arlene's physicality, but better left to the imagination.

I was hungry. Hadn't thought about it, which brought song lyrics about him being up and gone. No breakfast for him. Have to paraphrase. Can't use song lyrics in a book. Bastards.

It was barbecue Tuesday on the special menu. Pulled pork on a homemade roll with a small cup of baked beans. The waitress asked which side I wanted? Sweet potato fries sounded good. Did I

want something to drink other than water? I looked across at Arlene. She demurred.

"We were talking about relationships and I told you about one that didn't happen. And you told me about lots of goings-ons. Have you ever been in love, Arlene? Present circumstances excepted."

"Are you thinking I'm in love with you, because we had a couple of talks?"

"That was a good kiss."

"One bloody kiss, in a world of kisses."

"It was the best of all possible kisses—for me." She said nothing.

"Besides, I didn't say I was in love with you, I merely put us off to the side, as a work in progress. Although, to be frank, I am falling in love with you." Damn, I knew I shouldn't be saying that, but the only thing going for me, thus far, has been honesty.

"Okay, she said. "Have I ever been in love? Yes, I've been in love. He's in Melbourne, married, with kids. I met him at a race when his wife was away in Africa. I'd never known anyone who affected me the way he did." I began wishing I hadn't asked...

"There was disarray in their relationship and he wasn't sure he wanted to get back with her. She was always gone. In our talks, I told him I saw love as something simple—simple and devoted. If it weren't that way for both of you, it wasn't love—it was accommodation. If you could think of something more fun than spending the afternoon in bed in small talk between bouts of lovemaking, you needed to reconsider your options. He asked me if I'd ever had that in my life. I told him no but I wouldn't settle for anything less. We both saw the beginnings of a strong friendship. Then I left for a bike trip across the continent."

I didn't want to hear it, but I'd asked. And what would happen when this dude in Melbourne got fed up with his situation and remembered Arlene?

"What does he do, Arlene"?

"He's a family therapist." I thought about the series, *In Treatment*, where the guy who's the therapist (the Irish guy—I can't remember his name, but he's good), has a fucked-up relationship

with his ex-wife and kid. And with the shrinks who work on him. The only people he does well with are his clients. They're actually patients. So messed up when they come through his door.

"Are you still in touch with him?"

"Not really. I'd think about him on the ride and text a bit. Told him I was heading out across the plain. He said he loved the plain—have fun! That was it! That's strong friends? Then nothing for a week. Finally, I texted that I'd had enough—I was done.

"That brought a response from him about how great I am. How much he appreciated my honesty. That my email made him sad and hurt. He was sorry that his not getting back had offended me. That I should take care.

"I wasn't going to respond but I had to. I told him I wasn't offended—I was hurt. We resolved. Then another week went by when I didn't hear from him and again I'd had enough. Told him I wished I hadn't sent him a song—he never mentioned the beautiful Coltrane blues. I felt the fool when enthusiasm was my only transgression. This time, for my own sake, I was done. That being his friend was like riding into a desert, thirsty, where there appears to be water on the road ahead, but it's a mirage.

"That brought him back again. He hadn't intended for us to active friends. That if we saw each other again, organically (it was a word like that but a different word, some new-age bullshit), in the normal course of events—whatever that means, maybe we'd have another of those good talks? There's 8 billion people in walkabout on this planet, and if you happen to bump into one of them..."

"You sound worked up over this," I said, finding it hard to breathe.

"Fuck yes I'm worked up. He's a fucking therapist and he can't be straight up with me. Maybe I was getting a little crazy from him not answering my texts, all the way across Australia!"

I was so wishing I hadn't brought it up. The lunch had arrived on colorful plates, as if we were in the islands. The pulled-pork on the round sourdough bun looked good. Probably an inch and a half of pork. The sweet potato fries were cooked just right and the little blue and black speckled metal porcelain cup with a handle, con-

taining a few ounces of baked beans, looked the best. But I wasn't hungry.

Arlene ate ravenously. She was beside herself with energy. When the waitress came close, Arlene ordered a whiskey, with a look to me. I shook my head.

"Was there more?" I asked.

"Yeah mate, there's more. Back in Melbourne I gave it another go. I invited him to lunch. Hadn't heard from him in a dinosaur age—at least a week. He said something about how he only got thirty minutes for lunch—though. I suggested I could order for us so it would be ready when he got there. I never heard back.

"But that's not what's important. What is important is that I wasn't fucking important enough to get back to. It's what they do when the chips are down that tells you. That's who they are. And soon after, I heard from a bud that this guy had an affair with his wife's best friend."

"Good that you cut it off when you did."

"Naw, mate. That's not the story. The story is he didn't want me enough to even bother!" I toyed with my food.

"That bothered you?" I was surprised she asked it that simply.

"Yeah, it did. And since you saw it bothering me, why did you go on for so long?"

"What? Are you already so possessive and jealous of me that I'm not allowed a past? You asked if I'd been in love, and yeah, I was—once. And you heard about it. Is that a problem for you?"

"I guess not." She smiled at me. "But you don't want to hear about it again, right?"

"That was the only time you've been in love? What about from fifteen to twenty-six?"

"I didn't say there weren't men, and women, but I didn't get attached. You ready to go?"

"Where do you want to go?"

"Up to my room and get this thing going."

"Can we stay just a bit? You had that whiskey, but at the time I couldn't swallow." I ordered a coffee with a shot of brandy.

10

There's no room for jealousy in love, because trust needs the whole space.

I knew these roads, I ridden most all of them when I wrote *The Ride*, and now I found myself thinking about Alex and Tara, their relationship and their lives, fused with mine—shared imagination.

But the last time I'd been on 93 South, I'd been in a car because they were in a car and I'd wanted the same feeling—the same concerns. Now I was on my trusty 81 BMW, with Arlene just ahead on her thirty-eight year newer F800GS Adventure, brilliant in red and black, with all the nifty add-ons from BMW.

I tend to ride faster than people I ride with, so I'm often in the lead, but I don't really care who's out front. As long as I don't have to ride in formation, or with specific rules. Today, Arlene was in the lead and I just let her go. As long as I could see her now and again, that was enough. I like being alone on the high desert, and except for the sound of the wind and the valves, I appreciate the silence. I'd mapped this trip over roads and destinations she'd never seen. Today was south on 93 for a couple of hours, then east on 50. I was wishing we would intersect 50 farther west because it's such a great ride, but this was good. In a couple of hours I'd be done with Alex and Tara roads, and on to a new adventure.

Soon it was early afternoon and heating up. Arlene's skin-tight, brown Ducati leathers, with a helmet painted to match, must have been oppressive. She wore black, mid-calf, deep brown boots over her leathers, but she rode like a punk, hunched over the bars as if she'd seen Brando and Lee Marvin one too many times. I thought on how I used to ride with one hand, just to look cool, often with one foot dangling. When I see that straight up position on a bike, I think of the German military. It's probably better for your spine. Who gives a fuck?

I can't say much about this road without repeating what I said in *The Ride*, how there's a holiness about this high desert—how calming it is to not see a car but a few times an hour. I thought through last night—every moment of it, five or six times. I'm sticking to what I said about not saying anything about me and Arlene, but I will say that I waited to get into bed until she was in because there are things about Arlene that intimidate me. I reminded myself to take it slow because we had the whole night to get where we needed to go.

She must be hot in all that leather. Stylish but hot. A year ago, I hung my heavy motorcycle pants on a tree in Paris, Texas, with a sign on them—*free*. Now I was in Levis that were breathing, and under my black motorcycle jacket that was mesh with leather trim, unzipped to the navel, I had one of those Nike, white poly tee shirts, that also breathed. When I needed to cool off, I stood on the pegs with my upper body above the small wind screen. I'd do that for maybe twenty seconds, then sit back down, air-conditioned by perspiration and wind. Such a great feeling. But my helmet is hot—flat black (somehow hotter than gloss black) with a dark red overlay (that I did myself), beginning narrow above the visor and getting wider over the top to the back. You're supposed to change helmets every couple or few years, but this one has been around the world. I use it to break the wind. I'm not going down.

The high desert and my thoughts took me through the next two hours until I saw Arlene's brake lights as she slowed coming into Ely, Nevada. At the stop sign she rolled through and I made a complete stop. There's probably one cop in fifty miles.

Ely's a small desert town, not much to see, but Arlene checked out everything as she rode through, looking side to side as if the world were a tennis match. At the Prospector Hotel and Gambling Hall, she backed her bike to the curb and I did the same. She took off her helmet and clipped it to the handlebars. If I'm going somewhere I can't watch the bike, I take mine with me.

"You hungry?" I nodded and she headed into the cafe.

These places remind me that what matters about life doesn't change—life's as complicated as you want it to be. If you watch

Randolph Scott, a real American man, in something like *Comanche Junction*, life is reduced to it's essentials—something to do, someone to love, something to look forward to. It's still the same.

In these old western hotels, not much has changed. There's more emphasis on the food, but drink is a given. This hotel was dark inside and the past was conveyed through the many photographs along the walls. With no one around, we seated ourselves. Presently, a youngish woman came to take our order.

"How long have you lived here?" I asked.

"Most of my life, I'm a teacher."

"How come you work this job?"

"Summer. I like teaching but I make more working here—way more." I looked around. There wasn't a customer in the place.

"It's not always like this. On the weekends, this is the place to be and there's usually a band."

"Are you married?"

"I was, but a main pastime here is drinking and I'm not into it. So I'm by myself with two young kids and two jobs. But I'm not complaining. Having no husband is preferable to most of the possibilities here." She went to place our orders.

"Are you married?" asked Arlene.

"How was the ride?" I asked.

"Good. Not much different than the Outback. Brought back the cowboy movies."

"Australian or American?"

"Both, but mostly yours. American westerns are a force to be reckoned with on the Outback."

After we ate, we stood in the sun by the bikes and talked about where we were going. For the rest of the day we would be on Highway 50, *The Loneliest Highway*, but the really lonely part was back the other way. Not that what was in front of us could be thought of as urban.

"As a woman, I don't think I could live here. Too much like the Outback, except for that description from that *unmarried* woman

you were talking to. Reminded me that Americans don't give a woman much to choose from." I couldn't let that go by.

"Was there something wrong with asking if she was married? Did my asking make you jealous?" She looked at me with incredulity.

"I'm traveling with someone young enough to be my little brother and you're talking jealous?"

"Yeah. I may be young, but I spend my days with plots, you know, human interactions—I'm betting because of last night you're more attached to me now and something bothered you in there."

"From one night of trading devils. You must be joking?"

"Oh, no. This is way too important to me, to joke about. I got in bed last night with a mature woman who looks like she might be able to take me down. So don't think I didn't have to come up against my own self. I'm thinking trading devils doesn't quite describe what's happening with us, or if it does, one of your devils is maybe feeling vulnerable?"

An old GMC half ton, passed and backed into the parking space in front of the bikes. The guy got out, maybe 35, in Levis and a cowboy shirt and cowboy hat. Not a Rodeo Drive cowboy, a real one, with a hat that had spent time in the dirt. The guy was clean shaven with a chiseled, handsome face. He didn't see me, nor the bikes, but his eyes walked up and down Arlene as if she were Texas—then he continued on into the bar. Arlene had seen him. His directness had reddened her cheeks and caught her up to where she didn't notice his bumper sticker, *My honor student shot your life coach*. So much for there not being any intelligent men in the Ely desert. When Arlene unmesmerized back to reality she looked at me as if a cop had caught a *peeping tom*.

Strangely, I wasn't affected by the guy. I was resolved that I wanted this thing with Arlene and I would take on any guy for her and I would take her on too. I got back to it.

"Was the thing about the woman not being married, something that bothered you?"

"I just didn't get why you had to ask that?"

"And do you get how you and I are just starting out and the first cowboy that walks by makes your ears red."

"They did not!"

"They did, but it's okay. Life is complicated. It's the same themes over and over, and they keep being presented to us as new. Then we remember we've seen them before and they begin to fray at the edges. In my novels, I write fight scenes, negotiating scenes, seduction scenes—that I've lived or imagined. But how will they function in my life? Like now, we've got Nevada. Tonight we'll have Utah, then Montana. How are things between us gonna play out? One night of bad drinking could be the end of us, unless we know what we want."

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I want to be the guy that when your girlfriends ask the question, 'which of our guys would be unfaithful?', when it gets to me, they all laugh. 'Arlene, you don't even have to ask.' "

She tilted her head and looked at me.

"A little jealous, perhaps," she said. "Ears a bit red, maybe, but more from being appraised like some heifer. But what you just said—I don't know how you do it... ."

I've felt really good in my life but the two hours between Ely and Delta, along 50, were as good as any in my memory. I let Arlene go to where I could no longer see her. That way I could be with her and alone. I was content to not have her on the back of my bike. To me, after awhile, that becomes like Siamese twins—guess we're not supposed to say that anymore? Jesus, when my dad grew up it was Mongolian idiots and hair-lips. In grade school, he perfected an imitation of hair-lips inability to make certain sounds. If it was mean-spirited, he seemed mostly unaware. Anyway, I like being on two bikes without worrying for Arlene's safety.

The sun behind me was heavy into the mountains, the shadows long in the east. I adjusted my mirrors so they were of no use, but neither did they blind me when the sun glanced off them. The silence was everywhere. I don't understand riders who buy fancy

helmets to hear music. Worse are the guys with intercoms to talk to the wife on the back or Uncle Ed next to them. They've been brainwashed by technology. They might as well stay home.

Just a hint of light when we entered Salina, Utah. Not much there but one motel that looked decent, a couple of truck stops and a Denny's that would not be there had we not just intersected Interstate 70. Arlene pulled under the awning at the motel and headed into the office. I liked it that she didn't feel she had to wait for me. I caught up with her at the desk.

The proprietor, of course, was Indian—not from these parts. What's the deal? Three million people from Bombay and Delhi, at some point decided to come to the American West and buy all the motels? This fellow was talking to one of his staff, and in no hurry to perform customer service. You can bet these hoteliers don't ride, because a long day in the saddle needs a room and Arlene was beginning to look peevish.

"Where do you come from?" I asked in a imperious manner. Arlene looked at me—startled. The guy stiffened his soft, complaint body to meet the stare of a racist, an atavism from the crown rule of India—*the Raj*. I'd taken out my phone and found a picture of my friend Gautam, his wedding picture with Angela, his tall bride from Germany. I motioned the skeptical proprietor over and showed him the picture. I told him about my best friend who was from Pune in the northeast. The guy brightened.

"I am from Mumbai which is in the same region." From that point he forgot about his employee and treated us as family. We took our things to our room on the second floor. Motorcyclists like to be on the first floor with their bikes right outside the door, but I don't like the sound of feet walking above my head, and besides, I can look down on my bike from the walkway.

We could have gotten two queens but the king was only five bucks more, and hopefully it would be some time before either of us needed our own bed. Memories of last night lingered. The room was a meme postcard for motels owned by Indian proprietors. Too many colors, too many patterns, and somehow, an encore of plywood panels in dark stain. Everything was old, especially the TV. I

mean, what does it take to go to Walmart and get a cheap flatscreen? Out here you already have to pay for cable so what's the point of a shitty, 15 year-old TV. But it wouldn't matter tonight. He'd also gone cheap on the cable. There was a listing, sealed in plastic, of the 12 stations available. No HBO or movie channels. Just the things he could get for the minimum. It's a bleak night on my motorcycle trips when FOX News is the treat. But like I said, tonight, TV was not on the menu.

We walked to Denny's. I remembered traveling with a girl who told me, one more Denny's and we were through. Tonight, I didn't bring it up. Denny's isn't all that bad. I see it like Subway, sometimes better than the other options. The kid who came to take our order was of an age that a carnival barker at a *guess your weight* attraction could only guess at.

"How long have you worked here?" I asked.

"Almost a year. There's not a lot of jobs around here, especially for a high school kid."

"What grade?"

"Just starting my junior year—I got this job on my sixteenth birthday." While waiting for our food I asked Alene if she didn't think this kid seemed mature for sixteen? She'd had the same thought. When he brought our food, he told us that his shift was ending and could we settle up with the other waitress when we were done?

"For sure," I said, "but is there any chance you could sit with us a few minutes. We'd really like to know what's it's like to grow up here—to live here?"

He wasn't at all taken back by my request. Arlene moved across to sit with me and he slid into the booth. I introduced us. He shook our hands and told me his name was Virgil. How about that? Virgil. How many sixteen year olds are named Virgil?

"I gotta ask? Your dad's name or the poet? And, if not, I get the one more guess."

"Neither," he said. "My dad's name..."

"Stop right there. I know your dad's name."

He smiled at me as if he had the winning poker hand, but I was undaunted.

"Your dad's name is Wyatt."

"How do you know that?"

"Because if Virgil wasn't for the poet or your dad's name, who the hell would name their kid Virgil, except somebody named Wyatt, in a town called *salt*, in the middle of the western desert."

"You got it! My dad's name is Wyatt Earp. We're related. Wyatt's brother was Virgil."

"So, Mr. Earp. Tell us about this place and what's it's like to live here?"

Virgil talked through our whole dinner without another question from either of us. When the conversation lagged at one point, I told him that Arlene was the world's fastest human. He went on and on about dirt bikes—he was in awe.

"What about the election, Virgil?"

"I would have voted for Trump. Everybody here voted for Trump."

"What about the guy from Mumbai at the motel."

"Him more than anybody. My girlfriend works there. He's really into money. Everybody here is conservative. Not me so much—my dad neither—but he voted for Trump. Out here, we feel left out. Do you think any of the Clintons came here?"

"Wait a minute! Trump came here?"

"No, but he was all over these states where nobody has a job."

"What about Obama? Do people here like him?"

"Some, but not many."

I spoke for his neighbors: "We just finished with eight years of Barack Obama, who didn't believe in the presidency—an office for deal making. The congress gets bogged down and it's the responsibility of the president to make it happen. Obama, for whatever reason, couldn't be bothered. When it didn't go his way, he dropped out or blamed others. With an eight year term, if the president can't accomplish an agenda, that's on him."

"That's exactly it," he said.

We talked a long time, until I saw that look on Arlene's face that I'd seen when I sent her along to I could talk with Kyle out on the salt flats. That wouldn't be happening tonight.

Virgil asked if I knew any blacksmiths he could intern with when he finished high school. I did. I gave him my card and told him to email me—to keep in touch. And I would put him on my blog list.

"Your blog list?" she asked, as we walked back to the motel. I don't see why you need to have anyone with you? You just talk with whoever's around." The night had a chill in it and I pulled her close as we walked. "And how did you guess his dad's name?"

"I can't imagine how life was ever worth bothering about without you. In the Denny's foyer, on the wall next to the *claw grabs the toy game*, there was an employee of the month award, in a frame—Virgil Earp. She pushed up against me as we walked.

11

Most everybody's riding around with one headlight out.

For all of my adult life, four years or two, depending on how you count, I begin writing, riding—late in the morning, and I go way into the evening. But here I am on the road before eight in the morning following Arlene along the interstate, until we cut off on 10 north through a series of small towns: Emery, Ferron, Castle Dale—up towards Vernal. Arlene was going to ride as far as she wanted before we stopped to eat. Since I wouldn't normally be out of bed for two hours—I could put off breakfast.

When I get to thinking the world is small, I get a wake-up on these backroads. Every ten or forty miles is another little agro-ranching town that may have been here more than 100 years—maybe five times as long as I've been alive. People settled here,

raised families here—they died here. The world hasn't gotten smaller—it's unfathomably grand. And you don't need to leave the West to see it. Each of these towns along route 10 has a hundred stories for my one.

I was thinking about Virgil—how the people in the middle of the country feel abandoned by the East and West Coasts—the celebrities of Hollywood and New York—and all Obama's *folks* in D.C. Never, at least not since the Civil War, has this country been this divided. The election had little to do with Donald Trump, another poor choice viewed as the better choice by the people out here. When somebody from New York, a hospitality mogul with orange hair, skilled in bankruptcy court, is the preferred candidate for the rednecks, you know things are getting bad. The so-called liberals have abandoned the little guy and Trump is what they get.

Something else about backroads. They give me the space to think and the ease to be. To feel blessed. I hadn't seen Arlene in almost an hour but I had little concern. If one of us found the other in a ditch it would probably be her finding me.

What was it about the left that caused the people in the interior to vote for Trump—en masse. As Virgil suggested, elites don't give a damn about the people out here. Why else would Obama write a healthcare bill in cahoots with huge corporations? For the same reason he made secret corporate trade deals—big money. Why did his black attorney general allow blacks in southern states to languish a dozen years in prison for a few puffs of grass? And a better question—how can elected officials, on day one, not recognize how many Americans do long stretches in the grey bar motel for damn near nothing? And, if you're in a position of power where you could do something and you do nothing, what's that say about you? But, how many people know about this stuff? Barack and Hillary are the good guys—right?

I almost rode by Arlene's bike in a parking lot on the southern edge of Vernal (Mormon towns have interesting names). As usual she wasn't waiting for me. We'd been on the road more than four hours, so this was lunch. I couldn't tell if I was hungry or not, hadn't thought about it. I must be hungry. Hadn't eaten in 20 hours.

I liked the look of the place—down to earth. The cafe name was painted on plywood in black and white. Outside were four picnic tables, two of them occupied. But no Arlene. Inside, she was at the counter scanning a blackboard with chalk offerings for the day.

"No menu?" I asked. She gave a nod to the blackboard. Like In/Out Burger—just that little menu above the registers. This one had a breakfast, a burger, and a BLT. That was it. I got the breakfast and coffee. Arlene did the BLT.

"You want to sit out?" I asked .

"I don't know. We've been out all day."

"In helmets and jackets."

We went outside. Now three of the picnic tables were occupied, but the one adjacent the empty table looked as though they might clear out soon, which would be a good thing as each table was noisy—one with that perennial woman with the laugh that needs surgically removed. I don't know who this woman is but she apparently lives on the road because I run into her often.

At the table next to ours were four guys in their fifties who were shooting the 'proverbial' shit. I couldn't hear everything they were saying because they spoke a language, honed to where they live. They were talking about their jobs, with occasional laughter. At one point, the one closest to me, who was wiry and thin-haired, wearing that same short-sleeved shirt my high school biology teacher used to wear, said:

"Sometime, I'm going to wipe the face right off his smirk." I need to remember that one. I waved off something Arlene was saying so I could hear what they were saying. "He keeps it up, but shit, I need the job. You get fired from the prison and it's a fucking death sentence—so for now I just let the motherfucker upbraid me up and upbraid me down." This dude should write. Arlene gave me a look that anticipated my listening in wouldn't be enough. I smiled at her and raised my palms in mock surrender. Besides, their lunch plates had been cleared away and all that remained were a couple of coffee cups and water. Then, all four of them lit up.

"Can they do that?" she asked. The *wiry* guy overheard.

"You must not be from around here, young lady. This is Vernal where we have open disregard for the niceties of New York and San Francisco. More smokes here than doesn't, besides, we're outside, so who does it bother?"

There was a decent possibility Arlene was going to take him on so I wedged between them.

"I don't have one smoker friend who doesn't call it a foul habit, but what I'm hearing is about letting people be, who aren't hurting anybody." So much for millions of dollars of research on second-hand smoke? He hadn't been looking for a dialogue—just put Arlene in her place. My *let well enough alone* thing got him going.

"You got it, partner. That's how we see it out here. You leave me alone—I leave you alone. He raised his arms in wiry benediction.

Our breakfast and lunch had arrived and I was hungry, so between mouthfuls...

"I heard you mention the prison. Which prison is it?"

"Great Basin. Just outside a town."

"How long's it been here?"

"Oh, a long while. It got built back in the late 90's." That gave it maybe an eighty-five percent chance of being a for-profit prison—a direct result of Clinton's *tough on crime* policy. How the hell could anyone of the minorities have voted for the Clintons? It doesn't take an hour on-line to uncover that they did more to degrade blacks than anybody since plantation owners.

"Is Great Basin a for-profit?" This was bringing up sex before marriage with your girlfriend's grandparents, but I was curious.

"Yeah, it's for-profit. If it wasn't it wouldn't be here because there ain't enough people out here to lock up."

"So they bring convicts from all over?"

"All over Utah."

I could see it, some good Mormon family man, law and order judge, deciding a fate over paraphernalia sniffed out by a canine unit with a beehive stencil on the door. A guy who had overheated a seedy Corolla on the long pull from Salt Lake to Parley Summit on his way to Wyoming, hoping for a job in the oilfields.

Instead, that selfsame judge, a non-equivocating broker for the good people of Utah, kept his high standards by handing down a harsh sentence for a bit of nothing. Forget about driving across barren Wyoming past copious wooden wind breaks between the summit and Rawlins. Instead, you get manacled transport over to Great Basin. Good for the economy and a reminder that justice in Utah can be swift and memorable.

"But what about it guys? You already get no interest on your money in the bank and you know they want to get rid of cash—cops can take your money without charging you with a crime. Aren't for-profit prisons part of the problem? I mean, you can't be against Obamacare's corporate greed, then support corporations making money from throwing people in the slammer over a nothing charge?"

My wiry friend stiffened. Without a shirt, the hair on his back would bristle like a terrier. But I didn't let him in.

"You gotta have a job. I see that. If I lived here I'd be working at Big Basin—if I weren't a guest." That almost brought a wiry smile.

"But that's not my point. This whole thing is so fucked up that if we don't own up as Americans, about private investors housing crime and lobbying for longer sentences—it adds to the bullshit. We work the jobs, but god-damn, this country's messed up."

To Arlene's amazement, they somewhat agreed with me. I wasn't threatening their livelihood. I wasn't a union buster—I was just a guy talking common sense and they knew where I was coming from. Cops taking your money is bullshit. It's all bullshit.

When they'd moved on, I finished my breakfast. It had gotten cold but I got a hot coffee refill that helped. I don't mind cold food. The bacon was slab and a little hot sauce on the eggs with toast and jam did the trick.

"If I lived here I'd be working at Big Basin?" she said.

"Well, sometimes you say things so you can talk about things or you might as well shut up. The only hope for America is 250 years of being able to sort out bullshit from facts. Even if they don't hear anything but fake news, most people know bullshit when they see it. I hope that's true because there's no other way forward."

We'd been sitting more than two hours, but it was still summer and the days were long. We had no destination so there was no hurry. We'd gotten into a pattern. Arlene would leave, this time heading north on 191, and I would leave a few minutes later. Because my bike is thirty-some years older than hers, I should probably go first, but that's not how we were doing it. Besides, we had nowhere to be, so if she had to ride back an hour to find me, no big deal. I felt tired. Maybe waiting so long to eat had become a minor digestive trauma. I'd had coffee that hadn't done much but make me jittery. But the food and coffee would soon become energy.

State Highway 191, about thirty-five miles north of Vernal, fans out in a kind of chicken wing. Highway 44 goes up the western edge of Flaming Gorge, to the town of Green River, while 191 continues up the east side to Rock Springs. I wondered if Arlene would stop at the gorge and I wondered if I would know if she did?

At the cutoff, I continued north on 191, keeping a lookout for her. A car passed, going south, with one headlight out, the right one. Politically, most everybody is riding around with one headlight out. Those with the right headlight out can't see anything from the point of view of the flyover states. Those with the left light out are the good blind republicans we grew up with. At night, if both headlights are out, that's a central banker or a congressman.

Now there was no Arlene and I was at the outskirts of Rock Springs. I could see Rock Springs fanning out to the west but our deal was 191 so I kept on. Soon I came to the one motel, with Arlene's bike out front and, of course, no Arlene.

12

To be or not to be—at someone else's discretion

There was a key waiting for me. Arlene had gone up to the room. She'd remembered about the second floor. I left everything at the bike and went up. She was asleep, under the blankets. She couldn't have been here more than five or ten minutes—she didn't even look up at me. I guess her advanced years are catching up with her, or our nights had been just too much for her to handle. Something to banter with her about? Better not.

I hung up my jacket and put my helmet in a corner, snuck out as quietly as I could and went back down to the bikes to get my Mac-Pro. This one motel on 191 wasn't bad. I asked at the check-in if there was a password for WiFi and there wasn't. The whole place had it. What they also had was a gym, a pool, and best of all, a room with desks and comfortable chairs, and coffee.

Something I hadn't mentioned to Arlene until yesterday—I write a blog—*updates on the insane world of money and power*. I've written 140 of them, and I have a website—NHAB neverhada-boss.com. I started, maybe ten months ago, and though I keep wanting to quit, I keep writing. For awhile, I was sending them out to maybe a hundred people and not getting much response, but as my books became popular, I get requests to be subscribers. Still, I like fiction more—with fiction I don't have any self-doubt about why I bother with economics and politics. I added Virgil to my list.

Today I'd been thinking about Trump's promise to make things better with Russia. It's beginning to look like it's not going to happen. He won't call out the McCains and the Grahams as warmongers. He won't say he's done with the sanctions, and he's not getting together with Putin. Instead, he's attacking judge's rulings that go against him—calling their findings, matters of opinion, and using Twitter to subvert the rule of law.

That was enough for a two page blog that I wrote in less than a hour. I edited it once, knowing I should wait until morning to send it, but I sent it. Then from Apple Pages, I made a PDF which I exported to documents. This was all rote to me. Didn't have to think. My fingers knew what to do. Then I went to my hosting site, typed in the name of my blog, and dragged the blog from documents, hitting publish. It didn't publish. Being something of a *luddite*, even after all the blogs and two novels, I assumed the problem was me, so I went through the steps again, from the beginning. Nothing, so I tapped on *view my site* and there was no site. My host was there but I was gone. I'd have to call in the morning. I'd lost my commercial email account once before and it had been my fault.

Before heading back to the room, I checked my email accounts—nothing that mattered at my regular gmail but when I switched to my .com account there were a half dozen bold-font messages from my server. The first one:

"We've determined that your comments may be in violation of our *User Content Policy and Rules*. Spamming, through the sending unwanted content, or engaging in unwanted or mass solicitation, is prohibited. Continued violations can lead to the loss of your ability to use some or all features of our services."

I'd gotten that one before when I responded to comments on podcasts. But, I'd desisted immediately? From that time forward I didn't include any contact info. I didn't want to be dropped—be it for good reason or no reason at all. I had a platform I wanted to keep, from where I sent out audiobooks and posted blogs.

The next email was another I'd seen before, having to do with content. But how could that be? My hosting site had nothing to do with my server? I emailed my blogs and then posted them on my site. The email said there'd been complaints that I posted content that wasn't community friendly. But I had a blog site where I paid extra so there wouldn't be ads. And I wasn't using any podcast site. It said that I had been using my server to email and post controversial subject matter and events related to war and political conflicts.

So much for the First Amendment. The platforms and the servers were now the arbiters of the First Amendment, that will

likely soon contain the words—*community/advertiser friendly*? The next email warned that I should make my material—audience appropriate. Before sharing content, I needed to consider whether or not my audience will find the content interesting. That any content flagged by users as spam will be removed. That after hearing from users about content that may violate the policies, content is reviewed to decide whether or not action should be taken, including restricting access to the content, removing the content, and limiting or terminating a user's access. In conclusion, they reminded me that their platforms are set up for free expression.

A couple of things jumped out at me: any content flagged by users as spam will be removed? The users decide what's fit to publish? Freedom of speech had become the property of lowest common denominator? If five people disagreed with you, that was cause to have it removed? Controversial content found to be advertiser un-friendly would be removed. Though major news networks no longer host shows on fake news, employing corporate representatives, those same corporate sponsors would now decide *value* in terms of advertising dollars?

I opened the last email, titled Suspension and Termination. I had circumvented and violated policies and standards, over 100 times—because of that I was suspended from all activities associated with my server and steps had been taken to remove content that had been found to be in violation. As of this date, my accounts had been suspended and terminated. There was nothing having to do with recourse—no suggestion that I write a letter, or reapply after a certain amount of time. Nothing.

My accounts—what did that mean? From my default email, I sent an email to my .com email address. It sent, so I changed accounts to make sure it arrived. It showed that I'd signed out. I signed in and the account disappeared. I went back to my default email to a notice of undeliverable mail. I clicked—the addressee did not exist. I clicked my inbox and my email site disappeared.

What was this? I knew the corporation owned my email, my search engine, and the platform on which I watched podcasts. Did they own Safari? No, it still came up, but I could not search. I

quickly accessed another search engine. One of the emails said I could not use *Pages*, but they must be referring to something they have by the same name. I clicked on the Apple Pages icon at the bottom of my screen and it didn't open. I went to it online and went through the sign-in. There was no account with my user name.

My friend Miles used to say that if you haven't saved it in three places you haven't saved it. I had it in email, in iCloud and Apple Pages, and on my site—but I no longer had any of those things. At home I had a G-Raid storage with two novels and all but the latest blogs. Thank you, Miles.

But how could this be? I'd had the warning about soliciting my site, but that was simply a reminder to obey the rules. I'd been somewhat shocked when I saw Tim Cook from Apple talking about *fake news* and how we had to take steps to make sure people were sticking to the true narrative—the one towards which they needed to be educated? That's corporate news.

And he's not alone—Bezos/Amazon, Schmidt/Google, and Zuckerberg/Facebook, are all cohorts in rooting out alternative news in support of corporate news.

I don't buy anything from Amazon (unless I'm committing a sin). *The New Yorker*, when they could still criticize other so-called liberals, wrote an expose on Bezos and his robber-baron company. Now he, and the other clucks, are advising the defense department.

As the Church Lady used to say: "Now isn't that special?" You wanna get the corporations lined up to do the state department, Homeland Security, and the DOD's biddings? Easy. Do like they did in high school—make all these billionaire nerds hall monitors. No official tasks—just patrol. Give them a badge and a yellow vest, and they'll march to the end of the earth to assist Obama's Secretary of Defense (what was his name), to make sure that we get into it with Putin and Russia.

How did this happen to me, and how did it happen so quickly—without any steps? Drop a guy who tries to report the facts, who shows the corruption on both sides of the aisle, with evidence that the department of state is an insane asylum with a mission to dele-

gitimize and destabilize regimes to keep the petrodollar in control. Maybe my answer lies somewhere in there?

I laughed loud enough that the desk clerk stuck her head around the corner. I stopped and she went back to her post. I felt so light. As if a great weight had been taken from me and I'd been honored as a critic of the tyranny. There would be consequences for me, but not tonight. Besides, I didn't have to check Facebook to see if I had an account. Ten years ago, despising Zuckerberg—I signed off.

13

Limitless horizons are often gone—in a moment.

I woke the next morning with something like buyer's remorse. I'd gone to sleep comfortably, wrapped in the shroud of a patriot—stripped of his rights. But I woke with foreboding, which I didn't want to convey to Arlene.

But it conveyed to her on its own. Each night I'd spent with Arlene, at some point I'd woken her up, through mild protestations, to seduce her. It was sleep abuse—but I persisted until she was in heat. Tonight I didn't rouse her when I came in, nor did I trade my fitful sleep for the possibility of a second opportunity. I was 0 for 2 and she would notice.

She woke up in diffused light, through sheer but crocheted curtains, which played on her sweet face. She woke up with a smile.

"Where were you last night?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. You were gone for hours and when you came back you weren't here."

"You were awake?"

"Enough to know you had no devils to trade. I guess the honeymoon's over?" I was silent. She kept on: "If the honeymoon's over, we're over." She said it with a smile but I knew guys, friends, who, when they could no longer, for whatever reason, get up for their gal—often, it was over. I told her everything. By the end of my telling, she had sat up, pillows behind her, no longer smiling.

"What you write and what you say, unfortunately, is probably what is and what's coming. Writing fiction with love, sex, and adventure, mixed with economics and politics is one thing, but writing a blog about doom and gloom, changes how the big boys see you. Now they're after you—no surprise there.

"But me, I'm here with my little jungle friend who wants some attention. And she's not willing to trade for politics or economics." Referring to her friend as a *jungle* was likely what got me going.

While Arlene was in the shower, I thought about how nice it is to stay at a good place. I called the desk and asked if we could have a courtesy checkout at noon—no problem. I lay back down on a good, not overly firm bed—not a spring bed—maybe latex. I'd read that this chain cared more about the beds than anything else.

At the foot of the bed was a decent sized flat screen that fit into a blond armoire. The armoire needed to go. But the room was pleasant, with consideration for color and art. And no carpet on the wood floor. That's healthy.

Arlene came out of the bathroom and dressed in front of me, My world has become a world of thankfulness. No matter what comes my way, as long as I had her, I'll be fine.

By one we'd eaten, had coffee, and were on the road. When I offered to pay half of the room, she demurred.

"No, if we're doing this, any money we have is *ours*—not our own." Like some Scottish idiot, I started running the numbers through my head. She was famous, but famous for one of those things that doesn't pay much. Serena Williams she is not.

I had my royalties, some precious metals, and some property. Then the part of me that functioned as her advocate (I think that's French for lawyer), argued that she wasn't asking for my property or marriage, she was suggesting that love was more important than

who paid. And since I was way too far gone with Arlene, and I trusted her, at least as much as I trust myself, I took what she said as a declaration of love. Would I regret that down the line?

It was a beautiful day. She left about five minutes before me. Before she'd go, I'd gotten into the habit of warming up my bike. I mean, it's an 81—if she's gone and it doesn't start... Pulling out of the hotel, I remembered that no matter how fast I rode, I hadn't overtaken her. Which was fine for today—I had much to think on. This morning, after our talk, had been the best yet, but it needed weighed against my concerns from last night.

But, for now, I didn't want to think. I wanted to be. Who knew how many days of idle lay before us? I had today and I wanted to dwell in the purr of my valves. That reminded me—my valves needed adjusting. Unlike the bike Arlene was on, which needed a valve adjustment every twelve thousand miles, some say eighteen or twenty-four thousand, mine are like those old VW airheads where the valves need adjusting at 3000 miles, rain or shine. But today it was just the comforting sound of tappets telling me they were due for a check, but wouldn't need much attention.

I like the way we're doing this. Our plan this morning took us over backroads, 5 highway changes, to a destination at the intersection of Highway 14 and Interstate 90—more than 400 miles from the hotel. She had six gallons of gas, I had nine, but she got better mileage, unless she was riding hard. I assumed we wouldn't make 400 miles today—not with an unconcern that I'm feeling.

The day was glorious, maybe 70 degrees, with just enough sunshine from the north to warm the front of me. These were real backroads, in a high valley between mountain ranges. The Great Divide all around us, but the roads mostly straight.

At Highway 28, I took the right fork up towards Lander, then another right through a tiny pueblo of Hudson (I like the name), and on to Shoshoni. Up ahead was Thermopolis—what a great name for a Wyoming town. Between Shoshoni and Thermopolis I ran out of gas. No worries, it happens often. First one carburetor

runs dry, then the other, a few seconds later, on the opposed side of the engine. I shifted to neutral and turned the two petcocks under the tank, on either side, to the up position. I shifted back into third and let out the clutch and she started under power.

Just like early VW's that also had no gas gauge—just a lever between the seats for the reserve tank. But, there's a catch, the old VW's and the bike, had less than a gallon in reserve, so within 35 or 40 miles, I'd be walking. But this happened many times—and I was yet to run out.

I made a mental note of the odometer, then tried to not look at it—but that doesn't happen. Today, I was on a little-travelled road and my apprehension increased as the miles clicked by. As a bonus, there is seldom phone reception in these wilds. At 32 miles, my luck held and I saw a Shell sign in the distance. I went into the world's smallest convenience store for a quart of water. They had the boutique brands, but I got a spring water for two bucks.

"Did a women come in here on a bike like mine?"

"No, but a women came in on a real nice bike."

"How long ago?"

"Long time. You'll never catch her."

I walked out and looked at my bike. She didn't look so old. She was well kept. The tank was newish. I guess it was just the look. The opposed heads sticking out from the engine and that great huge gas tank. It didn't matter that her siblings has won the *Paris to Dakar* race most every year of her production. If you hadn't grown up with her elegance and simplicity, she was a relic—from a time long gone. Like trying to induce somebody who only listens to Snoop and Eminem to get with Gene Vincent or Eddie Cochran.

The afternoon was mostly gone but there was a whole evening ahead and no towns between here and interstate 90. After taking the east fork, from Worland, there was something called Ten Sleep that was less than a blink, and then nothing, not nothing, but no habitation. It became more apparent as I wound into the mountains. After crossing the Norwood River, I had miles of mountain road to Buffalo without a town, and at least one pass at 10,000 feet. Good thing it was summer, because it began to cool.

As the sun goes down, in the summer, on a bike, I do this thing. If I'm within an hour of where I'm going, I challenge myself to not add clothing. My jacket is mesh over a tee shirt, so I get cold. Now I was climbing fast, leaning into curves like I owned the road, chilled to where there was no worry of losing focus.

Left curves are different from right curves. In right curves I hug the line to see what's coming at me. In left curves, I hug the shoulder in case opposing traffic drifts into my lane. I don't think it's the way you're supposed to do it, but after countless curves, I'm still alive. In a long left curve I saw Arlene's bike, twenty feet off the road. But I didn't see Arlene.

The mind is a funny thing. For an instant, I flashed back to a couple riding in Baja, a few years back. She hadn't ridden before and went down hard—twice—the first day out. The second time she went down, he went down, watching her in his rearview mirror (sympathy crash). I didn't want to do that.

I scrambled off the bike and ran towards her bike. Before I got there, I saw her sitting on a large rock below the bike—her helmet still on. I approached, squatted in front of her. I didn't touch her.

She had slid and she had rolled. She had gone down on her right side and slid across the rocky ground onto her back and ended up on her left side because the only part of her helmet that wasn't badly scraped was the visor. Same with her Ducatis. Both sides of the jacket were chewed up, and though I couldn't see it, the back as well. Same with the pants.

I didn't say anything—I didn't want to hear that she was badly hurt. I held to the opinion that underneath it all, she was okay. Thankfully, she'd been wearing good gear with pads for elbows, hips, knees, shoulders, and spine. And a good helmet. In my gear, I would have found her beside the rock.

She raised her visor and made a small attempt at humor:

"Took you long enough."

"Are you all right?"

"What, this little thing?" she said through thick Aussie brogue.

"Much worse was the four vehicles that passed and didn't see me. You were nearly the fifth."

"Have you tried to get up?"

She did a small laugh. "You thinking I slid into a sit up on this rock?" I was hoping it wasn't bravado.

"I think I'm all right. Stiff but nothing especially broken. I forgot to tuck for a sec and hit my throttle hand a good one. That could be broken."

"What about your head? That helmet's seen a slide and a roll."

"I think I'm okay." While I waited, there were ciphers in my head about how far it was to the next town."

"What happened? How fast were you riding?"

"I didn't look, but I'd been taking the curves at maybe 75. It wasn't any faster than that because earlier this year I lost a wheel on a dry lake and slid out at 115. This wasn't like that. I came into that last corner hugging the line—unlike you do in a left. Today that put me into a herd of elk, forty feet in front of me."

"What did you do?"

"The opposite of what I swore I'd do, take animals head on. When you swerve to miss one you go down. Aim where you want to go, and if you don't have a way past, take it head on. But no time to remember. I went between the first two. They're not like deer. Hindquarters are huge, like hundred meter sprinters. A third managed out of the way on her own, but that left a little one that didn't move. Just stood there—startled."

"Did you hit it?"

"No. I swerved to miss her and damn near made it. I was leaned so far I drug a knee, then caught the dirt with my front tire—and I was down."

I looked at her left knee which had worn through the leather to the plastic.

"You went down to not take out a little elk?"

"That's it. So much for planning."

We were there awhile. I walked her through questions and physical tests, which she did begrudgingly.

"I think you've missed your calling. You could run one of those roadside sobriety stations."

Soon she was up and about, but stiffly. I tried getting her bike up but I couldn't quite do it. Against protestations, she helped and we got the bike back to the road where I put it on the center stand so I could rotate both wheels. They spun true. One engine guard was roughed up but had done its job. One end of the handlebar and the handguard was rough, but the bars themselves were straight. Other than that, the left pannier was a mess. I could probably pound it back into useable shape. The bike was better than Arlene.

It started right up. If it were a Harley, it would be done (just being mean). Now it was almost dark, but not quite. We were in luck with the headlight. On my old horse, a headlight bulb costs about ten bucks. On this baby, a broken headlight is the whole computer assembly—maybe \$1300. But it worked. I insisted she ride my bike to the first motel at the interstate, to which she declined.

"You want to get me killed? Those bikes should be in museums. That headlight is like holding a candle."

I followed her in. Soon, I was on the throttle to keep up.

14

It might be funny if it weren't tragic beyond measure.

I was up before Arlene. Checkout was noon so we still had three hours. I quietly dressed and went out to the bikes, stopping by the desk to explain that my girlfriend had had an accident and we might be staying over, but I didn't know. This was the first time I'd referred to Arlene as my girlfriend. Before she went to sleep, she was sore and stiff—her right hand was strained but not broken.

I didn't want to wake her, and I needed to adjust those valves. But first I had to deal with her bike. Other than the pannier, she looked operable. Over five minutes, with my fists and gloves,

along with a short piece of galvanized pipe that I carry as a cheater for a ratchet wrench, I was able to make the pannier functional. Then, I put my bike on the center stand and got a wooden stick out of the pannier which I wedged under the drive train until the back wheel was clear of the ground and I was able to rotate it by hand.

I took the seat off to get to my tool set. The 80's BMWs came with a good German tool kit in a roll-out pouch. Arlene's bike came with a couple of little wrenches, which added to a feeling of helplessness of not being able to deal with mechanical problems. But, along with the tool kit, BMW has gotten rid of many problems. Still, I longed for the old days that I'd only heard about.

I unrolled my tool kit next to the bike. Then I popped out the round rubber, inspection plug and set it on the tool kit. I clicked the shift lever until I had her in fifth gear, and by pulling on the tire and spokes, bumped the rear wheel forward, against a light resistance of fifth gear, which turned the engine, incrementally, with each bump.

It sounds complicated but you get so good at it you don't have to think. Somehow, you position yourself such that you can make out the flywheel turning inside the inspection hole, and watch for the letter Z to come up, which means you've almost arrived at TDC, top dead center, making one set of valves ready for adjustment. Then I removed two 10 mm nuts and the 14 mm bolt that secure the valve cover to the bike and pulled off the cover, careful to catch a thin stream of oil in that same valve cover.

Using feeler gauges, I checked whether the right piston was at TDC, which it wasn't, so I took my operation to the other side of the bike and took off that valve cover. Here, there was play in the push rods which meant it was at TDC. I checked the exhaust play—8 mm. Then the intake—6 mm. Just right. Back on the other side of the bike, I laid out my tools, and bumped the wheel forward until I could see the Z and then TDC. I could see Arlene standing in the sunshine by the front door and I made a move towards her but she waved me off with one of those *finish what you're doing* looks. How fortunate to have found a good looking motorcycle woman who saw the bike as being as important as her.

I went back to work. This side needed adjusting—which requires two wrenches, a 12mm and a 10mm. The 12 to hold one bolt in place and the 10 to loosen the other. Both the exhaust and the intake valves are the same procedure. After loosening each and twisting the pushrod, just enough to get the clearance, I tightened them—not overly, and re-installed both valve covers. You're supposed to torque them, but I've got the feel. I put away my tools, re-installed the seat, pulled loose my wooden stick and put it back in the pannier.

Arlene had hobbled over.

"How is it?" I asked.

"I like watching you. Methodical."

"Thanks. How are you?"

"You know. Twelve hard rounds with Jeff Horn—lost another close one. Nowhere on my body hasn't taken a hard punch." How many women could talk like that and look like Arlene?

It was now 10:30 and checkout was noon. I wanted to check the internet to see if some miracle had taken place but Arlene told me there was no internet in the room. You had to go down to the desk and buy it for five bucks—cash. What a bunch of crap. Don't people realize that internet is a utility, a necessity, like water? They used to do the same thing at Starbucks. You needed a card to be part of the club, until the little coffee shops around them began offering free online, which made the big boy buckle under. But not Motel 6. They may have made their better locations look European, but this internet crap... .

I didn't want to give them five bucks so we went up and I showered. Arlene had showered earlier. When I came out, she was under the blankets. I asked if she was alright?

"I think you should have waited on that shower."

"Are you sure? Are you okay for that?"

"I said I was beat up—I didn't say I was dead."

Soon we were on 90 heading up into the Little Big Horn—the battleground, about an hour north. Arlene was ahead and I dropped back, but just a little. My bike was ready for thousands of trouble-

free miles. The day was glorious and still, rolling green hills in long grasses, what I'd imagined to be the terrain where Colonel Custer met his end. At an exit maybe ten miles from the battlefield, Arlene had pulled off. As I approached, she kept on to an intersection with a Starbucks.

Starbucks is corporate style. Everything to eat has been frozen in Rochester, New York, or someplace. But it comes with nice names like turkey pesto. And the coffee is decent.

I went on my MacPro. Nothing had changed, except now there were no notifications. The deed had been done. For me there was no reprieve.

"How can they do that?" she asked.

"Constitutionally, they can't. But Obama signed into law that he can take over, in an emergency, whatever the president deems necessary to maintain national security. I guess I'm an emergency?"

I still had Safari with my new search engine so I looked to see if others were having my experience. There were many posts. Because of the recommendations of the a-for-mentioned corporate billionaires, almost 200 sites had disappeared—one was mine.

Someone had posted a list of grievances made against the RT/Russia Today network, which made it such that they had to identify themselves as an agent of a foreign state because they operated with state funding—no different than the BBC or Canadian/CBC.

To do that, intelligence agencies had to show cause. RT had been cited for doing shows in support of Occupy Wall Street. Also, they reported the US had unsustainable levels of debt, and that corporations were getting control of the United States. Each of which are examples of good reporting.

But to take away my site as well as my ability to communicate with the world? That was like cutting off food stamps along with work permits. I suppose our future has arrived. Obama put the tyranny into place for Hillary to use. But no worries, Trump will do it for them. Can you imagine what those social network billionaire geeks got in return for their allegiance? A badge? But no gun.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Nothing. It's like the old days. If I want to blog, I have to use someone else's site, which puts them at risk, so I guess I go back to passing out leaflets."

"Are you going to do that?"

"No, I'll find a way to get out my audiobooks and blogs as audios. Other than that I'll forget about it. Like this electrical engineer at a hotel in South Dakota told me, 'just ride motorcycles'."

This really is a tyranny. And Trump probably doesn't see it that way. He's partial to the Goldman Sachs boys and he's probably in awe of the Zuckerbergs of this world. And Pence just cast the tie-breaker in the Senate, removing class action suits against corporations. We can no longer go together to take on the big boys.

Trump Towers is low-rent compared to Facebook. All I'd hoped from Trump was to get rid of the Clintons and reduce the possibility of armageddon with Russia. He did the first, but now we had to deal with his forays into torture, his penchant for a bullshit version of law and order, and a bigger military. A businessman's idea of what it means to be a citizen.

He doesn't understand history—especially geo-economics. Obama and Hillary did, but with a view based on the false premise that a nation which has lost its manufacturing base should continue to rule the world. Now we have Trump, who wouldn't know how *manufacturing consent* became the goal of the government, and how, with the abandonment of the gold standard in 1971, we began our grand downward spiral into economic oblivion.

He got some things right about the economy, during the campaign, but he didn't get that an unregulated free people are the force that moves an economy forward. We live in a time of authority that began with Clinton, then W. Bush—and went exponential with Obama. But this is different. Bush and Obama laid out the tools for the tyrant, but it's Trump who will be using them. They should be proud of their boy.

Not knowing what time the national park closed, we headed in, through turns into an uphill left, into a park that spread out in front of us—tour buses and grave markers as far as the eye could see. How the hell could that be? Custer only had a few hundred men?

We parked and walked slowly from grave to grave, graves from this decade or the one just before. Apparently, veterans can choose to be buried at the Little Big Horn. For me that took something away. Being late in the day, several tour buses, some with East Coast license plates, loaded up, with drivers on the intercoms talking about hotels in Yellowstone.

As a people, we are so un-self-moved. We go about in a herd and they tell us where we're heading next. Then came an announcement that the last talk would happen in ten minutes. I was inclined to walk around by ourselves, but Arlene insisted.

The views were awesome. It was as if some movie mogul had chosen this site. Below us were copses of trees along the Bighorn River, in rolling hills of grass, on both sides. And above where the talk would take place, there were three hills, each higher than the last, coming up from the river. Across each of them were grave markers, with more on the slope of the highest hill.

We got to an area of benches and found good seats just as the ranger arrived—an Irishman for sure. Five-ten, 200 pounds. Fearing no man. His hat, a stiff, Smokey the Bear—he wore at a jaunt.

"Ladies and gentlemen, what I'm about to say to you is about murder. It's about mayhem. It's about blood and gore and death. If you are here with children, six or under, I suggest you leave immediately because what you are about to hear will not be toned-down for younger ears."

He had been at teacher for thirty years and now he did this. He asked a woman on the front bench to hold his water because sometimes, when he really gets into it, he sweats. Mothers were quickly moving away with their children, and I was thankful that Arlene had insisted.

He described that day, the 25th of June, 1876. The weather was pleasant for Colonel George Armstrong Custer to divide his troop in two, taking 300 men to ford the river and attack the First American camp on the other side. What he couldn't know, was that some 5000 Lakota Sioux, Cheyenne, and sundry plains Indians were waiting in the trees.

They had long ago been given the Black Hills, by treaty, but when gold was discovered and ever-growing numbers of settlers wanted the grasslands for cattle and sheep, the not-so-*great white father* had taken back the Black Hills and, as a further indignation, had ordered the tribes to present themselves at Indian agencies to be shipped across the country by rail to a different reservation.

Custer's cavalry didn't know it but the Indians had had enough and decided to lay it all on the line, under the leadership of Crazy Horse (*today's a good day to die*), Sitting Bull, and Gall.

Custer was himself a powerful warrior, thirty-six years old. He'd been a general, a decade earlier, during the Civil War. He had a reputation for charging the enemy, single handed. It was said he had thirteen horses shot out from under him.

Crazy Horse was also thirty-six. Another great warrior who would attack the enemy without concern for his own life. And this battle was decided before the bluecoats crossed the river. The ranger said it again: *the Indians had had enough!*

They attacked Custer's troop in the river, driving them back. Later, it was Gall who said the battle lasted only long enough for a hungry man to eat a meal. The river ran red. Custer's men fought valiantly, retreating up the first hill, then the second, and up along the third, where they made Custer's Last Stand, and where most of the crosses stand.

The ranger's presentation was something I would have expected from Lawrence Olivier. Thirty years of standing in front of a class had paid off. Afterwards, I shook his hand and thanked him. Arlene and I walked up the path towards the last hill. Curiously, no one followed. Up there, we found a quiet majesty, where time lingered in the grasses.

The sunset was upon us, and although Arlene didn't let on, she needed rest. We took the interstate only as far as the first motels, which was at Hardin. This time Arlene stayed with the bikes while I went in. I deliberated about getting a downstairs room but I could help her up the stairs. She did fine with the stairs and I made a couple of trips to get our stuff.

"Why'd you get two beds?"

"I thought maybe you'd need some space."

"Don't get to thinking what I need." I couldn't tell if she was playing, but I do know that if you can't tell—don't assume.

"I'm hungry," she said, "but I don't much feel like going out."

Hardin didn't offer much but I walked to a place that offered teriyaki chicken with rice and salad. I got a couple of bottles of beer—American beer was what they offered.

Arlene must be really hurting because she was lying down watching MSNBC do their take on a Saturday Night Live skit, with a panel discussing how Trump was attempting to undermine the media. There was no surprise until the anchor said that the media's role is to control *exactly* what people think. Was I hearing this right? And no one on the panel challenged him? I thought on those programs from Crosstalk, on RT/Russia Today, which are knock-down, drag-out affairs, around differing views.

This was a lobotomy club. They just sat there, thinking that the media had been ordained as mind control agents. That was bad enough until what came next: an national emergency alert delivered by the President of the United States, Donald Trump. Our intelligence agencies had uncovered national and international plots to bring down the United States. As a consequence, for a limited time, the United States would be subject to extra-constitutional authority—just until the danger had passed. Yeah, just like Nixon temporarily closing the gold window in 1971.

Trump had caved. Authoritarianism had taken over less than a year after inauguration. He'd received the message that if he wanted to continue in the presidency, he needed to get on board. They must have threatened him with economic collapse. Martial law had not been mentioned, but US troops would now be assisting the police—which is unconstitutional. We were under martial law.

This was a conflation of fascism and technology. Certain individuals had been notified by email, to turn themselves in to the nearest law enforcement center, to be cleared by law enforcement. But the Constitution had been suspended, so there was no law of the land. Instead, we had these post-constitutional laws—illegal.

The banks were closed. That was bound to happen no matter what. And, commencing in fourteen days, travel outside of one's city would require a travel permit. It had been coming, and now it had arrived. Which on the one hand, was a good thing. Now the American people, if there were such a thing anymore, would be able to see who was pulling the levers. Not a democrat or a republican, but a single tyrant state. The false flag event, that usually comes before hostilities, had been announced, but, of course, they weren't telling what it was because the only thing that had happened was this takeover by the tyrants.

"What do you think triggered this?" she asked.

"Nothing. It used to be that something like martial law could only take place after a Pearl Harbor. And we didn't get martial law, even then. This is a coup, without explanation. But at least they won't be able to notify me by email."

What about the hundreds, maybe thousands, who had lost news sites and email? I turned on my phone to see if I had a notification. Yes, I had one—instead of safari or anything else, my phone was a one-page notification. I was to turn myself into the nearest law-enforcement center, to be cleared. It was as if I were a Jew, in Warsaw, in the 30s. Better yet, standing along a wooden platform with Crazy Horse, waiting for a train.

Arlene was in shock because few of us are prepared for this. I suggested we turn off the TV while we ate.

"Don't you want to hear this?"

"There's nothing to hear. We've heard the lies and the rationales. Any news forums are either going to back it up or be shut down. At least for now, there won't be any news. This is all orchestrated." She nodded in agreement.

But we still had internet and I still had Apple Music, where I quickly put together a playlist of Ray Charles, *The Atlantic Years*—dinner entertainment.

I'd been right about Arlene needing rest. I offered to give her a massage but she was too sore. An hour after eating, she was asleep. I wasn't tired. I needed a plan The first step of which was to get rid

of my phone. Not responding to the message might be regarded as a felony, or worse.

I slipped out of the room and down the stairs into a night of electric stars, those same stars that had always been. My dad's stars from the 50's and 60's. They were here when he fathered me at fifty. They were here when he passed last year. They'd been the stars that lit up the free world. It was better that he didn't have to see this.

East, from the motel, were barren fields, without the grasses of a few miles back. I set out across a moonlit field until I found what I needed, a flat stone and a round stone. I laid my iPhone on the flat stone and pounded it to oblivion. There was no need to remove the SIM card. When I was done it was shattered aluminum, an eighth of an inch thick.

There was no way I was turning myself in. And no way was I riding my bike with my license plate. And I would not log-in to anything as me. Arlene had to be the user for my laptop and we needed to use it as her. But those were short-term fixes. We had but a short time to get out of this country. For her that was easy. For me, it might be a most dangerous thing.

Back at the room I went online and removed myself as a user for my MacPro. Then I logged in as Arlene, as if I'd sold it to her. The alternative news was gone. There was no Russia Today on YouTube, and even some run of the mill economists were gone. And, when I typed in names of two economists from the Reagan administration, David Stockman, and Paul Craig Roberts, they didn't come up.

I peeled the blankets back from the second bed and hesitated before getting in next to Arlene. She scooted her bum into a spoon with me. I lay there thinking the thing most troubling was the reaction of the liberals. They were as rabid as conservatives had ever been. They'd sunk into mired emotions to where they'd lost any sense of rationality. How lost must we be to get rid of real journalism—Germany now had hate speech laws instead of free speech. I remembered something a journalist said: *If those in power don't like you, you're doing your job.*

15

The greek chorus is the status quo who sing our failures.

As if nothing had changed, by nine the next morning we were on the road east. I thought on my friend Tom's description of Vietnam: infinite boredom punctured by sudden terror. Here I was on a highway, with my girl, heading across Montana—all of which could change rapidly. She was ahead, more than usual, because we wanted space between us. She was on my bike.

I liked her bike—even banged up. It was smooth, more powerful. They'd done a lot with the same 800ccs. But what they hadn't done was make it comfortable. Somehow, European bikes have gotten away from comfort. Harleys are like being home on the couch while BMW's have seats meant to keep you awake. My R80gs seat is flat, well padded, and comfortable. I could ride it forever. The F800 seat is angled down towards the tank, making it imperative to adjust your position and work your Levis free from your junk every few minutes. But, I was lucky enough to be riding a bike that didn't have a license plate linked to me.

There are no backroads that parallel Interstate 90, so we were riding with the cops until Livingston. One of my classmates, two years younger, had lived there while he wrote "Six Feet Under the Ponderosa", which was made into the film by the same name. I hadn't heard from him since he became well known but I remember him telling me he liked Livingston, so we would be stopping there for a late breakfast. At the exit—no Arlene, so I continued on into town. When I was crossing Russia, my buddy Anibal used to say that if we got separated, head for the downtown.

Livingston must be old, with its rather large downtown of multi-story masonry buildings from early on. I liked the look of the place. It wasn't too small. There was plenty of walking around to be had and things too see. Arlene was standing next to a curb along the main drag. She gestured that I should continue on and take a

right, which I did, where I found a hotel parking lot. She found me a few minutes later.

"You understood?"

"Yeah, I got it." Arlene knew better than to park either of the bikes on the main drag or park the two bikes side by side.

"I put it where we would be able to see if anybody's watching it. You would have a bike there's only one of. I rode in without a helmet so the cops might be looking at me instead of the bike."

Neither of us felt like eating so we walked around looking in windows and reading historical markers: *Livingston, Montana is a direct result of the Northern Pacific Railway. This site became a centralized point in the Rockies and the location for railroad shops to service Northern Pacific Railway steam trains before their ascent over the Bozeman Pass, the highest point on the line. Livingston also became the first gateway town to America's first national park, Yellowstone National Park.*

In 1882 George H. Carver, a man who would become a major local businessman and local political leader, arrived at the site of present-day Livingston. Carver and McBride became the first local residents when they pitched their tents on the 16th. Also on the 16th, 30 freight wagons arrived, drawn by 140 head of oxen, carrying 140,000 pounds of merchandise. Clark City eventually had 6 general stores, 2 hotels, 2 restaurants, 2 watchmakers, 2 wholesale liquor dealers, 2 meat markets, 3 blacksmiths, 1 hardware store, 30 saloons and a population of 500 people. As Clark City was growing nobody realized that the Northern Pacific had marked on their maps a town called Livingston near the same place.

The railroad had officially reached Clark City on November 22, 1882. In October 1882 a post office was chartered for Clark City. In November, Livingston received its charter. That was when they decided that Livingston be located a short distance away, and Clark City residents bought lots to the northwest, in Livingston, and moved. The birth of Livingston was the death of Clark City. Very few buildings remain.

"Clark's luck was as bad as your's." If she was being ironic, I couldn't tell. But that explained this complete town, built by masons, out in the middle of nowhere. But 30 freight wagons and 140 oxen, then nothing of a man's dream?

At a late breakfast, I was thinking things had changed. What was between Arlene and I was still there, but along with it, I had a feeling that comes when summer ends and your girlfriend drives away in her parent's car, her knees on the back seat, her elbows in the package tray, watching you get smaller in the rear window.

I was no longer a free man—I was a fugitive. In a land where the line securing the Bill of Rights had been cut and the past had drifted off. Like a slave before the 1860s, when the marriage ceremony read: *until death, or distance, do us part*. Loss of freedom has more to do with feeling than fact, and the feeling was upon me.

"There's a little town," I said, "an hour from here, Pony. There's not much there besides a post office and a bar. What do say we go there and hang out awhile"

"At the post office or the bar?"

She had a point. I didn't know anyone there or where we might stay? What would we do there? Which brought up another question: Arlene was Australian. She didn't have to deal with this. She had sponsors—she had obligations. How long would she want to be on the run with me?

16

If I were the man you wanted—I would not be the man I am.

In a town with a downtown, that's where you stay—downtown. This time it was a grand old hotel with a quarried entrance, with-1896 carved in granite above heavy, red-lacquered double-doors.

We went to reception and asked about rates. No too bad. We

asked for a room on the second floor and the woman gave us three keys. There was an elevator that had been added as an afterthought but we took the wide-winding, carpeted stairs. The third room was the best, with huge, double-hung, single-pane windows, looking out on main street.

Arlene stayed in the room and I went for our gear. When I got back, she was asleep. That fall had taken something out of her. I took my laptop and went out into the hall.

I love these old places. This one had a railing around a clearstory below, which was the dining area. Maybe fifteen tables and no one there. At the other end of the second floor was a sitting room, with tables and chairs and a couple of overstuffed armchairs, one of which I slipped into.

I'm so used of writing blogs I just start in. Now I wondered who was I writing for? I didn't care, even if I was writing only for me.

Turning to the Light

"Plato—the *Allegory of the Cave*—remember that? Now, in the midst of our political turmoil, it's worth thinking on. In the cave, down where there is no natural light from the sun, there are prisoners, shackled, facing a wall, and behind them is a fire. So everything they see is a shadow of something passing between them and the fire. They judge shadows. And they're quite good at it—lots of practice. If anyone comes down into the cave from the sunlight, they're at first blinded by the lack of light—and made fun of by the shadow judges. As if you went on a game show in Bulgaria, having to do with things Bulgarian, where your only chance had to do with your girlfriend being named *Sofia*.

Having heard that anyone who climbs up out of the cave, never returns, he is not deterred, and claws his way to the surface, with trepidation. Once into the light of day, he is blinded and wants to go back down. That was me when I saw who the historical Plato really was, in terms of freedom and authority—the father of modern tyranny."

But this morning, I wanted and missed the comfort of the cave, the fire, and my compatriots. All that was now gone.

I ended it with a poem for a time when so many relationships are coming apart as couples recognize their other is not one of them. Like Shia and Sunni, who intermarried for centuries, only to end up killing each other over what was always, or maybe never, there.

she looked at me
as though
150 years ago
i would have shot buffalo
from the train
here in *liberal*
mine is a bit part
a non supporting role
a few scenes
with no lines
a silent film
in black and white

Back at the room Arlene was up. She'd showered and was reading.

"How is it? I asked.

"Better, but it's gonna take time. I did something," she said, and got up slowly, making her way to the bed and her laptop. She patted the bed beside her, motioning me to join her. "I went to gmail and made three new email accounts so you can send your blogs."

"If they associate you with the blogs, they'll shut you down, too."

"There were things to decide, and I made a decision."

"What kind of decision?"

"To help you get your writing out!"

"That sounds like the consequence of a decision?"

"What is it with you? Do you have to analyze everything. Isn't it enough that I'm willing to chance a take on you?" She just said it just wrong enough that we both smiled.

"On the road I was wondering where this would put us. I'm being hunted and you're Australian. I was wondering if we have a future?"

"We both wondered, but I'll give it 10 years. See where it goes."

17

A good coincidence is a gift from the gods.

The next morning we headed for Pony. Knowing there wasn't much there, we stopped at the only cafe, a couple of miles outside of town. It looked pleasant enough with seats along the counter just inside the front door, and past the end of the counter, a seating area that was unoccupied. We took the farthest booth.

Arlene started in: "You best not use a credit card and you probably can't access a bank, so what do you have in mind?"

"I'm in the perfect place to be supported by an older woman."

"Quit messin. Do you have access to money?"

"I can probably forget about royalty checks, but the checks for my app go to an LLC, which I made sure is not linked to me."

"Your app?"

"Yeah, I spent so much time on back roads, all dotted with historical markers, thousands of them. Some that are really worth pulling over for. But you don't know what they are until you read them and when I stop my bike to read about geology, about the Mohorovicic Discontinuity and terminal moraines, I get annoyed.

So I did something about it." My soliloquy was interrupted by a tall, comely waitress who asked if we ready to order.

We ordered and I went back to it. "I decided to bring technology to history. Well not really. I had the idea and hired my weakness—a web site guy. In the end we came up with an app that popped up on your phone or other device, or your car's interface to announce

and describe a coming historical marker. So I wrote an ad: 'Everything's just as it was back then except—you are there!'. I called the app, *You Are There*, which I stole from a 50's TV show. I figured that by now they all must be dead or in dementia."

"Did it make money?"

"I netted about a quarter of a million the first year. And now I assume revenue flow, which diminishes with time."

"You can get the money?"

"Oh yeah. I figured early the shit was going to hit the fan so I enlisted the five people I trust most to be my banks for 20% of the take. Every three months I give them detailed directions of what and where to do with my cut."

"Like what?"

"Cash in twenties, gold, silver, safes in safe places."

"And you trust these people?"

"When you get to be as old as I am, if you don't have people you trust, you need to take a look. Besides, I made them all rich."

"I can't believe it. You make Joachim Murrieta are look like an amateur."

"Whoa! Joachim Murrieta. How do you know that name? Who in Australia knows that name?"

"I'm into treasure. My whole life's been a dream of pirates or grifters who've gotten away with something big. When I was ten I outfitted for a gold expedition into the Outback that my parents were able to head off—barely. My favorite movie is "Treasure of Sierra Madre."

I could envision the ad she'd post on Match. "Strikingly beautiful girl from the Outback, deeply passionate, wants into something big that involves treasure, without getting caught. Seeks same."

But more was coming. Our waitress passed and said: "Did I hear you guys talking about Joachim Murrieta?" She was loaded up with dishes and didn't stop. On her way back from the kitchen I asked if she could sit for a minute. Arlene slid over and she sat down. She introduced herself—Cabiria.

"How do you know about Murrieta?" I asked.

"My parents are way into films and folk history. Their second name choice for me was Murrieta." That would have been something, a six foot white girl named Murrieta.

"You must have quite the parents," I said.

"Oh, you don't know the half of it." She was from Pony where her parents had land and a house, with a rental above the garage, and they were gone to Mexico for three months. She was going to Bozeman because she had to find better work. Her son Huston, who was 21, was taking care of the property and the animals. I didn't ask but I wondered if her son was named for Walter or John. First it was Virgil and Wyatt—now we had Cabiria and Huston. What is it about the West?

I told her we wanted to hang out in a small place like Pony, and did she know anything for rent? She didn't. There wasn't much there. Before she went back to work, she hesitantly suggested we go by and meet Huston—which was a nice reach of trust. She would call and tell him we were coming. I got the feeling that visiting Huston might be an interview? Maybe. I left a good tip.

You know where *Tips* comes from? *To insure prompt service*. And how many waitresses know about highwaymen and hidden gold while inviting you to her home?

18

The best things are not anticipated.

Pony. Coming into town, it's a post office and that's all—one of those prefabricated buildings—nothing historic. Up and around a bend is the town, which is a couple of decayed masonry buildings that have sat idle a long time, a bar, and a bank that probably closed in 1930. But a good stone and brick bank, hearkening back

a town that used to be something. That's the whole downtown, in a town that's nearly nonexistent.

I turned around and headed back in the direction of the post office where I'd seen two large masonry buildings on a street that dead-ended at the main road. I made the left, pulled up below them and got off my bike. I'd ridden the R80 from the cafe because there couldn't be much in the way of law enforcement out here. With that thought, the local sheriff in a large white pickup drove by and continued on up the hill. He paid no attention to us.

"What do you think Pony was about?" I asked. "There's not much here except three fine old buildings." The two in front of us were two story, big enough to be a grade school and a hospital, except there weren't enough people here, for either.

It reminded me of a time I rode up to Joseph, Oregon—the heart of the Nez Perce nation. On the way, I stopped into Baker City, which was also enigmatic to me? Out in the exact middle of nowhere, existed this town with grand masonry buildings. The next day, when I got to Joseph, there was nothing. Well not nothing. There was one vintage hotel that was being refurbished, but the rest was tourist based, clapboard structures. Which made sense: the Nez Perce had no use for five-story buildings.

"It was gold," Arlene said. "Only gold could make and leave a place in this condition." Which again made sense. The bank at the end of a downtown that didn't exist had a grand entrance, cut on the diagonal. The building was red brick with a portal of Roman columns and a portico, beneath which, a stone arch, and arched, ornate wooden doors. Cut into the fine stone frieze that framed the arch, was the name, Morris State Bank. It took money, important money to build that way out here.

"I think," she said, "that big, falling down building across from the bank processed ore for gold, which they stored across the street in the bank." It was a good guess—an even better guess if it were true because that was the story of Baker City, which had built up around maybe the largest gold find in the United States.

"How are we going to find Huston?" she asked.

"We have two choices—the post office or the bar."

I backed in and parked next to the bar where I spotted a ten dollar bill on the ground—a nice omen. Just a couple of picnic tables outside the bar with one guy sitting alone. We sat at the other one and ordered a couple of pints of anything brewed in Montana. The waitress told us about the menu but we weren't hungry.

From the direction of the post office came a young guy, lanky and tall, who looked a lot like his mother. It seemed almost too much of a coincidence until I remembered that hardly anybody lives here.

He dressed bohemian—a tee shirt over woven, horizontally striped, black and white shorts, maybe a tad tight, and cowboy boots. Not just cowboy boots but tall black boots with narrow silver-tipped toes. From where she was sitting, Arlene couldn't see him. As he passed on the street I called out:

"Hey, Huston." He turned and walked directly at me.

"Do I know you?"

"We met your mom at the cafe and she suggested we come by and visit."

"Visit Pony or visit me?" I pointed at him.

"Then you must be special because my mom wouldn't usually do that. She's a private person and I'm a altogether private person." It sounded slightly highfalutin, yet authentic.

"Then I guess it wouldn't be a good idea to offer you a beer?"

"I don't drink beer but I'll have *a* beer." Without any further invitation, he sat across from me, on the same side as Arlene, but a picnic table slide away from her. She introduced herself.

"I hear you're a writer and filmmaker?" I said.

"A writer, yes—a filmmaker—aspiring. The latter takes money."

"Yeah, but being a writer is as difficult."

"Are you a writer?" he asked.

"I am, and though I've had nothing to do with making a film, I know that organizing a novel is the hardest thing I've done. The first edit can feel like savages dancing around a fire. Sometimes, when I let it go for a week, I have to read the whole thing again to find out what it's about. At those times, I follow the ancients in

their quest for enlightenment—light a candle, draw a dagger, and find enlightenment before the candle goes out."

"Harakiri," he said.

"Yeah, but in the vernacular of the old west—gut yourself! How do you see it, Huston? How does the writing go for you?"

"I haven't had enough experiences to draw from, so for me to write prose, I have to have read the books, seen the films, studied history, and language. To write in simple language requires a ready vocabulary." Again, something highfalutin, yet authentic. Maybe you can't write without that mix? Highfalutin seemed his defense against a culture that had earned his distrust, maybe his disrespect?

"From somewhere," I said, "you have to come up with those similes and analogies a writer needs."

"And films, don't forget films," he said. "Films, brilliant though they can be, are no better than a three minute rock and roll record that depicts and defines. Had I to choose between books and films and music, I would have them shoot myself."

"And all those films that are no longer viewed (I would have said watched but I was trying to be cool), or have gotten lost—they're like friends dying without a gravestone."

"Have you written anything I might have read?" he asked. Arlene told him two titles and he had read both. Huston and I had each found a new friend.

He'd mentioned he also wrote songs, and as we got to the bottoms of our pints, he and I were singing, not loud, Beatle songs, with a bit of harmony—he had the stronger voice. Then I began singing the lines from an obscure Jerry Jeff Walker song, which caused the guy at the next table to straighten up and look at a me.

"How do you know that song? I don't know anybody but me who does it?"

"Outside of me," I said, "I haven't heard anyone sing it in person."

"Sam, I didn't see you sitting there," said Huston. We introduced ourselves and the waitress came back out, obviously Sam's girlfriend. And maybe not as forthcoming as Sam.

We walked with Huston towards his house with him pointing things out and telling us what a great country singer Sam was and he that would be playing at the bar over the weekend.

"You're gonna stick around, right?"

We told him we weren't sure—that we had asked Cabiria if she knew of any rentals. Huston got that same look as his mother and I said nothing further. But I did ask: "Cabiria and Huston—is there a Walter or a John involved in that?"

"Both," he said. "Both, I hope."

19

Other things is life, you might have seen coming.

The next couple of days were all me and Huston. Neither of us knew anyone like the other. Almost without words it was decided that Arlene and I would have the house and pay what we thought fair to his mom. But there was a caveat—Huston had the run of the place for laundry and the big screen TV, on which Huston and I watched three films a day.

I could feel some strain from Arlene, but she covered it over. The second afternoon, a guy, Jerome, came to the house, looking for Cabiria—something about building a chicken coup and pens for the goats. While Huston and I watched, *A Simple Plan*, he and Arlene sat out in the small garden room and talked for a long time.

At some point, she came in and told me they were going for a walk. I nodded the nod of a man paralyzed except for his chin. I'd seen the movie we were watching before, but, by the end of it I didn't know what it was about. After the movie, I asked Huston about Jerome. He was single, quaint, interesting, good with his hands, and able to keep his failings from the ladies, at least at first.

When they finally returned (it seemed a long time), and he finally left, after making sure we would be at the bar and dance tonight. I was no longer in that place where I spoke my feelings—more catatonic with a fixed smile. Huston had been telling me about a woman he liked who came to visit for a week. I asked if they'd been lovers and he told me it hadn't come up, but she'd told him about various love relationships that had happened for her.

She did mention that none of those guys were like Huston—she could always feel something was missing. But the other guys were her lovers, and in the middle of this goddamn forsaken hole, whether or not they would be lovers hadn't come up?

I felt so stupid. I'd made trouble by not paying attention to Arlene. It was my fault. Here we were again, in Ely, outside the hotel with the handsome cowboy, except this time he was making sure she'd be at the dance tonight. And I wasn't saying nothin'.

Night was coming and Arlene had been in the bathroom a long time. When she came out, she let it be known that she was hungry and needed a drink. She was wearing a short red dress with boots, neither of which I'd seen before. She looked spectacular—which paralyzed me to the point I wanted to let her and Huston go down to the bar without me, and when they got back, I would be gone.

Wouldn't that be great—a hunted man deserting his woman, into a Montana night, with no particular place to go. And that it seemed a likely option? But all three of us decided to walk to town. Three abreast, Arlene in the middle. The heavy dusk interrupted by only the smallest of small talk.

It might have been a swell evening. It was as still as it gets and it was silent. I thought about wild animals as the darkness closed around us.

Huston, earlier, had wanted to talk about building his own structure, so we'd walked the property looking for a site. Just beyond the back deck, the ground sloped down into a cut and a creek where a spit of land had formed, sandy soil and chest-high saw grass. There, the fast moving stream, coming out of the majestic Tobacco Mountains to the south, had split, leaving a half acre of

level ground that we reached with a good jump over one section of the split waterway. We talked about building there but let that go to the possibility of a massive flood from the mountains.

I asked about a depressed area in the flattened grass, about the size of a VW Beetle. It had been there for two seasons, the first year it was a grizzly sleeping in that grass, but lately it was a bull moose. He'd seen both of them from the deck. The flattened grass was no more than fifty feet from the deck.

This could have been a swell evening if things were like they 'd been a couple of days ago. Now, I didn't know how things were, but I knew how I was, which wasn't good. I wondered if Arlene could tell? Or worse, did she care? She was looking forward to the bar while I was wondering whether I wanted to exist.

Inside, the bar was gayety. I'd seen it before in towns like this. In Williams, Oregon, where it seemed doubtful 100 people lived, bring a good band to the grange on Saturday night and those 100 are joined by 200 more.

The band started up with Sam as the front man. At the picnic table he had seemed nondescript but I had seen this in musicians before. They might be loners, but give the a bandstand... .

He was big fun and the band was right there. One of those four-piece bands where the front man plays rhythm, a big guy on base, and next to Sam, a lead player who ought to be famous but instead lives in Pony, maybe in Bozeman. A young drummer made the skins come alive, with his high-hat seeming to be another player.

After the first song, a young woman with the reddest hair I'd ever seen got up on the stand with a voice so big that she wrapped it clear around notes. They were all good but she knocked me out!

What else was good was that Jerome hadn't showed. He probably thought about it—figured it out. Good for him. Arlene seemed to be in a good mood, though maybe looking around a bit much. At the break, Sam came and sat with us. His girlfriend waitress brought my third pint and Arlene's third pint with a whiskey back. Remembering the sidewalk in Ely, where I told Arlene that one drunken night could be the end of us, I pushed my pint to Sam,

telling him I'd had enough. He asked if I wanted to come up and do, "I Feel Like Hank Williams". Huston and Arlene said I would.

Maybe twenty minutes into the second set, Sam invited me up. I was okay about it, beginning to feel better. You could tell it was a favorite with this crowd because they were dancing before he got much into the first verse. We sang the chorus together and he gave me the (your verse look). I went into it at the same time Jerome came through the door and beelined for Arlene, sitting down next to her. Like two old friends finding each other (a pair of Caribbean steamers, built in the same yard, meeting on a romantic sea, under a neon night of brilliance).

Luckily for me, the place was loud and my verse was short, and red joined in lustily on the chorus because, in life, anything that is not its own thing, but the measure of all things outside of it, functions as a crude common denominator, a condition which, if describing an individual, describes a nobody. In this case, me.

As I stepped from the bandstand, Sam launched into "Hey Good Looking" as part of a Hank medley and before I got to our table, Jerome had whisked Arlene onto the floor where they proceeded to go at it. I had eye contact with Huston in which he must have seen the mask of the depraved because he leaned across the table, conveying mostly through a gesture that he would rather be home watching black and white film noir—and he was gone.

As the fates would have it, the Hank rendition was interminable, egged on by Jerome and Arlene to keep it going. I sat, stolid, non-existent. Finally the epoch of song came to its sweaty conclusion and Arlene turned towards our table, a move nipped in the bud by Jerome who took her by the hand and headed farther into the obscurity of the dancers—which woke me from my stupor.

I walked after them. Arlene gave a quick look in my direction. I wanted to be pleasant but it was too late. I put myself between them, my back to Arlene. I was smiling now.

"Hey man, it's just a dance," and he moved towards her, his shoulder intended to nonchalantly move me out of the way as if I were a cardboard Elvis. But I didn't move. Actually I did, a half

step back to Arlene and I extended my arm in front of me so it was six inches from his jaw.

"Think of what I can reach as my space," I said, a little too loud. "And think of Arlene in that space—forever. You've had your dance with Arlene for this life and if you come into my space again, without permission, you'll need to kill me."

We didn't say much on the walk home because there was nothing to say. We turned down the dirt road, into a Georgia peach, full moon that sat on the roof of our house, lighting, in soft wafts of wind, a grove of sycamores as we passed. A million leaves, gleaming, moving in unison, under a pale night sky, as if some colossal school of fish, turning hither and back again.

She took my hand.

"You best not do that again," she said. I didn't allow myself to anticipate her meaning. "If you want trouble, just put me in a place where I need something, and you'll get all you can imagine."

I didn't say anything and I never would. But I knew. And there was still a whole lot of Saturday night and Sunday morning to let her know that I knew.

20

Physics is preferable to god.

I couldn't stay on in Pony, not with Arlene having just about left me and Huston expecting three movies and lots of talk. I told Huston I'd been missing my alone time with Arlene but I hoped to see him again soon. I suggested to Arlene that we head for Butte and asked her to trust me, to just go, without breakfast—without stopping at the cafe.

Butte wasn't far, maybe an hour and a half. Summertime in Montana is soft warmth without being oppressive. And it's greener than Southern Oregon or Northern California where late summer runoff from the mountains all but disappears. Here it continues its rush, winter to winter. There's something wild about that, like that *pampas*-like grass behind Huston's house that grows tall enough to hide a moose.

We were back to riding and being mindful. I was on Arlene's bike, hanging back far enough that I could be someone not with her. We'd been on the interstate maybe twenty minutes when I saw the 287 sign for Helena. It was, take that, or stay on 90 to Butte. I cranked on the F800 to overtake her, signaled right, and we headed for the capitol.

Now I remembered 287, how it headed north as a straight road, then a twisting climb into the mountains with high passes. Compared to southern Oregon where a pass might be 4000 feet, these passes can be more than 10,000 feet. This is the land of the Rockies—where once the earth spoke loud.

But something else had a hold on me. Butte, where we now weren't going, was known for two things—maybe the world's biggest copper mine, and the world's pre-eminent daredevil—the favorite son of Butte—Evel Kneivel. And my dad telling me that during his high school years, Evel had been something else. He was from that pantheon we associate with the South, even though he was from Montana. He was an Elvis, Elvis who had moved the whole world but still seemed a hick. I mean, those movies Elvis made—gimme a break.

It was maybe an hour to Helena so I used the time to compose a blog and a poem in my head. Winding down the mountains, I had most of it as we came into the northern cowboy capitol. I'd taken the cutoff because Helena is something of a progressive place, almost artsy, though a bit conservative, while Butte is definitely not artsy. There were things here I wanted Arlene to see.

I more or less knew this area, with its high pass cresting before a wondrous valley, and Mount Helena smack in the middle of town. Helena has come of age these past few years. Corporatism

arrived late, relegated to the outskirts, but it's here now. Every restaurant chain, every chain's lodging. I'd been here twice before and I knew where to go.

After a couple of wrong turns, I recognized Smith's market and cut across their parking lot into the lot for the Actual Food Store, which my dad built for the owner, Laughingbrook. Dad was the guy LB needed for the predicament he had created. In his monthly newsletter he'd lambasted his landlords to the point his lease was up in thirty days and they wouldn't even talk to him about renewing it. So my dad drove up and helped smooth things out. LB was still in business and we parked on different sides of the lot.

"What's this place?" she asked.

"This guy is really into food, and the deli is his focus." It was true; though a vegetarian, LB made lunch for all preferences, a well-presented fare. We loaded up some good china plates, went through the register and took it outside to a table. We were both hungry, eating in silence until I noticed a slight upper-lip curl. A tell that she was enjoying a personal joke.

"What's that look?"

"Nothing much. Just thinking how easy it will be to rein you in if you start to drift."

"Really, but you do know that you girls come with an expiration date, after which you can't inspire jealousy? It's a genetic thing—built in for re-production, and when it goes, it's gone. And if a gal is older to begin with... ." She acted unaffected but I could see the expiration-date thing had gotten to her, so I kept on:

"It's like the Dermont thing."

"The who?"

"Dermont. He's a neighbor of my folks. He's 93 and he just married a fifty-year old woman. You know, as long as you're funny and your thing still works, a guy can be old."

"Why are you bringing it up?" she asked in such a way that I sensed trouble so I slipped into the chair beside her—told the truth.

"I said it because I saw you re-living and enjoying last night, which was one of the worst nights of my life. And I kept it up because I can imagine you paralyzing me with fear and jealousy even

when we're older. And I don't like how that feels. But let me tell you about Dermont, who's a character that doesn't relate to you and me." She relented.

"First off, he's big and handsome—and Mormon."

"Why would you bring up that he's Mormon?"

"Because it matters. Mormons that I know, see the the world as a gift from the gods to them, their own special *manifest destiny*, plaything. Here for their benefit and their fun. Dermont owned the airport and the land above my folks and he did whatever he felt like doing. In his late sixties he wanted to build a downhill runway from his house, for his Cessna, down a steep descent then coming home and landing uphill. Thank god he didn't do it. He was the best neighbor possible. We had a road in and a back road—the road in he never used. But after a big snow, there would be Dermont on that road, plowing for hours, with me riding on his lap.

"One day I went up there with my dad, and Dermont had removed the whole top of a mountain with this huge Caterpillar, uncovering a pile of boulders, each the size of small car. No permit—no nothing. Then he preceded to build a two story building, bigger than his ranch-style house, without a permit. Then he gave the property to his daughter and her husband to let them sort it out. She worked it out with the county that Dermont and his wife, could use the building as an office, and live in the motorhome. As far as I know, they never spent a night in the motorhome.

When I eat at the Actual Food Store I eat too much, so I suggested we leave the bikes and walk the mile or so to the capitol building, or ride out to Mount Helena and climb it.

"Are you thinking we stay here tonight? If we do, I'd rather climb in the morning." That was my preference too so we headed for the capitol, not a fun walk along a main artery, but the bikes were safer where they were. After a few minutes of walking she asked me what I was thinking about?

"It's just something stupid," I said. "Nothing worth repeating."

"Humor me—it has to be better than this walk."

"I was thinking that maybe I'd rather we were driving a car and I could comb your pussy hair while driving."

"What's the stupid part?"

"I guess it's not stupid."

"If hearing that does something other than get your girlfriend thinking about what she's going to do to you tonight, it's time for a new girl."

Up ahead was the capitol building, splendid, on a hill with lawn everywhere. Worth the walk. I'd been here before, more than once, so I headed in the direction of the rotunda and the assembly room for the legislature, which was not in session but the doors were open. The sanctity of the room drew us slowly and quietly to the front and the huge mural.

"That's amazing," she said. "All those Indians on horseback. It looks like that one has seen something and he's telling them, but it's causing a frenzy that's moving the rest of them in an involuntary circle, trying to catch what he's saying, as he rides in the other direction around them."

"That's what I see," I said. "I wonder what he's saying?"

"If it were now, it would be that he'd just encountered aliens." A janitor, doing something with desks, within earshot, heard Arlene's comment, moved toward us, to where he could be heard:

"That's a good guess, Miss. Charlie Russell, our great painter of Indians, did that mural, depicting a brave having just encountered aliens. The first white men in this area—Lewis and Clark."

That would have caused a frenzy. We walked upstairs under the rotunda, around a young Asian couple who had just been married and were posing for pictures on the wide curved stairs.

"Something that janitor said reminded me of Art Cashin, who's worked the floor of the New York Stock Exchange for half a century. He said you could only predict the end of the world once. That mural and those Indians—what happened that day could only have happened once."

"And how did it happen?" she asked. "The warriors in the mural look like they're one with their horses. How could Lewis and Clark

have crossed an entire continent and lived to tell the tale? It seems some band would have wiped them out."

The janitor told us, that across from the capitol was an exhibit of Charles Russell with many of his paintings on loan from the Russell Museum in Great Falls, which had been closed by a freak rainstorm that flooded the gallery. When we got there, there was no admission and hardly any people. It's a wondrous thing about people associated with the arts—the trouble they go to for the public. There were maybe ten people in this vast three room exhibit.

Like people do in galleries, we wandered around solo, coming together when there was something one of us wanted the other to see. At one point I went looking for Arlene to tell her I needed a half hour, maybe an hour, on my own. Then I went to the gift shop and bought the cheapest thing to write on, which cost me almost ten dollars for ten pages, each of which were embossed with an image of the capitol, and a cheap souvenir pen with a Helena, Montana decal on it.

I don't know how long I'd been on that uncomfortable steel—slatted bench, but I was deep into it and oblivious that Arlene was standing behind me. I asked if I could read to her?

It begins with one lie, then over time, more lies. Not that I'm against lying—it has its place. And I don't mind a bit of bravado as sauce on otherwise dull fare. But ongoing lies deliberately narrow the focus, with an intention to support the liar, which in our case is corporate media and the government, peddling disinformation and printing phony money, which they market as something that supports the economy, without bad consequences. Something they can perpetuate endlessly. That's the first lie, followed by jiggered employment numbers and inflation numbers, all of which are spin, rendering—no sundering—our country and its economic system, into something unrecognizable. I'll try to say it in a poem.

history will not be kind

the land
where i live and love
she's unfaithful to me
and she lies about it
but i can't let her go
because i want her
again
and always
as when first i touched her
in blush

ahead i see the sign
for butte
60 miles
i think on bobby knievel
evel not evil
it rhymed with knievel
he'd grown up hardscrabble
across from the big pit
here no quaint streets
no sidewalk cafes
no shaded tables
where old men in white linen suits
play checkers
over tiny cups of espresso
instead a truncated reality
where tracked vehicles
clattered red brown dust
cacophonizing
a pick and shovel portend
for a life he could little abide
so he poached
and stole
before risking everything

for a guinness record
for broken bones
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for most
he was a sideshow
a diversion in elvis costumes
of stars and stripes
but for me
growing up
he was an american
laying it all on the line
time and again time
throttling up ramps and soaring above
open boxes of
mountain lions and rattlers
or endless cues of yellow buses
an elvis who couldn't sing
a james dean who couldn't act
yet he performed
without benefit from lies
without compromise
without book entries
he did what you never would

i see him as a boy
7 or 8
at a museum in great falls
in the cowgirl section
looking up at a photo
where alice somebody
is standing
as a roman gladiator
one foot on each rump
of huge draft horses
she's coming at us

airborn
in a ten gallon hat
and thick lipstick
clearing a cord convertible

did evel see the photo
dunno
but i know he lived to do
whatever it was
he said he'd do
because
in this life
what matters most
is somebody sayin
that's one i owe you mister
im obliged!

i ride this morning
sensing mourning
gathered on the horizon
soon to accuse
those who did this thing
to my land
those who had no word
to keep
those to whom history
will not be kind

We looked at the painting together. Arlene said that the Alice in the painting was the same Alice as in the poem. Alice had no need for equal rights—equal rights would have diminished Alice. Any man who had Alice next to him had all he could handle. And how could this painting be here? I'd seen it once, in Great Falls, and it wasn't at the Charles Russell Museum. It was at another upstairs gallery that couldn't have flooded. Yet, here she was... .

We were hungry so why not—we headed back towards the Actual Food Store Deli. Traffic was heavier now so we cut uphill a couple of blocks and headed for the store on a tree-lined street of houses that were built a hundred years ago. Beautiful homes, one of which I'd name as my favorite, only to change my mind in the middle of the next block. Huge deciduous trees lined both sides of the street, in some places reaching across to make a shade canopy.

I remembered much of Helena being like this, heritage homes, each with a unique, full front porch, with pillars turned on wood lathes. Homes painted in soft, muted tones of brown and green and gray. Occasionally there would be a poured concrete porch but most were wood—thin strips of painted fir, in a slight decline from the front door to the steps, or to gussets in enclosed railings to drain rainwater. Most had no roof gutters—only spacious eaves to shade the windows and to keep dripping rain from the walls. None of the roofs were a mild pitch—all were steep. If you didn't know where you were and you opened your eyes, you would know you were were someplace that expected snow.

Back at the deli, we loaded up on more food than we had earlier—by the pound and not inexpensive. The breakfast was something like twenty-five dollars, but it was the best part of the store, and everything was organic. We were through the register when I spotted the owner, who I'd met once—we made eye contact and he recognized me. I remembered that my dad drove up from Oregon, wondering whether Laughingbrook would be a Sioux Indian, or a new age Jew from Berkeley. He got the Jew from Stanford. I also remembered a conversation he and LB had with a Christian, where LB said that physics is a better ordering principle than the idea of god—a centralized concept. I'm still not certain what that means? I made a little salute and we walked outside. He didn't follow.

"Is that the owner? He seems to know you?"

"He does, but talking about the past or physics right now isn't where I'm at."

Once we were safely installed in the Comfort Inn, Arlene needed a rest, so while she took a nap, I walked to a small coffee shop we'd

passed, to write a blog and try out my new email choices. I'd already had coffee but I went ahead and ordered a medium coffee, in a china cup, with room for half and half, and just a touch of sugar. I love coffee.

When I finished my blog, I used their WiFi to sent it, and it sent. I'm including some of it as an example of the kind of writing that removed my online existence and warrants that I turn myself in at a law-enforcement center (like Crazy Horse alongside a railway platform), so I can be sent for re-education camp—or worse.

From Russia With Love

Why is Britain patrolling in the Black Sea, right up against Russia, and why are the Brits moving troops and armor into the Baltics? They say it's to stop Putin from invading, as he did in the Ukraine. Russia shares a long border with Ukraine, and had they invaded, it would have been sudden and dreadful. As for Russia invading the Balkans, that's ardent, unfounded lunacy. Would Britain be okay with Russian battleships patrolling the Isle of Mann?

It's all about the sale of weapons. Britain, in 2016, became the second largest arms manufacturer, two thirds of which go to the Middle East. The nice thing about arms sales is no customer return desk. If a two million dollar missile that you bought, fails, you own it. That's a lucrative business model, one that might persuade some to lie through their teeth about Putin getting ready to invade Estonia. Besides, your queen and country need the revenue.

When the Ukrainian government rejected the European option, in favor of closer ties with Russia, the parliament there, in an not-so-soft coup voted to impeach their President—an action supported by the US and NATO, which, in the end, turned Ukraine into a failed state with our fingerprints all over it.

Which created a situation in Crimea, where, amidst the chaos in Ukraine, a referendum was held, one in which the citizens of Crimea voted overwhelmingly to rejoin Russia. Neither Europe nor NATO recognized that referendum because it's against Ukrainian

law, and because they view it as a military annexation. But Ukraine, at the time, was a lawless, non-functioning state, home to Russia's only warm water port—Sevastopol, Crimea—over which Russia has held dominium since Catherine the Great.

Was Crimea annexed? Do we accept the will of the Crimean people? We don't accept the referendum in Crimea, but we do accept one we promoted in Kosovo, which violated the Constitution of Yugoslavia? And what do we do with the 135 observers from 32 countries who validated the Crimea referendum as a fair vote, expressing the will of more than 70% of the people?

During the presidency of Gorbachev, the US promised no eastward expansion of NATO in return for the re-unification of Germany. Since then NATO has added ten countries, some of which are neighbors of Russia—and has tried for more. Remember those war clouds over the country of Georgia, in the early 2000's, which almost led to war with Russia? That was caused by an invitation for Georgia to join NATO, that Putin wouldn't go along with.

Why do we keep breaking our agreements—with impunity? What was the deal in Ukraine? We wanted Ukraine to be closer with Europe? Not really. We wanted them in NATO, in order to further strangle Russia and get rid of Putin. We wanted what we often want, regime change, leading to a vassal state. The United States is fast becoming like Germany in the 30's. But, be careful what you say because civility is at a low ebb, and questioning the accepted narrative is seen as treason.

But, if we don't speak up, who will? Not since the Wehrmacht massed along the Russian border, in 1941, before Adolf Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, which claimed the lives of more than 20 million Russians, has Russia been under the kind of threat it faces today from NATO. And what's that about? It's about the *insane world of money and power*. Insane to the point where some fools are willing to risk WW3, to not lose their crony despotism.

In the final analysis, the only common ground we have with Russia is to defeat ISIS, which is not enough, because ISIS promotes our agenda of destabilization and regime change. Will Russia be willing to stand aside in Syria and Ukraine, as they did in

Libya, which led to the total annihilation of two countries? And who did that? The United States and the Brits. Are there countries out there with a foreign policy as loony as ours? Maybe the Brits?

21

Oliver Stone interviews Vladimir Putin, and 170 million Americans tune in. Schoolchildren watch on closed circuit. Yeah—sure.

The next morning, over coffee and cream cheese bagels, Arlene was still too sore for a hike up Mt. Helena so we decided to head west. It's about two hours through the mountains along highway 12 to Missoula where we would continue on the 12 cutoff in the direction of Lewiston, Idaho. Like always, Arlene left first, but now on my bike, and after ten minutes I followed on her's.

The views today were awesome—lots of curves to keep me focused, but I can ride and think. Like about a news show where the housing market in Toronto was beginning to crash. To set things back on course they brought in Pitbull (whoever the fuck that is) and Tony Robbins, as motivational speakers—purveyors of unlikely fantasies for hapless peasants—who worked the Toronto crowd into a buying frenzy for houses in a real estate market that had already become the bubble of bubbles. It's a sure sign it's messed up when they bring Tony in.

Like my friend Mark has been saying for a long time, the human experiment is failing and we're all doomed. I hate it when he says it but I more or less agree with him, especially with what's been happening lately. Last night we watched Oliver Stone do a four-part interview with Putin—Putin may be the statesman of our time—by far the most rational of the bunch. Especially considering

one bit of video from an earlier time where congressional members are being addressed by Putin and he is offering gracious terms for friendship and cooperation. In the foreground, John McCain is sitting next to Joe Lieberman (another piece of work), wearing this insane mask of derision that I hadn't seen since early Fellini.

At Missoula I had to stop for gas. There were several stations so I didn't bother to ask if she'd been there. But now it was different. I had no phone—I couldn't call. We'd agreed to stay on 12 so that's what I did. I'd been over this road before but not for awhile. I remembered it as a good ride, down through Lolo, then up over Lolo Pass, into Idaho. The passes were lower now, this one under 5300 feet. Then a seventy mile stretch over high mountain ground to Lowell, into Kooksia, where there was no Arlene—so on to Orofino. Now I was beginning to get concerned. I hadn't seen her in almost five hours, but there she was, parked under a shade tree. She saw me, signaled to pull into traffic and she was off again.

Coming into Lewiston, she was standing outside of a diner, on the eastern outskirts, without the bike. A real diner that had been a railway car. Whenever I see an old railway station that's moved four blocks from the tracks and has become a boutique, I wonder how they did it? Did they move it in one piece or did they take it apart? How did they get it under the electric and telephone lines? And a railroad car doesn't come apart to move. On this diner, the wheel assembly was gone. That probably helped, but still it's a huge heavy thing.

Waiting for scrambled eggs and pancakes and coffee we talked about a plan. We didn't have a lot to say because we didn't know our options, other than the road. I wanted to get into the barrenness of Eastern Oregon and roads I knew. Maybe we would go to Ashland—but they would be looking for me there.

"Maybe we could get off the road a bit in Ashland where I have friends and there's out of the way places."

"How far is it?"

"Going easy, we'll be there in a day or two."

"What'd you think of that Putin thing?" she asked. During the fourth hour, she'd fallen asleep. But she watched three and a half hours of Putin.

"It's one of the more real things I've seen in a long time. I'm surprised it's still on Showtime. With all the patriotism going around it should be gone by now. Then again, I expect so few people watch it, it's already forgotten about."

"But, did you believe him? Do you think he's a good guy?"

"I do. It startled me that his answers were more balanced than what I was thinking. He may be the only reason we're not at war."

"What did I miss?"

"You missed the end. He asked Stone if he had ever been beaten. Stone said he had, but a long time ago. Putin told him he could expect to be beaten for these interviews. They parted friends."

"But could Putin have been playing us the whole time?"

"No. And there's no way a western leader could have stood up to that questioning without stopping the interview. Putin did it with grace and depth. I was embarrassed to be an American—what fools we must look."

The breakfast had arrived and we quit talking. I'm enjoying the small things more and more. Every time I get served a nice breakfast, I wonder will this be the last one? It makes you think. Today I wanted to ride my own bike. We even left the diner together. Fuck em! They may have guns but they ain't nothin!

We were heading south on 129 towards Oregon and Hell's Canyon. Arlene hadn't seen it so we'd be tourists. Southern Idaho and Northeastern Oregon are endowed with such gorgeous mountains and waterways. We stayed on 129 all the way to 3, still in the mountains. We didn't stop in Joseph but continued on to the canyon. I rode through the parking area to make sure there were no *powers that be* vehicles. There were but they were maintenance. We parked the bikes together and walked down to the view. Hell's Canyon is amazing. It's deeper than the Grand Canyon, and with that same magnificence. But, like the Grand Canyon, once you've seen it... .

Coming back to the parking lot there were two state cop cars, with lights and all, right close to the bikes. We found a place to sit, out of sight. After ten minutes they headed out.

"You think they know it's us?" I said no. I can't imagine they would have left. Policing, like anything else, is a job. Sometimes you remember what to look for and the rest of the time you're just putting in your eight hours.

We headed south then cut west on Oregon 86, and small world that it is, we rolled into Baker City, another Livingstone that had grown up around gold. Another city in the middle of nowhere, full of splendid masonry buildings. I remembered one of the hotels was an exact replica of the Ashland Springs Hotel. The architect had probably saved his clients money by offering a twofer. We headed for that end of town.

The only room they had was on the third floor and I don't like to stay above the second, so I asked to see the room first. Two floors below the windows that fronted the main street was a hard awning we could drop to in case of fire, or goon squads. We took the room. I wanted to walk around town, but I was concerned about being out there. Arlene was in favor of a walk—we could do back streets and her leg could use some loosening up.

Back streets were a good idea because Baker City, like Helena and Livingstone, has been there a long time, and beautiful old homes were everywhere—with alleys full of end of the season primroses and sunflowers. And churches from the early twentieth century. On one corner was the grand old Catholic church and directly across the street, the Anglican Church—less staid, more modern, with a steep roof.

We decided to eat at the hotel, to keep from the streets, besides, the restaurant at the hotel had an inviting look to it. Arlene went up for her laptop while I perused the menu. Waiting for our food, we played out one consequence of my being banned online. Both of us on the same side of the table sharing a laptop. This may not sound like much but Americans are used of having their own devices. This was like sharing a bathroom down the hall, or worse, going back to sharing your phone with a party-line.

Anyway, at least I was with Arlene who wasn't looking at re-decorating sites—she was interested in the news. And news there was. The time for those named by the government to turn themselves in to be cleared had now passed, requiring new measures. Then came the bombshell. There had been several government agents who, on attempting to arrest individuals who had not turned themselves in, had been shot at, and one agent had been wounded. Probably bullshit. I listen to many podcasts and I was having a hard time imaging any of the people I subscribe to, shooting the Feds. More likely this was the domestic version of a phony (false flag) event, like the one's we do to destabilize and control the world. But now I was scared. I remembered about those no-knock raids where somebody would grab the gun from their dresser and be mowed down by a swat team at the wrong address. And worse, the newer tactic of cops—knocking loudly at night to scare their way into a search, where sometimes the occupant would come from the bedroom armed and be shot dead by cops who had not announced they were the police. Courts of inquiry found the police, in these instances, to be operating within their mandate.

"Maybe I should just turn myself in."

"Yeah, you do that mate and I'm gone. This is bullshit—they're bullshit, and if you turn yourself in—you're bullshit."

She was right. The first world problems were now in the past. This was about liberty and survival. And they were bullshit.

"Without boring the shit out of me," she said, "can you give an explanation how the world, the whole world, got to this place? I'm thinking on Australia where the screws have been tightening for a long time. It's not as bad there, but it's getting there."

"Not as bad there? You all have at least as conservative a government as here—not that the liberals would be any better. And you have draconian gun laws. In fact you turned in your guns. Which reminds me, it's time to get my revolver from my pannier. I'm not going undefended in a shoot to kill world."

"All this time you've had a handgun and you haven't told me? Do they know that? Does that mean they would shoot us on sight?" I hadn't thought about it—good question.

"Yes, they know. I have a concealed weapons permit, so they'll assume I'm armed. And they know I have weapons. They're supposed to get rid of all those background checks, but... ."

I was thinking on how to describe the situation she was asking about and I had a thought.

"It's about debt, it's about oil, but underneath both of them is greed. They say it's the gold standard that held things together. Maybe so, but economic cycles are tied more to energy than anything else. All the way back to the Roman Empire. When energy spikes, it's a country like Greece, that's already in dire straights, and has no oil, that gets into the most trouble."

"Can renewables take care of it?"

"No, without something big that we don't see, it's just an exercise in self-delusion, where we assume that because technology has saved our asses so many times before, we can expect the same now. Like people thinking their bank deposits are insured. In fact, thinking a cure will present itself adds to the complacency and makes things worse."

"You're the grim reaper, mate!"

"Just the facts."

"So, with your facts, where does this go?"

"Hard to say. Before oil we were agrarian and before that we were nomads. And when we were agrarian it was all small farms, local farms. But about the time small towns lost their vitality to the interstate highway system, we went to factory farming, requiring fossil fuel to produce and to deliver. Now we're eating the last of our fossil fuels. And there's no way back to agriculture that will feed seven and a half billion souls—probably no way to feed half that many. In times of energy stress, cultures simplify, sometimes quickly—often they disappear. We had enough fossil fuels to last almost forever, but we had no plan."

"Alright, So where do you think it ends up—say five or ten years down the road?"

"It could be much sooner, but the next time somebody tells you it's being figured out and we will be saved again by technology,

take that bet. Two to one we return to scrounging nomads, on the lookout for Mad Max."

Back in the room, I thought about so many of our so-called assets being energy IOUs—like a gigantic thirty-year mortgage. Americans live on what was built with burned energy, but their part in it is still owed. Not only that, they need a thirty-year job to pay for it, and that job is not going to be there in an energy collapse. What will be there is gold and silver, which required burned energy to get them out of the earth, but now they're held as energy, outside the system, each their own store of value.

When Arlene was asleep, I went down and moved the bikes to a side street, not parked together. And I retrieved my revolver.

22

Circumstances given

What is it they say? If there's a gun on the wall in act one, it gets used by act three. Just after first light came a loud banging on the door—really loud. I was up with my revolver in hand, taking a quick look through the peep. There was nothing there. It was only last night I'd talked about people being shot for answering the door—armed. I took a quick look back to Arlene who was sitting up in bed, naked.

Again came the knock—again I took a quick look at nothing. Whoever was out there said nothing. Strange. Where were they? Which side of the door were they on? Were they left-handed, they would be on the right-hand side of the door with their back to the door, so they could swing towards the door with their left hand and fire. That would put them on the hinged side of the door that opened in.

I thought through this over maybe three seconds, deciding they were on the left side of the door because seventy-five percent of people are right-handed, making it three times as likely they were on the opening side of the door. I took a stance, gripping the revolver two-handed, and I aimed chest high at the sheetrock on the left-hand side of the door. But I couldn't do it. I didn't know who was out there and I didn't want to kill anybody. Plan B.

I pantomimed to Arlene to get dressed.

"Just getting out of the shower—give me a minute."

Luckily I was with the world's fastest woman and within thirty seconds we were ready to go. She had taken a look out the window and didn't like what she saw. But this old hotel had not been retrofitted and still had double-hung opening windows, one of which I opened, with Arlene looking at me askance. From my bag I fetched a 50 foot climbing rope (one never knows), which I threaded through the radiator while Arlene, without a question, lowered herself onto the awning, held by huge chains at either end, with only a slight tilt towards the street. She scanned the street and I tossed our bags and my helmet to her. Then I followed, pulling the rope after me once I was on the awning.

Up and inside, someone was yelling and pounding on our door. I sat down, put the rope around my waist, and Arlene lowered herself to the street. I dropped our stuff, looking for something to attach the rope to and lower myself. Threading it through one of the chains, it slipped through my hands and dropped to the sidewalk. Grunting in disgust, I crabbed my way over the edge, hanging as best I could to the slick metal, and I dropped. It was a good ten feet but Arlene half caught me. Then we ran.

Around the hotel and through a back yard behind it. Out the front yard and down an alley in the direction I had hidden the bikes.

"What do we do?" she asked. "Who do you think that was?"

"Don't know—nobody we want to see. But don't let it bother you—you're Australian."

"I'm an accomplice to someone who's going to be shot on sight."

"No, you're not." I wasn't especially concerned. Not much sense being concerned about what you have no control over. I remembered my dad during his last year. My mom had had panic attacks for decades that kept her from good sleep. When finally, my dad had one, he told me it was physical—he couldn't breathe and he felt as though he was going to have a heart attack. Then he remembered he was 73 and he didn't much care so he went back to sleep.

Soon we were on the bikes, our own bikes, heading south through Baker City backstreets. At one point I pulled over and Arlene pulled up alongside. I gestured with my chin. About six blocks farther on were two Oregon State troopers—one facing us, the other pulled up in the opposite direction, so the drivers could talk. I didn't know if they'd seen us so we made a quick right that dead-ended at the city park. The only way to turn was in the direction of the police so I continued on the gravel path into the park. To stay upright I had to stand (which is what you do on a bike in sand and gravel). Arlene powered by me on the grass, sitting.

The word that formed on my lips was *bitch*, but it formed with a smile. I didn't mind being bested by my girl. Towards the end of the park we came on a swift running creek, with a bridge that rose on one side in a steep arc and came down on the other side. Arlene took it like Evel Kneivel and I followed, barely keeping upright.

Soon, Baker City was petering out behind us, the cops were all behind us, and we were riding together down OR 245, to 26, to Prairie City, then John Day, where we would intersect 395 south to Burns.

I was thinking about my dad, and I dropped back from Arlene. I reminisce better when I'm alone. I've always been a fantasizer, projecting fantasies as dreams for the future—if you do it enough and you do it well, they sometimes come to be. They used to call it *spontaneous dream projection*. It sounds ridiculous, but depending on your self-worth, your fantasies can become your reality.

My dad—I don't know if he was as heartfelt as mom, but he was always there for me. It bugged me that his personality was big and he was so sure of what he did know. But he took my abuse, good-naturedly. And sometimes I'd let him know he mattered, like one

Father's Day night when I knocked softly on his door and went in to where he was writing and simply told him he there was no other dad who could even hold his coat.

My reverie was interrupted by a bridge over a fast-moving stream where I made a quick stop and got off my bike. I thought back to *The Ride* where Alex and Tara toss their handguns into the Sea of Cortez, but not until Alex had killed three men. I didn't want that to be my fate. The people looking for me can do what they have to do, but I don't have to do it with them. I crossed to the downstream side of the bridge and threw my revolver as far as I could into the muddy water.

I got back up to a comfortable 60 miles an hour, remembering a film, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, where a youngish Warren Beatty constructs a town in the gold country, where he is the self-proclaimed king. But alas, the powers that be send a couple of businessmen with a non-negotiable offer for his town. He ridicules them, later to discover that this ain't funnin—this is life and death. He rushes to the train station catching one of them before the train departs. The guy tells him it's too late—he's made his report—it's been handed over to others. That's how it is. Whether you're with Robin Hood in Sherwood Forest, or just turning east on 26 towards Prairie City, you have to be mindful of the elites, to whom your life doesn't matter.

So much of my memory lives in my dad's memory. He wrote it all down for a time so I would maybe read it. And read it I did though it was after he'd gone. Here's something he wrote that shaped who I am:

"My dad was a draftsman and an engineer with this wonderful hand that could print like god's scribe. Beginning when I was ten, I would go with him to shop jobs. First, we lived in Toronto, until that market dried up, then we'd cross the world's friendliest border to look for work in Cleveland or Pittsburgh—in a 1937 Plymouth coupe with a wooden back seat and an AM radio with one speaker, out of which, one afternoon, came Elvis, changing everything that

mattered—music and cars—forever. By 1956 manufacturing had moved west and we went with it to Los Angeles.

In those days it was all about skills. The jobs my dad would get lasted maybe six months to a year, with small companies with names like Miller and A. Smith, who had a contract with maybe Douglas Aircraft for a part they'd design and create a set of plans, which would then go out to one of many tool and die shops that would fabricate the part. The whole process was termed—job-shopping.

Back then we had service industries, but more people worked in manufacturing. Made in Japan was a joke, their cars were curiosities. Meanwhile China was hosting Mao's revolution, smelting iron in back yards, and Germany was in the process of re-building a war-ravished infrastructure.

Anything that mattered was made in the USA. There was Mercedes and Rolls-Royce, but everybody wanted a Ford or a Chevy. My kids scoff at a 56 Chevrolet Bel Air, two door hardtop, when compared to a BMW, but they only do that because they don't know what a bit of heaven American cars were—back then. They don't remember what that two-tone Bel-Air in red and creamy white felt like. And because we made it all in the good old US of A, there were jobs. There were economic cycles, with recessions, but there were jobs—for everyone. There was a cohesiveness to the country and it was evident. To be fair, civil rights hadn't yet happened for the South, but this was the West. And women's rights? Beginning in 1960, I worked as a box-boy in supermarkets where more than half the staff were women. Not just women but sassy women with quick tongues who could banter, and when necessary, put men in their place.

I was 16 and I had a union rep who would occasionally ask me how I was being treated. And how I was being treated was great! I worked hard, part-time, through high school, making enough to buy a brand new 1963 Dodge Dart coupe, white with red interior, three speed, with a slant six engine that was good for a quarter of a million miles. It cost \$1600 and I made \$1.60 an hour, which meant my sweet ride cost less than half a year's wages.

There was little red tape if you wanted to start your own business. Like one day when this big guy, maybe 50 years old, Jim, stopped in at the Atlantic-Richfield gas station where I pulled a few shifts, and within an hour he'd rented the adjacent one-car garage with some space outside where he hand-waxed cars. For more than a decade there was never a time when there wasn't the next car waiting for Jim. When I say Jim hand-waxed cars, he didn't own an electric buffer.

Even in the gas stations there was a camaraderie. Somebody'd pull in and we'd wash all their windows, check their oil, and if they needed oil there was a full rack of glass jars with metal spouts, each one a quart. And if they asked we'd check the air in their tires. They depended on us and we depended on them. It was more than that—our customers were our friends. Few had wealth, but there was enough. When the owner, Milton Smith, opened in the morning to find that along with pumping gas, I'd worked in a couple of lube, oil and filter changes, it meant something to him. It was the same in the markets. I had my favorite customers and I'd make sure their groceries were double bagged and help them out to the car. At Christmas I could expect an envelope with 5 or 10 bucks."

Why'm I sharing my dad's story? Because Americans are going to experience a long-coming economic and political correction like the world has never seen. Over the next decade we will see changes that to most of us are unimaginable. When dollars are no longer accepted in exchange for imported things, we'll see the stark reality that the United States doesn't make things. When, through a time of shock and awe, we're forced to grow our own food, when we won't be able to make it without a trusted network of friends, when we have to learn skills—not to keep up with the Germans, or the Chinese—but to stay alive.

We're going to need the attitudes my dad grew up with—self-reliance and the willingness to work hard. To work with our hands. To learn to do things and fix things that we know nothing about. In that process we'll find that we don't need near as much as we thought we did to be happy. We'll come to a kind of self-worth that

we didn't know existed—the contentedness that comes from having less, but doing more, and caring and loving and playing with friends we rely on—made sweeter when it's all on the line.

I reminded myself I'd seen radar speed traps just south of Burns. At John Day I followed Arlene south on 395 and I passed her immediately, remembering a road west and then south that would take us around Burns. We were now into the flats of Central Oregon, sparse vegetation—terrain I find interesting. The road west was unmarked but it was the only one, one of those pock-marked asphalt two-laners that haven't had a top coat in decades—great motorcycle roads. We wove through ruts and voids, the long forks of the bikes moving up and down like the foot pedal on a base drum. Not many drivers came this way. To the intersection where we turned south there wasn't a driveway. Seems like there would be some god-forsaken ranch or the rusted remains of mining, but there was nothing. We hadn't seen a car in an hour when we came on a big 4x4 at a wildlife viewing area. Three guys, all overweight, in fatigues, were in the prone position squeezing off rounds in the direction of the wildlife. Assholes.

Now we were on 395, south of Burns, into southern Central Oregon, and Wagontire. I remembered reading in the *NY Times* how everyone comes to Wagontire, which is a bunch of crap because there's nothing here. There used to be a cafe and a motel, but they're gone now. The *Times* said there's still a husband and wife, but I've seen no indication. What is here, is the forever twin ruts of the Oregon Trail, which speaks about this land. On either side of the ruts is sparse tufted grass with wagon tracks clearly visible after a hundred and fifty years. This is desolate land where not much grows, neither in the hot and dry, nor in the cold and dry.

We took the west road towards Christmas Valley, maybe another 50 miles. I dropped back to let Arlene go as non-sequiturs came across my mind like an old typesets. Like: *a stab in the dark*—when did that come into the lexicon and who was on the receiving end of that? Then another one: *a chink in the armor*. Both images are about being stabbed to death—like this trip—a competition

with mortality. Then something I made up: *millions and minions* of people! That was it—masses of millions, minions for the elite. If we'd been just a little more skeptical of these bastards.

My fantasies were taking on the loneliness and the isolation of the dude in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. The book that ended with his insanity. I had Arlene but my fears about the culture had taken on a prominent role. How could they not? There was a *shoot to kill* order out there because I asked questions and drew conclusions. Questions that were nothing extraordinary, except they challenged the powers that be. Whether social networks should be viewed as utilities? Things like Twitter—are they a conduit through which information passes, and protected under the First Amendment? Facebook, YouTube—just because they're privately owned does not allow idiots like Zuckerberg to decide what we can and cannot say or write. The lunatics are the problem, not my observations about them.

The guy who wrote *Motorcycle Maintenance*: he was dealing with his buddy's realization that the University of Chicago was hopelessly controlled by the elite, to the point that *quality* and questions about quality didn't matter. God, this was already in full swing back then—when was that—the 70's?

I knew where I wanted to stay in Christmas Valley and when I pulled in Arlene had already rented the last room. There's several motels in this little community but this one feels the best and they cater to motorcycles. It's painted red, with gravel for the drive and it's all on one level. I like that—people sitting out and talking, and nobody walking on top of your head.

Arlene was hungry so I offered the possibilities. The gas station on our side of the highway had food they made there. Other than that, there were couple of restaurants I hadn't eaten at. Arlene opted for the gas station—a girl after my own heart.

"I would really like to take a walk later," she said. "I need to use my body." I told her I'd been thinking about it all day. If it was some cardio, mixed with undying devotion she was looking for, I could offer both.

23

Life is hard enough when it goes okay.

We were up in the morning early and back down to the fast food gas station. We'd found food last night but it had been made that morning and was somewhat dried out by the time we got it. Now it was fresh. They were making and wrapping breakfast burritos. Outside, it was already warming up. Inside, at the cold case, they had Texas cold-brew coffees—chocolate mocha for a bit of decadence and salted caramel for anytime.

"Hard choice," I said. "I enjoy hot coffee in the morning but I love these, and it's getting hot out there." Arlene hadn't tried them so I got two of the salted caramel, and two breakfast burritos, which gave off a morning scent of sausage and eggs.

"You wanna take these back to the room or sit outside at the tables?"

"Outside," she said. "That room's a bit dreary."

We hadn't been at the table for five minutes when a cop pulled up right in front of where we were sitting. Arlene looked so nonchalant I almost laughed. The cop got out and was heading for the store when he fixed on us and came over.

"Do I know you?" he asked. Arlene withered.

"Yeah, you do," I said. "You're Mike. I was out for a walk one evening and you pulled up beside me and told me your name." Which meant I couldn't help but tell him mine. I mentioned it to one of the women who works here and she said: 'That's our Mike'. Mike nodded, but his mind was working through a rolodex.

"I thought I knew you or I was supposed to know you." With that he went inside. Arlene, petrified, began gathering our stuff.

"Don't. If he knows, there's no way out of here. Enjoy your breakfast. Do the Buddhist thing—thirty chews for each bite. And between each bite, a tiny kiss."

Half an hour later we were heading for Fort Rock, with me on my bike, but thinking that before we reached Highway 97 we should trade. Maybe five miles out of Christmas Valley, a car behind us came fast and hit the berries and cherries. We pulled over where there was a good spot to get off the road. It was Mike. Arlene and I had pulled up side by side and I suggested we stay on the bikes but take our helmets off. And that we keep our hands on the grips—I did not want to be shot on sight.

"I know who you are," he said. "I knew who you were back there. I remember talking to you when you were walking." For a moment he just stood there and we sat.

"This is tough," he said. "It's my job to enforce the law that says I'm supposed to apprehend you." I kept my hands on the grips and said nothing.

"But what they don't get is that most us out here in the brush—we're not as stupid as they think." I looked into the horizon.

"We can't deal with CNN. We don't watch FOX. Most of us can't even afford cable. My friends, cops and ranchers, if they get news at all, they get it from the internet. We may not know much but we know we aren't buying what they're selling. You two go ahead but find a way to get off the road as quick as you can. Drop these bikes down a well. Go hide, because I know officers who'd agree with what I'm saying but shoot you on sight." He walked back to his car.

I started my bike and pulled back onto the highway. Twenty minutes later I turned in at the ghost town at Fort Rock. I was off the bike when Arlene pulled in.

"Do you think it's safe to stop here?"

"More or less. We haven't crossed a county line so this is still Mike's territory. There's state cops, but it's not likely we'll see one out here."

This was the only time I'd come through here when the fort was open. I've tried to imagine what it must have been like to be stationed out here in the 1800's. I mean, there's nothing here now. Back then there was less than nothing. The fort is on the other side of the highway from the rock, a massive outcropping in the shape of a horseshoe on an otherwise flat plain. I'm not good at estimating height but this rock ring looks to rise 200 feet above the valley.

We toured the ghost town only to find there was no Fort Rock out here. These historical buildings had been moved for this museum. It's the rock itself with its toweringly thin, basalt-ringed wall that gives the appearance of a fort. Artifacts had been found from a shallow inland sea, evidence that First Americans had paddled canoes out to the rock.

Back on the bikes, I stayed with mine. We headed west towards 97 where we would head south until the cutoff for Medford. Over a few miles everything changed. Scrub-brush became scrub forest, then mature ponderosa forest, until we were riding through a full-on pine and fir forest. Our lives had also changed that quickly. We were living at the edge of experience—the acute edge. We were alive. I'd seen the change in both of us. Arlene wasn't taking anything for granted. We were living lives where plans didn't matter.

I might have avoided all this if I hadn't been a blogger. One can get away with a lot more in fiction. Maybe not. The tone and plots in my fiction are the same as my blogs, besides, I didn't want to be another guy who wouldn't stand up for the truth—another guy willing to trade freedom for food stamps. Zuckerberg would have his billions while I get the guaranteed allotment, the guaranteed hand-out, intended to crush individuality. The opposite promise of a country where each of us is equal under the law to make our way or not—as individuals. The founders knew and relied on self-reliance to go forward, with no thought for anything more. No free food, no free housing, no free education, no free health care. No big government, no big taxes. Just a legal structure, with the potential to prosper, where you helped yourself. And maybe those around you.

I got to 97 South and Arlene was already gone. 97 changed everything. Here, there would be state patrols but no local police. I rode through Crescent where I'd had lunch with my family when I was a kid. Then Chemult, a quarter mile of businesses. I think this is the place that for years had dozens of American flags along both sides of the highway. This was during the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. What they were thinking?

Now we were riding along a two-lane highway chock full of 18 wheelers and radar traps. This is Oregon, the land of fifty-five miles an hour. Soon, we came to the cutoff for Medford—Arlene had been and gone. This was also 55 but the road was so straight and I could see so far that I couldn't bend to the rules.

There were many things I wanted to think about but I was getting tired of being on the bike and the cold brew I'd had at breakfast wasn't doing much for me. I tried going with the Buddhist maxim: *when you're tired you're enemy's tired*, but it hung in my mind like a pop slogan. My tiredness was making me insecure about Arlene, which seemed ridiculous. I got pulled back to Pony and the bar and Jerome. Would there be another Jerome? I remembered the feeling from the bar. Then, there she was, ahead, off to the side of the road, bringing me back to reality.

I suggested we stop at Beckie's, a burger and homemade pie place, maybe halfway to Medford. Arlene got there first and I found her sitting in the farthest back booth facing the door. Beckie's has been here a long time and it's usually busy—the only place to eat between Southwestern and Central Oregon. I think of it as an ice-cream place with a summer crowd out front taking on double dips. But today we ordered cheeseburgers without fries, which left room for homemade pie.

"I don't know what's wrong. I feel like I'm losing it."

"I wondered," she said. "You've been suspiciously positive for someone in your situation."

My gaze was downward and I looked up. I thought back to Pony—I needed to love this woman right off the pedestal I was putting her on.

"Maybe I'm compensating with optimism. Compensating for the paranoia of not knowing who to look out for. They don't all necessarily wear uniforms. They might be anybody out there."

"Not Mike the cop," she said. "Whatever happens is something you can't know so you need to keep your eyes open and let yourself bumble through."

Good advice. There's no way to know what's going to happen. This shift in my life was only days old. I remembered something:

"Did you see Russell Crowe in *The Gladiator*? That scene before he goes out to fight where the guy tells him that because he's a known warrior, the opponent needs to kill his name before killing him. That's what's going on now. They need to kill who we see as Americans! The world knows that stopping free speech is illegal crap—there's no way around that unless they get rid of our rights. That's why they're going after statutes of Jefferson and Washington, and not just Confederate generals. Demean the names that matter—sell them as ancient white bigots—until the name is gone. Don't remind the people that without these men there would be no United States. And now they've exalted me—calling me the same names as those guys—quite an honor."

"Does that help?"

"No, but seeing the very hopelessness of the situation gives it perspective. Like when Bob Dylan said that the *New York Times* said it was the coldest winter in seventeen years—he didn't feel so cold then. Meanwhile, they give out awards for drone warrior of the month, in a world where our kids get to live through what it would have been like if Joe McCarthy had been able to pull off his commie witch hunt."

Beckie's may be the only place to eat, but the burgers are good. I wonder if food was a better quality when this place first opened? The food back then, was it different? Crisper lettuce and redder tomatoes. Virgin loam and clean water where pesticides were not yet rumors?

I'd thought hard about quitting my blog. Instead they did it for me. Online email and host sites are like the telephone company,

owned by someone, but the phone company doesn't censor an argument between you and your wife. And because these entities are in cahoots with the powers that be, they decide if you're someone to be evaluated by the authorities? What's the difference between that and Chile where they picked up students, took them to a football stadium for questioning, and they were never seen again?

But here we were at Beckie's, a spot known for homemade pie. We were down to the thick fork-art crust when Arlene told me to not look but two dudes had come in, wearing suits and ties. Not common attire for up here. I left thirty dollars on the table and didn't look back as we exited the rear door.

As we pulled out of the lot, I saw their car—storm troopers. I rode west to the first right turn, exited and found a place to shield the bikes.

"What did you make of those guys? I asked"

"I'm not thinking they made us but one of them had the look of an unsuccessful rapist."

Where we'd pulled off gave us a place to wait it out if anyone was looking for us. This was the stretch of the Rogue River known as the gorge. We walked along it to where you stand above a crush of water between rock walls, just below.

"This is something," she said. "Like when a violent lightening storm lets you know you're nothing. It's more powerful than Hell's Canyon because it's right here below us. Are you ever going to write anything that's positive?" I was flummoxed.

"Much of what I write is positive. My stories are hopeful about love. My play ends with a future that might work out."

"Two finished novels: one with a couple running for their lives for 300 pages, then he (who's sixty-seven years old) is headed for Oregon, with this beautiful young woman and their baby, to meet his aging wife. Does that about have it?" I didn't challenge. "Then, *The Audit*, in which he gets a friend killed to prove there's no gold at Fort Knox. And, he ends up being chased by everyone in the world who works for the government."

"He has his lover—he's on his way to meet her."

"Yeah. A guy who precipitated a nuclear holocaust. A guy that few understand but most would shoot on sight. He's Edward Snowden, driving around the US in a two-tone classic truck with bullseyes painted on the doors."

I didn't argue. I could have argued. In my blogs I chronicled the goings on of an insane asylum—sometimes in a sardonic way. Even the new novel, *If Only By Chance*, is the actual account of two people presently hiding out at the Rogue Gorge, with a *shoot to kill* order on one of them.

Maybe there was something I could write—a self-help book that people might carry with them, dog-eared the pages with time? I thought I had done that with *Probable Cause*, which I wrote for young people dealing with a police stop. But that was three years back and things have worsened since then—to where I don't advise that kids stand up for their rights at a police stop unless they really have to. The last time I was stopped before all this, I played the coyote, mentioning how I wouldn't want his job, and how it must be way more dangerous than in decades past. I'm such a loser.

I think this cascading water goes on for miles, but once you see billions of gallons of blue and white, thundering down the walls of a rock canyon ten feet below where you're standing, you've seen it. And how long could we stay here? It's unlikely anyone knows we're here, and if they did know, there's only the one road to get from here to anywhere. There was no one at all along the gorge, but we had to get out of here.

Soon we were heading down into Medford, but first there would be smaller places, Prospect and Butte Falls, before a much bigger Medford—with sheriffs and local cops.

I could see Arlene up ahead through the turns. I thought about what she'd said—about writing something positive. But it would have to be about something other than politics or economics. The three years of the Kennedy presidency were thought of as Camelot but there was no Camelot. There's never been a Camelot and there will be no Camelot. Politics is a maze, where we perpetuate ideas that don't make sense. But the maze isn't everywhere—it's on the coasts—it's in the big cities. If you can handle the winters in South

Dakota, and give up a big pay-check for a job in a fly-over state as a public defender, you might live simply instead of doing crime work for the trans-nationals. You could get a house for fifty or a hundred grand and walk to work. But, for most, the maze goes on.

Much of what life used to be is now tyranny, and being positive won't make it go away. Maybe I could write something that would help. But, if it didn't take into account, the hell we've descended into... . Besides, there's nothing can be done for those who don't know they're in a maze. I could write, something like: *A Beatdown of Your Demons—a Roadmap to Self-Worth*. Maybe I could do it without compromising the facts on the ground.

As soon as we could, I turned off Crater Lake Highway and took the back road around Medford, along the sparsely inhabited side of the freeway across from Phoenix, Oregon, and Talent. Coming into Ashland, I avoided as much of the town as possible. Backroads all way to Tolman Creek, then up the mountain to my property. Well not exactly my property.

Which presented another problem. Everybody up there knows me and I'm a wanted man. About half a mile of dirt road rises from Tolman Creek, which we covered without seeing anyone. At the main house the renters weren't home.

Arlene was wide-eyed: "This is all yours? How did you get it? Is this car yours?" The car's a roadster, a BMW Z3. It was my dad's. He'd build everything on this hill, most of which was now unfortunately run down.

"It's my mom's. It will someday be mine but not while she has anything to say about it. But this shop, the tools, the car and up-stairs are all mine to use."

The renter's Toyota was coming up the road, a fall plume of granite dust that signaled the end of the dry months in their wake. They turned off the main road into the woods and a few seconds later came back into view and parked in front of their place. The woman ushered her two small girls up the wooden stairs and into the house. The guy, who my dad liked, walked towards the shop.

"That neighbor at the creek who didn't get along with your dad saw you coming up the hill and recognized your dad's old bike. He called the cops. He's waiting for them at the bridge."

I thanked him and he headed back to the house. Remembering what we were supposed to do up here in the event of fire, we rode farther into the property, past the five cabins my dad built. I forgot to tell Arlene the road would be rough—rougher for me than for her. At the last cabin, the road, more of a two-wheel trek, rose sharply onto an equally bad road but at least it was level. At the next juncture where the main trail rose so steeply it would be difficult to stay on the bikes, I turned downhill onto an overgrown path passing the wreck of an 1949 Chevrolet sedan, parts car. A hundred yards farther, the car path turned into a logging road that descended so fast it was all I could do to stay on the pegs. Then the path flattened to where, through the thick fir forest, I could see the road above the bridge.

I couldn't see if the neighbor and the cops were down there so I opted to wait it out—get off the bikes and watch. They couldn't see us here. They couldn't even track us because a neighbor's kids rode dirt bikes up here making motorcycle tracks unreadable. Besides, they would think we went out the back way.

As luck had it, a sheriff's SUV, followed by my neighbor, passed below, heading up. I gave them a minute then started down and across the bridge where Tolman Creek Road headed south up to Mount Ashland, or down to town. I headed down, then took a driveway west that went up into some hills where I hadn't been for years. It was something called the Oredson Woods.

Vehicles weren't allowed up here but our bikes were able to cover the terrain to a copse of trees where they would not be visible. We walked back down in the direction of the creek. Vince Oredson had been a friend of my dad—he was a Quaker who did things for the benefit of everyone—including himself—but everyone, nevertheless. He sold off lots to build a subdivision, but the rest of it, the creek and the woods up high, he turned into a preserve. We walked through it down to the creek that ran down along a rock basin, without the force of the creek up at the gorge—just a

beautiful stream with ferns and mossy rock and the sweet sound of the water running for Ashland. The woods were thick shade from deciduous trees having grown up along the creek with fir and pine farther back. We sat on some boulders and took it all in.

"They're going to make it hard for us to be together," I said. "And, those who have no romantic illusions—it be easier for them."

"Do you think the unromantic are immune from feelings of what might have been?" she asked.

"I don't know. One night my mom had her friend over while I was watching the Vietnam series—I could hear her friend crying in the living room so I turned it off and went out there. I didn't say anything but I got down on my knees with my elbows on the ottoman so I wouldn't be talking down to them."

"They were talking about the woman's lost love and how she'd heard just the other night that he had Asperger's. I asked how she knew that? She'd been letting out her emotions to a couple who were friends to both her and her ex. The guy, who's some kind of sociologist, thought her ex had Asperger's, which came as a revelation to her. That was the key to the puzzle—finally she knew why he wouldn't let her into his most private place. It was because he had a disease."

Arlene broke out laughing which provided a needed epiphany. I liked her dark side.

"How long had this woman been suffering before she had the revelation?" she got out though a staccato laugh.

"A long time—maybe a year." Which brought more laughing from Arlene. "As the woman kept crying, I ran through a dozen men in my memory, to the realization that most men I knew were incapable of relationships—if they involve love. And it didn't take a disease for them to get to that place."

"Duh. That's why, when you find someone, you don't cross any lines. You don't do that thing that makes your mate react such that you have to react back?"

"Like with that cowboy in the pickup truck in Ely?"

"Exactly, like with that devastatingly chiseled, handsome cowboy in the well worn and filled-out Levis—the one with the penetrating intelligent eyes and the sardonic wit. There was nothing he could do—nor could he ever do to get me away from you. As for your mother's friend—she needs your book on self-worth."

As the shadows became long, we headed back up the hills to the bikes. On the way I recounted a little history of the place.

"There was a fire on this hill back in the 70's. A lightning strike that began just above the creek and ran up the mountain. One of the reasons Vince could later make this place into a picturesque woods is that half of the big timber burned down in about an hour. It was the end of summer and the place was a tinderbox. Up at the dead end of a bad logging road, where our bikes are, two huge Swedes, brothers, who worked for the forest service, had been up there that morning marking a cutting project when a wall of flame from below, pulled by an updraft, came their way. It moved so fast there was no possibility of running for the ridge. They'd done the thing you're supposed to do in the woods: park your vehicle in the direction you want to go, but that was directly into the fire. The older one asked the younger if he'd done what he asked of him the night before—fill the Ford with gas. He'd forgotten—thankfully. They got in the truck and big brother drove into that fire at 60 or 70 miles an hour with the suspension being torn apart by the bad road. Into the lead flame and the inferno that was maybe 100 feet deep. They didn't slow until they crossed the creek on flat tire rims, in a truck of blistered paint and fried windows. But they were alive."

It was late in the afternoon when we turned onto Tolman Creek road and headed into the mountains. I stayed apprehensive until we were a turn beyond my driveway. Crossing the mountains seemed our best bet, but this was fire season and the turnoff to Mount Ashland might be closed. I knew the main road would be closed at that junction.

I grew up on this road riding a mountain bike and running. Six miles to four corners, then screaming down on a bike, or I'd head up the mountain—another four or five miles of strong uphill. I swear I liked the uphill as much as coming down. Growing up here was incredible.

The Mount Ashland road was open and we moved along smoothly—so different from pedaling, and in no way as good. You can't be one with a motorcycle the way you can with a bicycle—a bicycle is an extension of you. At Bull Gap the road leveled and we rode another three miles to the ski resort highway. Purple and rose sky was reaching for the horizon with a burst of Mt. Shasta and Pilot Rock in the distance. The sky was ultra blue for this time of year and for Arlene who hadn't been here before, the vista was something. But I had another concern. If there were going to be cops, it would be in this next couple of miles between here and the lodge.

The lodge came into view and there was no one—not even maintenance. It would be a couple of months before this place was jammed with cars and trucks in blizzards, with their windshield wipers pulled back so they wouldn't freeze to the glass. We passed the lodge and rose with the road that worsened in front of us. At one spot with views everywhere, we stopped but didn't get off the bikes. In the spring this meadow is a shock of high mountain wildflowers. I remembered coming up here, sometimes on my mountain bike, then all the way down the other side to where we were headed now.

It was dark when we came out onto the highway and purred into Williams where the general store was still open and where they had hot food. I asked about a room and the guy directed us to a hundred year-old house where a woman had a couple of rooms.

The house looked to be as old as the landscape, with no porch light on and just one lamp going, somewhere back in the house. But we didn't have any other choice so we stepped across the creaky wood porch and knocked on the door. After an interminable time, during which I really didn't want to knock again, a light came on in the entryway, followed by a light on the porch. A woman,

who looked to be of the same vintage of the house peered out at us through rippled glass from the early 1900's. She was in no hurry to open the door, on the other side of which we stood smiling but not to the point of looking ridiculous. Finally, deliberately, she opened the door with her skepticism intact. Arlene explained that we were on motorbikes and she was afraid to ride farther in the dark and the man told us she would maybe have a room.

She let us in, with no guarantee she would be of any help to us. But it was a chance to communicate. I stayed with nods of agreement and let Arlene do the talking. Before long Arlene had clean folded towels in her arms and was shown the sitting room where we could sit if we didn't feel like sleeping right away. Breakfast would be available in the morning, included in the price of the room. I thought back to a night in Siberia when I came into a city after dark, needing a room. All I knew how to say in Russian was *thank you, yes, and no*. That and the word for hotel that I only knew phonetically—*go-steen-it's-a*. When I was a kid I played hockey with this kid Steen and the way I could remember hotel was "Go, Steen, it's a goal."—without the goal part, that's hotel in Russian—*gosteenitsa*. Anyway, in that Siberian city I gesticulated to several passersby who either saw me as nuts or knew of no hotel. Siberians on the road sleep in their cars. Finally I found someone who knew of a hotel. And like tonight, the woman who opened the door either saw me as part of a never-forgotten German invasion, or insane. At one point I held my hands in prayer—beseeching for a room. I invoked the name of the son of god and all things holy. I praised Stalin (he's well liked there), until finally I was allowed in. After twenty minutes, this woman, to whom I could not talk, was bringing me towels and making sure I was taken care of.

Later, after Arlene was asleep in a bed dating from Wilson's War, with Coolidge's headboard, I got my computer and went to the sitting room to write.

Most people don't have the stomach for self-deprecating humor.

In the morning we made a plan over breakfast. The house was somber in daylight—as much daylight as there was. Every window was shut and covered with ancient brocaded drapes and curtains. Without the electric lights, it was all you could do to make your way from room to room. But true to her promise there was breakfast, eggs and sausage and toast—without butter, but with jam. All we needed.

There's a couple of ways to reach Oregon 199 to the coast from Williams. We decided on the one that probably didn't see a cop car but once a week, if that. At the coast we would go north towards Canada. We headed west along Cedar Flat Road towards Cave Junction where we would intersect 199 to the coast.

This was one of few roads I hadn't been over and I couldn't imagine why someone hadn't told me about it. On the map it took a circuitous route to get to its destination—which is an understatement. When they built these roads the technology was primitive compared to now. And since there now existed this paved road, there was little chance of putting millions into a redo. Here was the same road from maybe seventy-five years ago, where on some stretches, we rode three miles to get a mile closer to the coast—through a treasure of turns that sometimes exceeded a full circle, over a carpet of maple and oak leaves, scattering as we cut through.

It's a little more than an hour to Cave Junction, Oregon's answer to Carlsbad Caverns. I'd been there once, with my dad, the only time he'd been there. I was maybe ten, and there was this young woman who took us through the caverns. She was way younger than dad but they worked up a rapport. She was something, a bit of a tomboy, tall and cute. At one point she worked her body down

through a narrow crevice to a floor below. I remember looking at my dad and seeing him for the first time as somebody other than dad.

I appreciate my bike because it's an authentic mechanical motorcycle. You feel it, you feel it all around you. Maybe it's not as good as Arlene's through the turns, or as smooth, or as quick, but there's something about the industrial age that gets lost in technology. It's like those Brammo electric bikes that won the Isle of Mann this year. Who, that came up in the age of Bonneville's and Commandos, would want an electric motorcycle?

At Cave Junction we gassed up. Next to the station was a coffee hut where we got a latte. Arlene asked the server how long it would take us to reach the coast? She could have asked me—I've been over 199 a hundred times. She was just making small talk but the response was interesting. It depended on how long we had to wait at the checkpoint, the roadblock where they were checking traveller's paper's. There it was—no concern for search and seizure under the 4th Amendment, the right to freely travel our country—unimpeded. Again, the republic was nowhere to be found. We should just leave the bikes here and hitchhike but that would put us at the police stop in the backseat of someone else's car. We needed to stay with the bikes.

When things get tough one needs the art of surmise. Where would be the roadblock? I made my bet. From Cave Junction, Oregon, to Brookings, Oregon, you have to go into California for most of an hour, then back into Oregon along the coast. The roadblock would be at the portal and weigh station for California past O'Brien. That made it tricky because that stretch of road was all bends though the redwood groves and we would probably be at the roadblock before we even saw it.

I told Arlene what I was thinking and asked her to follow me on my bike and not lose sight of me along this wonderful road of the redwoods, with trees as grand as skyscrapers, two feet from the pavement—a road that paid homage to the giants by giving way to them at every curve. At O'Brien I pulled off the road and talked to a guy from Arlene's bike while she idled behind me. I told him that

my friend lived on the last Oregon road before the California line and I couldn't remember the name of the road. He didn't know it either but he thought California was about four miles, and just a bend or two before the weigh station there would be a fruit stand where they would know. With no clue whether there would be a road between the fruit stand and the border we headed out. Soon it became apparent those redwood groves I'd described to Arlene would be mostly past the border, but before the fruit stand we came upon a few that challenged the sky.

Then came the fruit stand, which was closed, but I pulled over anyway. I rode behind the shuttered structure and Arlene followed. We shut down the bikes and I asked her to wait while I lit out on foot, staying back from the highway just enough that I couldn't be seen. A couple of hundred yards on I saw the rosy taillights from a line of cars waiting to be un-constitutionalized. I kept on until I saw there was a road that branched off to the right—maybe twenty cars into the lineup. At that intersection, I couldn't see the portal to California. On my way back, I thought about leaving the bikes behind the structure, but they'd find them. It was better to get them off the road.

Back at the stand, I told Arlene what I'd seen, I straddled her bike and asked her to stay close. I rode off slowly. Now the line was longer—those illegal interviews needed to be thorough. We rode the dirt beside a line of traffic to a few dirty looks to which I gestured we were turning right, which we did, after barely transiting between a big motorhome and a massive redwood. We took the right and climbed steeply until I caught a glimpse of what looked to be an old path or road to the right which I took into underbrush, some of which I skirted and the rest was supple enough to fold under my skid plate and snap back into Arlene and my bike. Some time past this had been a road that was now overgrown with something that looked to be from the willows family, except there was no water here.

What happens in a forest on an abandoned road like this is that trees don't grow—first. First come bushes and after a few years come pine seedlings, sprouting up in the shade. This was such a

road, now dotted with small pines, some having reached six feet, which I wove in and out of. Then the path became a bare old road base that leveled out into an abandoned homesite. Amazing! Why would this place have been abandoned? There was a large open space with lots of sun and part of an old chimney from long ago. We got off the bikes and walked around until we stopped and peered into a hand-dug well. I dropped a rock that found water at maybe forty feet. Who in the hell had hand dug this? I remembered hearing how these wells started out, just wide enough for one man to work, but as the well deepened it needed to be widened up top to accommodate wooden support beams to shore up the sides against collapse. Especially important with the loose dirt and gravel before you get into rock. What a different world? What a different time?

"Here's what Mike said to do," she said. "Drop these bikes down a well." This was a well where we would be able to do that. These days, wells are a six inch hole in the ground, but back then, whoever'd dug this well had made it wide enough to get two or three men down there with a ladder and buckets to bring up the dirt and rock. There was probably enough space to drop the bikes in the hole but I wouldn't be able to do it. Not my dad's GS. At the edge of the forest, I found something else. The side of a hill had been cut almost vertically, and there was an old wood structure leaning against it. It had to be a mine. The structure covering the entrance was made of one-by's nailed into two-by's and leaned against the rock wall. It was grey and cracked. It had been there a long time. Getting on either side of it we were able to tip it forward and lower it to the ground revealing a jagged arch cut into the rock wall, not tall enough for either us to walk without a sight stoop, but tall enough for the bikes. It went back about thirty feet, all rock with no support structure. The last ten feet tapered down to a crawl space. They probably got tired. But there was space for the bikes. I suggested we take everything from the panniers we needed for the rest of our lives. A half hour later the bikes were inside, the structure was back in place and we were walking towards California with our future stuffed into two pair of Levis, knotted at the ankles.

Something law enforcement might recognize as being less than Samsonite.

We skirted the checkpoint which was a well-funded tyranny, with no less than half-a-dozen enforcers stopping traffic in both directions, and several Dodger Chargers—ready to go. We kept on through the redwood and fir with our half-scarecrow luggage until we were far enough past the checkpoint to get the idea that we couldn't walk to the coast, so we bushwhacked back to the highway and put out our thumbs, with Arlene more visible than me.

Luck came with immediacy. An old couple in a ton and a half truck half-loaded with hay motioned us to share with the hay. But at the same time, a black Cadillac Escalade pulled up right behind them—causing my heart to skip a beat. But it wasn't the Feds, just a hipster couple. Without sizing it up we got hip and loaded into the Caddy that swung into traffic passing and pulling away from the hay truck. Our driver honked a *so long* while Arlene and I waved a goodbye out the windows.

"You two swingers?" We looked at each other.

"We're not," said Arlene, "we're newly in love."

"That's cool, but a bit of fun never hurts," he said, twisting to smile at Arlene. "It's all still works later, for true love." This guy was going to land us back out on the road where I didn't want to be.

"My girlfriend's had some bad experiences. Best go slow with her. Where're you two headed?"

"Brookings."

"Good. Talk about something—she goes for good talk." Arlene gave me a *what're you doing?* look. But she took the initiative:

"Whatta you two think about the government rounding people up for re-education camps?" He twisted again in Arlene's direction.

"I'm with the big boys on this one," he said—"there's too much bullshit going on. We need to get on track—common purpose—common goals. Obama knew this and from what I understand, so did Hillary."

"But so many people think the Clintons and the Clinton Foundation are criminals," she gave back. "Could they all be wrong?"

"I wondered," he said, "so I fact-checked it on three sites. There's agreement that the liberals are the one's with common purpose."

"I'm not sure," she said. "My daddy says (in thick Australian) fact checking *is like reading biblical commentaries when you're looking for a vision of god*. Like trying to look up what wisdom is. I want an internet that I have to sort out for myself." He was hemming and hawing. He had this all figured out and he'd laid it out in his best self-assured voice that was maybe a touch high in timbre. A guy who never had to duck a punch in his life. Probably not quite true. This guy had his ass handed to him by the more privileged at private school. But not now, not within the confines of a plush nap and aluminum where all that mattered was how to get Arlene out of her pants. "In fact," she said, "I'd be inclined to help those people who are being rounded up—help get them to someplace where they could say what they thought." *Go easy, Arlene*

"That would be the felony that sends you to the same camp." Besides, he'd heard they just want to talk with these people and then let them go. His companion didn't say anything but gave off enough sexual innuendo to keep things stirring. She probably wasn't into being a swinger—not compared to him. She probably did it to keep him happy. And since narcissistic sexual behavior is only one step away from bestiality, he would be unconcerned if she wasn't completely on board. In the end, for him, animals, including the one you share your bed with, are neither the subject of rights nor respect

He took a different tact: "Let's face it. Most people who criticize the government are losers—people who can't make it on their own. Those of us who work hard for what we have see it for what it is. The whiners need to be told the facts of life. That's where the re-education schools come in."

"You, apparently, know more about it than I do. I haven't heard of any schools," she said, "I've heard of camps. Camps to intimidate people because Americans know they have the right to free speech, and by the time they let them out, if they do, the inmates

no longer constitute a threat. So, I'm thinking those camps are likely more like Guantanamo than Stanford."

"You best be careful," he said. "A year ago you could get away with that view, but not now. People are going to jail for what you're saying."

"Jail. Right mate! Not school, not camp—jail. For saying that people shouldn't be rounded up for saying what they think?"

He found his way into being patronizing and agreeable: "I like your style girl. You're feisty." I wondered would he be of that disposition for long?

Arlene went right at it. "It's not about feisty and style. It's about reality. The only people who get ahead now are those who started out ahead or who've learned to *live on the spread*—grabbing a piece of everybody's action without contributing anything."

He gave back. "You might be the kind of person I'm talking about—going around spouting off opinions. If I weren't more reserved I might want to ask why you're out here carrying your things in a pair of pants? I'd ask what kind of job you have?"

This talk, between the two of them, which excluded me and the live blow-up doll of a girlfriend, was not as harsh as it may sound on the page, yet the banter was tightening with each retort from Arlene. We might soon be walking but it was well worth the price of admission.

"And I'd ask you if you know that eight entities own half of the wealth of the world, wealth that was owned by millions of people called the middle class a few decades back?"

"And I'd ask you why you don't move to Canada, if you don't like it here?"

"And I'd tell you that I don't have to move to Canada because I'm not from here. And I'd remind you of what people like you said during Vietnam—*Love It Or Leave It*. That those who didn't go along with insipid patriotism should get out of the country. And, being Australian, if I care to, I can go in Canada whenever I feel like it."

"Yeah. You hate this country and you should get the hell out of it!"

"Not quite. It's people like you who hate this country because everything good here is build on freedom. Freedom that you apparently would trade for money. It's you who should leave, mate. And let me tell you something else. Love is mortal combat where those unwilling to even try and respect someone, are already dead—they just don't know it yet."

I was hoping she'd go easy and get us into Brookings. Instead, she was amazing, trading the role of wily coyote to speak her mind. When things get tough, *even wily coyote won't name the well it won't drink from*. Arlene had spoken her piece and our host pulled over and bade us farewell—without ceremony.

We were now at an intersection where one road continues south-ernly to Crescent City, just a few miles farther on, and the other road heads northwest where it ends at the coast highway.

"I used to come here with my dad. There was an old drive-in theater just north of Crescent City. There were a few of them left, hundreds of miles apart. I think he took me to all of them. He wanted me to have his experiences with music and cars. Drive-ins were part of it. It's a blessing I got in on this last decade or two of the gasoline engine."

"You know, I know. I guess riding horses across the West would have been out of control cool, but I'm a motor girl. We had both horses and a drive-in on the Outback. A big drive-in. Property out there is worth a nickel. In school I'd go to it with my boyfriend."

"I don't want to hear about it."

"It was twelve years ago."

"I just don't want to hear it." She gave me a sweet smile.

"My dad used to take me bowling at Crescent City. A place called *Tsunami Lanes*. There'd been an earthquake in Japan and a Tsunami'd hit here. I think people died. My dad thought nothing of driving three hours out here to take me bowling."

"So, you learned how to be a good dad?"

"You know another thing that gets me about guys like that? They hang onto the myth that there's anywhere to go? They don't get that the problems we're living are global—it may be better in

Canada, but maybe not. I saw that this guy in Germany lost, I guess it was his Facebook page, for posting a historical photo from the Second World War of some mullah shaking hands with a ranking Nazi official. They deleted the guy's site. And now they're going to fine and arrest him for undercutting Islam."

"I meant what I said about that he should move," she said. "He can go to Canada. All his problems are first-world problems. He can move to Canada and have another one. It would be a better place for him. I know because all us Commonwealth groupies are willing to give away rights we never had for a train that we can't afford to ride that runs on time. And the problem with you Yanks is you think football is something you throw, so you don't know coach Tony Adams who puts it so well: 'Play for the name on the front of the jersey and they'll remember the name on the back.' That's the problem with our boy in the Escalade. He talks the good talk of the patriot, but he's in it for himself. Not for him and her—he's in it for himself."

We had to get away from this intersection so I opted in the direction of Brookings. We walked past the first bend before we stopped, which got us out of sight from the intersection. We stood in the quiet of a redwood forest with majesty all around. Once in a while the sound of a vehicle on the Cave Junction, Crescent City road, but little else.

"I liked what you said about commentaries; we live in a world of commentaries." She placed a vertical finger to my lips. Enough talk. She put her arms around me and held me. Such a strong girl. She was holding me when the ton and a half hay truck came upon us from the Cave Junction Road. The faded chocolate fenders that curved up from the running boards over tall wheels needed only Bogart and George Raft as the drivers to complete the image. It pulled up beside us with a long-lost sound of the last set of mechanical brakes. The old man and his old lady looked out as he motioned us back to the hay. Their smiles told me they knew things we didn't.

We slowly wound our way through the redwoods to where the road ends at the Pacific Coast Highway, from where you can see

the ocean. We turned north toward Brookings, which was fine because it fit in with our nebulous plan of Canada.

Between here and Brookings is an interesting place that's referred to as the *banana belt*—where the weather is often moderate. Brookings is full of azaleas and other flowers you wouldn't associate with this far north. Oregonians from the interior regions often make the pilgrimage to this area during the winter. There are times when, if you can get from Klamath Falls to here, it might be fifty degrees warmer and sunny.

Arlene broke the silence: "I see what you mean when you say it's over—that there's no solution. It gets clearer when you're talking about it with someone like Mr. Escalade."

"Yeah, it's too late. If we'd acted on the energy from the Civil Rights movement, we could have risen up, or maybe at the end of Vietnam we might have brought big government to heel—2008 was our last chance."

"If it is over, is there anything to do?"

"Yeah. Migrate into crypto currencies, anywhere you can hide. Buy gold and silver, then slip into the dark web for privacy and sanctity."

I mused on what it might be like to get to Canada and how could we get into Canada? I remembered something—US Customs doesn't stop you entering Canada at those long bridges.

25

A laugh a minute

The old man pulled the truck over across from Fred Meyers in Brookings and let us out. We went to the cab and thanked them, then headed for Freddy's for a couple of duffel bags—too many cops between here and Canada to be carrying stuffed Levis. We

needed to eat and we picked Starbucks again over burgers. I'm a creature of habit, a medium coffee and turkey pesto is fine for me. Arlene got the same and we shared a blueberry muffin while we waited.

I have rules for things, like what I got from my dad for drinking: one with dinner, two if it involves love (not lust), and never a third. My dad didn't have rules for coffee because he had his first cup when he needed energy at sixty-seven. But I think the rules for coffee are: one in the morning, another in the afternoon if you really need it, and a third if you happen to be running from guys trying to kill you.

Starbucks was mostly full and everyone except us was on a computer or a cellphone.

"100 million love relationships missed because of cellphones," I said, "The love of your life walks by, unnoticed, while you search for a virtual girl."

"I'm still thinking about the guy in the Caddy," she said. "I'm wondering how moral ambiguity sets in to where you no longer see anything other than how you see it?"

"I think it's narcissism. It's difficult to dispel ignorance while retaining your arrogance. I know a guy who knows a guy who's hooked up with Blackwater and Eric Prince. Prince, he's the guy who decided to have his own army and now his contractors on the job outnumber our service-people.

"Anyway, the guy flies Blackhawk copters in Afghanistan—he goes for six months. This last time he went to Africa to identify targets for airstrikes. I don't know if I heard this or if I just made it up, but the guy is also involved with an orphanage. The distance between those two activities represents the entire scope of moral equivalency. But, on the practical side, when you kill the parents the kids need a place to live."

Arlene conjectured: "I'm betting he does it for the money. How much do you think they pay him?"

"A lot. How much do they have to give to have a guy shed his humanity?"

"Maybe, he's just a deluded patriot?"

"Yeah, like our boy in the Escalade."

"Is that what it is," she mused, "shedding his humanity? Are we born with humanity?"

"Maybe. Procreation and survival are definitely there but I'm not sure about empathy and humanity. We have empathy for our own, but extending it to others might be a social construct?"

"I can see that," she said. "It would explain the loss of empathy when times get tough. People pulling back in. And what is it about our time where so much of what mattered before hardly matters anymore?"

"It's a good question. This tech thing hasn't gotten all of us, but we are living in a world where the robots are coming—where the virtual world has become more important than the natural world. I thought there would be no way it could happen to things like sports but people my age are more interested in *fantasy* sports than real sports. Movies have fantasy plots—the old ways are gone."

Thirty minutes later a huge FoMoCo sedan from the 90's came to a stop on Pacific Coast Highway and we piled in. Not a classic—produced too late to ever claim that status, but it was a relic—two shades of green with full hubcaps. The dashboard, an expanse of naugahyde and levers for air conditioning. Everything was original down to the clear, plastic seat covers.

"How long you had this Ford?" I asked, looking back to take it all in. The headliner was green and the seats were green and white—and not an attractive green. Along the base of the headliner were chrome strips, secured to the roof frame with chrome Phillips head screws. For economy, the back seat had not been outfitted with plastic covers, still it showed little wear, which meant she was not the conveyance for a family with kids and a dog. The wide seat and the water-stained package tray could have comfortably accommodated Arlene with all her stuff, coast to coast.

"I bought it from my folks." Which didn't tell me much. The driver was of an age, indeterminate. I mean this guy could have been or forty-nine or fifty-nine. The car could be from the late 80's or early 90's. I know cars from the 40's through the 60's and Eu-

ropean cars all the way, but this car and this guy were a time warp. His clothes were from another time, white shirt, short-sleeved (kinda see through) over an undershirt tucked into pleated navy-blue cotton dress pants of vintage unknown. A jacket of the same material was laid out on the back seat and there were more shirts on hangers from a hook above the rear, driver's side, door. The guy was a salesman—an aging salesman.

"Where you two headed?"

"Up the coast to Canada," I said. How about you?"

"I'm going to Astoria and back, but I have stops along the way."

"Salesman?"

"Yeah," he said with the sound of expiration. "I guess. I began this route for Levi Strauss the summer after high school. Back then all these little coastal towns had one or two places you could buy clothes. The big-box stores were just starting up, and I could make a decent living selling jeans along the coast because those stores were the only places to get them. But now that's over. Places that used to take a dozen pair take a few, or none—they can get them online. Those that still buy do it because they know me."

Here was another guy kicked over the cliff by technology and Jeff Bezos. There didn't need to be a robot to replace him, a website had taken care of it. And he didn't have what it takes to do anything else. He was too old for Afghanistan. He might get one of Obama's, or now Trump's, woeful jobs.

"You two hear the one about the candy bar?" Here was the salesman at the water cooler. "The *Ali Ak-Bar*—the flavor blows up your mouth." Sales comedy had entered the realm of the jihad. Over the next hour I heard maybe thirty jokes—none made me laugh. Those failing small stores along the coast were his audience and they were probably okay with him drifting away—forever.

There would be no sharpening of the knives of my intellect during this ride, so I used my two-faces. With one, I could hear the jokes, and with the other I could reflect and absorb the beauty of the evening we were passing through. It was now late in the day—

the days were shorter now. Soon, the sun would be setting on the sea.

The Oregon Coast may be unmatched. It's as beautiful as any, and Oregon has taken care to preserve it with waysides and small campgrounds, every few miles. But we had no camping gear so it was motels or keep moving. Our salesman was going as far as Coos Bay tonight but I didn't think I could abide the jokes that far. The beauty of the sun going down behind spindly cirrus clouds couldn't stave off locker room mirth about the salmon fisherman and the farmer's daughter. Edging into Gold Beach, I remembered this was where we wanted to go and we got out.

In the first block we were passed by three cop cars, one was a sheriff. That's one problem with small coastal towns—they have three police vehicles and a six block town. My life was beginning to feel like Private Ryan on the Normandy beachhead. Nowhere was safe for more than a few minutes. We passed the Curry County Fairgrounds and I remembered my dad taking me there. At night they had a music venue called *White Guy and Indian*. A guitar player with an Indian on bass. They were so good, and to a ten-year-old they were really funny. When we got home I wanted to get their CD so we went online. Imagine what came up for *White Guy and Indian*?

Towards the end of town there were plenty of vacancies, but I was headed for the Motel 6, which is on the river with views of the river and the Pacific, and the long bridge north—especially from the second story.

26

And the twain shall never meet

Morning came and we were hungry. Around nine the night before, after having a meeting under the covers, we fell asleep and when I woke up to pee it was four-thirty. Arlene didn't rouse so I went back to sleep until six, when she was awake. By six-thirty we were walking under crisp dark clouds, an advertisement for the end of fall and Indian summer.

We walked up the river because I remembered a restaurant. It was brisk but we needed the walk. If it started to rain along the river it might come down hard. Ten minutes into the walk, Arlene asked if I was sure about the restaurant? I told her I couldn't remember the name but I was sure. Then there it was—Indian Creek Cafe—across the highway from the river, with a big, gravel parking lot, and they were open. Crunching across the parking lot, the wind came up across the river bringing a torrent of huge drops on to the roadway. By the time we got inside, it was really coming down, but as long as we made the rest of our lives into an extended breakfast, we were good.

The inside was decorated, grandma shabby, and there was the beginnings of a breakfast crowd, mostly fishermen, with flies hooked to hats, unperturbed by the rain since they were going to be standing in a river up to their thighs in waders. These guys went at the same pace rain or shine. They'd been raised fishing for trout. In high school they wrote their papers on Nick, from *Big Two-Hearted River*.

We waited a couple of minutes before deciding to seat ourselves at a table from where we could see the river and the rain which was now beating a drum. Arlene gave me a *what are we going to do look?*—which I avoided. Then our waitress was standing there with her little green and white order pad, a master of ceremonies, fielding our queries while keeping up a banter with sundry customers. She was bright and fast, and funny. She'd been at this a long time.

We ordered lots of breakfast. If this was going to be the rest of our lives, we best give ourselves something to do. And, if you were going to take up space in a restaurant during the breakfast rush, you best spend some money. Presently, almost too presently for

travelers with nowhere to go, she brought us five plates. It hadn't been four minutes. She hadn't even had time to bring us coffee.

More people were beginning to stream in. Four women in their fifties took the table next to us. They were talking about Ashland. Arlene gave me a little smile. Casually, I checked them out to see if I might know them from my parents or somewhere. But nothing reminded me. These were four women who had come to the coast, who had long ago given up any connection to sexuality. Procreation for fun or legacy was long past. Now, the trips to the coast had to suffice. My thoughts were a tad mean, but god-damnit, I was walking around with a shoot to kill on me because people couldn't face the truth. Didn't these women know that in Central and South America, so many women never lose their sexuality. Instead, they're working in a custom's office, sixty years old and they're still shaking it.

Not these four. These were Ashland liberals with no compunction when it came to robbing young men of their free speech. They didn't notice us and they didn't care to. They also didn't mind bringing the establishment narrative into the restaurant to share with the table next to them. That's accepted fare in a liberal community, but the Oregon coast is not liberal. And here it's not accepted without question that the Russians stole the election, that Hillary was robbed, that what we need eight more years of Obama. These women didn't mind holding court for their unexplored assumptions, because they know they are right.

While our waitress was asking if we needed anything more—we did need more coffee—the woman closest to me said to her cohorts:

"You can tell you're getting old when the person you show your rental to tells you who his parents are, and it turns out you grew up with them." Our waitress jumped in:

"You ladies don't qualify on the coast as even close to old. We say you don't know old until you're at least as old as Trump." As if a name alone could cause it, the woman closest to me shuddered all the way down her spine. I thought she was play-acting until I

saw the expression of exorcism on her face. Our waitress saw it too.

"I apologize for bringing him up," she said. "I should have known better. Our customers who come from Ashland don't want to hear his name. He doesn't exist."

"Oh, he exists, *alt* right," said another, "I just don't want my breakfast ruined."

"Yeah, you can sit there and go on about Hillary, but just his name makes you sick. Don't get me wrong, I think he's doing a crappy job, but most everybody here voted for him, including me. We're the deplorables Hillary ran against. This ain't Ashland."

"Is this the way you treat customers?"

"No, customers are customers, but when they get into politics at the table, they're fair game. Maybe, you feel safe in liberal Ashland, but it's a big world out here."

Shudder asked to see the manager.

"Can't. She's in Eugene. She organized the elect-Trump campaign for Gold Beach. And she would be less sensitive to your needs than me, but like y'all, she's insufferable in her opinions."

Everybody besides the Ashlanders and us were from here and the looks on their faces, over flapjacks, showed solidarity with our waitress. The four women hadn't yet ordered and were now in the same catatonic state as were the hosts of CNN on election night. Without so much as a *fair-thee-well* they headed back out into the rain.

Arlene asked, "Would your manager be okay with driving business away?"

"Oh, yeah. She wouldn't put up with that for a minute. She's actually like them. She has her positions and there's no compromise. That's the way it's gotten on the coast. We have conservatives every bit as closed as liberals."

The people here were used of her—there was hardly a look.

"Did you grow up here?" I asked.

"Born and bred."

"How come you haven't bought into the conservative talking points?"

"Can't say, except both sides stifle conversation, making it so there's nothing to talk about."

"Do you have kids and a husband?"

"Kids, three of them, different fathers—no husband."

I wasn't about to follow up on that.

"That's another thing about the coast—it's a hard place to find a man worth a crap."

Walking back to the 6, the rain had become a pleasant tickle on our cheeks. The river had quieted, moving into the great unknown as one sheet of dimpled glass, occasionally shattered by a jumping trout.

"It not just the coast," Arlene posited, "it was almost the same words as the waitress at Ely. It's about men."

"Yes it is, but about men who are locked into a belief system and don't see themselves as locked in."

"I dunno. Sometimes when I hear women like her I think this romance thing is just more bullshit."

"Damn, and we missed our chance with the Caddy couple!"

"No, but I read somewhere that maybe we could each be on our own, coming together when it happens, but knowing it's not something that will last."

"It probably sounded better in the original Esperanto."

"What's that?"

"A failed universal language. Arlene, people may not want to get married like they used to but they want to be loved. To them you won't be able to sell that idea."

"It's not really my idea. Sometimes I just get beat down. Do you think you'll still desire me in a year?"

"If you don't get fat. If you're into me. If I don't hate myself, I'll always be into you."

A Beatdown of Your Demons

How many Americans even know someone in the military? If we're talking about the West Coast, it's not many. The armed forces are all volunteer, and that's less than one-percent of Americans. I'm betting not ten-percent of our military come from the liberal bastions, because the armed forces are made up mainly of *deplorables* who have few options. The rest of us don't have to join or even think about it. I remember my folks, talking about their folks, who had fought in World War 2, who were supported by love songs like, "I'll Be Seeing You." Contrast that with contractors blowing people away for no good reason. The news this morning had to do with choosing terrorist targets in Somalia. Our role in Syria hardly makes the news anymore since we got our butts kicked there, marking another significant mayhem and chaos operation perpetuated by the United States, to fail miserably since Vietnam.

We retrieved our bags from the Motel 6 and walked across the long bridge north. I'd been in better moods. The view from the bridge is expansive—the coast, wondrous. Looking down the river out to sea, I saw what looked to be a jet-boat full of tourists, but maybe that's on another river. No, this is the Rogue and that's the name of the company. Watching the river slide to the ocean, I felt myself beginning to calm.

On the far side of the bridge we put out our thumbs. The first motorist was driving a police car. He didn't stop. Murphy's has a law for this situation—*if the cops drive by, nobody stops for you for a long time—which gives the cops time to think on you*. Finally the fates relented and somebody pulled over, a young Mexican couple in an older Malibu, with her sitting right up against him. That was the thing about the bench seat—it was made for you and your girl. When it was three speed on the column, you could put your arm around her and she could shift for you. She could sleep on your shoulder—lots of possibilities. It's no coincidence that most of the vehicles that pick us up are older, driven by those who are not well off, who understand that people with their thumbs out actually need a ride.

These two didn't say much. I think they spoke gringo but I wasn't in a reaching-out mood. And they didn't ask where we were going. Going in the same direction was enough. Arlene was behind the driver and I was sitting behind no one. We watched the Oregon coast slip by, up through the cedars of Port Orford and on into Coos Bay. Still, there was no question about how far we were going and we didn't volunteer anything.

Along this stretch the coast changes every few minutes. Port Orford lasted only a moment, but Coos Bay is bigger, a full-on port. Well, maybe not like it used to be. Now we're shipping logs to China where they turn them into goods to sell back to us. We're a colony—like a Saudi Arabia—useful only as long as it has oil. Again we were back along white beach and waysides. I wished for a different time and the bikes, when I would be able to spend days along this coast with Arlene. We drove through Florence, a tourist town with good salmon dinners and a promenade along the river. Then up through Waldport, to Newport, where they pulled over in the middle of town and let us out, with hardly more than a smile between the four of us.

Arlene said: "Those two have it going on. They have each other and it's all they need."

"Yeah, but their culture requires there be another four or five of them sitting across the back seat before it's over."

"Still, not a bad life."

We walked one street back from the main drag and when we came to the huge steel bridge we'd crossed from the south, we dropped down into old town along the river. That's how these towns came to be—fishing towns along the river, with logging farther up. This was old town. The Comfort (and the rest of the) Inns were on the highway above, next to cookie-cutter restaurants.

A nice thing about having no destination is you're not in a hurry. And this was a sweet late autumn day. There wouldn't to be many more and it was still afternoon. In old town, with our duffle bags, we blended in. We might have just gotten off the tour bus or parked our car nearby, looking for lodging. What I didn't remember was whether or not there was lodging down here. There were canneries and river adventures, businesses built around seafood, but then, on an uphill street, I saw a B&B. Arlene went up for a room, as she had no *shoot to kill* on her. They might have her name out there but that was a chance we had to take. A few minutes later she walked along the downhill side of the building to an enclosed upstairs stairway, into which she disappeared.

We weren't hungry so we left our things in the room and walked up-river through town where you catch the scent of each cannery before you get to it. Except for the tourists, I imagined Steinbeck on Cannery Row. At times I caught a strong odor of shrimp or something else—but mostly shrimp. Maybe the something else was salmon. Now we were past the canaries and the town thinned out along a graceful river, wide, with all manner of craft, sail and motor. Fishing boats that hadn't been painted in years and sailboats with the color built into their hulls. Some heading up-river, most heading for the ocean.

Being late in the year there weren't all that many tourists. Some businesses like the wax museum had closed for the season. Walking back into town, there were two Mo's restaurants, one on either side of the street. My dad took me there when I was a kid for chowder in a hollowed-out loaf of bread, but I didn't want to go

now. I had enough to think about. Besides, what was coming down the sidewalk towards us brought me back.

What it was, was the crew of a fishing boat that had probably just returned from a few days out. And here they came, looking for trouble, in a V-shape, appropriating the whole sidewalk, with a heavily muscled Thor, in a tight, stained white tee, at the apex of the V. They were trouble and they wanted everyone to know that either you moved into the street, or you'd be scattered like bowling pins met by a flying wedge of bowling balls.

Earlier, I hadn't been in a reaching-out mood, but now, neither was I in a *dive for the street* mood. Instead, I moved behind Arlene who was in his path and put my arms around her from behind. But I was ready. If he didn't stop, I'd give him both palms in the face before he touched her. He didn't know what to do? His bravado traded for confusion and he slowed. He couldn't scatter me as detritus because a good looking woman was between him and me. At the last second he adjusted his flight path to avoid her, throwing two rows of four guys into consternation such that their right phalanx was forced into the street.

"Lucky for your little man he has you to hide behind," he said, without a look back.

"Thanks for sacrificing me," she said. "That was a stupid move."

She was right, it was stupid to confront my authority problems with these guys. "I'm sorry. I wouldn't have let him touch you."

"If you could stop him."

Almost under the bridge, looming impossibly high above us, we found a coffee shop and went in. It was a quaint place, small inside, with outside tables in the late afternoon sun on the bridge side.

"Let's just get coffee," I said. "And get dinner later. I'll get us a table. Surprise me."

Outside, there was one old guy with his dog and a coffee drink in a large paper cup. The dog was obnoxious, staining against a small chain to get to me. Dogs and outside seating areas somehow go together? To me it brings the appeal of a neighbor with a loud

leaf blower. Maybe the guy could sense my lack of appreciation because, before Arlene came out, they'd departed.

"She's going to bring them out."

"Those guys on the sidewalk," I said. "I've been trying to see them as more real than people who've abandoned the natural world for the virtual."

"And are they?"

"I don't know. Maybe real isn't the word I'm looking for, maybe it's, *alive*. Something in me wants to see those guys as better, but they're not. It's just another kind of ignorance."

"That sidewalk thing could have gone way wrong."

"I'm sorry, Arlene. It was stupid and I only did it because I'm overwrought by the rest of it. I don't have any desire to take on the Thors of this world. It's better to just move over and give them their moment in the sun."

"Yeah. But I like it that you're not afraid. And I get your wanting to see those guys as an improvement on the factor, factor lot."

"The what?" The waitress brought our drinks and I didn't ask what they were because I didn't want to know. I liked that they were served in crockery and not paper and they had little seahorse designs in the foam. I took a sip of something hot and delicious.

"You know that album by Boz Scaggs called *Silk Degrees*?" she asked. I knew it from my folks and I was surprised she knew it. "He has this one line where she has *a jones for this and a jones for that*. A jones for this means you don't do it yourself—somebody else does it. And that's how it seems to me with the factor, factor. Like when we talk about luck. Suppose we try to understand luck by analysing somebody's supposed *luck factor*." I wasn't totally getting this but I was amazed by Arlene's take.

"Once you get one step away from the real—it's easy to take the next and talk about someone's *luck factor-factor*. By then you're in the ether and you're gone. You begin with a jones for this and you end up with a jones factor, factor."

"You're beyond me, Arlene, but I saw something that relates when you were sleeping. The lawyers from Facebook and Google were being grilled in the Senate by Al Franken, who was showing

off his ignorance. He persisted with a question as to why they didn't get rid of the Russia Today Network that had hacked our election and spreads propaganda. One of the lawyers had this *you stupid son of a bitch* look on his face but said nothing because his career would end faster than a Kevin Spacey—Lance Armstrong downhill.

"It's sad for me to see who Franken has become. I have this one memory of him on Saturday Night Live doing a skit with Bill Murray, who's this small time piano bar guy, who in the middle of his vocal reminds the room to come out again on Thursday for the happy-hour hoot. Franken is sitting with his back to Murray, twisted at the waist, applauding. Physical comedy genius. Now Franken and the whole fucking world have become factor-factors of themselves? What's this drink?"

"Dunno. Told her to surprise me."

Fading orange reflections from onshore breezes surfed tiny waves as the river and the giant erector set looming above slowly faded to black, leaving only the sound of supposed vehicles, above.

We walked up the street on the river-side where there were no walkers now. But there were restaurants ahead—lit by impressionist brushstrokes in moist night air. As the fates would have it we passed a restaurant bar, where I saw Thor and the boys inside and I did the smart thing, crossing the street on a diagonal and passing two restaurants before entering a third and sitting where we couldn't be seen from outside.

"Good move."

"Yeah. I need to remember that I feel isolated and it's easy to take stands that don't need taken." A guy sitting at the table next to ours, with his cup of coffee, writing in a notebook, looked over. He was listening. Every time I said something I might write in a blog, he looked over. He was obviously not part of the establishment—his hair a touch too long for that, unless he was with the DEA, and he didn't have those eyes.

"I haven't noticed you writing?" she queried. "Any blogs these past days and I imagine you have no time for the novel about us?"

"I write in my head while you sleep in a car, or at night, when you've had enough of me and drift off. I get up for an hour or two and try to remember what I thought about during the day."

"My computer is always shut down in the morning?"

"I do that. I don't just put it to sleep, I shut it down. Not sure it does any good, but I do it."

"What have you written about?"

"Maybe equal parts of the novel and blogs."

"I can't imagine how you get the time?"

"Sometimes I get a lot done. What I've thought about today is how much Alex and Tara went through. I only wrote what they told me and they were often in bad company."

"I want to read what you say about me?"

"The world is falling apart and you want to read what I say about you?"

"Exactly."

"You don't get to read it until I'm done. This story ain't turning into dueling banjos. But I will say, what I do write about you exalts you."

"And the blogs—what are you saying?"

Now the guy sitting next to us was leaning.

"How are you today?" asked Arlene of our neighbor, who was only visible in her periphery. Taken aback, he looked away but he must have known I could see his interest. I introduced Arlene and asked if he wanted to slide over and talk with us. He was Russ.

Because Russ'd been listening, I went on into what I was thinking for a new blog. "Lately, this guy, William Binney, who was a senior official at NSA, met with Mike Pompeo, the director of the CIA, at Trump's request. Over an hour, Binney presented evidence that it was impossible for the emails from Hillary's guy, Podesta, to have come from another continent because the needed bandwidth doesn't exist. In fact, there's barely enough to transmit an eighth or a quarter of the amount of material transferred in the download time. That meant it had to be a leak and not a hack and had to be local, probably on two thumb drives."

Russ pushed: "That doesn't rule out the Russians."

"No, in fact it doesn't rule out anyone, nor does it include anyone. So why the Russians?" (I answered for Russ) "Because, if you're trying to be a so-called American patriot, you have to stay with the Russians did it. They've been after the Russians since 1945 and they have to maintain it."

"But still, the Russians could have done it."

"Done what? First it was messing with the voting machines that weren't hooked up to the internet. Then the collusion with Trump and Russia, with not a shred of proof. Lastly, there's four, one-thousandths of Russian sponsored Facebook ads about the election—which shows the stupidity of Americans. You know what they say about a murder? Take a good look first at family members. In this case that's the democrats who Donna Brazile likens to some kind of cult—impenetrable, uncaring, dead. Imagine how many staffers hated Hillary and wanted nothing more afterwards than to sink her?"

Russ had more: "But every intelligence agency agrees it was the Russians."

"They actually don't. Four of them were of the *opinion* that Russia interfered in our election. The same four that agreed on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, on the Gulf of Tonkin—on so many untruths. Most of them are democratic appointees and they agree on anything that advances their positions. But enough of that, what's with you, Russ?"

"Not much. Out of the marines five years. Mostly moving around trying to find a place to be."

"How long were you in the corps?"

"Ten years. I re-upped." He had either gone in for four and signed on for six more, or he re-upped twice and they cut him loose early on the third one.

"Did you go to the Middle East?"

"You know, I'd rather not talk about it."

"No, but you want to hear what we're talking about. Russ, I have a *shoot to kill* on me for telling the truth." Arlene gave me a look that touched on the baleful.

"For the blogs?"

"Yeah."

"I heard they were doing that to podcasts."

For the first time I looked at Russ closely. He still had the Marine Corps haircut, maybe a little more on top but shaved above the ears. He wore a baggy olive-green jacket with huge pockets, into which he reached every few minutes. I wondered if Russ might be a shooter. He had the profile, roaming around, no apparent woman, and the haircut after five years out.

"I'd like to hear about it Russ. I remember when Leon Panetta was Secretary of Defense. He said something like: 'I understand that it's tough, and we are asking an awful lot of each of you, but frankly you are the best I have and when the world calls we have to respond.' It was such bullshit! 'when the world calls'. It's been a long time since the world called."

Arlene had that inscrutable look she gets when she thinks something is one way and it may end up somewhere else.

"I re-upped twice to go back. I'm the only survivor from my company. Most died over there, but the last suicide was two weeks ago. They don't tell you what goes on over there. It might even be worse than Vietnam because it's mostly an idea war where you live in a so-called safe zone, but you still get murdered by the locals. And when it's time for a show of force we take twenty vehicles on an all-out mad dash to the airport—with no particular place to go. And sometimes one of the vehicles gets demolished by a roadside bomb. The guys survive, mostly, but without limbs or faces. Then they get to go home to live out their last fifty years of fucking misery."

Russ dug deep into his pockets, and for a second I froze. "We hated all the motherfuckers, You wanna see Obama for real? Be one of thirty thousand *surgers* that comes back as someone who'll never get a chance at that job or that girl. And look at me—I'm thirty-five and I haven't a fucking clue. When they cut me loose I took my separation money and bought a Sportster. Now I ride. The money's getting short so I'm looking at the GI Bill. That could take care of four years, but four years of me kicking it around with liberals or conservatives—somebody might die."

We spent another hour with Russ, hearing what it was like to be ostracized over there and ignored when he got here. I brought my best self-worth ideas to the conversation but I could see an almost insurmountable task. Solace for Russ would not come tonight. He was jaded and he had lost everyone he knew. He could tell something needed to change, but it was like talking to an alcoholic leaning against the bar, between shots.

All in all, Russ caused Arlene to grow pensive, which settled on her like black clouds having lost their ability to fly. But one thing gave me pleasure. We ended up in a bar with Thor and the boys who were drunk enough that they had no idea who I was. Thor kept asking Arlene had they met? When he finally gave up on that, he became fast friends with Russ, another action figure—a real man. Back at the room, Arlene had no devils to trade.

I wasn't sleeping and around four in the morning, I turned to Arlene with the tiniest kisses. She was in the habit of sleeping naked and tonight she gave off a big warmth through even breaths, supremely kissable, with the blankets down, revealing the tops of her shoulders, her neck and her face. She said nothing but made sounds of irritation from being woke up.

"It's fair trade," I said. "When you want it you wake me up and I'm there. If I'm tired you need do some work to get me into that place but, when you need it, it's there... "

"Suppose I just don't want to?" she said as her breathe and skin grew hotter against me. The only thing holding her back were her words.

"Suppose I say go ahead but I'm going back to sleep."

"Okay, but you're gonna have to sleep through a long fuck."

I promised the readers that what went on with me and Arlene would stay private—and I meant that. But I should have mentioned that sometimes I stumble.

Usually, after lovemaking with Arlene, I sleep like a baby, but not this time. With nowhere in the bedroom to write, I took a chair

into the bathroom to take a crack at self-worth. When I was finished, I re-read it twice. The first time it seemed over the top to be linking self-worth with an overview of global economy, and politics. The second time I read it it seemed right on.

A Beatdown of Your Demons—A Roadmap to Self-Worth—Written over the drinking of one medium coffee, to be read in that same amount of time.

Something's wrong in our world, and its affecting you. It's greed—in a culture that wants something for nothing. Where the printing of digital money that doesn't exist provides the well-connected with an advantage of an unfair playing field, through no-interest loans which they use to become a *rentier* class, controlling property and raising rents for those who can ill afford it.

At home, the elites justify phony profits with rationales, which is analogous to what is happening in the broader world. In the Middle East, where, tiny but powerful Israel, an expansionist country, creates evermore settlements and checkpoints on Palestinian land, and wants to possess part of Lebanon and Syria. Though they don't come out and say it—they move in that direction. Meanwhile, the hapless Americans insert themselves everywhere (uninvited and in violation of international law) to maintain control of twenty-five percent of the world's wealth for five-percent of the world's population.

What does this have to do with the individual and self-worth? Mankind is the story of resistance to tyrannical power—power gained by taking away the economic and political rights of individuals. A story justified by concepts such as *survival of the fittest* and *exceptionalism*. Which translates to—*my family deserves more than yours*. Some families do deserve more than others, as long as it involves a fair playing field, but the playing field is not fair and it hasn't been for a long time.

The concept that holds economic tyranny in check is *guilt*—not religious guilt, but the *guilt* that holds us back from mistreating our

fellows—from taking unfair advantage, because deep down each of us knows it's wrong.

The powers that be have sold us a bill of goods: *things are better than we think they are*—and, *if we're not getting ahead—it's our fault*. If you're driving a beat-up Honda to three jobs—that's on you. But that's not the case. We live in a country that spends most everything on world domination, so there's nothing left for the folks back home. And, as the economy unravels, with those in charge having fewer options and no idea what to do, we are left, each of us, to deal with our own self-worth.

Cutting to the chase—if you're unable to see that our country is among the worst when it comes to respecting human values, my blogs function as a personal identity-hack to not-too-subtle facts, and in the process, raises your self-worth. But that's a seeing and there needs to be a doing. Resist the establishment narrative. Resist the Wall Street bag boys who have no concern for our well-being. Resist by speaking out, not in anger, but speaking to the facts.

Self-worth is founded in empathy and strengthened by resisting ill-gotten power. Often, the resisting doesn't need to be direct. While you're young, don't let them get in the way of your dreams, or your ethics, and know that wealth doesn't necessarily bring happiness—oftentimes the opposite.

What matters in life is shared obligation for the well-being of one another—for family and friends. What you bring to it is who you are, and not what you have.

When you see things for what they are, feeling badly about yourself begins to fade. Look at self-doubt closely and you'll find the unfounded assumptions you live by. Better than that, you'll see where they come from and how they get perpetuated.

Feel good about your self—do all you can to deserve it.

28

If you sniff around long enough, you'll find the asshole.

I'm done with hitching. This morning we stood out in a straight-down rain for too long before we got a ride. And all the way up the coast the rain intensified until we were let out in downtown Astoria, at the very tip of Oregon. Our clothes had mostly dried but the energy it took for our bodies and the car heater to dry them left us vulnerable to the weather, without a buffer. We worked our way through the downtown of Astoria from one heated shop to the next. One of them, a bookstore, was particularly well-heated and we settled into easy chairs with books.

I think maybe I'm done with the blogs—maybe the odd one if there's something to explore. Blogs coalesce my thoughts but they seldom bring me joy. And fiction is so much easier to defend because it's fiction. Besides, my blogs are filibusters that fall mainly on deaf ears. People read them—sometimes they agree with me, but I'm up against the whole corporate propaganda machine. Thinking that my blogs do some good, is like thinking a rumor can be spread across the country from housewife to housewife, hanging out clothes at the backyard fence. How many housewives even hang out clothes anymore?

Maybe it's my English heritage, but I can't sit here getting dry and warm without feeling guilty, necessitating I buy something. So I bought a Los Angeles Times from the proprietor who's name was the name of the bookstore—*McCarley('s)*—a smallish man with inquisitive eyes. I asked what he thought about the headline: 'Dollar on the Skids'?

"I like it."

"Like downhill on the runners of a sled?"

"Actually, it comes from Seattle, from the 1800's. The Skid Road, which became Skid Row, was the dilapidated urban area over which they would *skid* logs."

"And what's your thought on what the headline is about?"

"Well, that's a talk."

"One I'd like to have." A glance to Arlene showed a *here we go again*. But it wasn't negative.

His response was a look that doubted whether I would be up for the journey? There was nothing uppity in it, more of an exasperation after dealing with many people.

"Do you know your history?" he asked.

"Not sure, but I think I'm about to find out."

Dear Reader,

I thought long and hard about leaving out what McCarley had to say, for two reasons: it's long, and few Americans care that much about the state of the world we live in. But, because we need to care, and because Mac laid it out so well, I've faithfully reproduced it here. If you don't want to read it, skip ahead to Chapter 30.

"Were one to ask Americans, whether or not we are an empire in decline, most would have little idea of the significance of the question—though—when pressed, each would know something about the feeling that goes with the question."

To let him know I wasn't one of the ones he described, I said: "For instance, they wouldn't know that in 1950 the United States possessed half of the world economy. By 1960, it was 40%. And now it's between 15% and 20%."

"Exactly." His pale blue, Scottish eyes were now alive—they'd been reared in conversation. "Take Obama. Geopolitically, Obama was a genius who is grossly underrated." This bothered me because I don't like Obama, and McCarley caught that. "It's all about motive. Obama wanted to be the man to make the American Empire secure. And on that opinion rested his entire presidency—twice. His entire strategy was to have the United States hold on to power—the basis and the means for which no longer existed, not for an unproductive nation in decline."

"I agree. Without productivity, we've used credit to maintain control over the world, but in that process we've destroyed our infrastructure, our educational system, and our health care."

"Yes, and I saw you wince with what I said about Obama. But it all depends on one's perspective. He's thought of as a globalist but he's also an ultra-nationalist. And, in terms of that, Obama had keen geopolitical acumen. His twin trade pacts, TTP and TTIP would have re-directed sixty percent of China's trade back to the US. But, were that to have happened, it would likely have resulted in war, as did the oil embargo we put on Japan that resulted in Pearl Harbor."

This guy knew some stuff. I was inclined to ask how he was so versed, but I was more inclined to ask questions.

"Maybe he could have wrested power away from the Chinese and set them back decades?"

"Probably not. The problem with failing empires is a vision buried in hubris. That's why the collapse of our empire is such a threat. We are the first superpower since the Soviet Union to go down, while possessing an array of nuclear weapons and delivery systems. And what Obama didn't realize is that no power is any longer the hegemonic power. China and Russia have come into their own, and Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah are a year or two from being able of take on Israel."

"Then why do you say Obama had acumen?"

"Remember I said it had to do with motive. He promised to be a negotiator but he turned out to be more like Cheney, working from inflexible standards."

I thought on how I'd wanted to write a play where circumstances made for a meeting with Cheney and someone like me, where over the course of an afternoon, Dick would be forced to admit the assumptions he had operated under were flawed, which led to the present calamity.

"But in the end aren't they both like Robert McNamara, forced to see that when they ought to have been negotiating, they instead went for the power play?"

"Yes, that's the hubris I'm speaking to. And as it so often happens, a fading superpower gets manipulated. Manipulated by its over the top view of itself. When the Soviet Union fell apart there was huge concern about their nuclear arsenal, but they went into retirement, peacefully. With the United States, I'm not so sure."

"What about the United States could be different?"

"It's been so long that we've been top of the heap. Not just militarily, but culturally. Everybody wanted to be an American, to listen to our music, see our films, drive our cars. There's been empires—the British may be our closest parallel, but still they weren't the Americans. With our Bill of Rights we were seen as godlike. Now that's changed to our wanting to control everything. It's been that way for some time, but now the world sees it."

McCarley and I, by now, had made our way to the armchairs where Arlene was sitting, after a young girl, who looked to be McCarley's daughter or more likely his granddaughter, had taken over at the register for him. I introduced him to Arlene, who he greeted with gentility then kept on with his subject:

"As I was saying about Obama's brilliance at controlling geopolitics. Along with his trade deals he planned a pivot to Asia, away from Persian Gulf. He knew our main opponent was China, who had to be countered, so it was his intention to rebuilt military enclaves in Japan, Korea, and the Philippines—to re-position sixty percent of our forces around China. Challenge China with carrier groups steaming through Chinese waters. All of which heightened the importance of Hillary Clinton winning the election. None of this could happen without her, and Obama bet everything on her win."

"But, did we have the necessary power to make that happen?" I asked. "I know that decades back we had enough for guns and butter. But this last twenty years the butter had been missing and all we brought was military might and regime change."

"That's true, but as with all dying empires, the choice is slow erosions or dramatic eruptions, and Obama wanted to hold on to the reins of power. The TTP trade agreement would have shifted democracy to corporate control, where corporations would pick judge and jury to decide issues. That's the trade-off. Obama was willing to trade the democracy for a bit more control of our downward spiral. And now, with Trump, China has won. They want to own the East and South China Seas. The longer our trouble goes on with North Korea, it's in China's interest. We know we can't strike North Korea without killing hundreds of thousands of Americans, Chinese, and Koreans who are within shelling range of their artillery. The balance of power has shifted to where the US just might not win wars with Russia and China. The Chinese Belt/Road involves much of the world doing trade in opposition to one hegemony. As a consequence, for the US, things could get bad quickly."

All of a sudden, Mac apologized to Arlene for going on so long. Arlene told him she was used to it and that she found it interesting. But, she wanted to know about him, where he came from, how he came to know so much, and was he out of place in a place like Astoria?

He laughed. "When you own the only book store you meet everybody who thinks at all. And this store has been here since before I was born. My dad was also Mac, and he was also political, but more literary. His best friend was Henry Miller who wrote "*Tropic of Cancer*."

Arlene, who had done it before, astounded me again with: 'We are living at the Villa Borghese, and we are all dead.' The opening line of *Tropic*.

We were well-warmed up when we bid farewell to Mac, promising to get together again. Later that night, after dinner and in bed, Arlene had questions? What was unresolved with her from the talk

with Mac was the thing about empire—did I think our empire was done, and what was that going to look like?

I took a shot at it: "Empires don't last as long as people think. The *Third Reich*, which controlled most of Europe, lasted until 1945—maybe six years. The Empire of Japan—even less time—though it was the largest empire after taking most of China. The Soviet Union lasted 60 or 65 years. Britain controlled the known world from 1815 to WW1—maybe 85 years. And by 2013 the United States had been an empire for 75 years."

"So we've outlived most of them?"

"Yeah, and we started out by supporting the rule of law which we no longer do. The end of empire can be gradual or precipitous, depending on the moves. Like now when we can't come up against China in their backyard, especially China with Russia. We're broke and China has three trillion in US bonds. And how long will the Chinese empire last? China's Belt-Road is 9000 miles of railway. More than the rest of the world combined, along with transcontinental gas and oil pipelines to cover all of China and Russia. One trillion dollars for that and another trillion for Africa, and the Asian Infrastructure Bank. 200 billion on China/Pakistan corridor ending at a Pakistani shipping hub from where China will rule the waves.

"China's is a 21st century economy, based on an 18th century model, using 17th century energy—dirty coal. But now they're in the process of changing to Russian natural gas and to renewables. Ultimately China's Belt/Road may be an even worse system, without any of the human rights that the West has been known for. And we get the responsibility for that. Like the Mark Twain quote about those things that we have done to others coming home to destroy us." Arlene's gentle snore ended the afternoon of ideas.

Berserk—a working definition for the government of the United States.

I was up early, and yesterday's afternoon of ideas wasn't quite over for me so I headed back to Mac's, where I found him installed behind the counter, with just a few patrons browsing the aisles this early in the day.

"So as not to drive my girlfriend crazy, I had a few more questions, if you don't mind?"

"I don't, though I think my granddaughter would commiserate with your girlfriend.

"Much of what you said yesterday was historical, which made me wonder about the rises and falls of empires in terms of time and events, maybe events that out of an empire's control?"

"Events change everything," he said, "but events don't often get the credit. In the 16th century, the Western nations were the prominent seafaring nations, when the Portuguese and Da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope, and were able to reach India by sea, that opened the spread of Christianity and Western influence to the world. The Mongol hordes weren't able to show up in Europe with cannon, but man-o-wars came with fifty of them. The canal at Suez changed things even more. With the advent of the canal, Britannia *ruled the waves* and the world. Suez is an obvious event, but other events go unnoticed until they become game-changers.

"The Trans-Siberian Railway joined two continents and half the globe's circumference. It's importance was underplayed for decades, but things that massive change the epicenter of the human

condition. Still, it was completely overshadowed by the United States, post WW2, taking over the world as a consequence of a war that Russia won for us. Nevertheless, with our covert ops, manipulated elections, invasions, coups, and regime change, along with the 5th fleet in the Persian Gulf, the 6th fleet in the Mediterranean, and the 7th fleet in the Pacific, along with 600 bases, and satellite telecommunications, we constructed a *steel* road over which we ruled ruthlessly—all in the name of democracy."

"Sounds insurmountable for the rest of the world to be anything other than vassal states in perpetuity?"

"It does, except for the hubris that accompanies the end of empire. Like hungry boxers dethroning the complacent champ, countries like China and Russia moved forward incrementally, unburdened by the corruption of a failing, despotic democracy. When Putin required a missile defense system that worked, it was delivered, or else. When Xi had had enough of corruption, he simply killed them. Tyrannies and economic tyrannies are quite effective at insuring cooperation."

As I said earlier, reflecting on this conversation later, its length and depth almost caused me to leave it out, but damn it's important—a clear account for the the end of life as we've known it.

"Dying empires have grandiose assessments of their power. As when we tried to launch anti-missiles to bring down North Korean missiles launched over Japan, and they failed. That event failed and we failed with it when South Korea and Japan bought Russian defense systems.

"So many mile-markers for the end of empire have historical counterparts, as when despots ally with heinous groups like ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and support for a Saudi war against Yemen. And, what happened to Britain with their invasion of Suez, in 1956. They overplayed their hand and ended their empire, necessitating an IMF bailout of the pound sterling. But now there are no more bailouts—only the splendor of collapse. The Saudis know their oil fields are depleted and they want to control the Yemen-Iran joint

fields. So we support the Saudis and Israel (both powerful human rights violators) in that war, which is actually a ploy to get into it with Iran, and is analogous to the Nazis, siding with the dictator, against the people, in the Spanish Civil War.

"Meanwhile, US ships, for unknown reasons, lose all power and sit helplessly in the waters of the China seas, while others of our battle groups run into ships that don't show up on radar. And if that weren't enough, this late imperial politics where all tax dollars go to the military and corporate control, has come to the point where average Americans have had enough and are rising up to claim the money being wasted on a failed empire, for needed domestic concerns."

Americans have had enough? That brought thoughts of Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull. There was more to this conversation but enough's enough. How could this one man, from a little known town on the Oregon Coast, lay out the facts as they are? And why has he not been summoned to the halls of power to fix the mess? The demise of our empire is evident when a bookstore owner, in Astoria, Oregon, is our best hope for making America great again.

30

It's not personal. You point the gun—you shoot the gun.

The next morning, early, was rain again, but that didn't stop Arlene from wanting to take a walk. I asked a kid outside a bakery if it rained here often?

"Some years, every day."

"It's better than Southern California," I said. "You get the rain, and they get evacuated from raging fires."

"When all of Southern California gets burned to the ground," he replied, "then it will be better to live here."

The really big deal in Astoria is the bridge. At first glance it looks like something not real, like something from a sci-fi erector set. You approach it by making a tight turn unto an ancient onramp. From there it goes up—and up. Up high enough for large ships to pass under on their way up and down the Columbia. Then it drops back down to the water where it becomes a road to the other side of the river. The other big deal about Astoria is the size of the downtown. Like Livingston and Baker City, it has a bigger downtown than you'd expect.

On the same block as Mac's we'd noticed a coffee shop with a bakery, so we headed there. Crossing the street we couldn't see through the condensed windows because half the town was inside, leaving only stools along a bar at the windows as available places to sit. I laid my jacket across two high stools and went after Arlene, who was in line.

As the line progressed we took looks at the menu. If she and I stay together I'm not sure how we'll eat because neither of us seems to care much about the preparation of food—though we both like to eat. Our first meal together was more or less fine dining, but neither of us seems the gourmet. Sometimes she gets an exotic coffee drink and so might I if she's already getting it, but a medium coffee with room for cream is all I need. This morning I got the coffee she got. I'm not sure what it is but it'll be fine. That and a whole wheat bagel with cream cheese, egg, bacon, and avocado, to share.

Sitting on the stool, I used my jacket to wipe small circles of visibility in the glass in front of us, so we could see the street. I was feeling real silly.

"Okay. You can't alter the outcome in any way. You're up in the Texas Schoolbook Depository ahead of the Kennedy motorcade, with a movie camera. You're there for historical purposes. You can't speak to anyone. Do you want to be there?"

A woman sitting on the stool next to Arlene, shot me an asshole of the year look, which I deflected like rain on patent leather. Like I said, real silly.

"Yeah, I would do it," she said. "Just for myself I'd like to see what really happened? What about you—would you do it—of course you would. Trouble is your beat!"

"Not fair! I didn't think too much on it until those Kennedy papers came out, and I didn't focus much on those. But when I saw that the Surgeon General talked about a bullet coming from the front, through the windshield, that got my attention. Why the hell hadn't we heard about that?"

Now the look from Arlene's neighbor was of the loathing variety. What had I done? I didn't kill Kennedy, I didn't release the papers—what I was saying was in those papers. I tried to ignore her.

"After that I got interested. I'd never done it so I YouTubed videos of witnesses from that day and I watched all of them. They seemed credible but I know there's a tendency to believe the written, and I suppose, the videoed word. Maybe these guys are crackpots? Maybe Oswald did it by himself? But probably not."

How a woman, who needs a makeover more than the one who hosts *Democracy Now*, can, in a coffee shop, the last bastion of free speech, glare openly at someone talking about facts is beyond the pale. It wasn't what I was saying—it was that I wasn't speaking to power, with humility. As a fawning Uriah Heep, from Dickens. Here was a woman who needed a *beatdown of her own demons*, but instead she was choosing to beat down the free speech of strangers.

I think Arlene could feel her off to the side because the woman's heat had dried much of the condensed windows.

"Did you mean that about being done with the blogs?" Here was my opportunity.

"Maybe one more, then stay out of trouble." My gaze was fixed on the woman and not Arlene. "Maybe I'll write one last musical blog where this tall dude from Arkansas buys two pair of socks at *Cindy's Diner*—festive socks that have the name *Cindy's* descending down the ankle. Only problem is one pair is for his wife and the other is for his mistress, who happen to run into each other at the mall. The two women are Hillary and Yoko. It ends in a duet,

'I'm With Her!' With that, our interloper was out the door as if having been cattle prodded.

"What was all that about?"

"I don't know, maybe I do know, but I don't know? What I know is the whole world's gone insane. It's as if something that wouldn't have been possible then is reality now. Like Bob Dylan doing an ad for Chrysler at the Super Bowl halftime. I can see the dude from *30 Rock* selling stupid bank cards, but Bob? The only thing missing is him driving and singing "The Times They Are A-Changin'."

I'd underestimated the gale-force woman who'd left ten minutes earlier. I hadn't thought about her knowing I write a blog. Through now clear windows, I saw her across the street pointing out to two cops where we were sitting. Without a word we were up, behind the register and into the kitchen. At least two men back there looked to block us until Arlene yelled "gun", which parted the waters, and we were out the back. But not far. I motioned to a steel ladder to the roof that my girlfriend went up like a young black bear on a steep embankment. I followed. Below, I heard the cops and then, one shot. No warning—just a shot. That's shoot to kill for you. Maybe it was a warning shot? Either way, depicting a musical that had Bill buying socks for both Hillary and Yoko called for the death penalty? Could there be something more? Could it have to do with John?

The flat roof over the second story had in the middle of it one of those roof protuberances that houses a door, which was mercifully unlocked and contained stairs that went down to a doorway to the sidewalk, Arlene looked right and I looked left and we were across the street, post-haste, through the front door of a laundromat and out the back into the alley where we headed for our bags and the bridge. It was just that easy.

31

North Korea and the United States—a shared foreign policy?

It wasn't that easy. Getting across that bridge into Washington State would be an almost impossibility. Every cop would be looking for us. As I said, the bridge is the focal point in Astoria. It towers over the town and access to it is steep, a hike, not a walk. But there was no traffic—none. What there was a sign denying pedestrian and bicycle access, but I kept on.

"Did you see the sign?" I didn't reply.

"You really think we'll be able to walk five miles with no sidewalk and not get spotted?" I didn't answer.

At the top of the climb the bridge was closed off for the annual ten kilometer footrace that happens once a year, and this was the day. Race workers were picking up the last of the plastic water bottles and debris from the starting area. One, wearing a vest and a dangling ID, intercepted us as we passed between the barriers, but I barely slowed.

"Too late to start across. Most runners and walkers have completed the course." He looked at his watch. "The bridge opens back up in twenty minutes."

"I need to get to the finish line. I'm scheduled to speak. I won this year's LA Marathon. Where's the race director? Can you get me to the finish line?" I didn't stop walking onto the bridge. He didn't know what to do.

"What are you doing?" she chided. "We can't get across this thing before traffic starts up."

"You got a better idea?"

It was scary and lovely windy. At least the wind hadn't been blowing head-on for the runners. Instead it was coming onshore, directly into the side of the bridge, and the damn bridge moved more than you might expect.

"At least there's no cops," I said, switching my duffel to the left hand so I could put my arm around Arlene's waist and pull her close to me. There we were, with the whole bridge to ourselves, a bit of freedom for maybe fifteen minutes. No walkers and no cars.

Once I got over being anxious by the bridge and the wind—a wind that had blown away the clouds and fog, leaving stupendous vistas, it made the day, whatever come what may, worth it. I pushed against Arlene, steering us to the barrier where we looked down on a sea of sparkling ripples—backdropped by the majesty of the Olympic Mountains, which reached to become one with their namesake, and sundry Greek gods.

Then we were off again, with arms around each other, hip to hip, as if in a three-legged race.

"Don't look now," she said, "but here they come."

At most we had walked half a mile and half a mile behind us came a solid line of vehicles, which would include the authorities. But no need to worry, there was nothing to do about it now. Luckily, there were no cars coming from the Washington side, so we would be able to cross into that lane, at least for now. We'd dropped to that portion of the bridge, which is most of it, that runs straight towards Washington, just above the water. The wind was blowing and the rippled sea had become whitecaps just below us. Behind us came the sound of brakes as a huge bus came to rest alongside us. We walked her length as the front door swung out towards us revealing a bearded gnome at the wheel.

"You two need a ride?"

Soon we were across the bridge, slowing through a throng of post-race gatherers. Here there were police, but the Washington State variety. Soon we were away from everything having to do with Astoria.

Our benefactor, Sri Denesh (a chubby American with a longish beard) introduced us to his two wives, each of whom had a Hindustani name, and though I was thankful for the ride, I didn't put effort into remembering what Betty or Sue might have been renamed to complete Denesh's fantasy. Two wives? It was all I could do to hold on to Arlene. But these two were different from Arlene. The younger was quite attractive, but there didn't seem to be anyone home behind her eyes. The second wife was older, by maybe ten years, not unattractive, but shopworn. She seemed intelligent, and not fully under the sway of the patriarchy mythos. The first decent guy to come along, looking for something normal in a relationship, would have little trouble getting her off the bus.

That said, Sri had gone to great lengths in pursuit of his myth. I sat on a stool next to him, while he drove, with the girls farther back in the bus. He'd bought a retiring school bus, a big one, in great shape, and started from there. Then, along with another friend named Denesh (okay), they'd redone both buses. I'm having some fun with this—but the workmanship was superb.

The girls took me on a walk-through. He'd added an entire second story, built to factory standards. Blue Bird could have done no better. The seats had been replaced with a living room of built-ins, and a dining area, with a bedroom and bathroom in the back of the bus. A narrow spiral staircase led upstairs to an office/work area, with another bedroom and bathroom in the rear. The thing was a work of art.

I asked about the engine—those things must have a lot of miles on them when the districts get rid of them. It had and he'd replaced it with the biggest GM engine available. Denesh the 2nd had unfortunately gone with the stock engine and crawled up hills.

"How's the mileage?"

"Not so good. Denesh gets six, and I get closer to four." That's an average of five. Both Denesh's better pray to Krishna for low gas prices. Hundred dollar oil might force our Denesh to pull over and face his marriage dilemma.

There's an interesting thing that happens when people see the world from a religious perspective. If it's not thought through, it

can get bad—*Old Testament* bad. The more I listened to Denesh, the more I was convinced he was a half-baked Christian, flying a Hindu flag. Some of his pronouncements were quote-ables from the dark end of the (not so holy) Bible. This trio had left LA ahead of the coming end of the world, event. Thought they'd be better off up on the Olympic Peninsula. Maybe they will be. I didn't push questions with him—I instead listened to a sociological unfolding, much of which he was so involved in that he couldn't get outside to view it.

I've become adept at writing blogs and novels while things are going on around me, and I found myself doing that now. Though I might be done with blogging, I could write: *Hello, North Korea*, about a place like the United States, where government news is the only news. We still have the internet (sort of), but most people are too brainwashed to use it. In one hopeful development, Facebook had to quit flagging *fake news* stories because they were being shared more than they would have been, not flagged. Yet, we continue to argue over 300 pound men taking a knee at a sports event, at which American flags and a military presence in dress blue uniforms is paid for by the Pentagon to garner support for subjugating the world, while football fans stand and join in our national sing-along, which has come to mean little or nothing about who we are.

Denesh was indefatigable, continuing with his treatise into the late afternoon. The girls brought food that we ate while I listened. It was getting dark when we passed through Forks on the way to Port Angeles. Forks looks dreary—one of those Western Washington sogs, popularized a few decades back by Tom Robbins. Given a choice, I might rather blow up with San Clemente than be a survivor at Forks. Our hosts were leaving the bus at Port Angeles and taking the ferry to Victoria in the morning. This non-stop Christian/Hindu talker, with two wives, one who didn't know better, and the other, who couldn't see a way out, were free to travel to Canada with the blessings of democracy, while I, who wrote about what's happening and why it's happening, has been deemed a thorn under the saddle, to be removed at any cost.

We were offered Denesh's hospitality for the night, but as I weighed it, I thought of my dad playing the guitar and singing "Love the One You're With", and that was enough to take our chances out in the world.

32

Vagrants, window-shopping in the rain

Two blocks up from the ferry to Canada, above Port Angeles, there's a steep staircase of maybe 150 steps. From about half-way up those stairs, Arlene and I sat in the somewhat cold and surveyed the scene below. The last ferry came and went. It looked as though it would be difficult to board with our ID, and probably more difficult to get through Canadian Customs, once on board. Because I was Canadian, Arlene thought I'd be safe if we were to make it on board, but I wasn't convinced. The Canadian Customs guys worked everyday with the Americans, and both would be on board for the goings and comings. It's my bet the Canadians would simply hand me back to the Americans.

"What'd you think about the Deneshi's?" she asked. I liked that. As if Deneshism were a religion unto itself.

"That's a hard one. Maybe it works, but the taller gal doesn't seem all that convinced."

"She's not. She asked a lot about you and me. How long we've been together? How old we are? How I felt about the difference in age?"

"Why'd you tell her about the difference in age?"

"I didn't. She could see it. She's a lot older than the little one?"

"Yeah, but that still makes her a long decade younger than him?"

"Did any of it make you think about you and me?" she asked.

"Only that I didn't like the setup. I see life more basic than that. If people are starving maybe you get two wives or two husbands, but other than that..."

"It works for some people."

"I doubt it." I thought about Alex and Tara and how things had worked out for them.

"Here's how I see it," she said. "Life isn't the way some people try to sell it—like this guy I know. He's supposed to be a motorcycle racer but he spends most of his time on hype. Always a new get-rich scheme: *bring it to cash*. He tried to get on *Shark Tank* with a driving app that showed convicted pedophiles where they could and could not drive. He's always talking about abundance—so much abundance that his relationships get measured in hours."

"That's not you," I said.

"Right. But I'm not into marriage—I'm not into the government messing with me, and demanding a huge post-dated check."

"So, marriage is what love is not?"

"Right. Love is when I want you to have nothing beyond me."

"Wow—that's not abundance."

"Nope, there's no abundance in love."

"That's Socratic. There's this dialogue, *Symposium*, where the greats and the near greats sit around offering a definition or a myth on the nature of love. Some are flowery and full of abundance, but when it's Socrates' turn, he offers that love is a lack—that the lover always lacks. That the lover seeks what he doesn't have, always striving after the beloved. Of course, in Athenian terms, that may be a young boy and not a woman. Either way, you take your beloved for granted, and you may find yourself on parched earth."

"You know that."

"There is no chance I won't."

The last ferry had long departed, leaving a wind that came and went, each time bearing a promise of rain. Then, large buses began to pull-in and line-up along the street in front of the ferry building. Maybe high school classes or sports teams were coming in from Victoria in the morning. But that thought lost credibility when it

got to be twenty buses, then thirty, then forty. Something odd was afoot.

I asked Arlene to wait there for me, that I would be right back, and I bounded down the stairs. I cut over one long block to stay out of garish lights and cameras that monitored the ferry. But no worries, there were so many buses that they occupied blocks heading away from the downtown. I walked along the buses away from the ferry. Passing maybe twenty buses, I turned left and headed back up away from the water, back to the steps.

What I'd seen was odd, but lately everything is odd. Down below were forty identical buses, each of them with bars in the windows, each a deep blue against a black sky, each kept running by a driver on board, and each of them wore the designation: *Los Angeles Sheriff's Department*. What the hell were forty buses doing in PA—from Los Angeles?

What to do? We could try and make our way to Port Townsend, maybe forty miles east, or stay here. Again came the wind and the promise. It began to sprinkle, making the lights below a wash against the night sky. Then it began to rain hard, which stole away the harbor entirely, and we made our way up the stairs to well-lit marquees, beckoning a row of motels.

When Arlene was well asleep, I dressed and went back down to the steps. The rain had stopped. At the pier, where it wasn't scheduled until morning, sat a huge, empty ferry. The forty buses were gone.

33

Best laid plans...

Port Townsend. One of the lovely places. Fort Worden, with officer housing from the Second World War, and gun emplacements in-

tended to thwart the Japanese, along a wondrous spit of land that reaches out into the ocean. As a kid, my parents brought us here and I grew up scanning the horizon for Jap ships. Then I got older and did the Rhody Run—the run for the rhododendrons. And always the boats—all manner of alluring craft and the wooden boat school. There's two wooden boat schools that matter. The other's in Maine where I rode last year. And better than either school was the boat works of my friend's, friend, Simon, who died recently, and left his boat works behind. What he built were dories—all wooden dories. Probably the finest in the world, and I got to see them. I got to sit in one.

Arlene thought we would be safer using air B&Bs because they were probably less scrutinized. In Port Townsend they wouldn't be hard to find because this place lives on tourists, and being late in the season, on a weekday of intermittent rain, we wouldn't have much of a problem finding one. We asked at a store where we might stow our bags and a delightful woman offered to keep them for us.

With a break in the rain, we walked up over the hill and down into Fort Worden, where Arlene wanted to see everything, so we made a tour of officer housing and obscure gun emplacements. Then out to the lighthouse at land's end, after which we headed back towards town through verdant neighborhoods. If one doesn't mind a bit of wet and a bit of cold, Port Townsend's a special place to live. Back down at the marina, we explored each of the walkways, along which boats were tied up. Some were products of the wooden boat school—works of art. On maybe a quarter of them, the skippers were working on deck. All this moisture must wreak havoc, requiring constant maintenance for any wood surfaces.

One guy didn't have the problem—he was sitting on deck, in a spitty rain, with not one obvious piece of wood on his craft. I take that back, there was smallish wood trim items that looked to be in hopeless disrepair. We passed within six feet of him and he gave us a nod.

"You don't have the maintenance issues some of your neighbors do?"

"I don't but I don't have what they have, either."

"You don't even have much brightwork to keep up?"

"That was the plan when I built her."

"You built this boat?" asked Arlene.

"Yep, forty years ago. This is what's called a cement boat—they were all the rage back then."

"Cement?"

"Concrete. It's a lightweight formula—still a bit heavier than her sisters. You two want to come aboard?"

He was Peter and he was a lonely guy. What used to be red hair was now a bald top with a thin strip of gray-red above the ears. He was quite short and it seemed likely he'd gained a couple of pounds each year since he built the boat. There would not be a woman on board.

"There don't seem to be many women on the boats?" Arlene said.

"There's a few but most of us in marinas are guys."

"But some women live on boats?" she asked.

"Yeah. This is a safe place for women. Most of the guys here, the older guys, have given up on any hope for a relationship. They mostly keep to themselves." Arlene was curious.

"They're not interested in the women who live here? They must have things in common?"

"They do, but the four women here are two lesbian couples."

Peter brought out two folding chairs and offered us something to drink. All he had was whiskey and coke, which we were pleased to partake of. The reference to two lesbian couples reminded me of a recent trip I'd made to Palm Springs, which may be the gay capital of the world.

"I was sitting outside, at Starbucks, where everybody was in shorts, and half the patrons were gay men, sharing coffee and nuance with one another. Then this guy walks up. He's maybe sixty, with grey, close-cropped hair, in a crisp blue suit. He didn't belong anywhere that didn't have to do with high-pressure sales or the CIA. He looked to be a Ralph Steadman rendering from a Hunter

Thompson novel. I wanted to say something to him about how different he was from everyone here, but I just watched. He went inside and soon returned with a six and a half foot transgender, in spiked, sequined heels. She looked to be famous. A smallish woman joined them and they walked along the sidewalk, outside the seating area, then turned left along more seating area. From behind me someone yelled what sounded like, *fag*, and all three of them turned sharply towards the speaker, a guy holding out a hand *bag* that belonged to the smaller woman. Big blue came back for it and thanked the guy, but a message hung in the air. Palm Springs is a place where you might get away with yelling fire but not *fag*."

Peter did not have much of a social life so he liked having someone to talk to.

"I don't get this thing with women," he said. "It's like you can't say anything, anymore. It was hard enough when I was young to talk to women, but in a place like this where there's ten guys for every woman, I'm afraid to say anything at all." Peter's clothes needed washing and he needed a gym membership, but it was way late for that. If he were fortunate enough to get an epiphany, it would be to get the hell out of this boatyard and go to where the girls are. And on the way to hit a beauty salon and eat one meal a day for two months.

Arlene came in: "I think you're right, Peter. It's getting tough out there, but that's no reason to give up. But on the other hand, women have never been seen as equals—that's why they're striving for control."

Peter did a little laugh. He was a hurt puppy and he wasn't buying into any more talk about women's rights.

We spent most of the afternoon on board, with occasional gentle wakes from passing boats, lapping along the concrete hull. We were getting hungry and I suggested we go to the marina cafe for dinner, but Peter opted to not go. He seldom left the vessel unless he had to. He had beans and frankfurters on board, which he offered to rustle up for us, which was enough for Arlene to say she needed a walk and would we like her to bring back food? The way

she said it contained the question of whether or not I wanted to stay on board—and was I thinking of Peter as our way across to the new world? I thanked her for the offer to bring back some dinner.

With Alene gone, we men could get more into the morbid gloom of economics and politics that we're forced to temper in the company of the fairer sex.

"What are you seeing about people getting by out there?" he asked. "People here are as bad off as they've ever been. Some are choosing to anchor offshore because they can't afford a slip. And no slip means no head, no shower. The ocean's a head so that's not a problem, but no shower? The fees to tie up aren't all that much, but once you lose your space, you get back in line for maybe a year. And, the marina can't raise rates because the guys just don't have the money."

I could see it. Guys like Peter, loners from the git-go—and it got worse as time went on. Who would hire Peter in the state he was in, with his disposition?

"How much is the slip?"

"Mine's \$250, but I think they want to raise it to three."

"Are you okay with that?"

"I'm two months behind now."

"Do you have income?"

"I'll have \$460 in social security starting in four months." *\$460—he must be cashing in at 62, because that's such a small amount. Which meant Peter had hardly worked.* "I had a credit card that I lived on. Now I pay the minimum and it goes up every year. I don't even remember what it was that I charged back then."

"It's not your fault, man (it sort of was, but not entirely). There are not enough jobs and everybody's in debt. The golden age was the 50's and 60's. The biggest factor back then was so little was needed to service almost non-existent debt. Now it's all debt."

"What's different?"

"Historically, these kind of times end in a debt jubilee, where debt is forgiven and you start over. The problem now is the rich are too greedy to do that. Normally, a simple business cycle sorts it

out. But in an economy, controlled by the state, there are no business cycles."

I knew that Arlene would be back soon, so I cut to the chase.

"You want to take us to Canada for two months mooring?" He had to know we could go from Port Angeles for maybe \$50—not \$500. He looked at me, furtively.

"When would you want to go?"

"As soon as we can." It was obvious he knew something was up—but he was on our side.

"We'd have to do it at night. No lights-no motor. Just a silent sail and stay out of Victoria Harbor where the cams are always on. But I know that coast and I can put you ashore up towards Esquimalt." That brought nostalgia. My dad's dad had been on the HMS Iroquois, a destroyer out of Esquimalt, during the war with Japan.

"When could we go?"

"We could go tonight. The winds are fair and favorable, which means we could make the crossing in a few hours.

"Would you come back tonight, Peter?"

"No. I'd tie up to one of the buoys, offshore, where I'd drop you. They're used to me. The border with Canada is pretty lax. Less so these last months, but lax. I didn't mention the buses. I didn't want to scare Peter off.

"What's different these last months?"

"Don't know for sure but lots of scuttlebutt about hundreds, maybe thousands of Americans trying to get into Canada." That sounded like the Vietnam War when Canada welcomed draft dodgers. But would they welcome this latest influx?

"There's lots of Canadian custom guys but they won't be where I'm taking you. I don't think you'll have any problems." I could see Arlene making her way down the walkway with both our bags and dinner.

The best laid plans of mice and men are often driven off course by the demon rum, whose close cousin is whiskey and coke. We ate and we drank and then we drank some more. Peter drank the most.

The waves lapped at the boat and Peter lapped at the whiskey. And we were not far behind him.

At the last sip of my last drink, I offered: "The US has, thanks to Obama, a Constitutional free zone that extends 100 miles into US territory, nautical miles as well as land miles. That's sixty-six percent of the US population. And in that zone, all electronic devices can be confiscated to gather information, without suspicion." I made a toast to our head kaffir, Barack, who once again had been voted the most admired man for the tenth year in a row, but not to be outdone, Hillary had been voted the most admired woman for the fifteenth time. Are we fucked up, or what? Then again, Obama was the master of geo-political acumen, moving chess pieces to control the world in favor of five percent of the world's people. All the while, hiding behind a sonorous and mesmerizing voice, while he crushed anyone who blew the whistle on corporations or the government. We drained our glasses and the quart was empty.

It was well dark when we motored on quiet water, with the sheen of lamplight on oil, out of the marina. The motor was one of those two-stoke relics from thirty years ago—I think the brand was *British Sea Gull*—a horse and a half that ran okay but barely powered us along. It would take a week to get to Victoria using the Gull. This was beginning to remind me of Alex and Tara flying with Angel from Baja to the mainland, except Peter was a better guy, and the Gull didn't miss a beat. But, Peter was quite drunk.

"How far is it, Peter?"

"I was thinking on that, but I'm not sure. Every time I've been across I sail down to Port Angeles and I cross the next morning. I think it takes me two or three hours."

"How much farther is it this way?" He didn't answer—just made some speculating sounds. Which raised my level of anxiety.

Now we were at sea and I helped Peter raise the mainsail and the jib. I should say I raised them following semi-coherent directives. Except for sitting at the tiller, Peter was incapacitated, and I began to wonder if he could get us to Vancouver Island at all? I slid in beside him, as the the wind picked up from behind.

"What are you using to steer by?"

"I took a look towards Angeles as we lit out and figured forty-five degrees from there. I think that should get us close." A forty-five degree angle, estimated as we headed out—that was going to get us across hours of a strong current, at night? Everybody who is Canadian, and who has parents, knows about the Strait of Juan De Fuca. No one could swim it's rough current until the late 50's when a diminutive girl from Ontario, Marilyn Bell, did it. And the farther we got out into it, I could see why. The current was waves, some of which broke across the bow.

"Don't worry about the waves," he said. These concrete boats are just about unsinkable. I built air pockets right into her. Even if she were to flop she wouldn't go down."

"Where's your compass, Peter?"

"I lost it overboard a couple of years back, but we'll be all right."

"How many times you been across?"

"Three, no, two."

"When was the last time?"

"Both were the first year I built her." So much for customs guys being used to his boat tied-up along the Canadian coast—maybe, if they'd been at it for the last forty years."

The wind kept picking up from astern, and we were running, but mostly up and down as wind turned the straights into troughs and breakers that we took at forty-five degrees. We cut through the water, or better said, we ran up and down, not sure if we were heading for Canada, or not? We were all queasy from the whiskey and Coke. Peter, got sick first, on his hands and knees on the deck, holding onto the metal rails and heaving, not quite over the side, with breaking waves washing away his leavings and the stench.

The wind was now strong enough that even with a following sea I had to call out to be understood. "Let's let Arlene go below and get the life preservers," I yelled, holding the tiller with both hands, straining to keep control. He didn't answer. I motioned her to go below and find them while I tried to see which star was the north star so I'd have something to go by. I thought I'd found the one star that wasn't moving, when clouds, black clouds aft, began

overtaking the boat and drifting across the stars. Arlene had come back with news that there were no life preservers she could find. I asked her to help get Peter back here so I could talk to him. But to be careful. The deck was being swamped by high seas and I'd lost what little control with the rudder, I'd had.

She started forward and I grabbed at her and held her back, reaching for a coiled climbing rope at my feet, which I tied around her waist and wrapped around my shoulder and neck, so I could play out rope as she went forward. The waves were now crashing along the port side instead of the bow, as I fought the tiller to get back that angle across the current. But I no longer had control of the craft—in a huge running sea where at times I could see nothing at all.

Then came a wave that, along with Arlene's weight and a crush of water, yanked me from my place. The deck cleared. Peter was there, against the railing. Arlene was not. But I could feel her at the end of the line. I let go of the tiller and hauled her in, hand over hand. When I could see her, I reached down and dragged her over the stern, in beside me. I untied the end of the line from her waist and secured it to a metal rail with a couple of half-hitches. Speaking into her ear, I gave her control of the the tiller while I went for Peter. I tied the loose end of the rope around his waist, then using that same line, I fought my way into the wind, aft, then dragged Peter back to the stern. I untied him and sat him up against the railing. He wasn't unconscious, but he was really out of it.

"When did you hear the weather report?" I yelled, through a gale force wind.

"I just took a look. When you've been doing this as long as me, you just know." With that he hung his head and puked between his knees. "I'm sick—I gotta go below."

I helped him forward to the hatch that, thankfully, Arlene had closed. With the rope between my teeth, I lifted the hatch cover just as another wave crashed across the deck, taking Peter with it.

I made my way back to Arlene. I took over the tiller as stars reappeared in a running sea and wind. Just as an earlier wind had blown away the stars, this fresh wind had blown away the clouds.

Soon there wasn't a cloud in the sky, but something was still very wrong. Earlier, when the winds were not this strong, I could hold my angle to the north star. Now, in higher seas and wind, she was drifting sideways. I know a bit about sailing and I tried to tack but it made no difference. This was like a car with a steering wheel no longer attached to the steering rods.

I tacked and tacked but I couldn't hold course. The only good thing was the lights of Victoria off to the northeast. Somehow, we'd passed them in the direction of Escumalt.

Still the wind came and I could do little to keep from being slammed at ninety degrees. I motioned to Arlene to go below. She shook her head. I motioned forcefully, and, after the next wave crashed and subsided, she scrambled across the deck and into the hatch, sliding the cover back in place behind her. I kept on with blistered hands in salt water, straining against a mahogany tiller, which hadn't been refurbished in years, and each of those years now tore at my hands.

Then, for no reason at all, I tacked away from Victoria and the boat obeyed. In fact, the boat nuanced. I could turn her five degrees and she would comply as we ripped through fierce seas. But control had a downside—the mast strained under the pressure of the wind because she was no longer going where the wind wanted her to go—but where I wanted her to go. With each gust it seemed the aluminum shaft would fold itself in half. I had to get that jib down—we were carrying too much sail. I thought to call Arlene but I wasn't going to risk her life to save the mast. Could I make my way forward and get us down to one sail? Would I be able to see what to do in a sliver of moon?

The wind slackened. I say slackened but this boat was probably running and cutting as fast as she ever had, heaved over as much as she could do without laying down. And the shoreline was coming fast. I'd hold the tiller with both hands and just when it felt we might flip, I'd give some back. I got pretty good to where we were no more than half to three quarters of a mile from shore, well northeast of the lights of Victoria, when a sudden Moby Dick on

steroids came into view not fifty feet off the port bow, closing faster than I could get out of the way.

I know I've said it before, but some events are as when a boxer sees a huge left hook coming, but is unable to get out of the way. I did the math and there was no way. If I held the tack she'd take us—if I let go the tack she'd take us. There was nothing to do, but look towards where Arlene was, as a huge United States nuclear submarine, with no cause to hit the brakes, sliced thorough a concrete boat, like an eastbound freight through a ribcage, then continued on, leaving the gods to deal with what got left behind.

I came alive, drunk, in water much colder than had been the waves. With just a skim of light on waves and whitecaps, the wind had slowed but the current was running fast and I could feel myself being moved along. With no available reason for my being alive, I treaded water until I saw something in the distance and I swam for it—just a black shadow moving away from me against a blacker black. Whatever it was, I swam for it for all I was worth, which wasn't much. When I saw the dingy, afloat, it gave me energy but it took every bit of it to get one hand on the gunnel. A choking sound from the dregs inside pulled me up and over the freeboard where I rolled against Arlene, then quickly got out of her way because she was choking. Paralyzed with cold and exhaustion, I lay there and hoped she would be all right. Eventually, the choking stopped and I gave her a slight elbow to make sure she was breathing. She gave it back in annoyance.

I don't know how long I lay there shivering, but that got old. Finally I peered over the side to find we were only a couple of hundred yards offshore and I didn't hear any breakers. I slipped over the side and hung on to the stern, kicking us in the direction of shore. When I was near exhausted, Arlene helped me back in and slipped over to take a turn. In a quarter of an hour we were laying on a sandy beach, unable to get up.

"What was that?" she asked.

"A nuclear submarine. I saw one once. I think they live up past Port Angeles."

"You think they know they hit us?"

"Yeah, maybe, but they wouldn't come back. You know, we might be the Russians."

"In a cement boat?" We were talking but shivering from exposure. This ordeal was not over.

"I don't know what happened. I couldn't steer—then she steered perfectly. I think we were ten minutes from this beach when we got run over."

"He hadn't lowered the center board. There was a crank that brought it up at an angle, with a stop. I released it and the thing *whirred* down. I was coming to tell you. I lifted the hatch cover and the last thing I remember is an awful look on your face. Next thing, I was hanging on to the dingy trying to get a leg over the side.

Now there were high-powered flashlights up and down the sand. They were coming our way and we needed to get into the trees, but we didn't have the means or the time. We lay there until one of them lit us up. "Here—here they are?"

34

The truth shall set you free, just don't tell it to the authorities.

Once our benefactors were reasonably sure that except for exposure, we were uninjured, they helped us through a deciduous forest to the road where an RCMP car came for us. There was only the one car and they helped us into the back seat before one of them went into the boot and returned with two blankets—leave it to the mounties. There was no talk, not between the two of them, or questions from them to us. It might not look good to question exposure victims who had just been ripped apart by a foreign nation's nuclear sub and left for dead.

"Don't talk to the cops," I whispered. "Nothing but your name and citizenship. They have a strategy that does not involve being our friends."

"Duh."

Within minutes we were coming into Victoria from the north. I'd been here before. I thought they'd take us to a hospital but we pulled up outside the Royal Canadian Mounted Police law enforcement center where they supplied us with jail clothes and accompanied us into separate bathrooms to change. This was Canada and Arlene got a woman deputy. Then they sat us down on the Group W bench (*Alice's Restaurant*—just funning), where we waited. We weren't in any lockdown zone, double swinging doors to freedom were thirty feet away. But it was cold out there and nicely warm in here, and we had our blankets. But I was thinking about walking away when a kind-faced, older officer came to round us up and take us in for questioning. We were ushered into a windowless room with only an overhead light, a desk from World War 2, and one of those mirror windows, behind which, guys from lousy cop shows listen.

"What happened out there tonight?"

"Don't know," I said. "It happened too fast."

"There was a gale warning for the straight. What were you doing out there?"

"We were with a guy we met and we went for a sail. It was calm when we started out."

"What happened to the guy?"

"He was swept overboard."

"What's his name?"

"Peter."

"Peter, what?"

"Don't know. We just met him today."

"Where did you start out from?"

"Why does that matter?"

"I don't know whether it matters or not until I hear the answer."
I said nothing.

"You are citizens of what country?"

"Canada"

"Australia," answered Arlene.

"And you are living where?"

"Canada," I replied, which technically was true. I was alive and I was in Canada.

"Where in Canada?"

"I'm on the go." The kind-face was now turning into something else.

"One last time before I hold you over for questioning. Where did you sail from?"

"You can't hold us over without probable cause that we've committed a crime. The only crime I see is a US sub not watching their radar and leaving victims to drown."

"This is Canada, we don't go by probable cause. I'll have someone escort you to the holding cells."

"Don't you have to charge us with something?"

"Yes, in this case, not answering my questions."

"Really, then I insist there be a signed transcript of this interrogation, and a recording, available for my attorney. And I also insist that you explain why you failed to inform us about Section 8 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms that pertains to everyone in Canada, and is not limited to citizens, which includes this young woman. No charge, no detention? Isn't that the law?"

He took our names and left the room. Arlene gave me a stout look of approval, but I'd exhausted my knowledge. I only knew about Section 8 because it came up in my research for a handbook: *Probable Cause*, and I only remembered it because a Section 8 is what gets you kicked out of the army in the US. Soon, we were ushered to a holding tank that turned out to be a clean row of half-occupied, freshly painted cells, of which I had my own, with a fold-down bunk and a cloth-covered foam mattress that seemed, though I hadn't had the experience, twice as thick as what you'd get in the States. I was sound asleep before anyone could come by to ask if I were hungry.

From a sleep that had crossed into the region of the nether-world, I was awakened by a night stick playing marimba on the bars.

"Time to go. You've been cut loose." Arlene was already at the sargent's desk by the group W bench. I liked it that the desk and counter were open to the public—no glass panel with the round hole in it. Baltimore has not yet made it to Victoria. After we signed forms, we were told to not leave Victoria and to provide any address of where we were staying.

"Why are we being released? I queried.

"The inspector's being a stickler. He wouldn't hold you over without probable cause or charging you. And he can't find out if the US authorities have an extradition request on either of you until Monday. So you're being released on a technicality."

"Not quite Sarge. We're being released under the law."

Outside. under a cold morning thaw, I mumbled:

"Volunteer where we're staying? Good luck with that."

I looked at Arlene. "Do you need to sleep?" She didn't and neither did I. It might be adrenaline—sometimes when I have a late cup of coffee, I wake up early, ready for the day. Based on that, and my girl not having been here before, we hit the spots—foremost of which is the capitol building. Not everybody gets it that Victoria is the island capital of mainland British Columbia. Seems it would be Vancouver but it's not. In the early days, this island was the place to be. Still is. On the way we passed the Empress and I asked if she wanted to have high tea?

"Maybe if they give me a hundred dollars. I don't like uppity bullshit!" Thank the gods for Arlene—now and forever. But, the Empress is incredible spires and a huge facade covered with climbing vines. At the last moment, she wanted to walk through, so we did. We used the interior of the hotel as a slow moving heated sidewalk on our way to the capitol. Lots of starch and white linen and people ready to spend seventy bucks for a cup of tea and a crumpet. And not a smile to behold. At the far end was the bag-check counter, but we had nothing to check. I had money and cred-

it cards in my half-dried wallet, and no passport. Arlene had none of that.

The capitol building is something to behold. Built of rough-hewn stone, quarried during the 1800's, it stands as a monument to Canada. Inside it's finely, finished wood and brass and high domed ceilings. But, with all of that, for us, it was a ten minute walk through. From there I headed towards the coast for a walk along the straight, where we soon came to the bust and pedestal for Marilyn Bell. She was just a kid when she swam Lake Ontario in 1954. She wasn't the only one to make the attempt—she began it with professional women swimmers who had already swum the English Channel. But she was the one who fought off the lampreys and eels for thirty-two miles. When she reached Sunnyside, on the Toronto side, it had been on the radio every hour, and there were 250,000 Canadians waiting for her, at night. When they asked, she said she did it for Canada. Me too. I swam the straight for Canada.

Arlene was in disbelief: "How the hell did she swim that?" Looking down on the straight it was as if there were three straights, the two closer to land and the faster one moving down the middle. A swim across seemed improbable. I heard a car behind and glanced over my shoulder to a bright red, 59 Chevy Impala, with huge, curved, gull-wing fins. Coincidental?

"Out on the straight, a black, nuclear submarine, flying the stars and prison stripes, motored in the direction of Port Angeles. I'd bet five minutes of my future with Arlene it was the same one that took us out. Apparently, they'd taken their time turning about to come look for us?"

35

2nd degree homeless—two pit bulls

Walking towards downtown, there came an apparition that I associate with the States. Filling the sidewalk, coming towards us, were five young people, constituting a *huddled mass* from the dark ages, each wearing everything they owned, and for each, it had been years between haircuts. The lack of a full beard was the only tell that one was a girl. When it was evident they wouldn't be yielding any sidewalk, we drifted unto a lawn to go around, with two dogs growling and staining their heavily-muscled necks against leashes held nonchalantly by a fellow who gave us one of those *they're friendly* looks.

Now we were into downtown where I had little desire to be, but we hadn't eaten for a long time so we stopped in at a kinda fast food but non-franchise Italian place with outside seating on the main drag. We were wearing what we'd been wearing on the water, which included our jackets, kindly dried by the RCMP, so we were warm enough. Across the street I saw something else I recognized, Canadian Immigration, where my dad had taken me to get my Canadian Citizenship, and where I'd balked at spending a whole day in that building to get an alternative existence to the United States. I suggested I go across and do what I had to do to get a new passport while Arlene could have a look around and meet me back there.

It was as I remembered—maybe even the same guy acting as the conductor, directing visitors to the appropriate line. My line was the longest and the slowest. It took most of an hour to get to the front where a matter-of-fact woman in a short-sleeve shirt and pants uniform listened to my request and explanation. She hit so many keys on her computer that I lost any imaginings about what she might be doing. Finally, she handed me some papers and told me I needed passport pictures and where I could get them.

I walked out and went but a few doors up the street. I remember getting Canadian passport photos in the US and having them rejected several times—any hair below the ears that cast a shadow on the wall, was unacceptable. I mean, c'mon. In the end I'd gone for a close-cropped haircut. At this shop they were hip to the drill and a half hour later I headed back up the stairs with a non-shaded photo.

Thankfully, the conductor sent me to a window beside the line where the same woman processed my application. I could pick up my passport in three days if I agreed to pay an extra processing fee. When I turned back to the entrance, Arlene was there.

I asked if she'd enjoyed her time?

"Very much." We headed down into the street.

"What'd you do?" She reached into her new leather bag and waved an Australian passport.

"How the hell did you do that?"

"The Aussie Embassy was easy—this is Canada. There wasn't anybody there but me and the guy who was from fifty miles from where I live. And a motocross racer. He knew just who I was and could get me a temporary passport right then if I would have tea with him. To which I agreed."

"When's this tea?"

"I left that to him. Told him you'd have to be there because I couldn't stand being away from you. He suggested we put off the tea for another time."

Life is a hard thing. I could no more control what Arlene might do than could I talk YouTube into admitting they were suppressors of real news. But life presents its possibilities, if you take it straight on, and stay out of situations where you have less than a fifty-fifty chance of survival. Which made me think back to Dick Mie—*him and the melting guy, crabbing down the hall*. He'd worked at one of the last operating steel mills at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where one day a bulwark gave way to molten steel, creeping along a concrete floor towards him and this other guy, in a dead-end hallway. The other guy freaked and Dick quieted him with a plan. They would put their feet against one wall and their palms on the other wall, and slowly crab their way down the hall past the lava.

Dick told it matter-of-fact—he knew the other guy wouldn't be able to do it—he wasn't strong enough. But Dick needed him to quiet down. Dick was the toughest, wiriest guy I ever knew—a golden gloves champion in crepe-soled shoes. The other guy went first, making it partway down the hall before his arms and legs started to shake and he slowly slid down the wall to where he

melted from the ground up until all that showed was his mouth in the shape of a silent scream.

I didn't voice it but we needed a plan. Those buses in Port Angeles made me wonder if Canada were safe for us? Just as the United States is the only country that can collect taxes from its citizens who make a living in other countries, maybe my dual nationality wouldn't protect me, here. Those buses had likely been intended for a roundup of Americans who had fled US authority into Canada. The fact that I was a Canadian citizen might not protect me from an extra-legal, night ride to the border.

But that was the problem and not the plan—a plan I couldn't come up with. Canada had been the plan and now I didn't know? Between staying here and going back to the States, this seemed better. But first we had to get away from here and out of sight. It was now late in the day and we needed somewhere to be. We needed clothes and toothbrushes. I thought about a nice hotel where I'd stayed with my folks, quiet, in a neighborhood. But that would require solid ID and credit cards. That neighborhood was in the same direction we'd come from our walk along the straight, and we headed back that way on a different street, looking for a B&B, of which there were none, but one block over, we found one and got a room, with just a minimum of fuss—at least for now.

Our landlady told us of a rumor that the banks would not be opening on Monday, though there had been no official announcement. Beyond that she had no information. But I did, and we headed back downtown. One helpful thing about a touristy capitol city is the myriad places to exchange currency, of which we had but a few bucks. But, I had a debit and a credit card. After dealing with a place that had the feel and the brogue of the Bank of Scotland, and about as helpful, we found ourselves in the Canadian underbelly of currency exchange, with the feel of an Iranian bizarre. Here, as long as there was a profit to be made, business would be done. Two obvious brothers, who had just enough English between them, talked nonstop with each other as they dealt with separate customers at two windows of an office on wheels that could just as

easily have served small cups of bitter coffee and falafels. After much back and forth, and a fee that might best be described as ransom, we left with near \$1200 US. And there would be no more.

I suggested coffee, but it had to be a place where the CBC was reading the news. We found a place, with a TV on CBC, with volume. We each ordered medium coffees with room for cream, and they came in delightful cups that weren't too tall, but much wider than an ordinary cup. They looked like fun and with the addition of half and half they looked even more inviting. The place was supposed to be a bakery and coffee establishment, but there were signs everywhere that every item was vegetarian—gluten and wheat free. Though it may sound cruel, and I know some people have a problem with wheat, it's my surmise that more often than not, undigested problems with growing up, have identified wheat (and many other things) as the culprit, and businesses take on the responsibility for curing the wheat-cruelty for the rest of us. They even offered, with a three-day lead time, a gluten-free nine-layer chocolate cake with strawberry jam between each layer. Just the sugar would kill you. Had they a suggestion box I might have offered a name: *Dante's Cake from Hell for a Mother-In-Law Party* (in case that doesn't do much for you, Dante's hell had nine levels).

Just as I was wondering if the news would provide any news, it did. "Looks like we're looking at something unprecedented coming our way in the world of finance, Elmo." Elmo? Imagine Elmo on CNN. Leaf blowers started up outside and we had to move closer to the TV. People who use leaf blowers are sound pollution.

Elmo told the story: *Canadian banks would not be re-opening Monday, and, according to the IMF, it might be sometime before they did. The problem, for which preparations had not been made, was liquidity. Because of Canada's out-of-control trade deficit and one of the highest debt to GDP ratios, foreign banks were no longer interested in Canadian dollars. Until asset prices corrected (which could prove catastrophic—my thought), Canada would need two currencies. One to settle overseas transactions and another for domestic purchases.* What Elmo didn't say was the domestic Canadian dollar might be worth 25% of what the global

Canadian dollar was worth now, because its value would depend on foreign government readiness to accept international Canadian dollars in trade. It's fortunate that Canada has winters with fast downhill sled runs (I mean toboggan) because the whole country's going to take a big downhill run—riding together—and soon).

And there were other important things Elmo didn't mention. Canada, and Justin Trudeau, who got elected because he was young and pretty, and liberal, had adopted forced immigration from unstable Islamic countries, and, at the same time, sold the remainder of Canada's gold. Since the 50's Canada had been our naive neighbor to the north (their bands were more of the *Guess Who* variety, when there was already a *Who*). Along the way, Canada's been influenced by their southern big brother to where their good samaritanism, infused with a reliance on others, had made it so they are now screwed.

What else Elmo didn't address was that Canada would probably be the just the first domino down, in a worldwide depression that could easily lead to horrendous wars. The thing was too much debt—the question was how did we keep it going this long? Canada's debt was 270% of GDP. Money had been given to banks that didn't get loaned out because they needed it for reserves. England, Canada's mother country, during the good decades, had debt of less than seventy percent, which meant that Canada had to reduce debt by 200%, which was impossible because of a bad trade-deficit. The world had speculated on who would go down first, and Canada won. We should have seen the bloated housing prices moving across the country from Vancouver to Toronto as a coming Black Plague.

Walking back to our B&B, Arlene said something about not understanding how all this worked. I laughed because, even given a good overview, the future is murky. This was bigger than 2008, and it was going to be global.

"What it reminds me of is John McVie listening to Stevie Nicks and Lindsay Buckingham auditioning for *Fleetwood Mac*: 'This ain't close to the blues,' he said. His manager came back: 'No, but it sounds like money.' *Fleetwood Mac* were good at what they did—

they loved it—but they never broke though. The addition of Nicks and Buckingham sold millions of the next two albums. In the same way, we exult over Adam Smith as *THE* economist, but he wasn't. He began the *Wealth of Nations* with the supposition that labor is the basis for economics, when it's actually energy. And since we abandoned rational economics in 1971, in favor of credit, we've just been waiting for the end to arrive. Credit, not used for productivity, is wasted energy, and like *Fleetwood*, there's no possibility for getting where we want to go without an infusion of *more immediate* energy."

36

no particular place to go

I don't know how but the hopelessness of the coming week freed me. Where I would listen to three or four podcasts a day, I now tuned in to none. If I wore earbuds, it was playlists. I was reminded about animals knowing things like earthquakes are coming. So many lives could be saved if people paid attention to their pets. Tsunami in ten minutes? Your dog knows. Here, I was a dog. I'd kept an ear to the political tracks and scanned the economic horizons for years, so I could see it. There was nothing to do or that could be done.

So I focused entirely on Arlene. When she'd be doing stretching I asked how long before she'd finish. If she was reading—same thing. All I wanted was to get her into bed or onto the couch. I did it in a sweet way where my questions would bring this little smile. She understood what was going on and she was way more into my pestering than than me being into podcasts, anyway.

We loved and we walked. We ate and we loved. We watched a movie and turned it off twice. We slept and we loved. And I didn't tire of it. I don't speak for Arlene, but neither did she. The end of the world came and went and so far we'd benefited from it, greatly.

We went to the mall to get some clothes, where my credit card still worked—for now. And the Iranians had paid us in US dollars. Thank god. Canadian dollars were now items of barter. The malls have become sad things. My dad used to take me to one in Medford when I was a kid, so I have great memories. But now, malls, have become our sad rendition of the promenade square in Latin countries, and are on the way out. They're places where people go to take a walk but are unlikely to buy anything.

Four nights we'd been at the B&B. It was now November and colder. The banks were closed and the town felt as if a freeze had descended upon it. The skies were darker but it was mostly the people who had changed. You take away people's ability to be self-sufficient and self-determined and you get Eastern Europe in the 60's. Part of me wanted to get back to the podcasts because I knew the world was falling apart, so, while Arlene was shopping, I tuned into *Crosstalk* on RT, but not on YouTube. Those days were gone. Free speech in the United States was done. On YouTube I could get a few minutes of something before they had time to take it down—like a pay-for-view fight, live from a Russian living room, with bad visuals... .

I found a homemade *Crosstalk* and I got to the break before they took it down. Then I found another bit someplace else. Like when Facebook tried to brand things *fake news* and everybody shared it. I could see why they wanted it down. The US had deployed carrier groups to the South China Sea—maybe not such a great idea during an economic meltdown? And it had resulted in a tragic collision with the Chinese Navy, which told me all I needed to know. This was one collision too many. The Chinese had the ability to hack into and incapacitate our vessels, making for the mayhem of out-of-control ships. China demanded an apology which is something we never do, especially when we suspect they've rendered our navy useless. Trump and his generals had

been bellicose about playing the military card. But so would have Hillary—to a much worse degree. And how stupid is it to tell your adversary you're coming for them?

I didn't feel the pressing need to write more blogs. Lately they'd been bleak because what I'm writing about is bleak. My economic blogs were written around too much debt. And politically, it was even more basic: if your nation were an adversary of the United States and you were without nuclear weapons, you would be invaded. With nuclear weapons, you would be sanctioned to extinction. Further blogs were simply variations on the theme.

In the meantime, Arlene had made friends with a lesbian couple down the street from where we were staying, which made it feel more like home. When I came home from a podcast walk I'd be just as likely to find her at Inger and Tracie's as at our B&B. This afternoon I'd walked the promenade downtown along the water out as far as the breakwater and back. Arlene wasn't at our place so I headed over there. I knocked and somebody inside yelled—to come in.

Arlene was on the couch between them and they were drinking wine, which they offered to me and I accepted. Listening to them talk, I came up with an idea for a new play: *Dick and Me*. I'd been wanting a play with just two people in it, and here it was. I'd write a play about a guy whose daughter is lesbian, and is getting married to Dick Cheney's daughter, who I knew was a lesbian. In the lead up to the marriage, the guy finds himself spending an afternoon with Cheney at his Wyoming ranch, and in the course of that conversation the question arises as to whether or not Cheney had made decisions that affected the United States and the whole world, using wrong assumptions. This would be a difficult feat to pull off because Dick would have to find himself in that conversation without recognizing how or that he'd gotten there.

I kept with my thoughts, drinking wine and dipping chips in guacamole. For some time I had no idea what the girls were talking about until Inger asked: "Hey, are you here?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Just thinking about something."

"Pray tell."

"You really want to know?" I told them about my idea and I wasn't surprised by the inevitable.

"Why does it have to be about lesbians?"

"Well, if you were going to spend an afternoon alone with Dick Cheney, and you didn't know Dick, the only way I can see that happening is if your daughters were getting married. That his daughter is a lesbian was the one chink, the one vulnerability in his armor. The angriest conservative who ever stalked the halls of D.C. had to come out in support of gays."

Inger wasn't buying: "It seems to me that lesbians get targeted needlessly."

"Like now, when you can't get a TV show on the air without a gay character in it, or a movie? I'm thinking that if the portrayal is pro-gay, you have no problem with it?"

"No, but what you're talking about is a device to write your play."

"Plots are devices, and if you find one that works..."

"I just don't like it."

"Whether you like something or not is not the measure. The level of political correctness in Canada and Europe is astounding. When a man says lesbian, heads turn—like he has no right to say the word. You gotta be careful with that. Granted, we've had a patriarchy where being gay was a criminal thing, but that's not getting fixed by installing a matriarchy to suppress free speech."

"That's not what this is about."

"No Inger, that is what this is about. Hundreds of men have lost their careers and standing in the arts and professions because of women coming forward with sexual harassment claims. Many of those men needed taken down. But this thing has now taken on a life of its own that it doesn't deserve."

Arlene jumped in: "I know first-hand you're respectful towards women, but listening to you now, I wouldn't be so sure, and I think that's what Inger's reacting to."

"My exact point. When you don't know the motivation, you don't get to make conclusions. I'm thinking conclusions get made about men these days before the questions get asked and the facts

get weighed." This made for some silence. "I'll give an example you three may want to crucify me over. And all I ask is, rather than condemning me, set me straight. I'm thinking about the dude who was a TV producer who put a camera in a women's bathroom in a box of tissues and watched them doing their business." All three looked at me as if Dracula had sat up in the crypt. And I laughed.

"Don't get so serious. That guy was committing a crime and he deserved lose his job and be pilloried on the news. The said, men go to great lengths to see women naked. The guy lost his job—I'm good with that. But to give him four years is fucked up. That's the matriarchy I'm talking about. Sure, it's an invasion of privacy, but it's not a four-year invasion."

Tracie's turn: "If the penalties aren't big, this shit will just go on and on." We were all getting toasted on the wine. I was drinking now, just to keep up my courage—without guacamole to dampen the effect.

"Tracie, that's the matriarchy! If the penalty is more severe than the crime, it's just shifting the problem. Let me tell you something my dad told me. When he was maybe twenty-one, in the mid 60's, he worked in a gas station in Belmont Shore, in California. This was when women were coming into their own."

Tracie exuded: "No, they weren't! That was the height of misogyny."

"No, Trac, ISIS is the height. But this is my dad's account—one that I trust—and you weren't there. It was a different time. My dad was twenty-one and his neighbors actually had names like Dick Drilling and Dick Goodspeed. The gas station where he worked was owned by Milton, but it was his wife, the boys referred to, without affection, as *Hatchetface*. One afternoon, *H* called my dad to her office to show him something. She was concerned someone was living in the attic because, in the storeroom, there were greasy handprints all up the shelves—handprints that had been left by Mark and Ron, two English guys who worked there, and sometimes my dad when they'd scurry above the women's restroom to watch women, through the grate, changing into bikinis or just tak-

ing a pee. Though he never did it again, my dad hadn't taken it too seriously when it was going on."

The girls sat—dumbstruck. I don't think men tell the truth to women, often.

"My point is that he learned from that and he didn't need four years in jail to do it."

Tracie came again: "I think like most men you just don't get it!"

"No, I get it. Women have had to deal with disrespect from men their whole lives, and they've developed un-compromising views of men. So much, that they don't see that men, especially aging white men, are now under the same kind of attack that women have been under forever." None of the three commented.

37

Presume nothing when survival is on the line

Six days into our stay at the B&B and the news wasn't good. The Canadians had caved to the Americans, just as I thought they would. Under the auspices of re-education, thousands of Americans had been picked up and sent to camps. And, as of yet, it hadn't made for an uprising. Maybe they were cherry-picking—you know—leave the more vocal until last, pick up everyone more rational, but less incendiary. But that didn't jive—Ron Paul had been picked up, after serving his whole adult life as a gynecologist and a congressman from Texas. His son, Rand, a senator, and all he could do about his dad's detention was filibuster. Paul Craig Roberts, who served as Reagan's Undersecretary of the Treasury, had been picked up, and David Stockman had been banned, not only from the networks, but from YouTube.

Anyone who'd been keeping an eye on things knew this was coming. Headlines like "US Intelligence Gives Israel Green Light

to Assassinate Iran's Top General", and the *Mad Dog Mattis* proclamation that "War Is Not Over" in Iraq and Syria, foretold a forebode. Then, just as it came clear that the rape charges against him had been fabricated, Julian Assange disappeared from the Columbian Embassy—without network followup.

And none of this brought the feel of Nazi stormtroopers until I was walking back from downtown with my fresh Canadian passport and I saw two teams working both sides of Government Street, illegally stopping and questioning people, some of whom were ushered into large vans. Those buses I'd seen at PT were for Americans, but this was worse. This was in the tradition of Southern slave hunters, before the Civil War, plucking blacks from New Hampshire streets as runaway slaves. Nobody stopped them then and nobody was stopping them now. Each team was heavily armed, dressed in black, three with RCMP uniforms, and one with FBI in big white letters on the back. It was all in the open, although the FBI had no mandate outside of the United States.

Across the United States, police departments were encouraging citizens to file reports on "individuals who stay at bus or train stops for extended periods." And: "individuals who carry on long conversations on pay or cellular telephones, and joggers who stand and stretch for an inordinate amount of time." The Kentucky Office of Homeland Security encouraged people to report "people avoiding eye contact," or homes or apartments that have numerous visitors "arriving and leaving at unusual hours," as PBS's *Frontline* reported. Colorado's fusion center produced a fear-mongering public-service announcement asking the public to report innocuous behaviors such as photography, note-taking, drawing, and collecting money for charity as 'warning signs' of terrorism, the American Civil Liberties Union reported.

Anti-freedom was now a hysteria gripping the whole western world, and Canada was at the epicenter. We had to get out of here. Arlene wasn't at our B&B but I knew where to look.

"Can I talk to you, outside?" She came out and I explained the situation to her. I had to get out of here today and she might actually be safer here because she wasn't an American. But there was no

way she was letting me go without her. We went back inside where she wistfully said goodbye to her friends. There were tears, but they knew the whole story and they understood. They seemed sad to see me go. On the way out it was Tracie:

"I so much respect your relationship with Arlene. You're a role model."

We went to our B&B and without a goodbye, we were ready to go in ten minutes and down the street.

"I knew this was coming: "Do you have a plan?"

"Sort of. Stay off Government Street and anyplace the authorities might hang out. Tell me if this makes sense to you. I want to end up in the States, but in the reddest of the red states where the powers that be aren't welcome. But, on the map it looks like everything from Victoria to the Canadian mainland crosses US water, and I'm not willing to do that, so we have to take a bus all the way up by Nanaimo to Departure Bay. From there we can go Canada to Canada and come out south of Vancouver.

It was amazing to me how much the noose had tightened, and that people were accepting tyranny. Like a time when I was watching *The Zookeeper's Wife*, a supposedly true story about a Polish couple who owned a zoo, aiding Jews to escape from Warsaw. A woman watching the film with me said she couldn't believe that had happened in a place as civilized as Europe. I suggested to her it usually had to do with an economic debacle. She looked shocked when I suggested it might come to us, next.

What's the opposite of complacency? Acuity?—a kind of keenness of understanding. I wasn't seeing any of that. What I was seeing was another something, best expressed by the word—dilatory—something intended to cause delay. That's what the authorities were doing: turning down the screws on freedom, with enough propaganda, that people wouldn't realize what had happened to them until it was too late.

Afternoon rain was falling and we had neither umbrellas nor rain gear so we got soaked. We walked alongside the parliament building on the way to the Empress and stood under a bus awning out of

the rain looking at routes and schedules on the wall. We could get a bus from here but this spot was like sitting in a showroom window. Were I in the FBI, I'd just cruise bus stops. What works for sex-traffickers works also for the FBI.

There was a stop I remembered, maybe six blocks away from the downtown, where we could be out of the rain and away from scrutiny. I hailed the first cab and we were on our way. An hour later we were heading for Departure Bay, an hour and thirty-five minutes out of the rain and many miles farther from the US. The bus was nearly full so a quite wet Arlene and I had to sit on aisle seats not close to each other. I was sharing a seat with a young Canadian on his way to Nanaimo for military training.

"Is it army?" I asked.

"Army, yeah."

"And is it like the US, all volunteer?"

"Yes, there's no draft."

"What made you decide to join?"

"There's no jobs. There's jobs but go try and find one. The whole oil fields is shut down because it costs too much to get oil out of tar sands. I was lucky to get this because they're not taking many. You ever think about joining?"

I thought hard before answering. "Not now. It seems we're in endless wars and I don't see what they hope to gain." Much of our history inspires young men to join up, but now, what it's for? Money, power? One of the great Americans, Ulysses S. Grant, a humble man, wore the uniform of a private with three stars, which was later worn by another humble American, as the Eisenhower Jacket—except his had five stars. In a letter from Grant to his father, he said: 'I will not identify with those people who seek advantage from this war or from their positions.' Where's the people like Grant when we need them?

On the other side, Grant had Robert E. Lee, who was regarded then as a great man—now he's attacked as a Southern slave owner. I think that's being done to tear our country apart. Before General Lee surrendered to General Grant, at Appomattox, one of Lee's generals, maybe it was Porter, proposed they divide the Army of

the South into small guerrilla bands, to harass the Union into submission. Lee thought on it and decided against it because the nation had been involved in bloody conflict for more than four years. To prolong the conflict through such tactics would be at the expense of everyone involved. His men would be reduced to bands of marauders, robbing and stealing to survive. Robert E. Lee was as right in 1865 as the liberals are wrong in attacking him now.

At Departure Bay we had a two-hour wait for the ferry to Vancouver, but it felt safe here. The only officials were Canadian and they didn't seem especially concerned. Still the rain came down and there was nothing to suggest a letup—it was a gloomy world. We were almost dry except where it mattered. Sitting on the bus for so long had dried what the air could get to, but my butt and crotch were still wet. Arlene had slept on the bus and she dozed at the ferry depot. I found a morning paper.

The American fools were still at it. Carrier-based drones had fired lethal weapons at undisclosed targets in Asia, but they had been totally useless and plunged into the sea. Orders had gone out to destroy Chinese satellite stations but our missile batteries did not respond. Our ships had been infected with malware and could not operate. Now they were trying to get back to base, steering by the stars. But the Chinese missiles did not fail, and they conducted tests on targets near Guam and Hawaii to make the point. We'd lost the strategic high ground and we had little possibility of beating the Chinese and Russians in a war. Our century-long hegemony was done.

And it didn't stop there. Obama had put into place all the ingredients for complete control by the government. He assumed, of course, that it would be Hillary Clinton at the helm. But it was Donald Trump and his cast of characters that had put into effect the emergency act signed by Bush 2, after 9/11, which had remained in place under Obama, who had positioned America “just one phone call away from martial law”. Now that call had been made.

Cash had been banned, which at this point seemed stupid. We'd found ourselves to be a paralyzed superpower and in response we

went after our own money supply? For what? To keep power for a few more minutes. And now we had bank bail-ins, where the so-called depositors found out that they were not depositors—one of last moves of fascism. Use the little guys savings to prop up a banking system gone bad. All the banks were insolvent and everybody knew it. If those banks had gone down in 2008, we'd be better off now. It would have amounted to the biggest debt jubilee and starting over in the history of man. But there would be no voluntary debt forgiveness now. For that someone would have to care.

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Even when it's not funny...

You gotta keep a sense of humor. Without it you're done. You'd really need sense of humor at a re-education camp because, when you take the rule of law out of something and direct the rank and file to use extra-legal means, what you get is Guantanamo. America isn't about education or re-education, it's about punishment. When they send you to prison it's a penitentiary—a religious place where you go to learn penitence.

The crossing to the mainland was rough but the ferry was good-sized, so it wasn't too bad. They had food on board and I wasn't seasick enough that it bothered me to eat. On the other side, the rain had stopped and we were soon on a bus to Abbotsford, about an hour away. As we came into the depot it was getting dark.

Abbotsford was much larger than I'd expected and I found myself at cross-purposes. I wanted Arlene to think I had a plan, but I didn't. And here we were at the intersection of Highway 11, South, where we stuck out our thumbs for Sumas, which on the map looked to be a town on both sides of the border. We got picked up by the first vehicle, a pickup truck, driven by a guy my age.

"Where you two going?"

"Not sure. Down to Sumas, but I don't think we want to cross tonight. Maybe find someplace to stay this side of the border."

"You Americans?"

"I'm Canadian, Arlene's Australian."

"Arlene's Australian, but you're American."

"I'm both."

"Yeah, but you're American."

I didn't know what to say.

"Lots of trouble going on up here," he said. "Not a good time to be an American in Canada, not if you don't buy into the bullshit. Lookout crossing that border if you're anybody they want to talk to." He gave me a serious look and then went into a laugh.

"They're a bunch of assholes," he said. I used to think it was just you Americans, now its all of them!"

I still didn't say anything. I wasn't sure where to go with this.

"You two have a problem with the border?"

"We're afraid we may be on some list," Arlene offered. "We're looking for a way to cross the border that doesn't involve cops."

"You're in luck. I live on Boundary Road with my mom, who sleeps with her head in Canada and her feet in the US. But even Sumas is under watch. We see the assholes driving around."

We ended up at his mom's house on Boundary Road, a nondescript house like you often see in rural Canada. No particular design—it could just as well be a mobile home but it wasn't. His mom was pleasant enough, and welcoming, even. Angus introduced us as more of the same—Americans who were probably wanted.

"That's the only kind we like these days," she said. "It's coming apart, and unless we have someone new to talk to we just drink a too much and watch TV."

"That sounds good," said Arlene. "There's lots worse lives now than drinking and TV."

"You two like a drink?"

Arlene demurred: "What are you having?"

"Honey, I spent most of my life on the sober side of a bar, and I can make you whatever you need."

We'd got lucky. They liked us being there, we shared values, and they liked to drink. Which added up to a better plan than I had.

Angus' mom made drinks and he was listening to a US broadcast on Coast to Coast. Into our second drink he asked did I know that station? Since he hadn't held back with his opinions, and I was slightly buzzed, I gave mine.

"Coast to Coast is the forerunner for CNN or MSNBC. It's insanity disguised as science. They talk about big foot and aliens as established facts and they have channels all across the whole damn country. It's no different from the bullshit about Hillary being the most qualified candidate in a century, or Russia stealing our elections, except aliens and big-foot are more interesting."

"Yeah," he replied, "it's all bullshit. Outside of Netflix there's nothing on the radio or the TV. We keep watching though because we're morons. And the reason we're morons is because my family's been farmers for almost the whole history of Canada. But Canada fucked that up, making my family migrate to the city for work. Now the life we knew is gone. If you were a farmer, and your family moves to the city for one generation, that breaks the chain. Missing one generation ends it. So I don't know nothing about farming. We just watch TV and drink.

Wasn't this what happened to the First Americans? We took their way of life and made them into fat, welfare drunks, instead of warriors. It happened to farmers. It was happening to everyone.

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Complacency begets risk.

Angus and Myrtle (great names from a bygone Canada) were happy to have us around, and except that we might become raving alcoholics, it was better than any plan I could come up with. Besides we had our own room. When we went out, we went with them, and they showed us places where you could walk into the States without climbing a fence. But, for now, I was enjoying Sumas as a town, having nothing to do with any country.

They both loved to talk, mostly Angus, and neither would touch a drink until the sun went down. After that there were no holds barred.

"What do think about this?" he asked. "There's two views up here. The people are suffering because they did this to themselves or, it's all part of a plan."

"The people," I said, "played along. It's like kids in a toy store. They'd take everything if they thought they could. But when I hear those commercials about Goldman Sachs coming into a community to help out, I retch. They destroy communities and countries by plunging them into crushing debt. They're debt monsters—inept, stupid, and avaricious. With a history of getting it all wrong. Funding useless wars. But mankind's history is one of fluttered handkerchiefs sending our boys off to war, whether they be dressed in World War 1 tunics, buttoned to the neck, with a steel hat that looked to be the rings of Jupiter, or camouflaged from head to foot, into a desert of lost hands and feet."

"You should be a writer, dude."

The few days we spent here were good for me and Arlene. It was cold and crisp, but without snow or rain. It was a different kind of cold than an hour or two west. This was bone cold. There we used to say that the moisture was what made you cold—here it was evident that the moisture is what warmed up the coast.

Now we were comfortable to go out walking by ourselves. We had seen nothing in four days that gave us pause. It was as if we were living along the most friendly, accessible border between two countries—possible. Walking along Boundary Road made it clear that we could stroll into the States at any time, but we would wait

for the right evening to do it. Until then, we were careful to stay on the Canadian side, which was marked like the Pacific Crest Trail—the signs were there but you had to look for them.

Then came the morning of the big snow. We'd been warned about it, that it maybe had to do with huge weather that had hit the East coast and shut the whole region down. There was speculation that weather patterns from the north had shifted and we were going to be subject to an Arctic blast.

But this was just a big snow—nothing earthshaking. We walked where we usually walked until it became difficult to see anything at all through snow that fell as feather quilts from the gods. I remembered years back when a family had tried to make it across Bear Camp Road, in Southern Oregon, and ended up burning their tires to keep warm, and dying trying to walk out. But today, we had on plenty of clothes, and though I didn't know exactly where we were, we moved back towards the house, building to building, staying away from open spaces.

We'd moved between three buildings, none of which were houses, more like warehouses that I hadn't seen before. At the last one, we stood under the eaves, as the snowfall finally relented and we could see the two other buildings. I was looking around to get my bearings when I heard a vehicle approach. We walked to the end of the building and listened. A motor shut down and there were voices—one telling the other to check the doors. They were too close for me to take a look—no more than a few feet from us.

I waited, listening, then I lay flat on the snow and looked around the corner at ground level. It was a four-wheel Sumas Police rig. From behind me there came a voice:

"Whatcha seein down there, partner?"

"Not much," I said, quickly getting to my feet. "Just wondering what you guys are up to?"

"We're just checking. In a big snow like this burglaries go up. With you laying in the snow, I'm wondering what you're up to?"

"Nothin. Walking. We got lost in the snow. You guys are allowed to check the Canadian side of town?"

"Nope, just this side."

"You mean we wandered across the border."

"Not by much, but you did."

"Sorry, it was the snow. Just aim us in the right direction and we'll get out of here."

"No problem, but you're trespassing, so I need some ID before I can let you go back."

"It's at the house on Boundary Road. Can you take us there?"

A close look at the guy was enough to know he wouldn't be helping us. He was dressed head to foot in black, in a bulletproof vest, with an assault rifle. Officer Childress. He didn't give off a protect and serve vibe.

"But I'm a Canadian and she's Australian. You don't have to make a big deal out of this. How far are we out of Canada?"

"You see that big pine?" He pointed to a Ponderosa not twenty-five feet from us.

He called for his partner. "Carl, you best come over here."

After few minutes, with snow falling heavily again, giving our captors the zebra effect, Carl was of a mind to let us walk, but Childress was unmoved.

"We can't let them go because they match two that have been seen in Sumas. And here they are across the line."

"But, listen to her accent, and he says he's Canadian."

Finally, Childress relented. "Okay, young lady, show me some ID and I'll cut you loose."

"Does that mean you'll cut both of us loose?" she asked.

"I need both ID's for my report."

I came back: "Officer Childress, there doesn't need to be a report. It's a blinding snow. I don't know how you found your way out here. As for trespassing, you know we don't know where we are. No crime's been committed—there's no reasonable suspicion we've committed a crime. Without a crime, we're just a couple of guys having a voluntary chat."

"I'm comfortable the chief will back me insisting on ID for a trespass."

"But there's no complaint of a trespass."

"Don't need it, partner. These are commercial buildings on our regular patrol, so you're just wasting my time. I need some ID or I need you to put your hands on top of your head—now!"

I'd had enough. "Let me ask you something, Childress? You know that what the government is doing, rounding people up for waterboarding, pardon me, re-education camps, is a bunch of crap. And guys like you who go along with it will never be able to explain to their kids why they went along with it. So we're out of here Childress, I'm walking to that tree and back into Canada."

Carl jumped in: "Don't do it. He'll shoot you." Childress had me turn around and cuffed me, then he turned to Arlene. "Place your hands on top of your head, miss."

She waved him off. "I've got my passport." He didn't run her. He told her to go stand by the big pine, in Canada. I watched her—she seemed years away. He searched me and found my Canadian passport.

"Now will you let me go back into Canada?"

"Yes I will, just as soon as I run you." He walked back to the vehicle. Soon he came back: "You're under arrest." He read me my rights. Childress was by the book. Now there was nothing to lose:

"Don't you have more important illegal detentions to take care of?" I asked. He paid me no mind as Arlene walked back into the United States from the big pine.

"You want me to run you, little lady?"

"No, what I want is for you to ease up a bit and let me say goodbye."

"Can't do that. You need to make arrangements to see him at the law enforcement center."

"You know I won't be able to do that. You know they won't let me into the United States."

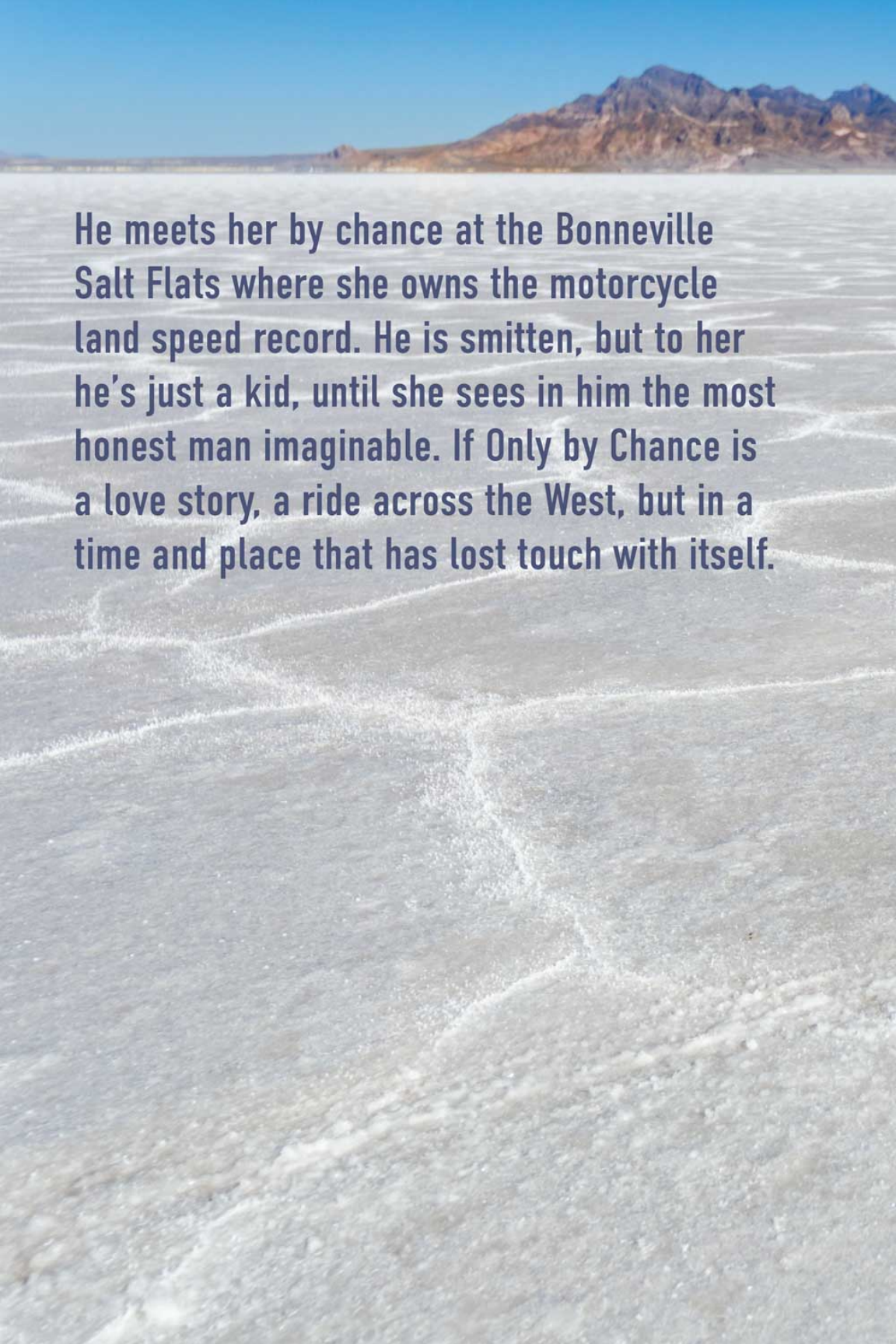
"Best watch what you say ma'am. You're making a case for me to run you, too."

"He's my boyfriend and I need to say goodbye. That's all. It's no hide off your knackers to let me say goodbye." Carl had been quietly watching.

"C'mon Chill. This is the second time you did this. You sent that Canadian girl back without even letting that kid get her address. What's it hurt for them to say goodbye?" Childress walked under the eaves away from us, maybe fifteen feet, and stood there, facing us. I was beaten, but at least I no longer needed a plan.

Arlene came to me, grabbing my jacket collar with both hands, almost lifting me off the ground. "You look beat up mate, so here's what you do. Stop with the whining. You think I go 300 miles an hour, feeling sorry for myself? You go get re-educated. You get re-formed. You get patriotic religion. You get right because you and me are what matters. Taking them on behind barbed-wire might indicate a second-rate personality. I'll see you back at the bikes."

Snow had buried the world in silence.

The background image shows a vast, flat, salt-crusted landscape, likely the Bonneville Salt Flats. The ground is a mix of white and grey, with some darker patches and faint tracks. In the distance, there are low, brown mountains under a clear blue sky. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

He meets her by chance at the Bonneville Salt Flats where she owns the motorcycle land speed record. He is smitten, but to her he's just a kid, until she sees in him the most honest man imaginable. If Only by Chance is a love story, a ride across the West, but in a time and place that has lost touch with itself.