For Robyn.

WOMEN I LOVE
(A Travel Yarn)

Barry Rosenberg

The characters, organizations and events in this book are real.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PRE-WORD

THERE WAS A MOMENT I knew for certain I could never make it as a full-fledged New Zealander.

Not long after I had moved to the area I've called home over thirty years now, I volunteered to help shift books, furnishings and equipment from the old storefront public library to its new, expanded facilities in the council building.

Maybe forty of us were involved that day. In typical Kiwi fashion, following half an hour of work a twenty-minute smoko break was called. I went off to wash my hands, then grabbed a cup of steaming tea and stepped outside. The volunteers stood on the footpath slurping and gabbing in a perfectly formed square formation:

Older males in the lower left-hand corner. Older females in the lower right. Younger (say, under thirty-five) males upper left. Younger females upper right. This experience was far from an isolated instance. Over my years in New Zealand I have noted with virtually a hundred percent consistency similar formations of gathered humans
at any number of unrelated events. I've often wondered: is such segregation according to sex and age taught in schools here? Inculcated nightly by whispering parents to their sleeping toddlers? Written on parchment brought over by the earliest vessels from Britain and South Pacific islands of Hawaiki? Reflecting upon these experiences got me thinking about my own relationships.

A happy solo, I don't go to parties, hang out in pubs, belong to clubs. Rarely anymore do I attend gatherings of any sort. I do, however, have a wonderful coterie of mixed friends. How can this be when I'm practically a semi-recluse?

Travel.

On the road, moving about as I do, no set itinerary, no e- or i-gadgetry, a disdain for TripAdvisor, Booking.com, AirBnB and the like, just a half-size backpack and the determination to pursue the one element most essential to my vagabonding lifestyle – freedom – I am open to meeting people. And of the people I do meet, a handful climb into my heart and become forever part of my one true family. Recently I sat down and made a list of my inner circle, around thirty.

Most of these I have little face-to-face contact with as they live far off. But when I'm home we keep in touch through email. (I have a disdain for social media.) Now here's the curious thing: of my nearly forty amigos, thirty are women, their ages ranging from teens to mid-eighties, and representing more than a dozen countries on five continents. I suppose this phenomenon is easy to explain: I simply find women more interesting than males, and those females whose friendship I have cultivated over the years without fail are extraordinarily engaging and absorbing. And in case you're wondering whether Rosenberg is some sort of gallivanting lothario, let me say that only one of these women became a lover, and she my partner. In my world, a straight male and female can be the best of mates without mating.

These, then, are eleven women I love/have loved, most of them first encountered in travel of some fashion, and listed here in no particular order or preference.

JO

SOME MONTHS AFTER ARRIVING in New Zealand on October 23, 1980, I came to a couple of understandings with myself. First, I wanted to stay here, live here, for evermore. Second, I would need to earn a living.

In the USA, I got by as a freelance magazine writer. Periodicals other than junky women's rags offering celebrity gossip and astrological advice columns were just beginning to appear in NZ. I applied at onesuch, showing my credentials in the form of a brief portfolio. Then another. Then a book publisher. Then another. What I didn't realize was that in literary NZ there existed (and exists yet) an impenetrable old boys network.

What I found instead was a new and decent professional women's magazine edited by an intelligent North Shore mainstream housewife. Right off she liked my stuff, bought everything I submitted.

One day I had this idea: I had met this person whose occupation was a little, eh, different from most of the women profiled in her book.

'Oh, I shouldn't think so,' she said, aghast. 'Our readers —.'

'Your readers are upper middle-class women who wish to be enlightened as to what is truly going on in their city and country,' I countered. 'You know I can tell this story without freaking anyone out.'

We went back and forth, and I most definitely was losing ground. Finally I said: 'Would you care to meet her?

Just spend a few minutes talking with her in your office. Trust your instincts.' I made sure not to say, Don't worry, you won't catch anything, which for sure I was thinking.

The editor agreed. I quickly called my friend, whose true name is Jo, and who agreed to do the story so long as she wasn't identified. Now, I would love to have been there. Jo went in moderately conservatively dressed, sunglasses, tats showing on her upper arms and back.

'You should've seen them,' she said later. 'The entire staff, each of them standing in the doorway of their cubicles, wide-eyed, like I'd just stepped off a UFO.'

The editor rang me the same afternoon. 'She's really quite lovely, your friend. You would never know —. Okay, do the piece. Just keep it, you know…'

That was around thirty years back. Here then is the article, word for word. That is, right up to the final few pages.

Jo

The room is small enough for a double bed – maybe two feet on each side around it. There's a red light above the bed with a dimmer. It depends on how I feel, whether I make it bright or dim.

There's a speaker with music – nothing seductive, just music. I can control the volume. Mirrors on all the walls. A little shelf with a bottle of oil, bottle of powder and a toilet roll. No windows.

At the end of the night, when the doors are locked and all the regular lights go on, you can see what the place really looks like. The carpet's holey, worn in patches, there are rips in the mattress when the sheet comes off.

This is the sixth place I've worked in the past seven years, and they're all the same – dumps.

The girls hang out in the lounge. There's a sofa for each of us. Most of them sit around talking, or watching videos. The clients don't see us beforehand. We don't parade around so they can pick one of us, anything like that. We work in turns.

My turn. The boss calls me, tells me how much time the client's bought. Thirty-five dollars for half an hour, forty-five for forty-five minutes, fifty-five an hour. The boss keeps all of that. The client has the right to refuse the girl he's assigned and ask for another. It happens, but not too often.

I introduce myself to the guy, ask him to take off his clothes, give him a towel and have him take a shower. This place I'm working now is more a neighborhood parlor. Everything is pretty honest, so it's okay to leave his wallet. Other places I worked, there was a lot of stealing. They could put their wallets in lockers, but they'd get pinched anyway.

Once, a guy came in with a wallet fat with hundred dollar notes. When he was in the shower I reached my fingers in and slipped one out. He made a fuss on his way out, but I just denied it. Later, when I looked at the note, it was only a ten!

When the client comes in after his shower, usually he has the towel wrapped around him. I take off my clothes, have him lie face down on the bed, ask if he wants oil or powder, then get on the bed with him. Most of the other girls just do a quick massage,

but I get into it pretty much. Some of them will say don't worry about the massage, I want this or that.

The prices – and they're standard all around Auckland – are forty dollars for hand relief, seventy for sex, ninety sex with oral. That's a bit of oral, with a condom on. Then I jump on top. He only comes once, that's all he pays for.

The guys – aw, they're lonely, unhappy, bored for the most part. Many work pretty hard. We don't get unemployed or dole bludgers: they can't afford it. Some are shy; others need to talk. It doesn't matter to me. All they're after, really, is a momentary release. No love, no kissing – just release. All the money from this, I keep. It's rare I don't take home a thousand a week.

At the end of the night, we clean the rooms. It's part of our responsibility. So there I am, high-class prostitute like me [laughs], hoovering the crappy carpet, on my knees polishing the mirrors.

I PICKED HER UP hitching. Jo and a young Swedish woman. Both wore heavy make-up, sunglasses, and looked either tired or strung out. They were heading for Gisborne. I said I'd take them a few miles down the road, to a junction where the hitching was better.

Not a word passed among us, until the Swede, Erika, asked was there any place she could get coffee? They'd been on the road since early morning. I said no, not around here. Then I heard myself say, 'If you want, we can stop at my place. I'll make you a cuppa, then take you along to the junction.' After a silent conference, they agreed.

Sitting on the veranda, they loosened up a bit.

The two of them had recently got back from extended tours of Asia, where they'd met. Returning home and seeing it through new eyes, Jo felt herself

freaking out. She couldn't handle her parents, friends or neighbors in their suburban ghetto. She'd rung up a counseling agency and was told to sign herself in to a drug-rehabilitation program. They were hitching to Gisborne to visit a friend before returning to Auckland for Jo's first counseling session.

'Are you doing drugs?' I asked.

'No. Did, in India, of course. But that was months ago.'

'Then what do you want with a heavy rehab program?'

She looked at Erika, back at me. Shrugged. 'I don't know what else to do.'

They stayed two days, sleeping in the caravan in my garden. They sunned in the garden, walked the beach, ate my vegan cooking. We talked. The third day I drove them to the junction where they could hitch to Gisborne. Less than 24 hours later they were back.

'Gisborne was a bummer,' Jo explained. 'Okay if we hang out a day or two more here?' she smiled. It was the first time I had seen her do so.

'I've decided I'm not going into the rehab program after all.'

Jo

I learned about sex at Centerpoint, when I was eleven. My family had a house not far away and my best friends at school all lived there, so I'd go over on weekends.

My first experience was innocently walking into a room full of writhing naked bodies. I just stood there, gawking, not believing what was in front of me. I had never even seen my dad in the nude, and here they all were — squirming pink flesh!

I went to the loo. I was sitting on the toilet – there were no doors – and this guy comes in, stands next to me and begins peeing, looking down at me and grinning. I felt embarrassed, a little sick – but I wanted to look. I'd never seen one before, so I peeked out the corner of my eye.

After a while, I realized the kids I was coming to visit were all having sex with adults. They didn't seem bothered, but I was. Couple of times my best friend, I'd be in bed with her and some 30-year-old guy while they were making love, me just watching, making sure nothing bad happened to her. I didn't like what was going on. It felt evil, this man doing this stuff to my best friend. I didn't want to turn my back on it because I suppose I was interested too. She looked happy – I mean, he was turning her on.

One day, a boy – he was eleven – began playing with me and he brought me to orgasm. I'd had orgasms by myself, but this was the first with another person. This boy would boast how he used to sleep with thirty to forty-year-old women. He knew what he was doing, all right. I thought it was strange but I wanted to do more and more. I wanted to do everything but full sex.

At school, some of us would get together and sort of do things in the PE shed – you know, open-mouthed kissing, feeling around – but Centerpoint was totally different.

It always seemed to me women were being used there, taken advantage of. As I look back on it now, I feel those women just wanted to *be* someone – be loved, part of the family – and felt like they had no choice, that it was part of the package they'd bought into.

My friend Amy, after Centerpoint, went with older men all the time, having sex every day, couple

times a day, and I didn't want that. Maybe it wasn't all that wonderful for her, because when she was sixteen she became a Christian.

I actually didn't have full sex till I was sixteen. I met this punk rocker at the Sweetwaters festival. When I told him I was a virgin, he was really gentle. Still, there was a lot of pain and I thought, Shit, I'll stay a virgin the rest of my life! I was supposed to have multiple orgasms and all – that's what I kept hearing from all the women at Centerpoint. But all I got was pain. And disappointment.

Two months later, I got my first job as a prostitute in a massage parlor.

SHE WOULD SHOW UP at my place unannounced, hang out for a few days in the caravan, then disappear just as quietly. Always, she had problems.

In the beginning, it was a boyfriend who was always stoned. So of course she got stoned with him.

'It seems stupid to hang out all day doing dope,' she'd say.

'Then why do it?'

'I don't know. He does it – they all do it, my old friends. I guess I just want to feel part of something.'

Once, she drove in late at night, brought in her woes. I read her the riot act. 'You're stuck in between and you hate yourself for it. Sing a new song, lady. I'm tired hearing this one.'

Next morning, she left before I got up. I felt awful; I'd been too hard on her when what she'd wanted was some understanding. I figured that was the last I'd see of her. So when she showed up at a weekend meditation class I was teaching I was more than a little surprised.

During those two days, she didn't say a word. Frankly, she looked like hell. At the end of the weekend, she came up, teary, and gave me a big cuddle.

'I learned so much,' she said. 'And I know I've got so much more crap to clean out.'

It was then that I began to get a true picture of her courage.

Jo

My family knew nothing of what went on at Centerpoint all those years. They're the type that, even if I'd told them, they wouldn't have heard me.

Shortly after I left school, I moved away from home. I made a down payment on a motorbike but couldn't for the life of me pay it off. I was a dishwasher for a week, a strawberry picker for two weeks. The money just wouldn't come.

I had a boyfriend then, and moved in with him and two girls who, I learned, were prostitutes. They'd come home at night and show me these big wads of money and in my eyes the till just went *ding!*

I thought: that's me, I'm going to do that.

I sneaked out one night – didn't tell my boyfriend – and went with the girls to their parlor on Fort Street. The boss said, 'Let's see if you can massage', so I gave him a massage. Then he said, 'Let's see if you can do this', so I did it, and he kept egging me on. Now of course, I know I didn't *have* to do that – the scumbag just took advantage of me.

When I began, I was really trying to satisfy. I'll tell you: that first client – he didn't know he was my first – did he ever get his money's worth! All the guys were giving me compliments and I'd think: this

is great, they're really loving me, accepting me, really liking my body.

After I started getting into the job, I began to really hate it. I didn't want to be like the other prostitutes, looking like them. I wanted to be different, knowing I *was* different — slowly, steadily, developing more hatred for what I was doing. I didn't want to do that, *be* that.

I'd become a punk rocker by this time, moving away from my boyfriend into a flat with a bunch of skinheads. To set myself off from the other girls at the parlor, their phony femininity, I shaved my head. I had to wear a wig to the parlor, of course. I'd change in my room before I left home. After work, I'd take off the wig, my frilly dress and high heels, stuff them in a bag and put on my Doc Marten boots, all my chains, leather jacket. I had two lives, and nobody from one knew a thing about the other.

The girls all had tattoos – pretty little butterflies, that sort of thing – so I went out and got these huge, blobby ones – real masculine tats, just to be different.

I was making a grand a week, and it just flitted through my fingers. I seemed to be supporting every skinhead in Auckland. They never asked where the money was coming from, didn't really care. Mainly, I was buying bags of dope — *huge* bags of dope.

I was doing a lot of dope then, plus pills – anything, really – speed… The other women were doing far more than me, some even shooting heroin. The red light hides all the tracks, the flaws.

The drugs were a necessary evil of the job. I used them to disassociate myself from the clients, the whole scene.

The boss'd make us do really bad shifts – like ten at night till eight in the morning — and we weren't allowed to fall asleep between clients.

I really hated that bastard. He was crude, manipulative. Every time a new girl came in, he'd have sex with her, and not just by himself. Often, he'd let the other guys who worked there – escort guys – share her with him. I did some escort, myself. I went out to all the flash hotels – Sheraton, Regent. Escort work, you don't even bother with massage, just say hi, talk a few minutes, he offers a drink and then down to business.

I left Fort Street and moved over to K Road, but got sacked shortly after I started. Another girl accused me of stealing a client. She hit me and I decked her, but in the process, the wig fell off – just as the boss came in. He saw the skinhead and freaked.

Fights happen a lot among the girls. It's really competitive in the parlors. A lot of girls, they don't have their brains screwed in right, because they're so drugged up, and will accuse you of all sorts of things. There's a lot of paranoia in these places.

Most of the women who work the parlors are pretty much no-hopers. They have nothing but contempt for the men who come in. They talk to them like they're kids: 'Now take the towel and go take a shower, that's a good boy. I'll be right here when you get back.' Of course, a lot of guys lap that stuff up.

When the women are together in the lounge, they talk about clothes or their new toys or their boyfriends or their kids. Most have boyfriends, sometimes husbands, they're supporting. Guys on the dole, heavy druggies. Every dollar they earn, they spend. New cars, stereos, flash clothes. They wouldn't be caught dead in the op shops, where I buy most of my stuff.

Now and again, you find one who's different. I remember one, a society matron from Remuera. Hobnobbed with the upper crust all day – sewing circles, charity events – then came into work the parlor at night. Another woman is sixty years old. Honest – sixty! Doesn't look anywhere near it. She's got a lot of regular clients, they always ask for her when they come in. She treats them nice, talks to them, listens. She's as much a therapist as prostitute.

But they're exceptions. Most are cold, calloused. If you took a count, you'd find the vast majority have been raped at some time. My first parlor, every single one had been raped – most of them gang-raped. I thought myself lucky; thought myself different. Then I realized that even though I was never raped, I'd been molested. At Centerpoint guys were always touching me all over, and me feeling I had no choice and letting it happen.

THE CHANGES WERE SUBTLE. She just seemed to have more confidence with each visit. As soon as she came in, she felt at home, and I felt she'd always been there. Also, she's a giver – always bringing things: food, clothes, bone carvings she'd made.

She was there when I threw a birthday party for a friend. I think she expected a house full of people levitating in the lotus position and chanting *om*. 'They're just people!' she whispered, eyeing the assortment of tradesmen and housewives from my tiny town. I reckon that was the moment she graduated from the caravan. Next time she showed up, she grabbed a room in the house. She'd become family.

Jo

I had one boyfriend for two years. He was on the dole, always on drugs, and I was supporting him. I'd come home from the parlor after having sex half a dozen times and there he was in bed, wanting it. What *I* wanted was just somebody to hold, and to hold me, after a hard night's work, but that wasn't to be. Basically, it felt like being with another client.

I had to cut myself off from feeling in the parlor – either with drugs or just sending my mind someplace else – so when it came to making love with Mike it was just an extension of my non-feeling at work. I'd make fake noises like he was bringing me to all these orgasms, but I never had orgasm, and of course he knew it. He'd always say how amazing I was, and it made me think: what a load of rubbish! All I felt was frustration. And I was angry, really angry at him. And poor Mike would feel guilty. I could sense he was feeling really inadequate. Both of us were faking, lying; feeling just awful.

Because he was my boyfriend, and the guys at the parlor were clients, I felt like I hadn't really slept with anybody else. I felt like I was being faithful to him. But what would happen, even though he kept saying it was cool, no worries, he'd get pissed off at me and go sleep with other women. I felt really betrayed.

One thing I didn't learn till later was that he was hanging around outside the parlor at night and beating up guys as they came out – just hating the guys who go into parlors because they provided a job I was doing to support him. He was happy to take the money. Well, maybe not happy, but he took it.

I know why I stayed. I just had to have someone to come home to after work, someone I

could actually be real with and not act any more. We tried to split up half a dozen times but kept going back, kept hurting each other.

Finally, I left the parlor, left the country and went to London. I got a job in a pub. Mostly, I was stealing things – alcohol, cigarettes, money from the till. After a few months, Mike somehow got together money and came over.

We were living in a big squat house, in different rooms. One night, I decided to sleep with another guy and Mike found out. He began kicking down the door. I wanted to go to him, but this guy I was with kept yelling: 'Carry on, babe! Carry on!' I couldn't believe it – he was getting off on the whole thing!

Finally, Mike broke in and smashed me, and I smashed him back. It turned into a real brawl before some others pulled us apart. After that, he got worse and worse – trying to commit suicide. I knew I couldn't do any more for him and decided to go back home.

A week before I left, I met this really beautiful guy. When I got back to Auckland, he was on my mind all the time. Then a friend in London wrote and said forget him, he's got a wife and kid. I was heartbroken.

I rang up this guy who I knew adored me. We moved in together straight away so I wouldn't have to be alone.

I can see now that my relationships with men have all been the same. The guys who turn me on are from the same mould: dark skin, smooth body, tall, slim build, short hair, little bums. Boys, really. And I always seem to wear the pants with them.

My boyfriends are always more emotional than me; they cry more than me. When I lie in bed with

them, it always winds up that they're lying on my arm, never the other way. I'm holding *him* all the time: he's not holding me. It makes me feel powerful.

When I have met a man who wanted to put his arm down for my head, it's been scary. I suddenly feel real vulnerable: oh no! I might need this man – and I don't want to need him!

The pattern has been that if he loves me too much, I'm in control – I can say goodbye. But if I love *him* too much, I'm out of control. He can leave and I'm left in the shit. This is what happens to other people all the time; I don't want it to happen to me.

My sexuality has always been confusing. In the parlors, I've felt like a sexual woman acting out this video thing, this porn movie. That's how a woman *should* be. With my boyfriends, sometimes I'd feel really sexual with them, loving – but it didn't feel like *me*. And I so rarely have had orgasm – it's like deep inside, I've resisted it, didn't feel I deserved it. I suppose I've always felt asexual: not female, not male. Certainly numb.

When the relationship with this last guy broke up, I went out on my own to try and find something out about myself. I was still into the punk scene but I was trying to change. I did some rebirthing, and that helped. Then I got into creative dancing and that opened up a whole new thing. I began to express myself. I felt much more feminine and much more whole as a person because I knew I'd been acting all my life. I was trapped inside these Doc Marten boots with this skinhead and couldn't be myself.

I took another trip to India and went to see a Buddhist monk a friend had recommended. I guess he thought a lot of me because he spent a lot of time talking to me – counseling – which I found later he doesn't often do.

Shortly after I came back to New Zealand I did a ten-day silent mediation retreat. It was excruciating. Every day I was positive I was leaving. I'd go out in the bush and scream and cry. Somehow I hung in there. But it was a horror. I didn't think anything could be so painful. Oh God, I thought, I'm so full of lies and bullshit – will I ever get rid of it all?

I'd been away from the parlors nearly two years by this time. I decided to go back. I know it sounds weird, but mainly I wanted the money to continue my spiritual growth.

It was a little scary at first because last time I was in the parlors I kept saying: Well, this isn't affecting me. This isn't hurting me. This isn't mucking up my life. Yet it was.

The difference now, I think, is that I'm there all the time. When I'm having sex with these men, I'm not away somewhere, thinking of what I'm going to do tomorrow. I'm not lying to myself any more, I'm not acting. *I'm there*.

Now, I can see the massage parlor game so much better, and it's really so sad. Sad men being mechanically released by sad women. What a pity it has to be this way. I've tried to talk to the women – instill in them a little of what I'm discovering about myself, try to get some kind of reaction, but there's just no light on. They're only interested in what they're interested in. They're not about to change, to see anything else.

I know that when I leave the parlor, this time it'll be for good. I should have enough money to do more work on myself, to travel, to allow myself to be open to whatever comes.

One thing I know is coming is a person – adventurous, outgoing, really independent – who knows where she's going and what she's doing. And I

see a man who's really honest and lively. I see myself meeting this man and being with him – traveling with him. A man who's already got rid of his shit. That's something I never thought possible before.

I LAST SAW JO in April. We'd taped a series of interviews. (You see the results on these pages.) Some finishing touches were needed, so she drove back down to the beach.

Coincidentally, I was in the midst of a very heavy personal crisis. I thought, this ought to be interesting: a reversal of the roles we've played the past couple of years.

I needn't have worried. She was brilliant, exhibiting vast patience and understanding for a friend old enough to be her father – certainly old enough to have known better than to get himself in such a mess. And as perhaps only a woman could who has seen heaps of life at its seamiest she helped steer me into a new clarity regarding my relationship which had just gone under.

Shortly afterwards, Jo did a series of rebirthing sessions with a mate of mine, who told me: 'She's really an amazing young woman.'

But I already knew that, didn't I?

THE EDITOR WOULD NOT ACCEPT my ending. Jo claimed that as her life had changed, so too had her attitude to her work and the men she serviced.

'But it's a happy ending,' I said.

'Is it? It has her still doing what she was doing, being what she has been. Our readers —.'

Yeah, sure. Driving in every day from her North Shore burb to the magazine's center city office and back gave her such an accurate picture of what her readers wanted to read. I argued. I lost.

'I like what you've done. Now change the ending.'

'To what?' I wondered.

'To what our readers want to read. A happy, loving relationship.'

Dilemma. In the States I had pulled more than one article when an editor wanted to change stuff far less essential than this. But I loved Jo's story. It was strong but ever so soft and gentle. And real. God, was it ever real.

I changed my mind. Changed it back again, then changed it once more. Yes, no, yes, no. Finally I gave in. Jo actually had got in a relationship, even got married. This to a Muslim man she'd met in Egypt and fallen madly in love with. I hated myself for writing it, tying everything up in a middleclass ribbon. I especially hated myself when later she told me that shortly following their marriage her husband, who turned out a psychopathic heroin dealer, made her his prisoner, at one point tried to poison her, and Western friends had to break in to their apartment when he was out and secretly escort her out to the British embassy, which flew her to London. I found all this out when she phoned me collect from there to please send money for a flight back to New Zealand.

But three things happened over a period of a few years, which led me to understand that my decision, much as it had hurt, had been the right one.

First, a few Auckland women Jo's age had read the article. Some years back these women had lived at Centerpoint and to the present day felt humiliated by the acts they had been peer pressured into performing there. The women got together and filed a complaint with the police. As result, Centerpoint's leader and charlatan guru was imprisoned for three years.

And it was three years later I received in a letter forwarded from the magazine (which I no longer wrote for). A young prostitute in the city of Christchurch had tried to kill herself with an overdose of heroin. She was recovering in the hospital, contemplating another go upon her release. Bored, she delved into a pile of old magazines sitting in the patients' common room. She selected the crumpled, dog-eared copy of a magazine bearing an article on another such prostitute whose career had ended happily. The Christchurch prostitute claimed Jo's story changed her view of things markedly. I now want to live! she wrote.

And lastly, Jo, who wanted kids but had been told a problem with her fallopian tubes would never permit this happening, had miraculously got pregnant there in Egypt, giving birth later in New Zealand to a girl who is now a beautiful woman in her twenties.

You just never know.

WHEN I BEGAN WRITING this book I asked Jo to detail the various hardships she has been through during her half-century of life. I knew many of them, but the list when she emailed it just staggered me.

I had an awkward upbringing in East Coast Bays, didn't fit in - felt different. My Father was always at sea, Mother always busy.

Aged 14 turned into punk rocker

Aged 15 got my first tattoo of many to come, broke my Mum's heart

Started working in the sex industry. Contracted pelvic inflammatory disease leaving me use of only one fallopian tube.

Continued working and used money to travel around world backpacking alone enjoying alcohol sex and drugs in exotic places.

Married an Egyptian man in Cairo at 22 yrs. He was very sweet until I married him and he became controlling and spent all my money. He set me to work by giving me stolen credit cards and I had to use them to buy gold. He would sell it and spend it on drugs. He became suspicious that I was going to leave him and so he drugged me. When I awoke 2 days later he had stolen my plane ticket, money, photos, clothes and jewelry. We had a vicious fight where I hit him with an iron frypan and he scalped himself and tried to jump out of the high rise building. I fled the country pregnant when I realised he was a drug addict and nobody would help me because of our Islamic marriage.

Made it safely home for the birth of daughter in New Zealand 24 years old

Met a recovering heroin addict and got a habit after using for 3 days. Fell pregnant so married him because he was English and his visa ran out.

Got mixed up in a terrible drug scene lying cheating stealing working as a sex worker. Hating myself. Had a car accident with daughter 2yrs and unborn son. Gave birth with broken pubic

bone and many other injuries. Had hit a truck front on and nearly killed us all

We all left NZ for London because our police records were getting bad and our heroin habits worse. Trouble just escalated and life as a junkie became unbearable with no family to help. I gathered the kids one day and sneaked back to NZ without husband.

Year 2000 gave up heroin using methadone programme which were the 3 hardest months of my life after. The pain and agony and lack of sleep nearly killed me {or so I felt}. Had to go back to prostitution to support children on my own.

English husband found me in NZ and begged me to have him back making promises of a happy family and he would give up too. Stupidly I believed him hence started years of putting up with him boozing cheating on me and physical fighting. We committed burglary together to retrieve my bone carving tool from his drug dealer.

Went to prison for 13 months. My son was sent to England and my daughter lived with my Mother. It was very scary and sad time in my life. I wrote a lot and drew pictures. I was 34 when I was released.

Husband kept staying at my house and bludging off me up to his same tricks. It took me a few more years of abuse before I finally got rid of him. I then realised how old I was and I wasn't

getting as much work. I tried dating but had no clue how to act anymore. I started heavily drinking.

The kids left home to live together and at 42 I became a Grandmother. I gave up work after being in the Industry for 33 years. I managed to get a proper paying job and had to adjust my life financially.

Now I was free to travel with nothing else to hold me up. Whilst in Scotland I drank so much that I got sick because my liver was infested with hepatitis C. I ended up in hospital having a seizure. After returning to NZ I joined AA but it did me no good.

On one of these travels in Thailand I had a terrible car accident in a rolled car. I broke my collarbone. In hospital in Thailand I was in so much pain with hardly any pain relief and massive alcohol withdrawals. I struggled with my alcohol addiction stopping and starting. My body was getting a thrashing because I was working a physical job too.

On arrival home my flatmate had a guy staying. We hooked up fell deeply in love and married a year later. I intend on being with this soulmate for the rest of my days.

I still hadn't given up alcohol entirely and each time I binged I would get sicker and sicker. The last time was recently when I binged after getting rid of my hep C...although I no longer had it I did have cirrhosis of the liver and my body

shut down and all my organs stopped working properly. This time I was in hospital for weeks. I also had a shoulder work injury which had made me drink more for pain relief.

I stopped drinking lost my job and now starts the next chapter of my life at 50 years old.

OF COURSE, THIS IS BUT AN OUTLINE. Fill in the blanks and Jo's life reads like a classic chamber of horrors. For my part, I will never forget how I learned of her imprisonment. I was holidaying at Byron Bay, Australia. A letter arrived bearing untold address cancellation and forwarding stamps, following me across Asia and now Australia. I had just begun reading the first of four handwritten page when the owner of my rented flat appeared through the screen door.

'Are you looking at TV?' he wondered, a somewhat curious question.

'You know I never watch it.'

'I think you should turn it on.'

'Why, has World War III been declared?'

'Very possibly,' he said softly, and retreated back to the main part of the house. I flicked on the set in time to see two matchstick people jumping out of the top floor window of a very tall New York office building. The scene was repeated three, four times. On the last rerun I heard a loud squeal from within the room. It was me. The squeal ended up in a wail, which began an orgy of crying jags that was to last three weeks. I still have no notion whether this was prompted by the event, by my dear friend Jo's situation, or some deep, deep well of primordial grief and suffering dating back to the beginning of time.

Jo's itinerary also referred to her job. What she didn't note was that, rapidly approaching fifty, with a body that had suffered ills and pain equaling a ward of a veterans hospital, she was the sole female employee in a lumber yard, where to negate the snotty remarks of male co-workers she felt the need to perform more than a single person's share of heavy duties. This included lugging around weights of over a hundred pounds. And when she was let go because her body no longer could take the strain, what was her biggest concern? That for the first time in her life she was dependant upon her husband – a man! – to provide for her fiscal needs.

During the three decades of our friendship, she would disappear for years, then show up unannounced one day because the stack on her plate had become so high and top-heavy it threatened to topple over and engulf her.

On one such occasion my dear friend Robyn, a former partner, was visiting. Now, over the years I had told Robyn many Jo stories, as they were the stuff of legend. We had just come in off the beach, and I ducked into my bedroom to change clothes. From the living room I heard female voices, one obviously Robyn's. I walked in and there was Jo. I believe she had henna-color hair then. Or was it blond. Or, Christ knows, blue. They were conversing like two old friends. Later Robyn remarked, 'She's so soft and lovely!'

'Yeah, well?'

'But what she's been through!'

JO THINKS IT'S QUITE STRANGE she should merit a profile in this book. 'I'm still wondering what I've achieved to be in this story. As far as I can see it's just the ability to stay alive.' Well, that too. But this

woman has courage that's unreal. That she has bounced back time and again from overwhelming adversity has been an inspiration to those who know her, for sure including me. Plus, she would have every reason to be caustic, callous, hard-bitten over the hand she's been dealt. Yet she is gentle, giving, loving.

As I write this, Jo is happily married to Tony, a kind and caring fella. Her kids are healthy and happy. It is an ending very similar to the one I wrote in my magazine piece. Only this time, thirty years later, it appears to be real.

TRAVEL YARN No. 1

DEAR PRIME MINISTER

ONLY TWICE IN MY LIFE have I written to a head of state. In 2003 I sent a plea to the former prime minister of my adopted country, New Zealand, begging her to exclude us from what I suspected was going to be a disaster of a war in Iraq. Must've worked because she did precisely as I asked.

Second letter was somewhat different.

I'd wanted to visit Bhutan for many years. This is the tiny landlocked Himalayan country which lowered its drawbridge of isolation a mere generation back, and whose then-king disdained monetary value as a domestic measure, instead claiming his country's standard to be 'gross national happiness'. Now, how could you possibly not wish to travel to such a place?

Only trouble, to keep out the riff-raff the country has a policy whereby you must pay upfront $250 per day just to get in. (Includes hotels, meals and all touring; still...) Plus they don't particularly encourage solo travelers. But when I read a most positive appraisal of its then-newly elected prime minister in the New York Times, I sat up and took note. And when the article claimed that the PM, who had gone to university in America (Pittsburgh, then later Harvard), loved basketball and jokingly had challenged Barack Obama, also a basketball nut, to a match of one-on-one, I couldn't help myself. Despite odds ranging somewhere around infinity to nothing, I cranked up the laptop.

Tshering Tobgay
Prime Minister
Thimphu, BHUTAN

Dear Sir

For some decades now I have had your country on my mind as a place to visit. There is just a tiny problem – two tiny problems, actually. First cost: $250 a day is just a bit beyond my reach. Second is the fact that your country makes it difficult to travel solo, mainly as a means to keep out the vagabonding riff-raff, and I agree wholeheartedly. However, I can assure you that at age 75, and living on a government pension, my riff-raffing days are long behind me.

In truth, I blew an opportunity to visit Bhutan free some years back. I was then living at Wat Umong in northern Thailand, and was befriended by a wonderful monk by the name of Venerable Santititto. He was invited to Bhutan, and asked if I wished to accompany him as a sort of man Friday. At this very same time I met a beautiful woman who wanted me to accompany her to India. Take a guess which option won out. Score: Samsara 1, Bhutan 0. Sigh.

Now, I read recently in the New York Times that you were quite a basketball player some years back, still love the game and recently challenged another former quality amateur player, chap by the name of Obama, to a game of one-on-one, but you have yet to hear back from the man.

In my youth I played a lot of top-level schoolyard basketball in Philadelphia. Well sir, may I request that if you do not hear back from Barry O, you consider a match with Barry R? I shall be most happy to go one-on-one with you. Perhaps it's been a while since you've seen a 75 year old with a high arcing two-hand set shot. It is, I assure you, a remarkable sight.

Hoping to hear from you on this matter of great urgency.

Barry Rosenberg, October 7, 2013

I STUFFED THE LETTER in an envelope, addressed it to 'Prime Minister, Bhutan', stuck on some postage, dropped it in a mailbox and promptly forgot about it.

Three weeks later I got an email purportedly from someone on the tourism council of Bhutan. Knowing how the cyber-crazies operate, I was about to delete it as virus-infecting spam, but for whatever reason one does improbable things, I opened it.

'The Prime Minister has instructed me to invite you here,' the letter said, 'waiving the standard daily fee of two hundred and fifty dollars and providing free accommodation at two of our finest five-star resorts for part of your stay. Please select dates and email a copy of your passport.'

You believe in karma? Well, neither do I. Except sometimes. And what I immediately reckoned was that either this was just reward for something really terrific I'd done in a past life, or I'm going to have my ass kicked severely next go-round. Like I cared.

I'd already worn out several miles of shoe leather in my half-century traipsing the globe. Seen it all, I had. Nothing new, few surprises anymore on the highway of life. Then I spent sixteen days in Bhutan.

And Bhutan blew me away.

(Actually, Bhutan is a name the English bestowed; the locals know it as Druk Yul, or Land of the Thunder Dragon. Leave it to the Brits to bland a place up.)

This tiny land of just seven hundred thousand souls, ethnicity a blend of Indo- Mongolian, Tibetan and a smattering of Nepalese, and predominantly of the Mahayana Buddhist faith, occupying an area of eighteen thousand square miles (halfway between the

sizes of Maryland and West Virginia), is by far the most outrageously beautiful country, with the most amiable, intelligent inhabitants, I've yet experienced.

The land ranges from the perennially snow-capped Himalayas (up to twenty-four thousand feet) in the north to semi-tropical in the south. In between are mountains and valleys and terraced rice fields and raging rivers and farmlands and untold villages inhabited by a variety of tribes sporting colorful traditional dress.

Fauna-wise, Bhutan claims leopards, rhinos, bears, nine hundred species of birds and more wild tigers than China. (The national animal is a takin. A *what*? Exactly.)

It is trekking nirvana. (The twenty-eight day Snowman route is rated one of the most magnificent – and arduous – in the world.) Great rafting, too.

The truth is, you cannot turn a corner in this country without encountering a scene that screeches your breath to a halt.

Shangri-La? Just hang on, there's a long list of no-no's:

Bhutan's laws decree no mining of their supposedly abundant minerals. No fracking. No drilling for oil. No deforestation. (The constitution ensures a minimum sixty percent of the land to be covered in forests; presently there's over seventy percent.) No chemical spraying. (Bhutan claims to be ninety-nine percent organic and working on the final one percent.) No fast-food chains permitted entry. No climbing the eye-boggling mountains. (They're sacred). No traffic lights. No buildings over four stories (and all must conform to traditional architecture). No advertising billboards. No gender discrimination in the government and private workplace.

Plus (wait, there's more?), education is completely free to the highest level for all, as is health care. Should local universities not measure up to your innate smarts, the guv'll ship you to one which does overseas, like they did the PM. And if local medical facilities can't fix you, they'll fit the bill for a top hospital in neighboring India.

I mean, the place is a Michael Moore wet dream.

All this goes on at the mandate of their present king. Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck is king number five. His great-great-granddaddy began the string in 1907. Poppa-king, the gross national happiness dude (who by the way married four sisters, meaning there are currently no fewer than a quartet of queen mothers), handed over the crown in 2008. A constitutional monarchy was declared, but in fact the king still is the power here. And the man, holding this bizarre notion that his wee nation's natural wealth should not be plundered for immediate goodies, rather be preserved intact for future generations to enjoy, appears a sensible, compassionate and adored head honcho in a time where a few other current world leaders might fall slightly short.

King Jigme has declared that, unlike Thailand, unlike Bali, his country is not to have its heart torn out by brain-dead tourism and acquiescence to rapacious transnationals. And the current PM, Tshering Tobgay, appears determined to carry out his monarch's edicts.

I met the PM for lunch. There were ten of us at the table, but Tobgay insisted I sit by his left hand.

He's around six feet, athletic, a solid-bearing guy around fifty. With a Masters from Harvard, the man is hardly a slouch. And he seems sincere in preserving his country's pristine landscape while looking for ways to bring in business. (One of his

stated goals is to have all electric vehicles on the road by 2020.) The number one industry currently is hydro-electric energy, all of which is sold to India. Number two is the potential killer of ideals. Tourism.

The PM and I talked. Not talked down, condescending chit-chat; rather gut-stuff like long-time buds. When lunch ended (the food was outrageously good), I stuck out my hand. Tobgay virtually brushed it aside and reached in for a bearlike man-hug.

Actually, I see this now as a very clever distraction, for unbelievable as it may sound, it wasn't until I arrived back home I realized that the one-on-one basketball challenge (which got me to Bhutan in the first place) had never transpired. And here I'd practiced for several minutes, actually working up a sweat, and on one occasion even got both feet off the ground attempting a jump shot.

The prime minister of Bhutan, Tshering Tobgay (c), along with his top advisers and a basketball whiz from New Zealand.

My take is the PM was afraid of losing face, thus the subterfuge. But then, he is a politician, right?

That aside, my punt is that Bhutan will largely escape the perils of tourism, will somehow through an inherent love of country and appreciation of its land avoid going the way of so many other lovely places that have fostered decay through native greed and

mindless selfie-snapping visitors. But there's another problem, and it appears far more serious: India and China.

Bhutan has been aligned with India since 1949. Financially, Bhutan could not, until lately, survive without India's help. But along with bundles of rupees has come a small force of Indian military 'protectors' in the area of a tiny town in the west with the lovely name of Haa, a narrow stretch of land between the two billion-plus-population giants. China, as China will and does, began building a road just inside Bhutan's side of their common border, which India has strongly objected to. And while this may sound like one of the goliaths is the obvious goody while the other wears a black hat, many in Bhutan, business folk especially, no longer view the two muscular nations in this manner. China is wealthy; their people, recently liberated from constraint against foreign travel, wish to visit their beautiful wee neighbor. Tourism again. (Of interest, Indians are permitted in Bhutan free of visa fee, while Chinese must pay the standard two fifty per diem.)

The question, at least at this writing (mid-2018) is this: Will the goliaths squash the new kid on the block in their efforts to one-up each other? Stay tuned.

LOMÉ

Barry Rosenberg

ASKED TO DEFINE HER in two words I would have to say Class Act.

The woman has grace. She is stylish beyond any measure. She knows fashion, for certain she knows clothes, knows art. And she really knows music.

She throws a party, you want to be there. Her parties take place in her living quarters, which is the basement of an old house in a leafy suburb of Brisbane. Take all the furnishings out of that basement and it's a huge, shabby space you'd think twice about setting foot in, let alone live and throw lavish parties. Storing junk you just hate to carry out to the curb on collection day, sure. Site for a party everybody and her cousin can't wait for the day to come? Um.

But Lomé (LOH-may) has made that space into something special. As special as she herself. It's a magical transformation. I know because besides attending a few of her parties I have spent untold nights sleeping there. It's my home base whenever I'm in what I know as the best winter city in the world.

Used to be, Lomé would throw really big parties: far too big for the basement in a house. These were adult dances. Folk, say, thirty-five to fifty-five. Or thereabouts. They would be major events in the city they call Bris. I would get letters from her prior to each event, along with stylish posters and handbills with a note scrawled Please Come! Climbing on a

plane and flying from my tiny beach town in New Zealand to the capital city of Queensland, Australia always seemed a bit much to go to a dance, so I missed the first dozen or so. Then I was flying back home from my standard Southern Hemisphere winter sojourn in one Asian country or another and stopped in Bris on the way. This was just a day or two prior to the night of such an event.

The morning of, I helped her shlep a bunch of stuff from her basement abode into what I called the Lomé mobile, an ancient monster of a gas guzzler with front doors that wouldn't open (you had to get in the back and belly-roll over seat backs to the front) and windows that couldn't close. She drove us to an old sporting hall, empty now and barren. We began setting up tapestries and weavings, wall hangings and art works and tasteful vases filled with beautiful flowers. Time we got done the place was warm and accommodating and lovely. The jocks who normally met there to drink and celebrate their sporting side never saw the place looking like this.

Early that evening we returned to the hall. She asked whether I would sit at the table just inside the door and sell tickets. Her two then-teenage daughters had done this in the past and, she said, were sometimes a bit lax in making sure all those who came in, especially friends, paid their dues.

The band was warming up. Superior musicians, no question. As I've noted, the woman knows music. Especially Latin/African, of which ilk Brisbane, a city of imports and refugees from South America and South Africa, have in abundance.

People began arriving. A positive energy beginning to form. By nine o'clock the hall was packed, several hundred. Now, I have been to such affairs in my many years aboard the spacecraft, but

nothing like this. Everything was, as it always is when Lomé throws a bash, perfect. I walked around, observed, listened. Of a moment a picture I hadn't expected formed in mind.

'Lomé, you didn't tell me these dances were meat markets!' I shouted in her ear above the beautifully blasting sounds.

'It's not!' she replied. Then she relaxed. 'Well, a little.' She giggled.

But the woman does not need to stage events to be who she is. She is the focal point for scores of people, most women, mostly very successful women business-wise, who come to her to talk, to pour their hearts out. Lomé is an excellent listener. And when she stops listening and offers advice, it's always smack on the money. And speaking of money…

'Why don't you do this for a living?' I often wondered. 'You're a natural.'

'I couldn't. These are people I know. How can I charge friends?'

Well, one reason is that most of these people are considerably well off, and Lomé is broke. Lomé is always broke. Because she is forever giving away the relatively meager income she derives from her straight job as a social worker.

HOW WE MET? She picked me up hitching.

She was living with her then-husband and their three kids on a parcel of land belonging to his extended family. Ever there were two people unsuited to be together in matrimony, Lomé and her husband were it.

She was born and grew up in Fiji. He's New Zealand European. For many years he worked for the UN setting up, of all things, chicken farms in third

world countries. They lived some years in Bangladesh, did quite a bit of traveling.

She is typical free-spirited Fijian; he was uptight, OCD, controlled early on by a strong mother. A condition which he laid on to his second mother, Lomé (and following their divorce yet a third).

After she and I became friends we would often sit in a café and talk about our lives and histories. Frequently she would point out the differences and discrepancies in her marriage. Always with laughter at the ridiculousness of it all. They had a favorite game. Husband would cheat on her. Then come to her in tears and confess. Whereupon she would take his credit card and buy herself clothes. A lot of clothes. Expensive clothes. One day she told me she had worked out how much money she'd spent on her wardrobe the previous twelve months: over a hundred thousand dollars. And this was during the 1990s, when a buck was still worth a buck.

'Hell do you do with all this stuff?' I once wondered.

'I like to wash the entire lot and hang everything on the line in the wind and look at them,' she giggled.

When finally they split up, Lomé took the three kids, a bunch of settlement money and some fine art works and shifted across the Tasman Sea from NZ to Brisbane. In around a year's time she was penniless. Not all of it spent frivolously, unless you count sending fortnightly telegraphic transfers back to the huge family in Fiji.

'It's what you do when you're Fijian,' she once explained, this fairly recently when she was scrimping to pay her rent. 'It's expected of anyone in the family who leaves and goes to live in the developed world. Besides, I like doing it.'

'Even if you yourself have to do without?'

She shrugged. 'We are all who we are.'

The dances are long in the past. Lomé realized she really wasn't earning enough from them to justify the intense labor she put into their production. Parties at her basement home, though, still go on. And they are events to look forward to.

Now, there's a flip side to the woman's elegant and graceful nature (many of her core friends, me included, are convinced she was past-life royalty). She's a bit of a space case. Whether it's her upbringing in Fiji, where clocks are made of rubber and time is ever so elastic, or the fact that her plate is forever stacked to Babel-like proportion, Lomé's word, though perfectly well-meant, is not always her action. Whether it's meeting you somewhere or picking you up when you've just trained in from the airport or coming to your home for the weekend, Lomé might, or might not, get there when she's promised. And it's not just time of day. Day of the week as well. Or never showing, never calling, never explaining. Anybody else, you'd feel forced to write her off as a friend. Not her. Never her. You just sigh and think, Well, it's Lomé after all.

Since her divorce many years back she's lived on her own, though of course there have been men friends. One fella she was semi-partnered with for nearly a decade was Australian Irish, a man who lived with his aged mother, who claimed to adore Lomé.

'She was very old-fashioned, very prejudiced, especially against blacks,' she confided a few years ago. 'We'd be sitting with her and she'd just go off on the damn niggers always getting away with things, lazy so-and-sos just living off white people's taxes.'

I looked at her. Lomé is an extraordinarily proud woman. An extraordinarily proud *black* woman.

‘And she didn’t think this would bother you?’ I wondered.

‘She’s blind. We never told her.’

TRAVEL YARN No. 2

KEEP ON TRUCKIN'

IT AIN'T ALL PEACHES and cream, traveling. Still, the best stories invariably come from experiences which, at the time of their happening, seem somewhat less than delightful. Example:

I'd just booked a flight to Siem Reap in Cambodia, home of the amazing Angkor Wat. Visa card in hand, I was about to finalize the deal when an attractive young female entered the tiny Bangkok agency and requested a coach ticket to the same place.

'Two hundred and eighty baht,' said the Thai agent.

I sat up straight. Two eighty? Twelve dollars!? My flight was costing twenty times that! Smartly, I stuffed the Visa back in my wallet, canceled the booked flight and purchased a coach pass. Little did I realize I was setting myself up for one of the most adventurous ordeals in my sixty years of traveling.

The journey, they said, would take seven or eight hours, during which I would get to see the beautiful countryside of these two picturesque lands. The only catch, a small one, would be the need to change buses at the border.

I boarded the coach at 8am, the oldest by forty years of a score of backpackers. It took a good hour to pass through the ugly urban sprawl of Bangkok. But soon as we did, we hit…the ugly rural sprawl of eastern Thailand. And why it was the driver stopped halfway to the border, got out without a word, and left

us roasting in the bus for forty-five minutes remains a mystery.

Border crossings. I've often wondered: do alien species, spying on us with perplexed curiosity from distant galaxies, actually see dotted and dashed lines criss-crossing our wee blue globe? And is this separation of land masses into little oddly-shaped box-states peculiar solely to our earthly form of insanity?

In straggly line we marched, bearing packs of varying size, shape and color through Thai immigration, where men in ill-fitting uniforms armed with rubber stamps and thoroughly bored expressions took an age to pass us through. Then we crossed an open space which at once became five degrees hotter, ten degrees filthier, and peopled with age-old child beggars and hawkers offering limp, fly-infested alleged foodstuffs. More slow-motion passport stamping by tired, unhappy men seated behind tiny windows, and we officially entered the Kingdom of Cambodia. Where we were immediately greeted by Central Casting character #4063.

He exists in every country in Asia. He is early twenties, handsome behind wraparound suns, wears a perpetual smile and speaks excellent English. He is street savvy to the nth. Western women tend to swoon over him, while the Western male slides between jealousy and awe. His name is Asia Slick and he exudes sincerity — even when you know he's lying through those gleaming teeth. As in:

The coach that was to pick us up? Well, normally, Slick smiled, there would be a coach, sure, but due to severe road flooding buses could not get through, so instead there would be a spanking new, very comfortable pickup truck to carry us across the wet roads safely as Noah's ark. But before it arrived, he would be most happy to escort us to his cousin-

brother's nearby shop where we might exchange currencies at a most generous black market rate...

The pickup was ancient, caked with mud, and bore hardly a square cm of fender that wasn't crushed or wrinkled. The dirty open bed was loaded with our packs, whereupon in climbed the majority of our group's young travelers plus two teenage locals. Me, I quickly claimed the inside passenger seat. Just behind me, squashed cheek to cheek in the narrow rear seat, were four lovely young women 'packers from (l. to r.) Poland, UK, Norway and Japan.

'Everything okay, Papa?' inquired the grinning Slick through the window.

'Yep, all good,' I replied.

Remember those words.

Asia Slick then disappeared, replaced by the driver. Definitely of a different mold: small, wiry, scarred face, heavily tattooed, wisp of a goatee. He was hung over, grumpy and obviously not relishing the task at hand. As a matter of fact, he looked as though a misplaced word, an innocent sidelong glance, might well result in a lightning-quick throat slashing.

From the onset, the unpaved road was a moonscape. That the truck had right-side steering in a country with right-side drive presented little hassle, as the driver occupied whichever part of the road appeared to offer the least offensive refrigerator-size potholes. Within minutes body parts I had not been in touch with in ages revealed themselves by screaming out in punishment. Behind me, the women used one another as crash-dummies. I hated to think of the poor souls in the pickup's bed.

And then it got bad.

The first inland sea appeared. It extended for hundreds of meters of road. It looked deep. Our driver lowered the window and yelled out. The two teenage

locals jumped down off the bed and began wading through the water, ankle-deep, shin-deep, thigh-deep, searching for a navigable pathway. But the driver didn't trust them; he too got out and semi-immersed. Then back in the truck and away we went, streaming through water that rose up to, and now and then above, the headlights.

This scenario was repeated dozens of times, the journey painstakingly slow, slow-stakingly painful. And then it grew dark. I mean, black-dark. No road lighting whatsoever, save for our own headlamps. Soon it began to rain. Hard. I dared not look through the cab's rear window to the uncovered assemblage huddled back there.

The first time the driver and his young scouts were swept off their feet, and then off the road completely, by the swiftly moving flood waters, I was aghast. But they recovered quickly, reappeared in the vehicle's lights, and somehow the driver navigated us through. This scene was repeated several times, and we grew to accept it. What was somewhat more harrowing was the first time, and third and fifth and tenth times, the pickup itself was swept off its tire-bottoms and sideways sailing we did go. I don't recall ever using the word *lurch*. But that's what I experienced every time the truck was swept off its moorings. Lurching. As in my stomach. What made these escapades especially terrifying were the several vehicles we passed, barely visible in the night, which lay on their sides just off the road like beached whale carcasses.

And then the motor conked out, quickly followed by the extinguishing of all lights. Totally dark and eerily silent except for the occasional gigantic fork of lightning followed by a deafening crash of thunder.

Now, I am not one of those males who have need to lend a hand when a vehicle is in disrepair. And those few of our team who felt so called were quickly shooed away by the driver. Face saving time.

It took over an hour. From my front row observation point I marveled as the driver used such high tech tools as a steak knife, packing tape and plastic bags, working off the light of flaming cigarette lighters held by his assistants, in several not quite successful attempts to get the truck mobile. At some point he even removed the bonnet, stashing it in the back, to provide room for his mounting concoction.

While all this was happening, a witch's hand of lightning momentarily lit up the sky, revealing the sudden appearance of dark figures silently, stealthily, alongside the vehicle. Not speaking. Not moving. Watching. Waiting. There were, I reckoned, a dozen men, shirtless. Wherever had they come from, here in the middle of nowhere? From what glimpses I got in the shadowy available light, they looked hard, these men; tough. I thought: among the twenty of us, we were carrying more money than these people earned in their lifetimes. I thought: who knows, really, that we're here? I thought: we could so easily disappear, not a trace. Later I learned that, coincidentally, nineteen others owned notions perfectly matching my own.

The truck's lights finally went on. The vehicle still refused to start by key, but our visitors obliged by getting behind and pushing until the motor kicked over. And off we went, leaving behind our audience, moving at a snail's pace in the perfect snail's environment. Sometimes the wheels staying on the ground, sometimes being swept drunkenly off course, the truck twisted around, listing precariously before regaining equilibrium. Muddy water sloshed in from

under the doors, filling the foot wells. Behind me, the four young women were chalk white, especially the young Japanese, who either was battling severe bouts of hyperventilation or suffering an asthma attack.

And then the truck stopped. We were ordered out. The water here was so deep, the truck now had to be winch-towed by tractor. A boat appeared, long and low and mud-encrusted. With tiny motor, kerosene lantern and a bandito-mustachioed man who demanded three hundred baht to carry us over this particular sea. Little recourse, we counted out our money. Nine of us went on the first fifty meter sail, nine more on the second. Two young French guys, however, followed the truck on foot, packs held high over their heads. I watched as they sloshed through water up to their chests.

We made it to the other side, where sloppy, slippery mud replaced the temporary lake. Then back in the truck and off we went. And if I had been unnerved before…

Obviously I must have fallen asleep because I suddenly woke with a start. The vehicle was weaving all over the road. And there alongside me —

I let out a yelp, reached across and swatted a shoulder. The driver, his dream rudely shattered, muttered loudly, shook his head a few times, stopped. Got out of the truck, splashed water on his face. Back inside, he put on a CD. Khmer hip-hop. Top volume. Nerve-shatteringly awful. ‘No prob-rum!’ He grinned for the very first time.

It was past 1.30am when the road finally cleared of water, and half an hour later that light appeared faintly in the distance.

‘Siem Reap!’ announced the driver. The promised city. Eighteen hours after we’d set out.

At a roadside guesthouse, ninety-five percent of the backpackers jumped out of the vehicle and immediately made for an illuminated outdoor dining area, demanding cold beers. The other five percent was led to a room, an air-con room with bath, you'd best believe, where, covered in mud and grime, not a bone, muscle nor joint untouched by fatigue and ache, I set down my pack and crawled into bed, asleep in seconds.

Somewhere on the road just traveled, a comfort zone lay quietly submerged under brown rushing waters.

MONIKA

Barry Rosenberg

MY FIRST TIME IN AFRICA was not going well.

By rights, all should have been perfect. I had been invited by a dear friend, a woman who many years prior had been in one of my early Alpha Mind Control classes. As a teen Naima was bright and sparkly, well spoken and adventurous: certainly not a combination that would have her leading a mainstream existence in a place like Philadelphia.

At age twenty she moved to Kenya, married a Muslim Lamu fisherman who already had several other wives and a slew of kids. She got herself a job at the classy Peponi Hotel, lasted twenty years there, during which time she had three kids of her own. Then one day she realized how much she missed her family in Philly and returned there not only with her own kids but a few of their half-sibs as well.

She frequently returned to visit Lamu, where she owned a house, and was forever begging me to join her there. Finally I agreed. The problem once I got there was this: her huge extended family was also visiting. The house being constructed of concrete and plaster, the noise made by all these people reverberated – ricocheted? – off the walls, through my earholes and into a brain that craved peace and silence. Although I liked every one of those staying there, my comfort level was rock bottom and descending.

While walking on the beach one morning Naima and I were approached by a tall blond woman. The two females hugged mightily, and I was introduced. An accomplished yoga practitioner, Naima had taught this woman the art some years back, following which she had set up a fashionable retreat center on the island. 'Come tomorrow for lunch,' the tall blond woman said as we parted.

Next day we walked through the maze of narrow alleys which constitute the Lamu district known as Shela Beach until we came to a high white wall. Naima knocked on a door embedded in the wall. It was opened immediately and we stepped through. We might well have been passing through the gates of heaven.

BORN IN THE NETHERLANDS in the mid-1960s, Monika enjoyed a loving family life: happily married parents, kid sister she got on well with. Did well in school, lots of friends, happy student days in Amsterdam. Following her studies she began work in the fashion industry as a buyer and designer. Enjoyed the work, the glamour of the biz, wearing the mandatory black, stiletto heels, driving an Alfa Romeo, traveling – the fast life. Then at age thirty-two she traveled to Kenya at Christmas to visit her sister, working there as a doctor.

'I went from the European fashion scene straight into the African bush. A completely new and different world…and I loved it!' Following ten wonderful days in this new element she returned to Holland to start a new job as head fashion buyer for a large retail chain, and immediately saw her life through new X-ray eyes.

'Suddenly I couldn't breathe. My old life, the only one I had known until just days before, began

suffocating me. I mean, really — buying your tenth black trousers or jacket: the meaningless of it all!' Six weeks later she had sold her house, sold her car, given away job and possessions, and hit the road. To Africa, of course.

After several weeks at her sister's house, Monika began what she called her real travel, around Kenya. She got to the island of Lamu on the first day of the rainy season. No tourists, just peace.

'I was sitting at an outdoor café eating some mandazi, the local bread. A man walked straight up to me. Out of the blue I asked whether he wanted to share the mandazi. He sat down and we talked. He told me his name was Banana. Okay, why not? Then he spoke about his dream of building a guesthouse and just like that asked me for a loan. I gave him most everything I had; my family thought I was out of my mind – handing an African you don't even know all your money?

'I traveled around Africa and Asia on my own for a year and a half. I thought a lot about this Banana man. Then I tore some ligaments during a ski holiday; that and just being tired of traveling I went back to Lamu on crutches. Banana had indeed built the cutest house and we moved in together. My sister came to visit and said, 'You can't live here with him if you're not married, these people don't respect that kind of thing.' So we got married, a simple ceremony which took place in the afternoon because that evening there was a football match, Holland against Argentina. And my new husband was rooting for Argentina!

'I left ten days later for the Netherlands as I was now broke and had to make some money. I got my old job back for a few months and wrote Banana that he had to make some money of his own so he

could come up to meet my parents. Which he did. By the time we flew back to Lamu I was pregnant.'

I HAD BEEN TO TROPICAL PARADISE RESORTS catering to tourists before, and mainly they struck me as over the top – too much flamboyant color in order to impress the visitors. Banana House wasn't like that. The color was here, sure, the tropical splendor, but it was soft and gentle and soothed you instead of blowing you away. Monika gave me a tour: the guest accommodations, tasteful, and the yoga center, African modern but quietly pleasing. The grounds were exquisitely maintained, and a swimming pool did not cry out for attention; it simply was there, fitting into the scene perfectly. Everything, in fact, seemed ideal. There was just one element missing. Here it was high season, there were twenty rooms, and every one of them stood empty.

A few weeks prior there had been an incident. The incident was blown way out of proportion, reported by a hyperventilating media as a Somali terrorist attack. Although it was quickly proved to be no such thing, panic nonetheless was the order of the moment. Banana House had been booked solid for the high season. Every single booking canceled.

I went back to Naima's house, to the amplified sounds of people I liked, went in my room, closed the door and thought. I knew Naima would be disappointed. Her concerns, however, had to come second.

Following morning I went back to Banana House. Monika said she'd be happy to have me there. We worked out an arrangement: I would teach her Alpha Mind Control and polish up the English on her website and promotion brochures and she would charge me her costs: twenty dollars a day for

accommodation that normally went for ten times that. In more than half a century of traveling, it easily ranks as one of the better deals I have come by.

NAIMA HAD BEEN SHELA'S YOGA GURU for eighteen years when Monika began practicing on the beach with her. When my long-time friend returned to America, Monika took over the role of instructing the foreigners. While this was going on, she became a mother, twice.

'When my first child, Jamil (meaning beautiful), was born in Lamu hospital there was not even a doctor in the night, only two donkeys in the hospital corridor. But all went well.'

Her second son, Karim – meaning cool, relaxed – was born at home while Banana was in prison for fighting with local police.

'Though life in Shela was beautiful and simple, I was having trouble dealing with a husband who was never home. Why, I wondered, could I not be like the local women, not caring about husbands always off with their mates, rather were content with sitting and chatting and cooking all day?

'I'd started to rent out the top floor of the house Banana had built. The tourists loved it, being in the middle of a Swahili village, guests of a mixed marriage. Banana was the cook and organizer of tourist-type activities.

'But being a Swahili man, meaning he was rarely home, it was not easy for me. Still I managed. I not only rented out our place, I began to look after properties belonging to the locals. The millennium economy was booming and at one point I was managing sixteen properties.

'Financially we were doing well and the kids were growing up in peaceful surroundings. We began

to build Banana House. We built it by ourselves and put all our love into the place. Unfortunately, we were unable to put it into each other. Then he went off to Holland to get Dutch citizenship, as we figured the future would be simpler if he possessed European documentation. In truth, I was relieved he was gone.'

She recalled standing on the beach in January of 2003, speaking to God.

'How does one grow spiritually?' I asked. 'Who are my angels, who is my guide? How do I do this? I never figured the answers would come so quickly.'

Her second son Karim fell sick. It started with the flu, his breathing difficult. When he became completely apathetic Monika took him to Nairobi, forced to leave her older son Jamil at home with the houseboy. Karim was placed in intensive care. He had liquid in his heart and it was removed by needle and syringe just in time. But a few days later he had a stroke – paralyzed on the entire right side of his small body. No talking, no walking, nothing.

'I returned to the Netherlands with the boys for Karim's recovery. Banana and I had planned to go on a short holiday to see whether we could once more become close. But Karim got sick again, so I chose to stay there with him. This provided me the opportunity to do a course called the Art of Living. It was the perfect answer to my questions of a few months before. The knowledge and understanding I gained were amazing. They enabled me to somewhat relieve my stress, deal with the sadness and anger and disappointment. So when I returned to Kenya, a new life began for me. For sure it wasn't all positive. Banana constantly lied. He told me, for example, he was going to India to seek medical help for a heart problem, but I discovered he had a girlfriend in

Tanzania and together they traveled to America. I was left caring for the boys on my own.'

I NEVER SAW BANANA THOSE FIRST FEW WEEKS. Monika's parents were there, and while at first they seemed puzzled by my presence, it took only a day or two for them to completely accept me. Her father was patient and pleasant. I marveled watching him work with Karim, teaching the ailing boy, now thirteen, to swim in the pool. Like me, the man was an intrepid walker, and often when I went for my morning beach amble of some miles I would pass him, this tall gentleman with perfectly erect bearing marching a straight line with his ski sticks.

Monika and I would hold Alpha sessions twice a day. In between I got to know the staff people, especially the man who served me breakfast on the common veranda. He was delightfully convivial and we were easy to bring one another to laughter.

Most days I would walk or hop the ferry to the other end of the island, to the real Kenya. I'd navigate the narrow alleys for a few hours, doing my best to avoid the young street men who did not quite understand the words **'**No I don't want any!**'** as they tried ceaselessly to part me from my shillings. Then I'd walk or ferry back, chiding myself for living in white luxury when I had come thousands of miles across the Southern Hemisphere to experience black Africa. But it was apparent my role here was to help this remarkable woman gather up her spiritual strength in order to pass on what she had learned to others.

'MY MAM CAME TO TAKE CARE OF THE KIDS, and I had a much needed three week holiday on my own. Yes! I could be Monika again, and slowly I began to feel I was not the boring housewife, that I

was not fat and ugly: all those things which come up when you are going through a difficult relationship.

'While the next some years were up and down on all levels, business-wise it was continuously up. We built seven houses in ten years, I started a school for local kids to give them a more international education, taught yoga daily, looked after our properties, ran Banana House, organized retreats, was active in the local environment cleanup activities.

'My parents would come for three months every year. My father was the best possible therapist for Karim, and my mam loved gardening and taught Dutch to the boys. During this time Banana would come and go – he had broken up with his girlfriend – but even when he was on the island the kids and I rarely saw him. I know he was having affairs with different women, yet he kept coming back to me. And I kept taking him back. I had to do a lot of yoga to get through it all.

'Just before Karim turned nine, life took another turn. He became epileptic. Early on I didn't know he was having seizures, and when finally I took him to Nairobi for medical tests they showed nothing wrong. He was put on medical treatment anyway, and a nightmare happened. He got poisoned by the medication. He had a very high fever, was swollen and needed to be in absolute quarantine as all his white blood cells were destroyed and any simple infection could be disastrous. He was flown to the hospital in Nairobi, kept on high alert and injected with very powerful antibiotics for ten days.

'The kids and I spent a year back in the Netherlands as I wanted to give Jamil more experience of Europe. Karim could no longer use his arm and leg, he had a heart problem, epilepsy of course, and since

he had stopped learning around the age of eight or nine required special education.

'I missed Lamu a great deal. Banana kept having affairs and I finally decided we needed to divorce. Banana always maintained that I had one bag of love; when I had Jamil half the bag was emptied, and then the other half when I gave birth to Karim, so there was very little left over for him. This was his way of thinking.

'The years of Karim and his epilepsy were not easy at all, as his seizures worsened, and after a few years he began to fall down a lot. He nearly drowned in the ocean, he tumbled into the swimming pool, cut his head in the kitchen, and so on.

'One time when some friends from Holland were visiting he nearly drowned again. One of the friends was a doctor, and it just so happened his brother was the top neurological specialist at the Netherlands Center for Epilepsy for kids. Miracles do exist! We returned to the Netherlands and Karim spent three months at the center. Throughout all of this my parents were fantastic. They supported us one hundred percent and never once said a bad word about Banana or questioned my having married him.'

I DID MEET BANANA TOWARD THE END OF MY STAY. A number of us were sitting around a large table in the garden having dinner under the stars. He was dripping in silver, rings, bracelets, necklaces; argued every point that was brought up, and never once looked at me though I was seated directly across.

I left Lamu and the beautiful Banana House wondering whether I had ever met anyone as beset with testing situations and conditions as was Monika. And she managed to struggle through every one of them.

It would be easy to paint the woman as foolish. (And a number of the locals thought her so.) Yes, she should've kicked out her unfaithful husband early on, and yes, she could've stayed in Holland and led a successful, if mind-numbing, life. But I witnessed the good she was doing in Lamu, for her guests and students, for her staff, for her adopted community. I noted how she genuinely cared for people, and despite the tsunami of personal problems and frustrations, she soldiered on.

Karim continued to get worse. He would become angry, occasionally violent. (Once in a rage he went at Monika's mother with a knife.) Then a CT scan revealed an enlarged aorta, and shortly after it was found he needed a new heart valve, an operation which could not be performed in Kenya. All this was happening at the same time Monika was organizing the first Lamu Yoga Festival.

'I will never forget the day after the festival, which had been so wonderful and successful. I woke at five, went out to what I call my magic beach and saw the full moon set at the same time the sun was rising. I was floating on the water and all of a sudden I felt a good-by from my mam. She'd had terminal cancer for three years, didn't want to do any chemo, merely to live happily as possible till the end. Which she did.'

Monika's most recent communiqué to me ended with these words:

'Yoga, business, courses, friends, traveling, kids…and life moves on.'

TRAVEL YARN No. 3

THANK YOU FOR STAYING HOME

I LONG HAVE MARVELED at the silliness of those who periodically shift themselves to another part of the world in hope of enhancing their spiritual wellbeing. Wait: that in itself doesn't indicate the presence of a silly bone; in fact, of all humankind's curious ways this shows a rare abundance of damn good sense. What's silly – hell, downright crackers – is when these same people use a singular event NOT to go to a favorite place, or worse, to pack up and flee whether the event was an act of the Big Bopper or supposed terrorism while they're already there. Call such action (or non-action) the Chicken Little Syndrome.

And while I find such behavior ever so peculiar, I have on a number of occasions been quick to take action of my own. So whether it's a tornado in Toronto, bombing in Bombay or assassination in Abyssinia, wherever I happen to be when a one-off 'disaster' strikes, I frequently have rushed to grab a flight and head off to the source.

I AM SITTING on the beachfront terrace of the world famous five star Peponi Hotel on the magical island of Lamu, off the coast of Kenya. It's a typical gorgeous day. A dozen or so sleepy dhows bob on the waters just before me. A few locals stroll the beach below in the typical manner of nowhere-to-go-and-all-the-time-in-the-world-to-get-there. Ever-present donkeys,

perhaps Lamu's most populous ethnic, clip-clop along. The delicious aroma of frangipani wafts in all around me. I sip my espresso (costing less than half a similar brew at home). Utter peace…a virtual parody of tranquility. And how many souls of the tourist or expat genres are present to share the experience? Not a one.

A while back an event took place on Manda Island, a few hundred meters across the channel. In no way shall I attempt to underplay the horror of what went down: a home was invaded, an invalid woman dragged out of bed and spirited away by goons with guns. (Deprived of her meds, a few days later she collapsed and died.)

The world's media, hardly needing an excuse to spew the traditional bile, cried Kidnapping! By! Pirates! A radical religious group from nearby Somalia claimed responsibility for the act (these characters will claim responsibility for anything: the Japanese tsunami, killing of Cock Robin, melting of the icebergs). The government in Nairobi used the happening as reason to invade the neighbor to the north (and I do not for a moment believe the malicious rumor that the guv had been plotting this for years, needing only a justifiable excuse). Whereupon otherwise intelligent, sensible and discerning folk, to whom Lamu with its marvelous Shela Beach has been a mainstay of enjoyment for years, in many cases decades, canceled, bailed…FREAKED.

Lamu. I'm awake at five, my alarm clock the first call to prayer from the nearby mosque. I'm a few minutes from the beach along winding, extremely narrow paths where you encounter gorgeous kids headed to madrassa, donkeys, morning fish vendors, donkeys, old women in their black bui buis, donkeys…

With my keen sense of direction it takes me barely a week to master the zigzag tramp without getting hopelessly lost or doubling back on myself half dozen times. But getting lost, especially in ever-so-slow rural Africa, is the pathway to discovery.

The word is *jambo*. Means hello. I make sure to exchange it with every local I happen past. Another often-heard word is *karibu* – welcome. But the one that initially knocked me for a loop was 'Hi, Barry!' Wha-a?? How the hell do you know —? Until it was explained that *habari* is Swahili for, simply, how are you. Ah.

Anywhere else, certainly in my original home town of Philadelphia, encountering a couple large black guys wielding big sticks might be incentive to finding an alternative direction. Here, they're helpful security people hired by the Peponi to patrol the beach.

The beachfront strip of Shela, as well as Manda, brings to mind a quote from Auberon Waugh: 'If at a party you're introduced to an architect, punch him.' The quite tasteful Peponi, spread about the waterfront but mostly hidden behind magnificent tropical greenery, is the exception. But around the Peponi, a kind of can-you-top-this display of arrogant architectural yuk prevails, topped off by an albino Darth Vader edifice owned by – who else? – Americans, from – where else? – California. Because. They. Can.

Except they can't because fear has rendered virtually all these homes people-less. Well, not totally, as the owners of these visual monstrosities seem to have retained full staff to keep the pools filled and clean.

My beach experience in Lamu is limited to hour-long strolls, followed by dips in the warm-

enough-to-poach-an-egg sea, at sunrise and again just before sunset. Rest of the day is spent in the island's interior, where the people live and reality thrives. I'm plunked in the middle of a typical third world environment of kids crying, grownups yelling, cats screeching, donkeys braying.

A few times a week I'll head off to Lamu town, a different kettle entirely from Shela. Lamu isn't very big, population around twenty thou, but is it ever busy. Soon as I appear on the promenade, I am a magnet for 'hello-my-friend': human leeches who ever so hospitably volunteer to escort me to places I don't wish to go, procure for me unheard-of deals on commodities I wouldn't dream of buying. They're as easy to get rid of as a visiting mother-in-law, but I am assured by locals they pose no threat, so please yourself, guys.

The town is everything that is Africa, condensed into a couple hours' meander. I mooch through shops, grab finger food wherever it looks quasi-healthy, swivel-hip pack-laden trotting donkeys. Mostly, I'll find a place in a spot of shade to watch the local people: my premier roadie profession. I do the town at morning before the heat grows too intense, making sure to get back to the dock by midday to catch the return boat to Shela. Afternoon is passed by a nap, a read, check of email and occasional online glance to make sure the rest of the world is still out there, somewhere. Peel me a, well, mango will do.

Sunset beach walk, swim, an hour at the Peponi sipping a drink and ogling the most incredible light I've ever seen. Home, meal, asleep by nine.

Lamu, I can say for certain, is good anytime, at whatever price you can afford. But thanks to the human condition called paranoia, it's especially good following a chunk of sky falling in.

Barry Rosenberg

ANUSHA

Barry Rosenberg

JUST BE YOURSELF

by Anusha P.

(Published in Anusha's college yearbook, 2017)

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING in life, which most people never quite understand, is to be true to yourself. Often you are playing a role as if you're in a stage play or movie, but is this really YOU? It's so easy to lose sight of this. There are three main questions in life that you should ask of yourself every day: 1) Who am I? 2) Why am I here? 3) Where am I going? These questions provide the basis of your integrity. On various social media you can see the roles people play by what they post. They are saying: 'Look at me, this is what I am doing, isn't it terrific, aren't I wonderful, aren't I important!' But is this truly you? For example, are the results of an exam in school who you really are? If you know yourself, the exam, and the results you achieve, do not define you. Of course you should do your best, but don't allow the results to define you. Try not

to limit yourself and always be satisfied with who you are.

I don't know the key to happiness, but being true to yourself obviously is a major part. If you follow your heart (for right work) you give yourself the opportunity to be successful and happy. You can have red hair, wear any clothing you feel comfortable in so long as you are contented. This is all that matters. If you keep worrying what others think, you are bound to be unhappy and keep yourself from shining. You may worry that you'll be all alone, but remember that the sun is alone yet is shines! It spreads light to every corner. So be yourself and be true to yourself. There is no one else like you in this world and that is great, isn't it?

'*HAJUBA*!!' The small, black haired, sparkly eyed child was sitting on the floor, angled away from me as I stepped through the doorway. Twisting around to see who had just come into her family home, she grinned and shouted that word. The grin grew wider as she cried it out again.

'*Hajuba*!!'

I had an idea what it meant – short for *hajurabuba*, the Nepalese word for grandfather. I simply had no notion why she would ascribe it to me. Besides being of different race and skin color, I had never laid eyes on her before, nor she me. I shifted my focus beyond her, to her parents, who appeared just as mystified.

I knew the father, of course. We had been friends since I'd first encountered him when he was the twenty-three year old manager of his brother's hotel in Nepal's second largest city of Pokhara. An intelligent and resourceful young man who, it was apparent early on, would quickly ascend beyond his

current position. Which most certainly he has, now a successful Kathmandu lawyer. I later met his lovely wife, and as her English then was limited, our relationship was not nearly so close. This was the first time I was visiting them since their daughter's birth.

'*Hajuba*!!' again the happy three year old girl on the floor cried out.

'Uncle, we never said a word to her,' the father now explained, more embarrassed than perplexed. 'Not a mention of you, ever!'

Well, things happen for a purpose, I suppose.

I CLAIM THREE SURROGATE Asian granddaughters, all within two years of one another. Though she's the youngest of the three, I've known Anusha the longest. At the same time I've spent the least amount of time with her, and I'm not at all happy about that. The reason is this: the city where she lives.

Way back, hippie days, Kathmandu was a magical place. Peaceful, clean, laid back. I was only a sporadic doper so I couldn't be counted upon to spend months there, as many did, continuously zonked on prime hashish. The joke was – the *reality* was – a cup of chai back then was so cheap that instead of giving you change for the smallest denomination of Nepali coins, a paisa, you'd get instead a clump of hash.

For me the true joy of K'du was Durbar Square. Every evening the local men, older ones mainly, would congregate there in their colorful canoe-shaped caps and smoke and sing. Sadhus and gurus, real ones, not the fakes who abound there now and demand money to have their pictures taken, could be found everywhere. The main temples of the city, Pashupatinath, Boudhanath and Swayambhunath, were quiet peaceful places to hang out during the day. (Just don't feed the monkeys!) A decent room and

good meals might run you a dollar daily. Life was good.

No longer. The city is overcrowded, filthy, lung-damagingly polluted and heartbreakingly full of wretched street kids sniffing glue and petrol. The apartment Anusha and her family share – there are now a sister and brother – is too small to accommodate a visitor, and the K'du hotel scene is geared towards adventurers and climbers and not to my liking. Were she in, say, Australia, a three hour flight from my New Zealand home, I'd have no problem putting up with uncomfortable circumstance to see her. But Nepal means three flights over seven time zones. So since our initial meeting — my indoctrination as her *hajurabuba* — I've seen and spent face time with my prime granddaughter just twice. But we keep in constant email touch, and through this medium, and her ever-increasing fluency with English, I've experienced the vast pleasure of watching her grow into womanhood.

When the devastating earthquake struck Kathmandu in April, 2015, fearing the worst I was desperately emailing and phoning her daily. It took nearly two weeks before I finally received a reply.

NAMASTE GRANDPA. How are you? We are all fine here. I am very sorry for the late reply. We are back in our home. In fact we were living in our home from the fifth day of the deadliest earthquake of April 25.

The house we are living in has not got much damage except some small cracks, which is normal after the 7.8 and 7.3 magnitude quakes and small aftershocks.

We are all safe, Grandpa. Though we are in home, there was no internet connection and quite often no electricity. Due to no net

connection we were not in touch with you for many days. We really are sorry Grandpa.

Grandpa, last week we went to Malekhu, Dhading, to our maternal uncle's house. As there was no internet in the house we could not contact you there as well.

Grandpa, seven days in Dhading was so cheerful, however, we could never sleep patiently at night. The unexpected storm did not let us sleep.

In such condition, mummy and baba were not with us and we (brother and sister) were supporting the bamboo, which gives support to the tent. We were all wet. When the rain stopped, we hurriedly went to our house.

Grandpa, we all are heading toward a normal life following our daily lifestyle before April 25. However, we are still afraid deep inside our heart as aftershocks can be felt till now.

Grandpa, we are really missing you. Grandpa, do not worry about us. We are all safe. Good bye.

Anusha

A FEW MONTHS LATER I received another long letter detailing further problems in her small beleaguered country.

Namaste Grandpa and good afternoon. I missed you so much. We are all fine here. Hope you are also fine.

Grandpa, Nepal is facing a serious crisis. I don't know why India imposed so-called unofficial blockade to Nepal. Since the blockade, there is shortage of fuel (petrol, diesel, kerosene), food,

oil, and most of the other daily basic needs There is even a lack of medicine.

Recently, there was the news of shortage of vaccine, which should be given to small babies.

Grandpa, the blockade has changed our happier life into stressful and sad life. There is less food to eat, less vehicles to travel in.

Even some of the people do not have gas cylinders to cook food. Grandpa, school life has also been affected. Due to lack of food and fuel, schools are closed. Schools and colleges do not have fuel in their bus to receive their students, nor do they have sufficient food to feed all the students.

On top of that, price of the daily basic needs have touched the sky. Everything is so expensive here.

We customers are being cheated daily but probably no one can do anything as everyone wants to survive and they need their basic needs.

Probably, everyone is the victim of this crisis and I am no different Grandpa. Grandpa, when India imposed blockade there was only two weeks remaining for the board exam (which had to be finished in May but the deadliest earthquake in April caused our exam shifted to October). My test centres were very far from my home.

There was no petrol so vehicles in the road were very less. However, baba managed some petrol to reach my test centre for some exam but when returning back me and my friends came home by walking for almost two hours after finishing our exam paper. We could not

concentrate on the exam because of the difficulty to reach the test centre.

However, my exam has finished Grandpa. Grandpa, the crisis has even affected our festivals (Darshain, Tihar and Chath). This year Darshain was a very different experience, probably for everyone. Even in the time of difficulty we shared happiness and joy.

Grandpa, this year has been unlucky for all Nepalese people and our beautiful country Nepal. At the start of the year 2072 BS the 7.8 magnitude earthquake hit Nepal and now the blockade by India has added salt to our unhealed pain.

After the earthquake most of the people have not got settled and this unofficial blockade has worsened the situation. There is no work and no money. Tourism in Nepal has been affected. Economy of the country is getting low day by day. Grandpa, I don't know how we Nepalese can overcome this problem. Hope Nepalese government and people will negotiate with India and solve the problem. Nepal is asking for help with other countries, so hope they will help as well.

Grandpa, we are missing you. Grandpa, is your new book complete?

Anusha

THREE YEARS HAVE PASSED since those letters. (Both were published in my New Zealand town's local paper.) Conditions have improved slightly in Nepal, and, I do believe, markedly for Anusha. We correspond regularly, and now and again I get a report of work she has done in school. At this writing she is just finishing her third semester in computer science,

on her way to a bachelor's degree. The essay she wrote for her university yearbook, Just Be Yourself (the opening paragraphs reprinted here), was result of a dialogue she and I had on the anxiety she so often experiences prior to an upcoming exam.

It appears she got her *hajuba*'s message to place the exam in its proper perspective, embellished it with her own thoughts and experiences and passed it along nicely.

TRAVEL YARN No. 4

INDIA, Part 1

Barry Rosenberg

I

I'M IN INDIA. For the umpteenth time. It's an addiction I hope never to detox from.

People who travel here either love it or hate it. If you're a tourist, have the need to be at a certain place by a certain time, you definitely will be one of the haters. Even with all the new technology (and India supposedly leads the world), nothing works here as it should. Or when it should. But if you're a type who can live without rigid itineraries, India is as John Lennon wrote in his very last recorded song: 'Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.' Substitute India for Life and you've got it. For India is THE land where the unexpected is the norm, and invariably exceeds the planned.

Actually, I'm in the part of India that is the least Indian. Oh, nothing works as/when it should just like the rest of the country. But this area, called Ladakh, in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, is different in a number of ways. It doesn't have monsoons, for example. Where the rest of India is hot and sweaty with daily torrential downpours in summer, Ladakh is largely rain-free. In fact, the only real time to be here is June through August. Winter gets a little cold. Minus 25-35C cold. Which makes the roads in and out impassable. Which doesn't matter all that much since few arrive overland. To get here, you fly in. But since the capital Leh, where Ladakh's sole airport is located, is situated amongst the

country's highest mountains, Indian pilots must navigate through what looks – scarily so from the passenger section — like the very tiny hole of an obese, jagged-topped bagel.

Leh is eleven thousand five hundred feet above sea level. I'm told five percent of those who fly in get hit with altitude sickness. I don't wish to brag, but. First time here, totally unexpected, the moment the plane's in-flight controlled air system was shut down, I suddenly felt like every last bit of my energy was being sucked out. Am I dying? I wondered. At the very beginning of a much looked forward to journey? Definitely bad form.

In all but the rarest of cases recovery takes a few days, during which time you're told to rest, drink lots of water, and rest some more. All the while feeling like a building has fallen on your psyche. Of course, me being me, I haven't exactly followed sound advice. Early morning here is so stunning, so absolutely mind-blowing, I just had to get out and, gasping and puffing, walk half an hour up to the local Buddhist stupa to catch the sun rising over the eastern snow peaks and creating a magnificent silence and light spectacle upon those in the west.

And speaking of stupas, I have just noted the biggest difference between Ladakh and the rest of India: the area is almost wholly Buddhist. Very much similar to the Tibetan variety, meaning the place is considerably laid back. No elephants or monkeys, no squatting citizens unashamedly depositing last night's curry in the streets.

So what, exactly, has brought me back here? Family. Four years ago upon my initial visit I had found a small, out of the way guest house fifteen minutes' walk from town center. Almost immediately, I was adopted by the seventeen year old daughter,

obviously in need of a grandpa. The rest of the family was equally convivial. I've had other experiences in my fifty-plus years of travel where similar attention existed at homestays but which I sensed was simply good business practice. Not these folks. I stayed a month and the feeling just got better and better. So when the seventeen year old high school student, who'd somehow become a twenty-one year old university student in Delhi, wrote a couple months back that she'd be home on holiday for all of June, and 'I'd love to see you, Grandpa!' this hardened, grizzled roadie melted like ghee.

Like so many other preferred cities in the world, Leh is currently experiencing growing pains. The town's population is around a hundred thousand, and the streets and roads, constructed when a goodly number of vehicles were drawn by bullock and yak, can no longer accommodate the rapidly expanding auto traffic.

Which is why I shy away from the streets in my walks. Leh has an amazing network of tiled alleys. They curve and bend and crisscross, an arterial maze that is the town's life's blood. Narrow streams of rushing water flow alongside and even underneath. Ladakhis generally being friendly, when you pass a local you invariably get a smile and the all-encompassing greeting of *Juley*! (Note: Ladakhis don't beg. There are beggars here, though: they're bused in from real India every summer to ply their trade.)

As with altitude sickness, I am afflicted with another infirmity. I have the world's worst sense of direction. Give me a typical Western grid system of streets, I'm a walking GPS. Curlicue alleys, not so much. I'm forever getting bamboozled, often find myself in a direction opposite to that which I knew

with absolute certainty I was headed. Other than feeling like a doof, I'm not all that bothered. I have no qualms asking directions, and, this being India, where my confusion takes me quite often beats the destination I had intended.

II

AND THEN, COMPLETELY UNEXPECTED, on my eighth day away from home and sixth in Leh, I had my moment.

The day began a few minutes past five when daylight seeped through the thin red curtains into my brain like a bugler's call. Toilet, meditate, stretches, slip on a sweatshirt and hit the road. Still experiencing slight aftereffects of my losing battle with the rarified air of this three thousand five hundred metres above sea level desert, I made the mostly uphill trek to the stupa non-stop. As always, I spent several minutes at the lookout ogling the majestic snow peaks and allowing the scene to softly stroke my being before heading back to the guest house.

The previous day had been my best yet. I'd been moaning to myself about the weather, unseasonably cool; about being stuck here when I could be on a tropical island or beach; about my curious relationship to the surrogate granddaughter, who can be a handful; about her momma, a small, gracious woman who is forever feeding me her delicious cuisine far in excess of my needs. (Try saying no. Try leaving food over.)

Still, the day went well. I spent two long sessions alone with the granddaughter, first enduring an onslaught of her woes (parents take her for granted, suffocate her with controlling attention, favor her seven-years-younger sister, yada yada). Then she

abruptly took leave of her poor little rich girl monologue to reveal that some years before she had prayed to the Lord Buddha to bestow upon her a loving and understanding grandpa (the real ones had died early in her life). The Buddha, she said, had never once failed to answer her pleas. This must have been a toughie for it took the Bude Dude an extended while (having a few more pressing calls), but then one day four years back this funny old fella from New Zealand by way of Philadelphia staggers in the door, carrying a mid-size backpack and giant-size dose of oxygen deprivation.

(This Lord Buddha biz: On the one hand, as a card carrying atheist I don't buy into the praying to a higher being bit. On the other, well, I taught for several years and diligently apply to myself the pseudo-scientific practice of mindpower. So whether it was the spirit behind a billion lawn ornaments, or the universal mind's energy force which in 2013 deposited me in this remote part of northern India…really, does it matter? Only in that, if indeed the former proves the winning entry, might I claim travel expenses?)

We met up again that afternoon when she'd finished her daily shift tutoring a couple local kids. She took me to her favorite café, which, she noted, was started up by a Leh monk, all profits going to some worthy cause or another. The place at once felt welcoming: restored old timber ceiling, floor and beams; refurbished two hundred year old wood and yak-poo burner; comfortable chairs or seating on thick Kashmiri carpets; the menu an assortment of coffee, herbal teas, smoothies and cakes. The ideal venue for students to gather and exchange the latest gossip, pop star rumors and what was hot on the hand-held-gadget social media circuit.

The granddaughter was in a positive frame, and we raved, laughed and snapped the obligatory interminable selfies. I had to acknowledge that my grumpiness of the past some days was rapidly being washed away by the genuine feeling I had for this young person. A drama queen at times, she was as well super bright, didn't engage in any of the fashionable bad habits, and owned a fresh determination to withstand her parents' rigid guidance towards conventional job security and somehow use her creative abilities in behalf of her planet and fellow creatures.

An hour of this and we trotted over to the nearby palace, a huge, monolithic, derelict ghost of royal position situated on a mini-mountain smack in town center. The multi-tiered edifice was in the process of restorative conversion by an NGO into a community art exhibition and workshop facility. A huff-and-puff climb (me; she practically sprinted up), we reached a level high above the city with breathtaking views of the town below and snow peaks in the distance, at the moment semi-enshrouded in mist, adding a touch of mystery to its other-worldly presence.

So an eventful day which, I'm certain, indirectly led up to today's moment. Following breakfast, and farewell hugs exchanged with a delightful Russian couple who were heading home after a year on the road, I walked into town, alternating zig-zag alleys with brief dashes on the busy streets. Due to the technical uncertainty of Leh internet I had happily fallen back to a once cherished travelers' gig: postcard sending. I searched out the most bizarre, added my own bit of tongue-in-cheek commentary individualized to the recipient.

Posting the cards was always a treat. Three women in their forties worked behind the glass. Often they'd be chatting with one another or known customers. There might be two people ahead of me, which could entail a ten minute wait to buy my stamps. But what else did I have to do?

The PO is located in the town market, two long streets at right angles. Since my last visit, vehicular traffic had been banned from the market, certainly a positive move. The powers then cut down all the lovely trees, however, and built wide, and somewhat tacky, 'pedestrian-friendly' median strips from one end to the other. At first take, I didn't care for the change, but as I now left the post office the sun was shining, the temperature had risen above 20C and people were strolling and sitting on the scores of large elevated squares that dotted the streets' tiled center islands.

I moseyed on over to one of the squares and boosted myself up to have a sit. Around me, strings of Tibetan flags hung from side to side well above the street. To my right, sitting high, the ancient, dilapidated palace, and peeking out from behind, a strip of ever-present white cones. To my left, more shops and flags plus a contingent of colorfully outfitted village women sitting on the sidewalks offering banks of fruit and vegetables from their tattered blankets. Without thinking, I dug into my daypack and yanked out a tin whistle. Feet dangling just above the ground, I started in on a medley of old favorites culled from my inner juke box.

Being it was lunch hour, more and more people passed as I played. Monks in saffron robes, wrinkle-faced old women fingering beads, equally aged men twirling small hand-held prayer wheels, teenage girls making fashion statements, 20 something

males working deals on smartphones. I noted Ladakhis and Muslims from Kashmir and Sikhs from Punjab and Hindu tourists and Tibetans in delightful garb, as well as a mix of these ethnicities in the occasional straight-back soldiers in their combat fatigues.

And then it happened, like a tiny electric shock. I took a breath, slowly put down the whistle and squeezed shut my eyes. Were this a movie, the entire market would be freeze framed, stirring background music would crescendo. Always, at some point in my stay in a place as exotic relative to my home on a seven mile ocean beach that I might well be on a distant world, the moment appears, unexpectedly leaping into my heart before shooting out to every atom of my humanity, whispering *Look where I am*! *LOOK*!!!

If there's a word to describe the moment, it's belonging. I am here because I belong here. A million miles from home, I am home.

III

FROM BEHIND ME I HEARD: 'Hello!' Loud.

I was walking down the path from the stupa, tapping my hollow aluminum walking stick rhythmically in cadence with the silent recital of my mantra…om mani padme hum…om mani padme hum…the stick tapping the ground on *om* and *pad*.

I use the stick during my morning walk to the stupa and back. It folds into itself and can lock at six different positions. When I go out any other time of day I push the stick in to its smallest position and stuff it in my daypack. The purpose here is a warning to dogs. There are numerous street dogs in Leh. They are

well fed by the local Buddhist populace; in my time here I have never seen a scrawny dog. Generally they are placid and harmless, but now and then I've encountered packs. Whenever I'm walking in the narrow alleys and am confronted by dogs that might harbor challenging notions, I reach back, pull out the stick, unfold it full length, bang it on the ground a few times and stare the lead dog in the eye. Does it work? Damn real. The dogs at once fall down, roll on their backs and howl with laughter as I cruise on past.

Walking from the stupa and hearing *Hello!* I glanced over my shoulder. A large dark complexioned male in a hoodie maybe twenty meters away. I gripped the stick a little tighter, relaxing my fingers only when I noticed he had a smartphone clamped to his ear. Relieved, I continued on my way. Om (tap) mani pad-(tap) me hum.

A few minutes later he caught up with me, and though he had a quicker pace, slowed enough to walk alongside. He pushed back the hood, revealing a nice looking older gentleman. We exchanged *juley*s. Still he kept pace, so I shut down the mantra and awaited the standard opening questions: home country? first time in Ladakh? name of accommodation? I was not disappointed. Then he wondered, 'How do you like Leh?'

A trick question. Yeah, I like it, though I doubt I'll return. As with so many wonderful places discovered in my travels, Leh is a once-idyllic town that is being wrecked by the most treacherous terrorists known. In fact, as a force of destruction, those demented brainwashed ISIS fools can't hold a candle to them. Tourists, I mean.

ONE OF THE SOUNDEST PIECES of roadie advice ever received occurred back in the mid-'80s. China

had just opened to free travel. I'd found a small city (small for China), and hunkered down. Loved the place — a grand walking town, cheap hotel, few tourists, locals free to speak English to a Westerner for the first time in decades. After a couple late autumn weeks, however, I felt I was missing out on the rest of that immense country and needed to move on. I mentioned this to a local friend I had made.

'What! You crazy, man! It coming winter. China big fucking cold! Freeze white ass! You stay here. China come to you.' And this, pretty much, has been my mode of travel since. Longer I stay in a place, the more I get to know the locals, and they me.

When I returned to this particular Chinese city five years later, it had tripled in size. Why? Invasion of the dreaded enemy. Which meant hordes of Chinese were moving there to cash in on these strange pale long noses who whizzed in, stayed two days, whizzed off with bags of souvenirs, then, once home, wondered why they'd bought such crap. Worst of all, those I had become close to five years before had changed. People who'd been perfectly content to tool about the city on single-speed black bicycles now had spanking new Japanese cars they washed diligently in public each morning but didn't have a clue how to drive. Wealth and status danced like Astaire and Rogers on Mao's grave.

Over the years I've had similar let-downs upon returning to once relaxed and friendly spots as Paros, Greece; Ubud, Bali; Pushkar, India; Nyaung Shwe, Myanmar; Hoi An, Vietnam; Luang Probang, Laos. And, good lord, the peaceful, laid back, convivial city of Kathmandu I had found early in my hippie days is now a stinking toilet of a megalopolis I wouldn't touch with a barge pole.

So in answer to the Ladaki man in the hoodie, I simply noted that yes, I liked Leh, mostly because of the people, but I didn't really care for the changes since my last visit four years back. His reaction? You might've thought I'd stomped on his foot.

'Oh, the changes!' he cried. 'Awful, awful! Insane traffic. Pollution. Everywhere roadwork and construction. He waved his arm expansively about him. 'This used to be all open land. Just trees and fields for grazing. No buildings. Now look: nothing but hotels and guest houses. All with fences and locked gates. And stress; so much stress now.

'I was born in Leh. Everybody had small homes, sheep, cows, yak, goats. No electricity. You cooked and heated with wood and dung. Now everybody has LPG and TV. Hardly anyone had a car: why would you need one? We walked everywhere. And no taxis. The first taxi in Leh was an old army jeep. Now taxis all over the place. Our narrow streets and roads are clogged with taxis! You knew everybody and everybody knew you. People talked to one another. Now? Who talks? Everybody texting, putting silly pictures on social media. Kids sitting around with their heads bowed over gadgets texting other kids, who are probably sitting right next to them, what they had for breakfast. I grew up here in the stone age, now I live in the computer age. All this in a single lifetime!'

He sighed. 'My son called a while back. Know what he told me? He said I was responsible for Leh going this way. Me! All my neighbors had built hotels on their land. So what was I to do? I had to build one as well.' He shook his head sadly. 'I would give everything I have to return to the way it was. The stone age. Such a peaceful time.'

We walked along in silence, the only sounds the tapping of my walking stick and the growling of passing taxis carrying tourists along the single lane road up to the stupa.

IV

ONE OF THE MORE INTRIGUING FACETS of travel is eating. I've been to formal functions in the West where no fewer than a dozen knives, forks and spoons were laid out either side of three different plates. And don't you dare mix up the precise formation of these utensils. (First thing I'd do upon sitting? Start playing spoons like that guy from Split Enz. Don't think I'm half bad, so why would the waiters all start running over to me? Did they somehow suspect I was considering a similar number with plates?)

Then there's the which-hand-do-you-hold-the-fork game. In America where I grew up the hand you throw a baseball with has top billing for all events. If I have something on my plate that requires several cuts, I take the knife in right hand, hold down the foodstuff with the fork in my left, cut half dozen edible portions, lay down the knife, switch the fork to my right and dig in. That's the way I learned, that's the manner I'm familiar with. Having moved to an English country in mid-life, this is considered lower-class, wrong. The fork is always in the left hand, you cut with the knife in the right, shovel as much on the fork as it can possibly hold, open the piehole wide as it will stretch and stuff in the whole bloody mess. It is absolutely gross, but it's the way of the land, and on numerous occasions I've endured typical British – or colonial — look-down-your-nose comments about Americans being so common that I promise myself the next time,

the very next time, my so-common right-handed fork just may get planted in some smirking dolt's eye.

In China, of course, chopsticks are the norm. I can handle sticks pretty well, I just don't hold them the 'proper' way. Instead of lying flat against the web between thumb and forefinger, my sticks stick up. Plus I hold them pretty much in the middle instead of the fat end. My times in China I've observed people holding the food bowl just under the chin and rapid-flicking food into their mouths, accompanied by loud and long sucking sounds that send shivers up my spine. And they make fun of me.

The intelligent and hard working woman who runs my Leh guesthouse, cares for my twenty-one year old surrogate granddaughter and her fourteen year old sister when they are at home, which is infrequent, and worries about them the rest of the time when they are far off at their respective private educational institutions. She cares as well for the family dog, a fourteen year old character of mixed breed, as well as a number of neighborhood ferals. Momma is also a full-time teacher at a local school, although she has taken off a couple months in order to be home with the family during this period all are here together.

Poppa is a physician. He is also a full colonel in the Indian army. He is stationed at a base far from here, where he is administrator of a large staff of medical personnel. I hadn't met him when I was here in 2013, and frankly was a little concerned when prior to my coming the granddaughter wrote that poppa would be home for most of my stay. What would he be like, this full bird colonel/doctor. Would he be barking out orders to us all? My medical/military experience was in the US Air Force fifty-five years ago. I was listed as a medic, but the extent of my medical practice was poking needles in arms and arses

of personnel about to depart on overseas duty. The rest of the time my prime function seemed to be falling afoul of by-the-book senior non-coms. I had two stripes, but these were ripped off and sewn back on so many times I thought seriously of attaching them with Velcro.

But poppa had proved to be a regular guy who loves with big heart the three females, all different, who constitute his family. Me he has treated like, well, like a grandpa to his elder daughter. When I'm with them all, the family, and ninety percent of that time is at meals, I feel as comfortable as if I were in my own home with those closest to me. When you consider the basic differences in race, religion, nationality, culture and language (to say nothing of my being a vegan in a household where meat is at the top of the menu every meal), I would venture that's a pretty fair indication of acceptance.

There is no dining table we all sit around. This, to my experience in several parts of the subcontinent, simply is not the Indian way. Eating is undertaken in a mid-size room off the kitchen. There are a couple of low tables, a small settee, numerous large colorfully covered cushions, a pair of beanbag chairs. Oh, and three huge portraits of the Dalai Lama at various stages of his current incarnation. The younger daughter appears to be the only one with a set position in the room, which is also the place she does her school work. For the rest of us, it's wherever.

I have had enough experience in this country to feel completely normal eating the Indian way: the first three fingers plus thumb of your right hand. You kind of mush everything together in a copper dish with low sides, tear off a hunks of chapatti, wrap it around a clump of food, lean forward until your face is inches

from the plate and chuck in the roll of edibles, aiding passage with a light slurping.

With all the positive elements here, I still have two minor dining problems. In typical Indian manner, the lovely momma does not understand the words no more. (Convince me Indian and Jewish mothers don't come from the same seed.) To keep from turning into the Michelin Man during my month here, I need to be strong. I am not strong.

The second problem is one of my very own making. I'm an intrepid food dropper.

I don't think there's been a meal this lifetime I haven't dropped something on myself. And I try so hard not to. I do everything right. I don't put too much on the fork, or spoon, or chopsticks, or in the claw made by my fingers. I make certain all of it is deposited within the proper orifice, then immediately close the gates behind. I chew with mouth closed, never talk while mastication is in process. Often I will finish a meal with the proud understanding that not a single morsel could conceivably have been dropped, then look down and spy a spot or smudge on my shirt or trousers. How did it get there?

I will tuck a napkin into the collar of my shirt. Frequently place a second napkin on my lap. When I am flying, conscious of the cramped space in economy seating and jostling of the aircraft, I'll tuck in the blanket that's provided for warmth, spread it out so every last bit of clothing down to my shoes is covered…and still there will emerge a spot, a stain, a blemish on my clothes. How is this possible?

And not only on my apparel. I cannot possibly eat, say, rice without a grain depositing itself in my beard. One grain, no more, as though signature of my digestive artistry. Is it not contrary to the laws of physics that a single grain of rice teleports away from

the others and plants itself in my muff? Yet it happens. Constantly. Since I am living with a family who feed me (and feed me, and feed me) three meals daily, approximately eighty percent of which contains rice, I am the prime object of their pleasant and kindly attention. They won't actually say anything, but to enlighten me as to my discretion will fake-brush their own chins as they focus intently on the real grain's presence upon mine. Losing facial detritus without losing face.

I estimate that had I saved every single escaped grain of rice, buckwheat, quinoa, barley and couscous over the half century I've had a beard, I could feed the whole of starving minions…well, wherever it is they're starving these days.

Barry Rosenberg

WAYAN

AS A YOUNG TEENAGER, her condition brought her shame, embarrassment and the understanding that she would never quite fit in with her community. And no, she didn't fall pregnant. (That's actually quite acceptable in small Balinese villages. The girl simply marries, has the child, and more to follow, not a worry.) Wayan's problem was worse, far worse. She had a weak cranial bone and would never be able to carry on her head the ceremonial tower of fruit and flowers that is traditional custom for Balinese females. The problem, in time, did lead her to something equally rare for her kind: freedom.

Rather than face life as a village wife and rice field worker, and be made to stand by and not participate, simply be an observer during the myriad ceremonies in her tiny hamlet, Wayan at fifteen left home and family and went off to the city of Ubud. There she scored a job at a tourist restaurant. Began work at five each morning and quit at midnight, when she would collapse onto the straw mat in a filthy back room no larger than a toilet. She had no days off. Her salary was fifteen dollars a month.

Her intelligence and spark attracted the attention of a visiting woman artist from Hawaii. She coaxed Wayan into leaving the restaurant, and together they went to Wayan's village, where the American lived for several months, employing Wayan and teaching her English.

After the Hawaiian left Bali, Wayan returned to Ubud where an Australian couple, likewise quick to spot her qualities, paid for her further study, this time in the capital of Denpasar. When the American returned, she again employed Wayan, in Ubud now. She then introduced Wayan to an amazing English woman by the name of Mary Northmore. Not an artist herself, Northmore was married to Indonesia's premier painter, the incomparable Abdul Aziz. She coaxed her husband into letting her use a property he owned to open a gallery featuring works by Balinese women. This had never before been done. For generations Balinese art had been a family affair, more along the lines of draftsmanship than individual creative venture. Northmore's Seniwati Gallery changed all that. Indeed, it became the first all-women's art gallery on the Asian continent.

When Wayan began working at Seniwati, her resourcefulness quickly impressed Northmore, and Wayan's responsibilities and wages increased almost monthly. In less than a year she became the gallery's manager.

I met Wayan not long after she started at Seniwati. The gallery was located on a narrow side street just off the main drag, and in my standard traveling manner of spending hours meandering back streets I spotted the gallery, one of many in Ubud, but this one, for no obvious reason, dragged me up a set of steps and inside. The works were nothing special. Some talent, sure, but the understanding that expression comes from within, and not from copying someone else's copy, had not yet kicked in for Ubud females. The young women working there, all dressed in black, five feet or under with beautiful brown faces and gleaming white teeth and jet black hair hanging

down below the waistline, not only looked alike but every single one was named Wayan.

A note about Balinese names. The lowest of Bali's four castes, the one with eighty percent of the island's population, has just four names, male as well as female. The first of these is Wayan, then come Nyoman, Made and Ketut. Comes along a fifth kid, she/he is again Wayan. Stand on a crowded intersection and yell out WAYAN! and half the town's populace turns to see who's addressing them.

I was on the final furlong of a couple hours' tramp through the rice fields this one day when I heard my name called. Looked around. Nobody. Again my name. I peered up. And there she was, standing on an embankment fifteen feet above me. She was smiling and waving in the fingers-pointed-down manner of Asian folk. I hadn't a clue who she was.

'Wayan,' she said. 'From the gallery.' That narrowed it down.

I found a set of stone steps crafted in the Balinese style: constructed for giants, and no two the same height. On top the embankment was a family compound, narrow and extending away from where we stood.

'You live here?' I wondered.

'Come, I show you around.' The property had a gentle, relaxed feel, far more so than my current accommodation.

'Is there any place for guests?'

She pointed out two bungalows. 'Both are empty now.' Not for long they weren't. One, anyway.

EVERY YEAR THEREAFTER I made Wayan's home my home. Wherever my annual out-there might take me, India mostly, sometimes Nepal, I would conclude my extended journey here.

Wayan would serve breakfast on my terrace each morning, and we would talk. I got to know her, and as well acquired a rare insight into Balinese life, one denied the vast majority of tourists. It wasn't all pretty postcard scenes and smiles.

Frequently I would hire a car and driver and we would tootle off to her rural home village. This was as different from the touristic areas as might be possible. Never once did I see there another foreigner.

Over the years I got to know the suitors pursuing her. First the dweeb from Philadelphia. Until it was discovered he was married. Then came a young Dutchman. He and his parents, who'd met Wayan in Ubud, invited her to Holland. It was her first trip away from Bali. She spent three weeks with the family, who loved her to pieces. But the young Dutchman himself was so strange his own father quietly suggested that she ditch him.

Shortly after she returned to Ubud, the Dutch guy got in touch and said he was coming back there to be with her. Hearing this, and knowing her reluctance to have anything more to do with him, I conferred with her boss and we soon worked out a plan. Northmore had loads of official contacts; one of them was able to fast-track a visa. Following day Wayan was at my place in New Zealand.

It was summer, the days warm bordering on hot. And there she'd be, on an afternoon in the low eighties, track pants, jacket, shawl, gloves…and high heels on the beach. 'It's so cold!' she would moan, shivering.

When she saw a man hitting tennis balls, and three dogs chasing them into the sea and retrieving them, she reckoned it was the most astounding sight she'd ever witnessed.

One day, after nearly a month, she made the big plunge. Wayan courageously ventured into the ocean. Wearing a borrowed full-body wetsuit, lying in water no more than knee deep. Still, she'd done it. Ear to ear smile.

The Dutch fellow must have got the message because she heard no more from him. But then came the Korean, who was worse.

He claimed to have been a captain in the Korean military, and did he ever come across like a commanding officer. For three years he pursued her, until finally she gave in. His ardor was such he did everything asked of him in order to partake in the Hindu wedding ceremony. Well, almost everything. He skipped the mandatory teeth filing. It was the one single thing for which I ever thought highly of him.

There was something about this guy that rubbed people. On the surface it was hard to pinpoint. At least right off. A little later when the façade wore thin his I'm-always-right demeanor, like rust, oozed through. He was engaged in untold commercial ventures, his fingers in several pies. Now, Bali business people are extremely shrewd. And quite often not always the peaceful, accommodating folk the tourists get to see. It was known that the Korean, who never had money (a windfall was always coming, soon as the next deal goes through), was into harebrained schemes. He tried his grinning lend-me-X-and-I'll-pay-you-back-double routine with several people, me included. Rather have my teeth filed.

Once when the three of us went to her village a few of the extended family joined us on the veranda of Wayan's brother's tiny home. A farmer who sold his crops in the town market not far off, the brother was busily working out the day's earnings on a small note pad. The Korean was munching greasy potato chips

from a plastic bag and exclaiming how he could sell his brother-in-law's tomatoes in Lombok, make everybody rich. He was completely ignored by all. They knew. Everybody knew. Eventually even the wife herself. It had taken a heck of a long while, but finally she tired of his superior attitude, his controlling ways. Still, she didn't know how to get rid of him.

Once again, I conferred with Northmore, and once more I whisked her off to NZ. When the Korean learned of the impending journey he threatened to follow. 'There's no way you can stop me!' he grinned. Oh? Perhaps a whisper in the ear of an immigration person at Auckland International might have done the trick, but I needn't have worried. He had neither money, nor credit, to buy himself a ticket.

I WAS IN INDIA WHEN I GOT THE EMAIL. Wayan was seriously ill, and those close to her figured I might want to be there with her.

She was never a physically well person. Besides the early cranial bone condition, she'd experienced kidney problems, stomach problems, heart problems. But despite all advice the doctors had given them, her Korean husband refused to wear protection. And Wayan, who loved children, became pregnant. As folk do in Bali, she went immediately to a remote village to seek advice from what the Balinese refer to as a meditation man. They believe in a special brand of reincarnation: souls are reborn into family. The meditation man, who knew nothing of Wayan's family, claimed the spirit inside her now was that of her grandmother, whom she had adored as a child.

'He described everything about her,' she told me from her bed in a weak voice when I flew in to be with her. 'He knew things only those very close to her

could possibly know. I am so happy she is coming back as my child!'

But she became sick at the very get-go, and her condition got progressively worse. Mary Northmore had relieved her of all gallery duties a month before my arrival and brought Wayan to live in her own home outside the city. Further, she had contracted two of Bali's top doctors to care for her. Both agreed: chances were that if she went full term Wayan would not survive the birth. But then a fascinating thing happened. And everyone there, Balinese as well as those of us who had been accepted into the Balinese way, understood perfectly: grandma's spirit would not permit her beloved Wayan to die. So the fetus, perfectly healthy throughout the pregnancy, died two weeks before due date.

(During this time, the Korean husband disappeared. He just…vanished. There was a rumor the Balinese mafia had organized his onward journey to wherever. I don't believe Wayan knew what had happened. At least she never said a word.)

Wayan recovered physically within a month. But her psyche took much, much longer. I saw her several months later at a Seniwati opening. I hadn't told her I was coming, nor did Northmore let on. I arrived at the gallery and moved through the crowd to where she was standing. She looked up at me and forced a smile. There was no emotion. None. It would take another full year for her to even approach her normally buoyant mental and emotion state.

I DON'T RECALL EXACTLY WHEN IT WAS we began calling one another Poppa and Daughter. It just happened. And it felt so right. (She now addresses me as *buduh* Poppa. Balinese for crazy. She is *normal* Daughter. Yeah, right.)

Her real father was a delightful man. (Her mother had died years before.) On my every visit to Bali we would take the two hour drive to her village. There was something magical about this region surrounded by low mountains. People were relaxed. Unlike the rest of Bali there was never pressure on me to do, to buy. Indeed, they saw me not as a walking wallet, rather Wayan's *buduh* Poppa, and their welcome was genuine.

The village produced the finest food on the island. Rice, for example. Red rice. I had never before seen, or tasted, anything like it. Drop a handful of grains into a cup of hot water and you had the most delicious tea you've ever tried. Vegetables so sweet they were more like fruit.

Wayan's father, ten years my senior, lived in the small house of his son. In this one moment that's glued to the wall of my mind, Wayan's father and her four year old niece were playing cards. I watched them play for hours. They would talk like equals. Sometimes it seemed the girl was older than the grandpa. He glowed, this little man.

Some months prior he'd had an operation, and for the first time in sixty years he couldn't work. It drove him, well, *buduh*. He would sneak out to do things; they'd catch him, bring him back. Now he attended to a dozen chickens, the one remaining cow. (The second had been sold to pay for his op.)

One day, following a long walk around the village, I returned to the small house to find the father sitting alone on the veranda floor. I sidled over and sat next to him. We began a conversation. In theory, not easy as I knew perhaps twenty words of Indonesian and he knew fewer in English. Yet the two poppas had us an hour long conversation filled with belly laughs

and tears of sheer joy. Our common language was our shared love for a very special young woman.

SHE BEGAN TO TRAVEL ON HER OWN. At first this was primarily to Australia, where she would present talks on Balinese art and culture. While there, she met a man, and they got together. He had a powerful position in the Brisbane music and arts scene. My friend Lomé, who was deeply involved with the city's music community, wanted to meet him so I arranged a dinner at their place. I noted right off the excessive attention he was paying Lomè. She did as well.

Following dessert, Lomé had had enough of the guy, and we made to leave. Wayan's partner literally ran after us, caught up as we were getting into our car. He asked for Lomé's number, wanted to see her again. Lomé kindly explained she was not into further meets.

In time, he and Wayan drifted apart. Thankfully.

I HAD NOT SEEN HER IN TWELVE YEARS. She was now married to an older American and living in Arizona. We exchanged emails constantly, and she begged me to come visit. (She and Mike ran an upscale bed & breakfast just off the desert on the outskirts of Tucson.) Or better yet, meet up in Bali, where they stayed for two months every year during their B&B's low season. My reasons for not going? The months I found favorable for visiting them in the American southwest they were always booked solid, and the emerald isle of Bali had, for me, become a horror. Ubud, the art center of this once magnificent island, pearl of the Indian Ocean, had turned into a crowded, polluted slum (albeit with super-pricey

resorts dotting the rice fields I used to traverse daily). But I wanted very much to see her and so at last agreed to join them for a couple weeks at the Ubud guesthouse they stay every year.

There was yet another reason I felt somewhat reluctant. I had never met Mike. Her prior trio of partners having been such unsavory dolts, I had no idea what spending time with this new husband would bring.

The flight landed at Denpasar airport and I shuffled along with the mob of weary tourists. Once in the waiting area I looked around for Wayan amongst the throngs of hotel people holding name signs. Then I heard: 'Barry!' Male voice. Yank accent. I peered through the front row of people. And there he was. Long white hair, friendly open face. It was like meeting a long-lost brother: like at first sight.

Now, Wayan's role, one of them, at their desert B&B (they called it an 'inn') was cooking. She is one of the universe's most amazing chefs, Balinese cuisine especially.

'We have room for fourteen guests and are always full,' she explained that first day together. 'Sometimes I cook fourteen separate breakfasts. Full bacon and eggs. Vegetarian. Vegan. Gluten-free. Lactose intolerant. Poppa, I am so tired from much work. So I have decided I am not cooking at all on this trip. Very sorry.'

That evening we decided to eat close to the guesthouse. A local warung (small restaurant). Now, it's virtually impossible to prepare Balinese food badly. Virtually. The three of us left there with faces that said we had never tasted such crap. The following two weeks, lunch and dinner every day: Wayan.

We talked and we walked and of course rented a car and drove to her village. If the tourist centers of

Bali had charged measurably and become tragically ugly, Wayan's tiny home in the mountains was exactly the same in appearance and feeling as my first visit there a quarter century before.

The two weeks flew by. Early one evening I said good-by to our host in Ubud and Wayan, Mike and I walked out into the warm twilight. I put down my pack and we hugged alongside the waiting taxi.

My Balinese normal daughter had grown into a fine, fine woman. And she finally had found herself a great guy.

It was enough to make a *buduh* Poppa proud as hell.

TRAVEL YARN No. 5

INDIA, Part 2

I

AND SO WE ALL PILED INTO THE FAMILY CAR to go for a Sunday drive. Poppa decided to take the wheel despite not having driven in ages. As a full colonel in the Indian army with a huge staff of underlings he had little need to personally navigate a vehicle. Momma, whose car it was, wanted me in the front passenger seat, but both poppa and I objected. A verbal struggle went on between the two of them for some minutes, as it normally does, no matter what the subject, lots of jabbering in Ladakhi, and finally momma climbed into the front seat. Me, I commandeered a window position in the back because no way was I going to sit between the giggle sisters for any length of time beyond, say, thirty seconds. The eleven year old Nepali house girl, very dark as contrast to the light skinned Ladakhis, cute as a bug and not much bigger, squeezed in back with us, her tiny bottom never touching the seat, but rather would be shifted from one thigh to another of the sisters for the journey. And then we were off. Except we weren't off, as momma got out to retrieve something essential from the house, which took several minutes, and when

she finally returned, the sisters, one after the other, performed likewise after arguing with the parents that went I-need-it/you-don't-need-it, or something like that as the nattering went on in a language of which I understand perhaps six words, none of which were used during the debates, so for all I know they might well have been discussing the terrible situation in Syria.

Then a moment came, like sitting in a stationary plane for what seems like hours awaiting takeoff, thinking it'll never happen, I shall live out the rest of my days in this seat, motionless, and just when you are on the verge of searching through your bag stashed under the seat in front for an implement with which to slash your wrists, there was movement.

Poppa somehow navigated the skinny, winding single lane drive from the guesthouse to its connection with a slightly wider skinny, winding single lane street, cars maneuvering to pass going the opposite way, horns blaring, drivers politely smiling (grimacing, actually) as they and we went by one another miraculously without a single flake of paint being shed, thank Buddha. And Buddha it was we were off to visit, once we had navigated through the congested Leh city traffic to the congested Leh suburban traffic, half an hour, more, until open road at last. The giggle sisters all the while, and would continue for the entire day, snapping pics and vids with tiny cameras (in one hand) and smartphones (the other). And I reflected that this very same journey, with just a tiny diversion from our destination at the end, an hour-plus each way, was momma's drive five days a week when she was teaching. The Ladakhi education board had shifted her from the school she had been posted to when I was here four years back, a ten minute drive from home, to far out in the sticks as

part of the mandatory every-three-years' rotation of district staff.

The mountainous scenery we swept through was considerably breathtaking, and just when you figured you were growing tired of snow peaks since, after all, they existed everywhere, even in summer, another hit would arrive around the next bend. Plus the colors. Having spent time in deserts of the world I learned early on about colors. Not stark, rather they were subtle, pastel, the infinite shades of brown and brown-like with flecks of lighter hues tossed in. And the shapes, like created by artists on a bender, sometimes stacks of rock a thousand feet high, others times elongated cigar-colored tapering cylinders, topped by jagged, ragged peaks contrasted against the perfect ocean of pale blue sky.

At last we came to the monastery area. Called Hemis by name, this is alleged to be the oldest, and largest, Buddhist monastery in the district of Ladakh, perhaps in the whole of India. But once off the main highway and onto the switchback road (single lane, of course, with horn blowing touring buses passing with millimeters to spare every ten seconds), poppa had taken us as far as his surprisingly capable driving was able. After half a dozen stall-outs, he and momma switched roles. She too stalled three, four times before finally giving it enough pedal and we were on our way up the side of the mountain.

I will say this: the structure, built into the side of this mammoth rock, was impressive. I will also say that, as an avowed atheist, I favor Tibetan/Ladakhi Buddhism above all other forms of religion primary for the craft of their structures. They are often spellbinding. This is beauty created by humans for something they believed in with total heart.

The monastery was comprised of several sub-buildings, some appearing ancient, others obviously quite modern, and not a one lacking in exquisite taste and magnificent art. And somebody please explain the human spiritual devotion required to emplace magnificent giant Buddhas and Tibetan prayer flags at the top or near-top of mountains that offered no obvious pathways up, and which effort had been established not by certified climbers with the latest scientific gear but by monks in robes and sandals.

The problem, for me, was that the inspection of so many places and parts went on and on. I had brought along my fold-out walking stick, and I needed it. Buddhist monastery steps were definitely not designed with near-eighty year old knees in mind. Poppa, reasonably fit in his fifties, made certain his elder daughter's adopted grandpa kept safe by constantly admonishing, 'Slowly, slowly,' as though were it not for his sage counsel I would be galloping up or down these giant steps, no two of which being the same height. Then it was shoes off, shoes on, in every chamber entered. Inside each, you could not help sense the architects had been of a higher spiritual quality. In my hippie days we would have exclaimed the nature of vibes in these sanctuaries. And, in truth, how I adore the Buddha statues. In the past while visiting Buddhist countries I have frequently performed the standard ritualistic head touching the floor prostrations, but here the combination of high altitude, hot sun and encroaching senility motivated me to simply sit back and absorb the energy. At the base of each Buddhist statue in every temple – and frequently more than one form of the Buddha was represented – was a tray stuffed with rupees; observing this I could feel the emergence of a socialist thought forming, but I quickly stuffed it back down.

After all, funds for care and maintenance of the place needs to come from somewhere.

We had lunch in the monastery's own restaurant, a mostly open air and dirt floor affair. This was the second time I had dined out with my Ladakhi family, and as before I was the only one who ate Indian, the others all choosing Chinese noodles. The cute as a bug Nepali sat next to me, running her fingers along the hair on my forearm and making tiny monkey sounds. Then it was more investigation of hidden-away sanctuaries, these the ancient ones, but by now, full-bellied from lunch and in desperate need of a nap, I was thoroughly monasteried out. Still, it was another couple of hours and several score more selfies by the sisters before we climbed back in the car and headed back to Leh. Younger sister and the wee Nepali fell fast asleep and remained so until momma, who had outranked the full colonel and now drove, pulled off the road to do some food shopping at a tiny village. Somehow, there being but three shops, we lost sight of her and she didn't reappear until laden with bulging bags half an hour later.

That should have been the end of it, but no. Flat tire. Pulled off the busy highway. Momma got out the tire jack, but on soft sand she was unable to operate it properly, the car sliding off and very nearly causing her harm. The two adult males stood around looking helpless, poppa because he had little clue as to a jack's operation, and me because they wouldn't permit an old fella to get down on his knees, while the three young females sat in the vehicle examining the day's photo production. Fortunately, a family friend passed by, spotted us, stopped and had the experience to figure out the workings of the cheap jack. Lots of *juley*s and shaking of hands and we were off again, joining the heavy traffic returning to the city.

Back at the guest house, I firmly resisted the family's pleas to join them for dinner at a relative's nearby home and fell fully clothed into bed. I'd survived a pleasant Sunday drive into the countryside with the family I had come to love.

II

I HAD SEEN HIM A FEW TIMES in passing during my early morning walks to the stupa. Small chap, maybe sixty, kindly face, always a smile and hearty *Juley*! This one morning he stopped to talk.

'You're from New Zealand,' he said. I had a bit of a start, was about to ask how he knew, then remembered where I was. I was in Leh, capital of the district of Ladakh in northernmost India, sure, but Leh the city was in truth a cluster of villages glued together around a small but busy central market. This particular village was known as Upper Karzoo, and everybody in Upper Karzoo knew to the nearest decimal the total business and worth of everybody else in Upper Karzoo. Having been here a little over three weeks I had unknowingly passed the basic test for membership in the community. It would have surprised me only slightly had this chap recited my blood type, mother's maiden name and pin number.

'My son is living in New Zealand,' he announced proudly, to which I experienced a tiny flicker of doubt. Being the largest populated area in the whole of India where the summer months of June through August represent peak tourist season, Leh attracts a high number of merchants who come from outside Ladakh to peddle their wares. These temporary merchants migrate annually from Kashmir, rent tiny shops in the market and stock gems, rugs and whatever else they can get their hands on. Whereas

local merchants, perhaps because of their Buddhist nature, are laid back and wouldn't consider standing in front of their shops beckoning tourists, the Kashmiris get out there and hustle. They're not heavy or exceptionally devious, just extremely sharp and persistent. Underline persistent. Wonder Woman would have trouble leaving one of their shops empty-handed. One such character took a bit of a liking to me when I was here four years back.

'You're from America,' he declared sagely upon first sighting. Wow, I said, my eyes growing big. How did you know? 'I think California,' he added. To which I replied, Man, that's amazing! Can you tell which part? He appeared to study me a few moments. 'For sure San Francisco.' Aw, you're reading my mind! I cried. I won't say we became best friends, but I would stop in to see him two, three times a week (eventually revealing to his disappointment my home was New Zealand). I had established right off I wasn't into buying any of his glittering stones and gaudy shawls, more I was interested in the nature of his business acumen. Thereafter upon my setting foot in his somewhat claustrophobic shop he immediately would send out for tea, and we'd sit for an hour and talk. He told me he could discern with eighty percent correctness the country Western tourists were from based on facial features, clothing (shoes, mostly) and comportment. Whereupon he would ask their home city, and so informed would joyfully declare that his brother/cousin/uncle lived there, naming the area and very street said relative resided. 'I'm so happy to meet someone from your wonderful city! Come, I give you big discount on anything you buy!' All this, he confessed to me, was of course a wee fib. He had no relatives anywhere outside India, and his geographical

sagacity was derived from the great god Google married to a well practiced memory.

This in mind, I was momentarily skeptical of the small, friendly Ladakhi man with an alleged son in NZ, especially when told me said son lived in 'Oakland'. The chap then declared he owned a guest house, the name of which was familiar as I passed it at least once a day, its sign affixed to a high retaining wall. 'Please,' he said, 'come to my house for tea some afternoon.' A few days later, wi-fi non-functioning as was often the case, and having finished reading my latest book, I grabbed my walking stick and moseyed on over. It was somewhat of a shock when he led me through the door in the high outside wall to see what was contained within: a veritable palace, three stories, huge and modern, with terraces and extensive vegetable gardens, all, he noted, totally organic. (No doubt he knew I was vegan, but we never got around to the subject.)

He escorted me inside, to a well appointed and extremely tidy living area. He introduced his wife, who spoke little English, a daughter who was fluent and chatty, and either his or his wife's father, who said not a word. I was served apricot juice, then green tea with cookies. His son, he went on to tell me, had graduated from 'Oakland University' and now was employed by a major engineering firm, where he was advancing rapidly. There being so many Indians in NZ, I now had little reason to question his veracity. The man pointed out he had recently retired after thirty years' service with the Indian government, saved meticulously, then upon retirement had used his pension to secure a large bank loan to finish off his dream guesthouse.

He took me on a tour. Immaculate kitchen, not a speck of dust or unwashed dish. Past the closed-door

family quarters then upstairs to six tourist rooms, three on each upper floor, all quite large with top-level furnishings, full carpeting and balcony. He made certain I poked my head in each and every bathroom equipped with colorful modern fixtures. There was a small kitchen for guests who wished to prepare their own lunch and dinner (breakfast was included in the room rental). And then, most proudly, he took me into the puja room, for devoted Buddhist prayer, and a large meditation sanctuary, both spotlessly clean and luxuriously furnished.

'I don't take Indian tourists (aka Hindus),' he noted. 'They're so noisy, even late at night. They're demanding, disrespectful of other guests and upset the Westerners who stay here.' He shook his head. 'I refuse to have them.' He told me his room rate, which was most reasonable considering the size of the rooms and quality of what was in them. I wondered why there currently were no guests, this being high season, but felt it imprudent to ask.

In truth, I was most impressed. There was actually a moment when a thought passed through my head that it would be nice to stay here. And yet, upon saying *juley* to the family members (grandfather stood and clasped my hand warmly), there was something niggling at me, nothing major for sure. Yet something. I could neither pinpoint what it was nor shake the feeling as I walked back to the much smaller, simpler house belonging to my Ladakhi family. Here, there were five guest rooms; besides my own, two were presently taken by Indians, one a family of four, the other an older single male, and the remaining two occupied by a young couple from Italy and a solo Israeli.

I looked around, silently comparing the two operations. This one was clean but not obsessively so.

There was a family mutt, so naturally some dog hair around. A bit of 'noise', some occasions more than others, but it was the sounds of everyday life. And that's when it hit me, the niggle. The other place *looked* good, everything in its proper place, corners squared: a showpiece straight out of Better Homes and Gardens. Here one *felt* good. The house pulsated with the energy of people who lived and visited here. It struck me that the brief knee-jerk moment I'd had, where I wished I were staying there rather than here, likely dated back to my childhood when I craved order in a disorderly life. But I'd grown up some since then, to where order was valued not nearly so much as quality of being. I wondered what percentage of people would choose the beautiful but sterile GH for their holiday accommodation over a place where the very air teemed with humanity. I had no figures to back up my belief, of course. But I felt sure I knew the answer.

III

I FIGURED THE EVENT at the dilapidated-but-partly-restored Leh palace would bore me to my eye teeth. Still, attendance was imperative. When the granddaughter handed me the printed invitation addressed to 'family', she noted sadly that her parents would not be going. This was a big moment for her, so it was Barry to the rescue. 'Come at either 4 or 4.30,' she said. 'It's supposed to start at 4, but you know India: nothing ever starts when it's supposed to.'

So I made my way to the palace to be present by 4 in accordance with my obsessive nature, but it wasn't to be as the most accessible entrance was blocked off by a work crew. Leh is a fine small city and the Ladakhi people are as convivial towards

foreigners as ever you might imagine. But those in charge of physically upgrading the town's appearance are in desperate need of understanding that if your entire income is based on tourism that it might be prudent to dig up the streets and make a holy mess of the central market area in times other than daylight hours of the brief June-August season. So I was forced to circumnavigate the entire palace area to locate a pathway of rubble that led higgledy-piggledy up and around, following handmade signs until I'd miraculously arrived at the venue without tripping on the uneven steps or sliding down half a mile of treacherous loose gravel, slippery rocks and dog poo.

Perhaps fifty people were assembled in a large, not-terribly-well-lit room. The initial offerings were embarrassingly amateurish: a home-made vid that attempted to be clever but failed horribly, followed by awkward introduction speeches by a few nervous young women in charge. I planted myself on a low stool and commenced to mentally recreate the sixth game of the 1980 World Series, each pitch and swing of a bat which is memorialized in every cell of my being. But once the real proceedings of the affair began I had to sit up and take note.

The event's central issue was the experiences of local students who go off to prestigious universities in other parts of India, as well as overseas, once they return to Ladakh. Half a dozen such graduates were present to tell their stories. It started slow. Shakily, each student told of her experiences. I say her because only one of the group was male. Two of the young women had gone to highly rated institutions in the US, the others here in India. Their recollections, so similar, could best be summed up by the old WWII line: how ya gonna keep em down on the farm once they've seen Paree?

Now, it should be explained that, unlike Raj India of old, where vast riches were in the control of a handful of families, modern Ladakh has seen a skyrocketing rise of its middleclass. Wealth hereabouts is not of the super-rich variety, rather a preponderance of people who have taken advantage of the tourist boom, becoming comfortably well-off bedding, feeding and guiding travelers, both domestic and foreign. And the nouveau riche, here as elsewhere, have an absolute need to show off their new status. One of the prime symbols is where the kids go after high school to learn whatever it is they're supposed to learn out there. Parents do diligent research into various schools' qualities, and cost is of far less importance than institutional rankings. In addition to curricular studies, however, these kids learn a bit more than their parents have bargained for. They learn about life: both how it is in the real universe, and how narrow and stifling it can be when they return to ultra-provincial Ladakh.

I was moved by what the kids had to say. Light-skinned and Tibetan in appearance, a few who had matriculated to universities in 'real' India complained they were frequently mistaken for Chinese, or perhaps Nepali. 'No, no, I'm from Ladakh!' one woman claimed she would patiently explain to her ethnic questioners. 'Oh,' they would reply, 'you're a *foreign* student.' Ladakh, it seems, is the Chatham Islands, the Nome, Alaska of India.

But it was when they came home following a few years of having their eyes opened and mindscapes expanded that the real hardships were incurred. My granddaughter, not yet a graduate with one more year till her BA, complained passionately that her parents, both university degree holders, continued to smother her with excessive attention and demands beyond

what a twenty-one year old need endure. Other objections centered on the small-minded parental push to find safe jobs in government, the area's biggest employer by far, but not quite the work environment conducive to creative expression. I found their tales of generational frustration touching and sensible.

As the sole Western member of the audience, I then posed a question. It is the cultural rule in Ladakh, in the whole of India actually, that the young will return home at some point in their lives to take care of aging parents. What, I wondered, if your education took you far from Leh, perhaps even to another country, where you have successful and meaningful work, something you truly love and which fills your spirit, as well as having your own family and friends in this location: would you pull up stakes and leave your work and new community behind to do your Ladakhi familial duty?

I was surprised, obviously naively so, that the response to my query was like I had questioned their belief in Buddhism. My curiosity was, to them, hardly a point worth thinking about. Water freezes at zero degrees Celsius, thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit, and that's that. 'But of course!' was the unanimous reply of these educated, sophisticated 20somethings, as well of others in the audience who had gone this route in the past. I was wise enough to keep quiet as to possible alternatives.

Following the main event I dutifully wandered through the display areas connected with the event, had pictures taken with the granddaughter in front of the particular project she had worked on for some days at home, left her talking with friends and cautiously made my way down to street level and back to the guest house. I reflected on my own situation more than half century before when I was in the

predicament these young Ladakhis were in now. There was pressure, there was guilt, but added together they had no shot at measuring up to the desire, the absolute need, to strike out on my own and should you incur failure (did I ever!), keep striking. I'd say half of my group did the same, others capitulated and went the old way, taking in an elderly parent or two. The results here, to my observation, were with rare exception akin to chewing egg shells twenty-four/seven. Cranky, demanding, interfering oldies treating their grown offspring as children, making life a misery. Well, not on my ticket**!** You sowed, you reap, dear parents, and I'll do whatever to find and finance the best retirement situation for you, but live with me? Now that the shoe has switched feet, there's a damn good reason I moved nine thousand miles from my birth kids, and it's not only the lovely scenery of my adopted country.

The problem as I see it in Ladakh is the rapid explosion from pleasant peasantry to stressful, pill popping middleclassdom. Multiple family vehicles, pricey hi-tech gadgetry and huge bank overdrafts aside, old values in modern times don't quite make it. Thankfully, arranged marriages, even here in the mountains, are gradually going the way of the dodo. Placing a lifetime burden on your kids by having them move in with you? Not so much.

IV

DELHI. A STEAMBATH of twenty-five million people. Undoubtedly more, because what kind of census could count all the street people, the beggars, the dispossessed?

I'm staying in a small room in the Tibetan Refugee Colony. The room has A/C, small but modern bathroom and a window. On the other side of the window, about an inch removed, is a concrete wall, so the view isn't much to write home about. Queen size bed, tiny fridge. Clean (though the sheet and duvet cover have seen better years). Wi-fi now and then. At the moment it's in 'then' mode. Twenty dollars a day.

The colony itself is a fascinating rabbit warren of old four-story buildings, tiny shops, hotels like the one I'm in (I checked), a few modern restaurants and cafes, lots of people mingling in the alleys, sleeping dogs and the best fed monks I've ever seen. The monks seem to sit around all day gabbing, noshing and diddling smartphones. Dharma-dot-com.

The old buildings on either side of the main alley allow in little light except for the brief period when the sun is directly overhead. And then it's so hot you have to quickly find whatever shade is accessible. My third day here as I sit up in bed pecking away at the laptop, and I believe I am finally able to venture away from the hotel more than fifty meters without getting thoroughly lost. Although I have yet to test this theory.

The granddaughter arranged for me to stay here. For twenty bucks it does the deed. Actually, it was her boyfriend who did the booking. The boyfriend. And therein lies the crux of our story.

He is a lovely fella, twenty-two to her twenty-one. Graduated film school in the city a few months back and is presently in occupational limbo. Meaning he mostly hangs out at home in his tiny shared flat, smokes a fair amount of dope and dreams of directing his own movie. He is deeply in love with the granddaughter, and she with him. She is headstrong and he has a pleasant way of mostly letting her have

her way. He comes from Assam, which is one of eight glued-together tiny states in the distant far northeast of this humungous country. The states are known as the Seven Sisters and a Brother – the Brother being Sikkim, which didn't become part of the Indian nation until around fifteen years ago. Reluctantly so. In fact, the Seven Sisters themselves are not exactly tickled to be part of India. But together they occupy a land mass squeezed between India and – what's the other country? Oh yeah, China. The Indian government, a comically discombobulated body if ever, is focused enough to understand that were the Seven Sisters and a Brother given their desired independence, such autonomy would not last an hour before being gobbled up by the pac-man neighbor to the north. As it is, China being China, nibbling, the prelude to gobbling, has already begun in the area, as well as in nearby Bhutan, which has been autonomous its entire history.

I have not been to any of the eight states in the northeast, although listening to the boyfriend's descriptions, I have placed the region atop my traveler's wish list. They sound fascinating. Such a journey, I do believe, might well entail semi-capitulation as a traveler; in other words, become, to some extent, a tourist. (Yes, that was a shudder you just felt.) The northeast, from all I've heard and read, has to be one of the most magnificently gorgeous patches of real estate on the planet, and instead of my usual roadie nature of building a nest somewhere and squatting therein for a length of time, I should like to move about and witness as much of the inherent beauty as feasible.

But I keep straying away from the topic: the boyfriend. You see, he's Muslim. There are around a quarter billion Muslims resident in India, and quite a few are not wild-eyed nutsacks walking around with

wires poking out their vests. His parents know about my granddaughter. The momma is fully aware the granddaughter is Buddhist, and seems not to be particularly concerned. In fact, having met, the two females at once created a fine bond. The poppa's attitude appears to be he'd rather she be Muslim, but this is what happens (shake of head) when you send your son off to the big smoke to study. So, no problem, right? Er. The problem is the granddaughter's m & p. The folks who until a few days back accommodated me for a month as I have never before been accommodated. And whom I love dearly. According to the granddaughter, they not only would disapprove, but poppa would be down on the next flight to whip her out of university and back to the provincial confines of Ladakh. So she's told them nothing about a boyfriend. The kids desperately required an approval rating from a senior family member; I'm it, and I do.

Backtrack a bit. Well, more than a bit. Like, nearly seventy years. My sister, six years my elder, is a senior in high school. She meets a handsome young man who is also a senior, at an Ivy League university. He is Puerto Rican. But wait – wipe out the image that immediately comes to mind. He doesn't belong to a gang, dance in the street, wear skin-tight trousers. His family is the biggest land owner on the island. Parents refined, educated, liberal. They know my sister's Jewish; their reaction is a shrug. My parents, on the other hand, father especially, are dead set against their daughter marrying out of her religion. But they try keep it low key, reckoning that any overt interference will push her the other way. The handsome young prince graduates his Ivy League school with honors, and returns to PR. And my sister never hears from him again. A few years later she marries a Jew, who turns

out to be a not-nice fella. I mean really not nice. A bastard of the highest order, actually. Ultimately they would divorce, but not before my sister incurred a plethora of psychic scars she never fully recovered from. I was around sixteen when I sussed out the story. The Puerto Rican did indeed write letters to my sister after he'd gone home, several, expressing love, declaring his devotion, proposing marriage. My father opened each and every one while my sister was at work, read them, tore them up, never told her. The young man also made phone calls. My parents who answered politely informed him she wasn't at home, but they would surely leave her a message. Of course they never did. And my sister never learned of these calls and letters.

And two-thirds of a century later I am sitting smack in the middle of a modern day Shakespearean drama, Asian style. Tomorrow, I fly back to my comfortable home on a seven mile ocean beach, leaving these absolutely lovely young people to fend for themselves. Thanks to technology, I am instantly contactable, able to provide an electronic shoulder for my darling granddaughter to cry on, whom I treasure ever so much, and her beau, of whom I have grown extremely fond. I wish I could do more.

JESSIE

I WAS CLOSING IN ON FIFTY at the time, in the third year of a relationship that wasn't going well. I had a bizarre history of attracting younger women – in the present instance, fifteen years younger. Personally, I preferred women my own age, who'd been through many of the life experiences I had, whose kids were grown and gone and we could engage in a full-time sharing, just the two of us. For whatever reason, it never seemed to work out that way. My appearance or my manner, something, tended to attract women who saw in me a sort of new age father figure. I saw myself as anything but. I had little patience for my own shenanigans, but I had learned to understand them, accommodate them, deal with them. Other people's? Not so much. So what frequently began as differences leading to argument leading to enervating frustration, at some point I would perform the Barry Backstep – giving ground, conceding my position, walking away. In this relationship, a most unusual occurrence prompted me to toss aside this awkward dance and become assertive: Love for another human being.

Jessie was eight when I met them on the beach in Devonport, a North Shore burb of Auckland, not long after I'd arrived in New Zealand. Jess was tiny and smart and sickly: the worst case of eczema, and its corollary asthma, I'd ever seen. I was a hippie on the road, had been for years, savoring the movement, the freedom. Two firm rules marked my kind: never move

in with a woman who has a sickly kid. Second, don't under any circumstances break the first rule.

But Jessie'd grabbed my heart. She hadn't intended to. Over her brief lifetime her 'mum' had had as many boyfriends as I'd had female. Well before I showed up Jessie had developed a routine defense common to solo kids of solo mothers: since you're not going to hang around I'll reject you before you can abandon me. In my case, such an attitude was entirely justified, at least in the beginning. I saw her as a rather unnecessary footnote to my relationship with her mother. I was nice to her, but my niceness had little depth, and we both knew it.

When did it change? It happened of a moment. Chris had gone off to a meeting after putting Jessie to bed. I was sitting in the living room, reading. All of a sudden, a blood-curdling scream came from the bedroom. I leapt up and rushed through the flat. What I saw from the doorway to Jessie's room was my own worst nightmare.

Jessie's skin itched. Never stopped. Day and night. Problem was, the itching came from *inside* the skin. When she was awake, this knowledge kept the scratching to a minimum. Asleep, she would scratch through the skin to get to the source. Each morning her sheets were a Rorschach of blood. It was enough to keep a confirmed roadie eyeing the front door.

This particular evening, the itching/scratching horror reached into her dreams and erupted in screams and tears. I stood there, watching. Wanting to flee. Flee I could not – at least not till the mother came home.

I sat down on the bed and timidly reached out my hand. Making certain not to touch an affected area – not only because it made me queasy to do so, but because any touch exacerbated the condition.

'It's okay, babe. It's okay.' Yeah, right: okay. No, it wasn't okay, it was totally fucked. That this small being, pretty when you looked past the scabs, super bright, should suffer like this, and had been since the age of three months…

I stroked her more gently than I had any other human being, spoke soothingly. In time, she quieted down and fell back to full sleep. I kept my hand on one of the few areas of unblemished skin. And stared at her. And felt myself losing it. Oh shit, I thought. Oh, shit!

For eight years Chris had been mother, father, doctor, nurse. No help, just one-on-one. Whether guilt or duty, whatever, mother became smother. And Jess took full advantage. 'Mu-u-um!' would come the opening sing-song to a request/demand. Get me this, get me that, I'm hungry, how do you spell —. And the mother would be there in an instant.

Critical moment number two: we were sitting on the sofa, Chris and I, cheek to cheek, Jessie on the floor, the three of us reading. 'Mu-u-um, make me some tea.' Whereupon Chris made ready to jump.

'Wait a minute. She's got eczema, she's not crippled.' I held on tightly.

'But she's never made tea by herself.'

'At age eight? Jessie, c'mon, off the floor. We're gonna make a cuppa together.'

Stunned, Jessie looked pleadingly at her mum. 'Uh-uh,' I said. 'Just you and me. One time only. After this you make your own tea.' And when Chris began to complain, 'Look, you're no longer a single mother — !' The words just fell off my tongue. All life came to a standstill. Shock, the three of us. Me most of all.

I slowly led Jessie into the kitchen. 'Right. Fill up the jug. Cold water. Flick the switch. Don't watch it, it won't boil! You don't know that? Christ, what a

dumb kid, doesn't know a watched jug won't boil! Now it's boiling? Right: be very careful. Don't look at me – keep your eyes glued on what you're doing. Pour it slowly into the cup. Slooow-ly! Good, good.' Jessie in tears throughout. Until the jug was back on the table. She stared at the cup. Just stared at it. Then up at me. World record grin. Then to the doorway where the mother looked on, wringing her hands.

From then on, Jessie was easy. 'Yo, dude,' I would say whenever she would ask her mother the spelling of a word. 'That big fat book on the shelf? Called a dick-inary. Not much of a story line, but great cast of characters.' And she'd amble over and look it up, often saying, 'Wow, it's got ten different meanings!'

I'd never had fun with a kid before. Never. They were a different species, alien. That changed.

One cold winter morning I peeked into her room. Awake but not awake, awaiting the inevitable call for school. 'Pssst! You don't really want to go this morning, do you?'

She sat up. 'I don't have to go to school?'

'Wellll, I did have a thought about hitching up to Auckland, having an ice cream at Swensen's.' Two hundred miles away, this was.

She near catapulted out of bed. Now I had to work on Chris.

'She should be going to school. How are you going to hitch? That's not —'

'Just drive us to the Kawerau turnoff.' Which, finally, she did. Kvetching all the way.

I had taught Jessie the basics of the Alpha Mind Control course I had been teaching since 1972 and now ran on a freelance basis at Auckland University. What I did, I rented the student union cafeteria on successive weekends, hung up posters

around the city, did an interview or two on local radio. And filled the place, two, three hundred people. Fee was a donation. Being this was New Zealand, where people were known to squeeze a farthing, I didn't make a lot of money, but then, money wasn't the point. After paying the room rent, I gave the money away, usually to groups like Greenpeace or Amnesty. The hippie ethic.

Every evening when Jessie went to bed I'd be in there telling her a made-up story. Generally the stories were imagery guidings, not much different from what I did in class. Plus we'd play mind games. Visualize a tree. Reach out and feel the bark. When I snap my fingers, project yourself into the tree. You'll actually be *inside* it. You can change your size anyway you want to, move around freely. And all the while you are perfectly safe. Okay? Ready? *Snap*. And I'd have her tell me what she saw, what she was doing.

She not only was an apt student, she loved it.

Every class I had at the university during those back-to-back weekends, thirty-six hours in all, I'd have the group push back the chairs, form a huge circle and sit on the floor. Whereupon I would lead them in performing psychic healings. A subject might be part of the group but didn't have to be and most times weren't. The only descriptions I provided (reading off the note handed me by a class person who knew the subject) were name, age, town or city of residence and malady that required healing. I would then direct the group to imagine the person in the middle of the circle alongside where I was sitting, then send light, beautiful healing light, into and around the healee. Jessie was always the final subject.

The healing exercise was done on a Saturday. By Monday her skin would be like ivory; she'd be

totally free of the eczema. The clear skin would last a few weeks. Then gradually the eczema would return. Problem was, I normally taught a class every six months. So for the next five months she'd suffer. But what the whole thing showed me was her receptivity.

When Chris dropped us at the turnoff, I let Jessie babble and prance around a few minutes, let the crazy energy dissipate. Then: 'Okay, kiddo. Pull up your knickers and get to work.'

She closed her eyes. Took a few deep breaths. Very few cars were going by, and those that did I made no appeal for a ride. 'All right: whatta ya got?'

'A station wagon. Holden. Old one. Blue. No, green. No, blue.'

'Who's driving?'

'Old guy. Wearing glasses. Red checked flannel shirt.' Pause. 'Has a hat, but not wearing it. It's on the seat beside him.'

A few more cars whizzed by. Then an old Holden station wagon cruised to a stop. Blue, with one green door. The aged driver with glasses and red checked flannel shirt smiled as he leaned across and opened the passenger door, tossing the hat that was sitting on the seat into the back.

We got nine rides that morning. But the last, which we had hoped, had *programmed*, to take us directly to Swensen's in Parnell, dropped us instead in a suburb at the southern edge of the city. We got out just as a bus headed into town was pulling away from the curb. Gave chase but just missed it.

We stood just outside a bank waiting for the next one. A car pulled up, parked. A woman got out. She walked past towards the bank, stopped, retraced her steps. 'Barry?' I didn't recognize her. 'I did your last class at uni. What are you doing here?' I introduced Jess, said we were waiting for a bus.

'Well, I'm headed for Parnell soon as I do my banking. Can I give you a ride?'

I winked at Jess. She winked back at me.

I STOOD UNDER THE EAVES, just out of the rain. Behind me in the house my life was being taken apart.

They were packing up, mother and daughter. I'd sat in the house making like I wasn't aware, didn't really care, the two of them moving back and forth, stacking, lifting, removing.

'Do you want these?' Every now and then. Certain books. The Dylan tapes. Mutually acquired commodities. Say yes and there was a fuss. No, and I was a wimp.

They weren't moving far, a mile down the main drag of the tiny beach town I'd bought a house two years before. The mother I didn't mind losing. Our relationship had become an old tattered rag, limp, without value. But oh boy, would I ever miss the kid.

The moment came and they were gone. I went for a long slow walk on the beach. And back again. I was getting soaked. Finally I went inside. I looked for the cat. The big beautiful ginger who had shown up shortly after we'd taken possession. He hated rain so he ought to be inside somewhere. I called him. Nothing. Opened a can of his food. He'd always come running at the sound of the opener. Nothing. I looked in every room. I almost missed him. Jessie's room was like the ghost town in an old black and white Western. Empty drawers were scattered about the place, one atop her bed. I was about to walk out when I spotted something orange colored inside the drawer on the bed. A tiny triangle of an ear. I went over and peered down at him. He would not meet my eye.

I wasn't the only one who missed her.

We kept in touch. That is, I did. Went to see her a couple times a week. She was distant. Then I said how'd you like to go to the movies Saturday night. She looked at her mother. Who thought it over, finally nodded. And that became our weekly event. Plus pizza beforehand.

We would sit there with our heads together, holding hands. This was back in the days when New Zealand cinemas broke for intermission in the middle of a film. (But thankfully after they'd finally given up playing God Save the Queen before the feature, and everybody stood with hand over the heart.) Jessie would disappear to the lobby and come back with a small box of Jaffas, which we shared. One time she said, 'The lady behind the counter said how lovely it is to see me and my father every Saturday sitting so close.'

'Uh-huh.'

'I said, 'Oh, he's not my father, he's my friend.'

'Jesus, Jessie!'

'What?'

But it wasn't Jessie's innocence that prompted what went down not long after in my tiny beach town; rather my own.

I had written about the breakup and my separation from the first human I had learned to love. Inside our home, the pair of us hippies and hippie child often went around without clothes. Innocently, I made mention of this in the article. The editor later told me she'd been so moved by the piece that despite being worried that my statements might create a misunderstanding, she chose not to touch a word. As it turned out, she should have. Still, the responsibility was completely mine; I had failed to research the territory. Apparently an unimaginably high rate of NZ

women had, as girls, been abused by their fathers and mothers' boyfriends, with never any accountability. By the time I rolled around as a first-time surrogate parent, the country's adult females were angry and paranoid. A number of hard letters poured in to the magazine, and as well the women of my quiet, peaceful little burg pretty much erupted in furor. Fascinatingly, it was Jessie's mother, who when we were together could always be counted on to take the other side in any argument or difference of opinion I might be involved in, on this occasion astutely and passionately defended me, both locally and in print.

'So why didn't you ever take my side before?'

'You're such a strong arguer…I always felt the other person was at a disadvantage and needed somebody on their side.'

And then the mother hooked up with a new guy and the three of them moved to Australia.

DIDN'T SEE JESSIE for ages. Didn't hear from her either. Got dribbles of news: she'd graduated high school, was studying languages at uni. How did I come by such news? From Jessie's mother, who worked the market scenes in and around Byron Bay.

I had begun going to Australia every winter. I didn't like NZ winter, which in truth was more like early American spring in my North Island beach town; still I thought perhaps I'd relocate across the ditch full-time as had so many Kiwis over the years. So first I would fly into Brisbane, where I would stay with my friend Lomé. From there I would tootle off to Asia somewhere, then back to the Queensland coast. Finally, when an attempt to construct a relationship with a Brisbane woman petered out, I jumped on a bus south to Byron Bay.

Byron then was in its infancy as a tourist mecca, a magnificent beach town full of ex- and yet-hippie types who were working to keep the development-minded council from crapping up the place (as it is pretty much today). These were my kind of people, I thought. Except, as I kept discovering, they were not my kind of people, and over the years I have watched them grow from hippie to yuppie to beautiful people sorts who simply live a more organic-minded lifestyle than their conventional wealthy parents in Sydney and Melbourne. The most positive thing about Byron was that I was an hour's drive or bus ride to where Jessie was living and going to university in Lismore. We began seeing one another more often. And I began making the same idiotic mistakes of most every controlling father since Adam.

I thought she was better than Lismore and told her so. I thought she was better than her boyfriend/partner and told her so. I wrote her letters about it: letters that were filled with snide remarks and not very wholesome sarcasm.

One fine day in Byron she finally told me so. How every letter that came with my return address she would lay aside and not open until she could gird herself for what she knew would be within. I remember my face growing red as she told me how her hands would shake as she tore open the envelope. And I remember with great clarity the moment of realization how unbelievable a dick I was to be treating her so. To this day my curious behavior back then sits as unquestionably the stupidest, most mindless and hurtful personal conduct in my eighty years on planet Earth.

We got through it. There was still a lot of love there, and this, plus my cold turkey cessation of such arrogance enabled us to get on with this love. One day

she happened to mention that she'd received a letter from her former university stating that her student loan would be reduced a quarter if she paid the full amount owed at once.

'How much is it?'

'Eight thousand.'

'Including the interest? So if you pay six you're free? Jess, give me the letter and I'll pay it. Get out from under the damn thing.'

I know Jessie. I know her stubbornness to do things her own way, damn triple Taurus that she is. But I also know her body language. There was something else going on here. I waited as she looked left, looked right, look down at her shoes.

'I got addicted to something. I was on it for eight months.'

I waited, expecting her to say drugs.

'The pokies,' she said eventually. The slots. 'It started one night after work. We had dinner and I said I wanted to go for a walk. After several minutes I passed a casino. I'd never been in one. I went in, walked around, finally sat down at a machine. Innocently. Played a few hands. I don't even think I won anything. The following night, another walk. No intention of going back, then I looked up and there it was. This time I won a hand. Maybe two, don't remember.'

'And that was it?'

'Yup. It got so, it was just something I did in my day. Got up, had breakfast, went to work, came home, ate the dinner Steven made for us, went for a walk, pokies.'

'How much?'

She sighed. 'Twenty thousand.'

'And Steven never —?'

She shook her head. ‘I was bringing in most of our money, and he was too embarrassed to tell me what I should do – or not do – with it.’

‘You’re done?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Sure?’ I had worked with addicts of several varieties back in Philadelphia and knew for certain that gambling was the hardest by far to put a permanent stop to.

‘Yes. So you see why I can’t take any money from you. I really have to do this myself.’

Jessie had a well-paying but killer job at the Telstra call center in Lismore. She hated it, didn’t like the way the company treated subscribers who rang up to complain about billing, didn’t much care for the way her fellow service operators talked to customers.

‘I try to make up for them, talk to the callers like they’re friends, give them breaks whenever I can. But the whole corporate mentality drives me crazy.’

‘Y’know —.’ I stopped myself.

‘I know. And I will. But not just yet.’

Ah, those lessons in life. Jess now works at the university, far less money but she loves the job and the people around her. She and Steven are the best of friends. I usually only see them once or twice a year in Byron, although they did come to my place in NZ a few years back. A couple years ago my little girl turned forty. When I saw them they told me they wanted to do a trip, most likely Vietnam.

‘Nam is chokka with Aussies,’ I told them. ‘Why not try Myanmar? It’s so much better a place to travel.’

‘We’d love to. We discussed it, but Myanmar’s much too expensive for the funds we have.’

‘Earth to world’s most stubborn Taurus. Earth to world’s most stubborn Taurus. Guess what your old

New Zealand daddy's fortieth birthday present is to the human he loves the most?' I looked over to Steven. 'And to her long-term and no doubt long-suffering partner. And I just dare you to say no.'

'Yes!' she cried.

They went to Myanmar, traveled around in ways I used to travel in my thirties and forties: rickety overnight trains stuffed with locals, untold toddlers, live chickens, the occasional goat…the interminable bus rides over potholed third world roads, the mandatory breakdowns and less-than-sober drivers. Nowadays, I fly domestic whenever possible. It's called sacrificing travel yarns for comfort. So when I heard *their* travel yarns, saw the pics on Jess's hand-held, how damn envious was I? Oh, not damn envious at all, no sir. Not me. Hell, no.

TRAVEL YARN No. 6

GREENLAND.

GETTING GREENER.

SADLY.

‘YO, ROSEY! WAKE UP! You’re late for work your first day on the job! C’mon, man, get out of bed!!’

My eyes popped open. I glanced around at unfamiliar surroundings. Tiny room, ugly light green walls, lumpy cot upon which my body lay. The sun was shining brightly through the single window. The clock read 10.45.

I leaped out of bed. Or tried to. My feet got tangled in the sleeping bag, and I fell to the floor in a heap. Around me, peals of laughter. I looked up to see half dozen males peering down at me; that is, when their heads weren’t rocking back in guffaws.

I had become victim of the oldest practical joke in Greenland.

Yes, it was 10.45. And work for me began at 8. Only it was 10.45*pm*, half an hour after I’d hit the sack my first ‘night’ in the Arctic where, that time of year, there was no night.

This was June, 1962 and I was in Thule as part of my civilian job as personnel coordinator with the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System, a curious and frequently non-functioning multi-billion dollar US Air Force defense project aimed at detecting Soviet rockets coming over the North Pole. (As one highly-ranked, and highly disgusted, air force officer told me: ‘Damn Russkies could bring their nukes over the pole on toboggans, we’d be the last to know!’)

The experience was mind-opening for a 20something city boy who till this time had never been out of the States. Thule Air Base, located far up the west coast of the world's largest island, at the time counted five thousand residents, military and civilian. Five thousand male residents. Not a female in sight.

As Greenland was owned by tiny Denmark, the deal between landlord and tenant included the employ of a certain number of Danes. It just so happened that the Danes there all were gay (meaning unlike the Americans they were not all that fussed about the dearth of women).

The xenophobic, homophobic Yanks, meanwhile, knowing all gay Danes to be commies, wouldn't let them anywhere near the technical areas (else they'd immediately pass secrets of the frequently non-functioning hi-tech gadgetry to their fellow Reds). So the Danish chaps all worked in cleaning and kitchen positions. Quite happily, I might add.

As a personnel guy I had daily contact with the Danes, and within short order got to like them far more than the swaggering Yank yobbos. (Any potential snide comments alluding to my sexuality were quickly allayed by the photo of my gorgeous young wife that sat on my desk.)

Mostly, the Americans at Thule occupied their off-hours drinking and gambling, the Danes by getting out and seeing as much as they could of the amazing landscape. Early on they had made personal contact with the Eskimos living in nearby villages (who, also being commie sympathizers, were not permitted on base). It was through friendship with both these elements that gave the 20something city boy his first taste of the pristine Arctic environment.

Exhilarating dog sled rides over the polar icecap to the Eskimos' home villages provided a sense

of awe and wonder. A fur-clad driver would stand on the rear lip of the sled (as I sat just ahead, swathed in furs and blankets against the fierce cold wind), whip in hand cracking just over the heads of eight fanned-out huskies, while alongside trotted a second male. Without sign or signal, at certain intervals they would smoothly switch places. When a dog needed the loo, it would simply pull out of the fan, run alongside and do its deed without missing a step, then gracefully slide back into assigned formation spot. Miraculously, never once did harness straps become entangled.

My initial preconception of the icecap had it that all would be white. Uh-uh. The collage of soft hues and shades were in fact breathtaking. As well, distance was ever so deceiving. At one point during my very first ride, the Eskimo behind me leaned over, pointed to a far-off mountain and in minimal English asked how far away I believed it to be. Sensing a trick question, I doubled my initial estimate.

'Twenty miles?'

He laughed heartily, said something to the man jogging alongside, who as well had him a chortle. 'Hoonrit!' he replied joyously. Which later I found to be true.

Before my tour of duty was concluded, I experienced an assortment of majestically architected peaks and perfectly sculpted fiords, the spectacular aurora borealis, colorful lakeside villages and beautiful indigenous Inuit and Inughuit peoples, all of which I have found nothing comparable in a lifetime of travel.

Fast forward half a century. The world's least populated country per area size (Greenland comprises a land mass roughly the combined acreage of Germany, France and Scandinavia) has a problem: its

melting icecaps and receding sea ice mark the country as hardest hit by global warming of any place on earth.

There are other dilemmas. Number one employer of the sixty thousand citizens is the government. The Danish government, which also plumps up the local economy by millions of dollars a year. But Greenlanders very much want to break free from Copenhagen and go it on their own. Will they lose their prime source of income when they go solo? Most likely.

Also, two large ongoing industries, sealing and whaling, have become social pariahs so far as much of the world is concerned. And while the diminishing icecap has in the past couple of decades created fifteen percent more tillable soil for crops, this represents but a tiny portion of its necessary income.

Which leads to – ta-*taaaa* – tourism. Even here there's a marked quandary: the abbreviated season. Three months a year; September to May it's frozen in. Or has been since time began. Still, the numbers of visitors are leap-frogging annually as Greenland has become a prime holiday destination for travelers opting for someplace new, different and exciting.

People who have been to the Antarctic rightly exclaim its virtues. Consider the inherent wintry beauty of the very most South combined with a colorful and gentle native population and comfortable accommodation.

And exhilarating dog sleds rides across the icecap.

MYO MYO

AND NOW, FOR A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT dining experience…

The two European couples, billionaires both, loved to travel. But being proper jetset billionaires, certainly not in any conventional manner.

They'd been up Everest, canoed the Amazon, snowmobiled in Antarctica. They'd jumped out of planes over the ocean, jogged the Sahara, rock-climbed Gibraltar. What was left?

The rich, the super-rich, and those merely striving to appear that way, have got into the latest, well, not travel fad, exactly. Call it a different way of doing what the most common of us does daily. Call it the Extraordinary Culinary Experience.

People are flying halfway round the globe in search of a good meal. Check that: an outstanding meal; a meal that's extraordinary and different. And that's how these two ultra-wealthy couples discovered a short, attractive 40something woman in a small town in the land that used to be known as Burma.

THERE WAS NO LOGICAL reason I strolled into the small family-run guesthouse in Nyaung Shwe, Myanmar. This was 2002, my first time in the country, and I had already taken comfortable lodging nearby. I had passed the place a few times. Modest, unassuming, it certainly wasn't exceptional in appearance. Yet something about it attracted me.

Without really thinking about it, I walked up the path and knocked on the door.

A pretty woman then around thirty, whose pleasant face seemed to perpetually bear a smile, Myo Myo invited me in, and though I immediately explained my peculiar behavior – the fact I had a place nearby (turned out it belonged to her husband's uncle) – she made me tea, passed me a plate of delicious home-baked goodies and we proceeded to chat for an hour. As I was leaving she suggested I come back later and meet her husband. I thought to myself this made little sense, but later in the day I did just that, meeting a slim, handsome man named Ko Zaw plus a gorgeous six year old daughter, and was instantly smitten by this family. As we were sitting there, the couple suddenly began talking to one another in Burmese. Ko Zaw then turned to me and said why don't you move in here, stressing that his uncle wouldn't mind. There was no question I liked the feel of their place, plus I felt supremely comfortable with them. I asked how much a room would be.

'No charge,' he said. 'We'd like you to stay as our guest.'

Now, a suggestion of this nature normally would produce a loud inner gong of suspicion. But though such an offer had never happened to me before, since this occasion I've been offered free stays, often with meals, at accommodations of different varieties in a number of countries, including a few extremely pricey resorts. Never have I solicited such generosity, nor have I even hinted at a freebee. (In fact, I'm one of those rare travelers who don't even like bargaining.) I have yet to figure this out. I mean, am I being mistaken for somebody famous? Do I come across as a prototype surrogate grandfather, in need of adoption?

Whatever, the following day I moved in. It was one of the best moves I've ever made.

SHORTLY AFTER FINISHING UNIVERSITY, and then marriage, Myo Myo worked as a hairdresser and seamstress before opening a small tea shop in Nyaung Shwe, where she did all the preparation herself. Four years later the couple built a small hotel and restaurant, which they called ViewPoint. Eight rooms, and Myo Myo provided meals in their tiny family quarters for those in short-term residence.

'I never spent a single day at a cooking school,' she told me shortly after I'd been accepted into the family. 'I learned whatever I now know about food preparation from my grandmother while I was growing up. She did everything naturally, and in the traditional Shan way.' (Shan being a state of Myanmar; Shan also being the country's largest ethnic minority.) 'Even though I've added plenty of my own ideas and recipes from cookbooks, the internet plus trial and error, I still make everything from scratch. I never use anything processed or prepared off the premises.'

Though Nyaung Shwe was a sleepy town back then, word of her prowess as a chef nonetheless became known as far away as the nation's biggest city. A Frenchman holidaying at ViewPoint was so taken by Myo Myo's cuisine he convinced a friend in Yangon, who happened to be owner of the country's top-rated restaurant, to fly to Nyaung Shwe and sample her fare.

Long story short — the restaurateur, a Swiss expat, made Myo Myo this offer: he would finance construction of a fully equipped restaurant on the property, then use his contacts with local and European travel agencies to send them tour groups.

She and Ko Zaw would go fifty-fifty with him in the business and he'd stay completely out of Myo Myo's way when it came to the food. The agreement signed, the Swiss then dispatched a noted French architect to design the place – a stunning circular, upstairs facility seating over a hundred with breathtaking views in every direction from every table.

The Swiss restaurateur did teach Myo Myo some three-star restaurant ambiance: table setting, for example. And proper waitperson conduct. This was not always an easy matter for the Nyaung Shwe couple to pass on to staff.

'Many of the people we hired came from villages nearby,' she told me. 'Some had never eaten with a fork, let alone placed it properly on the table. And so far as linen napkins folded and stuffed into a holder…'

Also, many local males chewed betel, a substance that makes the teeth blood red and speech sound like it comes from underwater. Quaint and folksy, sure, but not quite the service conduct required for a restaurant on the way up the prestige scale.

Myo Myo did not hire trained chefs. 'I wanted my cooks to prepare food the way I do, the way my grandmother did,' I remember her telling me at the time. 'I feel experienced chefs bring too many bad habits.' She has never, for instance, used anything commercially produced. All foods served are either organic or unsprayed. And every single sauce, dressing and jam is her own concoction.

But high as the quality of meals there may be, it was not the sit-down restaurant dining that brought wealthy thrill-seekers to sample ViewPoint's feasts. Myo Myo and Ko Zaw came up with a few wrinkles to complement the standard eat-and-go experience.

Take Myo Myo's popular cooking classes, lasting three hours. Student numbers ranged anywhere from two to ninety.

(Hardest thing — from very personal experience — to learning Shan cooking? Forming 'boats' and 'tents' out of banana leaves to hold rice. Sticking in toothpicks to hold the leaves' shapes without tearing them can be a most frustrating endeavor. The main ingredients here? Patience and a gentle touch. Had she not come along and aided my feeble attempts (translation: finally doing it herself), I would've finished the lesson with my hands looking like a toothpicked porcupine.)

It was Ko Zaw who designed several forms of remote feedings: Being transported into a lovely nearby forest in authentic bullock-drawn wagons for a picnic. Or dining in the village off Inle Lake where he was born and raised, a village where little has changed over the past few hundred years and the presence of a foreigner is definitely a novelty (and where the villagers greet all visitors with smiles and unfeigned kindness).

But the cream of ViewPoint's feeding crop had to be lunch on the lake itself. For Inle is no standard inland water body. The surroundings are gorgeous, rice fields and green hills dotted with Buddhist monasteries and pagodas. But the main attraction has to be the local boat folk.

Perhaps nowhere in the world are water vessels propelled in the Inle manner. Here, a boat person, regardless of sex or age (some appear barely old enough to walk), stands on the rear lip of the longboat, wraps a leg, most often the right, around a paddle, and swings the leg in an elliptical manner. Daunting. I know. I tried it. Splish-splash!

Viewpoint's own longboat was motorized and equipped with tables, chairs, even an odorless commode set off with a wall of rattan and 'flushed' with cups of sand. The boat could accommodate twenty standard diners…or four European billionaires.

While a choice champagne was being plentifully served by waiters in traditional Shan garb, squatting before kerosene cookers at the far end of the boat was the hostess herself, preparing the meals.

The day was beautiful, the atmosphere upbeat, Myo Myo's food divine. At least, that was the reaction of the quartet of very rich, very contented people who, as they stepped off the boat two hours later into the launch that would deliver them back to their thousand dollar-plus a day resort, were heard crying *Bravo!*

THE SWISS EXPAT, being a man of vision, saw a day not far off when the corrupt generals who for so long had held Myanmar's throat tightly in their grasp, who had traded the country's most valuable resources, jade and teak, to China in return for pocket-lining cash and armaments to keep the populace in line, would be forced to step down. The internationally popular Aung San Suu Kyi, he reckoned correctly, would be freed from long-term house arrest and lead the country to democracy. (Note: a truism: the more things change, the more they remain the same. 'The Lady', as she was known to the Burmese, held up by the free world as a symbol of peace through her years of defying the generals, has supported one of the most blatant forms of genocide in recent years against the Muslim Rohingya people through her refusal to speak up about the Buddhist-perpetuated horror.)

The Swiss figured rightly that Europeans would soon come piling into the country, and the tiny town of Nyaung Shwe would become a red hot tourist

destination. The restaurant he'd had designed and built was fine to accommodate those who would be flocking in. But following their meals, they would go off to better sleeping space than a somewhat tired eight room guesthouse.

So another deal was made with the couple who'd called ViewPoint home the past several years: the guesthouse was bulldozed and in its place arose a resort on a small artificial lake. Totally eco-friendly — what the discerning tourists were now demanding. Cost of accommodation there would naturally be higher. Like twenty-plus times higher.

While Ko Zaw still serves in a managerial position, Myo Myo has left ViewPoint and opened her own restaurant in nearby Taunggyi, the Shan state capital and Myanmar's third largest city. As they had twenty years prior, the couple started with a piece of bare land and on their own erected every stick and brick of the new operation.

Curiously, Myo Myo has done what she'd told me she neither needed nor cared to partake in: attending cooking courses, first in Japan, then in Thailand, later Malaysia. The idea was to expand her culinary horizons with more international options to a populace becoming more and more knowledgeable about the outside world. It's obviously worked. The Taung Chune is doing extremely well, earning a four and a half star reviewer rating, and often it's impossible to get a table there.

Has it changed the woman at all? Well, a bit. No longer a small town self-taught cook, she has foreign traveled quite a bit of late with her family and is in demand in the big city of Taunggyi not only as a restaurateur, but as well by a growing clientele of fellow Burmese chefs demanding her tutelage. With it all, my dear sister Myo Myo is the same down to earth

woman who invited a stranger into her home for tea and delicacies, and into her family for life, several years before.

TRAVEL YARN No. 7

WHEELED INTO AMERICA

MY FIRST TRIP BACK TO AMERICA in twenty-five years was nearly sidetracked by the actions of a fool.

The fool was me.

With barely ninety minutes between the twelve-hour trans-Pacific flight and the connecting domestic to Philadelphia, I was worried about those never ending immigration/customs lines at LA International. I'd heard all kinds of horrific tales how, since 9/11, security agents were searching, scrutinizing, even stripping people coming into the country. My luck, surely they'd pick on me. Packs turned inside out, my smelly shoes examined, the dreaded bend-over-and-spread-'em ordeal as my scheduled flight to Philly took off without me.

But in truth this wasn't the fear which prompted my damn-fool action. I was afraid America would not let me in. Eighty-six me before I'd set first foot back on Yankee soil.

Having abandoned the land of my birth, immigrating to New Zealand a quarter century before, plus all those terrible things I'd been saying and writing about the inane bullying tactics of America's megalomaniacal leaders (and this well before the Trump era), I knew with absolute certainty I'd be denied entry.

Lately I'd been having these dreams; nightmares, actually: as I handed over my passport —

my *New Zealand* passport — I'd get this icy glare, a siren would go off, a platoon of huge, thick-necked marines would suddenly materialize, and I'd be frog-marched back onto the plane. Or worse, whisked off to that delightful resort with its guard dogs and razor wire and ninety-seven modes of torture called Guantanamo.

Then I discovered this brilliant diversionary tactic. A way to have them take pity on me. 'Yeah, right, he's done all these rotten things, but he's a pathetic old fart now, look at him. Okay, you! Get in here!'

It was my friend Ernie, another American expat living in NZ, who unwittingly planted the seed. In his mid-eighties and only semi-ambulatory, Ernie had gone back for a visit a couple years prior. I questioned him on procedure at LAX.

'Not a problem,' replied Ernie, who now has his own wings and therefore no need of airports or passport. 'I simply requested wheelchair assistance. Got pushed right to the front of the line.'

Ding!

Checking in at Auckland airport, I put in my request. The clerk typed it into her computer. I was set. Wheel me in, Scotty!

I AWOKE AS THE PLANE was descending over the Southern California coastline. Not just from a fitful long-distance airliner sleep; as well I was aroused out of my hibernation from good sense. Wheeled into America? After twenty-five years?? Schmuck!

But they were waiting for me. As I slow-stepped towards the plane's exit amongst the shuffle of tired humanity and clumsy bags, the cabin crew pulled me aside. I protested weakly. All I received in return were courteous, we-know-best smiles. The

small uniformed woman — Latina? Philippina? — standing behind the well-used wheelchair was anything but smiling. Serious business, this. Together, grinning attendants and somber airport worker stuffed me into the chair. And away we went.

The worst thing, as I sat slumped in the wheelchair, daypack on lap, tooling along at a rapid pace past the walkers, worst thing was the humiliation. On long distance flights passengers tend to become a sort of loose, we're-all-in-this-together community. You see the same faces, get to know idiosyncrasies. And here I was, picture of perfect health, being wheeled past the gang looking like Riff Raff in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Passing the lovely French university student who'd sat next to me for a dozen hours, her mouth now slung open at the sight of me. I avoided eye contact.

I was pushed, as my friend Ernie had noted, directly to the front of the long snaking line. Where I was promptly mugshot, electronically fingerprinted, questioned why as an American citizen I was traveling on an *alien* passport. (See, my brother was dying and the US embassy said it'd take ninety days for a new document to be issued, therefore…). And that was it. I could've been toting a WMD on either shoulder, all the security precautions I encountered.

My ancient, scuffed red backpack arrived at the baggage carousel moments after I did. I stepped off the wheelchair, dragged bag from belt, strapped it on.

'Thanks very much,' I said with gleaming grin to my pusher-woman. 'I can walk from here. It's not far. I'll just take it slow. Tiny steps.'

'I've been directed to take you through customs, then outside to a special shuttle bus for

people like you,' she announced in an emphatic staccato tone.

'Oh.'

'But I have a problem. There's a small ramp between here and customs. With your heavy bag it's too much for me to push you up the ramp.'

'Right. That settles it. Thanks ever so much. Well, bye now.'

The stern-faced little woman, late fifties, barely five feet of her, reached up and placed a hand on my shoulder and with the force of Thor's hammer flung me back into the chair.

'You wait right here. I'll get someone to help.' And made off through the crowd.

I waited. Sat in that wheelchair and waited. A minute. Two. Five. No sign of her. I looked around. Made to get up just as the woman reappeared, towing behind a very unhappy man in porter's garb.

'I'm gonna miss out carryin' bags!' The porter.

'Your contract says you have to do this!' Pusher.

'Hell with the contract. Y'all takin' away my livin'!' Porter.

'Look, I'm really sorry about this.' Wheelchair sitter.

'Ain't you, man. It's this bee-utch!'

'I'm putting you on report!'

'Look, I'm happy to walk. Honest.'

'You stay in that chair!'

'But —.'

'But —!'

'But —!!'

The porter positioned himself behind the chair and began pushing at close to warp speed.

'*Omigod! Omigod! Omigodomigodomi —!!*' Me, knowing with total certainty I'm headed ker-*splat!* into a wall.

Somehow, God Bless America, we made it to customs in record time without mishap. The porter stalked off, swearing loudly. The cursory inspection of my bags took less than a minute.

I wanted in the worst way to get off the chair and walk out to the street.

I didn't dare.

Outside the terminal, the Latina/Philippina navigated me to the curb, where another wheelchair was already placed. Japanese woman in her sixties. Alongside her, standing tall, a man in uniform. And that's when it hit me. The reason for the pusher-woman's insistence on my remaining in the chair.

I'd been away twenty-five years. I had forgotten what it is that makes America the great power she is, the most sought-after country on earth for refugees the world over. Freedom? Liberty? Democracy? Like hell.

Tipping.

I had no American money. Wait, I tell a lie. I did have American money. Two dozen hundred-dollar bills. Plus a crumpled piece of tan paper bearing the washed-out likeness of a very young Ed Hilary. I certainly wasn't going to hand over one of the former. And I could just imagine the reaction should I give her a Kiwi fiver.

The special shuttle bus for 'people like me', destination the domestic terminal where I would catch my flight to Philly, pulled to the curb. The door opened. Backpack in one hand, daypack in the other, I cannonballed myself off the wheelchair.

'Thankyousomuch,' I spit out in a groveling broken voice to the small woman standing behind my

chair. 'Really. Thank you. Thank you.' And like an Olympic high hurdler I leaped onto the shuttle. I glanced back briefly; two things did I note: the Japanese woman handing some bills to her pusher, at least one of which was a twenty. And the look of shock, horror and utter dismay on the face of the tiny woman who had, yes, with a little help, pushed me through that entire city of insanity called LA International.

I flopped down heavily, slackly, in the furthest seat from the door, my eyes cast solidly on the floor. Not a muscle did I move, nor breath take, until the Japanese woman had been settled in her seat and the shuttle started up and moved off, taking me into America.

AMANDA

SHE WAS DECIDEDLY NERVOUS that gray spring Saturday morning as she maneuvered her wheelchair onto the platform lip extending from the van's open side door, then used the hand-held remote to electronically lower herself to street level. 'I must be crazy to be doing this,' she said to me quietly. Waiting for her on the beach were a couple hundred people, plus TV and radio crews. 'I *really* must be crazy,' she said again as she wheeled herself onto the grass verge, then waited for her partner to push her up a slight incline as people straggled over to greet her, wish her good luck.

AMANDA HAD BLOWN INTO MY SMALL NZ TOWN twenty-seven years before, nineteen, tall, lovely, athletic, outgoing, fresh from Wellington, chef's diploma in hand. At first, she opened her parents' cafe at night, quickly establishing it as one of the finer restaurants in the Eastern Bay. Couple years later she took over the daytime caf. And more than any single person, Amanda turned this staid old Bell-tea-and-asparagus-roll mill town around. She made it jump.

She knew food, she knew music, she knew ambiance. And it wasn't long before Amanda's Café was pumping with great food, atmosphere and life. Always packed, it was the lunchtime trade that marked Amanda's as the place to be. Starting at noon and

going till past two, the line would stretch the length of the room, out the door and twenty-five feet along the footpath, passing yet another café where the tables remained unoccupied. No one would even consider forgoing the wait to go someplace else.

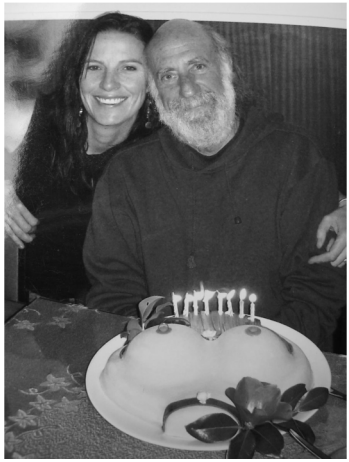
I got to know her through my daily early morning attendance there. She was one full-on babe, often playing big sister to her equally young women staff in addition to baking, cooking, doing the books, making sure all was running smoothly. Seven day, hundred hour weeks were common. Often stressed to the max, she would make her way over to my table for an ear to talk to, and now and again show up at the house to share some meditation.

Once when she was hair's breadth from total collapse, I reached up (she's an inch or two taller than me), grabbed an ear, and led her over to my travel agent. 'But I can't afford the time off!' she cried. I held fast to the lobe, booked her a two month journey to favored haunts in Asia. She came back a new person.

Starved for male attention and love, she had a number of relationships during the dozen years she ran the eatery. Each one ended in disaster, most notably a two year miserable marriage.

For years, I browbeat her to sell up and get a life. Finally, she did just that. She stayed in the food biz for a while, catering events and occasionally doing café locum work around New Zealand's North Island. She always had a head full of novel, sometimes outrageous, ideas.

Take my seventieth birthday. A small party at a local restaurant. As usual, Amanda was late. Finally in she walked toting a huge dish and wide, sly grin. And set down on the table a magnificent 'titty cake' – a perfect replica of a woman's naked upper body,



complete with nipple ring. Everybody in the place stood around and gawked, took pics. She handed me the knife. No way! I cried. (Bad enough I had to blow out the candles.) She had to do the slicing herself.

One day a few years prior she'd shown up at the house with a beautiful, shy woman in tow. Introduced her as Gemma. I looked at one, looked at the other. It was obvious they'd jumped the sexual fence and wanted my approval. I had to laugh. I mean, even in small town New Zealand, the twenty-first century had taken a foothold. Sure, whatever, my lovelies. Be happy.

And boy, were they. Happy and ever so active. If Amanda was full-on, Gemma, being English, was quiet, reserved and occupied with such activities as yoga and weaving. (Soon, Amanda would be into yoga, and Gemma became an active outdoorsy type.) She was also, I must tell you, the finest osteopath I have ever entrusted this achy old body to.

Occupationally, Amanda was still floundering. She desperately wanted out of the food biz, but what? As a person who could not sit still, nor was she content to be supported by Gemma's osteo income, she grew bored and scratchy. Which turned out to be the motivation to delve into something new, something scary. She went back to university.

At thirty-five and considerably older than all the other students, initially cowed by their academic banter, she resisted the temptation to cop out and

applied herself as she had done in her restaurant and café enterprises.

She started with a graduate diploma in strategic management. And what did she learn in this area of academic endeavor?

'I absolutely hated management! The biz bods I met – the *successes* – were such dorks. No compassion, no sense of humanity, just making money.'

However, one paper she did looked at the inherent inequality in employment. 'I loved it. Because of this paper I cross-credited everything I had to start a labor studies degree. I followed that through to honors. Straight A's all the way.'

She began teaching at the university. Her classes were hugely popular. Students had never heard such radical inculcation: applying heart and compassion to the world of business, and making it all work!

Oh, and during this period she also found time to twice do the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage walk in Spain, and, on my urging, both women did a four month journey through India.

Not long after they got back to New Zealand Amanda became pregnant. A daughter was born; they named her Lola.

Five years later Gemma as well delivered a daughter, named Ziggy. So the family became Gemma, Amanda, Lola and Ziggy, and forever after they were known as the GALZ.

For five days, all were over the moon. I have rarely seen a happier family. And then on day six the moon fell from the sky.

An accomplished surfer, Amanda spent an hour out on her board at the Mount. Finished, she did as she always had done at the end of a good surf: she

dived into the sea, into water she assumed to be a couple meters deep. And landed head-first onto a sandbar.

That was the tragedy, yes, but here is the beauty of that moment. A friend was on the beach minding Lola. When Amanda didn't come up for some time, too long a time, he rushed into the surf. Having lifeguard training, he knew how to lift her and carry her out of the water without further damaging the spine. She later told me she had absolutely no air left in her lungs; none. Another moment, she'd have breathed water.

Examination revealed extensive damage, although the cord itself had not been severed. Instead, among other problems, her C6 and C7 vertebrae, normally in line, had been squashed to where they were now parallel, one right alongside the other. Her spinal cord was doing an S.

An eight hour op ensued, repairing as much of the damage as possible. Still, she was paralyzed from the neck down, and the early prognosis said she most likely would remain that way forever. Her life as she had known it was over.

Little did they know our Amanda.

Within a week she was moving her arms up to her face. She had feeling in her hands, but no movement as yet in the fingers. And there was a spot on one leg she could sense touch.

The first few weeks I observed a support network of friends, plus her kid brother, who were simply amazing in their care and effort. The large, airy room she had at the Tauranga Hospital ICU was virtually a daily party of people who came not to titter and coo, but to laugh and encourage.

But the 'holiday' had to come to an end, which in this case meant moving her to the spinal rehab unit

in Auckland. There, the heavy lifting, so to speak, began.

Until the accident, she'd been a sort who would try anything, take any risk, no stone left unturned. Robbed of her ability to stand, to take even a single step for the remainder of her life, and with only partial use of her hands, following intensive rehabilitation she got right back into it. With just fourteen percent bodily function, two years later she placed second in a 32 km para cycle race. Then came a pair of competitive mile-long ocean swims. Amanda was the lone para. The first race she finished last, the second she beat out three accomplished and able-bodied contestants. Oh yeah: she began playing wheelchair rugby. Mainly against males. And took no prisoners. Like a demolition derby, but without the protection of all that steel and chrome and engine blocks. Then for something to occupy the few hours she wasn't playing sports and taking care of two young kids and overseeing the construction of the new home that would be able to accommodate her condition, she went back to university teaching for a year. students.

AMANDA'S FACEBOOK POST MARCH 2017

Ziggy is now 4 and Lola about to be 8. And I've just passed the milestone of 4 years in a chair... I watch Ziggy as she masters language, and learns how to control and use her body. Our stories are interwoven, I got a new body 4 years ago, and like her I am just learning how to use it too. What is heartening is that every year I get better at it, I have more control, I have more understanding...but it's all about the detail.

The last year and a half have been a massive transition period... I've been driving for almost 2 years now...that's a game changer. I can pick the kids up from school... Take Lola to sport...and now she is big enough to put Ziggy in her car seat we can go places alone...ahhhhh independence.

After a full on year we've moved into a purpose built house that has a kitchen totally setup for me... I've had hand surgery that gives me some function that will allow me to cook again. When I'm back in kitchen creating food, using my love language, then all will be a little more right in my world.
Physically I'm super strong, I go the gym, swim 2-3km per week, and play wheelchair rugby. My fitness is my job...because if I'm well, then I can look after my family...this year me and the girls swum the bridge to bridge race 1.6km ocean swim... Is so good to be in the water...it recharges my soul. The water makes me feel free, there are no chairs, nobody touching me. Just me, weightless, quiet, just breathing and looking at the sky.

Someone asked me the other day if it gets any better...my reply was no...you just get better at it...

We are getting there, our family is happy...Gemma and I are finding our way. There are more glimpses of freedom, and independence than I ever thought possible...

THEY CARRIED HER ON A FLOATING CHAISE into the chilly, choppy ocean. There were twenty swimmers in wetsuits. Most of them would swim around tiny Rabbit Island while Amanda would simply touch base and turn around. A few would accompany her, but not so close as to create a current around her, slow her down. Her objective was to raise awareness and money for a friend, a thirty-two year old male who had lived through untold physical adversity, and recently, to top it off, had had a leg amputated well above to knee in order to rid his body of a life-threatening blood clot. A second objective, the one that made her nervous, was to conquer the one mile roundtrip distance on her own, without assistance. She estimated her time would be around an hour.

In water chest-high to a standing person, those carrying the chaise turned it over, and she slid face down into the sea, quickly flipping over and maneuvering herself so that her head pointed to the tiny island half a mile off. Then she began to swim in the sole manner she is able — on her back, using straightened arms working synchronously in a backstroke.

Those lining the beach grew dead quiet. Some shaded their eyes as they peered out into the morning glare. Amanda's arms went up at around a forty-five degree angle, then back and down. And again. And again. Before long the only thing visible of her amongst the swells were two sticks popping up, falling down. She was swimming on an angle to our left, which would work with the current, moving to our right. Time seemed to pass very, very slowly. Then it was announced by someone on the beach, in phone contact with the accompanying swimmers, she had touched land and made the turn.

It was thought the swimmers encircling the island would wait for her and they'd all swim back together. But they were nowhere in sight. She was plowing like an engine through the water, which seemed to have grown even more choppy. The floating chaise was taken out to meet her in the shallow surf. Once aboard and sitting up, gold-colored foil was wrapped around her head and upper body to preserve her body heat, she looked the conquering Cleopatra upon her royal float. Cheers went up on the beach as she was set down on the sand. Two hundred hand-helds snapped pics and vids, the TV and radio people pointed lenses and mics.

Tears of exhaustion, ecstatic grin of achievement.

Crazy for sure.

AS IF SHE NEEDED MORE INCENTIVE to prove to herself that being crippled does not mean being broken, the river and ocean swims motivated her to go all-out for another watery venue: the 2020 Paralympics in Tokyo. But pool swimming is far different than the river and sea, where it's all straight ahead (or, in her case, straight behind). The paralympic people, however, were dubious. Their logic had it that nobody in her condition had ever accomplished what Amanda intended to do, therefore it couldn't be done, therefore she wouldn't be able to do it. The feat wasn't simply distance. As she can't even get into and out of the water unassisted, plus all the turn-arounds at pool's end, a person with just fourteen percent bodily function, which means eighty-six percent of her doesn't work at all, well…

As in the ocean swim she had done, she was 'competing' against accomplished, able-bodied swimmers at her audition in Auckland. They all beat

her to the finish line, as expected. But not by much. And there they stood waist-deep, waiting. When she got there, dead silence prevailed. Everyone was stunned by the performance. Suddenly, a roar went up. Cheers not only from the swimmers, but the entire body of staff and onlookers.

My lovely, gutsy good buddy, whose courage and determination know no bounds, none whatsoever, had become an entrant for the New Zealand Paralympics team.

TRAVEL YARN No. 8

SWEET HOME CHICAGO

THE FACT THAT A SCRAWNY little guy who looked like the sad sack who got sand kicked in his face could build an empire based on a (wet) dream says something about the twentieth century.

I can't say I knew the man, although I did have a couple 'encounters' with him back in the days I wrote for his magazine. Writing for Playboy was like the old line about your hated mother-in-law driving your new Beamer off a cliff: there was good and there was bad.

Bad was the manner in which a freelance author's prose got mangled and mutilated. In every piece I had published there over a period of some years, I rarely recognized more than my name in the byline and pic on the authors' page. The good part writing for Hef was he paid numbers nobody else did. And it wasn't just your basic fee that inspired whoring my meager talents for a pretentious publication which turned my tummy.

My first assignment I never left the corner of my bedroom which served as a workspace. 'Researched' the entire piece by phone. So weeks later when Playboy's accountants rang up wondering where was my expense account, I was too embarrassed to report there really wasn't one. So what I did, I sat down and invented trips I hadn't made, lunches I hadn't eaten, even a few hotels I hadn't stayed. Total:

$550. Waited two weeks before I could work up the courage to mail it in.

Another phone call from Playboy's accounting department. Fella was livid.

'Five hundred and fifty dollars – are you out of your goddamn mind!?' I was about to drop to my knees and apologize profusely when he added, 'You know the average expense bill we get from freelancers?'

'Uh, well, uh…'

'Six thousand five hundred dollars! And that's *average*. You submit this and Hef gets word of it, you'll have a few dozen fellow freelancers battling one another for rights to kick your teeth in! I'm tearing up this account right now. Send in a new one, and make it real!'

I don't recall the exact number of that re-submitted bill, but when the check came for my first published Playboy article I immediately went out and exchanged it for a brand new car. Even got a few dollars back in change.

Couple years later, another published piece under my belt, I happened to be passing through Chicago and went to visit an editor I'd become telephonically friendly with.

'Have something to show you,' he said, barely above a whisper, 'but you gotta promise you won't tell anyone you've seen these. Especially those who wrote them, who you'll no doubt get to meet.'

Puzzled, I took the sheaf of papers, began to read critiques on my last submitted article from no less than six different staff editors. As I read through, I could feel my face growing red. The analyses were scathing, dripping with venom, not only of my writing but my person as well. (I'd never met one of these

people.) When finally I looked up, mouth slung open gasping for air, the guy was laughing.

'Don't think you've been specially picked on,' he said. 'They do this to every freelance submission. They hate their jobs, hate the magazine and what it stands for, and mostly hate freelancers because you're, y'know, free. Every one of these editors is quitting on Friday and going off to a log cabin in rural Vermont to write his novel. Except comes Monday they're all back in their little cubicles collecting bloated pay checks, which novel writing in Vermont doesn't quite match.'

I later met three of them at lunch. Nice chaps. They all liked my writing. 'Your style is a breath of fresh air,' said one. He had noted in his review that I need give up writing and take up selling fish, as that's what my prose reeked of.

HUGE HEFFNER HAD GROWN UP during an era when glammed females were busty, overly cosmeticized, wide-hipped, high-heeled blondes in tight gowns (his first issue featured a nude Marilyn Monroe). The real image changed radically in the mid-1960s, when a fashionably attractive woman now was slim, had little makeup and wore minis. (His image of the cool Playboy playboy was equally anachronistic. Picture short-haired muscley jocks in suits, cocktails in their hands in a time of long hair, beards and slim physiques in jeans, holding a joint.) But by now Hef had a formula that worked: sales of his book and the clubs they gave birth to were booming.

I met some of the higher editors and top-floor executives. They, like the boss, were to a man straight out of the 1950s. As was their thinking. Frequent battles ensued between them and the younger staffers who felt they were working in a time warp.

And sales continued to go up. As did wages. Who the hell is going to run off to Vermont at this rate of pay?

I'd been there close to a week when my friend told me: 'I've been invited to the mansion Saturday. First time since I started here. I think I can get you in. Interested?' The Playboy mansion? Was he kidding? This was prestige beyond the call; some of the biggest celebs in America couldn't get in. 'Just one thing,' he added. 'As my guest I'm responsible for you. Just leave your hippie ideas at the door and don't make a scene.' I had no idea what he was talking about. What kind of scene could I make?

THE PLACE WAS HUGE and luxurious, a ballroom-size main area. In the center was a long, wide staircase leading up to a balcony. Maybe a hundred and fifty elegantly dressed people were standing around chatting and laughing and looking beautiful. (My friend had lent me a clean shirt, jacket and, since I refused to wear a tie, an ascot, which felt weird.) White gloved waiters waltzed through refilling glasses. Off to the side a band of old guys dressed in tuxes played soft elevator music.

I stood around trying not to be overwhelmed by the powerful stink of perfume and after shave, looking at the women. Exquisite in their finery, sure, but in truth not my type. Give me a well-scrubbed natural female over these uplifted mannequins any day. Bored, no one to talk to (if even I could be heard over the din), I had a cocktail of some sort, then another.

Suddenly the music stopped and a bell rang. The large room went dead silent and necks were craned as everybody stared up at the balcony. Nobody. Nothing. Slowly, the people went back to their chatter,

the band resumed playing. Ten minutes later it happened again, and again all went quiet, a bell sounded and all eyes to the balcony. It remained bare. I glanced over at my friend; he gave the slightest head shake and turned back to the woman he was busily chatting up.

Some minutes later, again: music stops, bell, dead silence, a hundred and fifty sets of eyes peering up the staircase.

And there they were. Hef and Barbie. Pipe in his mouth. Her head on his shoulder. And then there was a sound. Just one. Rather loud. The sound cried, '*OH FUCK!!!*'

I certainly didn't mean to. I just couldn't hold back, an oral knee jerk. The booze, most likely.

Suddenly there was movement all around me. People scurrying away in every direction, leaving me an island unto myself.

Give Hef credit. Man didn't move a muscle, bat an eye. Nor Barbie. Maybe her ear was glued to his padded shoulder.

I looked for my friend, but he was nowhere near where I'd seen him last. I had heard the term, of course, but never had I seen it in practice: slink out. Which is precisely what I did.

Funny thing about all this was that I gained a new respect from the lower echelon of Playboy workers. (It did take several months before my friend would take my phone calls, answer my letters of apology.) The few assignments I got post-mortification were met with raves from the judging editors. My friend reported that the gorgeous secretary in circulation I'd been not-so-secretly besotted by would happily have dinner with me ever I ventured back to Chicago. I never did.

JIN LING

HER WORK DAY BEGAN just before sunrise. Loud, scratchy speakers blared through the freezing dawn to wake her in her shared tiny hut with its two cots, ancient table and glass-less window. There was no chair, no light, no heat. First, it was outside for calisthenics and shouts of 'Long Life to Chairman Mao!' Then work began – a full day of digging, carrying and dumping in the fields.

Since she'd left high school two years earlier, this had been Jin Ling's life.

Each day was like every other day, but this one was different. She and her friend had an extra task, one they'd volunteered for.

It meant trekking twenty kilometers to the nearest town with an old wooden trolley called a *fen che*. Deep, and big as dining table, it sported two bicycle-like wheels and a pair of long handles, broken but bound together with tape. The whole affair wobbled and creaked as the two teenagers tugged it along, chattering and laughing.

It was twilight when they arrived at the town. They hid the *fen che* and enjoyed the sights. Then, when all was dark and quiet, Jin Ling and her friend retrieved the cart and went to the public toilets. They had to be sure no one was about for the waste in the communal latrines was the property of that district and it was illegal to take it without permission. The two

friends silently and skillfully filled the trolley with shovels they had brought.

With the stinking cart piled high with excrement, they headed back 'home' – the friend bent in half in front, pulling with all her strength, and the barely five-foot Jin Ling doubled over and pushing form behind.

They didn't make it back that night – and this was the true lure of the task. Outside the town, they push-pulled the dung cart off the road and cleared a bit of earth where they lay down to sleep.

The simple freedom of exploring the town, then spending the night under the stars away from the compound, even in winter, was more than worth the effort. And if they didn't deliver the much prized soil enhancer until the end of the following working day, who would care? Who would say a word?

TWENTY YEARS LATER, in March of '97, Zhang Jin Ling would arrive in New Zealand on her very first trip out of mainland China. Almost at once this refugee from the Cultural Revolution would begin her own quiet revolution. An inborn artistry, honed by a decade of training, would soon begin to emerge from the former farmhand's mind and hands. Soon her ceramic sculptures would be winning coveted prizes on both sides of the Tasman Sea, selling virtually as fast as firing was completed.

She would find love here, gain freedom far beyond that afforded by a night pushing a stinking poo trolley, and she would become instrumental in encouraging the career of one of this country's finest potters. But all this would not be achieved without sorrows.

IT BEGAN WITH HER grandparents. In China, it always began with grandparents.

Virtually from the moment of birth, Jin Ling had a file. This file would follow her everywhere. In it was recorded every action observed, every word overheard, and every rumor spread concerning her two older brothers and sister, her parents, eight aunts and uncles, and both sets of grandparents. Before she could walk, Jin Ling was the sum total of these seventeen people.

Following Liberation in 1949, and even more so after the Cultural Revolution began in '66, every citizen of China fell under one of two sets of classification. You could be Left or Right. Left were good comrades, but overnight a Left might swing Right upon the announcement of some new party edict. Many in China danced back and forth across the line like the needle of a meter.

You were also classed as Red or Black. Now and again a Red – of solid Communist stock – might slip into Black, enemy of the State. But never could a Black turn Red. And it began with the grandparents.

Jin Ling's paternal grandfather had been wealthy and politically influential in pre-Communist days. When the hammer and sickle standard rose, Grandfather Zhang was sent to prison, and never heard from again. He died there; no one knows how or when. The fact of his death was never reported to the family.

Before his death all nine of his children received top-flight educations. The eldest was sent to an elite military academy, the head of which was Chiang Kai-shek. When all hell broke loose in 1949 and Chiang fled to Taiwan, the eldest son fled with him. In the People's Republic, no sin was greater than this. Later, two of his siblings – one brother and one

sister – also died in the chaos of the Cultural Revolution.

Jin Ling's maternal grandparents were even wealthier. Both came from long lineages of top writers and scholars and owned a great deal of property. They had two daughters; the elder died of TB as a child. Not long after, the grandparents took to smoking opium. Both soon became addicted, and little by little they sold off every piece of property to finance their habits. The family became so destitute that Jin Ling's mother, forgotten in the haze, had to walk twenty km to school every day since no money existed for transport.

When they married in 1948, Jin Ling's father was a factory engineer and her mother a teacher at primary school. They had a comfortable house in Changsha, capital city of Hunan, where both had grown up.

The following year the Party ordered her father to work in a factory in distant Zhengzhou. The family was allotted a tiny old brick house – even the floor was brick – consisting of just two small rooms, an unused kitchen (due to a Party policy enforcing communal dining), no plumbing, electricity or heat. The toilet was also communal. Their only possessions were a bookcase, a box of photos and scores of books with which to educate the children they would have.

WHEN JIN LING, their fourth child, was born in 1958, she became owner of a file that was very Black indeed. Rarely were her parents home. They worked all day and attended political classes at night. Jin Ling can remember the house being dark, going without dinner, then waiting outside with her sister for their parents to return.

'I always fell asleep before they got there,' she says. 'Every night my father would pick me up and

carry me to bed. I got to see them only in the morning.'

Food was scarce. The communal kitchens were anything but organized, and frequently the Zhang children went without. Things got a tad better when Mao ordered the communal kitchen program scrapped and families went back to eating at home. But not much better.

Jin Ling can recall her elder brother scrounging for food. 'Not for himself, but to feed the rest of us. We had very little, but often he had none, for days at a time.' That her children were always hungry and frequently sick was a constant source of grief and guilt for Jin Ling's mother.

Jin Ling started school in 1964. A huge portrait of Mao dominated the classroom. The pupils would stand on command and shout paeans to the beloved Chairman. At nine o'clock all activity would stop – throughout the whole of China – and the radio tuned in to hear Mao's latest homilies and exhortations of self-sacrifice, concluding with the announcement, 'Be Happy for Chairman Mao'.

When the Cultural Revolution began, Jin Ling's classmates all joined the Red Guard. Not wanting to be left out, she applied too. And was rejected. She was not good enough, she was told; not revolutionary enough. 'I loved my parents but given the choice then, I would have been in a revolutionary family just so I could be like everyone else.'

One day Jin Ling's sister told their parents that Red Guards were conducting a house-to-house search for counter-revolutionary material. Without a word, the parents began burning the prized books they had brought with them from Hunan, many handed down from their own parents. Translations of Dickens, Shakespeare, Lawrence, Swift –examples of Western

imperialist thinking — went into the flames. Also burned were photos which might reveal the family's relative pre-liberation wealth.

When you were Black, without a hope of ever being Red, you kept your head down and your mouth shut. Saving face came a distant second to saving your family's skin.

'My parents never complained, nor would they ever discuss a subject that even remotely bordered on the political. They always told us, 'Whatever the Party tells you to do, do it. Don't ask, don't fuss – do it'.'

When she was nine, Jin Ling's mother was sent to work in the country for a year. Jin Ling was looked after by her older siblings and when she became interested in drawing, a friend of her brother's offered instruction. (There was no art training at school.) Sketching people, animals and scenes became her escape from the fact she was different, excluded.

She was a good student. She learned English, reading the translation of Mao's *Little Red Book.* And she wanted very much to attend the city's top high school. Entrance was based on competitive province-wide exams. She asked her brother to check the wall at Party Headquarters, where the marks were posted. He reported later that he'd scanned the entire list, beginning from the bottom, and couldn't find her name anywhere. In fact, he'd grown weary three-quarters of the way up the list and never reached his sister's name, at the very top.

When in high school her classmates all rushed to join the popular Communist Youth Group, Jin Ling did too. She submitted an application every year, and each time was turned down. 'You must be revolutionary,' she was informed. 'You are not a Red person.' By the time Jin Ling left high school all three siblings had been assigned to peasant work in the

country. Then it was her turn. She and twenty-one fellow students from her final class were sent to a commune, for how long no one knew. Perhaps for life.

'The work was very hard, but I got used to it. Always I kept busy. Whenever I had spare time I would sketch and water color. I'd go into the homes of neighboring farmers and draw them. They were very poor, but such wonderful people, and it made life tolerable just to be with them. And they were really happy to get my pictures. Even years later, when I was teaching at the university, I would receive the occasional letter from these people.'

FOLLOWING MAO'S DEATH in 1976, the peasant-in-the-country scheme ended at last and Jin Ling's four years as a fertilizer expert came to an end. Returning to Zhengzhou, she got a job as a telephone operator and kept sketching and painting whenever she could.

When Deng Ziaoping became China's leader things loosened considerably. At twenty-four, Jin Ling applied and was accepted into the highly rated Guangzhou Fine Art School. Here she got into ceramics for the first time, and spent many days at a famous factory in nearby Shiwan, perhaps the city in China most noted for the craft. She was an able student and quickly learned the form and technique that years later would create a stir in New Zealand.

After taking her degree in 1986 she was offered a post at Suzhou University, teaching art and design. Here she met her future husband, also a teacher, and the following year they had a daughter, Shen Yi.

Jin Ling began getting contracts for city sculpture. This entailed a fair amount of production-by-committee, and her designs took shape in the hands

of factory staff. It was a good living, it had its prestige, but it was not quite her vision of art from the heart. Added to this was the early-on realization that her marriage was far from happy. 'My husband was rarely home and when he was, he took no part. 'That's a woman's job,' he'd say. 'This is China and that is the Chinese way.' By 1990 I felt completely lost. My life was only for my daughter, for my husband – for this person, for that person. Never for me.'

She put out a number of feelers to art universities in the United States, but when the application forms came back she did not act on them. 'My daughter was too young. It just wasn't fair to leave her at that time in her life.'

Instead, she focused on her work and Shen Yi. 'We spent so much time together. We would paint, play piano, walk in the ancient gardens of the city. I was a very good mother, but not a good person to myself.'

When some years later the opportunity came to visit New Zealand, Jin Ling did not hesitate. She liked the idea of a working holiday out of China, a brief respite from her troubles at home. But hardly had she arrived in NZ when she realized her feelings for the place ran deep. 'I felt free for the first time. I felt like a real person. I had never experienced this feeling before.'

Also, she was getting to know a man who was present in the world only by great good fortune.

THE DAY HE CHOSE to commit suicide was a day the Fates set aside to play a huge practical joke. As a potter, Greg turned out domestic ware that was praised, that sold, that put food on this family's table. But for years he would sit at the wheel, clay to the elbows, seeing pictures of amazing pots in his head.

Fantasy pots. What-if pots. Also in his head were these voices, very authoritative voices, which said, 'Stick to the tried and tested. Leave the airy-fairy stuff to the dilettantes, there's a good chap. Just keep the dollars trickling in.' It didn't help when a close friend, whose prime income was the family benefit, began turning out experimental pots, some good, some not, a few earning prizes in the highly competitive arena of New Zealand pottery.

Life was frustrating and continued to get worse. His marriage turned sour, he was tossed out of home (one he had built on his own), his sons refused to speak to him. Add to this Greg was forty-five, dead-center in male menopause time. He had fallen down a well with no way out. So one morning in 1992, he set off to put an end to it all.

He drove to the edge of Puketi Forest in Northland, not far from where he was living, and parked behind some trees. Not a soul around, not a sound beyond the birds. A perfectionist, he connected the hose tightly to the exhaust, climbed back in, pulled the hose through the narrow gap at the top of the window, blocked up the gap with towels, started the motor, lay down on the seat and waited to float over the magic curtain.

Which is when the Fates said, Uhh, hang on a minute, mate.

A Department of Conservation worker, who was not supposed to be anywhere near the area that morning, found himself tooling up to the forest's edge. Noted a car, motor running, hose poked through the window. He rushed over, spotted a man inside, smashed the window, yanked open the door, dragged the guy out: is he dead or what? He lay him on the ground and, not knowing how to revive him (if indeed he could be revived), dashed off to find help.

At this precise moment two English trampers, who'd been in the bush for six days, took a wrong turn and emerged from the forest to see a man lying on the ground next to a car. The trampers examined the man, saw he was alive but needed to be airlifted out as soon as possible. Fortunately they had these new fangled instruments called cell phones – rare personal devices at the time. They also knew precisely where to call, what to advise. Well of course they would: both were doctors.

'I woke up to find I was on my back in a sort of box,' Greg remembers. 'I assumed I was in a coffin. Except the top was clear plastic, and beyond was a well-lit high ceiling painted white. I lay there thinking: strange ceiling for heaven, and pretty chilly for hell. And then my vision was blocked by a sudden face peering down at me. My brother, wearing this huge grin.'

The next four-and-a-half years were shaky. The divorce proceedings. Trying in vain to get some response form the sons he loved. Lack of funds. Staying at other people's homes. He managed. Relatives were most supportive, and after a nasty divorce settlement he landed a house in the small Northland city of Whangarei. He made new friends, fell in with a group of crafts people at a place called the Quarry and was appointed director of the Northland Craft Trust. In 1995 he was invited to China as part of a cultural exchange. Then a couple of years later, a Chinese woman he knew living in Whangarei asked him for a favor.

There was this friend in Suzhou – an artist, who wanted to come to New Zealand for a visit and to do some work. She needed a sponsor. So Greg signed the form and in March Zhang Jin Ling arrived, taking up residence at the Quarry.

Greg and Jin Ling saw quite a bit of each other. They talked of work, of experiences and hardships past, of the images of forms and color and glazes they each carried in their heads. It struck them as remarkable how, despite wholly diverse cultures and different backgrounds, they had so much in common. One day Greg offered, and Jin Ling accepted. She moved in with him.

IT'S A BIT OF A RARITY that two established craftspeople in tightly overlapping areas of endeavor can be each other's mentor, best mate and cheering section. Artistic egos and all that.

'This was the first time in my life I'd felt totally free to sculpt exactly what I see,' she now says. 'I've always had ideas that were different, but with Greg's trust and confidence in my ability, what I began making was pure me.'

Jin Ling's figurative sculptures show a curious but successful blend of classical, which is her training, with modern, which is her vision. They are gentle and soft, yet their power can be startling.

Greg: 'Look at the life she's had – repression beyond anything we in the West can begin to imagine. But she had a strong cultural tradition she respected enough to carry through in her work in a way I was never taught to do. I saw right off she had an artistic honesty, an integrity, I lacked. She may have been shy, reserved, often unsure of herself in her new environment. But none of this was evident in her art. She would see something she felt she'd be happy with and she went straight to it without even considering the restrictions of convention. Working alongside her, I realized that my own failure to take artistic risks, to follow my true intuition, was not so much situational as a fear of making mistakes, of losing face.'

Jin Ling's dedication to detail sometimes provided a shock element. Witness Greg stepping into his home one day and catching Jin Ling lying on the lounge floor, naked as truth, turning her head and hands and torso this way and that before a full-length mirror just prior to starting a new work. This for a Kiwi bloke born and raised on a dairy farm.

Their first few years together Greg yanked out the cork, spilling out those long bottled-up what-if images. During this time he was one of twenty-nine potters selected (from nearly a hundred and fifty entrants) for the Norseware Award in '97, and the following year was one of only eight New Zealand exhibitors – out of ninety-four worldwide, culled from eight hundred entrants – for the Fletcher Challenge Ceramics Award. He won merit awards at two pottery competitions and was accepted as an entrant in the ultra-exclusive (more than thirty countries represented) Sidney Myers Fund Award in Australia.

Jin Ling, meanwhile, took best-of-show in the Thames Society of Art competition and St Helier's Bay Art Festival, and was a finalist for the internationally prestigious Gold Coast Art Award. (Oddly, though she didn't place first her submission was selected to showcase all the GCAA's promotion and advertising material.) More importantly, in real terms, both were selling. For Jin Ling, this represented a whole new experience.

'When I lived in China there were no private buyers for your work. I was paid well by the government to produce, and I won many prizes. But for a total stranger to be so moved by what I make they voluntarily paid to own and display my sculpture was in the beginning a very high compliment.'

WHEN HER ORIGINAL three-month visa expired Jin Ling extended it for another three, then applied for permanent residence. Her husband in China did not take well to the news. It was worse when she later asked for a divorce and custody of their daughter. Initially he forbade contact between mother and daughter, gradually realized the futility of his actions and relented.

Jin Ling and Greg married, her daughter came to New Zealand — Shen Yi is now a highly respected hospital physician — and Greg solo-built a showpiece home and studio just outside Whangarei. These days Jin Ling probably spends as much time on her current passion – she is a remarkable gardener — as on her sculpting, and the couple travel extensively.

Our relationship began though Greg's and my long-term friendship, of course, but there was an ironic point of connection which occurred upon our very first contact. I had been to China just after the country first opened to free travel in the mid-1980s. (Prior, one was required to be part of highly regulated and extremely thrilling group tours of widget manufacturing communes.) I lived in the city of Suzhou for nearly a year. It was there I purchased a couple of lovely roll-up wall hangings at a shop near my hotel. No more than a couple breaths following her stepping through the door of my home several years later, Jin Ling let out a shriek, slapped a hand over her mouth and pointed excitedly at one of the hangings. The artist was her teacher.

For Jin Ling, wife, mother, gardener, sculptress extraordinaire, the past quarter century has been a long and fascinating journey from the days pushing a *fen che* wagon full of pilfered doo-doo twenty kilometers just to grab a few hours' taste of freedom.

TRAVEL YARN No. 9

PURPLE REIGN,
CHINESE MEDICINE

IT COULDN'T EVEN WAIT till I got to China. My nervous breakdown happened right there at the Hong Kong youth hostel.

I suppose it was inevitable. My relationship had collapsed a few weeks before, leaving me on my own once again. Not that I would miss my partner of three years. Good lord, I'd have no trouble living without the hassles, the fights, every word precipitating a full-scale war. It was her daughter I would miss, the eleven year old who had become the light of my existence, my reason for being alive. That they had moved just along the road meant I would see Jessie from time to time, reminding me what had been excised from my heart.

I thought: I have to get away from here till the jitters settle down – here being the lovely beach town in New Zealand where I had bought us a home the year before in a rare, and curious, attempt at playing happy families. Far away. And where in the mid-1980s could be further away, if not in miles surely in mindset, than the mysterious land which following decades of being sealed off from the rest of humanity had only recently opened its gates to foreign visitors.

As always in my travels I performed the absolute minimum of preparation. It's always been my way. No Lonely Planet then, no Trip Advisor and their phony starred user reviews now. Self-discovery: that's me. The day before departure I bought a plane ticket

to Hong Kong, the only place from which entry into China was possible for most of the world's nationals. No booked accommodation, no onward travel plan – I hadn't even a clue how one got from HK to the mainland.

Once on the ground, I asked around. I was surprised, this being a British colony, how few spoke English. I needed to ask several people before I learned there was a youth hostel, that you took such-and-such tram to its outer terminal, hoofed it a couple miles further, then up a steep hill. Looking back on it now, I can see that such focus on finding the place was what kept me on solid ground. Once found, though, the ground opened up and swallowed me alive.

I STUMBLED OUT OF BED, staggered down the hall to the loo. Stood before the commode not fully awake. Finished my morning purge, peered down and – *wha*?? I stared with incredulity for several seconds. 'Darling,' I called out quite loudly, 'would you come here a moment?'

This was a couple decades prior to the Hong Kong catastrophe. My then-wife showed up at the door, puzzled. 'What's the —. *Omigawd*!' She gawked. 'Your thing! It's purple!'

Which it was. Not a pretty purple either. Dark splotchy purple.

The wife backed away. 'Don't come near me with that, that, whatever it is!' And darted off.

Ah well, at least I hadn't suddenly gone color blind, my initial fear.

I was in my mid-twenties. Things should have been going splendidly for me. And, for anybody looking in from outside, they were. Beautiful wife,

great job, lots of gelt. Why then was I was so miserable all the time?

Actually, misery had been my name most of this life. I'd been an unhappy kid, unhappier teen, and there in my twenties I was sliding even further down the slippery slope of moroseness. It didn't make sense. So when I went to see the GP for my annual stem-to-stern and he asked how things were, for the first time I spoke some truth about what was going on which stethoscopes, finger-thumping on my back and gagging on a tongue depressor wouldn't reveal.

'I have just the ticket,' the doc, a wise man twice my age, announced. He scribbled some illegible wording on his scrip pad, tore off the sheet, handed it over. 'Have you shipshape in no time.'

That was four days prior. Three tabs a day and, in all honesty, I did feel better. Now this. Couldn't be anything except those damn pills.

I went to see him before heading to work. Pleaded with the receptionist/dragon, who snapped: Doctor! Is! Fully! Booked! Just one minute is all I need, I implored. It's absolutely urgent.

I must have had on my urgent face because, exasperated, she marched into his office, emerged moments later, directed me to a seat. He appeared not long after, apologized to a waiting patient, ushered me in, placed fists on hips and issued a look that said this better be good.

'Those pills you prescribed?' I said. 'See, I'm not really a purple fella. You got anything in aqua maybe? Chartreuse would probably work too.'

I zipped down, displayed my business. His eyes grew large. Mouth dropped open. 'Oh my god!' he cried. 'This is —. This is —.' And ran out of the room. I thought: the plague?

No more than twenty seconds later the door flew open and he came bounding back in, followed by two more docs from the practice, one with a camera. All three gaped liked they'd just rounded a bend and caught their first-ever glimpse of Mount Rushmore. The doc with the camera began snapping away.

'Never seen anything like it!' My doc.

'Definitely one for the journals!' Doc number two.

'Mind shifting it a little to the left?' Doc with the Nikon.

'Um, reckon I can cadge a dozen wallet sizes?' I wondered. 'Christmas cards.'

I went home after work, tossed the pills, waited a couple days to make sure the purple reign had ended, and for the past fifty-five years have not taken so much as a single head med beyond the occasional aspirin.

THE EXCRUCIATINGLY LOUD non-stop voices throughout the night made sleep impossible. The voices were in my head. They brayed at me in raucous accusatory tones, often overlapping one another, running in a loop, over and over and over, making no sense other than telling me what a horrible human I was. Around 3am, the voices close to suffocating me, I bolted upright upon the sweat-soaked mattress in the hostel's darkened open area. The voices only grew louder. I got out my journal and using a tiny flashlight attempted to jot down the rants. My handwriting was large and loopy and made as little sense as the word salad declarations within my cranium. I tried to write a letter to Jessie, but it was so gushy I ripped it up, then started one to her mother. Every sentence was harsh and ugly. I put away pen and journal and lay back down. In years past I'd experienced a few bad acid

trips, but there was always a slice of my mind that sensed the insanity was result of an induced chemical and in due time would wear off. Here I was panicking for real, and it might well be timeless.

I must have slept because next I was aware daylight was filtering through the shaded windows. I got up and for something to do walked into the common room, checking the notice boards. Looking for what? A folded note with my name on it? Open it and there'd be instructions on a flight plan back to Earth?

I saw a listing of consulates phone numbers and jotted down New Zealand's and America's, the two countries to which I hold citizenship. Around eight I tried calling first NZ, no answer, then America, same. I wanted to plead would they mind gathering me up and shipping me home. Then I realized there was no home home. A nice family had moved in to housesit for the many months I planned to be away; how could I now ask them to leave after a few days? Besides, did I really expect consulates to perform this task?

People began gathering in the common room. They sat around a long table. Everybody had brought their own food and were now busy preparing breakfast. I hadn't thought that far ahead. Nothing else to do, I sat amongst them. A Canadian guy, mid-twenties, chubby and loud, had just concluded a month around China and seemed pleased to assume the role of teacher/guide. At least a dozen people were taking notes

My head was such I could make no more sense of what the Canadian guy was saying than decipher the noise in my head. Next to me a young Danish couple were furiously taking notes. He had but a few wisps of chin hair and she appeared no older than

fourteen. (Later I learned their names were Erik and Ana, they were nineteen and recently married). I leaned over to the male.

'Uh, excuse me,' I said, awkwardly. 'You guys mind if I, y'know, tag along with you to make arrangements? I'm really clueless what to do here.'

He turned to the young woman. Some sort of silent couples' communication. 'Sure,' they said together. 'No trouble at all.'

We walked a couple miles into the center of Hong Kong Island, grabbed visas and tickets for the night ferry. We'd taken our bags as the hostel stayed closed between 10am and 5pm. I was deathly afraid of being on my own, but made like I was cool, that I stayed close by because I liked their company. (Which, actually, I did.) Hung out at McDonald's for some hours until time to find and board the ferry. From time to time the panic would work its way out of the wormhole my mind had become and begin to scream at me. I'd quietly go off to the men's, sit on a commode and take deep breaths until the clamor and shaking settled down.

The head-noise was relatively quiet that night on the rickety old ferry, though sleep on the hard, smelly mattress was fitful. Earliest morning we docked and together stepped out into China.

AN ALCOHOLIC WHO HASN'T TOUCHED A DROP in twenty-five years is still an alcoholic, yes? Me, I'm a depressive. Past, oh, say, thirty years to this writing I've been mainly content, a positive, optimistic guy. Yet I'm still a depressive. It took me half a century to gain this understanding.

I'll tell you how it used to be. In my thirties, shorn of marriage, job and money, absurdly I became one of America's foremost teachers of meditation and

Alpha Mind Control. I would conduct four-hour sessions three evenings a week before hundreds of students at the University of Pennsylvania, eruditely imparting how to enhance one's mental capacities. Then I would drive home, labor up the stairs, crawl into bed and pull the covers over my head, in which fixed position I would remain until the following afternoon when I'd get up, brush my teeth and spend the next several hours in a darkened room sitting hunched over with my chin on my chest until class time.

I began to travel to distant lands, and this helped immeasurably, at least while I was out there. But after some months I'd return home to teach Alpha at Penn and dive under the covers and sit in a darkened room, chin to chest.

Things began to slowly change after I took an assignment to do some travel writing in this place called New Zealand. I hitched around the country for a year, decided to buck the hundred-to-one odds initially quoted by the immigration people and applied for residence. Eight months later they informed me I'd been accepted. Stunned, I somehow stopped myself from blurting out, 'You're shitting me, right?'

A couple years later I met a single woman with a sickly kid, and broke the roadie's eleventh commandment: never take up with a single woman with a sickly kid. Then I fell in love with the kid and spent every cent I had to my name buying us a house on a beautiful seven mile beach.

I began doing weird things. Mowing lawns. Gardening. Fixing things inside the house. Walking Jessie to her school bus stop every morning and waiting there till she got on, just daring the little pricks, and prickesses, standing around to make one snotty comment about her sickly condition, which

they'd been doing when she had gone on her own. I mean, really, how can one possibly justify sitting in a darkened room, etc, when there's a loving family riff going on, plus a gleaming ocean just beyond the door. But then the loving family began to crumble, finally falling completely apart, and the loss of the now-eleven year old hit with the force of a collapsing freight elevator.

THE DANISH KIDS KNEW JUST WHERE TO GO. They followed their map from the Guangzhou wharf to a hostel directly across from the elegant five-star White Swan, supposedly China's swankiest hotel. Swanky our place wasn't. Our room sported five skinny beds in a row, just enough space between them to maneuver; not enough if both you and the person in the next bed decided to maneuver the same time. But hey – China!

The three of us hired single-speed black bicycles and dove into traffic. I was lost within seconds, but they seemed to have it together. We pedaled across town – there was no such thing as a street that went even close to a straight line – for half an hour until we came to the railway station. The railway station was the size of Oklahoma. Inside, dozens of long stretches of Chinese humanity were waiting to be served at tiny windows. Not a word in the Roman alphabet anywhere. We simply grabbed a queue and waited until we made it to the glass, an hour or more. Which is when I heard for the first time a word I would hear several score times in the future: *meiyou* (may-yo). Means no, don't have it, wouldn't give it to you if I did have it, piss off. Communist country, people get paid whether you're happy with their service or not.

In this instance, *meiyou* meant they were out of tickets for that day's trains to Shanghai, which is where we figured to go. (Or at least, the Danes figured and I'd trail along.) Okay, how about tomorrow. The next day after tomorrow. The day after the next day. Somehow, through pointing to words in a phrase book, we were informed that future days' train tickets could only be purchased at the *next day railway station*. Ah, and where, exactly, was that? Next door? Down the street? *Meiyou*. The other side of this wee burgh of six million.

Following another half hour's pedaling in and out of insane traffic, Erik and Ana found it. They conferred at a ticket window for several minutes. Turned to face me.

'There are four ways of train travel,' Erik explained. 'Hard seat, soft seat, hard sleeper and soft sleeper. Hard seat is just that. Wood, fixed in place, no cushion. This is all they're permitted to sell to foreigners here.'

'Oh.'

'It's a thirty hour journey.'

'Oh.'

Sympathetic looks. 'We're going to take it,' Ana said. 'We're young, our bodies can handle it.' Intimating that, as an old fella approaching fifty, I might not be so inclined. But there was something else I picked up: these lovely young people were on their honeymoon, had had enough of being trailed around by an elder. 'Up to you,' Erik said.

I thought about it. At some point I would have to break free…even if it broke me. I could feel the fear buds beginning to bloom; I was about to fall off a cliff into a sea of murky jelly. I took a breath. You're right, I said. Hard seat would kill me. Thanks ever so much

for you help. We shook hands. We hugged. I was on my own. In China.

I spent the next five days at the hostel after the kids left Guangzhou. What did I do all day? Woke up, walked across the street, sat in the A/C lobby of the elegant White Swan. Early evening I walked back across the street to the hostel, went to sleep. There seemed to be no way out of that city. Maybe ever. Then a funny thing happened.

I woke up giddy. That's the best word for it, like they'd piped in funny fumes through the air vents overnight. Went to the toilet, came back, packed my bag. Giggling. Paid my bill, checked out, strolled over towards the White Swan. Grabbed one of the taxis parked outside the hotel. 'Railway station,' I said. Giggling.

At the station, I handed the driver renminbi. People's money. The driver wanted FEC, foreign exchange currency (known as 'long-nose money' and worth fifty percent more). I pointed to myself. 'Chinese,' I said. Giggling. And walked into the cavernous city within the city. I selected the first queue I came to, walked directly to the window and gently elbowed my way in front of the first person in line. He tried to push me away, but I was bigger plus, having benefit of my backpack, considerably heavier. I leaned in to the window. A woman with glasses.

'Shanghai,' I said.

'*Meiyou*,' she said.

'Shanghai,' I repeated.

'*Meiyou*!'

We did this dance several times, all the while hands from behind were trying to shove me away. Then the woman pulled down a shade, closing off the window. I turned to face the others in the line, who were looking daggers. I giggled. A few seconds later,

the shade went up. A different woman, also with glasses.

'Shanghai,' I said.

'*Meiyou*!'

This went on a few times, then she too yanked down the shade. I was not in the least bothered. Probably not dope smoke. Nitrous oxide, maybe.

A third woman appeared, yes, wearing specs.

'Shanghai,' I said.

'Passport!' she said angrily.

Yes!

She wrote out a document that wasn't quite as long as the Magna Carta. Soft sleeper. I paid (in FEC), turned and waved the ticketing at those in my line. 'Don't take no for an answer, people,' I said, giggling of course. Then made my way to the appropriate track.

I NEVER MADE IT TO SHANGHAI. Well, not for several weeks, and then only on the occasional day visit. Credit a beautiful woman I met on the train.

So many things did I not know about traveling China by rail. To begin with, upon entering a carriage you surrendered your ticket to a mean-faced tiny woman. (This breed is standard; it is conceivable they are mass produced from a mold in a dark basement.) You were then given a token. When you departed said train you surrendered the token and got your ticket back. If you lost your token they wouldn't let you off the train, and if you then lost your ticket you could not escape the station into the real world.

When finally I got to the right track (there are zillions), located the proper carriage (ditto), found my assigned compartment, first thing I noted was the universal no smoking sign. Second thing I noticed was the three passengers already in there were smoking. As I opened the door, they immediately glared as if

suddenly invaded by a new viral strain of *yangguizi*, foreign devil.

'*Ni hao*!' I greeted them, cheery. My one word of Chinese. Stone faces. Gonna be a long journey.

Placing my bag on my assigned soft sleeper (not all that soft, actually), I sat in silence, my presence completely ignored. Shortly after we began moving I stepped out into the corridor, my exit dictated more by cheap tobacco stink than any discomfort over being odd bod out.

Within minutes I made two discoveries. First came when I was standing at an open window gazing out at the passing countryside thinking, almost euphorically, I'm in China! I noted a train coming the other way and backed off to avoid a wind gust. What I couldn't avoid was the unbelievable stench that suddenly invaded my senses, and lasted until the two trains finally were free of one another. The 'poo express': a train full of shit, literally, being transported from the countryside to the city to serve as soil enhancer.

Second discovery was decidedly more positive. Along the corridor, also by an open window, gazing out through rather fashionable sunglasses, a woman. Gorgeous, yes, but more, there was something about her, some thing… Her clothes? Bearing? She was dressed quite Western and carried herself with confident assurance. I sidled on over.

'Excuse. Me. Do. You. Speak. English?' My ultra-cool opening line.

She peered at me over the shades. 'Yeah, baby, what can I do for you?'

'Er, ah, um…' My ultra-cool follow-up line.

Her name was Ai Chen and this was her story. Age seventeen, fresh out of high school, her father, a high cadre (= big fish) in the party, arranged for her to

go to America. This could be achieved only by sending her to a university to study engineering.

'I didn't speak a word of English,' she said. 'They gave me a crash course before I left, but still I was hopeless when I arrived.'

Her school was Virginia Polytech, far from an easy place for a first-language English speaker, and here she was, the lone mainland Chinese amongst thousands of students. What, I wondered, got her through it?

'I could not fail,' she replied, as if obvious. 'I would cause my family total disgrace. All I did that first year was study. No outside activities, very little sleep.'

By her sophomore year she had learned to party. Apparently she was good at it. 'I told the others I was a spy. They all thought that was terrific. Everybody kept telling me little secrets to help me along.'

She wondered where I was headed. Shanghai, I replied. She wondered why.

'It's the only place I know,' I said, sheepishly. 'Besides Peking.' (Which is what I called Beijing. World traveler, me.)

Ai Chen asked to see my map.

'Hangzhou and Suzhou,' she pointed out. 'Beautiful cities. Small, laid back. This train stops at both. I especially love Suzhou. It's known as the Venice of the Orient. Which is bullshit because Suzhou's canals were built a thousand years before Venice.'

It was late the following day when I got off the train in Suzhou. Again, I hadn't a notion where to go. Half a dozen Chinese students had just alighted from another carriage. Hong Kong kids on school break visiting the mainland for the first time. When I

explained my dilemma, they quickly said come with us. But when we got to their booked hotel the manager took one look at me and issued the magic word: *meiyou*. A discussion between the students and manager ensued.

'They're allowed to take only overseas Chinese, not Westerners,' the student who spoke the best English told me shamefully. 'She gave us the name of the one hotel in Suzhou which permits Westerners. Please permit us to accompany you there.' With much kindness, they all bundled with me into a taxi. Ten minutes later we arrived at the Nan Lin hotel.

Once past the gate, a large expanse of tastefully landscaped grounds sported a large multi-storied five star to the left and a rather tired two-story affair the other way, the backpackers. My first step inside I was immediately hit with a strange feeling. The feeling was I'd arrived home.

EACH MORNING I WOULD LEAVE my room at the Nan Lin, hit the street and wait for the city to take me in her arms. She never failed me.

Every day was different. In the mornings I would generally stroll to the people's park, watch the oldies do tai chi and patiently suffer the hordes wanting to practice their English on me. I cycled the narrow footpaths along the glorious canals, frequently having to duck under graceful weeping willow branches. I discovered the local university – it was not on the tourist map – and, looking professorial as I do, would blend in, enter through the gate, find a tree under which I might sit and read or write in relative peace. Walking, cycling, sitting: within a few weeks I had pretty much superimposed my activities at home to my daily routine here.

And all the while my panic attacks were growing fewer and not nearly so severe and long-lasting.

I was headed back to the Nan Lin following another full day of nothing in particular when I came upon a mass of people standing in the middle of the street. As I approached I could see they formed a huge circle. I edged my way through, got to the center and a horrific picture. An elderly man lay bleeding, a crumpled bicycle nearby. He had been hit by a vehicle, now nowhere in sight. No one was attending him, nobody even stepped forward to check whether he was breathing.

I stepped in, squatted down next to him. I checked his vitals; alive, but just. I peered around. 'Has anybody called for an ambulance?' Silence. 'Anyone have some medical training?' Nothing. 'Jesus, what the hell's wrong with you people!' I growled. They all moved back a step.

I placed him in the recovery position, taking care not to move his back in case of spinal damage. I slipped off my sweatshirt and placed it under the man's head; it soon was soaked with blood. Still no one made the slightest move to assist.

I stayed there several minutes, applying some Alpha energy in hopes of easing his pain, make him comfortable. Every couple minutes I placed fingertips on his carotid, the pulse of which was becoming steadily weaker. When I no longer could feel a beat I remained crouched by his side a few more minutes. At last I stood, my knees cracking loudly. I looked around me. They were still standing, staring.

'You're all bloody disgusting,' I mumbled as I moved to the mass of bodies. They parted quickly to allow me passage.

The following day came a knock at my door. A man, forties, dark suit, carrying a bag. Some sort of official. Was I in trouble? Against the law for a *yangguizi* to administer care to a dying hit and run victim without authorization?

'Sir, my name is Fong. May I please come in?' As if I had a choice. Inside the room he glanced around, nodded as if all was as he had expected. 'The man you comforted in the street the other evening? That was my father.'

'Ah. I'm so sorry, Mr. Fong. I'm not a medic, I had no idea how to help him.'

'Your actions as reported to me were exemplary, sir. I've come to thank you for what you did. Perhaps it is puzzling to you why no one else helped my father.' He paused, took a breath, then in a surprising move slapped his hand against the wall. 'Chinese are stupid, superstitious fools!' he barked before quickly recovering. 'They are afraid of what they cannot see. To them my father being struck by a vehicle had nothing to do with the driver, rather evil spirits, and if they went to help him the spirits might attack them as well. Thirty years of communist rule and they still believe in ghosts and goblins.' He paused for a breath. 'I work for the government, sir.' He took out a wallet, handed me a card. 'Anything you need, you show this card to the staff here. They will immediately get in touch with me. If you are thinking of staying in China for some time,' he added, 'your visas will quickly be taken care of.'

'Gosh, I don't know what to say. Thank you.'

'It is I who need to thank you.' He reached into his bag, took out a brand new sweatshirt, flicked off a dot of lint, passed it over with a slight bow. A bit gaudy for my taste, but at least it bore no image of

China's most popular figure. The late great Chairman? Nah. Mickey Mouse.

'I have many friends here you might find interesting,' Mr. Fong then said. 'Famous artists —' Suzhou was known as the art capital of China '— many others I believe you would be happy to meet. Please permit me to take you to meet them when you are not busy.'

And the man proved good to his word. Once a week he would call by and take me in a chauffeur driven car to meet remarkable people who had fascinating stories of their experiences under the Cultural Revolution.

LATE SUMMER IN SUZHOU BECAME AUTUMN became winter became spring. And as the days and weeks passed I was feeling better, my head cleared of the rubbish I'd brought with on the journey.

Frequently I would visit one of the half dozen of the city's luxurious ancient gardens. One near-freezing early spring morning I followed a series of thick black cables leading from trucks into the oldest of these gardens, into the main building and up a set of wooden stairs. A movie was being filmed, a period piece, a tragic love story. I stood by watching. Not only was I not shooed away, at one point a glass of tea was handed me by an extra. They were shooting a death scene. The young lord, dying in his bed. Following each take, the actor would jump off the bed and join the director reviewing the scene on a monitor. Following several of these, one which I felt was easily the best, he turned to me. I winked and gave him the upright thumb. Grinning, he gave me his back. Later I learned he was Wen Jiang, mainland China's most popular film actor of the time.

I would stroll into any building that wasn't locked or guarded. A furniture manufacturer. Silk factory (fascinating). A group of old men in a house singing, one of them playing the *erhu*, a two-stringed instrument, hauntingly.

I became known. Not only to locals, who'd never before experienced a long-term Western visitor. A tour group from Minnesota, staying at the five star across the Nan Lin compound, claimed they had heard about me in another city. Rosenberg the living legend.

Early days, I'd had one of the hotel staff fashion me a card. In Chinese characters it read I AM A VEGETARIAN I EAT NO MEAT OR FISH. (I checked with two others to make sure it didn't read FEED THIS FOREIGN DEVIL DOG'S BALLS.) A month of flashing the card, I figured it was about time to learn the spoken words. Problem is, I'm useless learning languages normally, but tonal languages have me absolutely hopeless. So lately whenever I entered a restaurant I would announce, '*Wo shi su*!' Always did I get loud but kindly laughter at my pronunciation. Nonetheless, service and product were grand, and those days you couldn't beat the prices.

One evening at a new establishment, same deal. I make my declaration, everybody laughs. They seat me at a table, someone brings tea. An elderly man, a patron, shuffled over. Asked the standard questions: country, age, profession, number of children. Then, in perfect English, 'When you first entered you made a statement.' Yes, I replied, and tore off on a boring rant about vegetarianism, about how much more —. There appeared a glint in his eye, a warm smile, which stopped me.

'I'm afraid, sir, that what you said was not 'I am a vegetarian.''

'Oh?'

'No, sir. That is *wo shi shucai zhe*.'

'Oh.'

'However, sir, what you did say is actually perfectly understandable.'

'Oh? And what is that?'

The glint grew brighter, the smile expanded another mm.

'What you said, sir, was 'I am a *vegetable*'.'

WHEN NEARLY A YEAR LATER I returned home from China I was a different human being. I felt calm, content. Perhaps inspired from my time there I grew more vigilant in my mediation practice and got into some serious exercising. For several years I jogged on the beach daily, then when the knees went south, took to long distance walking and cycling. All of which added enormously to my quest of minimizing the craziness. Oh, I had my moments. For no apparent reason I would fall into a funk. Thing was, I wouldn't permit myself a long stay. A day, two, three at the most. Then, like a dog coming out of the surf, a big shake and the crap would fly off me.

It was at this time as well I began researching the whole cockeyed business called mental health. And the more I delved into it, the more I gained an understanding that led to a clear view of the inner workings of the pharmaceutical industry.

The subject of guns in my birth land is a well established fact: about those who manufacture, those who distribute and the evil organization which bribes Congress to keep the insanity going. Less known is that opioids, anti-depressants and the sundry mood movers account for untold times more deaths than bullets, and the American pharmaceutical mafia annually spends – you ready for this? – twenty-five

times the money lobbying for their death-dealing products than do the gun people.

When I lived in America, I'd read Samuel Butler's wonderful fictional account of the amazing land in the South Pacific he called *Erewhon*, where people were sensible, spiritual and healthy. Where all the males ran barefoot up tall mountains and every woman was Rosie the Riveter popping her biceps. In other words, people who were independent, unfettered by stodgy convention and used number eight wire to cure all ills. Then I got to the factual Erewhon and saw the reality.

New Zealand, I've read, has the second highest percentage per population of anti-depressant and related mind numbing drug consumption in the world, right behind Israel. I mean, it's sort of evident why the Izzies feel the need to scoff down all those pills. But on two skinny islands of snow-capped mountains and lakes and scenery that sucks the breath from your soul and a zillion miles of gorgeous ocean coastline — how do you account for such disturbing phenomena? The best answer I came up with had nothing to do with New Zealanders.

When asked what surprised him most about humanity, the Dalai Lama replied, simply, 'Man.'

> 'Because he sacrifices his health in order to make money. Then he sacrifices money to recuperate his health. And then he is so anxious about the future that he does not enjoy the present; the result being that he does not live in the present or the future; he lives as if he is never going to die, and then dies having never really lived.'

ANITA

WHEN MY PARTNER ANITA, twenty years my junior, world-class triathaloner and the most beautiful woman I've ever known, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, to distract myself from a situation I found close to unbearable I began asking people what I reckoned was a relatively straightforward question: if you were told you had six months to live but would remain perfectly healthy until the very last moment, what would you do? If I asked, say, twenty people, fifteen gave the same answer: I'd travel. When the first half dozen presented this reply I followed up with a second query: why don't you do that now? I had no intention of making people uncomfortable, truly. The abrupt change in body language, looking down at their shoes, a quieter, unsure voice (most of them mumbling, I gotta make a living) finally clued me in that I was placing people in a difficult, awkward position.

I'm certain the question came to mind because Anita and I met on the road, and the happiest times we spent during our brief time together took place traveling.

I'M IN INDIA. AGAIN. In what was then the lovely small town of Pushkar in the Rajasthani desert. (It's since been discovered, and ruined, by the worst scourge on the subcontinent, the rising Indian middleclass tourist.) I had a cheap tiny room at the government hotel, a converted five hundred year old

maharaja's palace. No toilet or shower, so I always got out early to claim one of the two communal bathrooms. Towel round my waist, I stepped from my cell onto the outdoor terrace and walked fifty feet to the ablution area.

The morning was chilly and mist hung over the Sarovar, the holy lake. When I'd finished, I rewrapped the towel, stepped back outside. Where before there had been no one about, I saw now a figure heading my way. The figure appeared to move through the mist, an apparition. As we got closer I saw it was a woman wearing slinky, clingy black. A beautiful woman, becoming ever more so as we approached, until we passed and she smiled and I told myself this was the most knockout female I had ever seen.

In my room I dressed, putting on two sweatshirts against the cold, slung on my daypack, opened the door and stepped out, turned around, locked the door, turned around again…and the woman in black was sitting on my balcony. Well, it wasn't *my* balcony, it was communal, but having been there nearly two months I thought of it as mine. I walked past slowly. She smiled again. She had an exquisite smile and the thickest, most radiant curly dark hair I had laid eyes upon. I took a deep breath, heaved it out and continued on my way. For about fifteen feet. Then without thinking I turned around, went back and sat down on the balcony next to the woman in black.

Her name was Anita and she was English and forty-eight and divorced and her first time in India, traveling in one of those awful Australian-operated open trucks where they whisked twenty-five people through half of Asia in a month. They had arrived in Pushkar last night around eight and would be leaving Pushkar this morning around eight. *Meep meep*.

We talked. She told me she had been married twenty-seven years and had four grown daughters and her husband was a really nice guy who'd been good to her and the girls, but for years there had been no real feeling between them. Or at least she felt nothing because when finally she told him she wanted out he was shocked and crestfallen. I told her I had recently been through something similar, only my relationship was four and a half years, still when I got the word I too had been shocked and crestfallen.

She had wanted to travel, but was afraid to go out on her own, and the truck deal sounded the best of situations for a solo woman solo in Asia. She described her journey, whizzing through open countryside, dust flying in her face all day, given barely enough time to set her feet on the ground at any one spot before they were off again. To make matters worse, the twenty-four others were much younger and hardly ever said a word to her. But really, she noted, it was okay because everything was so new and fascinating, and as she talked she didn't notice my heart turning into molten lava.

Just then a huge Aussie stomped over and began yelling that she had chores to do and they were about to leave in fifteen minutes and if she wasn't ready they would take off without her. There was a moment's hesitation after he stalked off and I silently pleaded, Yes! Yes! But then Anita the woman in black got up and walked away, turning once to smile before disappearing into the mist.

WE HAD EXCHANGED EMAIL addresses and over the next couple months upon arriving home I must have sent half a dozen letters. All were returned as no-such-address. I had an idea what happened. When Anita jotted down her email on a piece of paper, I'd

entered it in my journal and thrown away the paper. My printing usually is pretty clear. I must've been, um, excited because her address was barely legible. Was that an 'a' or was that a '9'? I tried every combination possible. Nothing. But even if I did get through, I reasoned, what kind of shot would I have with a woman so gorgeous.

And then one day I got an email. I'm in Malaysia, she wrote. I have a week left on my ticket. Would it be okay if I dropped down to visit you in New Zealand?

I thought: this'll be interesting. How many times in my life had I met a woman and when later we met up again she was nothing like what I had remembered. It was the same with Anita. She was even more beautiful than I recalled.

She spent five magnificent days. I begged her to stay. She said her mother's birthday was coming up, the big eight-oh, and she wanted to be there for the event. 'But I'll be back,' she declared when I saw her off on her flight. Sure, sure, I thought. A month later she turned up at my door.

It wasn't easy. She had told me that in all their years of marriage she and her husband never had a 'cross word'. Within half an hour we were having a donnybrook, over what I completely forget. The first of many.

I gathered that her husband had treated her like a princess. Brought home the money, took care of all her needs. She cooked, did the shopping, raised the girls. Their roles were established early on and remained such for the duration. Me, I'm an intrepid solo who now and again has had women partners. But not for long. The last such had been my longest term as a couple since marriage way back in my twenties.

Now, I live on one of the most beautiful beaches on earth. To me, there's nothing like going out on the dunes just beyond my patch and watching the sun rise over the ocean and low mountains to the east. Anita thought mornings were for sleeping in. I would beg her to join me. Just once, you'll see how magnificent a picture it is.

She claimed she simply wasn't a morning person. I never did buy that bit. Get up and let nature's art fill your soul, I'd plead. Just try it. Nope.

One morning upon my return from the beach she was in the kitchen making that awful gruel the English call porridge. She was wearing what the Americans know as a bathrobe and the Brits a dressing gown, bulky enough to wrap twice around Oprah (how ever did she cram it into her backpack?). Hunched over with hair flopped over her eyes, she looked like she could've had half a rolly in the corner of her mouth and screeching *Cor, blimey!* I began to describe the magnificent morning colors she had missed, but she didn't look up from stirring the swill on the stove. Then, still peering down at her witch's potion: 'I need to do some wash. You don't have any detergent.'

'Yeah we do. Huge box, not even opened. Bottom of the laundry tub.'

'I looked in the tub. Nothing there.' I walked into the laundry room, fetched the giant detergent box from under the sink.

'Well, it wasn't there when I looked.' Her stirring got faster.

I put the box on the floor. 'Well, here it is when you need it.'

'Don't leave it there. Put it on the table.' Which I dutifully did.

'Anita, babe, what's wrong?'

'Nothing's wrong.' The stirring now creating a breeze. Still not glancing my way: 'Why do you always think something's wrong?'

'*Arrrgh*!' I swept the box off the table. Somehow it landed upright on the floor. Was about to walk out of the room when:

'If that box breaks you'll be the one to clean it up!'

'What? *Whaaat?*' I looked down at the box, standing tall like the black monolith in *2001*. In frustration, I delivered it a good kick. For the first time that morning she looked at me. I kicked it again, harder. Eyes showing panic, she scurried past me and out of the kitchen. Third kick might've been heard in Nova Scotia. Seen there, too. Because the box exploded and everything – *every*thing, every square inch of ceiling, walls and floor, every molecule of air, every stitch of my clothing and pore of exposed skin — was instantly coated with scented white powder.

Felt fucking fantastic.

'I REALLY RESPECT YOU for what you did,' she said later while helping clean up.

'Yeah?'

She nodded. 'I hope you don't do it again, mind, but it was amazing how you expressed your feelings. Not many men can do that, you know.'

The English.

The year before Anita had participated in a triathlon in her home city. And won, beating all comers, including the men. This because she was such a powerful swimmer. But the first time we went for a bicycle ride on the road that parallels our beach I was going slow as I possibly could, and still had to stop several times to let her catch up.

'C'mon,' I called out to her once. 'Why so slow?'

'I don't want to get in an accident.' There was a vehicle passing every two minutes. Speed limit 50kph. So frustrated was I that finally, on the way back, I just left her and hit the pedals hard as I could. Two adults, both intelligent and resourceful, trying to find a common and healthy path in this strange thing called relationship.

One day the subject of marijuana came up. I hadn't smoked in twenty years. Wait, I lie. I did once, while with a party of trekkers in the Golden Triangle, '87 or '88. We came to a hill tribe village just as the sun was setting. After we'd eaten we sat around in that awkward time prior to crawling into our sleeping bags. I noticed a couple young local guys, dressed Western. One looked like he was holding a head of broccoli.

'Is that what I think it is?' I laughed.

'You want try?'

'Sure, why not.' I had three, four hits, no more. And got absolutely demolished. I stood up and went for a walk. There was a full moon and I was convinced I was on it, and that big light in the sky was earth. How was I going to get back? I sat down on the moon's surface and began to cry. I would so miss my home planet!

That was the only time I had indulged past couple decades.

'You know, I've never smoked,' Anita was saying.

'Never? You have four grown daughters and none of them ever shared a joint with you?' She shook her head. 'Would you, if I can score some?'

'I told myself when I left P___ (her husband) I was going to try everything I was certain wouldn't kill me.'

So I drove to a nearby town known for its resident lawbreaking of this heinous herb, and when I drove back an hour later I had in my shoe a joint the size of my pinkie.

We sat on the bed, facing each other. I lit the cig, took a small toke, passed it on. Anita put to it to her lips and did a comic parody of the first-time doper: furrowed brow, eyes squinting against the smoke, the teeniest, tiniest in-breath, followed by a racking cough I thought would take out a wall. We had two more hits apiece, each time she took hardly anything in, hacked like a consumptive. I figured she wouldn't feel the slightest buzz, this being her maiden voyage and all.

I had my fourth go, held it out. But Anita wasn't there. Well, she was there. And then again she wasn't. Her forehead was down on the mattress, her hands covering her ears.

'Um, Anita? Dude?'

I placed my head alongside hers. Girl was blotto. Last thing I wanted to do was ask was she okay, but was she?

I did some Alpha on her, which in my state of stone was no simple task. Fade in, fade out. Still, she was making like a tumbler who'd forgot how to flip her ass over.

Went on like this for, well, y'know, who can figure time in this dimension. I stroked her head, lightly, kept my face down close to hers. Finally, ages later, she moved. Lifted her head. Opened her eyes. Which were pink-rimmed and bloodshot. She looked at me like she was seeing me for the first time, ever.

'How y'doin, mate?' I asked with feigned cheer. She didn't answer. Maybe she hadn't heard. Or couldn't associate the sound of my voice with a human entity. Lady just sat there.

Much, much later she got up, went to the loo. Came back looking better. I didn't want to ask, sound like a damn academic. We went for a walk on the beach, in silence. I put my hand in hers but I might've handed her a leg of mutton for all the response I got.

Back home, she finally looked at me. Smiled that magic smile.

'Can we do it again, sometime?'

WHEN WE LEFT TO GO TRAVEL I was considerably more relaxed. Maybe it was because I no longer performed an eyeball-spinning, Wily E. Coyote-into-a-cliff-face number every time I saw her naked. Still, shortly after we got to Byron Bay we had us a major. Over, would you believe, money. And not even a lot of money. But really, it wasn't about money. It was about not ceding personal power to the other. And isn't that what it was always about.

We didn't talk for two days. Slept in the same bed and didn't talk, didn't touch. Once during this time she was on the beach in her bikini, and I was in the apartment we were renting, a lovely spot no more than twenty feet from the beach, on a rise fifteen feet above it. I stepped out onto the small lawn. Couldn't see her. Walked to the edge of the property, looked down. A young guy, late twenties, was standing there running a number on her. She didn't look all that pleased, but neither was she brushing him off.

Maybe it's for the best, thinks me. Maybe I'm just not cut out to be a couple. I mean, there were so many differences between us. Me, I'm a reader. Love books, devour them. Mostly fiction. Stirs the imagination, promotes my curiosity. Makes me *think*. Anita claimed not to have started, and finished, half dozen books in her life. All self-help rubbish.

Then there's humor. I love Monty Python, for instance. Brilliant stuff. She doesn't get it. Not at all. And it's her own culture! I'm very jokey, like to tell stories with funny twists. I kid with everybody. Sometimes stupidly, sure, but it's the way I connect with people. She not only doesn't joke, ever, but rarely understood mine. Always saying what's the point of jokes. What's the *point*!

And yet she certainly wasn't dour. Everyone found her cheerful, upbeat, pleasant. People enjoyed being around her, and not only randy males.

Later she told me she had seriously considered leaving, but she liked Byron, liked our accommodation.

'I'll pay half the rent,' she said. (I had volunteered the entire bill since, after all, she'd put out a small fortune flying from Britain to be with me.) 'Then when it's time to leave we'll go our separate ways.'

Next day we were making passionate love. We didn't even know who initiated it, how it got started. After, she 'confessed' having had a date with this chap she'd met on the beach. Nothing happened, just coffee and talk.

'I knew he wasn't for me. But I never thought you and I would get back together, and I don't want to be alone.'

BY THE TIME WE GOT TO BANGKOK a month later we seemed to have worked out a bunch of the kinks. We took the overnight sleeper train to Malaysia, hung out in Penang a couple weeks.

I've always spent a great deal of time in my head. I find puzzles, all kinds of puzzles, life puzzles, earth-bound puzzles, universal puzzles, and try to work them out. When I'm alone, which has been most

of the time these first eighty years, I do the puzzle solving in my head. Somebody else around, someone I feel comfortable with, I talk it out, try to elicit a few conundrums from them. Get another brain's take, view a different facet of the great prism.

We were lying in bed in the hotel room and I'm going on about some philosophical dilemma having to do with my old bud the Buddha. I was raving a blue streak when all of a sudden Anita jumped out of bed. 'I can't cope!' she cried. 'I'm leaving!' And with that she packed her rucksack in about a minute and a half and was out the door, leaving me slackjawed. I was so dumbstruck I didn't know whether to let her go, run after her, what. So I did both. Lay back a couple minutes wondering what the hell did I do/say/think, then got up and went looking for her. Nowhere in sight. Neither of us had a mobile so electronic contact was out.

She was gone two days and I was going bonkers. Then a knock at the door.

'Oh, I missed you so,' she sobbed as she fell into my arms. 'I love you so much.'

By can't-cope-I'm-leaving episode number three I began to sense a pattern. Forty-eight hours. Exactly. To the minute. Kid you not, I would watch the second hand sweeping slowly up the final quadrant, four…three…two…*Knock-knock.*

Nor was the forty-eight hour disappearing act limited by national bias. Her horizontal bungy-cord numbers took place in Malaysia (1), Thailand (3), Myanmar (2) and Laos (1).

MONTHS WENT BY and we were getting along better and better. Our days were spent walking, eating, making love. We did things on our own as well. I might hang out alone and spend an afternoon with my

face in a book. Anita favored silk garments, always black. And local stones, native knick-knacks. She loved bargains (as did I) and had a nose where to find such stuff cheap.

There would be times when she needed to stay in a place by herself. Might be for a day or two or a week. Often these would be inexpensive hotels or guesthouses. What was ironic was how many times we would run into one another when this happened. Whereupon we would go have a coffee, then return to where one or the other of us was staying for some good ol' loving.

On one of these occasions she reported she was staying at this hotel where two Asian businessmen shared a room across the hall.

'One of them kept calling me on the room phone, sending me little presents. I thought about C___ (a mutual friend in Australia known to enjoy the company of a man). What would she do if she were in my place? I'm sure she would've gone to bed with him.'

'And?'

She shrugged. 'I couldn't be bothered.'

Later, back in Bangkok, she met a German guy at a café.

'He was good looking, really nice. You know, coming on to me. Well, I've never in my life been picked up and gone to bed with a man. Can you believe that? Never! I thought, Okay, here we go. Another first coming up for the late bloomer.

'He told me he was thirty-two. I said, Well, I'm forty-nine. He laughed. I said, No, really. Sure, sure, he said, still laughing. So I took out my passport and showed him. His face turned white. I mean, *white*! He said, I could never go to bed with you, you're, you're, almost as old as my mother! And got up and

left. I don't think I really wanted to, but it would've been nice if at least he tried!'

The reason she liked to stay by herself sometimes, she said, she was a lousy sleeper. 'I've always been like that. I wake up in the middle of the night, can't fall back to sleep, so I watch telly. If I'm in a room with you, I can't do that.'

'Why not? You know I can sleep anywhere, through anything. Be no problem.'

'Well, it just wouldn't be right somehow. I'd feel guilty I was disturbing you.'

WE HAD BEEN ON THE ROAD most of a year, hit many of the Southeast Asia countries, and had worked through just about every significant difference between us. Life was good. It was mid-November, the wet season over and we were back in Bangkok when Anita began complaining of abdominal pains. As well, for some time she'd had to pee a lot, and lately the need to urinate was prevailing more frequently. But when she went to the toilet little or nothing came out. Then one day during a walk she suddenly doubled over. The pain lasted a good few minutes before fading away and she could straighten up again.

'Really, dude, you ought to see a doctor.'

'Oh, it's all right. Women's stuff, you know how it is.'

Thing is, she was in such good condition, all that long-distance swimming. Plus she'd been a dedicated gym jock for years before we met. After we got together she gave up first meat, then fish, finally dairy, joining me as a ninety percent vegan. Figured she was too healthy to be really sick.

One afternoon we were making love. It became obvious she wasn't her usual joyful self. The normal moans of ecstasy had become groans of agony.

I asked did she want to quit, but she said no, let's keep on. But it wasn't a pleasant experience so I stopped. Whereupon she took my hand, placed it on her lower abdomen. 'Feel,' she said. A bulge, big, hard.

'Dude, this is Bangkok. In lots of ways third world, sure, but they have some of the finest medical facilities in the world. Go see a doc. Please?'

Next day she took the bus to a hospital not far from our hotel. I didn't go with her at her insistence. Later we met for lunch.

'How was your day?' she asked.

'Aw, y'know. Walk, eat, walk, ride the ferry, eat. You?'

She went silent. Then: 'They think it might be cancer.'

A two-dimensional cartoon me slid down off the chair and collapsed onto the floor.

THE OVARIAN TUMOR WAS THE SIZE OF A GRAPEFRUIT. At first they said it could be either-or, either being a cyst, which was the case ninety percent of the time. But then they took a second X-ray; the tumor was filled with dark, solid matter. The Big C.

For months she had been planning to meet two of her daughters in Bangkok just before Christmas and the three of them would go south to the beaches. 'I don't want to disappoint them. They've already paid for their tickets. I think I'll just stay here, not let on, then go back with them to get treatment. I'll be all right.'

Which is when I exploded. Of all the arguments which flew through my mind those next few moments, the one that emerged was the clincher: 'Just imagine the guilt those young women will carry when finally they do learn. Anita. Go! Home!

She wanted me to return to Britain with her. I reckoned otherwise. She had family there to comfort and support her. I had work to do, the most serious work of my life, and I wanted no distractions.

I believe in what I call Alpha Mind Control. That's just a fancy name for using one's inherent power of mind to heal (among other things). I had taught it to tens of thousands of people, first at the University of Pennsylvania, later through my own center in Philadelphia, then following my move to New Zealand at Auckland University.

I practiced what I preached for those many years. I believed in it, used it every single day. Alpha became a way of life, changed my life.

This is not airy-fairy bullshit. Nor is it prayer. It is real, it is scientific and it damn well works. Boy, does it ever. Once I caught a whiff of the efficacy of the power of mind, I put on my boots and jumped right in.

My classes at Penn ran to several hundred students per course. Same at Auckland U, a little less when I conducted Alpha training as part of my center. Together, teacher and pupils, we performed miracles. Which were not miracles at all, simply sensibly applied technology of the most potent machine of all, the human brain. I was not about to wait for certified approval from the great god science, not back in 1972 when I conducted my first session at Penn, and for certain not now when the life of the person I loved was at stake.

In all my classes, whenever we would work on a sick person, especially someone with cancer, and the person improved to the point of recovery (and more than a few 'terminal' cases had instant remissions), there always was some crank who would say, How do you know it was what we had done that did the trick.

In other words, Prove it. Well, I couldn't, I wouldn't, and in truth I didn't give a damn to do so. What I would tell them was this: if it was, in fact, coincidence, isn't that sweet? This led to use of the term ABC: another beautiful coincidence. 'Now let's make more ABCs happen, okay?' I'd exhort them.

Anita would be put through a program of chemotherapy in England. This was the medical world's current manner of treating cancer and while I considered it diabolical, dark ages medicine, really, I had no problem with it. She was strong in body and ornery enough to tackle the enormous downside. At the same time I would be sitting on a meditation bench in the quiet and peace of my beachfront New Zealand home beaming healing energy her way throughout the day. And not just me. I contacted every former student I could get hold of. This is the drill, people. Get to it.

THE ONLY AVAILABLE FLIGHT from Bangkok to NZ over the next few weeks was the following day. I offered to stay until she arranged transport to London. 'No, you go tomorrow. I'll be okay on my own. When this is dealt with I'll be there in New Zealand with you.'

Next day she walked me to the ferry. I always like to travel local whenever possible, so the ferry, a brief walk, then a local bus would deliver me to Don Muang, the Bangkok airport back then.

We hugged on the pier as the ferry docked. I jumped on, almost tipping over under the weight of my pack, found my balance. As the whistle sounded and the rope was untied and the boat began to put-put off, I turned and looked towards the pier. She was hunched over in tears, her back towards me. I kept my eyes on her until the ferry was well out in the river and I could see her no more.

At the airport I called the hotel. 'Just want you to know you're not alone in this.'

'I know. And I love you.'

'Me too, my dude. Me too.'

I was numb through three flights home. No emotion, no feeling inside. The house-sitter had left early that morning, leaving a note saying how much she had enjoyed her time, and especially the company of my old cat Timothy. The garden was somewhat unkempt, which was a blessing. I attacked it, spade, clippers and both hands, yanking out weeds till it got dark, Timothy right there, rubbing against his returned mate's legs.

First couple days I was rusty, my intended focus drifting in and out. Then of a moment I locked in. I imagined myself the size of a bee, got inside her body and buzzed along swallowed up dark yukky negative energy and spewing out gorgeous healing, powerful light. The light is the trick. You see it, you feel it, you believe it, it is. I visualized her as she would be, healed and happy, radiant. No concept of real time, I might've worked each session fifteen minutes or an hour. What mattered was the clarity of visualizations. When I felt myself growing fatigued I would quit.

I called her every day. She related the horrors of the chemo, but was in full praise of Britain's National Health Service. They would pick her up at the door each morning, the hospital staff all were superb, they delivered her back home by evening, all this on the queen's nickel. They may be funny folk, the Poms. But damn civilized.

HER TREATMENT TOOK THE BETTER PART of half a year. Finally she was declared clean. This is

where I made a mistake. When the quacks quit, so did I.

We met up not in NZ, rather Australia. I had expected her to be a different person, and I wasn't disappointed. She'd lost all her magnificent mop of hair, and what was growing back was blond. She'd lost her amazing muscle tone, was noticeably thinner. But that wasn't it. She had lost something else as well. The old strength of purpose was gone. Her psychic vigor, if you can call it that, was no longer there.

We went south to Byron Bay, got the place we'd stayed before on the beach. A week after we got there, her number four daughter showed up. If Anita no longer had spunk, this twenty year old sure did. She'd just soloed two months through Southeast Asia, traveling local, met a guy, got it on, and when it was time to switch hemispheres said good-by and left. I liked her. A lot. What I didn't particularly care for was Anita's playing supermum.

'Dude, leave the kid be,' I'd say. 'She's clued in, doesn't need your constant fussing and protection.'

'Yes, but —.' Wouldn't, couldn't, let go.

The daughter pretty much ignored her when Anita was buzzing around her. 'Don't forget your keys. Do you know where the office is? I can go with you if you want.' Oi vey.

I coaxed her for a stroll on the beach one morning. She kept glancing at her watch.

'You're catching a plane?' (A joke. I should've known better.)

'No, but if she doesn't get to the office by nine she'll miss the bus and they won't refund her money back.'

'Great: she'll have learned a major lesson in life.' (Not a joke, but the point was missed as well.)

She turned around and fast-walked back to our quarters. I threw up my hands and kept on walking. When I got back an hour later, both women were gone, along with their belongings. The daughter was off to do a trek, then fly off home. The mother, I figured, yet another forty-eight hour disappearing act. I was wrong. I never saw Anita again.

IT WAS A YEAR LATER. I was home in NZ. I'd sent emails, lots. Never a reply. Following months of worry and anger, guilt and remorse, I eventually moved the woman I loved onto a back burner. Then one evening she popped into my head. Strong. I looked up the old phone number in England, the one I had called every single day a year ago. She answered.

'How did you know?' she wondered.

'What, know?'

'I just got back two days ago.' She'd been traveling since last I'd seen her.

'You okay?'

'Oh, yes. Yes.' Pause. 'Except…the cancer's back. That's why I came back here.'

I made some involuntary noises of despair.

'It's all right,' she sang. 'I feel fine. I'm going to be okay.'

We talked for some minutes further, but neither of our hearts were in it.

I began doing some Alpha on her, but the clarity I'd experienced before was completely absent. I gave up after a couple weeks.

Less than a year later I got a middle of the night phone call. From Anita's youngest daughter.

She didn't even have to say it.

TRAVEL YARN No. 10

BACKPACKING THE WORLD @ 80

THE IRONY IS THAT for my first twenty-two years, I slept in the same room in the same house every single night except for the few weeks every summer when I would accompany family to the nearby seashore. A team of mules couldn't budge me from the security blanket known as home; in all that time I never ventured more than sixty miles from my base. Then I ran afoul of The Law. The Law said you must put on an ill-fitting uniform and serve your country else we'll throw your sorry ass in jail. So I stepped aboard an aircraft for the first time, and hours later I was lining up with fifty other sorry ass Law afoulers, wearing an ugly green garment designed for a pregnant giraffe, sleeves and trouser cuffs rolled up several times, waiting to have my head shaved. ('Don't worry, son, the hair will grow back.') (Yeah, right.)

The experience was the first seed that took root in what would become a great forest of travel. Nearly sixty years later I am still applying the prime lesson of life the US Air Force taught me: how to roll clothing so small, so tight, you can stuff a rucksack with double, even triple, the number of wearables a civilian can manage. Bless you, Uncle Sam.

By the time I turned fifty I'd had an equal number of different countries' entry stamps in passports which due to so many added pages

resembled concertinas. The bug had bit and I was a lifetime junkie.

In the old days it was easier. Just show up at an airport, hang around the special section set aside for international charter flights, use my savvy understanding of human nature to pick out a bribable clerk, and for fifty bucks I had me a seat on a flight going, well, I didn't care where it was going so long as it landed on the opposite side of the ocean.

In Europe I got around mostly by thumb and other people's vehicles. If I planned on going to X, and a kindly driver was heading all the way to Y, then Y it was. I met people. Locals. Fellow travelers. Strangers. Who quickly became unstrangers. I'm sure that if I had passed the same people on the streets of my home city we wouldn't even exchange glances.

Then an amazing thing happened. People who owned magazines wanted to pay me to write about my experiences on the road. Unreal! I did this for years. Then one day I got a free ticket to fly to a place called – what was it again? – ah yes, New Zealand, to write about it for the American public. I checked a world map and there it was, down and to the right of Australia.

I GOT TO NEW ZEALAND IN 1980. Hitched from top to bottom, back up again. I never wrote about my NZ travels for the American public. No way did I want *them* coming and blanketing the beautiful shoreline with thirty story condos. Instead, I applied for residence. They informed me straight away I had no real skills the country was looking for, and besides, fewer than one percent of applicants currently were being accepted. But applying then was free (boy, have they since learned!) and I could hang around till they officially told me to scram. So I requested they put my

application through the mill. Eight months later they informed me I had been accepted. Somehow I had the presence of mind not to cry out, You're shitting me, right?

All those years on the road I had no fixed abode. Told myself who needs a home? After all, the road was my home. Lying through my teeth, I was. 1985 I bought a house on a seven mile NZ beach. Actually, what I bought was a patch of paradise which happened to have a house on it. Though constructed thirty-five years prior, the native timber three bedroom single-story felt as if it had grown up around me. Living there, I realized you could do all sorts of things to a house to fit your personal specs and needs. As well, I learned that if you plant little things in the ground, often they grow big and you can eat them, or simply look at their shapes and colors and feel good. Having so settled, I reckoned my roading days were now behind me. Another lie. I did go a couple years as a homebody. But then I began to feel curiously scratchy. Caught myself standing on tiptoes and peering through the trees on my patch, past the seven mile beach and magnificent ocean, to unseen lands far, far beyond. The road, alas, was calling.

Ninety percent of my trips have been solo. Twice I traveled with women partners. Both were good roadies in the sense they packed light and were not at all interested in shopping for cosmetics, clothes and souvenirs. On the other hand both were human and thus, when nature called, could be gigantic pains. If it's a toss-up between enduring loneliness, which afflicts every roadie now and then, and getting caught in a supposed adult's emotional labyrinth, give me the lonesome road any day.

Now as I am about to enter life's final furlong, the possibility of a new friendship has cropped up.

Thing is, she's never been a traveler. Has no notion of the uncertainties and occasional rigors that tend to arise out there. I think it would be fun to go roading together, but in truth I dunno. When I first broached the subject, she replied with enthusiasm: 'I'll go out and buy a proper suitcase.' And what did I say to that? Well, it wasn't so much what I said as how I said it – the same stunned sound and volume as if I had unwittingly set bare foot on burning hot sand: *SUITCASE*??? *Arrrrggghh*!!! Overreaction, sure; still, I'm just not accustomed to such blaspheming of my religion's most sacred icon. The dreadful suitcase, especially those with horrid little wheels which make that teeth-gnashing, blood-curdling racket when dragged across airport floors, is the mark of the heathen. The infidel. The enemy. The *tourist*. Those of us seasoned in the ranks of the Church of the Holy Journeyer, we're *backpackers*. The same noun that applies to the means with which we tote our meager essential belongings. The backpack becomes part and parcel of our being, an appendage to our spirit, the symbol of our quest for freedom. Plus, your hands are free. This is important, especially for Italian and Jewish travelers as an aid to conversation.

USAF trained, I can jam everything I need for a journey, short- or long-haul, in a medium size pack. I also carry a computer bag for my old laptop plus AC cord, mouse, various wires, power point converter, journal, eyeshade and ear plugs for long flights, even a small snap-shut jewelry case to safety store my denture. I no longer check anything when I get my boarding pass. I've had a gutsful over the years of luggage lost or delayed, as well as that delightful invention guaranteed to provide mass anxiety, the airport carousel. Me, my pack, shoulder bag and fold-up walking stick board the plane as a team.

Everything written here so far can be classified as sensible. What I have to say now I suppose can be listed under extra-sensible perception. You can't see it, or feel it, or hear it, smell it, taste it. But it's there, and every veteran traveler I've spoken with has agreed one hundred percent as to its presence. We know it as the Muse of the Road. And you'll forgive me (or not) if I refer to it as a her. Because all who speak from experience know for certain the Muse is female.

The Muse is always there for true roadies. It simply takes a while before you connect with her. You may have been a traveler since the beginning of time, and have delighted in her presence each journey you have taken. Then you return home to normal human existence and your memory gets stuffed in a drawer. So back on the road, even though you've done this innumerable times, it takes a while to regrow your road legs. Then comes an unannounced moment when she's there for you. In a previous report I spoke of when, several days into my present voyage, I was sitting in the busy market in the city of Leh, in the district of Ladakh, in the nation known as India, and with no forethought or expectation, suddenly I was *there*. The Muse, who had been waiting patiently for me to awaken, to regain the true sense of the traveler that I am, sat down alongside and laid a hand gently on top my head. Talk about a religious experience.

So if it happens, if indeed I take the huge step of roading with another person, will this new friend recognize the Muse when she appears, understand that she offers quality protection and guidance, and that traveling as a threesome can be one of the most rewarding of life's journeys?

KATH

AMONG MY ELEVEN SPECIAL FRIENDS, which include two beloved surrogate daughters and a late partner, there is no one more special to me than Kath. Perhaps this is due to the facts that she is, at this writing, eighty-seven; she's the only one whom I see regularly (lives ten minutes down the road), plus there cannot be two members of the human species more unalike on the outside than Kath and Barry. It is this last which has provided me inspiration to seek out what this woman is about.

She was brought up by a mother who was stern, unforgiving and extraordinarily rigid in adhering to old English tradition. So indelibly did she stamp these tenets upon her young daughter that to this day, years after the old girl's death, Kath lives partly in her mother's shadow.

Indoctrinated early into an existence of Serving Your Husband as prime reason for being, Kath married a fourth generation New Zealand farmer, raised four sons and, as mandated, served, and served well, the five males of her clan. But there was always a quiet force within that now and again moved her to break out, to serve more than just family.

I met Kath a few years after immigrating to NZ, when I moved to my present seaside location. She operated a craft shop on the family property, directly on a main trunk road, and now and again I would pop in to scrounge around for locally made gifts to send

friends back in the States. One day she invited me into her home for some tea, and our real friendship was born.

I began to stop in frequently, and soon took to know, and marvel at, Kath's duality. One aspect was the woman who had been the region's very first yoga teacher (and was ultimately kicked out of her class's hired premises in a local church hall by the synod elders — men, obviously — for expounding the devil's work). A woman with such an accomplished understanding of commercial enterprise which honored the human and spiritual alongside profit she was voted the prestigious, and highly sought after, New Zealand Business Person of the Year award, a most rare accomplishment for a female in those days.

The other side of her, well, I first noticed this one day when I drove over to share a cuppa and some conversation. Kath was nervous, easily distracted, for sure not herself. It took a while to unearth the root of her dismay: in a few weeks her mother would be arriving for her annual monthly stay. Not just judgment day, but judgment month.

(I always made certain to visit during the old woman's time there. She never made mention but I imagine the appearance of 1) an American Jew, with 2) long hair, 3) big beard and 4) scruffy attire must have sent shock waves through her conservative, antiquated belief system.)

Kath often complained to me how her mother and her own husband were in close alliance as to a wife's duties. And yet, on his own I liked Jim and the two of us got along easily. We still do. He's ninety-two as of the moment, just as old-fashioned in principle and thought as ever, and yet has the kindness, if not the spiritual bent, of his fair missus, plus is always genuinely friendly.

So how are these people I care for so different, one from the other? A tiny slice of a long ago conversation amongst the three of us perhaps can point out the basic disparity. Kath was recounting details of a journey they'd recently taken through the Australian outback.

KATH: '…and then we drove twenty kilometers into the bush…'

JIM: 'Wasn't twenty. It was seventeen.'

KATH (following a sigh): 'Jim, what does it matter whether it was seventeen or twenty. I'm just telling Barry how we —'

JIM: 'But why say twenty when it was seventeen?'

More? Some years back she had a notion to expand the craft shop business.

KATH: 'We're on the main coach route and tour buses often stop here. The people are thirsty and hungry. A café would be perfect in such a situation.'

JIM: 'What do we need it for? It'd only be more work and you don't even know if it would make money.'

KATH: But Jim, it doesn't need to make money. The main purpose would be to give relief to tourists who've been cooped up for hours in a coach.'

This particular dance went on every visit for a couple years, as though I were a walking scoreboard. Sick of hearing it, finally one day I growled, 'Kath, just bloody do it!' Having heard the voice of (very minor) authority, she did just that. And who got the most pleasure out of the planning and construction of said cafe? Why, the job foreman, who else? Each time I appeared Jim would grab me and point out some new element in the development. When the swinging doors

separating the serving area and kitchen were installed, he was beside himself with joy.

My very favorite Kath tale is this one: on her seventieth birthday she told Jim she wanted to go to an airport a couple hours distant to watch the tandem parachute jumpers. He reckoned this was a tad peculiar, but it was her day after all, so what the heck. Upon arrival, Kath excused herself and moseyed off. After a time, Jim began looking around for his birthday girl. He looked left, he looked right. No Kath. Then he happened to look up. And there she was – pouring out of a plane, goggled and fastened to the front of a fella like she'd popped out of his chest, the pair of them dangling from this huge beautiful 'chute. (She later told me that Jim was so proud of her achievement he couldn't stop showing the video to all and sundry.)

Around this same time came the saga of Shirley Valentine. I went to see the film when it appeared at our local movie theater. I loved the tale of a frustrated English housewife who complained to the wall (who else would listen?) that her whole dreary life was spent shopping at the butcher's and preparing dinner for her husband, who demanded the same specific meal each Monday, each Tuesday, etc. A woman friend, far more free-spirited, persuaded Shirley to accompany her on a fortnight's holiday in Greece. It took great courage, but finally Shirley agreed. When the friend copped out, Shirley, shaken but determined, opted to go on her own. She prepared fourteen meals, sealed them in foil, labeled each according to the day of the week and stuffed them in the freezer along with thawing/heating instructions. Husband, as well as daughter, couldn't believe their meek Shirley might do such an outlandish thing and

tried their best to talk sense into mum; nonetheless, off she went.

One afternoon I coaxed Kath to join me at the cinema. She was wholly taken by the character of Shirley, by the woman's grit in face of universal condemnation by family and friends. I didn't know this at the time, but upon arriving home later that afternoon there ensued an inner pitched battle between the tandem parachuting business person of the year lioness and the strongly conditioned dutiful serve-thy-husband mouse. Not long after, Kath shakily announced to all she was going off by herself to England for several weeks. There she would follow up on her genealogy research (a prime avocation) and visit a son who lived there. This, of course, was an action never before undertaken. (Whether she stuffed fifty foil-wrapped portions of Jim's one-and-only steak and onions repast in the freezer, I have no idea.) She was flaunting every rule set down for her, first by mum, then Jim. I imagine she felt guilty as sin.

The journey was grand. Upon return she was a different, far more engaging woman. I would call her periodically to inquire was it a good time to catch up. She'd answer the phone and I would ask, 'Is this Shirley?'

'Yes, this is Shirley. Come on over.'

This went on for several weeks. Then one day:

BARRY: 'Is this Shirley?'

KATH: (Pause.) 'I'm sorry, I'm afraid Shirley doesn't live here anymore.'

The holiday was over. Life, alas, had returned to normal.

KATH'S SITUATION HAS CHANGED considerably in recent times. It began a couple years back when she took to falling. No apparent reason for

it, but down she'd go. Not once or twice. A dozen times, more. Broke a rib. Then another. Damage to her hip, her legs. Things continued to grow worse. In hospital, out of hospital. Her body was forsaking her. Now, she can no longer walk. She requires outside help to shower in the morning, then sits all day by a window in the lounge. (Poor Jim has been forced to cook the occasional meal for himself – at ninety-two!) She is frustrated, she is terribly angry at what has become of her person.

Still, the woman yet possesses the one quality which most endears me to her, the uncanny knack of being able to see beyond the entangled jungle of human condition and spot not only the crux of a situation but as well its most viable solution. How many times in our knowing have I come to her bearing an enigma I can't get my head around, and in a dozen words she will lay out a perfectly reasonable explication.

Last time I was to see her, I brought with a problem of sorts. I didn't even consider it a problem, merely a giant knot I couldn't figure how to untie. Until I started talking about it. As she does, Kath sat in silence as I set the stage and laid out the dilemma. You couldn't even tell whether she actually was listening. I stopped talking, and there was a silence between us. And then she spoke. In a single sentence (which she repeated twice so the dummy sitting across from her might enable it to sink in), she laid out a simple, positive action that needed to be taken. Which I later applied to the letter and saw it work out perfectly.

AFTERWORD

WRITING THIS BOOK, and trying to be faithful to my friendship with each individual, proved far more difficult than originally anticipated. Attempting to depict several human beings each in a few thousand words came close to driving me loopy, so much so that on one occasion I strongly considered shutting down the project entirely, and, in truth, did set it aside for some months.

The crucial moment, the one which provided the fresh spark to kick-start me back on track, was when I instinctively pulled my nose out of the 'work' aspect of Women I Love and saw, and sensed, and *knew*, what it was about these eleven souls I so admired. They all possessed a trio of elements I deem of vast importance (and frequently question whether I myself am privy to them): kindness, courage and compassion. These qualities provide a triangle of related strengths of character which, I feel, make a person special.

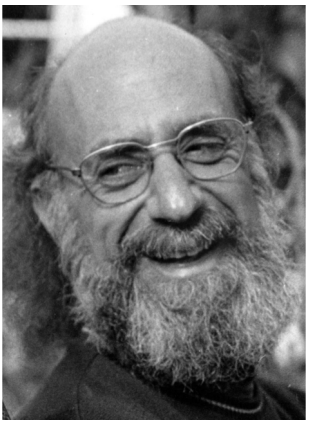
During the time I was writing this book, a movement involving women angry over long being treated unjustly, arose and shot up like a rocket. They termed it Me Too. I strongly support the idea behind this movement, which is gender equality at every level of employment and privilege, and keep your hands off me unless I give you permission to put them there. About time, too.

Except there's a danger here. For the history of the human race shows us that ten times out of nine the repressed, if and when they do crawl out from under,

become the repressors, Animal Farm-like. Having learned little from their experience, they put into play the ugliest qualities they themselves were forced to endure. (Do you read me, Israel?). I can sense this inanity on the verge of taking place with the sexes. If it does, it will set evolution of our species back a huge packet of time. And there doesn't appear to be a huge packet of time left.

We have a choice. I hope that women, whom I regard as the heart gender (as opposed to us blokes who operate largely from the head), can change the pattern, can turn the standard us versus them into us plus them equals us.

THE AUTHOR



FOR MUCH OF BARRY ROSENBERG'S EXISTENCE he has gone against the grain of society, bucked the stampede of his fellows.

Born in 1938, Barry was brought up during a world war where Jews were being summarily exterminated. His momma was convinced that her only son might stand a chance of surviving if he became a surgeon.

However, Barry thought: Wait — cutting people open? Blood splattered all over me? Momma, get real!

And thus began a lifetime of going against the flow.

As a teen, his chums were liberals; he was a staunch conservative. Over the years they all moved to the right, whereas Barry became further and further left as he grew older.

Force-fed the dogma of his parents' religion, he ultimately rejected all organized theology, his own as well as others. Invisible deity? Sorry, can't buy it.

While his peers were scrambling up the ladder of success in business, Barry joined the hippie movement.

He became a vegan when everyone else was discovering McDonald's and KFC.

When he was considering immigrating, friends in America cried, New Zealand? It's a backwater! When he was considering moving to his present home on a quiet seven mile beach, friends in Auckland cried, It's a mill town! Barry rejoiced. He would be a backwater mill town's sole JAVA — Jewish-American Vegan Atheist.

But Barry is beginning to worry. According to reports, the world's fastest growing 'religion' is…atheism. And veganism is booming everywhere, even in NZ mill towns. Mainstream males are shaving their heads and growing beards!

As his precious non-conformity is being co-opted by current convention, Barry fears he's in grave danger of becoming – *gasp* – normal.