

Woodstock – Ian Margieson

Woodstock.

A story by Ian Margieson.

Chapter One.

Saturday 23rd August 1969. With violins in our sunset, we hung around Orange for no longer than we needed to. After picking up a few supplies, we headed back out to the river. She seemed in a bullish mood, as if the discontent of earlier had left her. Either that or it had been bullied into submission. We made a makeshift camp on the banks of the Sabine and under the now sinking Texan sun, we lit a fire, made from anything we could find and given ample ammunition by liberal douses of Southern Comfort. The ground was hard and the breeze was warm. On the other side of the river was a barbed wire fence, rusted from rain and shot through with animal fur. This was truly rustic America. The colour of the sky that evening was as sweet as any I can remember, its changing hue seemingly pulsating from somewhere within itself. With bottle in hand, she leaned herself back on one of the big old tyres of the Lincoln while I made myself comfortable on a log. She puffed on a cigarette, blowing the smoke into that of the bonfire, while the embers and splints crackled and sparkled against the twilight backdrop, like tiny pearls taking leave of their captivity. Every now and then, one of us would get up to check the sausages, cooking on a primitive spit and when they were ready, we took feast upon our humble banquet. Nothing tastes better than food prepared outside. For a long time, we didn't talk; allowing the scene around us to hold its own conversation, but eventually it was her who broke the silence, then my heart. The campfire was our journey's end, but for me, this was the culmination of a story twelve years and more than three thousand

miles in the making.

The winter of 1957 descended upon Belfast with a bleak and desolate solemnity. It gripped the last golden flourishes of autumn tightly within its grasp, until soon; all that remained was the pencilled outline of a once magnificent season. The new Fianna Fail government had budgeted for an end to food subsidies and protest marches were taking place across the city. Unemployment had been rising steadily throughout the decade, with many people refusing to uproot and take the boat of emigration, preferring to stay and fight for what little work there was. Unemployment meant poverty and the coming of winter saw the struggle intensify. For many, winter was so much more than just a black and white image of chimneys and frosty cobble stoned pavements; it was a test of determination, in which only the steadfast would prevail. I had no ideas about any of this though. For me, the only thing on my mind was Christmas cake. I had turned eight years old that April and the most important thing in my life, was beating my two older sisters and older brother home from school.

It was the 21st December 1957 and I found myself rushing home through a gale. Elmgrove primary school had closed for the Christmas holidays and I was eager to get home, anxious to warm myself besides the fire, before Sheila, Gail and Michael returned. Until they arrived, I knew that my mother would allow me to sit in my father's armchair next to the fire in our front room. I knew too, that if she had been baking Christmas cake, it was in my best interest to get home as quickly as possible in case there were any tasty leftovers going begging. Maybe there'd be some cherries or a handful of currants. I ran as fast as my legs would take me. This was my routine every afternoon; the first out of school and back home as soon as possible. My journey took me along Greenville Road, into Clara Avenue and past Conn's Water, to

my home in Hyndford Street. I had even trimmed the timing down from a quarter of an hour in my first year to just less than seven minutes now. It had been this way since my very first day.

On this afternoon though, the wind howled through the streets like nothing I could remember. It stormed along the shop fronts, scooping up newspaper stands and vegetable racks as it went. Its ferocity was relentless. For me though, this merely added to the challenge. I skipped past the debris and leapt over dustbins. Nothing was going to stop me from winning my race. As I turned the corner of Clara Avenue, I knew I was over the worst; just a few more shops, then over the bridge and I would be home. Our house was almost in sight. It felt good to be so close. I could almost taste the cherries bursting in my mouth. Suddenly, from across the road, the branch of a fallen tree came hurtling in my direction. I saw it too late to move out of its path and it struck my thighs hard and knocked me over, the momentum sending me rolling into a shop doorway. As I landed, I hit my head upon the brickwork of the building. Then, as I settled, I lifted my hands up to my face. I remember pulling them away to see them soaked in blood. As I did this, my vision began to blur. I struggled to make out my fingertips and then, in an instant, all was dark.

“Laddie, hey laddie are you okay?” Opening my eyes, I heard a gruff voice and then felt someone helping me to my feet. “How are you, son? That was quite a tumble you took there. Can you stand up okay? Will I get you something young fella?” I looked up towards the gentlemen. He looked as old as the hills, with a mop of white hair and a beard to match. He smiled at me broadly, as much with his eyes as with his mouth, the way my mother did in the morning. He looked familiar, but I was sure I’d never met him. Wearing a shirt and tie under a brown cardigan that looked too old to be real, he looked like Father Christmas on his day off. That was

my first impression of him and I liked him immediately. It was one that would never shake off. He was still supporting me by the arm, of which I was glad. My head was throbbing and my legs felt weak, but I managed to thank him for his help, before asking, “Do I know you, sir? I’m sorry about your wall.”

“The wall? Oh dear boy, that’s tougher than a wheel string. Don’t you mind that none. Now, will I get you something for your troubles?” I thought for a moment.

“Do you have any milk please sir?”

“Milk? Yeah sure I do, funny thing for a youngster t’ask for, mind. I keep it on the window ledge, for me tea you know? Let’s just hope it’s not been blown away.”

“Blown away?” I asked, still a little groggy from my fall.

“Aye son, in the gale. It’s blowin’ for Kansas out there,” he replied. He sat me on a wooden stool, just inside of the door and then made his way to the back of the shop, humming as he went. I sat there and looking down, noticed that I was holding a wet flannel. It was warm. I held it up to the gash on my head and pressed it. It sure was sore, but somehow the warmth dulled the ache just a little. I sat patiently, like children in strange places do, and waited for my milk.

Looking around, I realised that this was not a shop into which I had been before. I was not though, nervous or concerned; always a quiet child, I was blessed with a gentle confidence. The front window was quite scratched but through it I could see the familiar sight of hogs strung up outside the butcher’s shop. They were flapping and flying around in the gust and I remember thinking how much they looked as if they were trying to jump down to get away. They were an eerie sight, the sort of things that could crop up in unwanted dreams. My attentions then returned to the shop in which I sat. What first struck me and what I remember vividly to this day,

was how cramped the place was. I was the only person there at the time, but had I not been, there would surely have been room for only three or four folk at most. The shop floor was lined with bookcases, some tall, some wide, but all of them packed full to the brim. These bookcases though, were unlike any I had ever seen before. They were filled not just with books, but also with what appeared to be an oddball collection of memorabilia of some sort. I was quickly drawn to a dark object in a case on a shelf immediately to my right. I had a quick look around and then told myself that seeing as the owner had not yet appeared with my milk, it would be okay to get up and have a little look.

Climbing down from the stool, I felt a sharp pain in my thigh, presumably from where I had fallen so gracelessly outside. It shot up my leg to the lower part of my back, causing me to take it quite gingerly once my feet were on the ground. It was the sort of pain that could normally only be eased by a hug from my mother, but the curious object had taken it over. I walked carefully to just in front of the shelf. “What are you then, little thing?” I said, addressing the case and cocking my head slightly, as if I were a quizzical dog looking at a lively hamster. “You’re not a book, that’s for sure,” I informed it, before carefully lifting my tender legs up onto tiptoes and reaching out for the case. It was glass and a blanket of blue velvet cushioned the curious artefact inside. I studied it carefully. Measuring about five inches in length, it resembled one of the pork sausages served up at home whenever my father was left to do the cooking. His sausages were not soft, brown and tasty like my mother’s, they were grizzled, black and covered in what seemed to be ash. My father’s sausages had the appearance of having been on a far more arduous journey to arrive at our table than my mother’s had. This did nothing to endear the object to me and just then, hearing whistling, I put it back just as quickly as I had taken it down.

“Ahh, that’s a beauty my boy! Do you know what you’ve got there, sonny?” Suddenly, the shopkeeper was right there, next to me. I took a step back, before stuttering, “I ... no, I’m sorry. I only meant to look.” I waited, but no reply was forthcoming from the gentleman. I looked up to his face. His eyes were fixed on the case, but he seemed lost somewhere in a gaze that seemed to stretch back to some far-off memory. I waited, unsure of what he would do. “That,” he announced all of a sudden, “Is a cigar which belonged to Mr Samuel Langhorne Clemens. A fine cigar, I’m told. I believe it dates from 1908. Fascinating isn’t it laddie?”

“Yes sir,” I answered quickly, before coming clean with my ignorance, “But who is that? Mr Samuel Loghorne Clement?”

“Mark Twain, young fella. That is the birth name of Mark Twain.” I shook my head.

“Oh you dear lad, am I to have the pleasure of introducing you to the delights of such a man? Come, come.” He ushered me back to my stool, helped me up and served me my milk. “Let me introduce you laddie, to the greatest group of friends you will ever know.

That was how it began. The kindly man, whom I soon got to know as Mr Rimbaud, took me on a tour of his treasure trove of a shop. The tour was to last until well into my late teens, as every afternoon on my way home from school and later from the clerk’s office where I worked, I paid a visit to Mr Rimbaud’s delightful den. Through him, I met James Joyce, Jack Kerouac, Oscar Wilde and Richard Brautigan, writers who shaped my young mind in ways I could never have thought possible and looking back, in ways for which I can now, only be thankful. Later, I even persuaded Mr Rimbaud to let me order rock and roll records from the United States of America to sell in his shop and it was not long before I became enamoured with the likes of Little Richard, Chuck Berry and then later still with the likes of The Byrds and The

Band and The Grateful Dead. Mr Rimbaud's shop became my home from home, my window unto a wider world. School may have been giving me the basic tools, but it was here, under the insightful tuition of Mr Rimbaud, where I received my cultural education.

Nearly half a century on, Joseph Morrison sat in the study of his elegant Georgian built home, half way up Bathwick Hill in the city of Bath, England and smiled. "Thank the Lord for that blasted wind," he said, smiling to himself. "That did me more favours than I ever might have guessed." Outside, the wind howled through the branches of the tree in the back garden, sending the birds that had come to feast upon the berries, scattering for cover. "Christ almighty, another golden summer comes to this fair isle, eh Squeak?" sighed Joseph, aiming his riposte somewhere in the general direction of his faithful cat, curled up on a beanbag in the corner of the room. The feline raised an eyebrow at the sound of her name, before lazily returning to her slumber. It was late June, mid-afternoon and for Joseph Morrison, novelist, the day was teasingly drawing towards an afternoon siesta. He stared at the blank screen in front of him. It changed from white to black and back again, as his eyes grew heavier and his senses lulled him into a doze. In no time at all, Joseph's chin flopped down towards his chest. The delights of an afternoon nap had woven its magic around his concentration.

"Joe? Joe, are you there Joe?" called a voice from the foot of the staircase. Mary Morrison, wife to Joseph for the last twenty-five years and mother of his two daughters, came up the stairs and into the study. As she entered, the door creaked ever so slightly, waking Joseph from his sleep. "Ah, Mary, wife of mine, I think I nodded off," he said without opening his eyes.

“You did that love,” answered his wife. “I’ve been calling you from downstairs. I’m going to take the girls into town, see about some outfits for next month. Do you fancy anything while I’m out?”

“No, I’ll take the time to write. I may meet you later,” replied Joseph. Opening his eyes, he stared at his wife; he could do that all day. Twenty-five years of marriage and his head had never been turned. Mary kissed him and left, singing as she made her way back down the staircase. She always sang. “Now then Squeak,” announced Joseph pulling himself up from his slouched recline. “Will we get this novel up and running?” He took the mouse in his right hand and touching it, awoke the computer from its own sleep mode. He was ready to begin again.

Several minutes passed. He heard the front door open and close downstairs, as his family made their way out to the car. Mary was taking twenty-two year old Naomi and her eighteen-year-old sister Abigail into town to search for outfits for the graduation of Naomi from Bath Spa University College in just over a month. A highly talented pianist, Naomi had just completed reading for a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Music. It was to be a summer of great change. In September, she was to move to Stockholm in Sweden, to take up a place at the piano stool of an illustrious European touring orchestra. She would be performing at concert halls and grand stately homes across the continent. This was something that enthralled and frightened Joseph in equal measures. By the time his daughters were born, Joseph had already enjoyed great success as a writer and this had afforded him the time to spend at home with his young family. He loved them both dearly, but his relationship with Naomi had always been something more than precious. Maybe it was just that she was his first-born. He didn’t know. Maybe, he wondered, they shared an artistic streak and it was this that brought them closer. He couldn’t be sure. All he did know, is that from

the day she was born, he felt not just love for her, but also a sense that she held within her something which had passed from father to daughter, something special and indescribable. The day Naomi had told her parents of her impending venture was already one of Joseph's proudest moments as a father.

When the two girls were infants, Naomi would often make her way into her father's writing room, something which they were discouraged from doing by their mother from a very young age. Sneaking in through the smallest crack in the doorway, she would silently sit at her father's feet and watch as he crafted his latest piece of work. Joseph often pretended that he had not noticed his daughter come into the room, his feigned ignorance excusing her unannounced intrusion. Sometimes, little Abigail would come in search of her elder sister, but so boisterous and exuberant was she, that Joseph would always end up being persuaded to finish his work for the day and go and play in the garden or in the downstairs playroom. However, whenever he noticed Naomi at his feet, he worked on, the two of them content in each other's quiet company. Even now, at twenty-two, she still did it. Joseph sure was going to miss that.

It was not long before Joseph began to realise that today was not destined to be a productive day. He had assured his editor, that his latest book, his fourteenth novel, was already underway and that all was going well. In truth, Joseph had yet to complete even the first page. He sat at the corner table, which was home to his computer monitor, leaning back in the swivel chair, pushing with his muscles until two of the four wheels upon which it stood began to lift off of the ground. Then he let it ease once more, bending his legs back into the sitting position from which he had begun his little jaunt. He repeated this manoeuvre several times, tapping the fingers of his right hand upon the wooden surface of the table, each time that his body

returned to its initial position of rest. Joseph was resolutely uninspired. He looked up at the hands of the clock, hanging on the wall just above him. They were the sorts that glided effortlessly around the hour, the second hand moving as if it were a dancer on some graceful waltz around a frozen lake. Time, Joseph told himself, was undoubtedly passing; it was just he who was stuck at a standstill.

With boredom seemingly setting in for the long haul, Joseph clicked the window of his writing document closed and opened up the news page on his Internet browser. “Same old, same old, Squeak,” he suggested to the cat. “I think we’ve come full-circle here.” Joseph, at the age of fifty-six, had reached the age at which little about the world around him came as much of a surprise. He could usually though, find an interest in almost anything, so it was rather unusual that today, he could find almost nothing worthy of holding his attention. Showbiz gossip, energy conservation, the conflict in Iraq; they were all skimmed over with the same uninterested manner. His eyes began to feel heavy once more, slowly beginning their quiet revolution. Under heavy duress from this sleepy insurgence, Joseph clicked on a link that took him to an archive news page. “Well, I’ll be damned,” he whispered slowly, as almost immediately, his eyes fell upon an American newsgroup story from the previous summer. He sat forward abruptly, leaning in to the screen to give it his full attention. As he did so, Squeak pulled herself up from her beanbag and jumped up onto Joseph’s lap, as if even she wanted a glimpse of whatever it was which had caught the writer’s attention.

<p><u>Final days of Yasgur’s farm: Development of 1969 Woodstock site.</u></p>
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“The day we lost another one,” reflects a greying, slightly portly man in his late fifties. “It was three days that changed an entire generation,” recalls a longhaired woman of similar age. The announcement of the development of 38 acres of disused farmland into a probable performing arts centre yesterday, Sunday 27th June, in a little known corner of Sullivan county, may not seem like the most noteworthy of news stories, but for an entire generation of middle-aged Americans, the development represents the symbolic demise of a little piece of their youth. It is only when one is told that the proposed site of the new Bethel Woods Center for the Arts happens to be a certain Yasgur’s farm, that any notion of what all the great fuss is about becomes clear. For three days, in August 1969 the farmland of Mr Max Yasgur was home to the Woodstock Music & Arts Fair, the festival which was to define an entire generation of young Americans and which has become a cultural cornerstone in the story of our country in the latter-half of the twentieth century. Yesterday’s news that the Gerry Foundation was to take a controlling interest in the development of the site was met with widespread disapproval by many who attended the festival, some thirty-six ago and by the Woodstock Preservation Alliance, led by Brad Littleproud.

Joseph sat back in his chair and looking out through the window, let out a long sigh. He closed his eyes and let his thoughts take him far away, across the Irish Sea and back to his hometown of Belfast. After several minutes of silence, Joseph got up from his chair and made his way across to his collection of LPs, many of which he had collected while still a teenager at old Mr Rimbaud’s curiosity shop. The records were housed in a leather carry-case and as he opened it up, Joseph felt awash with the memories of his youth. He carefully filed through them until he found what it was he was looking for, a copy of the American singer-songwriter Kris Kristofferson’s first

album. He looked at the photograph on the cover. Although half covered in darkness, Kristofferson's face reminded Joseph of himself at the turn of the sixties into the seventies. Clean shaven, but with shoulder length dark brown hair, Joseph had been tall and lean as a young man, blessed with an open and honest face which reflected his somewhat idyllic childhood. He pulled the record from its sleeve, closed the leather carry-case and put the vinyl disc onto the record turntable that stood in a cabinet next to his computer table. He lifted the needle and found the appropriate track. He sat kneeling on the carpet next to the record player, closed his eyes and listened.

Me and Bobby McGee.

(Words by Kris Kristofferson.)

Busted flat in Baton Rouge, headin' for the trains
 Feelin' nearly faded as my jeans
Bobby thumbed a diesel down just before it rained
 Took us all the way to New Orleans
 I took my harpoon out of my dirty red bandana
 And was blowin' sad while Bobby sang the blues
With them windshield wipers slappin' time and Bobby clappin' time
 We finally sang up every song that driver knew.

Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose
 And nothin' ain't worth nothin' but it's free
Feelin' good was easy Lord, when Bobby sang the blues

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And buddy that was good enough for me

Good enough for me and Bobby McGee.

From the coalmines of Kentucky to the California sun

Bobby shared the secrets of my soul

Standin' right beside me through everythin' I done

And every night she kept me from the cold

Then somewhere near Salinas, Lord, I let her slip away

She was lookin' for the love I hope she'll find

Well I'd trade all my tomorrow's for a single yesterday

Holdin' Bobby's body close to mine

Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose

And nothin' left was all she left to me

Feelin' good was easy, Lord, when Bobby sang the blues

And buddy that was good enough for me

Good enough for me and Bobby McGee.

When the song had finished, Joseph remained seated on the floor, his mind busy with thought. He looked once more at the cover photograph. Kristofferson didn't look like this anymore and Joseph was damn sure he didn't either. It was hard to believe that he ever did. Ever faithful, Squeak was soon in attendance. She curled herself into Joseph's lap and purred contentedly, as he sat still upon the carpet, allowing his memories to develop from within and settle in his present consciousness. After a while, he spoke, not to anyone in particular, for he was alone, but just out

loud. “Boy, I tell ya’. That song takes me back. It’s her you know ... down to a tee. I just can’t believe it ... it makes me feel old as hell. As old as Atty Haye’s goat. I know she was half crazy, but that was why I wanted to be there.” He took another long and lingering look at the record. ‘Thirty-six years,’ he thought to himself. ‘That’s more than some folks ever get to see.’ He shook his head and rubbed his face with his hand, before letting out a heavy sigh. Then, with a real sense of purpose, he lifted the cat out of his lap and returned to his computer table. “At last, you swine,” Joseph said gruffly to himself. His wandering muse had returned to the fold.

Chapter Two.

“Tell me Mr Rimbaud, what was it like there?”

“Where lad? What is it you want to know, my boy?” Mr Rimbaud and I were sat upon stools by the counter in his shop, my seat being the very same one which I had sat upon on my first visit to this wondrous place. In my hands, I clutched the latest record that I had persuaded the dear old man to add to his collection. It was by Bob Dylan and the back cover showed the young singer standing, looking effortlessly cool, in some unknown metropolis in the States. The year was 1963, the year of the resignation of Prime Minister Brookeborough, who was replaced by Captain Terence O’Neill. I remember my father praising the new appointment when he heard it over the wireless. I, however, had other things on my mind. I was fourteen years of age and desperately in awe of everything I saw and heard floating across from the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Mr Rimbaud, ever the eternal romantic himself, had stoked my burgeoning absorption into all things red, white and blue, opening my eyes to the great cultural melting pot that the country had become through stories, photographs, poetry and now music, feeding me a steady diet of stateside classics; everything from Steinbeck to Rockwell through Guthrie and Perkins. It was America and only America. Nothing else came close. I had read Joyce, only to find it unfathomable and Shakespeare only to be baffled by its pomposity; listened to music from Ireland, Africa and Europe finding none of it striking a chord and had even spent six months trying to master Mr Rimbaud’s Chinese board games. But for me, it was the American Dream that made sense. Six years after he had first opened up his shop to me, I was now truly a Yankee in waiting. My own country’s heritage, although

long and full of legacy, seemed grey in comparison. The heartbeat of 1960s American culture was thumping inside of me and my longing was painfully palpable. However, in all the afternoons I'd spent with that old man, there was one thing he had held back, until now.

“America, Mr Rimbaud. Tell me about America. My Da says you once lived there, a long time ago, but you had to come back for family reasons. Is he right, Mr Rimbaud? Is he?” Stroking his hands through the long hairs on his beard, the kindly old man began to nod, before answering. “Aye, your father is right young Joseph. T'was many years ago too, he's right about that. Many years ago, my boy.” Suddenly, I was giddy with excitement, scarcely believing it to be true. Why had he never told me? “What did you do there? What was it like? Did you live in the city?” I rushed. “Go on Mr Rimbaud, tell me.” My enthusiasm taking me over, I began to rock on the stool, like some crazy doolally-tap. Sensing that he had a captive audience, Mr Rimbaud got up from his stool, made his way across to the front of the shop and turned the sign on the window to ‘closed.’ He then came back past me and went out to the back room, where he kept his kettle and his lunch. I heard what sounded like papers being tossed aside, as if he were rummaging around in a cupboard for quite some time and then he came back across me with a large book carried under his arm. And his face. His face told of treasures about to be unveiled.

“Come Joseph, come see,” he motioned to me, before sitting back on the stool. Clearing a space on the cluttered counter desk, he laid the book carefully down. It was dusty and marked with what looked like paint, but its spine was strong and its cover was sturdy. Shuffling up my stool as close as I could to get a better look, I could tell straight away that Mr Rimbaud's book was an old photograph album; brown mock leather on the front, with a solid gold band decorating the rim. Without

saying a word, he opened the cover and then turned the hazy leaf of paper behind that to reveal two sepia-toned photographs of a group of young men standing in a shipyard; about a dozen of them, burly, serious of face and huddled together like a football team. I recognised it as a shipyard immediately, as my father had, for many years before and several more still to come, worked the yards of Belfast for Harland and Wolff. “Mr Rimbaud, is it you? Which one are you?”

“Well, I ...” began the old man, before I interrupted.

“No, no. I’ll guess. I’ll work it out, you see if I don’t sir,” I continued confidently. Sure enough, I managed to pick out Mr Rimbaud as the thick-set man at the back with slightly curly auburn hair and a face of rounded stubble, a feat which not only pleased me no end, but which also seemed to draw a smile of impression from the man himself. “Can we see some more Mr Rimbaud, some more pictures I mean?” I asked eagerly. “Will we keep going?” My teenage impatience wanted to rush on to the next page as quickly as we had arrived at the first. “Of course my boy,” replied Mr Rimbaud. “You look through the album and ask me whatever you wish to know. I’ll answer as best I can.”

The photographs were all that I had hoped for and more. In the margins next to some of the pictures, Mr Rimbaud had made notes of the dates they were taken and where they were; Labour Day 1938, a night out in Manhattan, 1941, posing at the home of the late Thomas Wolfe; each one the trigger to a memory. Pouring over the album like my life depended on it, they were more than just pictures; they were the kindling that nurtured my sense of wonder into something tangible; real people, real places. A dream I could one day have a chance of realising. With Mr Rimbaud’s album as my guide, I travelled the eastern coast of that vast nation, from New York to Virginia, taking in the plains, the highways and beyond to the Carolinas. And with it

all, were Mr Rimbaud's wonderful recollections. They turned a collection of photographs into a living, breathing chapter of this man's life. It brought Mr Rimbaud and I closer with every turn of the page. His wonder became mine and in turn, my curiosity became his to encourage. And it cemented, for me, a fascination with the States that continues to this day. A lifetime's interest and it all started there, with that dust-covered album. It turned out that Mr Rimbaud had once been a great craftsman, a man who could shape iron and steel into anything an engineer could dream up, travelling with friends from one harbour to another, wherever the work took them; an original band of gypsies. One photograph even had the group of them swimming in the harbour of New York City bay. The man was fast becoming my hero. It was not all pleasant though. He had returned to Ireland in 1948, his travelling days cut short by family tragedy. His face became ashen with intensity as he told me how his sister had become unwell, back home in Belfast and of how he had returned across the Atlantic to care for her, nursing her through a lengthy and terminal illness and caring too for his niece, the family having been left fatherless by the death of Mr Rimbaud's brother in-law several years before. He never left Belfast again after that.

It was, I discovered, while in America, that Mr Rimbaud had begun to collect the interesting trinkets and collectibles that had grown into the great collection now housed in his small shop. "This is me in 1933," he enthused, "Standing at the parade for the swearing-in of President Roosevelt. What a good man he was, my boy, a real gentleman. I still have the newspaper that I bought on my way home that night." As we looked through the album, recollections kept coming back to Mr Rimbaud and he shared with me the history of many of the items familiar to me from the shelves

around us. “Oh Joseph lad, look here,” he enthused, turning another page. “This is a photograph of me with Arthur Miller.”

“I don’t know him, Mr Rimbaud.”

“He, Joseph, in my opinion, is the greatest playwright that that country has ever produced. This was taken not long before I returned home. Would you believe, he took his glasses off to wipe his face, dropped them and cracked one of the lenses?”

“That’s not so grand, sir,” I stated.

“No Joseph, but look behind you, the third one up,” Mr Rimbaud said, pointing to one of the dusty shelves. I looked up and sure enough, there were a pair of glasses.

“Surely not?” I gasped.

“Oh yes, laddie. Mr Miller always carried a spare pair of glasses with him and he was most obliged to let me have his broken pair. In fact, I think he was a little puzzled by my request! Crazy Irishman, I expect is what he thought.” We must have passed several hours away journeying through Mr Rimbaud’s past and it did not feel like long before he was urging me to get on home. “Your Mam’ll be wondering where you’ve got to again Joseph. It’s about that time.”

“Mr Rimbaud, she knows I’m here. I think she’s kinda glad I have somewhere to go. Our Michael’s going to end up in bother, that’s what she keeps telling me. Even me Da thinks he’s got a touch of the devil in him. ‘You keep reading them books’, that’s what he says ta me sir.”

“Well, that’s as may be son,” began the old man, “But it really is ...”

“I know Mr Rimbaud,” I interrupted with a smile. “About that time!”

“Aye Joseph. It’s about that time. Take care now. I’ll be seein’ you.” I raced home, as I always did, hoping that maybe my mother had spent the afternoon baking, leaping

over the pavement cracks as I went, the winner, as always, of my solitary race. This was as good as life could get.

For the next few visits to Mr Rimbaud's shop, the talk was all of America. I quizzed the old man endlessly about the names of places and about the people whom he met. New York, baseball, American diners and Chevrolet cars; I was fascinated by his tales and took it all on board, all the time hoping that one day I would have a chance to see a little of what Mr Rimbaud had seen. Then one day, in mid-conversation, he stopped what he was saying, looked at me with a grin and said, "Joseph, we'll go there one day, you and me. What says you boy?"

"Mr Rimbaud?" I stuttered, my mouth dropping open.

"It won't be yet mind, you're far too young. I'll have ta speak to your father, of course. We'll do it though, my boy. When you're old enough. You can be my legs and I shall be your guide. What do you think Joseph?" Mr Rimbaud looked at me with his eyes alight, beckoning me to reply. "Aye sir," I said, "I think it would be grand."

Joseph sat back from his desk then rose to fill a glass of water from the jug in the windowsill. His head was buzzing with the excitement that his memories had brought and he was happy, for the time being, to wallow in the past. Before returning to his writing, he crouched down again besides his record collection, opened the carry-case and sifted through them. Bob Dylan, David Crosby, Jerry Garcia. Most of them had not been played for thirty years or more and yet to Joseph, they were as integral a part of his life as anything else around him. They didn't need to be played. It was enough just to see them again. As he held one in his hands, he relived once more the anticipation that taking delivery of a new record at Mr Rimbaud's shop had

always given him. Into his teenage years, Joseph had become an unofficial assistant at the shop, enthusiastically keeping the old man's stock up to date. Joseph took care of the records, Mr Rimbaud of the books. Sitting now, in the study, Joseph looked towards the bookcase on the far-side of the room, housing as it did, the several hundred hard and paperbacks which had been accumulated over the last forty or more years. In particular, Joseph found his eyes drawn to the now aged and yellowy pages of the books that he had first seen as a child, at the old man's shop. On the very top shelf, Joseph still had an old coffee container which he had used to collect his own small trinkets as a youngster and which he had never discarded. All around the room were traces of Mr Rimbaud. The remnants were all that remained, but they were enough to keep the old man's magic alive. Taking a drink of his water, Joseph's eyes narrowed, his concentration taking him away again. He drew a deep breath and sat back in front of the screen.

We never did make it to the United States together. It was a Monday when I heard the terrible news; a late spring evening, balmy and sun soaked. On my way home from work, I called round at Mr Rimbaud's shop. I still did this, two or three times a week, although his opening hours were becoming somewhat erratic to say the least. His health was not at its best. Today I was very excited, as I was expecting a delivery from overseas, the latest work by Mr William Burroughs, the American novelist, no less. Turning the corner of Clara Avenue, I caught sight of myself in a shop window and smiled at how much I had changed in appearance since I first came running round here all those years before. The year was now 1969 and I was a young man of twenty. Tall and wiry, dressed in the bell-bottomed trousers of the day and with a faded denim jacket to match, I doubt if the young tearaway of a decade before

would even have recognised me. My brown hair was thick and wavy and fell into my eyes and I ambled with the lazy gait of young people all over the world. Working to live, in a clerk's office on Bearsbridge Road, with my room at my parents' house all I had to show for it, calling in on Mr Rimbaud was as usual as my father's morning tea. I had been waiting on the Burroughs book for most of the spring and as I turned the corner, I skipped on a little in my stride, excited at the possible arrival of my package. In the days before home shopping and the Internet, the exotic turns of a humble stamp could not be overestimated.

The door was closed and the lights were off. The board that stood outside, decorated with the words, 'Rimbaud's Illusions' and 'Open', was nowhere to be seen. I looked up towards the window of Mr Rimbaud's flat and the curtains were open. 'He must be poorly; perhaps I'll give it a miss today,' I told myself. 'Or maybe I ought to go on and say hello; check he's alright and well.' I hesitated for a moment, wondering if to knock or not and looked in at the darkened shop floor. I didn't like to see it closed. It was a reminder of Mr Rimbaud's increasing frailty. Yes, I decided; I would go in. All of a sudden though, I was taken with a start. "Hey there! Are you Joseph Morrison?" I spun around to face the road, hearing a woman's voice calling my name. "Here, look. I'm up here." I turned back towards Rimbaud's and looked up to the flat once again, this time to see the woman, about thirty years of age, leaning out of the window above me. I recognised her immediately from a photograph that had always hung in the shop. She was Mr Rimbaud's niece, Anna. We had never met. "Aye ma'am I am. Is everything alright? Will I do anything for you?" Anna paused momentarily, before answering.

"You'd better come inside lad," she said. "I'll be down to let you in, d'you hear?"

I knew what was wrong. It was one of those occasions when an explanation was not needed. Anna came down to the door of the shop and let me in. I had never seen anyone else open that door before. I followed her up the stairs to Mr Rimbaud's flat, in through the landing and into the lounge. "Sit yourself down Joseph," she said dourly. "I'll put the kettle on. Do you drink tea, lad?" I remember thinking how peculiar it was for her to call me that. Lad? She was only a few years older than me; ten maybe less, but she seemed an old head on a young body. She had dark brown hair, cut into an old-fashioned bob and pale cloudy skin. Slight of build, she wore a tweed skirt and a plain blouse, making her look for all the world like a schoolteacher. She was attractive, but her clothes hid it well. "Tea? Err, no. No, thank you. Just milk will be fine, thank you." She went to go into the kitchen, but I could wait no longer. I felt an uneasy calm come over me and I needed it confirmed. "Anna, how did it happen?" I asked abruptly. "How did Mr Rimbaud die?" Anna's expression, as she turned to answer, bore out the inevitable. She spoke slowly and with a resigned, somnolent purpose. "In his sleep, Friday night. I had spent the evening here. I was to stay for the weekend. I came up on the train. We had a real time of it too; talked until we tired ourselves out. All seemed well and good." She was very matter of fact in her manner, as if it had been expected. I suppose, if I was honest with myself, it was wholly expected. He had not been well for some time; I just didn't want to see it. I felt dazed, as if I had closed my eyes and missed something in the dark. Here I was in Mr Rimbaud's flat and everything still looked the same, smelt the same and felt the same, only it wasn't. It would never be the same again. The most important part was gone. I sank in my seat, as Anna leaned on the old man's untidy table. Her grief was controlled and as she told me about his passing, she expressed thankfulness that she had been with him at the end. I knew from hearing Mr Rimbaud talk, how much they

meant to each other. Anna had been just a girl when her uncle had returned from America to care for her and her mother. He steadied her life when all around was uncertain. I could only imagine her sense of loss. Orphaned three times over. Next to that, my loss seemed small. “I’m sorry Anna,” was all I could say. She nodded in acknowledgment, keeping her counsel inside. Then we sat quietly for quite some time.

As we sat, I considered the last time I had seen Mr Rimbaud. Christ Almighty, it hurt like hell just to acknowledge those two words, the ‘last time.’ It was frightening how quickly the present had turned into the past. I felt numb, as if I’d been absorbed by a dose of disorder and suddenly, I became aware of how slow my movements were. Looking down at my hands, they appeared docile and unresponsive. It was like I was a second behind myself, gazing in through the looking glass and I felt deeply unnerved. It had been the previous Thursday when I had last seen Mr Rimbaud. I had offered to paint the outside of his shop front, where the cracked white paint around the windows was beginning to flake onto the pavement, but, having brought the gloss with me, I had become sidetracked by a record playing in Mr Rimbaud’s back room. That’s all it took; a record, a book, even a magazine article and we would be perched on those two stools like a couple of barflies. The song playing had been ‘Pastures of Plenty’, Woody Guthrie’s plaintive hymn to American life and it had got us talking about folk music, everything from Huddie Ledbetter and Cisco Houston on. Mr Rimbaud had seen Houston, a former merchant marine, performing at the Town Hall in New York after the war and often spoke of him as his favourite singer; high praise indeed from a man who was the very embodiment of a walking musical encyclopaedia. As I sat in Mr Rimbaud’s flat now, that conversation seemed a lifetime ago, the song a requiem to a departed friend. I

have never, to this day, been able to listen to the song dry-eyed. It was typical of our time together; busy dialogue over a lazy afternoon, with his love of music at the heart of it. It reminded me too, of the archetypal Mr Rimbaud. He was, from our very first meeting twelve years before, until the day he died, gentle, engaging and charming. I miss him every day.

“Now then Joseph,” Anna said quite abruptly, pushing herself up from the table and walking to the kitchen. “You and my uncle shared a passion.” Her suddenness surprised me, snapping me upright in my chair. She busied herself in the kitchen, still talking as she went. “He would have closed that shop a long time ago had it not been for you? You kept his interest going. Did you know that Joseph?”

“No ma’am, I didn’t,” I answered honestly. “He sure did know a lot though, Anna. I’ve never known anyone have so many objects as Mr Rimbaud. I’ve never had a dull visit yet. Well, save for today, if you don’t mind?”

“Here’s your milk, Joseph,” Anna said, coming back into the room. It did not feel quite right to be drinking milk, here in this room and for Mr Rimbaud to not be with us. It had still been only twenty minutes since I had been happily making my way along the road outside, such a short space of time, for my world to change. “Thank you, Anna,” I said.

“Joseph. Maybe this could have waited,” Anna said as she stood over me. “But I wanted you to know as soon as I found it out and now that I’ve met you, well, I guess it feels like the right time.” As she said this, the face of Mr Rimbaud’s niece softened and her eyes lit up. She seemed all of a sudden, lighter of mood, excited almost. “What is it ma’am? What have you found out?” I asked, intrigued by her soft smile. Anna sat down besides me, a brown envelope in her hands. “This is my uncle’s will.

Your name, Joseph Morrison, is in it.” She handed it to me and pointed to a paragraph for me to read.

I read the paper quickly. Then I read it slowly. And then I put it down. A rush of emotion burst from within me and before I could stifle it, my young eyes filled up with tears and I turned towards Anna. She suddenly seemed so motherly and as she spoke, it was in a gentle voice. “He loved you, you know Joseph?” she said. “Your dreams were his dreams. That’s why he did this. He wanted you to go, even if he couldn’t come with you.” I felt suddenly hot, then cold again, as my blood rushed excitedly from my head to my stomach. My hands trembled as I reached for my drink, gulping it down in one. Anna watched me intently, as if waiting for me to get my balance. Once more, I took the paper in my hands and read it through the shakes. It was true. I hadn’t misread it. Finally I spoke. “We’ve been planning it for years,” I said, rubbing my hands over my head in disbelief. “I save my wages every week you know. I just can’t believe it.” My head was murky with emotion, my heart wrestling with a joyous, but bittersweet situation. In his will, Mr Rimbaud had left me a considerable amount of money, but with a clause attached. The clause stated that I was only to be given the money if I used it to journey to the United States of America. Addendum to that, I had to travel within six months of Mr Rimbaud’s passing. “Something to remember him by,” said Anna smiling. A little bit of sadness ran down her face. I sat quite still, not knowing what to say. I picked the will up and read it once more. I was getting to know it by heart. Never in my twenty years had I known such an afternoon of mixed emotions. Anna, however, had clearly inherited her uncle’s knack of knowing precisely what to do and say in any given situation. “Come on Joseph,” she said, standing up and taking me by the arm. “Let’s go downstairs. You can show me some of my uncle’s treasures.”

The door of Joseph's study creaked open, as Naomi silently came into the room and sat herself down, as she always did, on the beanbag at her father's feet. Joseph continued to type, neither of them uttering a word and there they sat, father and daughter, enjoying each other's company in their own satisfied way. Disgruntled at being displaced on her beanbag, Squeak discontentedly left the room, venturing off to see if there was a switched on radiator to nestle under in the hallway. Joseph smiled at this and turned to his daughter saying, "I think you've upset my favourite cat, Nay."

"She needs the exercise Dad. You feed her too much anyway," came his daughter's reply. Unusually, Joseph leaned back from his writing and turned round to talk. This was a quality of time he was going to miss once Naomi had left in just a few short months and he wanted to make the most of it. "How was your trip into town? Did you all manage to find the right outfits?"

"Oh well, you know Mum ..." said Naomi pausing, before changing the subject by asking, "What's your new book about?"

"My trip to America, before I became a writer," Joseph began, before noticing that his daughter's attentions were somewhere else. She was staring anxiously out of the window. "Naomi, is everything alright love?" Joseph sensed that all was not well with his daughter. "Dad, I've got something I need to tell you," Naomi began, with a nervy, but determined resolve. "I want to, but I'm not sure how you'll take it." Her eyes were as big as emeralds, while her face was the picture of apprehension. Joseph turned round, leaning forward in his chair. "Naomi ..." he began to say. Just then, the study door opened again and this time, Joseph's wife Mary appeared, looking somewhat dishevelled. "Has she told you Joe?" she sighed. "No. Mary, Naomi,

what is it? What's going on?" Joseph asked. Without a moment's hesitation, Naomi looked directly at her father and said, "Dad, I'm not joining the orchestra. I'm pregnant."

Chapter Three.

"Jesus, Naomi what did you just say?" Joseph rose from his writing stool and with arms folded, stood over his daughter. "Dad, it's alright. I've given this some thought," began Naomi.

"Oh Christ, it's alright is it? Do you hear that Mary? It's alright. She says it's alright. Well, I feel much better now, don't you? It's alright 'cos our daughter says so." Joseph threw his arms up into the air in consternation and walked over to the window. "Did you hear birds, my daughter's going to give up her entire future and it's alright. That's a bloody load off." Joseph's voice was laced with sarcasm.

"Joe, come and sit will you? Give the girl a chance to speak at least," said his wife, attempting to intervene. "Let's hear her out. I've only just found out myself in the car."

"Oh Jesus, where's your sister. You've not told her already have you?" demanded Joseph of his daughter. Naomi stood up from the beanbag. "No Dad, I haven't, but why shouldn't I? Will you listen to me?"

"Abbie met a friend in town Joe. She didn't come home with us," Mary explained.

“Oh, let me guess,” Joseph continued. “She’s gone off to get pregnant too has she?”

His wife rolled her eyes and looked to her daughter.

“I knew it! I knew he’d be like this. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“I think we’d all notice when your bump got in the way of you reaching the bloody piano keys!” her father bristled.

“For Christ’s sake Dad, I can’t talk to you when you’re like this,” Naomi fumed. She pushed past her mother and marched herself down the staircase, cursing at her father as she went. The front door was next to feel her force and for the briefest of moments, a thunderous silence was all around. Joseph turned to his wife, sucked in his breath and opened his mouth to speak. “Don’t you dare start on me Joseph Morrison,” she snapped, beating him to it. “You sit down there and take some deep breaths. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Mary left. Joseph paced the room, angry and confused. “That stupid girl, what the hell does she know?” he admonished out loud. He rolled the sleeves of his shirt up, as if ready for a fight. “She can’t be serious. She bloody can’t be,” he scolded again. Each pace that Joseph took ground itself into the carpet so strongly that one could be forgiven for thinking they were footprints made by some cumbersome beast. He grizzled and cussed his way back and forth across the small room, trying to get his head around what he had just been told. Had it really been, he wondered, just a few short moments ago that he sat, with his daughter at his feet, in peaceful contemplation? What was she thinking? He glanced at the computer monitor and then down at the beanbag where his daughter had been sat and which had now been reoccupied by Squeak. “Christ almighty,” Joseph said, sighing to the tortoiseshell feline. “Pregnant? What the hell does she know about being pregnant? She’s still a ruddy kid herself.” A photograph of the two girls aged four and eight sat

on Joseph's desk. He used to be their world. They smiled out of the picture, the lost innocence of childhood infuriating Joseph all the more. He took the frame in his hand and ran a finger across the face of Naomi. In his stomach, he felt the mixture of anger and regret pulling tightly. "Oh crap," he sighed quietly. "It's not supposed to be this way." Kneeling on the floor besides the cat, Joseph twitched his fingers together. Squeak unfurled herself immediately and came to sit upon her master's lap. Then, Joseph heard the door push to once more.

"I thought you'd fancy something a little stronger than milk right now," said Mary appearing in the doorway. "Tom Collins okay?" She carried two glasses over to where Joseph was sitting with the cat. "Here," she said sitting next to him at his writing stool, "I'm too old for all this sitting about on the floor."

"Mary, is it something we've done?"

"Joseph Morrison, you old fool," said his wife sternly. "Have you really aged that much? You're spending too much time with that bloody cat." Joseph looked surprised at this, but said nothing. He knew that Mary was anything but unsympathetic and would tell it to him straight. Her self-reliance was one of the things he loved about her. "Joe, she's a grown woman. You forget that sometimes. Now I'm not saying I'm ecstatic about this and to be honest, I'm a little more than surprised, but our daughter has just told us that she is going to be a mother. Now you give that some thought."

"Mary, I'm not stupid," Joseph replied. "And it's not as simple as that. She'll not get another chance like Stockholm. Christ, you've got to take gifts with a sigh most men give to be paid, you know? It won't come again, love. You know that, as well as I do. It's what she's been working for. Jesus, it's what we've all been living for."

Joseph took a drink from his glass and rattled the ice cubes to and fro. Mary put her hand out and her husband took it with his. She squeezed it tightly.

“I can’t watch her throw it all away Mary, I just can’t,” Joseph said, rubbing the back of his wife’s hand with his fingers. “She’s worked too hard. She deserves it, damn it. We’ve got to do something. There’s no use talking when the harm is done.”

“Joe, you’re fifty-six years old and you’re looking at Naomi to be thinking like she is too,” Mary reasoned with him. “That’s just not fair. Sometimes, you’ve got to go back to be able to move forwards.”

“Come off it, love. That’s a bit naïve.”

“Is it? Joe, when I met you, you were the most laidback man I’d ever come across. Nothing unsettled you.”

“Well, I’m still the same.”

“Who are you kidding? Time and age change that. You’ve forgotten how to roll with the punches, too. We’ve grown old Joe and we never saw it coming.” Mary smiled at her husband. “Huh, it’s funny you should say that,” said Joseph, with a frown of resigned acceptance. “I’ve been thinking about Mr Rimbaud while you’ve been out. Even listened to some records too.”

“It comes to us all Joe,” sighed Mary. “I’m going to go downstairs; you’ll be wanting tea soon.”

“What about Nay?” Joseph said looking to his wife for help.

“You talk to her when she gets back. I know you’ll know what to say. I’ll give you some peace, love. You could probably do with it.” With that, Mary left the study, closing the door behind her. Joseph found himself alone with his thoughts once again.

He thought about the day Naomi had been born. He hadn't missed a thing. Never had a man been so ready for the big day. He barely put her down for a week and scarcely left her side for a year. The bond between them was there from the beginning. He thought too about what his wife had said about him ageing. It was true, he had become settled in his ways, but they were comfortable, pleasant ways, he thought. Perhaps that was the problem, he wondered. He had never been a wild thing, even as a young man, a wanderer perhaps, but never a rebel. Sat there on the floor, Joseph looked around. The past was all around him, the photograph of his two girls here, an old memento from Rimbaud's there. It was as if he had immersed himself in the past. Even the photographs of the girls were old ones; he hadn't let them grow up. Now they had and it seemed too late. "I thought I was a good father," he said softly, his mood meandering slowly towards melancholy. "Doesn't she know what she's throwing away?" He needed something else to think about. He pulled himself up and sat down in front of the computer. Closing his eyes in thought, it did not take long for the memories of his youth to lead Joseph back to Belfast once again, back to the most exciting summer of his life.

It was quite disconcerting to see so many people that I knew in the one place at the same time. I could put names to many of them. There were many more that were just familiar faces. The Reverend Moore had been there at all the important stages in my life and now here he was, leading me through yet another rite of passage. My parents had been married here, St. Donard's Church, in 1941. It was where a family joined the community. As we waited for the organist to strike up the opening notes of the next hymn, I looked at Anna, stood next to me. She winked and smiled. This reassured me greatly and the heavy feeling inside of my stomach relapsed, if only for a short while. Mr Rimbaud's niece had taken me under her wing somewhat

since our first encounter nine days before. It was as though we had something in common. I guess we did. Mr Rimbaud had been a fatherly figure to me since I was just a young lad, while he had literally and figuratively stepped into that role for her all those years ago. Although Anna and I had never previously met, we somehow had so much to share, Mr Rimbaud's passing forging our mutual understanding of each other. I already considered her a friend.

A distant relation of Mr Rimbaud's spoke to the congregation about their days as boisterous youngsters roaming the streets of Belfast at the turn of the century, which I found joyously entertaining, especially the revelation that back in the day, Mr Rimbaud had gone by the nickname of Boffyflow. Boffyflow, and Spike, as this relation was known, would regularly chase behind the growing numbers of motorcars in the city, hitching free rides down nearby Cyprus Avenue on the backs of them. It was heart warming to hear and even though I had known him only in later years, I could quite readily picture the young Mr Rimbaud, hanging on and grinning from ear to ear. The Reverend Moore said some nice words about thankfulness and devotion and we all sang 'Amazing Grace, but my mind was elsewhere. I was thinking about the shop. What would become of it? It would be up to Anna, I figured. We may have been at Mr Rimbaud's funeral, but it would be the shutting down of 'Rimbaud's Illusions' that would be the final farewell as far as I was concerned. That was where we should have been having the service.

As we walked the tree-lined pathway across the churchyard and away from Mr Rimbaud's grave, Anna caught up with me once more and took me by the arm. "Joseph, there's someone you just have to meet. He's an old friend of my uncle's." "Okay Anna, sure," I said politely but unenthusiastically.

“Joseph, he’s from America,” Anna went on, now with a sparkle in her eyes. “He travelled with my uncle when they were shipbuilders. They were great friends. He visited us when my mother was ill and he’s not long been back in Ireland now. He’s come home to retire.”

“Aye then Anna,” I answered. “I’d love to meet him.”

“Great,” smiled Anna. “Come on, you can walk me back to the house.” We followed the group of friends and distant relations back to Abetta Parade, to the house of a neighbour of Mr Rimbaud’s, where a little food and drink had been laid out. This was to be no raucous Irish wake. This was a quiet affair, just I imagined, the way Mr Rimbaud would have liked it. It was a house I had never been into before, but standing just a few streets away from my own family home in Hyndford Street and built with the very same stone, it was immediately familiar. Even the smell reminded me of my parents’ house. Once inside, I stuck closely to Anna. We went into the front room, where several people greeted us and made polite conversation with Anna. I said very little, finding it hard to comprehend that we were all there to mark the passing of Mr Rimbaud. It had only been eleven days since his death. The reality of it had not yet hit me. It was still as though he had just gone away on holiday. After ten minutes or so, Anna leaned over to me and said, “Come on, let’s go. He must be in the other room.”

He was a big man, comparable in his enormity to a rock of granite, the kind I could imagine walking right around, marvelling at its stature. In fact, I very nearly did that anyway. It was only the interruption of Anna’s introduction that prevented my jaw from dropping down towards my chest in awe. “Joseph, I want you to meet an old friend of my uncle’s. This is James.”

“Hello there, lad,” he said sticking out his enormous right hand.

“Joseph has had his head filled with stories of America by my uncle. He’s all set to go too.”

“Going to have yourself an adventure, is you lad?”

“Well, I ... I’d like to hear what it’s like, if you don’t mind sometime sir?”

Apprehension filled my heart. Was this really the time to be asking such a question?

In all that happened, I had not really given much thought to Mr Rimbaud’s request

that I take a trip across the Atlantic Ocean, not since Anna had told me. However, to

be faced with a local lad who had spent much of his adult life living in America, was

something that I knew I could not let pass. Fortunately, Mr Rimbaud’s friend was of

the same opinion. “Will you pull up a chair lad and I shall tell you what I know?”

Anna gave me a smile and disappeared into the other room. “She’s a fine

young woman,” James began. “You know he raised her? Came home from New

York city to be with his sister?”

“I did, sir. Anna’s been very kind to me this past week.”

“So,” James said motioning to two empty armchairs by the window. “You’re the

young lad who I kept hearing about in my letters are you? He thought a lot of you

laddie, did you know that?”

“I did sir, yes. We became great friends. I call by the shop ... well, I mean called by

the shop every day after school when I was young. Still have done, even after work.”

“Where do you work?”

“At the clerk’s office. It’s up Bearsbridge Road.”

“I don’t know it. So much has changed since I was last here. All this violence is

gonne’ lead us nowhere.” The violence to which James referred had culminated

recently in a number of loyalist bombings and the resignation of Prime Minister

Terence O’Neill, who had been replaced in the post by his cousin, Major James

Chichester Clark. This was the beginning of a sorry and torrid time in our country's history. "I haven't been back in twenty years. Anna was still at school ... bright thing even then, she was." James leaned back, making himself comfortable. Then taking a little sip of his drink, he looked at me keenly.

"Now then, Joseph, one thing I do know about is the United States of America. I first travelled there with Rimbaud more years ago than I care to remember. It was a young country then, but already full of culture, with a character round every corner. It was also a time of innocence. I mean that, lad. Now I was no green around the gills youngster, not even then, but I could sense the optimism in that land. A man could make of himself whatever he wanted; had the chance to too you know? We were lucky; we found work within an hour of stepping off of the boat. Will you believe that son?"

"What are the people like?"

"Well now Joseph, that's the million dollar question isn't it lad?"

"How do you mean?"

"Let me tell you this son. That great country is in turmoil. A great divide is pulling it in two and I don't mean the blacks and the whites. No, that will settle given time. It's a chasm bigger than any."

"Go on."

"It's you and me, Joseph."

"Sir?"

"Aye lad," he said, before pausing. "The young and the old." With that, James leaned his great body forward and took another sip from his glass. He took his time, but it mattered little; I was going nowhere.

America's youth was in the grips of the Strawberry Statement, struggling to make its voice heard in the wake of the on-going conflict in Vietnam. American troops had been fighting in South-East Asia since 1965 and it would be eight long and increasingly bloody years before they were pulled out. From our television sets in Ireland, we were becoming used to stories of a country divided. There were the assassinations of the Reverend Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy and the intense unrest and rioting taking place in ghettos across the country. Then in August of 1968, there had been the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, at which the police were filmed rioting against demonstrators in Lincoln Park. Mr Rimbaud's friend had seen all this first-hand and he seemed almost invigorated by it, if not more than a little dismayed at its cost.

When he was ready, James sat back into the folds of the chair and continued with his story. "The young folk of America are rising, Joseph my lad. They're finding their voice like never before and many people cannot comprehend of such a movement. It makes me ashamed to be an old man. These youngsters have something to say and they're not being given a chance to. I tell you Joseph, I have seen rallies and demonstrations; I have seen fighting in the streets all in the name of the most wonderful liberty of all."

"What is that?"

"Freedom of speech, my boy, freedom of speech." James almost lifted out of his chair as he said this for the second time. It was exhilarating to hear him speak of such vitality and youthful zest flexing its muscles all those miles away. I naively imagined the movement in America as being a peaceful alternative to the growing civil unrest developing at home in Belfast. As I looked around the room, I noticed it was filled with people all heading for the twilight of their years and suddenly I longed to spread

my wings and take off for the United States of America. I sat with Mr Rimbaud's friend for most of the afternoon, while he engaged me with his tales of the civil rights movement; of the burgeoning hippie movement and of the social changes he had seen during his time in the States. He also enthralled me with vivid descriptions of the beauty of that vast land, from the wide-open spaces of the Nevada desert to the mysterious mountains and valleys of the Catskills. If I had been able to leave that very night, then I probably would have done.

As the afternoon turned into evening, the mourners began to go their separate ways and I too knew that it was time to make my way homewards. I shook James by the hand; my somewhat slender hand dwarfed within his clasp, and thanked him for all that he had shared with me. Before letting me go, he pulled me in closer and said, with a quiet and deliberate sense of intent, "You go to America, lad. The time is now." With that, he turned away and disappeared through the doorway that led into the next room, his giant frame having to stoop slightly as he went. I knew that I needed to find Anna before I left. I owed her a lot. I searched the downstairs of the house, eventually finding her out in the back yard, alone but for her thoughts. "Was it all that you thought it could have been Joseph?" she said when she saw me. "Oh Anna," I gushed, like a giddy schoolboy. "I've just got to go. I've got to see it for myself. I've never wanted anything more."

"Then my uncle would be pleased," she said smiling. Anna put her arms around me and, for the first time since I had met her, let her feelings show. Her breathing became exaggerated and her shoulders began to roll and she let herself weep at last. I had never held another adult as they'd cried before. That's when it hit me. Mr Rimbaud really had died. I was never going to see him again. Her grief spilled into

mine and pulling Anna closer, we shared our tears. Above us, the orange sun sank down behind the ashen veil of clouds. The day was done.

The next three months were a bit of a blur. I spent a great deal of time with Anna at Mr Rimbaud's shop, boxing things up and clearing away a lifetime's collection. She was going to sell the premises and had decided to stay in Belfast until all of her uncle's affairs had been taken care of. I guess she figured she owed him that. I for one was glad of her company. She had a force of personality every bit as strong as Mr Rimbaud's and in a funny way; it was a bit like having him around again. All the while, we talked about where my travels might take me. Then one afternoon, as we sat on the floor of the shop, surrounded by cardboard boxes and dust, I picked up one of the music papers that still littered the floor and began to leaf through it. "You know," I said to Anna. "He used to have some of these sent over straight from America. It was wonderful too. I mean books and the like, well they're great, but they age."

"How do you mean?"

"The magazines are fresh, Anna. They're about things that are happening right now. Look, see." Anna shuffled over on the floor to get a better look, but as she did so, I near enough knocked her over as I leapt up, waving the 'paper around like a mad thing. "Good Lord, Joseph. What the devil has got into you?"

"That's it," I yelled. "That's where I'm gonna go!"



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In the town of Bethel, Sullivan County, N.Y.

3 DAYS OF PEACE & MUSIC

AUG. 15th AUG. 16th AUG. 17th

I can vividly recall, some thirty-six years on, the rush of excitement I felt at what I saw in that dusty ‘paper. Under each of the three dates were the names of the performers scheduled to appear; they read like a cast list from one of my dreams. Nothing, before or since, has ever come close to matching the sense of anticipation I felt as I held on to that advertisement, almost for dear life, that it might otherwise have taken off and left me with just the torment of its suggestion. This, however, was no dream. I turned the page towards Anna, still not letting go. She beamed at me immediately and said quick-wittedly, “Just a weekend break you fancy then, is it Joseph? Well then, we’d better get you packed.”

On August 13th 1969, the day after violence erupted at the close of the Apprentice Boys’ parade in Derry, ensuing the so-called ‘Battle of the Bogside,’

Anna drove me to Belfast International Airport for my flight to New York. It was to my good fortune, that only the previous year, Aer Lingus and BOAC had started scheduled flights to New York via Shannon and Prestwick respectively. I was to fly with BOAC and needed to be at the airport a good two hours before my flight was to leave. The journey was short and passed without much conversation. I was as nervous as I had ever been. Parking outside, we sat in the car for a while and listened to the 'planes flying overhead. After an awkward ten minutes or so, Anna said her goodbyes. "I'll not come in Joseph. I'll leave you here, if that's okay. I think you should begin your trip as you mean to go on, with a clear head." There was something very stoical about Anna's voice, which I found hard to place. She seemed bunged up with her feelings. "Well, I ... okay," I mumbled inarticulately. "You'll not need me fussing me around in there, Joseph. I'm not your mother."

"Right," I said, reaching my hand towards the handle of the door. This wasn't how I thought it would be. We had become good friends and I had not been looking forward to our parting. As Mr Rimbaud's niece and my closest link to him, Anna stood to represent a significant chapter of my life and saying goodbye to her seemed to close the book on that particular part of it. She would return to her family and sooner or later, I would return from my trip and resume my life, working at the clerk's office, but with a piece missing. That wonderful old man, whose passing had brought us together, was no more, and no doubt by the time I returned, the shop would have been sold up and opened as something new. I wondered would I ever see Anna again? Probably not. I didn't feel ready to let my past go just yet. To my great relief, and with all the warmth and wisdom that she had inherited from her uncle, she answered that question for me, with the next thing she said.

Her face softened and I realised that she was having as much of a hard time of this farewell as I was. “Joseph, you promise me now, you will take care.” As she said this, she put her hand to my shoulder. I let go of the door and turned towards her. Her eyes were as heavy as rain. “I shall be keeping an eye on the skies and I’ll wave when I see a ‘plane fly overhead. It might just be you. Do you know something else Joseph?” I didn’t speak, but shook my head. “We are related now, you and I. Related by our love for my uncle and by the time we have spent together. We are each other’s ties to his memory.” I felt myself choking as I tried to speak. “Anna, I have so much to thank you for. I just don’t know how ...”

“You shall come to see me, that’s how. Meet my family, my husband and my children. That’s a date now Joseph, don’t you forget it!”

“I will be honoured.”

“Goodbye Joseph,” she said quietly, leaning over and kissing me on the cheek. “I’ll let your parents know you got here safely.”

“Goodbye Anna, I’ll see you again.” I took my bag, got out of the car and headed across the car park, towards the glass door of the airport entrance. Anna watched from the car. She raised her hand in a single wave and drove away, back to her life. I on the other hand, had no idea of what the future was to hold. For the time being, I had a ‘plane to catch. The next day, after an increasing amount of tension at civil rights marches and loyalist counter demonstrations across my home city, British troops were brought into service in Belfast. The bloodshed had begun in earnest. I didn’t know it at the time, but I would not return to my homeland for another thirty years.

Chapter Four.

For many people my age, Woodstock has come to mean so much more than just the name of a music festival. Joni Mitchell wrote a song about it and Abbie Hoffman wrote a book. Charles Schultz took its name as the inspiration for a character in his ‘Peanuts’ cartoon strip and over the last thirty-five years or more, Woodstock has entered popular culture as shorthand for a period, an attitude, even a generation. It really was, three days of peace, love and music ... or so they tell me, because I missed it. I spent the nights of Friday 15th, Saturday 16th and Sunday 17th August 1969 twelve hundred miles away in the airport lounge of Miami International

Airport. A horrendous combination of turbulence over the Atlantic Ocean, a heavy storm on its way to New York and pilot sickness resulted in my absence from one of the most significant cultural events of my life.

At the time, of course, I didn't know that what I was missing would be remembered not just as a festival, but also as a defining cornerstone for, and of, an entire generation. Some people say that if you can remember Woodstock, then you weren't really there and for me the agony of those robbed memories has never really gone away. I look back upon old footage from the film and imagine where I might have been stood. Maybe I might have rubbed shoulders with some of the greats. They say Jimi Hendrix strolled among the crowds before his show and even now, I picture the scene. For three days I waited, forever hopeful that the next announcement would signal the departure of my flight. I considered hitching it up to Woodstock, but every time I readied myself, I'd catch sight of a pilot and end up convincing myself that he was the one I'd been waiting for. I nodded in and out of slumber, watching incoming visitors from abroad arriving to soak up the sunny Florida heat and endless streams of Americans travelling from state to state. To be honest, I begrudged every single one of them the smiles upon their faces. My dream was eating me up from the inside out and the ease with which these people seemed to be passing in and out of the terminal only compounded my feeling of frustration.

I caught snippets of information on the transistor radios of various passers-by and there was even a newsreel clip on a television in one of the offices I found while wandering the airport corridors late at night, but by and large, everything which happened, from the fifteen mile traffic jam which precipitated Richie Havens opening number on Friday evening to the dawn chorus closing of the festival by Jimi Hendrix and his guitar on Monday morning, was a mystery to me. I remember looking at my

ticket, \$18 and sent over to me by an American friend of Mr Rimbaud's, again and again, hoping that somehow the date on the enormous calendar clock above terminal three was incorrect. I spent my Woodstock festival on a red plastic chair, reading newspaper articles about the spate of violent killings then sweeping Los Angeles, two thousand miles away on the Western coast.

There was the music teacher at Topanga Canyon, found stabbed to death with the words 'Political Piggy' daubed on the wall in his own blood; there was the horrific slaughter of actress Sharon Tate and others at a house in nearby Benedict Canyon, where again the word 'Pig' was written on the wall in the victims' blood and most recently, I read, a husband and wife from Los Feliz had been murdered with a carving fork, after which the words 'Helter Skelter' and 'Death To Pigs' had been scribed, once again on the walls. As it was later to turn out, these terrible crimes were committed by followers of the rambling lunatic Charles Manson, the self-styled reincarnation of Jesus Christ who planned to lead his 'family' into the centre of the Earth, via a hole in Death Valley about which only he knew. This was not quite the free-spirited uprising of youth that I had imagined I would find in America. Never mind 'plane trouble; the spectre of Charles Manson held me captive to that terminal. I didn't leave the confines of the airport once.

After three days at Miami International Airport, I finally boarded a flight for New York and landed at JFK airport on the morning of Monday 18th August, just a few hours after the festival at Woodstock had closed. I quickly found myself a taxicab driver, or should I say that as a tourist, he quickly found me. Having spent an uncomfortable three days in the airport lounge at Miami, I was keen only to rest. With money to spend and no plan of where to go next, I asked my driver to take me to the most famous place I knew of in New York City, the Hotel Chelsea, on twenty-

third street in Manhattan. I knew of the Hotel partly from Mr. Rimbaud, but mostly by reputation. Built in 1884, by one George M. Smith, the Chelsea had earned itself a standing unique amongst residencies of New York. Mark Twain himself had been a frequent guest during the early part of the century, while over the years, such luminaries as Thomas Wolfe and William Burroughs, to name but two, had graced the building with their presence and with their art. In more recent years, it had been home to the likes of Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan and several years later would gain notoriety as the violent last stop in the relationship of punk rock's Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen. It was a cultural melting pot I yearned to experience.

The journey through New York was like something out of a dream. Back home in Belfast, the tallest building I'd ever seen was Churchill House, nineteen-storeys high, two hundred-feet tall and a landmark of the city, but here that would have been just another high-rise block. "Excuse me, sir," I asked my driver. "What's the tallest building you have here?"

"That's the Empire State building, kid," he said in a thick Manhattan burr. "Over twelve-hundred feet, top to bottom." The words flew out of his mouth as if he were punching them out with the roll of his tongue. Outside, a single glance along one of the streets revealed more people than I think I'd seen in my whole life up until then. It was truly an unnerving sight. Feeling like the archetypal stranger in a faraway land, I struggled to picture the young Mr Rimbaud on these streets. He must have felt that same sense of overwhelming awe that I was experiencing now. I couldn't help but grin. Hotdog stands, newspaper vendors and enormous flashing traffic signals filled my window. Breakfast at Tiffany's seemed just around the corner. Within an hour, the Hotel Chelsea was within our sights. Built from redbrick, it was dingy and dirtier

looking than I had expected it to be. As we pulled up outside, my driver leaned back to me and chirped, “You take it easy in there kid. That’s a hell of a place.”

It was late evening and having been impressed with the start he had made to his book and needing to clear his head, Joseph took himself out for a solitary, after dinner walk. If only, he thought to himself, real life was as easy to judge as that which he created on paper. Then again, even that had never been completely straightforward. When he wrote, Joseph felt the characters come alive at his fingertips and often, he found, they took him on a journey which even he as the author had not been expecting. Joseph allowed his characters room to breathe and to become fully developed, letting their own particular story unfold. He knew from experience, that the characters that he could not control were the ones who turned out to be at the heart of his most entertaining and gripping works of fiction. Right now, Joseph felt that way about his own daughter and he wished with all his might, that he could do something to change the course of her story. He knew though, that she had been one of the compelling ones from the very beginning.

Joseph made his way down Bathwick Hill and into the city centre, walking along Argyle Street, heading towards the majestic Pulteney Bridge. From the moment that he and Mary had first visited Bath before they were married, Joseph had been taken with the charms of this city. Like many University towns, it was historical, yet modern; quaint but vibrant and Joseph loved the contrasts. Modelled on the Florentine *ponte Vecchio* and designed by the eminent architect Robert Adams in 1769, Pulteney Bridge was, for Joseph, the picturesque heart of the city he now called home. Just before he reached the bridge, Joseph took a small spiral staircase down to the left and emerged at the bottom outside the Riverside Café, overlooking

the concentric sweeps of the graceful Pulteney weir. A narrow pathway meandered around the contours of the water's edge; while under a gathering of four sycamore trees, were two benches, both facing outwards towards the Avon. It was to one of these benches that Joseph headed.

He sat down in the shade of the trees. It was approaching eight in the evening and the blustery winds of the afternoon had parted to make way for a warm and pleasant closing to the day. Across to the right, Joseph could see the orange glow of the sun, setting slowly over Argyle Street and disappearing behind Pulteney Bridge; while in front of him, the three-tiered weir was framed by the stately Empire building and by Bath Markets. Nestled discreetly between these two impressive buildings, was a small bar known as The Rummer. It was a bar that Joseph had come to regard as his own local watering hole and despite the steady stream of students and out of town visitors who frequented it; it maintained a homely and unpretentious atmosphere that drew Joseph back time and again. 'Will I call in for a drink in a little while?' he thought to himself. 'I could bloody well use it after the day I've had.' Across the road from The Rummer was the bus shelter, around which were gathered a half a dozen students waiting to catch the number eighteen up to the university. Joseph's thoughts turned immediately to Naomi and to the news she had broken back home in the study. As he looked upon the bright faces waiting to board the bus, all he could picture was the future he had been anticipating for Naomi. He grimaced as he realised that this was a future to which his daughter was no longer heading. He leaned forward, let out a heavy sigh and watched as the bus pulled away.

From behind, Joseph could hear laughter and he turned around to see a man and a woman with two small children busying their way around the Beazer Garden Maze. That had been Naomi and Abigail not so many years ago and through his

melancholy Joseph smiled at the memory. He would often take the wrong pathway on purpose, allowing the girls to make it to the centre before him. Even when they were old enough to find their way with their eyes closed, Joseph would still do this. “Dad!” Joseph’s ears pricked up and turning back to face the riverside, he raised both an arm and a smile at the sight of Abigail, making her way along Grand Parade. The sight of his youngest daughter instantly lifted his spirits. By the time she had reached her father, Joseph had dashed into the Riverside Cafe and returned to the bench with a drink and a packet of crisps each for the pair of them. “Ah Dad, you always know,” Abigail said, sitting herself down at Joseph’s side. “I’m parched from all the walking I’ve done. What are you doing here anyway?”

“You’re a good girl, Abbie. You know that don’t you, sweetheart?” answered her father, completely avoiding the question. “I know Dad. You’ve been telling me that for as long as I can remember.”

“Well, I like to say it, that’s all ... and besides, it’s true.”

“I like you saying it too and you’re right, it is true!” Abbie smiled as her father put his arm around her shoulder and squeezed her gently. It was the sort of unconditional hug at which Abigail thought he excelled. “What have you been up to then?” Joseph enquired of his daughter, hoping to get lost in a bit of teenage reality.

“I bumped into Lisa while we were getting our outfits. Have you seen Mum’s? You’ll love it Dad. And Nay’s too, it looks fantastic. Me and Lisa, we’ve just been wandering around really. Oh, and we had tea at that Mexican sandwich place near to the cinema.” Joseph’s attention seemed to his daughter to be elsewhere. His gaze petered off across the water and he appeared agitated by some previous thought. Abigail said nothing. Then, quite abruptly, her father rejoined the conversation.

“Mexican sandwiches for tea! You’re lucky you’re not my age. My stomach couldn’t take that.”

“There’d be no room, you mean,” tittered Abbie, grinning affectionately at her father once more. At this comment, Joseph’s hug simply grew bigger. Abigail always had been and still was in her father’s eyes, even at eighteen, his impish little girl.

“How come you’re down here on your own Dad? Where’s Mum? You normally come for walks together.” At this question, Abigail noticed her father shift a little uncomfortably upon the bench.

“Mum’s at home. I’ve been writing, so I thought I needed a change of scene; a bit of inspiration maybe,” said Joseph, unconvincingly. His daughter was having none of it. Having inherited both her mother’s openness and straight-talking manner, Abigail quickly got to the point without any further ado. “Dad, what’s bugging you? It’s not your book; I can see the difference in your face and hear it in your voice even.”

“Abbie, I just needed to work some ideas out ...”

“Dad, I’m not stupid!” she interrupted, pointedly but not aggressively. “What is it?”

“Abbie, if you don’t know ... then ... I’m not the one to tell you.”

“Well you’ve got to now Dad, come on. What is it?” Joseph took his arm from around his daughter and leaned forward on the bench, clasping his hands together. Abigail, undeterred, put her hand on her father’s leg. “Jesus Christ girl, must you know everything?” said Joseph tetchily. They sat in silence for a moment, Abigail not moving her hand until suddenly, Joseph sat upright, took a deep breath and replied, “It’s that damn sister of yours. She’s pregnant.”

Abigail’s response was immediate and overwhelming. She gasped and grabbed her father by the hand. “I can’t believe it, that’s amazing. When did you find out?” Always tactile, she squeezed her father’s hand and waved their clasped

grip around as she spoke. This was Abigail at her most excitable. “How come no-one told me?” she went on. “I’m gonna have to ring her. Auntie Abigail, eh? Come on Grandpa, drink up!”

“Abbie, don’t call me that,” Joseph said irritably and pulling his hand away from his daughter’s, he stood up and walked towards the river, leaning on the iron railing. Abigail felt stunned, but quickly noted the cause of his previous tetchiness. She sat for a moment, not knowing what to do or say. Then, remaining on the bench, she confronted her father’s reaction. “Dad, what’s wrong? You don’t seem happy about this.”

“Happy?” barked Joseph. “How the hell can I be happy about it?” He turned to face her. “Abbie, you’re a sweet girl, but come on. Can’t you see what this means?” His agitation was etched across his face and as she looked at her father, Abigail realised that he was genuinely distressed. She felt a mixture of emotions. Disconcerted at seeing her father troubled, she nevertheless felt the urge to grab him round the throat and shake him. She stood up and joined him by the railing.

“Dad, I don’t understand. Why aren’t you happy?”

“Abbie, for pity’s sake you’re too young to understand. She’s got too much to lose. She’s got Stockholm to look forward to. That’s her whole life, that is. It’s all she’s wanted for so long. She doesn’t want a little babby getting in the way.”

“Have you spoken to her about it?”

“Christ no, there’s no talking to her sometimes. She walked out on your mother and me today, you know?”

“When she told you?” inquired Abigail.

“Aye,” nodded Joseph, with genuine disbelief in his voice.

“Dad, how were you with her?”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? How am I meant to take it when my daughter tells me she’s throwing away her entire future? Christ, I thought she was smarter than that.” With all the fortitude that came naturally to her, Abigail then took the conversation by the scruff of the neck to bluntly force home her point of view. “Dad, you’re crazy! Your daughter’s going to have a baby. You’re going to be a grandfather. You’re missing the point.”

“For crying out loud Abbie, she’s throwing it all away. That is the bloody point! What the hell is she going to do? Sit at the piano stool with the baby over her shoulder?” Joseph could not hide his sceptical incredulity. Neither though, could Abigail disguise her feelings about the matter. She was not about to let her father’s cynicism get a look in. “Dad, you’re being stupid.”

“Who the hell do you think you’re talking to girl?” growled Joseph. Abigail looked directly at her father. “The man who’s gonna be teaching his first grandchild to play football at the park,” she said calmly and slowly. Joseph opened his mouth in attempted retort, but nothing came out. He was at a loss for words. The two of them stood quietly for several minutes. By now, the setting sun had disappeared behind Pulteney Bridge. Abigail knew instinctively to let her father have the next word, no matter how long it took. Eventually he took her hand again and said, with a weary sigh, “When did you get so much like your mother?” Abigail smiled. She knew that from her father, this was the ultimate compliment.

Just then, the Sir William Pulteney tourist barge came in to dock just in front of them. Its arrival offered a new spark of conversation. “We spent some hours on that old thing love,” Joseph said to Abigail. “Every time we came down here you two wanted a trip up the river. Your mother thought you were destined to be sailors!”

“Hmm, we just liked the ice-creams they served on board. We knew you couldn’t resist once we were on it,” laughed Abigail.

“I never thought things would get so complicated,” sighed Joseph. “And I sure never expected this. God knows what she’s going to do now.”

“Dad, things will work out. You’ve always been the first to tell us that.”

“What if I’ve been lying to you all these years?” Joseph said with a half smile. “I don’t believe you,” replied his daughter, her strength of character shining out from her green eyes. “I think you’ve just forgotten what it’s like to feel young.” Joseph pondered his daughter’s words. Had, he wondered, age and narrow-mindedness really crept up on him so slyly? ‘In youth,’ he thought to himself, ‘we have our troubles before us; in age we leave pleasure behind us.’ It was an old saying he’d heard somewhere in the distant past. He sure felt old right now. The Sir William Pulteney began filling up for its last cruise of the evening. “Come on love,” said Joseph. “I’ll buy you an ice-cream.” Abigail took her father by the arm. “Will you speak to Naomi?” she asked him, stepping onto the barge. “Aye love, I will. God knows what I’ll say, but I will.”

The Victorian Gothic beauty of the Hotel Chelsea stood in the midst of a thriving neighbourhood of brownstones, tenements, tree-lined streets and ferociously ugly apartment towers. As I stepped up to the entrance, I imagined that I might bump into the likes of an Allen Ginsberg or even a Jane Fonda hanging around the hotel lobby. Hanging from the doorway was the sort of beaded curtain my mother put up to keep the flies out of the kitchen on hot days and which my father despised with a passion; the gateway to another world; an ethereal place where anything was possible. I brushed the curtain aside to my right and let the yellow beads pass through my

fingertips as I walked inside. Looking around, the place looked less like a big boho fraternity house than I had imagined. The walls were a dingy, pale yellow colour and I could sense the omnipresence of drugs. Artwork covered the walls. It looked like a three-dimensional tapestry, with each patch having been created by a separate and individual talent. My stomach tightened a little as I stepped over to what appeared to be a reception desk. A man with wavy hair and probably in his mid-thirties stood behind it. “Welcome to the Chelsea, sir,” he said in that same unmistakable New York accent as my taxi-driver. “How can I help you?”

“I’d like a room for the night, as high as possible please.” Quite why I said this, I don’t know, but my unintentional pun was not lost on my host. He smiled broadly, before answering. “If you wanna get high kid, you’ve come to the right place.”

Chapter Five.

Just a few minutes and a couple of signatures later, I found myself inside of room number two-hundred and five, which, so Mr Bard, the hotel manager, informed me, had been the very room in which the great Dylan Thomas had collapsed after one too many whiskeys in 1953, passing away soon afterwards. It was a large and decadent room, containing an open hearth, over which hung an elaborately decorated mirror. The room also housed two quite extravagant lamps as well as the biggest bed

I had ever seen in my life. The antediluvian feel was completed by an ugly pink and black Persian rug, which sat at the foot of the bed. The only tilt to modernity was a television, sat upon a ledge near the window. I took my shoes and socks off and spread myself out on top of the bed, before tucking into a chicken sandwich I had bought back at JFK. It tasted well past its sell-by date, but I had become so used to airport food after my stint in Miami, that the rancid sandwich went down in no time at all. The bed was comfortable. A breeze blew in through the window and through the closed blinds. They had been pulled closed when I came in. Maybe, I thought, the people here liked it that way. Later, I decided, I would have a wander around, maybe spot a few luminaries going from room to room, but for now though, I was anxious to rest. I closed my eyes and quickly fell into a deep sleep.

I slept for most of the day, my dreams peppered by the sound of sirens from the world outside and awoke fully at sometime just after nine that evening. I ran myself a bath and switched on the television, catching my first glimpse of baseball. The ‘local’ team, the world famous New York Yankees were scheduled to be playing the Kansas City Royals in Kansas and a round-up programme was dissecting the merits of each team. None of it made any sense to me, but I was enthralled by it nevertheless. These were Americans talking about what Americans do and for me that was enough. I remember them talking about a player who had gone AWOL from a game, citing personal problems; Joe Repitone was his name; I remember it as clearly as anything, thirty-six years on. I laughed and shouted at the screen, “Gone AWOL Joe, perhaps Georgie Best’s in town for the night!” I switched over and found some of what Americans laughingly referred to as Christianity, send in your dollars, God is watching you. I flicked the switch again to an entertainment show and headed for the bathroom.

From the tub, I had a clear view of the television screen. The presenter, Dick Cavett, caught my attention; now that was a name I had heard before. I leaned my head back and listened to the show, losing a word every now and then, as the water rippled into my ears. He began talking about his next guest, “A very talented young lady, making her first national television appearance, Miss Joni Mitchell.” I jumped up in the bath, nearly slipping as I hurried out and perched myself on the edge of the bed. Cavett asked her about the Woodstock festival, at which she had been scheduled to play and she regaled both the audience and the host with the story of how, as she had the prior engagement of this show, her manager had suggested that she didn’t go. “You weren’t the only who missed it, love,” I told her sarcastically. The interview was then enlivened by the surprise appearance of musical trio, David Crosby, Stephen Stills and Graham Nash, freshly arrived, via helicopter, from Woodstock themselves. Crosby described to an obviously envious Mitchell that the scene at Yasgur’s farm had reminded him of “the encampment of the entire Macedonian army.” I didn’t know what he meant then and I certainly don’t now, but I knew I wanted to be there.

The programme ended with Mitchell singing, of all things, ‘Chelsea Morning’, inspired so she said, by the view from a window in the very hotel in which I was now resident. The coincidences were all too alarming and so I decided, there and then, that I would go to Woodstock, to Max Yasgur’s farm and I would see where it had all taken place. There might not be anybody there, but I could at least say that I had been there. After my bath, I made my way downstairs and out into the city. I spent an exhilarating evening soaking up the atmosphere at a place called The Red Cat, a fairly upmarket restaurant a few blocks down from the Chelsea and could have sworn that I saw the actor, Dennis Hopper, sitting a couple of tables away, but then again, every other person seemed to have his trademark long hair and handlebar

moustache. It was like being sat on a film set, so gaudy and larger than life were my surroundings. Even my menu opened out like a children's pop-up book.

After dining on the biggest leg of lamb I'd seen before or since, I took my bloated self for a walk around central Manhattan. As late night turned into early morning, I gazed open-mouthed at the sheer enormity of the city. Back home in Belfast, there were places I'd think twice about walking around, even in the daytime and yet here I was, like a green islander on his first visit to the mainland, wandering about in one of the biggest cities in the world, unaccompanied, in the twilight hours. When my legs were too tired to carry on, I hailed a taxicab to finish off my tour for me. I saw it all, the Statue of Liberty, Times Square, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and even the location of the tomb of the former President Ulysses S. Grant. It was a whistle-stopped night and I arrived back at the Chelsea at three in the morning. Amazingly, the lobby was a low-level hive of activity. Two young women were stretched out on armchairs, their arms hanging limp at their sides. Both dressed in olive kaftans, as if it were some socialite uniform, they looked as though the sunlight had been keeping them up for days and they had finally fallen to rest, completely oblivious to the scene of their descent into slumber. At their feet, sat a man in his thirties, smoking and sighing. Just like the man in the restaurant, he reminded me of Dennis Hopper. I stepped over his legs and went upstairs to bed. "My, my," I heard him sigh.

I awoke the next morning at a quarter to ten and with a little help from the man at the reception desk, planned my route to Max Yasgur's farm. My precise destination was not the town of Woodstock itself, but the small hamlet of Bethel in Sullivan County, not far from White Lake. "That's gonna take you a good two to three hours, kid," rolled the desk clerk's voice. "Are you driving? Could be three or

four on a bus; plenty of Greyhounds heading out that way.”

“I guess I could drive.”

“Sure you could; you gotta be coming back this way though, if you’re gonna rent a car. You planning on a flying visit, kid?”

“I don’t know. I guess I just wanted to see the place where it all happened and then come back. I don’t suppose there’ll be much there.

“I don’t reckon so; hell of a lot of garbage though!”

“Where do I check the bus timetables? I think maybe that’s what I’ll do.”

“Sure. You wanna catch any bus headed for The George Washington Bridge station, that’s the new one, real nice; they’ll have all the schedules you’ll need there.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem kid. Enjoy your trip.” On my way out, I stepped over the feet of the man who looked like Dennis Hopper. He was still smoking and still sighing.

The George Washington Bridge station was indeed an impressive place. Opened six years previously, it sat on three levels and housed, among other things, a barber’s, a bookshop and a chemist. Its scope was phenomenal. Expecting it to have little more than toilets, benches and a vending machine, I was beginning to realise not to underestimate anything in New York City. From the masses of information on the boards surrounding my head, I found the bus I needed; it would be a one hundred and twenty mile trip, taking two hours and forty minutes to get to Woodstock. For Bethel, I would have to get off a few miles early. Back home, jumping on and off of buses was commonplace and often tedious, but a tingle of excitement ran through me as I boarded bus number seventeen-o-six, destination Woodstock. If I had had

someone to see me off, I might very well have given a little wave of triumphancy, so glad was I to at last be on my way. The music may have left the site, but optimistically, I hoped, the spirit of Woodstock might still have left a trace of peace and love in the air at Yasgur's farm.

Making good time, we travelled north to Albany and then on to Harriman. The road was littered with hitch-hikers headed in the opposite direction, mostly my age and many looking for all the world like they were on their way home from the biggest trip of their young lives, mud splattered in serenity and thumbing for lifts. By now, having read the newspapers over the weekend and having seen newsreel footage on the television, I had an understanding of what a colossal cultural event this three day festival of music had become. My envy could have melted the glass that separated me from the travellers outside. I fished around in my jacket pocket and looked once more at my unused festival ticket. I wanted to wave it at the passers-by, as if it were proof somehow of my identification with them. They, of course, had memories that would last a lifetime and next to these, my brand new ticket seemed little more than what it was; a now useless piece of paper. Still though, it was all I had for now and I held on to it for a minute, before replacing it in my inside pocket.

“A real shitty mess, that's all those dirty kids have left behind 'em.” A man sat across the aisle had spotted my interest in the hitchhikers and was not shy in giving me his take on things. “I bet your parents are glad you're not out there, huh son?”

“Excuse me, sir?” I asked, as I thought about how to tell him that that is precisely where my parents thought I was. “I'll tell you what, them's some frazzled brains out on that road, boy. Them poor bastards ain't gonna be good for nothin' when their

folks sees what's left of 'em." As he said this, he pointed to his own head with his index finger, rotating his wrist around in the way that a child imitating mental instability might. This one simple gesture summed him up far more succinctly than could any description I might be able to muster, but as I recall it, he was about forty to fifty years of age, with a thick set jaw line and a receding head of wispy, auburn hair. He sat back in his seat, resting his hands upon his bulbous-like stomach except, of course, when he used them to illustrate his contempt for the youth outside, which he did frequently.

"Where are you from son?"

"Britain, sir ... well, Ireland. I've travelled from Belfast in the North."

"Hey, a British boy! Glad to have you on board. The name's Seeger; Peterson Seeger." He seemed somewhat surprised at my nationality, but still comfortable enough to continue his criticism of his country's young people. He was the epitome of all that a generation had come to despise. I found him little more than amusing.

"You wanna be careful here, these kids are going crazy. Ain't nothin' but a couple of beers in my day and you'd a know'd your place. These weirdoes though, look at 'em." His hands were off again. "They're on all sorts of trippy drugs; brainwashed and good for nothin'. It's their parents you gotta feel for."

"Mmm," I sounded, still unsure of how to really join in with the conversation. "They need something to calm 'em down, that's for sure. I'll tell you what, kid ... it's us that's gonna be lookin' after them when they're through fryin' their brains."

"Is it that bad, do you think?"

"Hell yeah; marijuana, LSD, magic mushrooms; I seen 'em out on the street, smellin' of juniper juice or Lord knows what. You take my word for it son; they're going

loco. D’you know what I’d do?”

“What’s that?”

His hands became wildly animated. “I’d burn the skin off of the palms of their hands! That’d stop ‘em messin’ with crazy medicines.” I sensed no irony in his voice, no sense of impish exaggeration. Peterson Seeger was simply a hard-line, old-fashioned American with a hot-irons answer to what he saw as a simple problem. With that, he leaned forward, reached over his stomach and pulled a tobacco pouch out of the satchel by his feet. Feeling somewhat bemused by his radical solution, I looked out of the window and gave an acknowledging, almost apologetic nod to a pair of fellow longhairs sat on a trunk by the roadside. Given my proximity to my current travelling companion, I felt guilty by my association with him. I rifled through my own tightly packed satchel and pulled out ‘Pudden’head Wilson’ by Mark Twain, an old favourite of Mr Rimbaud’s and indeed his own copy, given to me by Anna when we cleared out the shop. Anna and Mr Rimbaud; my parents and my home; they all seemed a long way from here; a long time ago too.

A few pages in, my nose was alerted to the aroma wafting across the aisle from Peterson Seeger. It was a smell that I had been accustomed to meeting at particular types of parties, populated by particular types of people. In fact, it was an aroma I fully expected to have greeted me had I made it to Woodstock four days earlier. Here though and coming from him, it made no sense. It was dope! I looked across. Having carefully rolled himself a cigarette, he now sat, head tilted back, looking for all the world like a reformed character. He noticed me watching. “What ya reading son?”

“I ... err ... it’s um, Mark Twain. I’m reading Mark Twain, sir.”

“Mark Twain,” he repeated, nodding. He took a puff and nodded again. Then he nodded again. His nodding continued for an alarming amount of time, every third or fourth nod accompanied with his hazy repetition of the author’s name. “Mark Twain,” he repeated. I looked around to see if anyone had noticed the smell. A woman, two seats back, seemed to be shifting uncomfortably, but for the most part, the rest of the passengers seemed completely unaware of his assent to a higher plain.

“Mark Twain,” he said again. “A real American gentleman. He didn’t need no goblin’s gump to set him up for the day. These damn hippies; artificial intelligence that’s what it is son. They’re driving on a different plain to you and me, boy.”

“I see you smoke roll-ups,” I said, in an effort to bring his attention to the giant doobie in his hand. “Me Da touches nothing else.”

“Roll ‘em up, roll ‘em out, get ‘em up, get ‘em high, Rawhide!” he giggled. He started nodding again, this time humming the theme to the Clint Eastwood television western. “Your tobacco,” I intimated. “That’s quite a brew.”

“Well, it’s a damn funny thing,” he said, returning momentarily to the rational world. “I’ve smoked most of my life, kinda outta’ habit I guess, never really liked it, I just couldn’t stop it. Last time I saw my nephew though, just recently, he found me this new tobacco, real juicy stuff. Sure makes me feel at ease. None of this hippie shit though, he assured me of that. Says it’s from a place down South. He knows a fella, travels up and down the country. He gets it real cheap. You wanna puff, son?”

“No thanks,” I waved my hands, chuckling at the humour of this straight-laced hippie-hating middle American passing me his pipe of peace. Half expecting him by now to launch into the chorus of ‘Mellow Yellow’, I let the aroma wash over me and

returned to my book.

“Hey you!” The driver of our bus had his eyes off of the road and fixed firmly on me. “I’m not having no grass on this bus boy. You gonna put it out, or take a hike?” I held up my hands in a show of innocence. He seemed unconvinced and pulled the vehicle into a lay-by on the right-hand side of the road. A group of post-Woodstock travellers mingled around the bus. The driver pulled up the belt of his trousers and strode down the central aisle, his steely eye not leaving my seat. He stood over me. “Now son, what in the hell do you want me to do? I ain’t havin’ no pot-smoking delinquents on my ride. You’re gonna have to leave. D’ya hear me?” I was not at all upset by his assumption. After all, with my long hair and denim jacket, I certainly fitted the bill. If anything, I was a little flattered.

“I’m sorry, sir, I’m afraid you have the wrong gentleman.” I tipped my head and rolled my eyes over to the seat on my right. “Yippie yi-ay, yippe yi-oh,” sang Peterson Seeger, by now quite lost in his own little world and unaware of the commotion his flight of fancy was causing. “Ghost riders in the sky!”

“What in the hell have you done, boy? What have you given him?”

“I promise you sir; I have given nothing to this gentleman.”

“Hey cowboy change your ways today or with us you will ride,” continued Peterson Seeger, “Tryin’ to catch the devil’s herd across the endless sky!” He was clearly having a ball. The driver now turned his attention towards the real culprit. “Sir, would you follow me to the front of the bus please?”

“You betcha skipper,” said Seeger, bouncing up from his seat and heading off down the aisle after the driver. As he did so, he spotted the youths mingling outside and his hackles immediately rose. “Boy, we’ve got some trouble out there,” he shouted back

to me. “I guess me and the driver are gonna go sort it out. You sit tight. Damn hippies.” I waved him goodbye. The driver opened the doors of the bus and Peterson Seeger climbed out. The driver immediately closed the doors, returned to his seat and pulled away. As we drove away, I pressed my face up against the glass window to see Peterson Seeger being surrounded by a group of peace-loving teenagers. Whether or not, they allowed him to burn the skin from the palms of their hands, I never found out.

The remainder of the journey passed without incident and in no time at all, it was time for me to take my leave of the Greyhound bus to Woodstock and head for Yasgur’s farm. In his rear-view mirror, the driver watched me all the way down the aisle, making sure I saw his cynical look of suspicion. Clearly, he was not convinced of the innocence on my part in the ejection from the bus of Peterson Seeger. Nevertheless, I thanked him for the ride and hopped down onto the dusty roadside. Standing at a fork in the road, with a lake on either side of me, I took the road ahead of me, route 17B. Drawn in that direction by the proliferation of litter in the ditches and tyre tracks on the grass verges, I felt sure that the site of all the magic I had been dreaming of was just around the next bend. I was not the only traveller on the road that afternoon; across the wide road were several groups of Woodstock refugees, all wearily headed in the opposite direction. Despite feeling more than a little irked that I was the only person arriving after the party had finished, I ploughed on, still anxious to see where David Crosby’s Macedonian army had encamped.

It soon became apparent that I was in the right place. The roads were covered in mud and all around me lay the leftovers of several hundred thousand pairs of feet; footprints, large and small, some booted and many bare. Following a track to my right brought me to a sign for Yasgur’s farm, adorned as it was in coloured cloth and

bangles made from hemp rolled through the ears of grass. Nearby, someone had constructed two makeshift signs, pointing the way to ‘Groove Way’ and the ‘Gentle Path Highway.’ These too were decorated with an array of floral memorabilia and had been cobbled together from a few bits of wood and some rusty nails. They had a homespun charm that somehow complemented the mess all around, giving the place a bohemian sense of elegance. I imagined it as a natural meeting place, where people might discuss the music of the previous night, or swap bags of fruit for something a little stronger; a communal bartering point of sorts.

Continuing down the track, I was greeted by more remnants of what had gone before me. Flattened drinks cans and died out campfires accompanied me along the way. After about two hundred-metres, the road took a slight rise and then dipped down again. As it did, I was greeted by the sight of hundreds of acres of distraught field land, spreading off and up to my left and then climbing again to my right. This had been where it had all taken place; the most important cultural event of my generation and all that was left was some dirty meadowland. I guess in reality, that’s all there had ever been; it was the people who had made it what it was and now, they were all gone. Still though, it was an impressive sight. A big clean up operation must have taken place, because compared to the tracks that I had followed to get here; the fields were largely litter-free. The giant area where the stage had stood was flattened and pale in colour, while all around, there were clumps of grassland mowed down where tents and bottoms had been resident. More than this though, there was mud; enough mud to keep twenty dozen pigs content. I made my way down and walked around, never having felt so courtly in a field before. In my head, the imagined soundtrack to the three-day event played over and over again. I crouched down and touched the ground with the back of my hand, thinking of Mr Rimbaud.

For twenty minutes, I walked around the mud-trodden fields, collecting stolen memories from the imprints on the land, until I quite unexpectedly spotted something half way up a nearby bank of grass. It was a person, laid out upon their back and with their knees up. “Oh shit,” I muttered. “Just tell me that’s not a dead body. I haven’t travelled all this way to be met by a corpse!” My heart missed several beats and then some. There was nobody else to be seen. The last people I had met had been back on the main road. I considered leaving whoever it was to his or her business; it was after all a sunny day and there would be nothing unusual in someone stretching out in the middle of August. I figured that maybe I could just pretend that I hadn’t noticed. Not for the first time on my trip, home seemed a long way away. It did not take long though for the Irish Samaritan within me to take a hold of my conscience. Something about the situation was not right. This was hardly the place for a bit of sunbathing. I began to worry about in what sort of state I might find them; my first aid skills were rudimentary to say the least. I hesitated briefly, before my concern for the person took over and I dashed up the hill as quickly as possible. I did not know it then, but I had just made a decision that was to change the course of my life forever.

Chapter Six.

We are all perfect strangers just before we meet for the first time. I crouched down besides the body. It was a woman, a few years older than me, twenty-six or twenty-seven maybe. She was alive, breathing steadily. She seemed peaceful, serene almost, as if she were simply asleep. Her hands were holding one another upon her chest. Her mousy, straggly hair, as brown as a berry, was scrunched beneath her like a pillow upon the bed of grass. Her dress was typical of the day; a loose-knitted woollen waistcoat over a tie-dye tee-shirt, lost beneath an array of bangles and necklaces, most prominently one displaying the CND logo, complemented by a

cheesecloth skirt down to bare feet. A pair of large-rimmed round sunglasses sat upon her nose. Her face, although pretty, was not fine and delicate, but rugged and crevassed; a curious mix of feminine beauty and male toughness. In any other time and place, she would be a cliché, but here, she was the very epitome of the peace and love generation.

A hundred questions ran through my head. One stood out from all of them; what will I do? She was clearly alive and presumably well, but having stumbled across her, I felt a responsibility to stay by her side. Besides, she had stirred my curiosity. I wanted to know more. She seemed to be all that remained of the entire festival. ‘Damn,’ I thought. ‘The last person left at Woodstock and when she wakes up it’s going to be my ugly face she’s greeted by.’ I told myself I would stay. I sat, for some time looking at her carefully with a mixture of fascination and curiosity and then, with my back to her, as if I were a dog, keeping dutiful watch over a master. I thought about leaving, but every time I readied myself to go, something told me she was about to awaken. Minutes passed into hours and then the hours into sleep. Nodding in and out of wakefulness, I watched the sun begin to lower in the sky. It was funny, I thought, how this was the very same sun that set upon my home in Belfast. One sun and several thousand miles between us; it didn’t seem possible. I heard a cough from behind me. She was waking up, her body contorting into a spasm as she coughed. My stomach jumped up to my head and back to my heels. Now, only one thought ran through my head; ‘what the hell am I gonna say to her?’

“Do you remember those, my love?” said Joseph, pointing towards two holes in the underside of the bridge. The Sir William Pulteney passed slowly through,

moving to the left to allow a small punter to get ahead. “Hmm,” smiled Abigail.

“The pigeon holes, we used to call those.”

“I remember, sweetheart.”

“You know, me and Nay used to bet a pound every time we came by, whether we’d see one or not?”

“I didn’t know that,” smiled Joseph. “I just remember your whispering and giggling.” At this, Abigail noticed her father’s eyes glaze over again, like they had back on the bench. She knew that her sister’s pregnancy must have hit him hard; after all she was shocked herself, but he seemed to be having extra special difficulty coping with the news. It was almost as though he couldn’t accept it and that somehow he felt that it should not have happened. He seemed to her right now, to be a very old man.

Had she asked him, Joseph would have admitted to her of feeling that way about himself. The image of what a grandfather should be was fixed in his head by his memories of his own. Born in Magherafelt, a small community to the West of Lough Neagh, the largest fresh water lake in the British Isles, Patrick George Morrison had moved to Belfast some time around the turn of the century. Hoping to escape the drudgery of a life of fishing and extracting sand from the Lough, he soon found himself on the ground floor of one of the world’s biggest shipbuilding realms. He later described to his grandson, the deafening clap of noise and the thunderous and relentless riveting that seemed to last from dawn to dusk. In its day, the shipbuilding empire in Belfast had been awesome. To hear his grandfather recall how he had worked on the Titanic, under the direction of the legendary designer Thomas Andrews, before it set sail on its fatal voyage in April of 1912, had always

filled the young Joseph with an enormous sense of family history and pride, but it was never something to which he aspired.

As a boy, Joseph had known his grandfather only as old and wizened beyond his time. A lifetime of physical toil had left him with only his pride and his mind intact, his body having long since given in to the stoop and wear of its exertions. The young man he may once have been was unimaginable to the young Joseph. In 1959, when he was just ten years old, Joseph accompanied his grandfather on a hike to the Gobbins tunnel bridge, around the cliff coastal path. The bridge and rails leading to it had been constructed at the Belfast shipyards in Victorian times and the old man wanted to overlook a piece of local heritage while he still had the legs to do it. The terrain was risky for even a young man; indeed the path would be closed in 1961, never to be opened again; and on their return home, Joseph watched helplessly as his grandfather took a nasty tumble, gashing his head on a rock. He was confined to bed and died four months later, his body just too weak to recover. This, to Joseph, was what a grandfather was, someone at the end of their time. His childhood and teenage relationship with Mr Rimbaud had done much to overcome this misconception, but nevertheless, Joseph could not equate the two together. ‘How can I be a grandfather?’ he thought. ‘How can life have caught up with me so quickly?’

As she coughed, the dozens of bangles around her neck, and on her wrists, rattled as if the soundtrack to a hollow tin man’s dance. It was a raspy and scratchy sound, reminiscent of running a long fingernail along a metal railing. As my introduction to this sleeping beauty, the sound could not have been more at odds with her image. I turned to face her fully, resting on my knees, but with my head held

slightly back, partly out of nervousness and partly to avoid the sputter of saliva gushing forth from her mouth. My father, a smoker since the age of twelve, but at least thirty years the senior of this woman, often coughed like this in the mornings; his lungs bunged up with a mixture of cigarette tar and dust from the shipyards, but coming from a woman of such tender years, it was nothing short of alarming. Her gigantic mop of hair, which was littered with bits of grass and what looked like bonfire cinders, covered much of her face and for a moment, I thought she might pass straight back out again; that or choke upon her own straggly tresses. Then, without warning, she spoke.

“Aww man, I ain’t never slept so rough as this. I feel like I’ve been rode hard and put up wet! Jesus, where in the hell am I anyhow?” Her accent was unmistakably southern and was laced with a deep, leathery tone, both commanding and streetwise at the same time. “Are you okay, ma’am?” I asked, trying hard to hide my naivety behind my manners. “Will I give you a hand?”

“What the hell ...?” she began, before erupting into what could only be described as a cackle. “Ha ha, man! Is the party over? Shit, this one must’ve blown the whole damn house down.”

“I think you’re just a little disoriented. You’re at Yasgur’s farm, you know, the Woodstock festival?”

“Aww, I know where I am. It’s where I’m going I ain’t too hot on, ha ha!” she said, before launching into another screech. I remember thinking to myself, ‘Christ, if she’s like this when she’s only just woken up, what’s she gonna be like when she really gets going?’ It would not be long before I found out.

Shaking her ferocious mane of hair, the woman stood up and quite to my

surprise, put her arm around my shoulder and used me as a leaning post as she picked bits of grass and twig from the underside of her feet. “Shit, every time I stand up, my mind sits down,” she quipped. Then, leaning in closer to my face, she winked.

“You’re a real gentleman, ain’t ya?”

“I am?”

“Sure thing, honey. How many guys would’a sat there all that time like you did?”

“You knew? You were asleep.”

“Ha ha, man. I knew. I can smell a honey boy from two blocks away, ya dig?”

“I’m sorry, I just ... I wanted to make sure that you were okay.”

“Hey, if that’s your thing man. I got a cousin, goes like you.”

“Goes like me?”

“Yeah, a ‘guy’ guy. You don’t go for chicks, no?”

“I’m straight,” I told her with a smile. I couldn’t believe the brashness of her logic.

“God damn it, I found me a prince,” she shouted, before bursting into yet another cacophonous hoot. “What are you man, some kinda hoodwink?”

“Like I said, I just wanted to make sure you were okay. There’s no one else here you know? Everybody’s gone.”

“Except you and me,” she hissed.

“Well I’m kinda late I’m afraid,” I began to explain.

“Not for me, babe,” she replied, taking her hand from my shoulder and squeezing me around my waist. Things were about to get interesting.

“You’re a real peach, ain’t ya? Hell, that’s what I’m gonna call you.

‘Peaches’ it is.” She looked down at her bedraggled appearance. “Damn, I sure ain’t no cream today am I? Diesel, more like. Ha ha, we’ll be Peaches and Diesel. What d’ya say?” The way she was talking, implied that we were to have some sort of future relationship, something I had no designs on whatsoever. Something about her unnerved me. “I, er ... I guess so.” I really didn’t know what to say. While she had been sleeping, this woman had been somewhat of a vision; awake, she was proving to be something of a hurricane. “I’m Joseph, by the way,” I said, wriggling out of her grasp and stoically putting my hand out to shake. I was surprised at how reserved and stiff this woman was making me feel. “Aww, well we’ve howdyed but we ain’t shook. Man, that’s a mighty fine lilt ya got there. Where are you from, baby?”

“I’m from Belfast. I had a ticket for the festival, but my flight was delayed. I thought I’d come and have a look anyway; get the feel of the place.”

“Aww, bummer man! You’re breaking my heart. You and me, we’d a had some fun; still, there’s plenty of time for that.” There she went again; suggesting that there was more to come. I got the feeling that I was going to have very little say in the matter.

“So, what was it like?” I said, trying to ignore her last comment.

“The music?”

“All of it. Just being here. It’s been on all the television stations.” Her eyes, having had a somewhat groggy appearance up until now, lit up. “Aww, man. It’s been awesome. I can’t remember being in a place where every man didn’t say shit and pull together so much. We kinda became one and the same. Sleepin’ with your back coverin’ your belly does that. You know, tiny strands sown together by the music and the love; then held together by the force of what we’ve been through.” As she spoke, she looked completely lost, somewhere between the hill upon which we sat

and the heaven under which we hoped. I too felt moved. The cynics might tell you it was all a load of bull, but this woman was a believer and at twenty years of age and an ocean away from home, I was nearly ready to become one too. For me though, it was always about the music and, peace and love aside, it was the music that had drawn me to this field. I wasn't there to buy tye-die. I urged her to go on.

“Did you see The Band?”

“Hell yeah, kinda an off day for them though I think. That Robbie was singin' for all his might, didn't hear nothin' though, less'n his microphone was off. Real nice boys too, but took some knockin' off'a the table for a drink though!”

“You met them?”

“I met 'em baby, sure. No sweeter souls than that ain't come right on out when they sing. I was livin' on the high of that guitar. Man, the Howlin' Wolf himself couldn'ta kept up.”

“Go on,” I encouraged her.

“You should'a seen those English guys, too. Damn, they near enough stole it all away! Joe Cocker made me wanna cry and The Who didn't leave us all in nothin' but pieces. It's the new blues, Peaches.”

Just then, the sky thundered and the rain began to fall; slowly at first, but grey clouds in the distance told me this was not a passing shower. “I bet you've seen plenty of this the last few days?”

“You betcha, Peaches. Cold rain'll make you close buddies with the strangest of people. The more it rains, the closer you gets!” I figured that since I'd travelled all this way, I might as well make the most of the company that I had. I suggested

walking her back to her car or to the nearest bus stop perhaps. She may have been a little pushy, but I felt sure that I could put up with that for a short while, in exchange for some stories about the music she had seen and heard here. “You sure are a darlin’, Peaches.” The moniker was already starting to irritate me, but I let it go. We walked down the hill and across the main field, back towards the track onto which I had turned from the main road. Arm in arm, reluctantly on my part, it was impossible to know just who was leading whom. “Your car is up here, is it?” I queried.

“Up here, down there, shit man, it all kinda looks the same, don’t it?”

“The main road is at the end of this track. There were some cars ...”

“Hey, man! That’s the place,” she suddenly shrieked, pulling us across towards a gap in the trees. “Just where I left it baby, just where I left it.” Parked in a fashion, which could only be described as haphazard, a car could be seen, its back end sticking out of the rain-sodden trees like some sort of giant diving board. “Let’s go, Peaches.”

“Let’s go? I’m sorry I think you have misunderstood. I’ve got a bus to catch.” This woman’s presumptuousness was never-ending. “I’m only here for a little look around. Thanks, but no thanks really. I don’t need a lift.” She may have been a curio so, but there was no way I was going to get in a car with this woman. She irritated me too much.

Two minutes later, I was in the car. I didn’t know how it happened then and thirty-six years on, I’m not about to start second-guessing. Maybe it was the rain, but I don’t think so. She spoke immediately. “Baby, I need your help. I gotta get a long way and I sure could use some company.”

“Company? What do you mean by a long way? I don’t even know your name.”

“Aww man, for a young prince, you sure do a lotta worryin’. For a moment, there was silence. Then, she looked at me, smiled kind of patiently and said, “I’m going to Port Arthur, that’s in Texas. It’s a long way and I could do with a running mate. You sure seem like a sweet kind’a fella and you know what they say; two heads is better than one.” Then she looked away, adjusted the rear-view mirror and put her hand on the ignition key. “So that’s where you live, is it?”

“Where?”

“Port Arthur?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Do you work there?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Right,” I said, feeling confused. “This is your car, isn’t it?”

“This is my car.”

“And you left the key in the ignition?”

“I wasn’t going nowhere, not ‘til now anyhow.” I felt unnerved by her unpredictability and I wondered how I was going to get out of this situation; I really had no desire to travel all the way to Texas with someone I barely knew. “Okay, honey. Are ya’ all set?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Whatcha’ gotta lose? You ain’t got nowhere special to be going off to have ya?” And that was it. That was how she snared me. The truth was, that no, I didn’t have anywhere else to be going and she knew it. Why else would I be in the middle of a field, two days after the festival was over? I had no answer. I looked at her in a kind

of pathetic way and let out, unintentionally, a little whimper. “Beautiful man, just beautiful,” she whispered.

The car was a 1961 Lincoln Continental and was silver grey in colour. For a car owned by someone so raggedy, it was in remarkable condition. It had nifty, high-silled bumpers with chrome rails that ran the length of the vehicle, centre-opening ‘suicide’ doors and a huge, potent sounding engine. She reversed us back onto the track, then up past the signs for ‘Groove Way’ and ‘Gentle Path Highway’ that I had passed earlier that afternoon. Soon we were on the main road. “Which way, baby?”

“Which way? Will you expect me to know? Look, I’m really not sure that this is such a good idea ...”

“This way it is, then!” she said, carrying on regardless.

“Now look, I don’t mean to be rude, but ...”

“It’s gonna be a gorgeous night, Peaches. What d’ya think?” This selective deafness was really beginning to bug me. I tried again. “Miss, I need to talk to you, before we get too far.”

“You know you can, baby. Just say the word.”

“It’s about where we’re going. Well, it’s about where you’re going.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“Shoot. Ain’t no point in havin’ a diarrhoea of words and a constipation of thoughts, now. ”

“I don’t think I’m quite the right person ...”

“Man, would you look at that sun. It sure is pretty, Peaches. I bet that’s just the prettiest ol’ sunset you and me are gonna see for a while.”

“I ...”

“Just look, baby,” she insisted.

“Okay.” I looked. I had to admit, it was quite a mighty sight. Nestling between two valleys on the horizon, the sun cast a soft, orange glow over the road ahead of us, almost inviting us to chase after it. I let things slide for the moment, burying my irritation beneath the warmth of the evening sky.

Several minutes passed in silence. It was, by now, past eight o’clock at night and I realised that I had not eaten since I had left New York that morning. Figuring that there was no way of getting any straight answers out of my companion about just why she needed me with her, I decided to let it go for a while and concentrate on more urgent matters. I went to say something, but then realised she still hadn’t told me who she was. “I still don’t know your name.”

“Ha, ha. Ain’t Peaches and Diesel enough?”

“Hmm, not really,” I smiled, half-heartedly.

“Aww honey, you have a lovely smile. You should wear it more often.” I don’t think I had smiled all afternoon. “Well, you do know my name after all and it’s an awfully long way to go. Just how far is it?”

“Around seventeen-hundred miles, I’m bettin’. That’s gotta be two days ... and two nights, honey.” As she said this, she winked. I ignored it.

“So, I’m Joseph. Joseph Morrison.”

“I just love that voice of yours, Peaches. It’s smoother than an Arkansas sash. You

gotta be puttin' me on that you ain't no ladies man. Damn it, I'll bet they flock from coast to coast to hear you whisper sweet nothings.' Ha ha!" She let out that deep throaty laugh of hers, tossing her head back as she did it. Her hair, including the bright red feather bower she had trailing behind it, streamed out of the window, flapping about in the wind and for a moment, I pictured her astride a horse; a governing woman, a free spirit from another time and place.

"It's been a while since I ate something. We're going to have to stop before it gets too late," I suggested, trying not to think about what the overnight arrangements might be. "Hell, I guess you're right. I remember having a 'dog for breakfast, but shit knows if that was yesterday, this mornin' or Lord knows when!"

"What do you suggest?"

"Let's drive on, Peaches. When that sun falls between those two peaks, we'll make us a stop. Deal?"

"Sure, fine," I agreed. It was the first agreement we had come to all day. We passed away the next few hours, her by singing and laughing and me by listening. She seemed delighted to have an audience and for my part, I was more than happy to let her take the stage. She was, despite her undoubted eccentricities, a formidable raconteur and although I couldn't quite fathom where fact ended and fiction began, her tales of the high-spirited hippie lifestyle she seemed to be living, were just what I had come to America to hear. She told me of communes, of protest marches, of music in the streets and even, of the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. I bought into it all and was happy to. Of course, the harsh reality of it would be different, but here she was, living and breathing and every bit as real as me. 'Hell,' I even remember thinking, as I let my imagination run on without me, 'reality is just a state of mind

anyway.’

Every now and then, I checked outside to see where we were. New York State soon passed into Pennsylvania and with every mile we travelled, the names of the roads just seemed to get more and more charming; Pucky Huddle Road, Beach Lake Highway, Grandview Avenue and Eagle Valley Road. I hadn’t yet seen a pick-up truck, but felt sure that it was only a matter of time until I would! I checked my watch. It was nearly midnight. “Okay, come on, let’s find somewhere to stop. You need to rest and we both need to eat.”

“Almost there, baby. Check out the sign.” Coming into view on the side of the road, was an advertisement for a diner and motel, just a few miles farther along, in a place called Beech Creek. I was sure that her seeing it had been little more than coincidence, but it mattered not. In just a few minutes, we turned off of the idyllic sounding Sugar Run Road and into Township Road. The flashing neon sign of the diner was cracked and dimmed, but a day which had begun with me waking up in the Hotel Chelsea back in New York and which had ended with me on the road to Texas with someone I had never met, had seemed like an awfully long one and so it was as welcome a sight as any I had seen since my arrival in the States.

Chapter Seven.

“You know, I still don’t know your name. I can’t believe we’ve come all this way and I’ve let you get away with it.” We were parked outside the diner. Through the windows I could see six, maybe seven customers, all of whom appeared to be the drivers of the trucks parked nearby. “We’re not going in until you tell me your name.”

“Baby, you make it sound like I dragged you along. It’s an easy-ridin’ trip, you know what I mean, man?”

“Well, I don’t know where coercion ends and abduction begins and maybe it wasn’t kidnapping, but there sure wasn’t a lot of choice on my part. All I want is your

name.” I noticed that my arms had folded and that I was leaning in towards her. For the first time in our conversations I had taken the upper hand. “Please,” I added sternly. She cocked her head and as she did so, the corners of her mouth turned upwards, spreading into a smile that was by now, strangely familiar to me. “Okay Peaches, you win.”

“At last,” I muttered to myself.

“It ain’t nothin’ fancy, mind.”

“Go on,” I said.

“Janis.”

“Janis?”

“Janis,” she repeated, before pausing momentarily and then lurching into yet another cliché-ridden discourse. “You been ridin’ the rails with Janis, honey. There ain’t many men lived to tell the tale!” I said nothing and got out of the car. My back was stiff and my legs were deadened, given life only by the promise of a hot meal and a cold drink. We walked to the diner, with her behind and me in front. It looked like a quiet place.

A gum-chewing waitress, maybe forty and wearing a tightly fitting skirt, nodded to us as we walked in. She wore her hair in that teased up kind of way that women who work long hours do. The window seats were mostly taken by the trucker-types, so I led us to a table near the counter. I tried to ignore it, but couldn’t fail to notice the heavy-wearing eyes fixed upon us as we sat down. “Hey man, this is a hell of hole, ain’t it?” Janis said, nudging me in the back as she pulled up a chair next to mine. “Maybe,” I said quietly. “But it’s not the sort of place you oughta go

saying it in.”

“Honey, you ain’t gotta worry. These dopes are too old and passed caring to worry ‘bout a couple of out-of-towners like us. Hell, they’re just passing through themselves.”

“Just save it. I don’t know you well enough to get into a fight for you.” My anxiety, although quite real, was sharpened by memories of being home in Belfast. I had grown up knowing that there were certain places where one just didn’t go and if you did find yourself somewhere you shouldn’t be, you kept quiet and went about your business as quickly as possible. The looks from the blue-collared customers here, were telling me the same thing. “Let’s just order and move on. We need to go and check that motel too. It’s late and I don’t fancy spending the night in the car.”

The waitress was not long in coming over. Her name badge, identifying her as Nancy, was covered in fat and sauce. So too was her blouse. She looked very tired, but seemed friendly. “Hiya kids, how can I help?”

“I’ll have a glass of milk and the number seven, please ma’am.”

“Sure honey,” she smiled. “How about you Trixie?” Janis smiled back. It was different to anything I’d seen from her so far. It was almost sweet. “A number seven for me too and do ya have any ...?” She made a motioning action with her hand, suggesting alcohol. “Sorry doll, coffee’s the nearest thing we got to that.”

“Strong,” requested Janis, as Nancy wrote our orders on a pad. She smiled again.

“Won’t be more than a quarter of an hour, okay?”

“Thanks a lot,” I said, before turning to Janis. “I’m going to have a wander over to the motel; see if they’ve got any rooms.” I left Janis waiting at the table. “Get us a

big bed, Peaches!” she cried, as I got to the door. I couldn’t help but feel a rash of embarrassment fill my face; just what she’d intended. I needed a rest.

The reception area of the motel was alighted only by the blue screen light of a television set and all I could make out in terms of life was a pair of feet propped up on the desk. I pushed open the door and went in. “Hey,” said a short, balding man.

“Hi, do you have two single rooms, please.”

“Hold on there,” he said, bringing his feet down and switching off the sound of his programme. “Sure we do, but it’s after midnight, so it’s gonna be a little more.”

“You’re joking?”

“Hey, I don’t write it, I just read it kid.” I was too tired to argue.

“You’ve got the rooms then?” He leaned over to a board, upon which were hung half a dozen keys and picked two, seemingly at random. He motioned, as if to toss them at me, but paused short of letting them go. “It’s money up front; desk ain’t manned past two in the morning.”

“No problem,” I replied. “How much?”

Having paid, he pointed me in the direction of the corridor to my right.

“Numbers seven and ten; leave ‘em as you find ‘em. Enjoy your stay.”

“Thanks, goodnight,” I said, making my way towards them. I wanted to check them out before heading back to the diner. I don’t know what I was expecting to see. I came to number seven first, turned the key and went in. It was a plain room, housing only a bed, a small bedside cabinet and a wicker chair. It wasn’t the Chelsea, but it would do. My stomach began to rumble, my cue to return to the diner. Locking the door behind me, I returned down the corridor and back past the reception desk. I

could hear the television on again now; it sounded like a comedy programme. Maybe it was Johnny Carson. It was turned up loud, but I'm sure the sound of my stomach drowned out the volume. I sure was hungry.

As soon as I stepped out into the night air, I heard a smash. Somehow I knew it would be her. I ran over to the diner and was met by the sight of four men engaged in a scuffle. At first, it resembled a cartoon fight, so hard was it to tell just who was fighting who. Smashed plates littered the floor and food seemed to be everywhere. I looked around quickly. I couldn't see Janis anywhere. The waitress had run into the kitchen and was ushering in the chef, a large man with a long beard. The fight continued. I watched spellbound for a moment, having not seen a real fist fight since the playground. I could now identify that two of the men, one white and one black seemed to be on the same side. They were both in their late twenties, I thought. The black man's face was covered down one side with blood, while his comrade's face appeared to be blemish free. They were clearly on the defensive though, as the two other men, both somewhat older and stockier too, moved them towards the window, just to the right of the door through which I had just entered. One of the older men had a broken stool leg in his hand, while the other brandished a fork in his tightly clenched fist. Each man seemed intent on causing maximum damage to his victim.

I hoped that the chef might be about to break it all up, but he took one look at the scene and motioned Nancy, the waitress, to call the police. "You're gonna get what's comin' to ya nigger," yelled the man with the stool leg, "Just like that loud-mouthed bitch. She should'a kept her mouth shut 'an saved you all a kickin'." Janis! I scanned the room again, this time catching the eye of Nancy. She nodded her head over towards the floor by the cash register. There she was, with her head slumped down to her chest and her knees up. The kafuffle was between us, but through the

crowd of on-lookers, I could see that her mouth was bleeding. It was as red as the feather bower in her hair. There seemed to be a hell of a lot of people in this place now. The commotion was quite scary. I felt like a helpless witness to the beating I felt sure was about to happen. I looked again at Janis. She seemed shaken, but otherwise okay. Despite her sorry state though, I was not feeling especially charitable; somehow I felt sure she was at the bottom of this. ‘Damn it,’ I thought to myself. ‘How the hell did she stoke this up?’ The armed men moved in on their victims.

“Hey!” I shouted, somewhat foolishly and largely to my own surprise. Granted, I was not in full possession of the facts, but I felt sure I knew a bullying when I saw one. Before I could plan my next move or even what I was going to say next, the man with the stool leg swung it at his opponent, catching him full in the stomach. As his victim wobbled, coughing up his dinner in the process, the aggressor made me his next target. I had no time to think. I saw his fist coming towards me and then I felt the most intense shooting pain spread from my nose and out across my entire face. I stood for a split second, suspended in shock and then my legs gave way. It was as if the blood had just left the veins. The black and white tiles on the floor raced towards me. The room went suddenly dark and then, just as quickly, became light again. I found myself on the floor.

I’d like to say that the violence ended there, but it did not. The two men with the crude weapons set about the men on the floor. The black man took repeated blows to the head and chest with the stool leg, while the white man’s screams, as the fork was dragged down the side of his face, resembled that of a tortured animal. It was sickening to watch and I felt my still empty stomach begin to curdle. Almost immediately, a sickly green pool of my own vomit covered my knees. Then, as the

white man's screams threatened to shatter all the glass around us, the chef finally became involved. Commandeering a couple of truck-driving customers as deputies, he weighed into the mêlée and between the three of them; they pulled the two stocky men away from their prey. Given the violence that I had just witnessed, it was surprising just how sedately they surrendered. The two men on the floor coughed and moaned. Both covered heavily in blood, they looked like leftovers on a medieval battlefield; fodder for the vultures circling overhead. I remember wondering how in the hell they had survived.

“God damn you hillbilly loons!” came a cry all of a sudden. It was Janis. She was on her feet and headed for her two assailants. “Leave it lady, ain’t ya caused enough damage tonight?” shouted one of the onlookers. Janis was not listening though. She had her eyes set firmly upon the man who had been previously brandishing the stool leg. She looked crazed, with her hair a matted jumble of blood and feathers and her woollen waistcoat turned red from her dripping wound. I noticed that her feet were still bare and strangely, amid all that was going on, found myself wondering if she had ever put any shoes on. She pointed at him and then turning the back of her hand to the floor, she raised her middle finger and laughed that ferocious cackle of hers. She resembled a sinking ship, about to fire on the rescuers. Then, without warning, she lunged at him. Held as he was on both sides by the chef’s able deputies, he was powerless to avoid the full force of her bare right foot as it connected right between the trouser legs of his denims. He let out a wail as Janis, to my utter amazement, spun on her grubby soles and gave a little bow. “You crazy bitch,” I heard him whimper, as his knees hit the floor.

“God damn it, will someone get her out of here,” screamed the chef. He looked around for assistance. I could see nobody was relishing escorting this crazy

fool out of the building; that included me. Nancy the waitress, looked over to me again. I got the message; get her out before she gets knocked out. “Janis, for Christ’s sakes, will you come with me,” I said, getting to my feet and stepping in my own vomit. I did not wait for an answer; rather, I opened the door, too scared to look back and stepped out into the dry August night, hoping she would follow behind. I heard her bare feet on the tarmac. “Peaches, baby, let me see ya ...”

“Save it!” I snapped. “Take these, lock yourself in and don’t come out until the morning.” I was surprised at my own forcefulness. I tossed the keys to room number ten in her direction, grabbed my bag from out of the car and walked over to the motel. The television was still on. “Enjoy your food?” enquired the bald man. “Yeah, looking forward to breakfast already,” I lied sarcastically. My adrenalin seemed to have put paid to my manners. I hid my bloody face from his as I went past. I got to number seven and went in. I sat on the edge of the bed without turning the lights on and took my trousers off; they stank.

I couldn’t sleep. I kept waiting for the knock at the door; for the police coming to find out my part in the fracas that had taken place. Worse still, I feared, the man with the stool leg might come back to finish the job off. I lay there listening, ready to jump up at any minute. I looked at the clock. It was past two o’clock. My legs shook and my head throbbed. Outside, a dog was barking. I began to count its barks in a delirious attempt to calm down. Eventually, my adrenalin rush began to settle down and I was able to think with a little more clarity. I thought about how hungry I was. I thought too, about Janis. God only knew if she had taken my advice and gone to her room. I kept playing over and over in my head what had happened earlier. I felt mad at her. I had been gone for less than ten minutes and somehow, she had started a brawl, a really nasty one too. Maybe she really was crazy, I thought.

After all, what did I know about her? Her name and her destination; that was it. She was proving to be a real irritation and what's more, she was completely unpredictable, maybe even dangerous. I had had enough excitement.

I heard footsteps in the corridor and then a knock at the door. My heart jumped, but I knew I had to answer it. I grabbed my trousers and looked around for something with which to defend myself, but could see nothing. Anyway, I was not a fighter. I would have to take my chances. I took a steadying breath and opened it quickly. It was Janis. "Baby, I had to walk a long way to get these and the grease is running a hole in the bottom of the bag. I say we'd better eat them now." She stood one hip out to the side, with a grocery bag full of food nestled in front of her and what looked like a bottle of Southern Comfort under one of her arms. I could smell donuts. I looked at her face. Her lip was swollen and her eyes looked dark. She still had the same clothes on, which by now were smattered with dried blood. I looked down at my own; they were no better. "Hey hoss," she said. "I figured we needed to talk; get a few things straight. About what happened ..."

"About what happened?"

"Yeah, about what happened." She cocked her head to the side and smiled the same smile that I had seen her give the waitress earlier on. It had puzzled me earlier, but now I think I recognised it. It was a genuine look of humility. I felt my anger falling flat and I pictured that mysterious soul on the hill back at Yasgur's Farm, the one who had gone on to regale me with stories of the great American dream. She stood before me now. I put my arms out. "You'd better give me that bag if you're coming in," I said.

"Peaches, how's your face?"

“Not too bad,” I lied. I sat on the wicker chair, while Janis made the bed her home, tucking her feet under her long skirt like a hen on a nest.

“You know, that was a helluva thing you did; steppin’ in like that.”

“I wasn’t thinking. Besides, it didn’t do any good, did it?”

“Baby, those were some serious rednecks. Take it from me, where I come from those cats are runnin’ the show.”

“I’ve never seen anything like that before. It was scary. What the hell was going on? I only left you for a couple of minutes. What did you do?”

“Me?” She seemed surprised.

“Janis, come on. You were mouthing off as soon as we got there. You must have said something to someone.”

“Aww, Peaches. It wasn’t like that, man. They were lookin’ for trouble.”

“And you happened to be ready and waiting?”

“Peaches!”

“Janis! Two people nearly got killed! They might still have died for all we know. Will you just tell me what happened?”

She leaned over to the bag and pulled out the doughnuts, offering me one. I couldn’t eat, not just yet. I needed to know the truth. She took a bite of one and opened the bottle of drink, taking a swig. It was strong; I could smell it from where I sat. “Baby, I’ll tell ya like it was. I ain’t come here to fight.”

“Okay.”

“You left and I got chatting to Nancy, you know, the waitress?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“She was real nice, too. She kinda reminded me of my sister, Roberta. Anyhow, we was talkin’ and these two guys came in. They was big and dopey lookin, but I didn’t pay ‘em too much mind ‘til they started workin’ on a couple of young guys sat in the window.”

“One of them was black?”

“Yeah, honey, you saw ‘em too?”

“Well, it was hardly busy.”

“Well, they started off with the names, telling those fellas that they shouldn’ta be sat there and that it was a saved seat. It was real small-town shit. Damn, I swear they was so narrow-minded that they could’a seen through a keyhole with both eyes.” At this, I smiled a little, but Janis resisted the temptation to run away with the story. She stuck, as far as I could tell, to the facts.

“How did you get involved?”

“One of them big fellas, he grabbed the black guy by the shirt and shoved him off’a his seat. Well, his friend, he took exception to that and stood up ready for a fight. He held back though, those boys was dignified, man.”

“And you?”

“I seen it too many times, Peaches. There’s a generation of our country gone mad. They ain’t got no respect for those that are different. This boy’s as American as I am. What the hell’s his skin colour gotta do with any shit?”

“It was racist then?”

“He told ‘em it weren’t no nigger eatin’ house and they should stick to slavin’ and

servin’.”

“Then what happened?”

“I told those dumb lugs what every right-minded citizen in that place was thinkin’.

‘Hey you,’ I shouted. ‘Let me guess, sugar. You can never see a belt without hittin’ below it! Am I right?’”

“Jesus, woman!” I exclaimed. “You’ve got no business saying that. Nothing but trouble’s going to come your way.”

“Aww, Peaches. You can’t think like that, man. We gotta stand up for each other.”

“That’s not standing up for each other, that’s throwing yourself to the dogs. Would you not have just walked away?” I could see that Janis did not agree with me, but to her credit, she kept her cool and went on with the tale. All the while, she had been swigging from the bottle.

“Man, that guy was pissed. He turned to me like a shiver lookin’ for a spine to run up. Told me I should keep my mouth shut, ‘lessen I wanted a piece of him, too. Didn’t take him for no woman beater, but damn if that pig was gonna talk to me and those folks like that.”

“So, what did you do? I wish I’d come back earlier, or better still, not left you alone.”

“Peaches, I told him straight. ‘You’ I said, ‘shine and stink like rotten mackerel in the moonlight.’ Well, he let fly that arm’a his, caught me straight in the mouth. Sent me reelin’. Then those two guys they were riling, they got up and that’s when all hell broke loose. Just after that’s when you came back.” I couldn’t believe my ears. She took another swig of whiskey and looked at me with her eyebrows raised.

“Jesus and Mary!” was all I could say.

“I’m sorry, Peaches. You sure got mad back there.” I said nothing and went to use the bathroom, just outside my room. I splashed my face with warm water and looked at myself in the mirror. It was cracked in several places. “Damn it,” I said quietly to myself. “You shine and stink like rotten mackerel in the moonlight?” Through the cracks, I caught a smile. I didn’t know if I should kiss her or kill her. I spoke quietly again. “Janis,” I whispered to my reflection. “That was a wonderful remark!”

Chapter Eight.

I came back into the room to find Janis still drinking from the bottle. Equal parts Southern Comfort and sugar-pie, her image painted quite a picture. With her feet now stretched out in front of her and her head leaned back against the wall, this Texan vagabond looked every inch the tough cookie I now imagined her to be; tough as leather. In fact, my imagination was pretty much all I had to go on as, for all of her talk, Janis had kept her personal details very close to her chest. I wanted to know more about her. I decided that there was little point in going over the fight again, although I did have something I needed to say. “Janis,” I said, closing the door behind me. “I just want to say that I can understand why you did what you did earlier. Nobody should have to put up with racial comments like that.”

“And you’d do the same thing too, baby. I’m sure you would.” I wanted to ignore this, but I couldn’t quite let it go. “No, I would not have, but like I said, I can understand why you couldn’t leave things be.”

“Peaches, I ain’t sure if you’re butterin’ me up or slapping me down with that.” She held the bottle out and motioned to me to join her on the bed.

“Janis, why are we going to Port Arthur? I’m guessing it’s where you’re from? Is that where your family are?”

“Baby, ain’t I already told you? It don’t matter where I’m from, it’s where I’m headed that’s important.”

“Okay, we’re heading for Port Arthur.” I was beginning to realise that straight answers to straight questions were not part of Janis’ make up. Nevertheless, I tried to press her. “Something’s pulling you there?”

“Peaches, has it occurred to you that something might be pushing me?” It hadn’t and as I took a swig of what was left in the bottle, I considered this comment. “Janis, I think you’re only going to tell me what you want to anyway. I would appreciate a little bit of honesty though.”

“Hey man, I ain’t lied to you once. There ain’t nothin’ much to tell anyhow. Can’t it be that I’m just seein’ a little of the country? You know, from sea to shinin’ sea.”

“Is that the truth?”

“It ain’t a lie, man.” She smiled and took back the bottle, downing the last few mouthfuls in one. “Here,” she said, passing me the brown bag. “Have yourself some eats.”

“So what’s the deal with you, Peaches? You sure seem a little young and

naïve to be all this way from home. Hell, you shouldn't even be drinkin'!" This seemed to tickle her no end and she patted me on the back as she laughed out loud.

"Well, it really is like I told you. I was left some money by an old friend and I always promised him that one day we would come to America."

"Together?"

"Yes, together. He lived here a long time ago."

"Have you brought him along?"

"What?"

"You know, his ashes. Have you brought his ashes along for the ride?" Now it was my turn to laugh. "Ah ha, no; just his memories, I'm pleased to say."

"That's real nice, Peaches. You must have been good friends." As she said this, Janis sounded different, almost subdued. "Hmm, we were," I replied fondly. It seemed like longer ago than three months since Mr Rimbaud had passed away, so far away was I from my life at home. I wondered what my parents were doing. I wondered too about Anna. She would be back at home now. I looked at Janis. "I certainly never thought I'd find myself here, with someone like you." I really meant only to say this in my head, but there it was, out. I regretted it immediately. I could see in her eyes, that Janis was hurt. She brushed her hands through her thick mousy hair, breathed in deeply and put on a smile. "Here Peaches," she said. "Let me have one of those doughnuts."

"Janis, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that the way it sounded. It's just that I ..."

"I know baby," she said, taking over. "You ain't come all this way to get hooked up with some crazy-assed rock and roll chic. The truth is though, I like you Peaches and

I think we're gonna be good for each other. I felt it as soon as I woke up and saw you. You're different from most guys an' that's what I need right now. But I'm different too an' I am what I am. I ain't gonna compromise myself." She paused a moment. "I'm all I've got, Daddy," she snorted. I could sense the hurt beneath her bravado. I felt bad about what I'd said. Just a few short hours ago, I was doing my level best to get away from her, but things had seemingly changed and I had not noticed. She may have been wild, but I did not want to upset her and I was enjoying being with her. I needed to make amends; I figured some stories might do the trick.

"Janis, will you tell me some more about the places you've been to?"

"You're shittin' me, right? You really wanna hear it?"

"Sure. I really do." I really did, too. She needed no further encouragement.

"Peaches, you dig the music right?"

"I love good music," I smiled.

"When I was a kid, honey, it was all you could do to hear somethin' kinda fine; 'specially where I grew up." I wanted to ask her where that was. Instead, I just listened. "Well, baby, I used to get up real early, before the grass stood up, ha ha. I'd go out before school, sometimes I wouldn't even make it at all and I'd be lookin' for soda bottles. I'd scabble through thicket and squeeze into alleys tryin' a find me some. Damn, I once near got me a snake bite from stretching!"

"What were they for?"

"I'd run 'em down to the crook, straight on to the country store."

"For money?"

“Cash ‘em in and take my money to a man named Holling Apple. He lived in a shack on the edge of town, a little place, surrounded by trees. Baby, you could’a opened one of those windows and met you a Mr Bluebird for breakfast. Now, ol’ Holling was a black man, with white curly hair. Man, that cat didn’t have no worries, ‘ceptin what the fishin’ was like.”

“What did he do with your money?”

“Aww, Peaches. Holling Apple would play me the blues; soft and slow like. He was real pretty.” Janis pulled me in closer to her.

“How old were you?”

“Maybe I was ten. He looked to be sixty, with real smoky skin. I’d sit on that man’s porch and he’d play all day, just for me. The trees would play harmony and that man’s foot would keep the rhythm. Sometimes, I’d kick my toes in the water down by the steps and maybe dance a little. He told me his wife was a dancer, before she passed away. I’d be down for a whippin’ if anyone knew I was there, so I never told a birdie, least not ‘til now.” I pictured the scene in my head. I had seen it many a time before, in print or in song, but Janis brought it alive with her animation. She all but took me there. I wanted to be on that porch with her. I guess, listening to her tell it, I had the next best thing.

“Holling, man, he taught me to love the music for what it was. Happiest days of my young life, sat on that porch. The sun never stopped shinin’ on ol’ Holling. He used to play that guitar an’ have it sat ‘cross his knee. It was his prized possession an’ that’s all he had to show for a lifetime of toil.”

“That and all the memories he left you,” I said, thinking of Mr Rimbaud. Janis nodded, but said nothing. She seemed, for a moment, to have been put off of her

stride. Then, after a moment's pause, she was off again. "Peaches, you ain't heard nothin' til you heard of my meetin' the king."

"The king?" She rose up onto her knees.

"You know, baby!"

"Elvis?"

"Sure, Elvis! If I tell you a hen dips snuff, you can look under her wing."

"You've met him?"

"Well, nearly," she said, backing down a little. "I rode me a freight train all the way to Graceland. Figured he was the man I needed to see!" And that's how the night went; Janis talked until my eyes fell heavy and even as I closed them, I could hear her excited voice trailing off into my dreams. I fell asleep by her side, on the top of the bed. I never got round to even taking my socks off.

The sun burst in through the window like a streak of lightning heading straight for my tired eyes. I rolled over, wishing it would find someplace new to shine. I checked my watch. It was a quarter to six in the morning. Sitting up, I looked around the room. Janis was nowhere to be seen. 'Damn,' I thought. 'Where's that woman gone now?' I hoped she had not decided to make an early morning return to the diner. My face was sore enough from the previous night's excitement. Looking down, I saw that the car keys were on the dirty carpet; so too was the rubbish from our post-midnight feast. She could not be too far away. They say that when you get lost in the woods, you should walk downhill until you find the river and then follow it to town. Well, I figured that if I went outside, listened for the noisiest thing I could hear and followed it, that would lead me to Janis.

The morning was fresh and dewy. Despite my aching face and my tired bones, not to mention the still insistent rumbling of my stomach, I felt glad to be up so early. We didn't get mornings like this in Belfast. I was used to waking to sirens and smog. So foggy the birds would walk. With hands in pocket, trying hard to look nonchalant, I glanced towards the diner. It appeared open, but empty. I wondered if it had closed at all. The silver Lincoln we had travelled in the previous night was still parked in the same place and thankfully, appeared to be undamaged. Back home, I had seen many cars given the revenge treatment after a fight. 'Jesus Christ,' I thought to myself, as the fight scene placed itself firmly back at the front of my mind. In the clear skies of the morning, it was hard to imagine the damage done to those poor boys. I knew that however sore my face was feeling, it would be nothing in comparison to the hurt they would be waking up to. I hung my head in shame at just having been a witness to it all, never mind my having played some small part in it.

I scuffed around the car park, wondering where my travelling companion had gone. Apart from Janis' car, there were only three other vehicles there. There were two cars that I figured belonged to whoever was opening up in the diner and there was a truck and trailer; a real American wagon with more chrome than was decent. It had a 'Stars and Stripes' flag up in the front windscreen, acting as a makeshift curtain. The driver, I guessed, was sleeping inside the rig and would be soon setting off, travelling some unfathomable distance across the States. I loved the enormity of this country. Even our journey to Port Arthur, a little under seventeen hundred miles as far as I could work out, which would be impossible back home, was but a small road trip over here. A man could lose himself on these highways, I thought. You could just disappear one day and be gone for years at a time, only the headlights on the highway pointing the way. The itinerant child in me began to imagine where I

would head for; maybe out to the western shores to catch me some sun or perhaps I'd travel north to Canada, Alaska and beyond. Better still, I figured, I could go south, across the borderline to Mexico and really live out a nomadic existence. The notion appealed to me, but I knew I was a homeboy, at heart. In fact, what I did not know at the time was that I would never live on Irish shores again. Indeed, it would be three decades until I returned to my homeland. For today though, my destination was Port Arthur, Texas.

“Janis,” I called out, hoping to find her. No answer. I felt a little uneasy at my concern about her whereabouts, almost as if I was pushing down an uncrossed boundary of intimacy, in worrying. After all, I thought, she owed me no explanations. Still I searched, though. Beyond the edge of car park and behind the diner, I suddenly became aware of an area of grassland; a field in fact, fenced off by a rail of wooden pickets. I had not noticed it the night before. Given the time of our arrival though, that was hardly a surprise. The sun was already rising high in the sky and it cast a radiant and joyous light onto the figure perched on top of the fence; Janis. I have to admit, she was the very picture of beauty that morning, a real blossom of flowers. Just as she had done the day before, lying on the hill at Yasgur's farm, she unwittingly tapped into some natural element in the air that seemed to put her at one with her surroundings. Her skirt was tucked under her body to show the contours of her thighs, while her tee shirt seemed to fit just right. Her cardigan billowed gently in the early morning breeze and her hair looked elegantly ruffled. The bangles and beads round her neck were also caught by the wind and whereas yesterday they clattered, today they emitted a placid musical hum.

“Good mornin' Peaches,” she called, without looking around.

“Hey Janis,” I replied. “It’s kinda early to be up, don’t you think?”

“Smokey ole’ pool rooms and clear, mountain mornin’s,” she said, completely ignoring my question.

“Excuse me?”

“Them’s two things I just love, but ya gotta burn the candle at both ends Daddy, if you reckon on seein’ ‘em much. One complements the other, that’s the way I see it. It’s a damn near impossible way of life too, lessen you don’t mind it’s gonna kill ya sooner or later.”

“Janis, are you okay?” She turned her head around to face me. Her cheek looked red and a darned-sight sorer than mine. Putting her arm out, she beckoned me over to join her. She smiled that irresistible smile once more. I perched on the fence by her side.

“Okay now honey, you listen real careful, d’ya hear? Not a sound.”

“What am I listening for?”

“Shh.” She put her finger over my lips. Her hands were rough and coarse. I listened. At first, my ears could hear nothing. Was that the point, I wondered; was this some crazy hippie listening to the silence thing? I listened still though. The wind blew through my hair, causing each strand to flicker gently against the one next to it. I listened again. The blades of grass in the field danced to and fro, ebbing and flowing like the tide at the shore. I listened some more. This time I let go of my concentration, letting whatever sounds were around me find their own route into my senses. And that’s when I heard it. “Water,” I whispered. Janis had her eyes closed and was climbing down from atop of the fence, her bare feet touching the wet grass of

the field. She opened her eyes and began to make her way across it, as if guided by the sound of the water beyond. I followed, keeping my distance slightly, so as not to break her mood. We moved to the edge of the field and then through a thicket of brush, coming out on the other side. It was beautiful.

We came upon a scene that could have been lifted from a painting. The wide opening of a stream, which seemed to meander for as far as could be seen in either direction, was being visited by a number of early morning visitors. A pair of grebe busied themselves in washing and searching for breakfast beneath the water and behind them, a young deer rustled through the undergrowth looking for some morsels. At the edge of this idyllic scene stood a stately heron, regally surveying the panorama as if it were posing for the artist. I looked at Janis. Her eyes were alight with fascination at our discovery. We sat in silence and watched as a dragonfly danced across the water, rippling concentric patterns as it moved. I swear I could even hear the water as it swirled underneath the tiny animal's delicate feet.

I let my senses take me over and was amazed to hear crickets in the field across which we had just walked and even the twittering of birds in trees far from where we sat. My nose was alerted to the smell of the still-damp grass and to a sweet, honey like smell that I had never met before. The whole scene was magical; one of those moments when you are living completely and utterly in the here and now, without thought of the past or of the plans you might have for the future. I looked again at Janis and her face was a picture of contentedness; I got the impression though, that unlike me, she had been here before. It was as if she was visiting an old friend. I went to say something, but no words came out. Janis turned to me and smiled. "Let rivers flow, man," she said. "Let rivers flow." Her eyes were moist with emotion. I looked at my watch; two minutes to six, Wednesday 20th

August 1969. Beautiful.

Chapter Nine.

We skipped breakfast at the diner and headed out of Beech Creek, Pennsylvania at just after six-thirty. The morning sun was already hot and I wondered what the day might bring. Janis was quiet for a while, but was soon kicked into life again by the sounds of FM radio. American radio; I'd heard nothing like it. It was wild and spontaneous. In a few short years, American FM radio stations would become as sterile as the West coast cocaine-induced rock music they would churn out, but this was a golden age. It made you want to steal the nearest car and head out on the highways of that grand country. Janis wailed along with near enough every song. I couldn't help but join in. There was no chat; we let the music do our talking and through Cleveland and on to Cincinnati, the road was clear and our destination was set. With Credence Clearwater Revival and Big Mama Thornton as our navigators, we rolled on through one, two, three and four hours of changing scenery, but the road never wavered. We passed boulders and rocks; we left hamlets

in our wake, but there was never any doubt that better things lay ahead. “Second star to the right and straight on ‘til morning, baby!” screamed Janis.

By the time I caught my breath it was nearing midday. Having driven through much of Cincinnati, we were heading for the Covington and Cincinnati suspension bridge. Of course, I didn’t know that at the time. To me it was just another draw-dropping sight in a series of dreams. I suddenly began to wonder about the many places through which we had passed. What did I know about them? How many people’s life stories had we driven by? It was strange to think that my whole life could be dismissed as just another car passing through town. I guessed that’s what a country as big as this could do. Cincinnati? Well, I’d been to see the film starring Steve McQueen a couple of years before, but that was set in New Orleans, I think. Back home, my parents had filled my head with the history of our city. From the arrival of the Anglo-Norman knight, John de Courcy in 1177, when Belfast was little more than a wading point across the River Lagan, through to its founding as a town by Sir Arthur Chichester in 1603 and beyond, I knew it inside-out. It made me feel liked I belonged. Here though, I was struggling to recall even the names of the places that had littered our route. I was, however, beginning to enjoy the anonymity of it all and it sure was beautiful country; downtown Cincinnati rolled back from the Ohio River, to fill a flat basin area ringed by a disarray of steep hills. There were trees that touched the clouds and green moss underfoot. It reminded me of cowboy country.

“It’s a hell of a bridge, ain’t it, Peaches?”

“It’s huge. What is it? Where’s it taking us?” I knew a little about construction from years of listening to my father and grandfather. The bridge was green in colour and had conventional catenary and vertical suspension cables, plus diagonal cable-stayed

bridge cables for additional support and deck stiffening; in layman's terms, it was well put together. It looked magnificent. "It's the Roebling suspension bridge, 'cept it ain't really called that, mind; should be though, he's the guy that built the thing. It's gonna take us from downtown Cincinnati to downtown Covington, Kentucky state. Folks used to have to pay to cross, but that's all changed now. They pulled them tollbooths out. You know Peaches, they used to send slaves up from the South to cross this bridge; I learned that in school. My Daddy used to fish in the Ohio River, here see. He'd catch flathead catfish, sometimes as big as forty pounds, maybe a shovelhead or a mudcat too. I remember the names, cos' of how strange-sounding they were. Man, they got 'em all."

Janis' candour took me by surprise. Up until now, she had told me nothing about her family or where she came from and this small snippet of information about her father seemed somehow to be all the more significant because of it. She quickly moved on though. "Hell man, that was all a long time ago though. What d'ya say we stop for eats in Kentucky?"

"Yeah, sure. I don't think I've ever eaten so little as I have the last couple of days. I sure miss home cooking."

"Ha ha, that's life on the open road for ya, darlin'. I haven't been home in years."

"What? Seriously?" What about your father? Is he still alive?" Janis adjusted the rear-view mirror, checking her hair. "Man, I sure could use some Cincinnati chilli. We can get some in Covington. What do you think, Peaches? Do you have chilli in Ireland?" I got the message; back off.

"We have it, but I don't eat it. What's in it?"

"Oh honey, you're in for a hell of a treat."

“Go on.”

“Well man, let me see. It’s a combination of spaghetti noodles, meat, cheese, onions and kidney beans; served with your choice of drink.”

“Your’s being?”

“Whatever comes in the biggest glass, baby. Ha ha!” I didn’t know which would be the greater challenge, eating a plateful of Cincinnati chilli or getting Janis to tell me about herself.

We ate at a place called Skyline Chilli and except for Janis pinching the behind of the young man who served us, the meal passed without incident. The chilli was hot, but I was too hungry to notice. I told Janis about my brother and two sisters and about the office where I worked. It seemed a hundred lifetimes away from where I was now and to be honest, I couldn’t imagine ever going back; that’s another story though. Again, I tried to find out a little more about my travelling companion, but all to no avail; Janis preferring to tell me about a road trip she once took from Denver across to Las Vegas. I wondered if that is what I would become to her; just another anecdote in her collection. I hoped not. When the meal was over, we took a drive through Covington and my memories are of an eclectic-looking town, not unpleasant, but not particularly memorable either. There was an attractive, narrow, tree-lined street, populated by nineteenth-century houses, which was well-known as a Germanic neighbourhood and not far from that, was a pleasant looking park, but all I can say of note about Covington, is that it was the first and last place where I ever ate chilli.

From Covington, we headed south, with Nashville, Tennessee as our next destination. It was already signposted as being some two-hundred and seventy miles away on Interstate sixty-five, after Lexington and Louisville. Just the names of the

places were enough to make the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. “Aww, Peaches. You’re sure gonna love it down in Nashville. There’s hicks for sure, but those folks that ain’t are the prettiest and most decent people you’ll ever meet. We’ll fix ourselves up in some real cosy joint and we’ll go dancin’ in the moonlight. I can see it now, Peaches. It’s gonna be beautiful.” Janis’ voice sounded softer than it often did, as if getting closer to her roots was bringing out the innocent romantic in her; I liked it. She had a gentle voice when she relaxed. It reminded me of the feeling a warm drink can give you on a cold night. It made me yearn for a place I’d never been to. I closed my eyes and tilted my head back; the hum of the road gently sending me to sleep.

I dreamed of a house, with pillars outside the door. I was sleeping inside. The windows were arched with shutters to keep out the bright sunlight. I came through the door and into the garden, following a trail of petals that led me down to a gateway, beyond which was a copse. The trees were orange and red, so it must have been autumn. I wandered through the foliage, crunching leaves beneath my feet and soon came to a clearing, where a table had been laid. It was set for two. I sat at one of the places and checked out the platter. There were crabs, salmon, lobster and clams, all freshly laid out and presented in ice. I waited for my dinner companion to arrive and whiled away the time by looking at the sky. I wondered how long I had been there, as the sun was setting quickly and the evening sky was twinkling in anticipation. It felt like only moments ago that I had left the house. As if at once, the skies became ablaze with the shimmering veils of the Northern lights and I gazed in awe at the spectral dance unfolding before me; aurora borealis, unmistakably dramatic and eclipsing any vision I had ever come across. I couldn’t believe that the day had passed so quickly and I longed for it to linger. No sooner had I thought it

though, than I was on my way back through the copse and following the trail of petals back towards the house. Thirty-six years on and I can still remember that dream.

A wail engulfed my ears and I realised I had been sleeping. I opened my eyes to see Janis looking in the rear-view mirror, a thwarted look upon her face. “Shit, Peaches. I’m sorry. Guess I kinda got carried away.” I turned around to see what was behind, although I already knew. A grey-coloured Kentucky state police cruiser was flashing its light and the driving officer was motioning for us to pull over. My pulse quickened and I felt immediately guilty of a thousand and one crimes. “How fast were we going?”

“Aww, man. Well, you know, when the spirit takes you there ain’t no mind nor time for detail. Like a twig in the arms of the mighty Mississippi, you dig, Peaches?”

“Janis. How fast?”

“Seventy-five, eighty maybe.”

“In this?”

“Hey baby, don’t judge a book an’ all that!”

“I don’t believe it. For God’s sake woman, will you pull over?”

“I think we can beat him, Peaches. What d’ya say?” A steely gaze came over Janis’ face. “You are joking?” I could feel the sweat beginning to trickle down the back of my neck. ‘This is it,’ I thought. ‘She really is going to get us killed.’ “Ha ha, I’m joking. Of course, I’m joking. Aww, you should’a seen your face!” She indicated and pulled in to a dusty lay-by on the right side of the road.

“What’s the speed limit?”

“Not too sure. Sixty, I think, but it could be sixty-five.”

“We could be okay then. Have you got your licence with you?” Janis drew her breath in between her teeth and ran her fingers through her hair. “Please tell me you’ve got a licence?”

“I can’t lie, Peaches. I ain’t never really needed one.” The sweat was now forming pools at the base of my spine. “That’s it then, you can say goodbye to Port Arthur, cos’ we’re going nowhere.”

“No way, man. I gotta get there, I just gotta.” There was an air of desperation to her voice, which surprised me. Suddenly, Janis’ carefree attitude to things had changed. She put her hands to her face and made a moaning sound, then sat upright and tossed her hair back. “You’re a cutie, Peaches,” she said, with a glint in her eye. “But leave this to me. The time to kill a snake is when he raises his head.”

The driver, dressed all in grey, stepped out of the car and adjusted his belt. He was a serious looking man, tall with a pencil-thin moustache on a sturdy and blemish free face. Law enforcement was a serious business here and I doubted that Janis could sweet talk her way out of trouble. Just four years earlier, a Kentucky state trooper by the name of Delano G. Powell had been shot dead while serving a warrant in nearby Breathitt County and it unnerved me to see a gun around the waist of the man in the rear-view mirror of Janis’ Lincoln. He wore a pair of sunglasses and a wide-brimmed uniform hat and standing in the afternoon heat, looked the very picture of the archetypal American car-cop. Janis gave me a wink and stepped out of the car to greet him. She was either brave or very stupid; had I been driving, I think I would have stayed put until the man with the gun told me exactly what to do. The police officer spoke first. “Miss, the state of Kentucky police department takes a very serious view of speeding offences. Do you have any idea of how fast you were

going?”

“Yes sir,” replied Janis. “I was exceeding the state speed limit by quite a stretch. You have my apologies, sir.” As she spoke, Janis continued moving towards the man, neither flinching nor losing eye contact. “Sir, I realise I have made a serious error of judgement.” She kept moving. Her apologetic, but firm manner seemed to have some sort of effect upon the driver. He moved back towards his patrol car and the conversation continued out of both my eyesight and earshot. ‘What is she up to?’ I wondered.

I craned my neck to get a better view, but could only see the both of them from the waist down. The police officer’s hands were both hung stationary upon his belt loops, while Janis’ were both out of sight. All I could do was sit still and wait. A couple of minutes passed and things seemed to have progressed no further than the two of them talking by the side of the grey patrol car. I would have given anything to know what Janis was saying; was she spinning some elaborate tale or weaving her undoubted charm around his resolve? I leaned forward to have a nose into the glove box of the car. What, I wondered, did someone like Janis carry with her on her travels around the country. A couple of packs of gum, an empty hip flask and a well-worn copy of Jack Kerouac’s ‘On the Road,’ were all I could find. I leafed through the book. It was an American first edition. I recognised the cover from the copy that Mr Rimbaud had lent me several years before. It would, I knew, make the old man very happy to know that I was now living my own small-scale version of Sal Paradise’s adventures in the west. For a brief moment, I forgot about our current predicament and basked in the glory of what was becoming an enjoyable jaunt across the middle of this great land.

Alerting myself back to the present, I looked once more in the mirror. I couldn't see anything. I turned around and again, could see nothing. 'Shit,' I thought. 'Something's happened.' I didn't know whether to get out or not. There had been no gunfire, no loud screams; how bad could things be? I was concerned, though. She was unpredictable for sure, but I already felt as though Janis would do most anything for me and I felt almost protective of her in return. She seemed to have a knack of doing the wrong things, but for the right reasons. It was roguishly endearing. I had never met anyone else like her, nor did I imagine, even then, would I ever again. I hoped that Janis had found some way of persuading the grey-uniformed police officer of letting us off. I didn't think there was a cat in hell's chance of that happening, but I hoped all the same. I guess I just didn't want our story together to end quite yet. I wound down my window and peered out. The door of the patrol car was in the way; I got out and walked to where I could see.

My jaw near-enough hit the ground. Janis was on her knees, with her bare feet behind her and her face nestled in the groin of the police officer. His trousers, the gun still in its holster, were sitting around his ankles in the dust. He was sat side on in the car, his face the very picture of enraptured delight. I could see Janis' head moving rhythmically back and forth, guided by the left hand of the man, his fingers entwined in the mousy mop of her hair. His other hand disappeared up inside of Janis' tee shirt, pawing eagerly over her small breasts. A combination of disbelief and astonishment raced through me, mixed liberally with nausea and fear. My fear was a purely selfish one, petrified as I was about where my involvement in this little rendezvous would land me. There was no way, I thought to myself, she was going to just get up and walk away from this; no way at all. There had to be some comeback, surely. Had she really bought us off of a speeding offence by going down on a

lawman? ‘No way,’ I thought again. It just couldn’t be happening. I had been with a couple of girls back home and this sort of stuff just didn’t happen; not with a policeman, for Christ’s sake. Yet, here was Janis, one-on-one in fellatio with a complete stranger; in broad daylight, by the side of the road too. I picked my jaw up from off of the roadside.

For a brief moment, as my disquiet abated slightly, I went to jump to assistance, fearing that Janis had been coerced into this, but then, just as quickly, it hit me; she really was as hard as the hob of hell and it didn’t matter whether the sun shone or not, she was going to get to Port Arthur, come hell or high water. I watched for a moment. Janis’ head moved quickly and then without warning would slow down again to a deliberate, drawn-out movement. My anxiety levels were sky-high. Was she going to take this any further, I wondered? Would they be climbing into the car? My unease notwithstanding, I couldn’t help but watch. For a moment, she wasn’t even Janis; I was sucked into the theatrics of the physical act. I imagined myself in the car. Her hips and thighs thrust backwards in sync with the motion of her head. Her hands moved quickly in rhythm, direct and authoritative. Then, I caught sight of the gun again. Suddenly, it was real once more. I became aware of how swiftly my shock had turned into voyeurism. Full of apprehension, I sat myself back in the Lincoln. I moved the paperback from the seat as I sat down; I didn’t remember this happening in Kerouac’s book.

Chapter Ten.

The driver's door opened and Janis got in. Her hair was a mess and she checked it in the mirror. "You ready for that dance, Peaches?"

"I'm sorry?"

"In Nashville."

"I ... err ... oh, sure," I stumbled. She started up that noisy engine, switched the radio to 'on' and we were on our way again. I looked at Janis as she readjusted her clothing. She was a ragbag of disorder, but somehow, she looked a million dollars. She appeared to be as unruffled as I had been shocked. I opened my mouth to speak, but as so often happened, she beat me to it. "Here, Peaches. This should see us good for the night." As she spoke, she put her hand up to the feather boa in her hair and pulled out some money. She handed it to me. "Bloody hell," I exclaimed upon counting it. "There's one-hundred and twenty dollars here. That man gave you money?"

"Ha ha, Peaches. That son of a bitch gave me nothin'. What d'ya think I am, man?"

Ironic was not the word. "Where's it from? Would you tell me, damn it?"

"It's his alright. Well, I mean it was." Any shock and nausea I had been feeling before quickly exacerbated, reaching an intensity that threatened my very sanity.

“You stole it? You stole it.”

“Peaches.”

“You stole it,” I repeated once again. “I’m going to throw up.”

“You want me to pull over, honey?”

“Yes, I think so.” I could feel my temperature rising. Something was brewing inside. Then, in my mind’s eye, I saw the gun. “No!” I exclaimed suddenly. “Drive, for God’s sake. He’s going to go nuts. Are you crazy? What in the hell were you thinking?” I felt irrationality taking me over.

“Man, he’s gonna be a while yet. I left that cowboy smokin’ like a big boy; you know what I mean, Peaches?”

“I don’t want to know what you mean,” I snapped.

“He’s havin’ some time to reflect. We got plenty of time to put some miles between us. Man, some guys are easy to play ... ‘cept for you and the Lord, mind.” She laughed at her own smugness. “You really are crazy; I don’t care saying it now.”

“Aww, Peaches. Don’t get yoursel’ all riled up; even though you do look kinda cute when you’re wild.”

“Cute? We might yet end up dead”

“Be that as it may, honey, but if it ain’t tonight, I’ll live with that. Tomorrow never comes, ain’t that what ol’ man Curtis used to say? If it don’t kill ya, it only makes you stronger.” I’d heard of living for the moment, but this was ludicrous.

“Janis, I want my tomorrow,” I said sternly. “Put your foot down.”

“You’re the prince, Peaches. I’ll do what you say ... but it ain’t never gonna come.”

She pushed that Lincoln just as fast as it would go, until we reached the Tennessee state borderline. I didn't take my eyes from the rear-view mirror once and thirty-six years on, I don't think I ever have.

A different state, a different mood. Tennessee was a beautiful state. We crossed the border at a quarter to eight and the sun was still high in the pale blue sky. The excitement of earlier seemed to weary Janis a little and she suggested taking me to a place called Cheek Lake, situated between an old cemetery and the river. She said it used to be part of a place called Haysborough, but that place didn't exist anymore. We could, she said, get some food from a nearby store and eat it out on the lakeside. After what we'd been through in the last couple of days, the respite sounded appealing. We stopped at the intersection of highway six-five and route fifteen. There was a shop and somewhere to fill up the car. Janis flirted with the teenage gas-pump attendant, while I stocked up on supplies. In the days before one-stop shops, this was no mean feat. I filled my arms up with as much ready to eat food as I could carry and asked the man at the counter what he knew about Cheek Lake. He was in his forties, maybe, and dressed in the down home uniform of plaid shirt and heavy boots. He had sideburns which sort of reminded me of Elvis and his eyes were sharp and fixed on mine. When he spoke, it was in an alarmingly foreboding manner.

“Boy, you ain't from round here. Am I right?”

“I'm from Belfast, sir; in Ireland.”

“Well son, my advice to you is this; you take yourself back to Belfast, you get on to school and you start learnin' Japanese.”

“Japanese, sir? To speak, you mean?” I asked, slightly perturbed.

“I tell you what, son. I ain’t shittin’ ya. The Japanese are coming and when they makes their minds up, it’s Cheek Lake we all gonna be located in ... if you know what I mean?” This was hardly the kind of chitchat and banter I had been expecting, but the man’s piercing eyes told me that he was serious. “Do you mean ‘in’ the lake?” I queried. “I mean ‘under’ the lake. General MacArthur, they say his remains are gonna be the first in too. They’re gonna exhume him. I knows it’s true. That’s why I keep this safe.” He held out what looked like a locket and opened it for me to see. “You see that, son. That’s gonna be my savin’ grace.” The locket contained a grainy picture of a middle-aged man, wearing spectacles and a bow-tie. “Who is it, sir?” The intense keenness of his eyes fixed on me again. “Emperor Hirohito of Japan.”

I knew the name, but outside of the basic facts, I knew very little about the Japanese leader. I looked outside. Janis was laughing and waving her hands about; I sure hoped she wasn’t going to come in. God knows what she’d make of all this. The man put his locket back in his pocket. “What do you keep it for, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“When they walk through my door, just like you did tonight,” he said wagging his finger, “They’re gonna find them a peace-loving ally.” As he said this, he even stood up straight, as if to attention. “You take my advice son, you learn the Japanese ways.” He put my shopping into two brown paper bags. It was impossible not to notice that they were stamped with the red sun of the Japanese flag. “Take care, son,” he said, as rather sheepishly, I made my way back out to Janis. By now, she had her hands around the gas-pump attendant’s shoulder. “Everythin’ a-okay, Peaches?” she asked. I nodded, without saying anything and got into the car. Janis gave a wink to the teenager as she got behind the wheel. “Sayonara, sweetie-pie,”

she called to him and waved as we pulled away. “Janis,” what did you say?”

“Sayonara, baby. You know, goodbye.” It may have been coincidence, but it sure was odd. I turned the paper bags around so that the flag could not be seen. Some things are too strange to be pursued.

Cheek Lake was only about ten miles from where we had stopped. Janis seemed tired and in need of a rest. It was not possible to park right near to the lake, so we left the car and walked up a small hill and across a grassy bank. It was stunning. The lake was silent and where the still cloudless sky was reflected in its waters, it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began. Behind us, the sinking sun was nestling itself in between two duvet-like knolls; it felt to me like someone had put their arm around me, so affectionate was its warmth. From out of nowhere, Janis fashioned a picnic rug, laid it on the ground and surrounded it with several spikes of tree. These were our candles and she lit them from a lighter procured from the cardigan wrap she wore around her shoulders. I emptied the bags onto our makeshift spread. Janis rearranged the contents so that soon, they resembled not so much the baloney, pumpernickel bread and assorted fruits and potato crisps that I had bought, but more a hastily prepared light meal for two; just perfect for a night by the lake. Seems, she did have a lighter touch, after all.

“I’m famished,” I said, saliva forming around the corners of my mouth.
“Lunch feels like an age ago.”

“How did you like your chilli?”

“Not half as much as I’m going to enjoy this, I’m sure.” Janis smiled and cracked open a bottle of beer on a rock. “You sure did go a funny colour at that table, Peaches. Ha, ha! I thought you was ready to chuck.”

“Yeah,” I said sardonically. “You seem to have that effect upon me, don’t you?”

“Man, I just can’t believe it was still only yesterday that we met. Damn, that was a stroke of fate.”

“Do you believe so?” She paused, as if in thought and then took a swig of drink before answering with a curt, “No. There ain’t no such thing. I know there’s no one else I’d rather be travellin’ with, though. You are a prince among men, Peaches.” She opened another bottle without spilling a drop and handed it to me. I felt the sun still warm upon my back.

“So where would you be now? You know, if you hadn’t bumped into me? You said you needed someone to travel with.”

“Needed or wanted?”

“Needed is what you said.”

“You think that makes a difference?”

“It makes the world of difference. It makes it a whole different trip.” I expected Janis to shift uncomfortably, or to find a quick one-liner to get her out of the conversation. She did neither. “Peaches,” she began slowly, as if searching for each and every word to make it count. “Sometimes, a need can fulfil a want. I needed you with me and now ...” She trailed off, in spirit and in voice, tipping her head back and letting the sinking sun warm the very top of her forehead. “And now?” I pushed.

“And now Peaches ... now, it’s a want. I want you to come the whole way with me.”

“To Port Arthur?”

“To Port Arthur. I need a leaning post. You know what I mean?”

“Kind of,” I replied. She finished off her bottle, closed her eyes and laid her body

back into the soft grass beneath us. The conversation was over.

As I sat and looked at her, I couldn't help but compare the situation with the first time we had met, just the day before, back at Yasgur's farm. She had looked the very epitome of a walking cliché then; with her tie-dye clothing and her bangles and beads. Now, however, I saw her with different eyes. Her rugged face now looked only vulnerable to me, even despite the puffiness from the blow she had taken at the diner the night before. She looked younger somehow too. I would still have put her at about twenty-six or seven, but she had a youthfulness that hadn't seemed to be there the previous day. I guess she just looked a whole lot more interesting than she had when I knew nothing about her; not that I had gleaned much more than a few morsels of information about her anyway, but we had shared experiences to draw on now; real experiences too, worth a thousand times more than anything any imagination could conjure up. I tucked into the food laid out before me, careful to leave some for Janis for when she woke. I grinned at the realisation that I was living the adventure that Mr Rimbaud and I had planned. I had Janis to thank.

In only a few minutes, she opened her eyes and sat up. "You see that, Peaches?" she said, pointing up towards a nearby rock face. "That is Todd Knob. Getting' up there'll give us a hell of a view."

"What about your food? You must be hungry."

"Food'll keep, honey. The light ain't gonna pitch it in for too much longer though. What d'ya say, baby?"

"Sure, it doesn't look too high."

"First though ... a swim."

“A swim?”

“You betcha, Peaches. That water’s just calling out for us to ripple it a little.”

“I ... er,”

“You what? Ain’t got your costume?”

“Something like that.” I knew where this was headed. Janis stood up; pulled off her cardigan and tee shirt and then bent over to slip out of her skirt. She wore panties, but no bra. The outline of her body was slender; almost lean in fact, except for her backside, which curved elegantly into her thighs. Her breasts were small and somewhat sagged, her nipples dark and perfectly round. Her eyes shone out radiantly from beneath the mop of hair, which itself cascaded down upon her now naked and pale shoulders, like a weeping willow into a milky lake. She stood over me, hands on hips, confidence seeping out of every part of her upon which the orange sun shone. “Now you ain’t gonna go shy on me, are you Irishman?” she laughed. She lashed her tongue from one side of her mouth to the other in a display of sheer bravado. “Too late,” I stuttered.

Janis ran off towards the water and waded in. “Hail to Jesus!” she wailed as it filtered up to her waist and beyond. “God damned beautiful, Peaches. Get that little British ass of your’s in this lake right now. D’ya hear me?” I undressed down to my underwear and made my way down to the water’s edge, checking around our clothes with typical British reserve, to make sure that nobody was going to run off with my trousers. Janis was right. The water was lovely. It caressed and stroked against my skin, teasing open my pores and finding its way into my very heart, slowing and calming my mood like birdsong on a Sunday morning. We swam in that lake for who knows how long; it may have been an hour, it may have been a day. We didn’t speak

to one another, but it felt as though we were sharing an ocean, a lake and a bathtub, all at the same time. Memories are made of such delights.

Some time on and Janis waved to me and pointed up to the rock face again. “Before the sun goes down,” she shouted. I swam back for as far as I could and then waded the rest of the way. Janis joined me on the bank and we put our tops on, leaving our lower halves to dry in the air. “What’s the terrain like?” I asked. “Is it a climb or a walk?”

“It ain’t too bad, honey. Your tough ole’ feet’ll do fine and dandy.” I looked at her feet. For someone who never seemed to wear shoes, Janis’ soles were remarkably delicate. That was her all over though; a mass of contradictions. We set off and in what seemed like no time at all, found ourselves approaching the rock face from the Southern side. It was exhilarating. I couldn’t wait to reach the plateau and survey the lake from on high. Janis took the lead and scrambled up to what looked like the perfect place to rest. I followed closely behind, watching as she lifted her body over a cleft and then arrived at the summit. I had to concentrate to keep my footing. Then I heard it. “Son of a bitch,” came a cry from above me. “You poor bastard!”

“Janis?” I shouted.

“I’m okay, Peaches,” she replied. “You might not wanna see this though, baby.”

“See what?” I groaned, pulling myself over the same cleft that Janis had just negotiated, before seeing her discovery with my own eyes. I had to hold back my own vomit. “What the hell is it?”

“A dead hobo,” said Janis.

Chapter Eleven.

“Dead? Are you sure?” I moved a little closer. I had never seen a dead body before. I had never wanted to either. “Well man, there’s a rat crawlin’ out of a hole in his face.”

“Jesus Christ, Janis!” I said, leaping back. “You’re bloody joking?” Janis rolled her eyes and beckoned me closer. “Baby, of course I’m jokin’. He’s dead though, there ain’t no doubt about it. Looks like he just sat here and it kinda left him.”

“What did?”

“You know? Life. It just kinda ran out.”

“Ran out? What the hell does that mean? You don’t just die.” I was scared, but didn’t want to show it; Janis was too good at dealing with this sort of thing and it unnerved me. “I don’t know honey, maybe he starved, maybe he was injured or maybe ...”

“Maybe what?”

“Maybe he knew he was gonna die and he meant to be here. It’s a hell of a last view.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Live with it, Peaches. There ain’t nothing you can do to cheat death. I just hope he had a helluva time gettin’ here. Poor bastard.”

Janis sat on her haunches and looked at the man’s grim features. He had dark brown hair, with flashes of grey in and a thick beard that was remarkably well groomed. I guessed that he was probably somewhere in his late fifties. He wore a tidy and heavy overcoat, strange given the time of year and a chequered bandana around his neck. On his feet were heavy working boots; the kind my father wore at the docks every day. These too, were in fairly good condition. If it had not been for the colour of his face and the heady aroma of decomposition, one could almost have thought he was just resting, on his long journey to who knows where. “How long do you think he’s been here for?” I asked. I don’t know why, but I felt sure that Janis would know. “Hmm, not more than a couple of weeks; give or take a sunrise or two. What’s the date, Peaches?”

“The date? It’s the twentieth of August. Why do you ask?”

“Well, then, I would say, my good man,” Janis began in a mock upper-class English accent, “That this here gentleman has been dead since the ninth day of this month.” I turned to look at her and raised my eyebrows.

“You would, eh?”

“Indeed?”

“Based on what, Sherlock Holmes?”

“This!” she laughed. Janis was looking very cocky and waved something about in her hand. “What is it?”

“Peaches, cute you are. Nosy you ain’t. It’s a journal, man. It’s gotta date in it too.

Ain't much writin' mind. This cat must'a been up here writin' his story. Guessin' he died 'fore he got going."

"Where was it?"

"Down here," she pointed. "It was under his overcoat. It's been kept real dry too." I felt a sense of intrusion come over me and I suddenly felt anxious to leave. "Janis, let's leave it. In fact, let's just leave the whole thing; the man and everything, I mean. He needs his dignity, surely?"

"Baby, the man's dead on a rock in the middle of nowhere. He's just some no account drifter who had to let his ramble roll. He don't look no shakes, so I'm guessin' his hogs was so poor it took six of 'em to make a shadow. Now I don't know why he's here or if he even meant to be, but now we're here too and we gotta deal with it."

"Deal with what? There's nothing to deal with for Christ's sake. Let's just leave him in peace."

"Jesus, man. I didn't know you were so jittery." Janis was right. I was a bundle of nerves and I didn't know why. Maybe too much had happened in too little a space of time; first the fight, then the police and now this. Anyway, it just didn't seem right for a man to die out here all alone. Janis began to leaf through the journal. I looked down at the water beneath us. Cheek Lake suddenly looked a deep and forbidding lake from where I stood.

"Hell, Peaches. This dude's from Canada. Listen ..."

"Janis, I'm not sure we should, it might be ..."

"What's the point of writin' if nobody's gonna read it? He didn't get much down

anyhow. I guess he was only just beginning.” She began to read out loud. “I fled the tree of terror in 1932 and headed south. Canada was to be my homeland no more. The scars I would carry for the rest of my days. So ashamed was I of what I had done, I never settled again. For thirty years or more, I have walked the roads of a nation. My solitude has been my penance for the crime.”

“Who the hell is he?” I cried. I tried not to let on, but my anxiety was being taken over by a morbid fascination. Janis turned a couple of pages and read on. “I circled Lake Superior and moved on into Michigan, taking kindness and shelter from people that I met ...” Then she trailed off, reading to herself. “That’s it?” I asked. She spoke up again. “The first two months of 1934 were the coldest of my life. I spent the days sleeping and by night I walked. It was the only way to stay alive. A farmer in Vanderbilt let me stay in his barn. His wife cooked a fine soup. He told me that minus fifty-one had been called on the wireless. Of course, being from Canada, I was used to the cold, but living on the road made it a real hardship.”

“Janis,” I said. “What was that stuff about scars and heading south? Go back to that.”

“You’re showin’ some interest now then, honey?”

“It’ll probably tell us a bit more about him. Go back to the beginning.”

“Sure thing, sugar.” She turned the journal open at its first page and read to herself.

“Well?” I urged.

“Nothin’ here.”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s it. Just the bit I read, then it jumps to Lake Superior and Michigan and ...

well, here you see.” She handed me the journal. Only half a dozen pages had been written in and what little there was, seemed only to detail places that the hobo had passed through. There was a paragraph about a dog that had walked across Washington State with him and another about the Grand Coulee Dam, but as for the reasons behind his leaving Canada, there was nothing. I looked at Janis and her at me. Then we both looked at the man. There seemed no doubt, that he had had quite a story to tell, but that story had now passed away with his own life.

“Peaches,” said Janis, turning to me. “When I was a kid, some folks at school used to tell tales of hangins’, you know?”

“What do you mean? The gallows?” I said.

“Yeah, just to scare the crap out of us, I guess. Worked too mind, ‘cept not on me.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” I said mordantly.

“You’re all heart, baby,” she quipped back. “Anyhow, there was one of them stories that stuck in my mind and used to keep me awake at night.”

“Go on.”

“The story goes that back in the ol’ days if when you were hanged, your neck didn’t break straight off, they let you dangle and then, if you still didn’t die, they’d let ya down and you’d be a free man.”

“Did that happen?”

“Shit, I never believed it, but I always kinda wondered.”

“And what are you wondering now?” I said, beginning to wince.

“What if the ‘tree of terror’ in this here journal is the hangman’s rope and the crime this dude was payin’ for by living alone was what he should’a been hanged for?”

“No way,” I said unconvincingly.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Janis answered back.

“Which is?”

“One of us is gonna have to pull that bandana back.”

“Get lost!” I jumped back, nearly losing my footing at the suggestion. “You can’t draw blood out of a turnip. What in God’s name do we want to do that for?”

“Baby, you ain’t never gonna get another chance to meet a guy that’s been hanged. This is as scarce as hen’s teeth and frog fangs.”

“Meet him? He’s dead! Janis, will you think straight for a minute.”

“Honey, if you can’t do it, then I sure as hell will.”

“That’s fine by me.

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

She leaned in, her arm outstretched. “Wait, wait,” I said, not really sure why I was stalling. “What are we going to do then?”

“Peaches, will you just sit quiet a moment. This guy’s been a walking ghost in my mind since I was a kid. Ain’t you ever heard of an urban myth? I gots to know. It ain’t disrespectful. We ain’t thieving and we ain’t gonna disturb him none. We’re just sharing in a little secret that he can’t take with him where he’s gone.” I frowned. She smiled.

I looked at our surroundings. I guessed it was a pretty place to draw your last breath. The sun was falling fast, casting an eerie red hue over our Cliffside tableau. I

looked again at the man. I wondered what his name was. He certainly looked serene enough. What, I thought, might his last thoughts have been. Would he have looked back on his life with regret at whatever it was that led to his leaving his homeland? Or, would he be thankful for the second-chance that fate had dealt him, assuming that Janis' theory was correct? Did he know he was going to die? Had he achieved everything that he had hoped to or was there still a lot to do? Janis waited, as if for my approval. Then, from out of nowhere and quite to my own surprise, I spoke. "Okay, take it off, but ... we should bury him afterwards. It's only right. I don't know what this man did in his lifetime, but I'm sure he paid for any sins he committed long ago. Old burdens don't incite blows. We're not going to leave him to rot in the heat, in the middle of nowhere."

"Sure, baby," said Janis quietly. "You know," she added. "We ain't never gonna be able to bury him in this heat. Man, this ground's gonna be harder than Nixon's ass."

"What do you suggest?" I asked.

"Cremation." I considered it for a moment and nodded; I figured we would still be maintaining the man's dignity. It was strange; one man's fate decided by the nod of my head.

With a delicacy that belied her often-raggedy appearance, Janis gently tilted the man's head forward and untied the chequered bandana from the back of his neck. She pulled it away slowly and placed it in his overcoated lap. The sickness that I had initially felt when she had suggested removing it had now faded, replaced by a calm fascination with this mysterious hobo. I looked at his neck. Sure enough, under his dark beard and red against his pale neck, were the clearly visible lines of strangulation. My heart felt suddenly heavy again. It didn't seem real. Janis

whispered something to herself and then put her arm around me. We both looked at him, lost in our own thoughts. Mine were mixed. I wondered how the innocent victim of whatever this man's crime had been would feel, to know that he had lived for many years after his supposed day of reckoning. I wondered too though, how the hobo himself had felt to live with the physical and mental scars. The weight would have made for one hell of an unbearable load. I guess there were no winners.

“We can use the torches from our picnic, if you like,” suggested Janis, after a long silence. “Sure, I'll go,” I said.

“We'll both go, baby,” insisted Janis.

“Have we got any drink?”

“Always!”

“We'll need it to put under him.” Without saying another word, we set off back down the path from which we had climbed the cliff. The light of the day was certainly against us and we hurried. Besides, there wasn't much to say anyway. We knew what we had to do. Janis carried the lighted torches back, while I carried two bottles of whiskey and an assorted collection of sticks. I hoped they would be enough. To be honest, I had absolutely no idea how this was going to work.

Upon arriving back and still without speaking, we busied ourselves in the task. I filled the old hobo's pockets with the sticks and Janis poured him a farewell drink, from head to toe. Briefly, my mind flashed back to the last funeral I had attended, that of Mr Rimbaud, several months before. I could not have imagined then, for all the world, that upon my trip to America, I would find myself cremating a homeless man on a sunset-filled cliff top, alongside someone who only a couple of days before had been a total stranger. More still, I could not have imagined having

been involved in the excitement of the last couple of days with Janis. That was the right word too; despite my anxiety at her every move, I was having an exciting time and something told me life would never be this way again. As I look back now, some thirty-six years on, my time with Janis ranks up there with the great emotional moments of my life; from meeting and falling in love with my Mary, to the publication of my first novel and even to the birth of my two daughters. It holds its own private place in my heart too; two people a long way from home and a long time ago.

“Peaches, do you wanna say something? I know I ain’t never short of a word or two, but you’ve got a fine way of talkin’. I know you’ll do the man some dignity.”

“Well, I guess I could,” I stuttered. I thought for a moment. What would I say? I opened my mouth, but nothing came out, just a breath of air that disappeared into the sky. I watched my words float away into the night, powerless to give them a voice. Then, Janis spoke. “Well, I ain’t a one for talkin’ to the Lord, but I hopes we’ve given this here man a proper send-off. I don’t know whether he was a good man in life, but wherever he’s going to, may he take a little of our hopes with him. Amen.” With that, we lit the fires beneath him and made our slow way back down the hillside. It was almost dark, but there was just enough light to fetch up the picnic and head on back to the car. “We’ll have our supper in the car,” said Janis. “Hell, I guess we could call it a wake.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“Funny how some days starts and ends, ain’t it baby?” I have to say, that for once, Janis’ thoughts and mine were one and the same. In the car, we had the radio on low. An old Sam Cooke tune was playing; ‘A Change Is Gonna Come.’ As I watched the

embers of the old man's ashes mingle with the stars, I wondered to myself, what changes tomorrow would bring. I closed my eyes and fell asleep to the gentle sound of Janis humming along to the radio. For now, I was happy to be where I was.

Chapter Twelve.

I woke to the sound of a passing truck. I looked at my watch and it told me ten to six. I looked at the empty seat next to me. "Doesn't that woman ever sleep?" I muttered to myself. I took my time in waking up and listened to the car's radio for company. The Charles Manson 'family' killings, which I had read about at the airport in Miami, were still big news. Roman Polanski, the director and husband of the murdered actress Sharon Tate had been speaking at a press conference. The drawling southern tones of the newsreader filled me in on how Polanski, along with his father, had survived the Nazi atrocities committed in the Krakow ghetto during the war and of how his mother had died in a concentration camp gas chamber. Now, his wife, eight and a half months pregnant, had been senselessly killed; I guess the guy wondered what he'd done to deserve it all. Having made his name the previous year, with the film 'Rosemary's Baby', Polanski, one of Hollywood's rising stars, would be dogged with controversy and hullabaloo for years to come. I remember thinking how funny it seemed that some people pass through life unnoticed, while others ride the peaks and valleys with their arms raised high for all to see; as if in some deranged rollercoaster cart.

Then, following stories about Jimmy Hoffa, fighting in Vietnam and Hurricane Camille, the radio brought me news from home. I couldn't believe it,

given the insular content of the American news. Even to me, Ireland seemed light years away. The United Nations Security Council had turned aside Ireland's request for an Ulster peacekeeping force. Things back home were turning bad. From out of the Lincoln's tinny radio, came the voice of Brenda Devlin, a member of parliament, saying that the Londonderry Catholics would not accept the Ulster Special Constabulary, seen by many as a Protestant army, entering the district and that the B-specials, as they were known, would have to shoot her if they came back in. Listening to the news that morning, it was hard not to think that killings were coming into fashion. Ireland was in turmoil and although an ocean separated me from my homeland, the civil war threatening to erupt there pierced me to my heart. What would life be like upon my return, I wondered? Would it be safe to walk the streets? At just twenty years of age, my childhood recollections of haring around the city already seemed to be a lost reminiscence. During the following year, 1970, twenty-five people would lose their lives in the bloodshed and in the year after that, a total of one hundred and seventy-four people would be needlessly killed. I was witness to none of it; Ireland, as it turned out, would never be my home again. Life with Janis would see to that.

It seemed strange to think that all over the world, normal life had been carrying on without me. Since I had hooked up with Janis, our comings and goings had been my main preoccupation, but listening to the radio, I was reminded of how small I was in the bigger picture. It also impressed upon me how vast the landscape of America was. From the western coast of California to the eastern shores of Delaware, the country stretched for more than five thousand miles across. We had touched upon only a fraction of the fifty states and I wondered how many trips it would take before you could truly say that you knew the country; several lifetimes'

worth, I didn't wonder. Janis and I had travelled for forty-eight hours, without any interference from the outside world. Our only relationships, apart from with each other, had been passing ones, moments in a lifetime; people on a bus going by or a wave from a farmer on a tractor; a picture in a frame.

Another truck went by, shaking the car as it rumbled onwards. There seemed to be more trucks on the road than anything else. As a child, my images of America were shaped by the railroads, but those days were long gone; the highway was king of America now. Mr Rimbaud had jumped the wagons as a young man and the pictures he painted in his tales were full of steam and dust. His had been an America still connected to the old frontier, if only in his head; a land of leather saddles, Jimmie Rodgers' train songs and pioneering entrepreneurs. They were the years between the two world wars and growth was closing in on the old ways. The truth was, I suppose, it had always been that way anyway. Even the oldest traditions in the States, save for those of the Native Americans, were but saplings. In his day though, you could still meet survivors from the bloody days of the gunfight era. He once told me, I remembered, that he had met Josie Earp, widow of the legendary lawman Wyatt Earp, at a theatre house in a place called Colma, California. She was both pretty and polite as he told it, insisting that he call her Sadie, just as old Wyatt himself had done. I don't know how, but the young Mr Rimbaud even procured a lace handkerchief from the widow, which, of course, wound up in his shop many years later. He could have dined out on that story alone for a lifetime, but in all the time I knew him, I never heard him share it with another soul.

The news over with, it was back to the music; a tune I didn't know came on to the radio and I listened with all the enthusiasm of the young boy sat in Rimbaud's shop, twelve years earlier. On that day, Mr Rimbaud had played me a Library of

Congress record by the great Jelly Roll Morton. It sounded like it came from another world and it touched my soul. The Irish folk songs and ballads that I had heard up to that point were all about the past; they were both conscientious and righteous, but never appealed to me on an emotional level. The sound of Jelly Roll's piano though was something else, a wake up call or a kick in the head even. The music was twenty-five years old then, but it spoke to me, stirring something up inside and from across the Atlantic Ocean, I was hooked. Long before Mr Rimbaud and I planned our trip to the States, somehow I knew that I would be there one day. That record was the beginning of the journey that led me to Woodstock; the journey that led me to Janis and the journey that led me to this radio. As much as my hands and my heart, the music had been with me all the way.

That reminded me; where was she? I got out of the car and looked around. It was a beautiful morning and although it was still only just past six o'clock, I felt bad for having lingered in my sleep for so long. Cheek Lake was covered in a dewy quilt of mist, with only the odd moorhen breaking through here and there. I looked up towards Todd Knob. The smoke from the fire had gone now and I wondered what had been left behind. I wondered too, had we done the right thing? I found it hard to comprehend that it had been only last night; the last few days were beginning to merge into one and I knew that sooner or later I would have to stop completely and catch up a bit. I wasn't sure though, that Janis ever stopped. Yet again, I had woken early to find her already up and gone. I couldn't be sure that she had even slept at all. I stretched my arms out and looked around for signs of where she might have gone.

Across the road, at the start of the path that we had followed to Cheek Lake, was a notice, presumably for tourists. It had a map, denoting Davidson County's location in proximity to Nashville; I didn't even know we were in Davidson County.

According to the notice, it was created in 1783 and named in honour of William Davidson, a colonial soldier and Revolutionary War officer who was killed in action at the Battle of Cowans Ford on the Catawba River in North Carolina. The map showed Davidson County to be in an area known as Middle Tennessee and proudly named it as one of the state's three 'grand divisions.' Nashville didn't look to be too far away and I figured it would only take a short trip to get there, an hour at most. That was, whenever Janis turned up. And just then, that's exactly what she did.

"Mornin' Pappy. Ain't it a gorgeous one?" She was walking up the track from the lake, wildwood flowers in her hand. She was beaming, from ear to ear, not for any particular reason, I don't think; she just seemed to greet me that way. I liked it; it made me feel good. "You was sleepin', so I thought I'd leave you be." Her hair was soaked and she was half dressed, wearing a wet t-shirt and her panties. Her ubiquitous bangles and beads completed the look, giving her the appearance of someone who had been thrown unexpectedly into the lake. "What time were you up?" I asked.

"I don't know, baby. I didn't look."

"I feel exhausted."

"Well, I guess sometimes it's just best to keep going. I ain't stopped in years. You ain't never know when fate's gonna slow you down for good."

"You mean like him?" I said, nodding up to where we had lit the previous night's fire. She paused, and then answered quickly. "Yeah, that ole cat sat still for too damn long. I reckon he had violins in his sunset." She brushed her hands through her straggly hair kind of nervously. "You didn't mean him?" I asked.

"Peaches, you ask too many questions. Let some air in, baby. You know what I

mean?” I’d heard this before, but I didn’t feel like quitting.

“Janis, what’s on your mind?”

“Water, baby! Cool as hell, too. You oughta’ get yourself in that lake before we get going in. We got ourselves a date with a jukebox, don’t forget.”

“I haven’t forgotten. What did you mean about slowing down?”

“Ain’t it a bit early for the philosophising, baby?”

“Everyone has to take it easy once in a while. What makes you so different? I haven’t seen you sleep once in the last forty-eight hours, apart from when I found you, that is. You’ve got to be tired too, surely?”

“Baby, I guess some folks just likes to get up and do, you know?”

“You never come down though.”

“Jesus man,” she said, sounding agitated. “You’re soundin’ like my momma or somethin’. What in the hell’s the big deal anyhow?” I wasn’t sure myself, but something just didn’t feel right. I couldn’t put my finger on it; maybe I was just tired.

Janis went to the car and ruffled around in the boot. With a few carefully placed scrunches of her hair and a change of outfit, her damp and dishevelled appearance was quickly transformed into one of ramshackle beauty. She wore a short but loose skirt, which billowed out just above her knees and a pair of suede cowboy boots; the wet t-shirt was discarded for a white blouse, as crumpled as you might expect one from out of the back of a car to be. Janis though, wore it well. She flashed that smile at me again and beckoned me over. “Come on Peaches,” she said. “We’ve still got a bit of food left over from last night. Let’s have ourselves a breakfast.” She closed the boot of the car and perched herself on top, making space

for the leftover spread by her side. I leaned on the side of the car and picked through what we had. I was famished. There wasn't much, but what we had sure was going to be appreciated.

“So what's with the early mornings?” I asked. “Unless I'd seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe it. You know, you don't really come across as a morning sort of person.”

“Shit, man. I ain't never known a dude like you; always wantin' to know the wheres and whys. What in the hell do you care for anyhow?”

“I guess I just ...” I trailed off, stumbling over my words. The truth was, at the time anyway, I didn't really know. Looking back, I can see that I had become fascinated by Janis and had begun to care greatly about her. I guess, in a naïve sort of way, I had even fallen in love with her. Back then though, at twenty, I couldn't put it into words. Thankfully, Janis did it for me. “I'm sorry baby, I didn't mean that.” She put her arm round me. She was nothing, if not tactile. “We're kinda becomin' compardres ain't we?” I smiled at this. “You know what, Peaches?”

“What?”

“We could be Bonnie and Clyde. Have you seen that movie, baby?”

“Well, we've not killed anyone yet,” I joked. “Anyway, I thought we were Peaches and Diesel?”

“You bet your ass we are, baby. Peaches and God damned Diesel!” With that, Janis leaned over and planted a kiss on my cheeks. “You've been a hell of a friend to me. I gotta make sure you know that.” Again, I found myself lost for words. She pulled me closer and took my hand in hers. “A dry well sure teaches you the worth of

water.”

We sat quietly for a few minutes, picking at the previous night’s food and then, quite unexpectedly and with a genuine interest, Janis asked me about home.

“What’s it like where you come from, baby? Tell me about Ireland.”

“It’s nothing like this,” I said, looking around me. “In fact, I wouldn’t know where to start. What do you want to know?”

“Tell me about being a kid.” As she said this, Janis put her food down and pulled her knees up into her arms. She looked at me keenly; as if to let me know there were going to be no wisecracks and that I had her full attention. I closed my eyes to think. Just then, another truck came by. As dust blew up all around us, the gust of wind it sent straight through me suddenly took me back to 1957 and to the day that I first met Mr Rimbaud. For a second, I was running home from school again. “I’ll tell you one thing; Belfast is bloody cold in the winter,” I said to Janis, by way of an introduction. She leaned in closer to me.

“We lived on Hyndford Street, near to Connswater; that’s in east Belfast, terraced housing left, right and centre and chimneys to match.”

“Terraced housing?”

“Yeah, blocks of houses all the way along.”

“Sure, man. Like rowhouses, I guess.”

“I was born in that house in 1949 to the sound of the St. Donard’s six-bells. Weekends and after school, I used to hang around with a group of lads down by Beechie river, fishing tin cans out of the muddy water; didn’t see a fish once in all the years of trying. Me Mam and Da’, they were strict on schoolwork though and they

tried their best to bring me up the right way. Me Da, he's as straight as they come."

"Hell Peaches, I'd say they done theirselves proud. You're about the finest young gentleman I've ever laid eyes on. There truly ain't no-one I'd rather be travellin' with. You're a prince, alright." I felt myself blush; that southern charm never failed to touch me.

"Keep goin', honey. I like to hear it." I just said what came into my head. "Well, fishing for cans was fine in the summer, but there wasn't a lot of that, as I remember. Once autumn came around, I used to hang about around the streetlights, kicking a stone on my way to the World Cup and scuffing my shoes 'til the toes poked through. Come winter and I remember sitting in front of the fire with the wireless on, while me Da read the papers. On Saturdays, he used to take us up to Holywood on the bus. We'd get an ice-cream from the parlour and pie and chips to come home with; still do it now sometimes, only the ice-cream tastes of Guinness these days. There's not too much more to tell. You know about my job at the clerk's office and you know how I came to be here."

"Your old man friend?"

"Aye, Mr Rimbaud."

"Man, you sure took that old guy's dream and did somethin' with it," she said softly.

I nodded, before saying "It was the music that did it, I guess."

"It'll get you every time, baby; take you someplace special an' leave you pinin' for more. Lucky me, the way I sees it, 'cos you wound up here."

"I'm glad I did," I said. I meant it too.

"When d'ya reckon on going back?"

“Well,” I smiled. “That sort of depends on you, doesn’t it? We could be in Port Arthur by tomorrow evening and you still haven’t told me exactly where we’re going. You can’t keep it a secret forever.”

“Baby, I ain’t keepin’ no secrets.” Janis sounded a little put out.

“You didn’t tell me your name for a whole day!” Janis screwed her face up before answering cheekily, “But I did tell you.” For her, there was a very clear line between not telling the truth and simply not offering it, unless pushed. She favoured the latter. “Okay Peaches, I’ll tell ya somethin’ you don’t know. You wanna know why I gets up so early?”

“Of course,” I said immediately. I would take anything this cagey Texan would offer.

“Have you ever heard of the Texas Eagle?”

“No, never.”

“Aww, man. You ain’t lived ‘til you’ve ridden on the Texas Eagle.” She jumped down from the back of the car and scuffed up the dust beneath, her hands animated in excitement.

“It’s a train?” I surmised.

“Man, it ain’t just any ol’ train. It’s the most beautiful steam train in the whole damn country.”

“When I was maybe seven or so, my Granddaddy took me and my sister, Roberta, across to San Antonio. He said he’d been waitin’ ‘til we was old enough to appreciate it and that he had somethin’ real special to show us. My Momma made some sandwiches and we got up real early, ‘fore the rooster crowed even. It was three, maybe four in the mornin.’ We all three sat in the front of Granddaddy’s red

pick-up, singin' and whistling that ol' sun up out of bed; we sang all the way to the station. It was still early too, couldn'ta been much more than nine in the morning.' Me and 'Berta we was real excited like, couldn't wait 'til that big ol' thing pulled in. Man, what a sight it was; blue and silver and shinin' like a star atop a mountain. Granddaddy bought us three tickets from the money he used to keep for smokin' tobacco and we hopped right on. We'd never been on a train of any sorts before, so it was a mighty fine experience, let me tell you. We rode all the way to Palestine and then got us a lift back with a man from Palestine Municipal Airport, singin' Carter Family songs all the way. Shit, Peaches; it was the greatest day of my young life."

"Amazing," I said, completely hypnotised by Janis' romantic depiction of a time not so long ago. I wished I could have been there; it sounded like the America that Mr Rimbaud had told me about; pick-up trucks, folk songs and railroad dust. "Jesus man, it was pure heaven. My Momma told me that night that my Granddaddy had been waitin' since the day we was born to take us on that trip. He'd wanted to wait a few years, but ... well, time ain't always on an old man's side."

"What do you mean?"

"My Granddaddy was sick. He had emphysema and his lungs was fighting for breath. He didn't think he had too much time left, so he 'cided that there weren't no time like the present time. Turned out he was right, too. He took to his bed a couple of weeks after the trip, never got up again. My Granddaddy died three months later."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Janis." I couldn't help but think of my own grandfather, who died bed-ridden after the fall at Gobbins tunnel bridge, when I was ten. "He must've been glad to have taken you and your sister."

"You bet you're ass he was. He was the kindest man and I missed him like hell. He

was an early bird though, somethin' I never was. I got to thinkin' after he died, I'd like to see that ol' train by myself, but I knew I'd have to get up early 'fore any one else was up; so that's what I did one day. I snuck out with my little leather purse and a jar of sweets from the top shelf."

"How did you get there?"

"Man, I never did. It was damn near two hundred miles. I never got much past the edge of town. I'll tell you what though, my pretty little eyes was woken to the beauty of the mornin'. I heard crickets and saw rabbits and birds aplenty. Baby, the sun sure looks nice-looking when it's on the rise; orange like a roarin' fire. I never made it to school that day, 'cos of spendin' all day out in the sward. You might not believe it, but it was the beginning of my early risin' days. From that day on, I used to get up and go on out, see what I could see and ... well, I'm still doin' it now. In the quiet morning; there ain't nothin' like it. I'll tell ya Peaches, I seen more little creatures than the good Lord his self can remember creatin'." Janis let go of my hand and leaned across me to take some food. I looked at her face. I couldn't place the emotion. She had shared with me more information in the last ten minutes, than she had in the previous two days and she seemed almost relieved to have let it out. It did not last long though. "Come on Peaches, we'd better fill up on this food. It's a helluva long drive to Nashville and I'm itchin' to go." For Janis, the revelations were over and it was time to hit the road once more.

Chapter Thirteen.

We made good time and arrived in Nashville for a late lunch. Janis insisted that we go for a ‘Meat and Three’ at a place she knew. It was simple food and after the chilli of the previous day, that was no bad thing. The pork was drowned in gravy, while the vegetables, including corn muffins, were loaded in fat. I think they probably missed my stomach and headed straight for the lining of my heart; Americans are not rotund by chance. After eating, Janis drove us along the famous Music Row, which during the previous two decades had developed into the centre of Nashville’s recording industry. Indeed, it had flourished so much that when an announcer for WSM radio, David Cobb, nonchalantly dubbed Nashville ‘Music City U.S.A.’ during a 1950 broadcast, the name stuck. “Man, you see that place,” cooed Janis, pointing to a fairly anonymous looking white building. “That’s the R.C.A building.” I shook my head. “Hell, Peaches! That’s where Elvis recorded his first songs after leaving Sun. Can you believe it? The King sang ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ right over there.” I really couldn’t believe it and a tingle ran down my back at the thought. “That was the same year he was on Ed Sullivan,” continued Janis. “I was only five years old; my Daddy and me passed a TV store and he was burstin’ outta that screen and into my heart. I’ll tell ya man, Elvis kicked it off for me.”

It was hard not to be impressed by our surroundings; the United Artists Tower stood at number fifty Music Square West, while its neighbour, the M.C.A. Records building, stood at number sixty. There was though, something strangely sterile about the whole scene. To me, country music had always stirred up images of farms at

harvest time or old-time dances with pretty girls in chequered blouses; I just couldn't picture old Bill Monroe or Bob Wills sitting comfortably in these palatial looking buildings. Nashville, the self-proclaimed home of country music, seemed to be distancing itself from the soul at the very heart of the music. As it turned out, rhinestone suits and new shiny cars were just around the corner and in a few years, the music would become as insipid as these studios. I couldn't hide my disappointment from Janis. "What is it, baby?" she asked.

"It's just so ... I don't know, clean I guess. It's like there's no feeling here."

"Ha ha, I'll give you feelin' Daddy," she shrieked back. "We ain't stoppin' here. I just thought you'd like to see it, seein' as we was in the neighbourhood an' all."

"Where are we going?"

"Peaches, we're going to find some soul and have us a dance."

Mickey's Lazy Hour Tavern sat on sixteenth Avenue South. It was the kind of downhome bar where people wound down their day listening to old songs over beer and cheap wine. Not today though, it must have been about four in the afternoon and the place was quiet. "Man," laughed Janis. "Four in the mornin' and this place really would be rockin' for 'Frisco."

"I think I prefer it like this," I said, recalling the number of fights I'd seen break out in busy bars back home. "What would you like to drink?" I said, deciding that I should take the lead role. "Surprise me, baby. I'm gonna go check out the jukebox." Janis disappeared across to a dark corner of the room; in fact, the whole place was dimly lit. It had the classic American booths by the walls: just the sort you'd expect to see Marlon Brando or James Dean hanging out in. I ordered a whisky for Janis and, despite a strange look, persuaded the bartender to pour me a glass of milk. He

never asked me my age, so I didn't tell him; at twenty, I was a twelvemonth away from being able to buy alcohol in Tennessee. He was a plain, yet affable-looking man and he had a look of almost vague uncertainty upon his face, as if somehow, life was a mystery to him. I soon found out what was baffling him the most.

“Are you with her?” he asked tentatively, nodding his head in the direction of Janis. “Yeah, we've been travelling for a couple of days.”

“Where are you headed?”

“Port Arthur.”

“Huh, Disneyland more like,” he scoffed quietly, smiling at his own wit.

“Excuse me,” I said. Naively, I did not get his meaning straight away.

“Well, she's kind of funny lookin' ain't she?”

“She is?”

“Son, you seem like a nice kid, but take a look around you.” I did. The place was habitat to an array of friendless-looking middle-aged men, all nursing their beers like teddy-bears and wearing the regulation uniform of ill-fitting plaid shirts and grubby trousers. Then, of course, I saw Janis. She stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb.

“Boy, she just don't fit. We don't want no trouble in here, you know?” His tone was not aggressive. If anything, he seemed genuinely confounded by the appearance of this young woman. I could see his point. “We're just going to have drink on our way through,” I assured him. “There'll be no fights, we don't smoke dope or take crack and we'll sit here minding our own business.”

“I like it quiet,” he said. “My customers like it quiet.”

“I understand,” I agreed.

“Jesus Christ!” came a cry from the jukebox. “There ain’t no God damned rock and roll. I can’t dance to no Chet Atkins!” The bartender looked at me in near disbelief, his eyebrow rising in indignation. It was all I could do to mouth the word ‘sorry’ to him and wince.

I jumped up and hurried over to the jukebox, grabbing the arm of Janis as if I were an embarrassed parent about to admonish an unruly child. “I don’t think we should stop here,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Baby, what’s got your goat?” Janis replied, completely unaware of the attention, her very appearance was attracting. “Look,” I reasoned. “My face is still sore from the fight at the diner and I’m sure yours is too. I don’t need another bruise to go with it.”

“Man, what’s with you? I thought we were gonna dance?”

“Janis, will you look where we are? This is hardly Haight-Ashbury.” Janis stood up straight, looked me in eye and said, “Peaches, I been all across this country, from New Mexico to Montana, hell I’ve even been to Hawaii and I ain’t never negotiated from bein’ me. Now what in the hell makes you think I’m gonna be stopped by some poe-faced rednecks from Nashville?”

“I’m asking you, please?” I felt forlorn. The woman was wearing me out and I didn’t know how much more I could take. She winked at me, flashed her teeth and strode across to the bar. “Shit,” I said to myself, watching her go. “Hey, hoss!” she called to the increasingly bemused-looking bartender.

I cringed in anticipation and made sure I knew where the exit was. If she was going to do this I told myself, she was going to do it without me. I moved towards the door then stopped. I couldn’t do it. I remembered swimming in Cheek Lake and cremating the hobo; I thought about the stream we had found together and the tales of

Hippie-life with which she had wowed me. I couldn't leave her. More than that, I didn't want to leave her. She meant something to me and I couldn't desert her. "Damn it, Janis," I cursed under my breath, as I came back. I tensed myself, ready for the eruption. I figured if I grabbed her quick, then an early exit before the fighting broke out would be our best bet.

I stood behind her; about five yards back from the bar. She was leaned in towards the old boy and I couldn't hear what was being said. To be honest, I dreaded to think. I decided that I had to move quickly. I took a step closer and no sooner had I done so, than the bartender made a sudden and unexpected move out from behind the bar and towards me. I froze. He was headed straight at me. 'Christ,' I thought. 'My second bar fight in three days.' I didn't know whether to stand my ground or to take the offensive. Then I noticed his arms reaching behind his back to untie his apron. He did this quickly and tossed it on to a nearby table. Then he was at me, his right hand extending out towards my body. I went to clench a fist and moved to block him. He had a look of determination in his eyes. Then came the biggest surprise of all. He grabbed my hand in his and shook me by it. My heart stopped beating. He broke into a smile. "It's mighty fine to meet you, sir. I'm so sorry. I had no idea. I should have figured with the milk. I do beg your pardon again, sir."

My mouth dropped open and my arms fell limp at my sides. He went to the jukebox and busied himself in selecting a song. Then around my shoulder, I felt the familiar feel of Janis, draping herself over me. "Hey Daddy, how are doin'?" she said casually. "Hey Daddy?" I barked back. Unfortunately, my fight or flight instincts were still very much to the fore. "What do you mean by that?" I demanded. "Just bein' friendly," she said, as if in a breeze. Who stuck the burr under your saddle?"

“You’re not for real, surely. What the hell is going on, Janis? What did you say to that man?”

“Just hang loose, sweet baby and watch out or you’ll plough up snakes. I got us that dance, but at a price.”

“At what price? I was ready to hit him.”

“You, Peaches? Never!”

“Yes!”

“Yeah?”

“Well ... nearly.”

“Easy, honey. Come on.” She took my hand and led me to the centre of the room, where the bartender was moving some tables back to clear a space. I followed uncomfortably. “Just follow my lead,” whispered Janis and try and talk nice.”

“Talk nice?”

“Don’t worry Peaches. I’ve taken care of it all.”

The bartender scurried back to his post and gave what looked like a little bow as he passed. Then the jukebox selection crackled into life. “No way,” I said, as the music began. “You’re crazy; you’re taking the rag out of these old boys.” I knew the song well; my father had liked it. She sighed and then smiled. “I’m dead serious, Peaches.” Her voice was suddenly heavy with emotion. “There ain’t no other man alive I would dance with to this song.” Putting her arms around my shoulders, she kissed me on the cheek. “You’re a blessin’ to me and I thank whatever stroke of fate brought us together,” she whispered. As Janis’ words hung in the air, the strength of her sentiment got caught in my eyes, filling them with tears. I tried to hide them, but

it mattered not; Janis was not looking. Her mind seemed to be elsewhere. She relaxed her body and let it fit into the shape of mine, her arms not so much holding onto me as clinging on. Resting her head on my shoulder, she crooned along with the song, Tammy Wynette's already well-worn reading of 'Stand By Your Man.' A hit for the first-lady of country back at Christmas time, it was the most improbable song for Janis to have requested; ballsy, brash and self-assured and yet in my arms with a heavy, heavy heart.

I thought about our destination, Port Arthur, Texas. I knew nothing of the place or even really, where it was. From what Janis had told me, I figured it was near Houston. My knowledge of Texas and its people was stereotyped to say the least. To me, it was the land of ten-gallon hats and oil refineries; anything beyond that was a mystery. Certainly, Janis did not fit into any of my clichéd images; hip, sassy and flamboyantly dressed, I couldn't see her on a homestead ranch. The real mystery though, was that of why we were going there. I'd assumed that it was her hometown, but I had no real reason to think that. I'd also figured that she was in some kind of trouble, but again, this was merely hearsay on my part. What little personal information she had shared with me had been fairly obscure to say the least; yet I was also aware that the more time we spent together, the more she was beginning to unravel. Maybe by the time we got to Port Arthur, I thought, the smokescreen would begin to clear.

As we danced in that dimly lit bar, I felt closer to Janis than I had done on the whole journey. Her feet were on the ground and her arms were around my shoulders, but I got the impression that I was propping her up. For the first time since she had woken up coughing and spluttering at Yasgur's farm, she was not concealing her vulnerability and even if it was only for the duration of one corny country song, she

was letting me in. I desperately wanted to ask her again, why we were going to Port Arthur, but something stopped me. I guess I knew she wouldn't tell me anyway. "You sure are sweet, Peaches," she said, looking back at me as the song came to an end, "But a bird in the hand causes a big mess, you know? I gotta tell you somethin' truthful, like."

"Go on," I said. She moved our bodies apart, but kept hold of my hands.

"Just beautiful, your highness! Absolutely wonderful!" I dropped Janis' hands and spun around to see the bartender grinning inanely and clapping his hands with all his might. I immediately looked back at Janis. "Your highness?" I spluttered. Her face broke out into the biggest smile imaginable, as she laughed, "Well, I got us a dance didn't I?"

The next few minutes were as strange as they come, as the bartender let on to me that my 'friend' had inadvertently divulged my identity to him. "I sure am a big fan of yours, your highness. You know, my brother was in England once? He was in the army, see? He sure will be tickled pink, I can tell you." I stared, open-mouthed at the man. He appeared to be genuinely enthralled to have met my acquaintance and he wouldn't stop shaking my hand. Janis took the opportunity to order herself a couple of free drinks, before confidently taking control of the situation. "Well now, sir. It sure has been a pleasure for us to stop by Mickey's Lazy Hour Tavern, but we've gotta git. You know, ceremonies, scissors and such."

"Of course," nodded the man. "You're doin' a great job, m'am; the crazy clothes an' all. I have to say, I was a little taken aback when you walked in here, but it works. That freaky look diverts the eye, no end. I'll be damned, a woman too. Who'd a thought it?" Janis winked at me then wrapped up our visit. I still had not spoken a

word. “It’s been a pleasure, sir,” she told the bartender. “Worthy of a Royal seal, I shouldn’t wonder.” The man’s eyes lit up even more. He was lapping it up and I wondered just how far Janis would push it. We all shook hands and went to leave, but the man had one request before our departure. “Would you sign a beer mat?” he asked eagerly. He must have been half-baked, but what else could I do? I duly obliged; ‘HRH, The Prince of Wales’ read the inscription. It was all Janis could do to keep her composure. We left in a hurry.

Chapter Fourteen.

From Music Row, we headed into downtown Nashville and then south to the campus of Vanderbilt University. Founded in 1873 and designated a National

Historic Landmark in 1966, the university had gained notoriety, so Janis told me, a few years before, when a divinity student named James Lawson had been expelled for organising student sit-ins and demonstrations against segregated lunch counters in Nashville. A pacifist, committed to equal civil rights, Lawson had gained further attention in 1968, as the man who invited Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. to Memphis to help support a strike of the city's sanitation workers. It was at this time, that King made his famous 'I've been to the Mountaintop' speech. The next day he was dead, killed by a sniper's bullet while standing on the balcony of the motel where he was staying. "Sons of bitches, southern boys," spat Janis as she stopped the car at the campus. "Shit, some white folks ain't never gonna learn. It's been the same for as long as I can remember."

"Time will take care of people like that," I said naively. I believed it too, at twenty. In Belfast, colour had never mattered much to anyone; it was religion that tore people apart. I had grown up with it, just as Janis had grown up amid racial tension. As we sat there, surrounded by greenery and the impressive-looking buildings that made up that stately seat of learning, it was hard to comprehend. "People are people, God damnit," said Janis. There was nothing more to say.

It was the summer holidays and so the campus was relatively quiet, but the few eager minds buzzing about gave it that classic look of a sixties hotbed of ideas and activities; everyone looked so earnest and concerned. "Let's go for a wander," suggested Janis. "Maybe these kids have got a bar open."

"Do you think we should? We're not students. Don't they have rules about visitors?"

"Shit man, I don't know. What's the problem, anyway? Come on, honey. I could do

with a drink; it's getting' late." She got out of the car, leaving me to follow after her.

"Janis, it's just past five o'clock."

"Man, you agree then," she quipped. "Let's go." I don't know why, but I felt a little apprehensive. I had never been to a university before and having left school with only moderate qualifications at fifteen, I felt uneasy being somewhere where I was patently unqualified to be. A Nashville police department patrol car circled the car park and my stomach churned, recalling our last encounter with the law. I could almost feel the two officers looking me up and down, checking my description. As soon as they turned a bend, I hurried after Janis.

"Man, we need to find us a place to drink, damn it," she grizzled.

"I'm pretty hungry, too," I added.

"What day is it, Peaches?"

"It's Thursday. At least I think it is. These last few days have been kind of long."

"Ha ha, them's the best sort, baby."

"This is not my usual type of Thursday," I said, laughing and shaking my head. At work, Thursdays normally meant a trip to the post office on the Donegall Road, to stock up on stamps and envelopes; just a fortnight ago, that's what I had been doing. I had now been in America for over a week though and in the company of Janis for almost three days; I felt close to her and as I followed her blindly around the campus of Vanderbilt, I realised just how much I had come to trust her. She was leading the way and I have to admit, I was more than happy to follow, no matter where it led us.

With the August sun still high in the sky, Janis found a water feature to drench her head under. Her wet hair stuck to her cheeks, giving her a now familiar-looking,

bedraggled appearance; one that I found most endearing. I cupped my hands under the butt of the stone monument and splashed my face. The water was warm, but surprisingly fresh. “Hey, Peaches. Look over there, honey,” Janis said, pointing across a large open green. “Man, those dudes look pretty chilled out. Let’s mosey.” We walked across the green to where a group of students were camped out. A collection of bottles and junk food was strewn about around the group. There were ten, maybe twelve students in total and one of them was stood at a makeshift barbecue. “Hey fellas,” called Janis as we approached, sounding for all the world as though she were addressing a group of old friends. “Hey man,” drawled a friendly-sounding voice from the grass. “Dig the beads,” he added.

“Hey, you got any blow?” asked a dark-haired girl.

“Nope,” said Janis, “But I’ll tell ya what I do have.”

“Shoot,” said the girl.

“I got half a dozen bottles of Southern Comfort in the trunk of my car over there.” This came as quite a surprise to me. The woman seemed to have a never-ending supply of drink. Alcoholics Anonymous would have had a field day with her. At twenty, I never considered what she was doing as dangerous. At fifty-six, I shudder. Age brings shame to the coolness of youth. “Shit, honey,” said the guy at the barbecue. “Welcome to Vanderbilt!”

“Who are you?” asked the dark haired-girl. Janis tossed her hair to one side and put her hands on her hips. “Baby,” she laughed. “I’m the party you’ve been waitin’ for!”

Janis led a longhaired guy back to the car to collect the booty, while I sat down and became acquainted with some of the students. Sandy, a blonde-haired sweetheart from Dallas, told me that she was planning to be the first female President

of the United States. She was studying law and philosophy, as she thought they would give her a good grounding. She was also dating the son of a senator, as she figured that would give her a shoe-in; sex and power, where there's one the other will surely follow. A girl called Rosa told me that she had wanted to study at Vanderbilt after reading about James Lawson. She was slight and softly spoken, as she told me, "Sometimes, us black folks have got to go where the fight is." A simple phrase, all the more powerful for the delicacy with which it was delivered. She told me that both her mother and her grandmother were housekeepers and that her dream was to be able to afford to buy her parents house for them. My own simple job back home seemed decidedly uninspiring by the standards of dreams being bandied about around me.

Thankfully, before I began to feel too inadequate in the company of the youth of sixties America, flexing its intellectual muscle, I caught sound of a conversation in which I knew I belonged. "Man, Dylan just ain't the same without an electric guitar. That new stuff he's croonin', shit he sounds like Bing Crosby."

"Damn it, Robbie, you're missin' the whole God damn point. He's protestin' against the constraints of you and me; our expectations ain't gotta be his."

"Well, that's as maybe, but it's still shit!" I got up from the grass and introduced myself to the two protagonists with an outstretched hand; a very British gesture, I'm sure and as they obliged my courtesy they seemed a little amused by it. "Hi, I'm Joseph." I said.

"Man, that's a helluva accent you got. Where are you from?" said the abhorrer of the electric Dylan. "Belfast, in Ireland. I came over to see Woodstock. Dylan gave it a miss, I see."

“Yeah, on his own doorstep too. You know he lives on Byrdcliff, I hear? Anyway, it’s good to meet you man. I’m Robbie and this is Lee.”

We sat down on the grass and started to chat. Robbie told me that he was from Canada and had played in a few bands back in Toronto. He had jet-black hair which he wore brushed forward all around, kind of like a messy and longer version of the Beatle mop-top. He had on a wide-collared, flower print shirt, complemented by a pair of orange corduroys, while his feet were decked in a pair of leather sandals. He was, at one and the same time, the very epitome of sixties fashion and the pit of seventies college professors. He had a friendly and bright face. He’d ended up at Vanderbilt as he had an Aunt who lived in Nashville. “I used to come stop with her and I was hooked by the sound of WLAC radio. She and my uncle used to take me round the music joints. They’d have to smuggle me in, of course. Being under twenty-one is one thing, being twelve is a whole different matter!”

“So you stayed?” I asked.

“Yeah, you might not think it, being from Canada, but I love the feel of the south. People know their music round here.” Thirty-six years later, it sounds green in the extreme, but this guy really had moved thousands of miles from his home because of his love for music. I admired him instantly.

“Shit, Rob,” said Lee. “This ain’t the south. Man, you’re a long damn way from bein’ in the south.” His accent sounded similar to Janis’ as he rolled the words out of his mouth. He spoke deliberately and slowly. “Hey bro,” he said turning to me. “I’ll tell ya about the south.”

Lee was a lean and compact-looking person. He was dressed in noticeably reserved clothing, in comparison with all the other students and he seemed, if only in

spirit, to be slightly older than them too. Whereas flared trousers and loose-fitting shirts were the norm on campus, Lee had on a pair of tight to the leg blue jeans over leather boots. Into his jeans, was tucked a button-up shirt, much like one my father might wear, while his hair was shorter than that of his contemporaries. Somehow though, he did not look out of place. It was as if he was rebelling against the rebellion. I got the impression too, that he did not mistrust anyone over thirty, an all too often heard cry from teenagers of the day. “Robbie, you got that cold Canadian snow stuck in your brain. Any fool knows that you ain’t even close to the south ‘til you’ve passed down through Memphis and across the bridge.”

“Where are you from?” I asked him.

“Turkey Scratch, Arkansas,” he said proudly. “That’s twenty kilometres from the Mississippi River, son.”

“You’re joking!” I said. “Turkey Scratch? That’s a real place?”

“Hell, yeah. I was born there, twenty-two years ago and last time I checked it was still goin’ strong! It ain’t much of a place, but the people’s sweet as candy. I take it you ain’t ever travelled that way?” I shook my head. “Not many people have, lessen’ you got a reason to.”

“My friend and I are going to Port Arthur.”

“I ain’t never been there, never reckoned much to Texas. Furthest I went as a kid was ol’ man Gist’s music store on Cherry Street in Helena.”

“What about Turkey Scratch? What’s Arkansas like?”

“Well, my friend,” he said, rummaging around in his pocket, before lighting a cigarette. “Once you get down along the Mississippi, the air gets hotter and damper

than you'd ever thought possible. It ain't like round here; it's a world of bayous, creeks, levees and dikes. It's a meltin' pot of culture, too. Rock and roll grew up down there; don't let no one ever tell you different. The workin' people of the Mississippi delta, they was responsible, cos' of needin' a reason to let their hair down. There weren't no segregation between the colours in Turkey Scratch. Hell, we was all poor. But man, let me tell ya; lessen' you been to a Midnight Ramble, you ain't never seen a show."

"A Midnight Ramble?"

"Yeah, you know? A medicine show; drinkin' and jokes and sophisticated dancers."

"Sophisticated?" queried Robbie with one eyebrow raised. Lee laughed out load as he replied. "Course I was only young, but they was a fistful of somethin', I know that!"

"My family was real old-time people; cotton-pickers goin' back a hundred years or more. When I got through school and came here, they damn near as hell threw a ticker-tape parade through the place."

"What are you reading?"

"Literature. I'm gonna be a writer. Shit, Mark Twain near enough put me through school." I told Lee about Mr Rimbaud and the cigar belonging to Missouri's most famous author that I had seen as a child; it was one item I had requested Anna did not sell off as we cleared out my old friend's shop and it now sat in its case on a shelf in my room at home. I wished I had brought it with me; Lee was most impressed to hear about it. It would have been nice to give him a little piece of the man who was his inspiration.

“What makes you want to write?” I asked.

“Colours.”

“Excuse me?”

“You know, when you read somethin’ that touches you, it’s written in colour. You don’t get no literary masterpieces written in charcoal grey, am I right?”

“Yeah,” I said, a little unsure of where this was going.

“Well, where I come from, the land is filled with the most beautiful colours in this whole world. Out on the bayou at sunset, when the vines brush against the murky water and the light hits it just right; well that’s one colour. And when a sky of baby blue meets the cotton fields in springtime, contrasting with the sharp outlines of the ground beneath, well, that’s another colour.”

“How does that get you into writing?”

“Well, my Daddy’s always said that some things are too beautiful for words and how it was a shame that so many folks would never get to see the delta in its prime. I think he was wrong?”

“You do?”

“Yeah an’ I been writin’ stories since I was a little boy, fillin’ ‘em with colour and texture and feelin’, tryin’ to set that straight.”

“You should read ‘em, Joseph,” said Robbie. “It’s beautiful, man. There aren’t too many people got the touch like Lee. He’s gonna be a somebody, I’m not kiddin’ you.” He was right too. Some years later, while researching for a book of my own, I came across a novel by the name of ‘The Mississippi Peach,’ the author of which was Lee Hays, the young man from Turkey Scratch himself.

The three of us shared stories of our homelands. It was strange to think that we were from three different countries. So much was different, yet so much was the same and the music, always the music, kept pulling us back into a triangle. I was surprised too, that they were just as interested in Belfast, as I was in Toronto and Arkansas. I had never seen my own life through another set of eyes and had never ventured much beyond that which I knew; until I reached the airport at Miami, I had never even spoken to anyone from outside of Ireland. Had it not been for Mr Rimbaud, who knows how my life might have been different? I would not have been where I was, that was for sure. Robbie talked at length about his visits as a child, to a Native American settlement, where he had relatives, while Lee filled us in on the dying and bitter remnants of the Ku Klux Klan, the embers of which still kept a secret hold over much of the south. For my part, I told them about life on Hyndford Street and of how I would stop up in bed, listening to Radio Luxembourg on the wireless and of my daily visits to Mr Rimbaud's 'Illusions.' And of course, we each had our own take on the music of the day.

“So who are you diggin’ now?” asked Robbie.

“Anything American,” I said. “I’ve been hooked most of my life.”

“Do you know The Dead?”

“Yeah, sure. I love them, though they’re kinda far out for everyday listening. I like rootsy stuff, you know.”

“Son, now you’re talkin’ my kind of music,” drawled Lee.

“Man,” laughed Robbie. “Anything south of the Mason Dixon line’s got your go get. I reckon you boys would dance to a hog’s tune if he had a mandolin.”

“Ha ha, you just keep talkin’ Rob. It’s what you’re good at. He’s gonna be a diplomat you know?” Lee joked, turning to me. “They’re sendin’ him to Vietnam! Ain’t that right, Rob?”

“Sure man, well I’ve had plenty of practice interpreting funny languages, talking to you, haven’t I?” Lee let it slide and got back to the music.

“You know,” said Lee. “All jokin’ aside, there’s a triangle made up of Memphis, Helena and New Orleans that’s thrown up all kinds of beautiful music. You name it man, the Mississippi Delta’s where the big guns call home; Conway Twitty, Muddy Waters, Elvis, Jerry Lee, Fats Domino and even right up to Doctor John. He’s a New Orleans dude an’ he’s mixed it all up, somethin’ kinda special. Do you know him, Joe?”

“No, I’ll look him up though.”

“Okay, man,” said Robbie. “Enough of the South! What about Neil Young? Canada’s very own, you know? Man, he’s setting a trail already. Shit, that new album with Crazy Horse, it’s like being in the eye of a prairie wind, all low and brooding. Man, that guitar, too. It bites like a coyote.”

“It leaves you with a helluva sting too,” nodded Lee.

“He’s a good one alright. He was at Woodstock with Crosby, Stills and Nash, I read. I still can’t believe I missed it,” I sighed.

“You’ll see him again, son,” said Lee. “He ain’t goin’ nowhere.” He was right. Neil Young was in for the long run and I eventually got to see him a few years later at London’s Wembley Stadium, appearing on a bill with Crosby, Stills and Nash, The Band and Joni Mitchell; it was my own private Woodstock revisited and I remember

thinking about Robbie and Lee during the show. They would have appreciated the line-up, I'm sure.

“Well,” I said. “It's gotta be Dylan for me. He's one of the reasons I'm here. He didn't turn me on to the music and he wasn't the first to get there, but he's carrying the flag as far as I'm concerned. He speaks to me from across the Atlantic, you know what I mean?”

“He's a helluva man, for a little guy,” said Lee. “Some crazy kids are still lookin' for him to be some kind of guru,” he went on.

“But he's still the man.”

“I can't argue with that,” agreed Lee. “I reckon he's pulled it all together like nobody else. He's the blues, he's folk, and he's rock. Hell, he's even gone country.”

“He's cool,” nodded Robbie. “But I still hate that country shit. Nashville Skyline Rag; what the hell kind of music is that for Bob Dylan to be making?”

“Rob,” laughed Lee. “You just need to slow down a little, that's all. You need a good woman. Look at Joe here, he's hooked himself up with a real southern rocket.”

“She's just a friend,” I said blushing. “She's kind of showing me across the country.”

“Man alive,” laughed Lee. “And she's carryin' round crates of Southern Comfort. I bet that's one nutty ride!” I smiled; he didn't know the half of it.

“Hey Peaches, you ain't eaten all of those hotdogs, I hope!” Janis reappeared from her trip to the car, laden with drink and what few leftovers we had from the previous night's picnic. Her longhaired companion carried an equally heavy load, as he followed behind. I was glad to see her, although I did wonder about the unexpected length of time that she had been gone for; it was probably best not to

think about it. She quickly opened the first bottle of Southern Comfort, raised it high above her head and screeched, “What good can drinkin’ do?” A rhetorical question, I’m sure! In no time at all, it seemed, the barbecue was sizzling, the drink was being passed around and Robbie had snuck off, only to reappear moments later with his guitar in hand. Janis needed no encouragement and threw herself into a rendition of Bob Dylan’s ‘Like a Rolling Stone,’ much to the amusement of her Canadian sidekick. A verse or two in and she had commandeered the majority of the group to join in on the chorus, which they did at the tops of their voices. No one though was a match for Janis. It was just past seven in the evening and the sun was still high in the sky, but for a dozen students of Vanderbilt University, plus two out of town guests, the party had just begun.

Chapter Fifteen.

As well as I can remember it, the next few hours passed in a blissful haze of smoke, drink and music. I know I had too much of all three and it came as quite a surprise when Janis put her arm around me and whispered, “Come on, Peaches. It’s time for us to take our leave.” As she leaned over me, the moonlight shone through her hair, giving her an ethereal glow. Of course, the drink I had consumed was probably adding to the moment, but she looked positively angelic and had the next thing she said have been, ‘Will you marry me?’ then I would almost certainly have said yes. Needless to say, it was not. “Peaches, get up off your hiney; I wanna take you someplace,” she drawled.

“What about the party?”

“Man, take a look around. These kids are whacked, besides it ain’t the kind of party I wanna wake up from the next mornin’. I ain’t playin’ nursemaid to no college kids’ hangovers.”

“Will you nurse mine?” I asked pathetically.

“Always honey, but Peaches, you ain’t drunk. You’ve just had a little too much wild flower, that’s all. I’ve ain’t never seen a cat coughin’ and splutterin’ like you!”

“How much did I have? I feel odd.”

“Ha ha, about half a dozen puffs, that’s all.”

“Okay,” I said. “But I’d rather sleep than walk.” My head felt like a mallet had hit it. Never much of a drinker back home, I’d had way too much Southern Comfort, but the dull ache was more than just the drink. I could only put it down to the pot. It had been my first try and this headache was doing nothing to endear it to me. I would

seldom try it again.

I stumbled over the bodies, some sleeping, and all dreaming and found my shoes. The first female President was snuggled up in Robbie's arms. I bent down to shake his hand. "Hey, man. It was good to meet you. Enjoy Texas."

"Take care, Robbie," I replied, patting him on the back. I hopped back over to Janis. Lee was with her. He was sober and apart from Janis and me, he was the only member of the party still standing up. "You keep your eyes open, Joe. That's some pretty country you got comin' your way."

"All in colour, too," I laughed. I was sorry to say goodbye.

"You take care of this British guy, Belle," he said to Janis. "He's alright."

"Hey, man. Don't I know it? He's the prince that woke me from my sleep." I blushed inside, as Janis said these words. I wondered how she and I were ever going to say our own goodbyes when the time came. I didn't want to think about it. We left Lee with a smile and headed back to the car.

"Why did you want to leave?" I asked Janis.

"That red-haired girl was getting' kinda fresh with you," she laughed. "You looked like you needed an excuse to scam."

"No, really?"

"Well, it was getting' kinda slow and those kids just weren't the kind of folks I wanna be getting' slow with. They was nice an' all, but they ain't no Peaches and Diesel." I thought back to the first time she had used that phrase. She had seemed so confident of our friendship straight away. It was like she had picked me, and that was it, decision made; we were friends. At the time, it irritated me. Looking back, it was

typical Janis; no half measures. “My head feels kind of funny,” I said.

“You’ll be okay, baby. You just need some Tennessee night air in your lungs, you dig?”

“Where are we going?”

“We’re gonna take a walk. I ain’t never seen Nashville by night.”

“Me neither!”

“Then we’ll see it together,” she smiled, taking my hand. We left the car and walked off of campus, back towards Music Row.

Nashville was a real hotchpotch of the old and the new. We walked the city streets until the small hours and saw it all. The Texas Troubadour Theatre may have sounded a hive of old world entertainment, but its neon star lights and bawdy looking entrance placed it firmly in the present day, while the alarming sight of an old fallout shelter sign was a reminder of more recent times. At the same time, the painted red and white advertisements for Acme Farm Supplies and Parina Health Products looked like they had been there for a hundred years or more. On the sidewall of a bar, the moonlight and neon signs combined to highlight a faded painted feature publicising that horses and mules were once bought and sold there. It was a strange reminder that this had so long ago been the exclusive domain of cowpoke folk. The stained glass windows of The Ryman Auditorium brought it all together; a place where the old and the new met and blended, if not always in harmony, then certainly in spectacle.

Having first opened its doors in 1892, as the Union Gospel Tabernacle, the Ryman had seen the celebrated figures of the old and new worlds come and go. In

1893, the Arctic explorer Lieutenant Robert Peary had spoken there, while at the turn of the century, Strauss and the Vienna Orchestra had performed to a packed audience of six thousand people. During the inter-war years, the Auditorium had been host to such luminaries as Rudolph Valentino, W.C. Fields and Orson Welles, but it was in 1943, that the most celebrated part of the old venue's history was born. In June of that year, the Grand Old Opry moved to the Ryman, broadcasting country music to millions of radios across America. By the time Janis and me stood outside, on that balmy August night, it was not just a tradition; it had become an institution. Billboards in the windows announced the latest stars to join the show, George Jones from Texas and Tennessee's own Dolly Parton. "Shit, that woman's got more hair than me!" exclaimed Janis, as we peered in through the glass.

"Man, I need a smoke," Janis said, parking herself down on the steps of the Ryman. "My feet ain't nothin' but grizzled bone." I looked down and was amazed to see that she still didn't have any shoes on. "Janis, your feet!"

"Pretty ain't they?" she smirked. "I didn't know you cared," she continued in mock appreciation. "You've got no shoes on ... still!"

"Baby, I seen a helluva lot of weird things in my short life and I've figured that the best way to keep your feet on the ground, is to keep 'em touchin' at all times."

"That's nonsense," I exasperated. "You'll hurt your feet, plain and simple."

"Ain't happened yet," she cracked.

"You're a fool."

"Who's the bigger fool, baby; the fool or the fool who follows the fool?" I let the matter go.

“I been thinkin’, Peaches. We outta do what that guy Lee suggested and really see the south. What d’ya say?”

“Isn’t that where we’re heading anyway?”

“Sure, but we could take a detour down along the Mississippi. Hell, we could ride the trail to New Orleans. Man, I can see it now. It’s gonna be beautiful, baby.”

Listening to Lee at Vanderbilt had certainly whetted my appetite for a look at the Mississippi Delta and I could think of no person I’d rather see it with. “Do you know your way around?”

“Peaches, I might be a Texan, but I’m the original Huckleberry Finn! We’ll find ourselves a riverboat and sail down that Cripple Creek in style.”

“Haven’t you got to get to Port Arthur?”

“Shit, that place ain’t goin’ nowhere, ‘ceptin down the can. It’ll keep.”

“It sounds tempting.”

“Baby, you ain’t come all this way to the States to miss the mighty river, have you? Hell, some folks say it’s the strength of the Mississippi what’s holdin’ this damn country together.”

“Who says that?”

“I says it and you’d better believe it.”

“We can follow the Natchez Trace some,” Janis said enthusiastically.

“The Natchez Trace?”

“Yeah, man. It’s the last great American expedition. Four hundred and forty miles, all the way from Nashville to Natchez, Mississippi.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a journey into the past Peaches, going back to the late 1700s. Back in the day, it was a path used by explorers and by the Cherokee an’ Chickasaw tribes, in their trailblazing days. It wasn’t nothin’ but a trail fit for single-file horses at first, but the United States army changed all that. They contracted it, so to speak.” The development to which Janis was referring was the improvement made to the route in 1801, when soldiers, reassigned from West Tennessee, were put to work making the Trace navigable by wagon. It became a recognised trade and postal route and home to numerous inns and trading posts, known at the time as ‘stands.’ It was, for a time, the most important thoroughfare in the whole of The States. However, the boom in water-bound trade in the first two decades of the nineteenth century and the development of both Memphis and Jackson’s Military Road, a direct line to New Orleans, meant that Natchez Trace was becoming obsolete. It was discarded as an official route in 1830 and slowly disappeared, wending its way into the heart of American folklore and legend where it now resides as a symbol of the pioneering and outlaw spirit of the old country.

“Okay,” I agreed, “But we’ve got to sleep. It’s three in the morning.”

“Honey, I ain’t livin’ long like this.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, there’s plenty o’time for sleepin’ when you’re in a box.”

“If I don’t get some sleep, I’m gonna be crawling to my grave anyway. Now come on, let’s get back to the car and find somewhere to stop.”

“Peaches, it’s a two hour walk back to the car, at least.”

“You’re kidding? What are we going to do? I need to lie down,” I said in wimpish desperation. “Don’t you worry none. Nothin’ dries as quick as a tear an’ it’s a mighty fine evenin’. Do you fancy a night al fresco?”

“What?”

“Under the stars. We’re right near the Cumberland River an’ ‘cross from that is Shelby Park. It’s a helluva place. We can nestle down by a tree.”

“Anything will do right now,” I said.

“Alright then honey, you just stick with me.” I followed that bare-footed woman away from the Ryman and off towards the river. She was my pied piper and as we approached its cold waters, I even wondered if she was going to walk straight across the top of it, from one bank to the other; nothing seemed to get in Janis’ way!

Shelby Park was more impressive than I had expected. Stretching across more than three hundred acres, it had a long history going back more than a hundred years. Having once been owned by John Shelby, the first white child born in Sumner County, in 1786, and the man who built the Fatherland and Boscobel mansions in East Nashville, the park had, since 1912, been open to the public. To call it merely a park though, would not do it justice; it was quite simply awesome. Even in the dark of the early hours, I was struck by its grandness. It was unlike anything I had ever seen before. “Impressive, ain’t it?” smiled Janis, noticing my open-mouthed gape. “What the hell is that?” I exclaimed, pointing up.

“That’s a windmill, Peaches. What else?”

“A windmill? I think that dope you made me smoke is getting a second wind from all this fresh air; it sounded like you said a windmill.”

“Ha ha, that’s what I said my man. It’s a windmill alright!”

“Where are we for pity’s sake? Itchycoo Park?”

I rubbed my eyes. Janis was being straight with me. Imposing its shadow over us stood a Dutch windmill, built on a promontory and overlooking much of the park. It was a fascinating sight and was, I quickly found out, just one of several unique features surrounding us. “Check this out, Peaches.”

“Good grief!” I cried. “A steamboat!”

“Gotcha again, baby. It’s just a boathouse, you know?”

“It’s great.”

“You said it!” Elsewhere, we found a rock quarry, with seven bridges built across ravines, an eighteen-hole golf course, three log cabins and summer lodges, several baseball diamonds and the remnants of a disused swimming pool. “I’ve never seen anything like it,” I said.

“Kinda somethin’ ain’t it,” was Janis’ reply. “They shut the pool down in ’61,” she told me. “You know, back in the forties, the army used it for river assault boat training? That’s some heavy duty shit, man.”

At this point, I just had to ask. “Janis, how do you know all this stuff? Everywhere we’ve been, you been a veritable font of knowledge.” I truly was astounded by her mastery of American trivia and had even begun to wonder if she was making some of it up, not so much mendacious, as just mixing up fact and fantasy a little. At this rambunctious query, she laughed in reply. “Peaches, where I grew up, there weren’t a helluva lot to learn and once you’d learnt it, well you can be damned sure there was nothin’ to do with it. You might not think it, but as a kid, my

mind was as vast as a Texan sundown, only trouble was it was of the empty kind! So, my Daddy used to buy my sister and me the ‘Time’ magazines, so’s we’d know what was out there in the bigger land. I read about it all, from the heights of Mount Rushmore to the depths of this ol’ river we’re gonna be chasin’. I guess it stuck and once I hit the road travellin’, I just picked up a load more. It ain’t nothin’ special, I just seen a lot of land. You know, my Daddy used to tell me there ain’t no point throwin’ your rope ‘fore you make a loop, ‘cos it ain’t gonna catch the cow.”

“It’s unique,” I said.

“Yeah, what the hell does that mean?” she baulked, in mock ignorance. “Latin for asshole?” Sometimes, with Janis, there was nothing more I could say.

I yawned and looked around for somewhere to sleep. “How ‘bout us two lovebirds making our nest up there?” Janis suggested, nodding her head towards the windmill. “It doesn’t look too cosy, but I guess it’s the best we’ve got,” I agreed.

“Hell, just you give me a minute, Peaches. I’ll bet I can rustle up some cushions for us to snuggle up on. You wait here, baby.” She dashed round to the back of the windmill and I heard the jiggling of a door lock, followed soon enough by the thump of her feet on the staircase. I took my denim jacket off and placed it on the grass next to a tree. I sat down and leaned against the trunk. The bark was knobbly on my back, but it didn’t matter; no sooner had I sat down than my legs relaxed into the seat of the ground and my shoulders fell in tandem with my heavy, lolloping head, down towards the damp grass under the lining of my jacket. I felt settled and undisturbed. As my head bobbed back and forth and my eyelids wrestled with the night for my awareness, I could hear Janis, cussing and shouting in the windmill behind me. “Won’t be a minute, Peaches,” she would say intermittently. It did not take long for

my eyes to give in and soon I fell, like a bear into hibernation, into a deep and much needed sleep.

When I awoke, it was in the environs of a makeshift bed. My head lay upon two plump cushions, the type you find attached to wicker chairs, faded and worn by sunshine, while I was covered in what appeared to be a throw of some sorts, probably, I guessed, taken from the windmill in Janis' early morning treasure hunt. I sat up and pulled my knees into me, not really feeling entirely awake. The Tennessee morning though, demanded my attention; vivid and intense, the sun cast life as a dazzling, moving image replete with birdsong and whispering grass. From beyond the park, I could hear Nashville waking up and setting out to work; the school bus, the taxi and the train, all chanting the city's smoky, grey refrain. Tramps would be hustling for a morning coffee, children would be hunched over half-eaten bowls of cereal and cleaners would be wiping down floors. And then there was me; a twenty-year old Irishman, lying under a stolen blanket in the biggest park in town, scratching his head and wondering where his hippie friend had gone to.

The park was even more striking in the daylight, the bold architecture and the soft greenery hitting it off like the best of friends. There was nobody about; strange I thought for such a beautiful morning, not even anyone out with a dog. I checked the time, more out of habit than anything. It was just before seven; not that it mattered. I was not even sure of the day. Was it Friday, Saturday or was it Sunday? You could have told me anything and I'd have taken it as read. An aeroplane flew overhead, as small in a sense to me as I'm sure I was to it. I thought about my flight to America. I'd spent the whole time lost in anticipation of what my trip might bring, planning visits to imaginary burger bars or hanging out with guitar-playing troubadours. Beneath all of my excitement though, was a real fear. I had never ventured much

beyond Belfast and the thought of stepping out alone in New York City filled me with something approaching terror. How glad I was now, to have had a travelling companion such as Janis. She was unconventional, she was unpredictable and she was nothing like me, but she and she alone had turned the anticipation of what my trip could be into a glorious reality. I would be lost without her.

The closer we got to Port Arthur, the more I was aware of Janis the person, as opposed to Janis the hippie caricature. It was as if the familiarity of home was able to peel off the layers of bravado and bullsh*ness, until the person underneath was all that remained. I imagined the showmanship as layers of clothing, put on over time, each one removing Janis a little further from where she had been before; in the case of her jewellery, it was a metaphor that needed little effort in terms of visualisation. The closer she got to Texas though, the more she peeled them off. As for what had made her leave in the first place and her evasion of any questions connected to it, well, that was anyone's guess. Mine was that she had just been bored. The rest of the country might have been used to the primary colours and gender bending of the flower power era, but Texas, I imagined, was a different matter. For someone like Janis, it would have been tough going; she didn't fit into any of the preconceived roles of acceptability and maybe she just thought she'd try her luck elsewhere. Maybe. I wasn't expecting anything shocking or fantastic to be waiting for us in Port Arthur. I was though, still fascinated to see it nonetheless.

“Hey, beautiful! Good mornin' to ya.”

“Hi, where have you been? Or is that a silly question?”

“Took me a little early mornin' walk back to Vanderbilt, picked this up. We ain't gonna get far without it.” Janis, resplendent in round-rimmed sunglasses and the

ever-present feather bower, sat leaning out of her silver-grey Lincoln, country music drifting out of the window. “Don’t reckon much to the radio stations round here,” she complained. “We gotta get movin’, find us some decent tunes to dance to.”

“What are you suggesting?” I asked, getting up and walking over to the car. She had parked it on the grass and had sat waiting, presumably, for me to wake up. I hadn’t heard a thing. “Well man, I say it’s goodbye to Nashville and hello to New Orleans!”

“Are we driving or sailing?”

“Hey Peaches, don’t be kiddin’ now. You might be cute, but funny you ain’t. Besides, I might just get me the notion to build me a raft, ha ha.” She leaned over and opened the passenger door. “Get in, skipper,” she laughed. As I did so, I couldn’t help but notice the back seat of the car. Covered in a collection of clothes, make-up, cigarette packets and magazines, it gave away the essence of Janis’ rambling life. Strange, I thought, that I hadn’t noticed it before. She may have called Port Arthur home once upon a time and maybe she would again in the future, but for now, her loyalty was with the road.

It had been just a month since Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins had put man's mark on the moon. A few steps here, a flag post there, the simplicity of the symbolism was almost childlike in its grandeur and like much of the western world, I had watched in wonder at those first images, surrounded by friends and family at my parents home on Hyndford Street. I remember feeling swelled with a sense of shared pride at the scale of the achievement and to hear Armstrong's eloquent words as he backed out of the hatch, it seemed as though all Earth-bound beauty had been surpassed, outshone by the magnificence of a place we could never hope to visit. That is what I thought. That is what I thought, until I saw the almighty Mississippi River, nearly four thousand miles of sprawling, expansive energy. A life force in itself, stretching from its source in Clearwater County, Missouri to the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico, it truly is America's great father of all the waters. To this day, I have yet to see anything in the natural world that even comes close to matching it in terms of its impact and impression upon me.

To know of the Mississippi River is as crucial to a true understanding of American cultural history, as are those of the names of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Its place and significance cannot be overstated and in any discourse by a foreigner such as myself, one could only hope to draw near to something approaching understatement at the very best. With its name derived from the old Ojibwe word 'misi-ziibi,' meaning 'great river,' the Mississippi is the longest river in the United States, draining most of the area between the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachian Mountains. Running through two states, Minnesota and Louisiana, it also borders eight others, Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, Kentucky, Arkansas, Tennessee and Mississippi, before its grand aperture into the Gulf of

Mexico, some one hundred miles downstream from New Orleans. Its flow is impressive too; it has been said that a raindrop falling in Lake Itasca, in Clearwater County would find its way to the ocean in less than three months. These are the mere facts though. More than this, the Mississippi River has been an essential reference point in the country's cultural history going back to the sixteenth century.

History tells us that Hernando de Soto arrived as the first recorded European to reach the Mississippi River in 1541, while other notables such as Louis Joliet and Jacques Marquette explored it further a century later. During the subsequent two centuries, the river became known as a place of refuge for bandits and murderers, and later still as the inspiration behind the books of a certain Mr Samuel Langhorne Clemens. Setting off from Nashville, I found it impossible not to think of Mr Rimbaud and his collection of trinkets; that old cigar was from round those parts and it was strange to imagine its journey, all the way from the Mississippi to a quirky shop in East Belfast. I knew that my liaison with Old Man River would be a chance to say goodbye to my dear friend. As far as I knew, he had never travelled that far south and I, of course, had never been there either, but somehow it seemed it would be the natural place at which to bid him farewell.

In the final month of the year 1811, the first steamboat to travel the full length of the Mississippi from the Ohio River to the city of New Orleans set sail, part way through the succession of New Madrid earthquakes that would continue well into the next year. Its name was the 'New Orleans' and it would surely come as a shock to those piloting those pioneering first trips, to know that they were in at the onset of something that would become so synonymous with the river; even now, approaching two hundred years later, the steamboat is undoubtedly the first thing one's mind conjures up in association with the Mississippi. New Orleans, of course, was our

destination and by Janis' calculations, it would take us a whole day's driving, and then some, before we hit town. She painted it as a carnival town, with drink, dancing and celebration from dawn to dusk and even beyond. It was also, she said, an eclectic mix of the rich and the poor, the black and the white. 'Voodoo soup' is what she called it. It sounded like her kind of place.

We drove out of Nashville listening to country music's finest on the Lincoln's radio. It was not to Janis' taste or mine, although some years later, I would find myself becoming reacquainted with the genre via the 'outlaw' movement, as the likes of Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson found critical acclaim and hit commercial pay dirt with their own take on what country music should be. Both had been working in the somewhat rigid Nashville music scene for a number of years, before they truly made their breakthroughs in the early 1970s, each man making a name for himself as a single-minded, no-shit taking, son of a gun; for Nelson, maybe the image suited as a means to an end, but for Jennings, the term 'outlaw' summed up his whole philosophy; he wasn't going to be told what to do by anyone. It was a trait I recognised instantly. Both men were from Texas and could have been made from the same piece of weathered leather as Janis. They might have taken it to the masses, but she was every bit as tough as any man I ever met, Texan or otherwise.

Grabbing breakfast on the hoof, we crossed the Nashville city limits at just after eight, taking Interstate Forty, west towards Memphis and the home of the King. It was two hundred and twelve miles; I just loved the road signs in America. Back home, nothing was signposted as being two hundred and twelve miles away. In fact, I had never been so much as a hundred miles from my hometown. Janis switched about with the radio, jumping from country to rock, before finally settling on a station with a penchant for blues. "Man, now you're talkin' about real music," she purred as

an Elmore James track bounced out. I had never heard it before, but I liked what I heard. It was rich and direct. It kind of matched the view. The country was pretty, with a loose, old time look about it. It didn't look in a hurry. I remembered what Lee had said back at Vanderbilt, about the air being heavy in the southern states. I could feel it. The air blowing in through the windows was muggy and thick, swampy, almost. Every now and then, I'd catch a glimpse of an old tractor or a disused plough. There was cotton too; plenty of cotton and the sun shone down on it all like a sovereign overseeing its kingdom. Just then, came a shout from my side. "Man alive," cried Janis as the next song crackled into life. "It's the Queen herself."

"Who?"

"Listen hard, baby," she screeched. "It's Bessie Smith!"

Born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Bessie Smith became known as the Empress of the Blues, beginning her career by performing on the streets, before joining up with the travelling Moses Stokes minstrel show in 1912. With a voice touched by fury and fire, by 1923, she was recording her own sessions for Columbia Records and her strength in delivery of such songs as 'Downhearted Blues' and 'Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out,' marked her out as a star. Nobody before or since could muster up the dark, expressive emotions associated with the blues like she could. Her singing was both dangerously erotic and carefully studied at the same time and Janis writhed and wailed in complete rapture as Smith's voice called to her through the airwaves. I almost felt like an intruder, so intense was the connection. At one point, I even had to grab the steering wheel to keep us on the road. It was not until the song had finished, that Janis relaxed back into her seat and returned to the conscious world. "Christ, what was that?" I exclaimed.

“It’s a girl thing, Peaches,” she replied with a smirk. I shook my head and tried to think of manly things! Had I known at the time however, of the conclusion to Smith’s story, I think I would have felt a little more apprehensive. A feminist before the term existed and as hard-hitting in life as she was in the studio, Bessie Smith met her end in a car wreck in 1937, in, of all places, Mississippi. Living fast and dying young; it was all a little too close to Janis’ way of thinking for my liking.

“You know we ain’t far from where Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah, well at least that’s what folks reckon. Nobody’s really sure, but they say it happened at the crossroads of Routes sixty-one and forty-nine. That’s near Clarksdale.”

“Do you believe it?”

“Hell man, I don’t believe in nothing, but it’s a helluva tale.” Looking out of the window, I tried to imagine Johnson’s fabled meeting. Under the midnight sky, these long roads and dry, dusty fields would have an indomitable presence and Johnson, at his wits end could have seen anything he damn well wanted to see. I wasn’t sure he’d be impressed at the 1969 version of the crossroads; it was now, so Janis told me the home of Abe’s Bar BQ. Perhaps, I joked to her, Johnson could have bought himself a coffee, sobered up a little and saved himself a lot of trouble. “Oh honey,” she snorted. “You’re just as dry as a dustbowl ballad.”

After a couple of hours, we crossed the Natchez Trace and passed through Jackson, a pleasant looking place with one of the prettiest main streets I’d ever seen and then, it was downhill all the way to Memphis. “Peaches, there’s one place I just

got to take ya to. Man, you'll love it, I know!"

"This isn't another chilli house I hope?"

"Ha ha, no baby. This is somewhere I know you're gonna feel right at home. Just you wait and see." Janis' smile was at its broadest and most self-satisfied for some time and I wasn't sure whether to be wary or not. "Do I get some clues?" I asked.

"Aww, honey. I ain't a one for puzzles, besides I wanna see your face when we gets there." We hit Memphis at just after one in the afternoon and headed straight for the legendary Beale Street. This was truly the home of the Blues, but for me, the significance of the place was a little more personal.

A few years before, Mr Rimbaud had told me of the race riots in Memphis during the late eighteen-eighties. They had begun when two farm cart drivers had collided. One driver had been African-American, the other white Irish. The Irishman's injuries had killed him and in a sorry tale of Ireland's activities abroad, his fellow countrymen took their revenge for the accident, taking up arms and murdering dozens of Beale Street blacks. It was a dark chapter in the history of Memphis and as we drove along past the residents, I couldn't help but feel a thousand contemptuous eyes descending upon me. The shared guilt of my forefathers sat uneasily with me and I felt myself shuffle a little in my seat. It did not go unnoticed. "You're lookin' kinda shifty, Peaches. What's eatin' ya?" Janis said, checking my unease. I told her what was troubling me. "Shit," she said. "D'ya think rattlesnakes is bothered about Adam and Eve?"

"Excuse me?"

"Baby, you didn't take that ol' apple down, so don't be frettin' none. Lessen' you wants to be doin' time for someone else's crime, let it go."

“I guess I just feel bad about it. I know I shouldn’t.”

“Horseshit you should!” barked Janis, finishing the conversation. “We’re here, anyhow. Check it out, ain’t it pretty?”

We had pulled over to the curbside and were sat outside a fairly ordinary looking shop. The numbers one-hundred and sixty-three were stencilled over the top of two black doors, while above this hung a sign proudly declaring the founding of the shop in 1876. Next to this, painted in white lettering on a black background, sat the name of the store. It said simply, ‘D. Schwartz.’ Below the sign and above the doors, rosettes of red, white and blue added a patriotic flourish to the unpretentious decoration of the building. It looked for all the world like the local Republican Party office. I looked at Janis and waited. She said nothing. “Is this it?” I asked. She nodded. “It’s just a shop,” I said, somewhat disdainfully. She smiled and got out of the car, walking round to the shop front. Intrigued by the mystery, I followed her to the door. Finally she spoke. “Welcome to your past, Daddy.” She pulled open the door and ushered me in.

The year Schwartz’s was founded, 1876, General George Armstrong Custer met his end at The Battle of Little Bighorn and Mark Twain, the man who seemed to be weaving an ongoing thread throughout my Stateside journey, was putting the finishing touches to ‘Tom Sawyer’. As Janis and I stepped into the shop, it could have been 1876 all over again. Well buckets sat next to pot menders on shelves crammed so full of things that Janis was right; I could have been back at Rimbaud’s. The shop was a medley of paraphernalia, ranging from the long-forgotten to the never even heard of. There were typewriters, teddy bears, lap handkerchiefs and braces; bowler hats, bowls of rice, playing cards and biscuit tins. I even saw an odd-looking

item that could only have been a decapitated rocking horse. Not since my first day's arrival at Rimbaud's had I felt such a keen sense of mystery and excitement about being in a shop.

Janis disappeared off to a dusty crook of the shop and came back wearing a pillbox hat that could never hope to compete with her extraordinary brown mane. She curtsied ironically and gave me a petite twirl, before winking. Nobody winked like Janis winked. "What d'ya think, honey? Is it our kinda place or what?"

"It's incredible," I said, shaking my head. "How did you know about this place?"

"Mornin' folks," said a voice from a far off desk, cutting Janis off from answering.

"If there's anything I can help you with, just gimme a holler."

"Sure thing, hoss," answered Janis. I peered towards the desk, but could not see anyone, just a stack of books half the height of me.

"So, how about the hat?" Janis said, fanning her head with her hands. My attention was returned to the pillbox hat. "It's a little ... err, ..."

"Yeah, I know," she said. "A little bit dressy!" This was not the word I had been searching for. I wondered what Janis made of her own everyday appearance. Decked out in beads, bangles and her feather boa, she resembled a travelling circus at the best of times. I figured that agreement was the best form of answer. "You said it," I nodded. "Dressy!"

At this point, the man appeared from behind his mountainous collection of books and pottered about opening post and setting straight the seemingly never-ending assortment of matchboxes and candlesticks that filled up the half of his desk that was not covered in books. Janis continued looking through clothes, while I

found myself drawn to a set of books high on a shelf. On the spines of each, were written the words, ‘folk music.’ This was enough to grab my interest and tiptoeing to reach them, I pulled one down. Once opened, I found that they were not books at all, but folders, presumably made up by the man at the desk, full of newspaper clippings about folk music, some going back to the 1920s. There was a local Herald review of an Uncle Dave Macon show, a clipping advertising someone called Moonshine Kate and even a newspaper story about Woody Guthrie being commissioned to write songs about the Grand Coulee Dam. They were filled with everything from Leadbelly to Cisco Houston. As I turned the pages, I could smell the history of these characters. In fact, the whole shop had an odour. Not just dust, it was the aroma of oldness emanating from the merchandise housed there; the sort of smell you get in a really old theatre or in the backseat of a classic car. It was the scent of times gone by.

We spent a good hour in that old shop, searching for treasure and marvelling at so many untold wonders. It was heartening to know that all this way from home, there was a shop as interesting and full of character as that of dear old Mr Rimbaud’s. I bought a copy of Aunt Sally’s Policy Players Dreambook as a memento of our visit. The man at the desk told me that it had been a continuous seller in Schwartz’s since before the turn of the century. I clutched my copy as if it were a historical document. We thanked the owner for his time and he for ours and we left, both a little happier than when we had arrived, in much the same way as one might after a tea and cake filled visit to an old Aunt’s house in the Summer. I hear that even now, thirty-six years after our visit to that remarkable little shop, Schwartz’s is still going strong; no doubt, doing a roaring trade in people’s memories of the beauty and traditions of the days that used to be.

Picking up some club sandwiches from a diner nearby, we got back into the

Lincoln and took a drive around town. Memphis struck me as a real cliché of a place; a real southern mixture of the blue-collared types and the trilby hat-wearing office class, all going about their business in Main Street, plus the obligatory ghettos filled with barking dogs and partially dressed children. I struggled to comprehend the sheer audacity of the rich and poor divide; it was like something out of a film. It made me realise that for much of our trip so far, I had been sheltered from it. From New York to Cincinnati, through Kentucky, Nashville and beyond, this was my first wake-up call to it. All of a sudden, the car horn beeped. “Hey asshole!” shrieked Janis, leaning out of the window. “Get your head out from your pants!” It took me completely by surprise.

“A friend of yours?” I asked, as she pulled herself back in.

“Christ, man! I don’t believe it.” She looked wild. “Some son of a bitch just turned a woman away to the back of the line at the bank. I seen ‘em trailin’ out of the door. He took his place next to the other white folks. That dude with the case.” Janis stopped the car. D’ya see him?”

“I see him. Did he hear you shout?”

“Nope, I don’t reckon so. God damned racists, walkin’ an’ talkin’ an’ breathin’ this fine Tennessee air. It ain’t right.”

She watched as the man filed into the bank and went about his business inside. Then she turned to me. “Go round to the trunk, honey. Open it up and pull out one of them bottles of Southern Comfort.”

“You mean you’ve got more?” She ignored this, not taking her eyes from the man with the case. “Just get one and bring it to me,” she said insistently. I got out, did as she’d asked and sat back besides her. I knew, for once, that she did not plan on

drinking it. “Now what?”

“When that son of a bitch comes out, we’re gonna get him good,” she purred. I couldn’t believe my ears. “What?” I exclaimed. “Hit him over the head with it? Not me! I’m not spending the next ten years in a Memphis jail for that. Come on, let’s leave it be.”

“No, no, you’ve got it all wrong. We ain’t gonna hurt him. We’re just gonna make him feel stupid. You know, just like he did to that woman back there. He ain’t got no moxie for a fight. He’s a hundred dollar saddle an’ a twenty dollar horse man.”

“Moxie?”

“Yeah, guts. We’re gonna throw him so high that the birds’ll build nests in his ears ‘fore he hits the ground.”

“Right.”

“Listen up, here’s the plan.”

We waited until the man had finished in the bank and watched him step off along the street. He turned the corner to the right. “Okay, now’s the time,” said Janis. “Gimme the bottle.” She put it between her legs and pulled out, driving us in the direction of the path taken by the man. We took the right turning and saw him, crossed over on the left. “Perfect!” cried Janis. She pulled up alongside the man.

“Excuse me kindly, sir. I was wondering if you might be kind enough to give us a little help.” The man, lean and fairly good-looking, with dark eyes and sun-weathered skin, was more than happy to oblige. “Hey there, what can I do for you folks?”

“Well, what a gentleman you are, ain’t ya?”

“T’aint easy in this town, ma’am.”

“The niggers?” said Janis directly, virtually handing him his own noose. His eyes lit up, as if he had stumbled upon a kindred spirit. It was uncomfortable to see. “My Lord, it’s like they just will not be told. It’s been getting’ this way for ten years or more. A lot of folks round here, they’re fallin’ for it too.”

“Well, not us my sweet man,” conned Janis. The man crouched down, putting his hands on the top of the door. He smiled. Janis smiled back. ‘Damn,’ I thought, ‘she was good at this.’ I was feeling kind of sick myself.

“Anyhows,” Janis went on. “Me and my friend here are lookin’ for Graceland. I kinda promised him a look see, while we was in the area. He’s a real big fan, you know?”

“Yes, ma’am,” agreed the man. He looked over to me and nodded. I smiled, very half-heartedly. “You need to find Bellevue South; that turns into Elvis Presley Boulevard.”

“Okay honey, but I’m a little new to Memphis.”

“No problem, I got some paper and a pen in my case here, see? I can draw you a plan.” He was being so helpful, that part of me actually felt a little sorry for what Janis was about to do. “Just you hold on now, I won’t be but a minute.” He opened his case, sitting it on the pavement.

“Man, that’s a good deal of paper you got there, bud,” said Janis.

“It’s my job,” answered the man. I’m in advertising. In fact, I’m on my way to the office now. I’ve got some real important copy here. Got the boss comin’ in, you know what I mean?”

“Hell, he’s the man,” laughed Janis. The man joined in. I just squirmed in my seat.

“Where you on your way from?” asked Janis. “Been for lunch? We’re lookin’ for somewhere ourselves.”

“No ma’am, I’ve just been to the bank.” Janis opened the bottle of Southern Comfort, very carefully, so that the man could not see. “Expect there was niggers there?”

“Oh yeah, they let ‘em all in; Aunt Sally lovin’ freaks.”

“Don’t you just hate ‘em?” said Janis, egging him on a little more.

“They sure do stink, I knows that,” he continued.

“I’ll tell you what I hates the most.”

“Go on.”

“Ignorant assholes.” Janis’ tone changed. The man looked a little perplexed. “Hell, you know man, real pig-shit types; thicker than a hide of horn at New Year’s. I got me a picture of the biggest of them sons of bitches right here. D’ya wanna see it?” The man nodded, speechless. He seemed to have no idea where Janis was taking him. Then, having set the man up with such understated aplomb and with the greatest of elegance and grace, she executed her final move.

With her right hand, she flicked a small hand-mirror out of the window of the Lincoln and into the man’s open case. As he looked down to pick it up, Janis’ left arm extended out of the car, pouring Southern Comfort over his head and over the case of paperwork in front of him. It spilled out quickly, soaking the contents immediately. Then, in almost slow motion, he looked up, mirror in hand and with his mouth open in shock. “Hey pig,” Janis growled. “Why don’t you do the world a

favour and stick that racist, bigoted ass of yours on a roast and let it burn in Hell.” The man just stared at her, completely taken aback. “Better still,” Janis went on. “Go screw, yourself, asshole ‘cos you ain’t gonna find nothin’ ‘cept of a hog’s gonna wanna anyhow.” With that, she gave him a mock army salute and then turning to me cried, “Come on. Let’s rock and roll, Peaches!” She stuck her foot down, hooted the car horn and away we sped, off to see the home of the King. I turned to look back at the man. He was sat cross-legged on the curbside, head in hands, wondering I didn’t doubt, what in the hell just happened to him. He was a racist, no doubt about it, but I still felt sorry for him. He looked quite pathetic. I looked at Janis. She was pumped up, dancing and hitting the steering wheel in delight. I shook my head and looked to the skies. I didn’t like what had happened. At that moment, I felt cheerless towards the world.

Chapter Seventeen.

We took a further drive around Memphis, checking first on The Lorraine Motel, the place where Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated the previous

spring. Somebody pointed out the balcony where he fell for us. It was so ordinary looking; it was hard to accept that this was where a man of such strength and dignity had taken his last breath of life. Somehow, I guessed, even in a decade that had seen an American president shot in the head, I expected the great and the good to bow out gracefully, if they did at all. For me, living so far away, these people were never really dead. Their images were forever on our television screens, the symbols of modern-day America, and it was only being here in the cold light of day that really brought it home. For the first time, I realised why people made pilgrimages to the scenes of tragedies; it was to confirm for them what they might otherwise have cast aside as hearsay. My father had done the same thing after my grandfather had passed away, visiting the rocks at Gobbins Tunnel Bridge where he had fallen. I had never understood it, until now.

We passed too by the studios of Sun Records, just a few blocks northeast of Beale Street on Union Avenue. It was, as I recall, a funky little building with a white door and blinds in the windows. Again, it was kind of strange to think that this was where a little bit of history had taken place, not so many years before. Leaving downtown Memphis, we soon found ourselves on Bellevue South, which turned into Elvis Presley Boulevard, a street littered with kitschy, gaudy mansions, none more so than number three seven three four, the home of the King of Rock 'n' Roll. Now I've heard people say, even back in the day, that Graceland is nothing more than a show of decadence and over-the-top tackiness; well, I've been there and my recollection is otherwise. It struck me as a groovy-looking building and just the type of place you would expect Elvis to be holed up in. I have to say that I was mightily impressed with everything about it; the grand entrance, the long drive, the arched windows. "Are we gonna call in?" Janis suggested. "Man, it's bigger'n Dallas."

“Somehow I knew you’d want to,” I laughed back.

“Shit man,” she smiled. “Even I wouldn’t get in there. You gotta have tenure to go ridin’ with the King!” She always had a quick answer; it was something I envied.

We left Tennessee under a cloud of torrential rain and our journey continued westward, crossing the Mississippi River on the bridge at Interstate forty, then following Highway seventy-nine to Marianna, Arkansas, before switching south to highway forty-nine, headed for Helena. The weather cleared, blessing us with a journey filled with impressive panoramic views of the sodden farmland of the Mississippi Delta and, recalling Lee at Vanderbilt, I took close notice of the colours. He was right, it was beautiful and unlike anything I’d ever seen. The sun was gorgeously high in a sky that seemed so soft you could float off in it; the kind of blue that looked like someone had taken a paint pot to it and crannied right into every corner and even beyond. And it went on. For as far as the eye could see, that sky stretched endlessly on, unbound by roads and landforms, while away in the distance, another town called us nearer; another stop on a nowhere road.

The Mississippi meandered like a young woman’s mind. Catching sight of it proved elusive though, as we criss-crossed our way down through the bayou country of Arkansas and Mississippi County. It was out there somewhere and all around us was the damp, earthy feel of marshland life and water-kissed nature. It was spectacularly beautiful; the kind of place you feel you’ve been coming home to all your life. The boisterous sound of a John Deer could be heard from a nearby field. “Ain’t it somethin’?” beamed Janis.

“It’s just so ... vast,” I managed to get out. I couldn’t think of any better word to describe it. “It’s kinda like the engine room of the States round here.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, this is where all the sweat and hard work is done. There’s farmin’ folk in these parts servin’ us with three square meals a day, I bet.”

“Ah, there’s a whiskey distillery is there?”

“Hey, I told you before. Cute you can do, but funnies ain’t your style. What d’ya say we stop for a drink in Helena?”

“Sure.” I liked the sound of the name. It reminded me of a girl I went to school with. She was slim and pretty, with a serious face; I wondered how the town would match up.

The sun was shining in Helena, as we fixed ourselves up with a couple of hotdogs and milkshakes. I think it was only the second time I’d seen Janis drink anything other than alcohol. The hotdogs were good, made with real American hotdog sausages, rather than the bog standard bangers passed off as hotdogs in Belfast. I wished my father could have tasted one; he would have appreciated it I’m sure. Helena was a place full of character, Antebellum, Edwardian and Victorian buildings all sitting next to each other and music seemingly coming out of every open window. It reminded me of something out of a musical, with out of the ordinary looking people hanging out of balcony seat views and shopkeepers standing watch in their doorways. It had a small-town feel to it. Watching the people of Helena, I was reminded of the familial interactions and negotiations of Belfast life; nobody seemed in too great a hurry to pass by unnoticed, the charm of the people holding them together as a community. It is a part of my Irish heritage of which I have always been proud and which to this day, I have strived to carry with me. Now, in my mid-fifties, I find it an all too rare commodity; back in 1969 though, untravelled and

unwise, I assumed everyone was like it. Helena was my kind of place.

Bidding her farewell, we set off for New Orleans, almost four hundred miles to the south. Having slept little under Shelby Park's windmill in Nashville, I was glad of the chance to sleep and although we were headed deep into the heart of the alluring Delta, the call of slumber proved too heavy and somewhere between Greenville and Vicksburg, I slipped off. I awoke periodically, glancing out of the car to get a feel of where we were and just long enough to catch a tune or two on the radio. As far as I could tell, Janis stuck mostly to the main roads. The endless highway stretching ahead and the rumble of the Lincoln on the road became my sleeping companions. I dreamed, or thought, mostly of home and of my childhood. Nothing would be the same anymore, not without Mr Rimbaud. I had spent so many years dreaming of America, that it was now ironic to be passenger in a car travelling to New Orleans and dreaming of Ireland. I thought about what would be waiting for me upon my return, a job in which I was going nowhere, a resolutely flat and uninspiring love life and a country so full of political troubles, that it appeared to be unravelling by the day. All the tingles of excitement and anticipation which had led me here, had died in Belfast, along with Mr Rimbaud and I started to worry that reaching Port Arthur with Janis would mean the end of my American dream. I was starting to feel sick inside, the sort of feeling I had not felt since Sunday teatimes, the night before school; the feeling one gets when you know the end of something is close at hand.

In thought, I flirted with the idea of staying in America and exploring it further. Certainly, my visa permitted me more time to do this, than did my leave from work, but then what would I do for money? The money left by Mr Rimbaud although a good sum, would not support me for more than a few more weeks and any

thoughts of getting a job would soon be pulled in check by the absence of a green card. Still though, it was a tantalising thought, Joseph Morrison, citizen of the USA. I tried to picture myself living in some of the places that I had visited, my apartment in downtown New York, an elegant two-storey place in Cincinnati or even my country ranch house on the edge of Nashville. It was fun to wander through my imagination, but everywhere I looked, all I could see was Janis; she nabbed the box room of my city apartment, she lived in the annex of my Cincinnati home and she converted the barn at my ranch. It was strange, but I just couldn't imagine being in The States without her. She had become inextricably linked with the America in my head and I couldn't separate them. For the time being, I didn't want to. I didn't have to either. She sat besides me still, winging us on our way to another destination. Port Arthur though, was becoming closer by the hour. Soon, just one state would be all that separated us from her home in Texas. I closed my eyes tightly, clinging on to the hour.

I slept more that afternoon than I had on any of the previous three nights. In fact when I woke up, it was nearly eight in the evening. The smell of magnolia was blowing in from outside, sitting gently in the night air and subtly slowing the patterns of my breath. I looked out of the window. "Where are we? It's beautiful."

"This is Cajun country, man. We're in the land of pirates, voodoo and Mardi Gras."

"Which is where?"

"Louisiana, honey. We're closin' in on Baton Rouge. It's mighty fine out here, I'll give it that." The landscape was now full of rolling hills and rich agricultural land, spreading outwards towards the prairies and swamps of the night. It was hot too. Janis had somehow attached a tee shirt to the roof of the car and it flapped in through

the open window. Though laughable now, in the days before air conditioning, this sort of makeshift fan seemed perfectly normal. Janis was looking pretty cool too, with her sunglasses sat atop her head and her hair tied back. She made it seem easy. She also seemed so alert and at ease. It was unbelievable really. We had been driving for more than six hours and she seemed no more in need of a rest than when we first started. “Plenty o’time for sleepin’ when you’re dead and gone,” was all she would say when I suggested a stop.

Just then, as if on cue from a higher plain, that old Lincoln forced us into an unforeseen stop. Its big, old engine started choking and its cylinders began misfiring before, with some aplomb, a hiss of steam and a loud bang signalled a sudden halt to our trip. “Crap it, Godammit,” screamed Janis. “I don’t believe it. I been across this country three times over in this car and this ol’ thing ain’t never died on me. I bought it a nickel on the dollar too.” She steered the now lifeless car over to the edge of the road, before its puff disappeared completely. She smacked the steering wheel with her fist and got out. I followed, more out of a sense of solidarity and duty than anything else, as what I knew about cars could have been written on one of Janis’ matchboxes. “Crap it, man! Now what?” She gave the Lincoln a kick with the underside of her naked heel. It did not look bothered. “Will I take a look at the engine?” I suggested bravely.

“Peaches, if you can fix this automobile, then be my guest. I’m goin’ for a smoke.” She paced off to the rear of the car, cussin’ under her breath and fiddling about in her pockets for a cigarette. I opened the bonnet. A few seconds passed. I closed the bonnet.

“Anything under the hood?” she asked a few minutes later, returning from her

walk. “I’m afraid it doesn’t look good,” I said gravely. I didn’t let on my ignorance of car mechanics, but I got the feeling that somehow she knew. “Where exactly are we?” I asked.

“Well, I reckon we’re a long way from New Orleans, a hundred miles or more, I’d say. Hicksville, Louisiana for all the hell I know! There ain’t much round here. I mean, look at where we are.” I could see what she meant. The country, although pretty from the car, was now beginning to look kind of unforgiving when seen in contemplation of a walk to the nearest town. “We’ll hitch it,” Janis said suddenly.

“Sure,” I agreed. Despite my reticence about a lot of things, this was never going to concern me; I had been thumbing for lifts in and around Belfast since my early ‘teens. I couldn’t see how this would be any different. “Okay now, honey. You keep clear and I’ll hitch my legs up at some trucks,” she laughed. I laughed back, albeit a little hollowly; I still wasn’t always sure when she was joking.

The evening sun was beginning to wane, although you wouldn’t know it from the heat and standing on the muggy roadside, I felt a bead of sweat slip down my neck and into the back of my shirt. We would not be there for long; by the time the perspiration had formed a little pool in the small of my back, Janis had flagged down a passing car and was calling me over. “Ain’t we glad to see you,” I heard her say as I made my way over. We had pulled over a red Dodge pickup truck, twenty years old at least, the kind that could have driven straight out of a John Steinbeck novel. It was covered in dust and its bed was loaded with sacks of grain and what looked like milk churns. I stood next to Janis and met the driver. He was just a few years older than me, twenty-two or twenty-three maybe and he was thin and wiry; even with him sitting down I could see that. His hair was spiky and auburn, his face was pink and

freckled, while his clothing went with the truck. He even had a straw hat sat on the seat next to him, alongside a friendly, but scruffy-looking terrier. “Pleased to meet you,” he said, touching the brow of his forehead with his finger. “I’m Owen.”

He got out of his truck and walked with us to Janis’ car. In truth, it was more a mosey than a walk; slow and without agitation, yet purposeful at the same time.

“Where y’all headed? Mind if I look under your hood?”

“Goin’ south,” replied Janis. “New Orleans and then westward to Texas.”

“That’s kinda a funny route, ain’t it?” he said, inspecting the engine.

“Well my friend see, he’s from out of town.”

“Is that so?”

“Ireland,” I told him.

“Where the devil’s that? New Jersey or someplace?”

“Great Britain,” I smiled. I didn’t mind his not knowing. After all, why should he?

“Oh, sure,” he twigged. “England, right?” I smiled again.

“Left a bit and you’ve got it.”

“Ain’t never been there.”

“No?”

“Shit, I ain’t never been out of Louisiana!”

Owen had a good look at the car and decided that we’d be wise to go back with him to his farm in nearby Wilson. He’d be able to fix it for us and maybe get us a little supper. It was a kind offer and he seemed a pleasant man. We accepted without hesitation. “I’m on my way to Clinton though first. I gotta drop off

tomorrow's supplies at the general store. You're welcome to drive with me and we can hook up your ol' Lincoln on the way back. Not so much weight in the back that way, you see?"

"That's great," I answered.

"Sure is sweet," said Janis. "What are we waitin' for?"

"Not me," I said, checking my denim jacket pocket for my wallet. Janis brought nothing except the clothes on her back. "Are you going to bring the car keys?"

"Wasn't reckonin' on it, nope. What do you think, Owen? Is this ol' automobile of mine safe here in these Louisiana hills?" Owen's comment was predictably small-town. "Well, I ain't never lost nothin' ma'am."

"Ha ha," Janis howled, throwing her head back. "Did you hear that, Peaches? That's good enough for me. Let's go!"

The three of us squashed into Owen's pickup, with the dog, whose name was King, sat upon my lap. King was a keen-looking dog, more interested in holding his head out of the window than in the two strangers in his master's cab. "So, who's on the farm with you?" I asked.

"Well, you know me, Owen Lollis. Then there's my Daddy, he's a Louisiana man through an' through. Joanna too, an' of course June, sweet June. Not forgettin' the little'uns, Jesse and Bobby. It's a small place, but it's home. Kinda' set back in the hills a little, near a running stream."

"That's beautiful, Owen," Janis joined in. "It sure sounds like a pretty place. I can't wait to meet your folks. It's been too long since I sat down at the family table." She sounded almost humbled.

“Well, I thank ya. I’m sure they’ll be mighty glad to meet the both of you.” I was particularly looking forward to spending a little time off of the road in a warm and homely environment, as I was, by now, beginning to miss my own family back in Belfast. It had been too long since we had spoken. I was, however, surprised to hear Janis expressing the same sentiments. Looking back from a vantage point of thirty-six years, it makes perfect sense; she was a young woman who’d been out on the road on her own for a long time and hadn’t touched base. At the time though, it surprised me. I could almost see another layer peeling off before me.

Chapter Eighteen.

We took in Clinton, Louisiana helping Owen with his chores. I helped him empty the milk churns from the back of the flatbed, while Janis pulled off the sacks of grain. King, the dog, sat up front watching through the window. On the way back,

Owen gave us a little guided tour of the town. It was quite the picture postcard, filled with enough charming-looking buildings to start its own stamp run. There was the Sillman Institute, built in 1836, Marston House, constructed the following year, as well as the East Feliciana Parish Courthouse, which dated from 1840. Each building was blessed with character and an understated gracefulness, much in keeping with the State of Louisiana itself. The contrast of sweeping hills, shady groves and white picket fences was uniquely American. It was, to me, nothing short of magical. It really did seem, that the farther away from the cities our journey was taking us, the closer we were getting to the heart of the country; the real America, the one that you only find when you throw away the guidebook. Of course nowadays, nowhere is unchartered territory and there is a one-stop café or fast food chain in the most far-flung reaches of the rural States, but thirty-six years ago things were different. I really felt fortunate to be getting a rare glimpse into a world so gentle and simple that the mainstream had just passed right on by.

We left Clinton to its sleep and travelled back on the road from which we had come. Janis' Lincoln Continental was waiting for us and after a quick shift around, I found myself sharing the cab with Owen and King, while Janis sat behind the wheel of her car, steering it haphazardly along the highway, Owen having put her on-tow with a rope from the back. Wilson was just a short trip north from Clinton and in no time at all, we were nearing the family farm, approaching it along a stony track, which meandered downwards, giving full view of the land surrounding the smallholding. Its beauty immediately struck me. It was, just as Owen had said, set back into the hills, with a freshwater stream running diagonally across the land and a cluster of apple trees setting off the farmhouse to the right. I could see cattle, sheep and chickens; I guess maybe thirty animals in total and couple of barns off to the left.

It really was idyllically quaint. On the front porch, just in front of a screen door sat a man in a rocking chair. I couldn't help but smile. It was like stumbling onto an old black and white film set.

“Hey Daddy,” called Owen, waving his hand as we pulled up to the house. “We got us some visitors. Have June lay us two extra places.” The man nodded, but did not move. I turned around to check on Janis in the trailing Lincoln. She winked at me when I caught her eye. She already looked even more out of place here than she had back in that Nashville bar. Owen's pickup jerked as it stopped and out he got, followed quickly by the dog and then, a little more gingerly by myself. Owen's father had by now made his way down to greet us. He was tall, like his son and his hair was silver, but he didn't look to be much older than fifty. He had a King George beard and was wearing, of all things, dungarees. He was straight out of Huckleberry Finn. I didn't know people like him actually existed. His other significant feature was his jaw. It stuck out almost at a right angle to the rest of his face and it looked as though it had been set in steel. I don't know why, but I was feeling nervous. “How do you do there, son? I'm Jackson Lollis.” He smiled almost immediately, putting me at ease. I could see where his son got his affable, openhearted manner. The Lollis men, it seemed, wore their hearts on their sleeves. I felt much more relaxed now. He pointed to the car. “I see you have automobile trouble. Young Owen here, he's your man. He'll have you on your way in no time.”

Janis got out, wearing a smile as big as the sun and moved to greet Mr Lollis. “Thank you ever so much sir for havin' us at your home like this,” she said straight away. “It's real kind.” Mr Lollis moved towards Janis with open arms and they embraced like old friends. “Oh my,” replied Mr Lollis, in an overtly flirty manner. “It's my pleasure to have such a pretty young lady as you, I must say.”

“Ha, you ain’t had me yet pops, but hell, the night is young!” I blushed and coiled back at her brashness, but Mr Lollis found it delightful. So too did Owen. I felt like a prude as the three of them laughed. “Now you ought not to say things like that, miss. I’m an old man.”

“Hell baby, the sweetest wine comes from the oldest grapes on the vine, you know?”

“My Daddy’s a taken man too,” Owen chipped in. “Daddy, this is Janis and this is Joseph. They’re on their way to New Orleans, but I reckon they could stop here for a time, what d’ya think? I needs to eat, but I could take a look at your car first thing in the morning.”

“Of course,” smiled Mr Lollis in a fatherly way, letting the flirting go at last. “You two young folks are welcome to stay just as long as you like. We’ll fix you up a bed.”

“Two ...” I began to say, before Janis cut me off.

“Aww now, honey. You don’t need to be like that. I’m sure these nice folks will be understanding of our adult situation.” She turned to Mr Lollis. “He’s a little shy,” she said, nudging him.

“We’ve all been there son,” smirked the older man, followed by a knowing wink. I grimaced inside and put on my best fake smile.

“Joseph, I’d be much obliged if you could help me unload the truck once more,” asked Owen.

“Sure, of course,” I agreed.

“Janis, let me take you inside,” suggested Mr Lollis. “You can meet the girls, while these two get busy. They’ll be pleased to meet you.”

“Me and them both,” quipped Janis. “I’ll see you in a while, Peaches. You take care of my man, Owen, d’ya hear?” Owen waved, as the young Texan took his father’s arm. No sooner had they gone indoors than I heard laughter floating out of the open windows. Janis, much to my surprise, seemed to be fitting right in. I helped Owen with the empty churns that we’d picked up in Clinton and he showed me round the farm. There wasn’t much to see, but he was proud of what they had. He told me that his father had worked as a logger in Baton Rouge and then a farm labourer during the thirties and had managed to buy up a piece of land after the war, which he had tended to and built into the small farm where we now were. It was an inspiring tale and somehow epitomised everything I had told myself about the reality of the American dream. Back then, if there was a vision to be clung to, I grabbed at it with both hands. In truth, the passing years have done little to distil it; I’m still a sucker for a dream. Why else would I have become a writer?

After showing me round, Owen leaned up against the bonnet of his pickup and took out a cigarette. “Do you smoke?” he offered.

“No,” I said shaking my head. “Janis smokes enough for the both of us.”

“She’s nice. Where did you meet?”

“Up near New York. Woodstock, to be precise. On a farm, believe it or not?”

“No way! What was you doin’? Workin’?”

“No, we were at a music festival. Well, she was. I was kind of late.”

“Yeah, I heard about that. They had cars backed up all along the interstate, right?”

“That’s the one.”

“Man, you’re a long way from New York. What are you doin’ down here?”

“I’m sort of escorting Janis ... home. We’re not really an item, you know? We’re just friends.”

“Hey, Joseph. It don’t bother me none. My Daddy, he’s easy-goin’ too. It’s a kind of a funny family set-up here, anyhow.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, but before Owen could answer, Janis came outside and down the steps of the porch. “Hey boys, come an’ get it. It’s hot an’ there’s plenty of it. What y’all doin’ out here in the dark?”

“I was just showin’ Jospheh the ol’ homestead,” said Owen. “Come on, let’s be getting’ in. Daddy don’t like to wait when there’s food on the table.” As Owen led the way, Janis pulled at my arm and whispered to me. “Man alive, Peaches. There’s some funny shit, goin’ on here. I can’t get my head round it. This is one quirky family we’ve hooked up with.”

“I think I was about to find out myself,” I said quietly. “Until you came out, that was. What’s going on?”

“Well, they’re nice as pie an’ all, but I can’t tell who is who?”

“What do you mean?” She leaned in closer to me.

“Man, you can’t tell how deep a well is by measuring the length of the pump handle.”

“Hey, come on in, you two,” called Owen. He held the door open for us.

“You’ll see!” mouthed Janis, nudging me and looking more than a little bemused.

“You’ll see.”

Inside, it was a typical farmhouse. A big wooden table sat as the centrepiece of the kitchen, while high shelves and pots hanging from the walls surrounded it. The floor was solid oak and gave the room an earthy, rootsy feel, set off perfectly by a big

hearth in the middle of one of the walls. Mr Lollis was already sat at the table, as was a young woman of maybe nineteen or twenty. Standing at the stove, with her back to us, was another woman. She looked to be in her early forties, maybe a little younger. Mr Lollis stood up as the introductions were made. “Hi there,” smiled the younger woman. She was dark-haired and had pale skin and looked like she could have been freshly cut from one of the apple trees outside. She wore a two-piece outfit that wouldn’t have looked out of place in a barn dance, all floral and feminine. Mr Lollis moved to put his arm around her. “Joanna, I want you to meet two folks young Owen’s been givin’ a helpin’ hand to. This here is Joseph and this is Janis. They’re gonna be stoppin’ with us for a short time.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both.”

“Hello, nice to meet you.”

“Hey darlin’, how’s Momma an’ them? I dig that skirt. It’s as pretty as a summer bouquet.”

The older woman had turned round from the stove and was smiling at us both. I was instantly taken aback. She was strikingly beautiful, tall with long silver-coloured hair and a face as perfectly formed and angled as a newly polished gem. She was one of those women that you couldn’t look away from. “Hello to you both,” she said in a velvet-lined voice. “I’m June.”

“It’s a pleasure ma’am,” replied Janis. “We’re sure grateful for your hospitality.”

The woman looked at me. “Yes, thank you kindly,” I managed to get out.

“If you’re friends of our Owen, then you’re more than welcome here,” June continued. “You’re not from round here then, no? That’s a Texan accent ain’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am. I came kickin’ an’ screamin’ into this world via Texas twenty-six years ago.” It was funny to hear Janis give her age; a simple truth upon which to place her, as up until then, I had only guessed at it. She carried on, never one to miss a punch line. “And I kept on kickin’ an’ screamin’ ‘til they let me out!”

We washed our hands and sat down at the table. June served us up a casserole that smelt sweet enough and looked tender enough to just swallow without even chewing it. I sat next to Janis, opposite Joanna and Owen, with Mr Lollis at one end of the table and the arresting beauty of June at the other. I couldn’t help but gaze at her whenever she spoke. In fact, I think I spent most of the meal with my head turned in her direction. We sat, eating and passing idle chatter amongst ourselves for an hour or so. Janis delighted in telling everyone her story of how she and I had taken on the racist truckers back in the diner at Beech Creek, while Mr Lollis was keen on hearing about Ireland. The food was simply amazing and in the company of such kind and gentle people, the conversation flowed. I completely forgot about my hushed conversation with Janis on the way in. Just what did she mean? They were all so personable. I remember feeling so at home. The casserole was followed up by a fresh fruit salad, covered in cream. I can taste it now, thirty-six years later. “Our June sure serves up a mighty fine dish, don’t she? It’s delicious, honey,” complemented Mr Lollis. “Thank you, Jackson. Well, I can’t have the men of this family goin’ hungry now can I? What would me an’ my Joanna do without you both?” Her Joanna? It took me by surprise. Were they mother and daughter? I had not picked up on that. I had taken Joanna to be Owen’s wife and June to be ... well, I wasn’t sure. Mr Lollis’ new wife, I figured? I didn’t like to ask, but maybe this is what Owen was about to tell me outside earlier and also what Janis was referring to. Two families joined as one; nothing so unusual about that. I decided to keep my ears

open for any other references.

It was not easy. Much like Janis, these southern folk littered their sentences with liberal doses of sweet clarification. A ‘honey’ here, and a ‘sugar’ there, plus dollops of ‘darlins,’ made it nigh on impossible to fathom what anyone’s relationship with anyone else really was. Their physical intimations were no help either. Mr Lollis would have his arm round June one moment, and then he’d be looking at Joanna all love forlorn the next. And the women were just as bad. June would refer to Owen as ‘her Owen’ in much the same way as she had done with Joanna, but then she would soon enough follow it up with something along the lines of ‘my sweet Jackson Lollis.’ It made no sense. I caught the eye of Janis too many times to mention and she appeared to be as exasperated as me. In the mean time, the conversation was generally easy flowing and good-natured. Mr Lollis told us about Louisiana during the war, while June shared stories of her childhood. She had grown up in nearby Shreveport. Everyone was just as friendly as could be, but I just couldn’t stop thinking about who was going to be sleeping with who come bedtime. And that went for Janis and me too!

After dinner, we moved into the front room and after cranking up the family record player, Janis persuaded Owen to dance with her. She found out a long player by The Delmore Brothers. It was old-time bluegrass, the type you see played by men in straw hats and baggy suits. Janis looked right at home in that front room. With a glass in her hand and not a care in the world, she was, as always, the life of the party. She made it look effortless. Just by being herself and without even trying, she drew the Lollis family to her. It was as if they were moths in the hot, Louisiana night air and she were the white, bright light toward which they were wending their way. Some people need people. Janis was one of them for certain. She breathed

conversation and craved interaction with everyone she met. I have known, in my life, just a handful of people with that same energy. If you're lucky, you'll bump into one every now and then. For me, I reckon it's been every decade or so. It is a life force, around which it is a blessing to be. At the time, I knew she was something a bit different; the passing of the years have made me realise how much more than this she really was. She was unique.

I kept my eye on the others but was utterly confounded as Mr Lollis sat down on the settee with June nestled in under one arm and young Joanna under the other. June, having travelled the furthest of any of them, was fascinated to hear of Janis' life on the road. Although, for her part, Janis was still pretty cagey about the details, disclosing only that she had left Texas at sunrise and would only return once the sun had set and the time was right; mercurial was not the word. The dancing and talking went on until well-past midnight and then, when I least expected it; a window of opportunity presented itself at long last. A baby's cry could be heard from upstairs. I wasted no time. "Someone wants his mother," I said, feeling smart. June got up to go, but said nothing. Foiled, I thought. But then, Joanna spoke. "I'll come up with you momma, if your Jesse's cryin' then he'll set off Bobby."

"That's my boy!" beamed Owen.

"Yours?" I asked quickly.

"You bet."

"Bobby?"

"Jesse."

"Jesse? Yours and June's?"

“Yes siree.”

“And Bobby?” There was a moment’s pause. It felt like an eternity.

“Bobby’s my boy,” said Mr Lollis. “Mine an’ Joanna’s.” The room fell silent, punctuated only by the sound of my jaw hitting the floor. Then Owen spoke, light as a breeze. “It’ kinda funny, ain’t it?” he grinned. “I’ m my own grandpa!”

Chapter Nineteen.

My face felt as white as a sheet. Did I hear that right? I looked at Janis. Her reaction, after a night spent drinking and dancing, was unapologetically less diplomatic. “Holy crap!” she spurted out, spitting the drink from her mouth. “What did you say, hoss?” I reeled back at this, but Owen was unruffled. “It’s true, ain’t it Daddy.”

“That it is. T’aint nothin’ but a quirk of nature, mind. Title’s an’ names don’t mean

a thing where matters of the heart are concerned.” Neither man seemed vaguely troubled by the notion and if anything, they both seemed utterly sincere in their acceptance of the normality of what Owen had just disclosed. I felt a little uneasy and completely confused. Owen was his own grandfather? Was that really what he had just said? I didn’t know what to think, let alone say. I looked to Janis for some sort of help and she was grinning at me like a pig in a truffle pie. She just lived for this kind of stuff.

“I’m sorry Owen, did you say that you’re your own grandpa?” I swallowed hard as I said this, barely believing that I had said it myself.

“That’s what he said, Peaches! You heard him right,” interrupted Janis.

“Janis!”

“Hell, I’ve never heard such a thing as that in my whole life. You folks sure are livin’ the high life. Jesus on my life!” Mr Lollis and Owen seemed quite calm, in spite of Janis’ crass pontificating. “Janis,” I insisted. “Will you shut up?” She waved her hand as if she didn’t care and finished off her drink. Owen took the chance to answer my question. “That’s right, Joseph. It’s a crazy soundin’ thing I know, but its workin’ out fine.”

“Owen,” I said trying to sound diplomatic. “It sure sounds pretty far out. I don’t get it, I’m sorry.”

“Let me go through it.”

“Please do.”

“It’s a head scratcher for sure!” said Mr Lollis. I didn’t doubt that for a minute.

“Well, ya see,” began Owen. My Momma died when I was fourteen, leavin’

just Daddy and me here to run the farm an' the home."

"An' two men just don't make a good home," added his father.

"I had to learn to cook an' all, so's we wasn't livin' on beans an' bread all the while.

I learned to cook real good too."

"You've done your momma proud, son," beamed Mr Lollis.

"Well, a couple o'years ago, I got's to chattin' with the new lady at the store in Clinton. She was real good with advice on cookin' an' such like."

"Let me guess?" I said. "June?"

"Hot dang, Joseph. You're spot on!" June and Joanna were still upstairs tending to the babies. The crying had stopped and I could hear one of the women cooing softly. I remember hoping that Owen would get the explaining done before they came back down. Sure, things seemed a little weird, but they were still nice people and I didn't want them to think that we were being awkward or nosy. Thankfully, that's just what he did.

"I can't lie to ya, Joseph. I fell in love with that woman the day I met her. She was widowed, but didn't have nothin' but sunshine in her eyes. Boy, I ain't never seen a set sparkle like that. And her hair too. It falls down around her back like streaks o'silver lightnin' in the night." I knew what he meant. "She's a pretty woman, Owen," I said.

"So the two of you got hitched, right?" asked Janis.

"We sure did. Not more'an four months after we first met. It was real quick, but I couldn't wait no longer. You know, you don't choose love?"

"You don't?"

“No, Joseph. Love chooses you. Least that’s how it was for me and June.”

“So that’s all fine an’ dandy,” started Janis. “You’re all loved up, but where does your Daddy come into this? Come on,” she said looking at Mr Lollis. “How’d you end up with your boy’s stepdaughter?” At this point, Mr Lollis leaned forward and took over the explanation.

“I hadn’t met Joanna ‘til the day of the weddin’. She was so darn pretty I just couldn’t stop thinkin’ ‘bout her. She was young, but I couldn’t shake her out of my mind. Owen and June was gonna be livin’ on the farm with me, so naturally, Joanna used to come visitin’. We just kinda got closer and things kinda fell into the way they are now. We married twelve months ago last July.”

“So,” said Owen. “That made Daddy my son-in-law, seein’ as he’d married my wife’s daughter.”

“And made Joanna ...” I started to say.

“Yup,” interrupted Owen. “My new stepmother!”

“Shit!” groaned Janis. “I swear I ain’t never heard the likes before. We got any more drink?”

“It’s a high-soundin’ tale, I know,” said Owen. “But it ain’t the made up kind. Like I said before ...”

“I know,” sighed Janis sardonically. “You can’t choose love!”

“Well, ‘fore we knowed it,” Owen continued. “June and me was fixin’ to have a little baby. Baby Jesse was born an’ we was all just as pleased as pie. Of course, it made the family relations a little confusin’, as you can guess. Things didn’t ease none when Joanna fell in the family way an’ baby Bobby followed soon after.

Daddy was a grandpa, but little Jesse was his brother-in-law, which made him my uncle an' in turn made him Joanna' brother, cos' of bein' her momma's."

"Oh my Lord!" cried Janis. "You couldn't make it up, I swear." For my part, I was so caught up in the logistics of making it work, that the absurdity clean passed me by. "Keep goin' Owen," I urged. "I'm getting there."

"Well, you see. Little baby Bobby was my stepdaughter's son, so that made him my grandchild and by way of Joanna, my wife, bein' my mother's mother, that kinda made her my own grandmother."

"And so," I worked out aloud. "You're married to your grandmother, so you're her grandchild, so that means ..."

"Yup!" he smiled.

"Mmm," nodded Mr Lollis.

"Oh crap!" laughed Janis, clapping her hands.

"You're ..." I took a big intake of breath before finishing, but Owen beat me to it.

"I'm my own grandpa!"

The room fell quiet again, as we all sat figuring it out in our heads. It was a lot to take in and sure, it was stretching family titles to their most extreme, but in essence, there was nothing wrong in it. These two men had met and fallen in love with two women who were equally as in love with them. It was, in those simple terms, quite sweet. Mr Lollis had been right though; it was a head scratcher all right. It was, inevitably, Janis who broke the silence and after all her ragging of the situation, she showed great warmth in what she said. "Well, that's a quirky story an' I've heard some strange things in my time, but all I know gentlemen, is you an' your

family have made me and my friend here, real welcome tonight. I can't remember the last time I felt so at home in a place an' we sure are mighty grateful to all of you, so it don't matter what y'all wanna call each other." She may have been a southerner, but that was hippie to the core. "Ain't that right, Peaches?"

"Yes, thank you both. It's been a lovely evening, it really has." Janis then surprised me again. "I don't wanna upset your littl'uns, but would you mind if ..." She trailed off, as if unsure of what to say. Mr Lollis knew what she meant though. "Darlin', you'd be welcome as anyone to see those children. Go on up." Janis jumped up, quicker than I'd ever seen her move before and made her way to the staircase. She squeezed my shoulder as she went past and I looked at her face. Her smile was as big and bright as a freshly painted rainbow. Wonderful.

That left the three of us men downstairs. "I noticed you ain't much of a drinker there, son," Mr Lollis said, pointing to my glass.

"There's no story to it," I said.

"Ol' Joseph here's a regular clean livin' fella, Daddy. Don't you go corruptin' him none."

"Straighter than a man of the cloth?"

"I don't know about that," I said, feeling a little embarrassed. The truth was, I had just never had the taste for alcohol. To this day, much to the amusement of family and friends, I'd still have a glass of milk over anything else. Nowadays, of course, it's often passed off as the healthy living option but back then, it was much more of an odd inclination; at least to others, it never did bother me much. Mr Lollis walked over to a drinks cabinet in the corner of the living room, poured out another glass of what I think was Bourbon and raised it high. "To the only clear-headed man in the

house.”

“Here’s to ya, Joseph,” said Owen, toasting me too.

“You’re a good boy, Joseph,” went on Mr Lollis. “I like you, son. I sure am glad Owen ran into you kids.” He came back towards me and patted me on the shoulder. I seemed to be getting a lot of it that night.

One thing I had begun to notice about Americans was that they were so much more familiar with strangers than I was used to. Their boundaries seemed so much more uninhibited than mine, while their conversations were candid and littered with personal detail; Janis being the exception, of course. From the moment we had met, she was as cagey as they come; like the sun on the hilltop, but like a thistle on the hearth. She had her reasons I guessed. The way the Lollis’ had opened up though was remarkable. That would just never have happened in Belfast, no way. And in England, forget it! I have lived in England since before my girls were born and there is one thing I can say for certain about my adopted home’s countrymen; the English will circumnavigate personal detail like a deaf blind bird hovering above a cornfield. ‘You want a name? Well, you’re going to have to guess. My job? I think we need to get to know one another a bit better first.’ Not so the Americans. I found them to be more than willing to share just that bit more than I was used to. At the time of my trip in ’69, I probably thought it showed a bit more intimacy and looking back, that has certainly given my memories of the people I met a more vibrant hue. Time and age though, have taught me that it is probably just their way; a cultural difference that our common language doesn’t infer, superficial even. I certainly appreciated it though; as a stranger abroad, it was nice to cut to the chase and find out about the folks I was meeting, even if it was a little unusual at times!

I heard footsteps on the staircase. “Hey, Peaches,” I heard Janis whisper softly. “Check this out.” I turned round to look and was greeted by a most angelic sight. Janis was holding one of the babies in her arms. It fit her like a long lost glove she’d been searching for. She came over to me and perched on the side of the armchair. “Bobby,” she said quietly. “I want you to meet a very good friend of mine, the nicest darn friend a girl ever had.” She beamed at me. “Ain’t he cute?” At the time, my paternal sentiments were still some years away, but I could see that Janis was flush with emotion. “He looks at home there, alright,” I said, as the baby snuggled into Janis’ shoulder. Bobby looked a tiny thing, with his face all scrunched up and his eyes closed tight under the tenderness of his baby fat. I reckoned on him being about two months old. “Hey there, little man,” cooed Mr Lollis, leaning over his son. “Your cousin been keepin’ you awake?” As he said this, I couldn’t help but consider the relationship of the two babies. Were they cousins? Or were they brothers, uncles and grandparents all rolled into one? Who knew? My brain began to ache at the thought. What mattered I guessed is that they were loved; and that was something these two were never going to go short on. Joanna appeared at the bottom of the staircase. “Momma’s got little Jesse off now, how you doin’ there Janis?”

“He’s gone I reckon, honey. Ain’t it just like a man to go to sleep on you when you want a hug?!”

Janis took baby Bobby back up to bed and stayed up there a little while when Joanna and June came down. They each sat with their respective husbands and we listened to the quiet; of course, it was so easy to tell who was with whom, now that I knew the facts. Retrospect is a wonderful thing. Through the quiet, we heard a gentle hum coming from upstairs. I leaned forward in my seat and listened hard. It was Janis. She was singing lullabies to the boys as they slept. It made my heart

swell. This was the Texan who lived out of the back of her car, who had knelt down in front of a highway patrolman to get us off a speeding ticket; the Southern Comfort drinking hippie with a penchant for fights and partying. But it was also the same Janis with a love of old trains and music, who got up early to wander amongst the wildlife; the one who was being pulled towards Port Arthur by something about which I still had no idea. It was hard to put all the contradictions together as one person. If it was hard for me to imagine it, God knows what it was like for her to live it. She did though. It made complete sense to her. And she never compromised herself once.

As the rest of us listened to Janis' singing, Mr Lollis slipped off to another room and came back a moment later with a fiddle and bow under his arm. "There ain't nothin' like roundin' off the day with a family song," he cheered. "Some folks sit an' read the bible, well in this house we're pullin' with a different voice. Somewhere in the neighbourhood of 'B' gals." Owen kept time with his foot, while June and Joanna tuned in to the melody of Janis' lullaby and took it on a tour de force of harmony singing. With Owen joining them at baritone, Mr Lollis led his family group from one old-time favourite to another. Janis came down and sat beside me, wearing a look of tearful contemplation upon her face. I went to say something, but she just leaned her head into my shoulder and strummed along to the music, her fingers on the legs of my faded jeans. They sang of 'Old-time Religion,' 'Rock of Ages,' 'Jack of Diamonds' and 'Uncle Penn,' a virtual tour of American roots music; from Appalachian folk tunes to the heady Cajun brew of Louisiana, they treated us to a spectacle and then some. Mr Rimbaud would have been charmed, I'm sure; his inheritance to me was making a dream come true and I could scarcely believe it myself.

The evening was rounded off, like some county hall concert, with an a cappella version of ‘Will the Circle be Unbroken,’ complete with Janis waltzing me round the room like Cinderella enjoying her last dance before the stroke of midnight. Midnight in Wilson, Louisiana though, was long gone. It was past two in the morning when we all said our goodnights and even then, Janis was protesting that it was too early. June showed us to our room and lit the oil lamp by the bed, before saying that breakfast would be ready whenever we were. There was one bed and a single bed at that. “I’ll take the floor,” I suggested.

“Hey man, no way,” Janis said abruptly. “This is 1969 not 1869 and if two friends can’t share a bed, without a little hanky panky havin’ to happen, then the world is a sorry ol’ place.” I thought about it. She was right too; we were friends. “Okay,” I said. “Of course.”

“Just don’t be snorin’ on me, none. D’ya hear?”

“Me? I don’t snore.”

“Man alive! We’re bein’ visited by a hog of some sorts every night then, ‘cos someone in that car o’mine has been snortin’ like a Mississippi steamboat!” I knew it was me alright. My brother had been throwing pillows at me for years back home. Still, I half-jokingly maintained the pretence. “Nope, haven’t noticed,” I said, shaking my head.

Janis began to undress, pulling her top off over her head. Her naked body confronted me again, just as it had at Cheek Lake. I couldn’t help but look, she was an attractive woman, but it made me feel uncomfortable; not because I was feeling any physical attraction, but rather because I now considered Janis to be my friend and as a member of the opposite sex, it just didn’t feel right for us to be undressed in front

of each other. “Janis, we’re going to keep some clothes on, aren’t we?”

“Well, yeah honey ... I was just gonna change this for one from the car. I brought one in, see?” Her face changed. I didn’t recognise it at first. Then I realised. She was blushing and her cheeks were as red as blood. “I’m sorry,” I stuttered. “I didn’t mean ... it’s just, well you know?”

“I know,” she said. “I’m glad you said it. I don’t always think what I’m doin’. I need a friend like you, Peaches. You make me feel good.” She took off her jewellery and untied her hair, while I stepped out of my jeans. “Come on, Peaches,” she said as she got into bed. I don’t want your body ... but it’s been too nice a day to sleep alone.”

I put out the oil lamp and got in. We didn’t talk once in bed. My head was heavy and cluttered with thought and emotion and Janis’ I’m sure, must have been too. She pulled me closer and snuggled her head into my chest. Quietly, we lay there with our thoughts. Some of them floated out through the open window, while others knocked around the room, bouncing against the walls and refusing to go away. The movement of Janis’ breath was weighty and even in the dark; I could tell that Janis’ eyes were open. Who knew what she was thinking? Maybe she was contemplating our arrival in Port Arthur. We couldn’t be too far away now; down to New Orleans in the morning and then westward to Texas. It could be less than twenty-four hours away. The thought made me swallow hard and I held onto her tighter. She purred almost kitten-like at this, safe in the moment, away from the uncertainties that tomorrow might bring ... if uncertainties they were; with Janis it was impossible to tell.

Tomorrow would be Saturday, the 23rd August 1969. As I look at the date

now, typed on the screen in front of me it has an innocent, almost romantic charm to it. 1969? Was that ever really the year? It seems not just a lifetime away, but a whole universe ago. My life now, parenting, writing and a quarter of a century into marriage bears no comparison to that of the twenty-year old who lay there that night. Life has become a compromise, a balancing act and a trade-off even and the memory of those single-minded thoughts that night seems somewhat akin to looking through an old photograph album; somehow you know it's you, but you can't figure out when you stopped being that person and when you became the one you are today. The person I am today? Would the young me even recognise him? Age has brought me much; maturity for one thing, but what have I lost? My open-mindedness? My acceptance? As I held onto Janis, I wanted the feeling to last forever and for the morning never to appear. I couldn't change it; I didn't want to change it. Janis was not what I had expected, but she was more than I had hoped for. This was the first great experience of my life and I knew, even at the time, that it wasn't going to be repeated. It was a one shot-deal. We hadn't spoken about it, but I knew that once we got to Port Arthur, Janis and I would go our separate ways. I resolved to enjoy it while it lasted. The song was almost over; the curtain rope was ready. The crickets chirruped outside and the sweet smell of magnolia floated in through the window. "I love you, Janis," I whispered. "And thank you."

Joseph clicked 'save' on his computer and pushed his seat back. "Damn fool," he muttered. "I need to speak to Naomi."

Chapter Twenty.

Like an unwanted visitor at the door, the sun shone in on me the next morning, as yellow as a ragweed, its brightness warming my eyelids and forcing them open. I was tired. Too tired to be up, but too disturbed to go off again. Gingerly, I sat half-up in bed, resting on my elbows. Janis was gone. No surprise there. She would, no doubt, be outside in the yard or the meadow, tracking down insects or gazing upon a nest. It was the greatest of all her contradictions, the late night reveller rising with the dawn rooster to be at one with the quiet of nature. Burning the candle

at both ends, that saying could have been made for Janis. Perhaps it was her way of balancing the books. Certainly she never seemed to stop and maybe the peace of the early hours atoned for the bluster that accompanied her throughout the rest of the day. Maybe it was the other way round, I don't know. I knew she must be tired though; she had to be. I checked my watch. It was not quite six. 'Damn it,' I thought, ruefully but affectionately. 'Not again.'

It was no use, the sun was too bright for me to go back to sleep so I got myself up and dressed. I was beginning to smell, I was sure. The one thing they never tell you about road trips is how unhygienic they can be. I hadn't had a bath since New York and besides from my dip in Cheek Lake, water and me were becoming unacquainted. The Lollis' didn't seem to have one, so I guessed they were still tin-tub people. I had only a couple of clean shirts left and the Irish pragmatist in me wanted to save one for the flight back, so I was down the last one. It felt kind of funny knowing that my only clean shirt left was the one I would wear home. Home? Where was that? I'd only been away from Belfast for a week, but it felt like so much longer. If home is where the heart is, then I didn't know where I belonged; somewhere in a dream, I think, with the clouds sailing across the sky and a phantom highway beneath me. I knew that Janis should be with me too. She was America to me, my home away from home and I didn't want to wake up. My suitcase was anticipating the end of my trip and although I knew it made no sense, a part of me wished for a bigger case; as if somehow that would buy me more time on the road, more time to find whatever it was we were looking for and, in reality, more time with Janis.

I went outside to look for her. The Louisiana sun was already rising high above the farm. It was going to be a hot day. I stood on the front porch next to Mr

Lollis' rocking chair and looked out at the farm. It was a beguiling sight and one justly perfect for such a glorious morning. The sheep were rising from sleep and beginning to graze and the cattle stood to attention, as if they were ready to go somewhere. Around about them, the chickens pecked about, snipping the morning into life like an unmade bed. Janis was over by the cattle, sitting on a fence. Nobody sat on a fence like Janis did, the sun and the early morning breeze making it look like she'd been born there; so comfortable, so settled. I almost didn't want to disturb her, but she seemed pleased to see me, waving me down from the porch. I walked over to her and found myself accompanied, as if from out of nowhere, by Owen's dog, King. The three of us sat there, watching the cattle and making not a sound. I was used, by now, to Janis' early morning meditation and I knew that to speak before she was ready was pointless; she would not hear me.

It wasn't long before she spoke and when she did, I soon wished she hadn't.

"Peaches, there's somethin' I gotta tell ya."

"This sounds ominous already," I groaned.

"Well, it's about last night."

"Yes."

"After we went to bed, I got up for a bit and wandered downstairs. I couldn't sleep, see."

"You couldn't sleep? We only went to bed less than four hours ago!"

"Yeah, well that nosiy ol' snorin' of yours was keepin' me awake." I blushed.

"Anyway man, I was downstairs an' I heard someone in the kitchen, so I went for a look."

“Go on.”

“It was Joanna an’ she was none too happy, let me tell ya.”

“Why? What was wrong?”

“Well Peaches, she weren’t one for beatin’ around the bush an’ she got straight to it, so I guess I will too.”

“Okay.”

“That young gal has swallowed a watermelon seed!”

“She’s swallowed a what?”

“God damned, Peaches. Get with it, man. She’s pregnant again, ya dig?”

“I see,” I said slowly. It didn’t seem like such worrying news. “And she’s not happy? But that’s good, surely?”

“Uh huh,” Janis said, shaking her head. “Not when the Daddy this time is Owen!”

An uncomfortable silence clipped at the end of Janis’ sentence, hanging in the morning air while I got my head round what she had just said. “No.”

“Yes!”

“No.”

“Yes, dammit!”

“There’s been a mix up, for sure. Joanna and Owen? Do you think you might be wrong?”

“Man, I’ll be kicked to death by grasshoppers if it ain’t the truth. That gal told me herself.”

“Well,” I sighed. “I don’t know what to say. Poor Mr Lollis, I guess ... and poor

June. They don't know then?"

"I don't reckon so. It's kinda weird, ain't it? These Lollis', they're real hillbilly types. Nice an' all, but fruity as a Christmas cake." I scratched my head, a clichéd thing to do I know, but I did it all the same. I was struggling to comprehend it, which surprised me really. I had managed to take the previous night's surprises pretty much in my stride, but this was something else. "How did it happen?" The silence returned, then laughter. "Jesus, man," Janis guffawed. "How do you think it happened? The goddamned stork flew in from the Mississippi!"

"Okay, okay," I said, more with my hands than my voice. "I mean, how did they get it together? They all seem so happy with each other."

"Well, I think that's the deal, man. Joanna's kind of happy with everyone, if you know what I mean?"

"I always know what you mean. Sometimes, I wish I didn't."

"Welcome to the 'sixties, Pappy!" Janis jumped down from the fence and we walked over to the stream, King following behind us. He ran on when he saw where we were headed and lapped up the fresh mountain water. Janis bent down and let her fingers change the course of the flow, like five little dams. Then came the hippie patter.

"D'ya see that, Peaches?"

"What?"

"The tiny bits of silt an' mud coastin' on the water."

"Hmm."

"Well, this here water is fine an' fresh as any you an' me's ever gonna see, but it's not pure as can be. That only comes from interferin' someways down the line."

“I don’t get it. What do you mean? Filtered?”

“It ain’t pure, but it’s as natural as it comes, an’ that’s the best way to be.”

“Are you telling me it’s natural for Joanna to be carrying Owen’s child?”

“Hey, whatever gets you through the night.”

“That’s nonsense and I don’t think you believe it either.”

“Peaches, I did a lotta livin’ ‘fore I met you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Just don’t go judgin’ it ‘til you been there.” Janis’ tone was slightly different now, as if she were my older, wiser sister and I was her green kid brother. I guess, looking back, I was. I didn’t want to admit it at the time though. “Bloody hell!” I said, shaking my head. Janis laughed at me. “Why are you looking at me in that old-fashioned way?” I grizzled.

“Man, I just love your British ways!”

“Irish,” I corrected.

“Look, I’m tellin’ ya ‘cos I wanted to share it with ya. It’s been a long time since I had someone I could trust in, you know?” I liked her saying that. “Okay,” I nodded.

“So what do you want to do? Do you think we should say something? I guess it’s none of our business. Is Joanna okay?”

“She’s okay, she’s just a little groggy from it herself. I think she just needed someone to prop up the bar with. You know, it gets kinda claustrophobic out here in the sticks.”

“Okay, and what about the stream?” I teased.

“We’re gonna make like my fingers an’ let the silt pass us by, man. There’s plenty of beautiful water to enjoy here. Besides, didn’t you have a ball last night?”

“I did,” I agreed. “And I guess you’re right.” Janis took my hand and we started to follow the stream across past the apple trees. Before we’d taken more than a few steps though, she squeezed it and nudged me. “Hey,” she whispered. “It’s still kinda weird though, ain’t it, ha ha?” I smiled and kept on walking.

We followed the meandering stream for about a half a mile, before sitting down on the bank to cool our feet in its fresh movement. Janis’ feet, of course, were already shoeless. In front of us was the mountain from which, presumably, the water began as a spring. It was awesome, the sort of mountainside I’d only ever seen in old Westerns, full of alcoves and corners, just ripe for hiding behind with a Smith and Western. “I just can’t believe this country.”

“Why’s that, Peaches?”

“It’s just so beautiful.”

“Huh, that all depends on where you come from. It ain’t none too pretty where I’m from?”

“Port Arthur?”

“Port Arthur, right. Ain’t it pretty where you’re from, honey? Ireland, I mean?”

“Oh, surely, yes. It’s really something, but it’s all the same. Heather and hills. I never thought that was a bad thing until I saw the States. Here though, we’ve seen something different everyday. Mountains, open plains, the Mississippi, lakes; it’s just such a thrill.”

“Well, I’m glad I could be your guide, baby.” I was glad too.

Hey, you don't fancy a swim do ya?"

"In this water? No way, it's far too cold. We should get back. Perhaps June's cooking us that breakfast she promised."

"Man, I seen you lookin' at her last night. You had your mind on a mite more than just breakfast."

"Janis! I was just ..."

"You was just what?" she interrupted. "Taken by her cookin'?"

"Something like that," I blushed. "Don't you think she's ...?"

"A beautiful woman? Shit, sure I do, but I ain't all lapped up like you. I done a helluva lot of things in my time baby, but I ain't been with a woman ... yet!" I started to laugh, but before any sound came out, Janis suddenly lurched forward into the stream, grabbing my arm and pulling me with her. "Yehaah!" she screamed like some kind of deranged cliché of a cowboy. "Let's get us some freshwater suds!" Before I had even drawn breath, we landed in the stream, only a foot in depth, but colder than a well digger's rear-end. I howled at the cold, but Janis' laughter drowned it out, as I splashed around trying to get back to the bank.

I got my hand to a clump of grass on the side. Janis though, was tenacious in her mischief and would not let me go without a fight. She pulled at my denims and took hold of a big enough chunk to send me sprawling back into the water, soaking what few dry bits of me there were left. "Hey, no fair," I shouted in mock irritation, putting my arm out for Janis to help me up. My exasperation at being caught out so though, was real enough and having been in enough scuffles as the youngest of four siblings at home, I had no intention of coming out of this one as the only one wet

from head to toe. Janis put her arm out to help me, the only naïve thing I ever saw her do, and with one quick tug, victory was mine. The splash as she landed besides me was immense and must have sent ripples along that stream all the way back to the Lollis' farm. She looked at me from her riverbed seat, a look of total surprise on her face. "Shit, man," I didn't think you'd do it!" she said, through gulps and spits. "Sorry, Janis," I laughed, thinking about home. "That's having two older sisters and a brother for you! I've learned to cheat a bit, you know?"

"Ha ha," she cackled. "I'll be seein' you in the sweet bye an' bye. And here's me been thinkin' you're a gentle soul. Remind me never to play cards with you, Peaches!"

We helped each other out of the water and set down on the bank. The sun was rising high and Janis laid herself back, arms outstretched behind her. "Damn, it's gonna be another beautiful day. You're gonna love New Orleans, honey."

"Hmm," I grunted, not really listening. I was back in Belfast and thinking about my brother, Michael and my two sisters Sheila and Gail. Sheila, the eldest of us at twenty-eight was married and had made home with her husband and three year-old daughter, Heather, in the town of Newtownabbey, to the north of Belfast. She worked part-time at Sentry Hall, a historical house and was as hard working as my father and as kind as my mother. Gail and Michael were both twenty-five; twins by birth, but as different from each other as was possible to be. Gail worked at Belfast city Hospital and had wanted to nurse since before she had left primary school. She was as true as the gospel and was the mother hen of our family. Thirty-six years on and that still holds true.

Michael was my closest relation and at five years my senior, he had always

been my hero; strange really, because we were nothing like each other as children. I was the forever innocent, as gullible as I was guileless. Michael, on the other hand, was streetwise and as brave as Fionn MacCumhall. He would fight the battles and do the reasoning later, if at all. From the football field to the cobblestones outside, Michael was the one I yearned to be besides. He made others appear feckless in comparison and I felt safe whenever we were together. His temper though, was fierce and when wronged, he was a loose canon, as bad to be around as Barrington's bloodhound. Only my father could contain him, but as Michael grew out of his 'teens, even that became a thing of the past. While Sheila busied herself with little Heather, Gail worked hard at the hospital and I began my career at the clerk's office, Michael's source of income was a law unto itself. None of us really knew what he did for a living, but he'd often be seen driving along the Shankhill Road in a flash Jaguar or turning up at The Eurpoa Hotel in matching collar and cuffs. Then again, he'd be just as likely to be found having a few jars with my father down at the docks after work. It was this latter Michael that I tried to keep in mind. It was this Michael that I was thinking about, as I sat by the stream that morning, the brother with whom I had shared a room at our parents' house. The other one would have to go about his business silently; I did not want to know.

“Hey, Peaches!”

“Hmm?”

“Are you in there, man? You kinda tripped out on me there, baby. Where you been?” Suddenly, I heard the running water of the stream again and I was in Belfast no more. I looked at Janis. The sun was shining on her back and through her unkempt hair, making it difficult to see her properly. “Are you alright, man?”

“I ... err, I'm sorry. I was just thinking about home. About my brother and sisters.”

“Do you miss them?”

“I do, that. I don't see them as much as I used to though. You have a sister, don't you?”

“Yeah, but shit, I can't remember when I last saw her.”

“Roberta, isn't that her name?”

“Hey, someone's been keepin' tabs on me!”

“How old is she?”

“She's a couple of years younger 'an me.”

“Which makes her?”

“Aww, man. You ought not ask a lady her age.”

“I know it. You told everyone last night. You're twenty-six. So I guess your sister is twenty-four?”

“Well,” she smirked. “You already know, then don't ya!” Janis stood up, still dripping wet and started back towards the farm. “Come on, Romeo,” she said. “Let's get you some breakfast.”

When we got back, Joanna was sitting on the steps of the front porch, alone and looking pensive. So lost in thought was she, that she didn't notice us until we were upon her. The sun, thankfully, had dried our clothes on the walk back and we joined her in the shade. Janis sat close besides her and put her hand on Joanna's knee. “Anyone else up yet?” she asked quietly.

“Owen's checkin' on the cattleshed and June's fixin breakfast. Jackson's upstairs,

playin' with the kids.”

“You know, we’re headin’ off this mornin’, darlin’?” Joanna nodded.

“I sure am glad we talked last night,” she said, before leaning to face me. “I hope you don’t think anythin’ awful of me, Joseph?”

“No ma’am,” I answered honestly. She smiled sweetly at me and then at Janis.

“Man, that smile is a heartbreaker, darlin’,” said Janis, putting her arm around Joanna and pulling her in closer to her. “You ain’t gotta worry ‘bout nothin’. These folks love you an’ that’ll beat the hell outta anythin’. Ain’t that so, Peaches?”

“Surely so,” I smiled. It was strangely endearing; the idea of Janis being a big sister to Joanna, in light of how much time she appeared to have spent away from her own family and her own sister. Maybe that was what made it seem so heartfelt; was this, the conversation Janis had never had with her own sister? Chances were, we could be in Port Arthur by sundown tonight. Maybe then, I’d get to find out.

We went inside and enjoyed breakfast with the Lollis family, strange and gentle kin, the likes of whom I’ve never met since. After breakfast, Owen looked at the car and fixed a water hose, while I stood next to him, nodding unconvincingly. He told me if I was ever in Louisiana again, to be sure to look him up and we’d have us a drink. Thirty-six years later and I haven’t been back yet, but if I ever do find myself down near old Wilson, I might just pay him a visit. It’s funny to think that the young man I knew then would now be a man approaching sixty, more life lived than he has still to come. I guess that goes for him and me both though. June packed us up a basket of food to take with us, which made me blush, especially when Janis winked at me loading it into the boot and Mr Lollis told us a story about a cousin of his who had joined the circus and gone to New Orleans.

Just as we were ready to go, Owen dashed inside and came back again just as quickly, clutching a big camera. It was black, with a big shutter and reminded me of one I'd seen in Mr Rimbaud's shop, a real two-handed job. "Hey, Joseph, Janis! Somethin' to remember you by," he shouted, standing on the steps at the ready. "Come here, Peaches," bawled Janis, pulling me over to the bonnet of the Lincoln. We leaned in, our heads together as one and smiled as Owen took the photograph. About ten years later, after moving to Bath, just after the publication of my first book, I received that picture in the post, all the way from Wilson, Louisiana. It was signed on the back by Owen. 'From all of us at the old farm, congratulations on your book.' It sits in my study to this day, a little faded and a little creased; apart from my memories, the only recorded evidence of my summer with Janis. We said our farewells to the Lollis' and got into the car. "Where to, hoss?" grinned Janis.

"It's your country," I smiled.

"Alright, honey. Baton Rouge and New Orleans, here we come!" We waved goodbye and travelled back along the windy path, down which we had come with Owen the previous night. I watched out of the window until Owen and his family were gone, back into their farm and on with their lives and all the time I wondered; was this to be my last day with Janis?

Chapter Twenty-one.

We travelled south and were at Baton Rouge within three quarters of an hour. First settled in 1763 as a British military outpost, Baton Rouge was culturally British American for much of its first one hundred years. The Civil War and the expansion of the logging trade, however, began to change its population, as Spanish, French, Italian and black migrants made it their home. In the summer of 1969, when we arrived, Baton Rouge was noted as having the only school in the vicinity where black students could complete their high school education, thus the numbers of black people in the town's population was growing considerably. Personally, I found it to be a fairly innocuous and unspectacular looking place, given its continental name and we stopped only briefly, as Janis wanted to buy some cigarettes. "Man, I'll smoke ol'

stogies off the ground mostly, but it's nice to have the good stuff every now and again," she growled, as we pulled up outside a shop. I sat outside in the Lincoln and twiddled the dials of the radio, hoping to find something to tap my toes to. There were blues, Cajun, Tex-Mex, bluegrass and folk stations, all within a few frequencies of each other, but nothing which made me want to listen for long. I switched off and waited for Janis to return.

In only a few minutes she sashayed her way out with her cigarettes and a newspaper under her arm. With her bangles and beads, I heard her before I saw her coming. When I looked at her face though, it was wearing a pained and somewhat distracted grimace. "Man, will you look at this?" she shouted as she approached the car. "There's been a God damned disaster on our doorstep. We're lucky we missed it. It's wiped a whole town out." Tossing the newspaper in through my opened window, Janis got back in the car and with great haste, lit up one of her newly bought cigarettes. She tilted the packet towards me. "Not now, not ever," I said, shaking my head and waving the packet away with my hand. "Man, have you ever seen anything like it? That's serious shit, you know?"

"Will you slow down, Janis? Let me read it now." The headline story, 'The Remains of Civilisation,' made for shocking reading. Just under a week before, on the night of Sunday 17th August, as I sat in the airport lounge of Miami International Airport, Hurricane Camille had struck the coast of Mississippi, wiping out whole swathes of human infrastructure and killing more than two-hundred and fifty people. It was a disaster of truly biblical proportions and I read on in both awe and disbelief.

Beginning as a tropical disturbance moving west in the Caribbean Sea, Camille had been detected by satellite on the 14th August and over the next few days,

developed into a monstrously intense force of nature. It had sustained winds of nearly two hundred-miles per hour, it had a fantastically low barometric pressure and when it hit the town of Pass Christian, Mississippi sometime around midnight on Sunday, it produced the highest hurricane tidal surge ever recorded in the United States. Pass Christian was a good one hundred and twenty miles to the east of where we were, but quite how we had missed the knock-on effects of the disaster was beyond me. The newspaper reported that an estimated two hundred thousand people had fled the central Gulf coast, prior to Sunday night, while Camille's move inland had caused terrific flash flooding and landslides over the mountains of the southeastern part of the States. Areas of Virginia and Tennessee not far from where we had been just a couple of days ago, had been particularly badly hit, with more than one hundred people losing their lives.

It was, though, the complete obliteration of the town of Pass Christian that was most disturbing to read about. Houses were lifted from the ground where they stood; oceanfront hotels were swept away into nothing but rubble, while cars and trees were littered in the debris. Looking at the horrific after-effects shown by the photographs, one could have been forgiven for thinking that it had been an atomic bomb, rather than an act of nature that had swept across the small town. There was just nothing left, absolutely nothing. I cannot remember seeing any images, to this day, from the Vietnam war to the Ethiopian famine, that have left me feeling so cold as those in the newspaper that day. Maybe it was because we were so close. I looked around me. Suddenly the streets of Baton Rouge seemed different. People busied about under a sky as beautiful in colour as a robin's egg. How many of these people, I wondered, were refugees from Pass Christian? How many people had fled in the wake? It was frightening. I wanted to do something, but what? I was a twenty year-

old kid from Belfast, with little money and nowhere to stay myself. I don't think I've ever felt so helpless.

I read on, absorbing the gory details like an undertaker looking for work. The United States government had taken immediate action, with President Nixon sending more than a thousand federal troops into the area and Governor John Williams pronouncing martial law, while all roads into Pass Christian and the surrounding area were sealed off. Aside from the obvious human casualties and destruction of infrastructure, there were equally as pressing, if less headline-grabbing practical problems to be dealt with. Thousands of animals, from pets to farm stock and wildlife, had been drowned, creating an infestation of insects and rodents, which gathered to feed on the carcasses and the plentiful supply of rotting food. Bulldozers and dumpster trucks were on their way too, sent by the government to begin the clear up of wreckage. It was the clear-up operation to end them all, a wholesale wiping away of an entire community. Janis and I sat in the car both huddled over the newspaper. We looked at each other from time to time, but neither of us knew what to say. There just weren't words enough.

The photograph on the front of the 'paper was bizarre, to say the least. It was of a large boat sitting in the ruined front garden of a fairly ordinary looking house. Its absurdity was almost beyond comparison and it took several careful looks to convince myself that this was not a hoax. I tried to imagine the horror that must have gone before the click of the camera. I couldn't. As strange as it may seem, this is the image from that day I have retained in my head for nearly forty years; a boat washed up outside the front door of a once proud home. In the years that passed, when I returned to Britain and got on with my own life, I never forgot the upset and agitation I felt that morning. It has stayed with me to this day, every natural disaster through

the decades taking me back to that hot August morning in Baton Rouge. Something changed after that. Things were different for Janis and me. A cloud hung over the rest of our journey. Our reactions, of course, were secondary ones, but somehow the fun of our road trip died. Washed away with the Mississippi coast. From here on in, I could tell, things would be very different.

We took a slow drive out of Baton Rouge and headed west for Texas. I didn't realise it at the time, but we were only a few hours from the border. Conversation was at a premium; I said very little and Janis said less. She seemed focused on something that existed only in her head. As for me, I couldn't stop thinking about the hurricane. We didn't even have the radio on. We passed through Lafayette around lunchtime and didn't stop. Our hippie highway was running out of road. This was not how I had imagined the climax of our journey. It was happening too hurriedly. Houston was already on the road signs and we would surely be in Port Arthur before I even knew it. I didn't like it and I selfishly rued Hurricane Camille, not for the death and destruction it had caused, but for the dampener it had put on the last leg of our trip. Maybe, I told myself, it would have been different if only we hadn't stopped. If only Janis had not gone in to get the cigarettes. If only she had not picked up that newspaper. If only ... even my thoughts trailed off. It was useless. What was done was done. Stark reality had taken over my American adventure. I looked at Janis' face. She was as serious as the night.

In my head, arriving in Texas was going to be a sepia-tinged homecoming for Janis, a sentimental chance for her to show off her roots and to let me in on what was really going on. I guess, in all reality that was never going to happen anyway. Janis was preoccupied with more than just thoughts of Pass Christian and as I looked again at her face, she was pale and a million miles away. I looked then at the landscape

outside. It was as barren and desolate as I was feeling, not quite spiky-looking cactuses and spindly-legged coyotes, but not far off. The heat of the road seemed to have sapped everything dry, as if the day itself was having an early sleep. Every now and then, we would pass a filling station, each one looking a little more desperate than the last and as we moved silently on towards the Lone Star State, I wondered if I would ever come out of the numbed condition that the morning had put me under.

Just then, a bird swooped in front of the car narrowly missing the windscreen. I put my head out of the window and watched it dive off to the right, landing on the branch of a magnolia tree. It was a striking bird, yet no more than ten inches long and with a wingspan of perhaps a foot. Pale grey in colour and with two white wingbars, it had yellow eyes, surrounded by a thin dark eyeline. As we drove past, I could hear its loud and quite persistent call. I watched it, taken momentarily by its grace and beauty, then, for the first time in what seemed like hours; Janis spoke, softly and with a great warmth of recognition. “Huh, well I’ll be damned. Do ya know what that is, Peaches?” I shook my head.

“That’s a mockingbird.”

“It is?”

“Uh huh, the state bird of Texas, no less.” Her face changed, the colour returned to it and she sat forward in her seat. “Thanks for the greetin’ little fella!” she grinned.

The bird flew away, over the brow of a hill and out of sight. We drove on. I looked at an upcoming road sign. The town of Orange, Texas was just ten miles away. I thought about the mockingbird and I thought about Janis; the mockingbird an astute mimic of all those around it, but known and revered in Texas for what it is and Janis. Clichés are made of such stuff, I’m sure. I looked at her face again. She was

half-smiling; she was back. I began to think about making the most of what little time we had left together. Hurricane Camille had robbed us of some of the laughs we might have had, but I did not want it to wash away the entire trip. I even began to look forward to our arrival in Port Arthur. I still didn't know, but I guessed we would be meeting Janis' family. From everything she had said, I figured it had been a long time since they had been together. Had she left home under a cloud? I had no idea, but from the look on her face that morning, our arrival was preying, not just heavily on her mind, but was draining her of the very spirit that defined her whole being. I resolved that I would do what I could to be there for her. We were friends and that was that.

“Here we are, baby. Texas.” We rolled to a standstill as we approached the border sign. “You want in?” asked Janis. She seemed to be asking herself as much as me. “Come on, keep driving,” I said, trying to take control of things a little. “We need to eat. Let's try Orange, I'm sure we'll find something there. Do you know it?” Janis raised her eyebrows. “Of course,” I twigged. “Daft question, I suppose?”

“It's okay, honey. We've come a long way.” I wanted to ask Janis how she felt being back in Texas and also how long it had been since she had left. It didn't feel like the right time though. “So, what's Orange like?” I asked. “Is it a place to eat?”

“Shit, it's just another redneck town like everywhere else. They don't want no beatniks like us around.”

“Well, we're here now aren't we?” I said, trying to sound nonchalantly cool. My bravado though, was paper-thin. “Ha ha,” Janis guffawed. “My prince has gone hard-line. Let's check it out.” We took the small trip into Orange, across the impressive river of Sabine, which divided Texas from Louisiana. “You wanna do

some campin' tonight, Peaches?" Janis said, pointing out at the river as we drove by.

"That's a helluva spot?"

"What about Port Arthur? How far is it?"

"Too damn close," she muttered, before adding, "I wanna sleep under the stars tonight."

"You bet," I agreed. "Whatever you want is fine with me."

If you read the history books, Orange, Texas in 1969 was still on an industrial high, considered, along with Beaumont and Port Arthur as part of an industrial golden triangle. The city had boomed during the war, with three shipyards in operation and the United States Navy maintaining a fleet of nearly one hundred and fifty ships in the Sabine River. It was also just a twelvemonth away from electing its first black city council member and less than two years away from the opening of Lamar University. My recollection, however, is of a fairly nondescript looking place, bigger than I'd expected, but still dusty and weary from the southern climate. It seemed the kind of place where dominoes and card games would be order of the day, played out by old men with even older stories. Still, I figured, there had to be somewhere to eat. We parked the car up and walked around. It was a place of old-fashioned shops and down at home style, typically small-town Americana and with a noticeable naval presence. Not for hippies. I remember a young woman in a homemade floral dress looking at us with misgiving in her eyes. I felt conspicuously out of place with my long hair and denims on, a U.S. draft-dodging leftie in all but nationality. Janis, no doubt, felt it even more so; the feather boa in her hair and the cornucopia of jewellery marking her out as a visitor from outer space as much as the West-coast hippie I had come to know her as. Even to me, she stuck out like nothing else around.

Our late lunch was a quiet affair. Settling on a small diner, much like the one we'd first eaten at in Beech Creek, we took our seats window-side. I ordered a glass of milk and a beef sandwich, while Janis sent for a turkey roll. She was quiet still and unusually, didn't even hustle the waitress for some alcohol. I was glad, as I figured it would only bring her down some more. I tried to lift her. "Janis, there's a theatre house across the road. What do you reckon? Will we go see a film?"

"Sure baby," she brooded. "I could do with a rest." Her voice sounded dead-beat with exhaustion. "This dusty, damn city is makin' me tired." It was the first time in nearly a week, she'd admitted to being tired. I wanted so much to put my arms round her and ask her what was getting her down so. At twenty though, the script doesn't go like that. "Okay, that's settled," I said, maintaining my chipper approach. "We'll finish up here and go see what's on."

The theatre was cool and dimly lit, even in the foyer. It reminded me of one back home, only bigger. There weren't many people in; a few teenagers, some suited men who looked like they'd finished their Saturday morning overtime and us. I guess a matinee performance on a hot Texan afternoon wasn't much of a draw. "So what have you dragged us in to see?" Janis bemoaned as we stood at the ticket window. "Man, you're an earnest kinda guy, ain't ya?" she laughed. "I'll betcha it's a real honest to good movie. I hope so, anyhow's."

"Goodies and baddies?" I grinned.

"Do it, honey!"

"Two please," I said, leaning in to speak through the little window. Behind the window sat a woman in her early thirties. She was round and glistened and hungry. She looked as though she had worked there a long time and had never come out; so

long in fact that she even looked too big to fit through the narrow door to the right of the little window. Perhaps, I joked to myself, she had her meals brought to her through the grill at which I now stood. “Sure, sugar,” she smiled, sliding me the change from a five-dollar bill. “Okay, Janis. Are you fit?”

The film we saw was Henry Hathaway’s ‘True Grit.’ My father would have loved it, I was sure and I resolved to take him to see it when I got back to Belfast. A classic western, ‘True Grit’ told the tale of a young woman in search of revenge for the killing of her father and introduced the world to John Wayne’s irascible characterisation of Rooster Cogburn, the rugged man on the mercy trail. I loved westerns. I had grown up on them, Randolph Scott, Gary Cooper, the full barrel. Beautifully shot, it was a picture dedicated to everything glorious about the American landscape, from spectacular ravines to wild waterscapes. I considered how lucky I was to have seen some of this firsthand now. The characters in the film too, were strong and colourful, not wishy-washy like in many films of the day; an opinion worth having yesterday, it seemed, was an opinion worth having today. I couldn’t help but compare the America on the screen in front of me with the one I had spent the last week in.

The America I had found in the seventieth year of the twentieth century was as rich and unflinching in its beauty as that on the wide screen before me. It was a country of open spaces, of heritage and of dignity. The people I had met, from Peterson Seeger on the bus, through Robbie and Lee at Vanderbilt and onto the Lollis family, were, for better or worse, plugged right in to what had gone before them. There was a sense of culture being passed down. The modern world, the 1960s vision, was nowhere to be seen, lost beneath the lives of ordinary people. The counterculture, for them, did not exist and even if it had have done, it would have

been assimilated into the unbroken circle of life, father to son and mother to daughter. It was fascinating. Maybe if we had skirted the countryside less and got into the cities, then I would have seen things differently. Poverty, pollution and technology. Yes, my journey had been a charmed one for sure, but it had been mine and mine alone and one can only make of things what one finds. Even now, grizzled and cynical as I have become, I find it hard to think of the United States as being anything other than that summer with Janis, enthralling, enchanting and endlessly alluring.

Chapter Twenty-two.

We hung around Orange for no longer than we needed to and after picking up a few supplies; we headed back out to the river. Janis seemed in a bullish mood, as if the discontent of earlier had left her. Either that or she had bullied it into submission. We made a makeshift camp on the banks of the Sabine and under the now sinking Texan sun; we lit a fire, made from anything we could find and given ample ammunition by liberal douses of Southern Comfort. The ground was hard and the breeze was warm. On the other side of the river was a barbed wire fence, rusted from rain and covered in animal fur. This was truly rustic America. The colour of the sky that evening was as sweet as any I can remember, its changing hue seemingly pulsing from somewhere within itself. Janis, bottle in hand, leaned herself back on one of the big old tyres of the Lincoln while I made myself comfortable on a log. She puffed on a cigarette, blowing the smoke into that of the bonfire, while the embers and splints crackled and sparkled against the twilight backdrop, like tiny pearls taking leave of their captivity. Every now and then, one of us would get up to check the sausages, cooking on a primitive spit and when they were ready, we returned to our places to

feast upon our humble banquet. Nothing tastes better than food prepared outside.

For a long time, we didn't talk; allowing the scene around us to hold its own conversation, but eventually it was Janis who broke the silence. "You ever told a lie, Peaches?" It seemed a deceptively simple question.

"Of course, as much as my mother might like to think otherwise. Who hasn't?"

"When was the last time?"

"Jesus, I don't recall it," I answered quickly, not really giving it any thought. "When I was a kid, I guess. If you mean a white lie though, well I guess we're all guilty of that every day. Who goes through life saying what's on their mind? It just isn't practical."

"Have you lied to me?" That one, I did give some thought.

"No, I haven't. I am what I am, I guess." At this, Janis looked pensive, brooding almost. She threw the end stub of her cigarette into the fire, immediately relighting another. "You are what you are?" she said. "I guess you are. My man Peaches, from Belfast, Ireland, twenty years old and a long way from home. Two sisters and a brother, right? You work in a clerk's office and all you've ever wanted to do is come to America." It was funny to hear the basic facts of my life thrown together so raggedly, somewhat disconcerting too. I nodded, but said nothing, waiting to see where Janis was taking me.

"And what about me?"

"What about you?" I asked. Silence.

"What do you know about me, Peaches? Have I lied to you?" Now, the silence overpowered even the crackling of the campfire as Janis' words hung in midair,

daring me to do something with them. She looked directly at me, with eyes that almost begged me to challenge her. I didn't know how to though, not back then. "Janis," I began. "I know you like wildlife, I know you're passionate about music ... you're fiercely loyal and you drink more than anyone I've ever met. Damn, you drink more than everyone I've ever met put together! Beyond that? Well, you didn't give me your name for a whole day and you've gone out of your way to avoid telling me anything about what where we're going in Port Arthur. You're the most infuriating person I've ever known ... and ..." I stopped, drew breath and looked at Janis. She didn't speak, but somehow her face eased the words out of me, like a soft glove sliding off of a delicate hand. "The most infuriating by far," I repeated. "But I've ..."

"Go on, honey," she said this time.

"I've had more fun with you than I've ever had in my life before." I threw my arms up in a kind of exasperated way. "But have you lied to me? I don't know. I hope not, but nothing is going to take away the past week. "Janis," I said with a lump in my throat. "I can't thank you enough. You've made it the thrill of my life."

I stood up from the log, sat back down again and got up once more, shifting around nervously, naively embarrassed at what I had just said. The smoke from the fire drifted across Janis' face, making it hard to see her. "Shit Peaches," she said slowly. "Are they all like you in Ireland? Man, I musta been livin' on the wrong side o' the ocean." Her words, so often mocking and sardonic, were different as she said this. There was a sincerity in her voice, which made me both relieved and anxious at the same time. She ran her fingers through her hair and as the smoke cleared, I could see she was steeling herself to say something. "Man, I gotta be honest with you and

let me tell you Peaches, that's somethin' I ain't entirely been so far. Shit, I've been runnin' with my foot on the gas and empty in the tank for too damn long. You get kinda clogged up, you know what I mean?" She laughed, but not comfortably so, before continuing. "I guess you just get used to it and one day you wake up an' you can't remember how to get back home. Man, I been away so long I can't remember where I came from. And I gotta get back home, darlin'."

"Port Arthur?" I asked, sitting back down. And then she laid it on me.

She took me with a piercing, steady look that cut through the campfire flames, and spoke to me in a voice wrought with despair. Despair and relief. "I ain't from Port Arthur, man. Shit, I ain't even called Janis. I been livin' a God damned lie and I just can't do it no more. I had to tell you, baby. There ain't no-one else I can trust." In an instant, I felt the chasm of the Sabine River opening up between us, as if the person I knew had just completely vanished before my very eyes. In the split second it had taken me to process the words Janis had gone. The blink of an eye or the sound of a heartbeat couldn't have caught her. She was gone. The words though, remained; spinning around my head in triumph at the reeling their right-cross had given me. I drew in heavily and tried to speak. I tried, but nothing came out, just a few puffs of air and a whole bag of confusion. I looked around me, as if searching for an answer or for something to say, even for something to drink. There was nothing. Everything was monotone when I needed the reassurance of colour. Rubbing my hands over my brow, I let out a big sigh and looked at my companion. She had not taken her eyes from me. "I'm sorry, honey," she said. The smoke, so thick just a moment before, cleared from between us. I looked hard. She was there. It was Janis, only different. Janis without the thrills. I tried again to speak and this time the words came out.

“What about your parents?”

“Ain’t got none. Not anymore, anyhow.”

“Where are they?”

“They’re dead, man. Automobile accident when I was seventeen. They was out one night, it was stormy as hell. A tree fell across the highway and my Daddy couldn’t do nothin’ ‘cept take it off the road. Daddy was dead at the scene and Momma died in the ambulance.”

“Jesus Christ, I’m sorry. What happened to you?”

“Well, shit man. We was too old for fosterin’ and that didn’t last much more than a couple of months, but too young to be on our own too. I was outta school ‘fore the year was through, got myself a little two-roomed apartment. Workin’ like a dog. I didn’t do nothin’ there, ‘cept for goin’ to bed and gettin’ up. It was home for us both for a short time, though.”

“Your sister?”

“Yeah, man. ‘Berta got through school on my tips, but she weren’t a one for stayin’ put. She got married to an Airman and moved to Washington. Shit I ain’t been to see her more than three times in the whole time she’s been gone. I guess that don’t make me no good big sister, does it?” I didn’t know what to say. At twenty, who does?

“So, if you’re not from Port Arthur, where are you from?”

“I’m from a place called Luckenbach, that’s in Gillespie County. It’s about twenty minutes from Fredricksburg and an hour’s drive north of San Antonio. You might say though, it’s just the other side of nowhere. There ain’t nothin’ there but a dancehall and the ol’ German at the post office. When my parents died, the

population near enough split itself in a quarter!” I tell ya Peaches, a kid’ll go crazy livin’ in a place like that. ‘Berta got out quick an’ after too long workin’ the bars and coffee houses of Fredricksburg, I decided I’d better get me some life, ‘fore I died of boredom.”

“So what did you do?”

“Took me a Greyhound bus as far as I could afford and hitchhiked the rest. Wound up in ‘Frisco, livin’ at the top of a flight of stairs. Got me a job, made a few friends and figured I might as well have a good time. Man, it was a helluva scene back then, but there weren’t no tellin’ when the storm was gonna blow my way.”

“And now?”

“Ha ha,” she laughed, nodding towards the car. “Me and the ol’ Lincoln Continental, you could say we’re roommates now! I been hangin’ round ‘Frisco, on and off, ever since, takin’ off travellin’ every once in a while. See a little of my homeland, you know? When I heard ‘bout Woodstock, it sounded like a buzz, man. And that’s me, no fixed abode. Shit, no-one even knows I’m gone. I’m like a God damned leaf blowin’ across the country on the breeze, getting’ crumpled and brown the more I move.

She stood up, stretched her arms out and moved over to sit next to me. “You’re the first person I’ve been straight with for longer than I care to recall. I’m near enough, wored-out.” Pulling my arm around her, she burrowed in besides me, as if searching for some solace in the honesty of the night. Ten, maybe twenty minutes passed and neither of us spoke. The quiet afforded me a little time to think. It had been quite a night and I both needed and appreciated the chance to get my head around what I had been told. My initial shock had lasted only a moment and now the

deeper emotions and reactions were taking flourish. I wondered how far removed from her Texan roots Janis must have felt to abandon her name, her very identity. Maybe it wasn't as conscious as that. Perhaps it was a nickname that stuck, or just a joke that didn't go away. I thought about her family, or rather I thought about my own. It was impossible to imagine life without them and even an ocean away, I had thought about them every day that I'd been gone. It was reassuring to know that wherever I was, I could count on the image of my father at the docks or in his armchair, or of my mother standing in the kitchen. It was so comforting I would almost set my watch by them. To suffer the loss of both parents, as had befallen Janis, seemed not only cruel, but also incomprehensible.

I tried to imagine the strains Janis would have been under at the tender age of seventeen, grieving her mother and father, while being strong for her younger sister. I had no doubt that she would have been a gallant and mountainous support for her. Maybe the bravado had been too hard to shake off. Maybe she just got used to it or maybe she had just spent too much time carrying on regardless. Who knew? I thought about life on the streets of San Francisco, trippy and halcyon to hear Janis' stories, but undoubtedly tough and uncompromising in truth. Circumstance and necessity, I guessed, had weathered her leathery persona until whatever was underneath just couldn't be seen anymore. It was as if the lines between what she was and what she needed to be had become blurred. As the fire crackled in front of us and the stars danced above us, it felt as though we were on an island of two. I pulled Janis closer. Still, I didn't really know what to say, but I knew she needed the comfort of my being there. In truth, I needed the same from her.

The quiet did not last long. Janis, it seemed, had more on her mind. I did too. Leaning forward to toss a few sticks onto the fire, I decided to prod Janis a little.

“You know,” I began. “It took me a whole day to get your fake name. Isn’t it time you were straight with me about the whole deal?”

“Kate.”

“Sorry?”

You wanted my name right? It’s Kate. Kate Nelson from Luckenbach, Texas. I was born there in 1944 an’ I guess I been leavin’ ever since.” She said it as if she was exorcising a great burden and the relief was truly palpable in her voice. I decided to move with things. Kate? I liked it. It was no-nonsense, it was direct; it was Janis. “Okay,” I said. “But why Texas? Why Port Arthur? And why now?” Again, she did not flinch in the directness of her answer and when it hit me, it rocked me near enough to Belfast and back again.

“I got cancer. Four months now. Don’t know how long I got neither. Daddy and Momma are buried in the cemetery at Port Arthur. I been workin’ up the nerve to come back. I got myself all blowed up at Woodstock and didn’t reckon I could do it. Ain’t never had nothin’ but good time friends, worth a dollar an’ a dime, if that. Then you showed up, like an angel with folded wings. Peaches, you’re one of the blessings of my life. I couldn’a come all this way without you. You cut right through all my crap and talk to the real me. Man, I been playin’ at Janis for too long. You the first person that’s just listened in probably my whole life.”

“Cancer?”

“Yeah, in my throat.”

“Cancer?” I repeated. I felt myself wobbling on the log and needed to grab Janis to keep steady. It was as if I had been struck in the back by a rampaging bull. “You

can't have. You're too young, surely?" I managed to say. Janis, as was her way, just smiled. "Huh, 'fraid it don't work like that. It's like they say, when the man comes around, you gotta climb that ladder." She smiled at me again. God knows how? "Cancer?" I said again, this time slowly and quietly. "Cancer," once more. This time, it stuck. I went to speak, but words were not enough and as I struggled to find the right ones, Janis moved closer still, our arms becoming one and the same, uniting our bodies in feeling, so much so that I couldn't tell where mine ended and where hers began. It was the pinnacle of our friendship, no secrets, no lies and no confusion.

Slowly, but surely, the shock of it gave way to something else and soon, it was as though I had always known; as though there had never been a time when the cancer had not been with us. I guess in Janis' head, that's just how it had been. "Have you had treatment?" I asked.

"Sure, I seen a doc' in 'Frisco."

"What did he say?"

"Well, let's just say he didn't recommend planning my New Year's Eve party."

"Jesus Christ, you're kidding?" I said, shocked.

"Hell sugar, that's a long way off and I don't see no point in sittin' around, waitin' to die. I figured I'd be better headin' it off at the pass. Let life take over 'fore it's to late, you know?" I couldn't believe my ears.

"But what about getting' better?"

"Hell, I hardly been keepin' up with my health insurance! Anyway, do I look sick to you? Just bury me in the tall grass, honey, so's I can hear the cricket's song. It ain't

about how long ya got, it's about what ya do with it. Now I told you once before, it ain't gonna take me today an' it ain't gonna get me tomorrow ... an' that's all we got, baby. Anyhows chil', you too young to be singin' the blues." I didn't know what to say. That was her logic and I was just a kid.

We commiserated the only way Janis knew, with a bottle. "The last damn one in the trunk," she grizzled, pulling it out from the mess of clothes. "So what next?" I ventured.

"Next, Peaches?"

"We're only a few miles from Port Arthur. Then what?" Janis looked suddenly hopeless, as if I had spun her the biggest curveball possible. It was clear, that beyond Port Arthur, she had no plan. We were just a stone's throw from the end of the line and what came next would be anyone's for the taking. "I guess," she said slowly. "I'll go on home."

"To Luckenbach?"

"Man, are you kiddin' me?" she said, her voice still slow and deliberate. "That ain't my home no more. It's just some place I used to know. Behind the wheel of this ol' car, that's my home now." The resignation in her voice was painful; the emotion she couldn't cover up was still tender. "The last of the Mohicans an' all, ha ha!" She laughed, but no one was listening. "Maybe I'll just ride on down to Mexico, ain't never been 'cross the border. You want in, hoss?" And that was Janis all over. She'd been on the road so long she didn't know how to get off and if the cancer didn't catch her first, the highway was going to have to. All she had left to do was to keep on keeping on.

Her eyes, her face, her very life waited for my answer. When it came, it was

neither from my head or my heart. “It sounds grand!” It was the first and only lie I ever told Janis. The truth is, that I was exhausted. Nearly a week on the road with little sleep and nowhere to call base had left me shattered. I had enjoyed it like nothing before or since, but somehow, it felt like the right time to bring it to an end. Something had changed that morning, when we had found out about Hurricane Camille, the joy of the open road diminishing in the wake of such large-scale awfulness and now that Janis, had confided her truth in me, it just didn’t seem right to go on rambling across the States. I just wanted to stay put and to catch my breath. But I was not ready to say goodbye to Janis either, far from it. I wanted to get to know her for real now, one-on-one with no bullshit and no agenda. I figured all I had to do, was to get her to stay still for long enough. I could also I hoped, get her to see a doctor again. “We’ll do it then,” she bawled. “Port Arthur cemetery in the mornin’ and due south to Mexico.” I nodded, but inside, had different ideas, grand ones too, an apartment, a job even. My friend needed looking after and I was convinced I could be the man to do it. All I needed to do was tell her. Perhaps I should have gone with the momentum of the night, but I resolved to talk to her in the morning. ‘We’ll be roommates before she knows it;’ I kidded myself; it was going to be grand.

We finished off the bottle and camped down in the wake of the car. Texas days can be hot, but Texan nights can be cold as anything and we found ourselves the biggest, thickest Witneys that old Lincoln was hiding, just in case. The fire crackled on, its embers disappearing into the vast night sky, while Janis and I listened to the sounds of the wild, a coyote in the distance, an armadillo in the foreground and the rushes of the Sabine River in between. The wind of heaven’s lullaby swung gently on the canvas. It could have been a postcard and one I would have kept forever. We didn’t do too much talking after that. There wasn’t much left to say, at least not until

tomorrow came. As the night wore inevitably on, the noises became the soundtrack to our approaching slumber. Before sleep, as we lay side by side under the stars, I looked up, as I had so many times on this trip, at the moon in the sky; the selfsame moon that had shone on me night after night home in Belfast. I smiled. A strong wind began moving the clouds eastwards. Mr Rimbaud was suddenly on my mind. Could he see me, I wondered? I owed him so much. A gust of wind had blown me into his life all those years before, while a storm across the Atlantic Ocean had delayed my arrival in New York. Would I have found Janis otherwise? Probably not. “What are ya thinkin’, Peaches?” Janis said softly. I answered without hesitation. “Just how little it takes to change your life forever. It’s incredible.”

“Don’t I know it, darlin’,” she sighed. “You gotta grab it while you can. Ain’t never any tellin’ what tomorrow’s gonna bring.”

“Janis,” I said slowly. “Are you scared?” She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek, cupping her hand over my face and letting her fingers linger awhile before pulling them away. “Goodnight, Joseph Morrison,” she whispered.

“Goodnight, Kate.”

Chapter Twenty-three.

In The Quiet Morning.

(Words by Mimi Farina.)

In the quiet morning there was much despair
And in the hours that followed no one could repair
That poor girl
Tossed by the tides of misfortune
Barely here to tell her tale
Rolled in on a sea of disaster
Rolled out on a mainline rail
She once walked tight by my side
I'm sure she walked by you

Woodstock – Ian Margieson

Her striding steps could not deny

Torment from a child who knew

That in the quiet morning there would be despair

And in the hours that followed no one could repair

That poor girl

She cried out her song so loud

It was heard the whole world round

A symphony of violence

The great southwest unbound

In the quiet morning there was much despair

And in the hours that followed no one could repair

That poor girl

Tossed by the tides of misfortune

Barely here to tell her tale

Rolled in on a sea of disaster

Rolled out on a mainline rail.

The call of birdsong woke me up, piercing and insistent, as if there was work to be done. It was just after five o'clock. I rolled under the blanket for a lingering stretch and then kicked it off, rising to witness the early morning glory of the Texas

dawn. A rattlesnake passed me by and didn't even blink, while a trio of crickets chirruped a round for breakfast. This was Mother Nature's hour, the only sign of human activity being the bed of ash left over from our campfire. I crouched by the water's edge and cupped some morning freshness into my hands. Wetting my face, I marvelled at the honesty of the morning. Not a soul around for miles. I yawned and stretched out wide. My arms felt as though they had gone right round the world and come back to me, so peaceful was the scene. I could see why Janis loved it so. Janis? Most probably down the river someway. What a day it would be for her, what a night too. I'd thought of nothing else; orphaned, homeless and struck by cancer. It was almost too much just to have it all in the same thought. She would need her space once we got to Port Arthur. But I would be there for her. She had looked after me and given sparkle to my trip. I figured I owed her.

I lifted my blanket and shook it clean, across the river. My clothes were piled neatly next to where I had slept. My knapsack was there too. Strange, I thought. I had not left them there. My bag had been in the passenger seat of the Lincoln. "Shit," I said suddenly. How could I have been so blind? "Janis!" The car was gone, its tracks leading back up onto the road and away. She was gone. My heart sank to my stomach and my stomach to my knees. In quick succession, I felt panic, then anger, then confusion. 'Janis', I mouthed, the word forming but not materialising beyond a whisper. I slumped to the ground. Forlorn on the roadside, I ran my hands through the dust and sand; brown specks, grey ones and silver ones too. I felt sick inside, like somebody had opened a treasure chest up before my eyes, only to close the lid with my fingers still on the rim. How could she have gone, I wondered? There was so much more to say. I was flattened. The sky was suddenly heavy with the traces of her presence and my world seemed too big without her in it.

It was not supposed to be that way. Not yet. Still she was gone and I could not escape the inevitability of her departure.

For a long time I sat by the road, keeping one eye on the horizon and the other on the waters of the Sabine, waiting for her return. I knew she would not come, but still I waited. I ran the previous night's conversation over and over in my head, searching for clues, hoping for reasons. I guessed it boiled down to one thing though; for Janis the road went on forever. Staying put was too painful, it seemed. For Janis, the yellow brick road went on. And now she had gone. Gone for good, I was sure. No goodbye, no tearful parting and no mess. It was her way. Everything good is used in little pieces, my mother had once told me and as I watched the sun rise high in the sky that morning, I knew that I had been privileged to share in the good that was Janis. After a while, I turned to face the campsite. Everything was just as it had been the night before. The same, but different; like the Mona Lisa without her smile. I lingered, not wanting to change anything, not wanting to move. Like a bereaved parent who cannot adjust to the dust-gathered room of a once living soul, I hoped to preserve the scene. Her footprints could still be seen in the sand and the outline of her body where we had laid together on the ground had left the brown grass flattened and trampled. So I stayed, until the breeze of a passing truck blew the footprints away and the outline of her body could no longer be seen between the blinking of my eyes.

Eventually and groggily, the yesterday in my head gave way to the reality of the day. It was Sunday 24th August 1969 and I was lonesome and a long way from home. I needed to get back to a place where I belonged; I needed to speak to home. I decided I would head into Port Arthur anyway, not necessarily to look for Janis, but certainly to feel her. I felt certain that she would have visited the graves of her

parents, but after that, who knew? I wondered how serious she had been about going to Mexico. Maybe she was already on her way. Or perhaps, I thought, she had headed to Washington, to look up her sister. I would never know and it made me feel physically sick to think about it. It would take many years before I stopped watching the horizon in anticipation, or spinning round whenever I heard a southern American accent. She would, I knew, be with me for life. For now though, however much I disliked it, I needed to move on. I sat in thought for a few minutes and then, opening up the front pocket of my knapsack to check on my funds, I found a still-fresh ghost. Janis' copy of 'On The Road', the Kerouac bible I had seen in her glove compartment a few days before had been placed there during the night. Inside the front cover was \$200. No words, no message, just the money. 'A little something to get you home, Peaches,' I could hear Janis say in my head. Suddenly it hit me. I dropped the bag and wept.

"Hello ma, it's me." I had walked into Port Arthur, bought myself breakfast near Roosevelt's Park and was now standing opposite a giant Texaco sign, in a 'phone booth downtown. My mother's reply was hurried and beleaguered. "Oh, thank the Lord, Joseph. We've been praying you would call," she said, with an almost tangible shiver. The unusual quiver in her voice told me something was wrong and I swear, as she uttered those few words, I could feel her trembling down the telephone line. "Ma, what is it? Is it me Da?"

"It's Michael," she said without hesitation. "He's been shot." Shot? A shiver ran through me, centring on my head, making it thick and muggy. All of a sudden, nothing was clear. Shot? The word bounced about my head as if it were from a foreign land. It might as well have been. Shot? Had I misheard my mother? I knew I had not. All of a sudden, I began to think of him in the past tense. I saw him in my

mind's eye. I saw him as a child, my big brother scuffing his shoes on the way to school. I saw him at home, helping my father fix the coal bunker and then just as suddenly, I saw him in a suit, getting in and out of flash cars and disappearing over the horizon; the Michael none of us knew. That's when my mugginess cleared and was replaced by an overwhelming sense of wanting to throw up. "Jesus, is he ...? Is he alright?" I asked. There was an eternal silence before I heard my mother's faint voice trailing off away from the line. "Joseph, he's ... no, it's ... it was bad and your brother didn't ... he didn't ..."

"Ma?!"

"Joseph, he didn't make it. He's dead."

Dead? The hard consonants of the word fell from the sky and hit me on the head. "Dead, Ma? But I only saw him last ..." but before I finished, I found myself lurching forward, covering my suede boots with my morning's breakfast. This was followed, by a coughing fit and an almost uncontrollable urge to run. I fought for breath, wheezing and gasping as if I had been floored by a heavy punch. Dead? To most of us, it's just a word and one we so rarely have to deal with that its intensity falls by the way and yet here I was, thirty seconds into the death of my brother. When I had picked up the telephone receiver, he had been alive, at least in my head and now he was not. It was frightening how a life had been ended in one short sentence. As I stared numbly at my puke-sodden shoes, I heard my mother crying down the line and then I heard my father's voice. "Joseph, are you there son?" His voice called out as if in prayer. Once I had regained myself enough to listen, he soberly recounted what detail they had about the death of my elder brother. He spoke slowly, deliberately almost, as if he were detaching himself from the stark reality that

it was his son whose life had been lost. Like someone reading the news. I guess it was the only way he could get through it. The people on the streets of Port Arthur outside the phone booth vanished from my sight. My whole world consisted of my father's voice. Nothing else existed.

Michael had been involved in an incident in the Short Strand area of inner-city Belfast, a small nationalist enclave, surrounded by a much larger unionist area. He had been in a snooker club with a couple of associates and had become involved in a brawl, which spilled out onto the street and ended with a single gunshot to Michael's stomach, followed by the disappearance of all involved, except of course, for my bleeding brother. The emergency services, so my father had been told, had been at the scene in less than ten minutes, but Michael was pronounced dead in the ambulance. That had been on Friday, a week and two days ago, just twenty-four hours after my departure from Ireland. Michael lay now, under the grass at St. Donard's, the church where my parents had been married and where I had attended the funeral of Mr Rimbaud just a few short months before. Mr Rimbaud, Janis and now Michael. What was going on? The sense of loss was overwhelming, unreal even. Michael? Impossible. My father concluded with the facts and let out a heavy sigh and a bitter, rhetorical question. "What was he doing there, Joseph?"

A good question indeed, I thought. While I had barely come to terms with what I had been told, I have to say that my thoughts were quickly turning to the same question. The Short Strand area was becoming notorious for being an area to avoid. The following summer, in June of 1970, the provisional Irish Republican Army would fight its first major action there, defending St. Matthews Church against attack from loyalist paramilitaries and in subsequent years, the Royal Ulster Constabulary would have barracks with huge fortifications located there, because of bomb and gun

attacks against security force members. In more recent years, there has been a peace line on the northern edge of Short Strand, separating the nationalist Madrid Street and the unionist Cluan Place. For Michael though, borders and self-imposed lines meant nothing. It was the city of his birth and he saw fit, rightly or wrongly to go where he wanted. My brother, my protector; 'Michael the invincible' I had called him as a child. Dead at twenty-five.

Before I could ask my father any questions, my mother returned to the telephone. She talked to me of my childhood, of Michael and the girls, even of Mr Rimbaud. "He saw the dreamer in you, Joseph. Your father and I were not that way, but he did you right, son."

"I know, Ma."

"He was a good man. We never worried about you. We never have. You've a good shepherd walks with you, Joseph Morrison. Don't you ever forget that, will you? There's folk twice your age with half the sense, mind. Your Da an' me, we couldn't be prouder." I couldn't speak. I couldn't even form a tangible thought. I was emotionally used up, but my mother knew this. "Now tell me about your trip?" she asked, saving me. It didn't seem right, but I guess she just needed to hear my voice. I told her of Miami International Airport, through New York, Cincinnati, Tennessee and Texas, of Vanderbilt, Cheek Lake and Port Arthur. I said nothing, however, about Janis. My head was not straight on that matter and it would be years until I shared that secret with another soul. Mary, my beloved wife, would finally be the one to draw it from me, but for now, Janis was gone, scattered like the dust on my boots.

The comfort of talking to my mother was a much-needed one. She brought a

fresh shower of rain to the parched exhaustion of my mind. I told her that I had thought about staying in America for a little while, but that obviously, I would now be coming straight home. At this, my mother's tone changed. "Joseph?"

"Aye Ma?"

"Are you well, son?" It seemed a shockingly mundane question.

"I ... err, I guess ... I have been, yes," I mumbled. "I'm coming home though," I told her. "To be with you an' me Da." The next thing my mother said was the biggest surprise of my life. "No," she said firmly. "You're not to come back here." The upset in her voice seemed distant, as if it were buckling under the weight of something that needed to be done. "Ma?" I said, shocked.

"Now you listen to me Joseph Morrison." I could almost feel my mother pulling herself up to her full height, but I had no idea of what she was about to say. "Joseph, you're a special boy, do you hear? You have a love of the fine things that none around you here have. Your father and I have talked this over. You know of literature, of music and culture and one day it's going to lead you somewhere extraordinary." The melting pot of my emotions was stirred again; I had no idea that my parents felt this way. It was a pivotal moment. "Joseph, are you listening to me?"

"Of course, Ma." I was listening for my life.

My mother went on. "Belfast is no place for a boy like you, Joseph. We're losing our city to the violence."

"I know, I heard it on the wireless." So much had changed in such a short time. "It's not the city it was. Trouble is around every corner at the moment and it doesn't

matter who you are or what you think, we're all going to get caught up in this."

"I know, but you've always told me to be careful. I can look after myself, don't be daft."

"We told your brother the same thing ..."

"But Ma, I'm not Michael. I wouldn't ..."

"I have lost one son this past week Joseph," she interrupted. "I am not going to lose another, even if it means I don't see him. Good Lord, it breaks my heart, but it's not safe." A gap the size of the Grand Canyon punctuated the end of her sentence and the next thing that I said. Her words landed like lead upon my ears, filling them up and weighing me down. The roller coaster had decided to leave the tracks. "What do you mean?" I uttered, knowing the answer already.

"Joseph," she said resolutely. "Do not come back to Belfast."

"You're not serious," I baulked incredulously. "Not come home? Ma, what are you saying? Of course I'm coming back. I have to. You and Da need me." I paused. "And I need you."

"Joseph," my mother said, the emotion returning to her voice. "I dreamed a few nights ago that you were taken from us and it scared me to a sweat. I love you with all I have, my son, but spare me the hurt. You need to live your life in peace."

"Ma, I can't. I can't just leave. Where will I go? What will I do? Is it really that bad? What about Sheila and Gail?"

"The girls are settled, Joseph, but you're different. You've got your roots in rambling, you always have had. You've always had your eye on the bigger picture. Do you think your sisters would fly across the ocean and do what you've done, just

on the notion of an old man's dream?"

"But it was in Mr Rimbaud's will, Ma. I had to."

"But it was in your heart more, Joseph. I knew when you left that you wouldn't come back. Even if you came back in part, your heart would still be out there. Your father knew it too."

"But I ..."

"What have you got, Joseph? A job in an office on the Bearsbridge Road, is that where you see yourself? There's more out there for you, son, more than a country at war with itself. I want you to find it. Will you do it for us, Joseph?"

Five minutes later, I said my goodbyes and replaced the telephone receiver. I sat down on a grubby-looking bench nearby and cried. And cried. I near enough cried myself dry. Never in my young life had I felt such a groundswell of emotion. My whole life shook around inside of my head, moments taking me backwards and forwards in my thoughts, overlapping and crashing against each other like unstoppable waves on a defenceless cliff side. And there I was, being tossed from one to another, at the mercy of my exposed and still raw emotions. It seemed like an age before I returned to the sentient world of that bench. A part of me never came back. I don't know how long I was gone, but the next voice I heard, jolted me almost right off of the bench.

"Hey honey, are you alright?" That voice. It sobered me from my grief quicker than a bucketful of ice. I looked up through tear-stained eyes. Of course, it was not her and never would be again. A woman of about thirty-five, short and round, with bobbed blonde hair smiled at me. "You look like you could do with a drink an' a bite to eat. Do you wanna come in an' sit down? My shift's about to start." I said

nothing, but followed the woman into a nearby diner, where she fed me coffee and doughnuts. I told her about Michael's death and about my concerns over returning to Belfast. She was a good listener. Her name was Arlene and she had lived in Port Arthur all her life. I don't remember much more about her, but I know this. She became the first person I met on the first day of the rest of my life. That was thirty-six years ago, Sunday 24th August 1969. Port Arthur, Texas. A melancholy moment. Thoughts of a time and a place that were gone forever. Tomorrow I would pitch up and move again, but for now Texas was home.

Chapter Twenty-four.

I hung around Port Arthur for the rest of the day, trying to come up with a plan. I thought about my mother's words and I thought about Michael. I felt sick inside. I had asked Arlene where the cemetery was and caught the bus to Pace cemetery, Port Arthur's biggest. I spent the afternoon amongst the grass and the trees, the Texas wind blowing softly upon my back. Without looking for it, I found Janis' parents' grave, under a maple tree, uncluttered and neatly kept. 'Too soon gone, September 16th 1960' read the inscription upon the headstone. Janis would have been seventeen, Roberta, her sister, fifteen. I sat by its side for a time. It was strange to think that Janis had been here sometime earlier, strange, but comforting. In front of the stone lay a handful of wild magnolia flowers. I felt sure that Janis would have laid them there. I took a single rose of the blossom and attached it to one of the buttonholes of my denim jacket. I didn't think my friend would have minded. After a while, I began to notice a cold turn in the air, the sort you sometimes get in August; the sort that reminds you that summer is on the wane and that autumn is on its way. The sort of turn, I suppose, that told me it was time to be leaving. I found somewhere to eat in downtown Port Arthur and later that evening; I even came across an Irish bar. Unusually for me, I sank a few pints of Guinness and toasted my brother. I checked into a bed and breakfast for the night, but spent most of the time sat on the

window ledge watching the stars and listening to the voices in my head. I don't know if I slept at all.

The following morning, I felt a changing of the guard within me. I felt purposeful, renewed by my still aching sense of loss. I travelled to St. Louis to pick up the Texas Eagle, the fabled train in Janis' story about her grandfather. It ran all the way to El Paso and I planned to be on board for the whole route, a little something to remember her by. However, when I got to St. Louis, the old gent in the ticket office told me the Texas Eagle had blazed its final trail back in May. It wasn't economical, so they said. I've never missed a train more. And that was it; the last part of Janis that I had left was gone. It was time to move on. After that, I hitched around The States for a couple of weeks longer, eventually finding myself back in New York and then travelled into Europe, spending time in Spain and then the south of France. I worked as a labourer during the day and spent my nights experiencing the backwaters of the rural heartlands. It was during this time that I began to write. At first I kept a journal, but this soon expanded into storytelling, shorts to begin with, mostly just to amuse myself, but then, once the bug began to hit, I took to the idea of writing as being an expression of all the experiences I had within me, both real and imagined. And once I started, I just couldn't stop. I wrote my first novel, 'A Quiet Fanfare', in just seven months in the spring and summer of 1972 and having been away from Britain for three years, I decided to chance my luck on the whims of the publishing houses of London.

Sailing back from France, I met an attractive undergraduate from Cambridge who had been holidaying in Marseille with her parents. She was training as a nurse and planned to work in occupational therapy thereafter. Pretty, forthright and clever, with swirling hazel eyes and shiny chocolate tresses, she was blessed with an

endearing and underlying charm that I found irresistible. We struck up an understanding immediately and promised to keep in touch once we departed at Dover. I found digs in London and managed to get work in an office doing pretty much the same thing I'd done back in Belfast, while all the time harassing and pestering the agencies of Bloomsbury. The girl from Cambridge would visit whenever she could and it was not long before she and I were known as one and the same. Working as a therapist in sheltered accommodation, she supported me through the struggle of rejection, as my book was turned away time and again and then, on the 24th August 1975, she became my fiancée. Mary Weaver, the love of my life. Two days later, 'A Quiet Fanfare' was accepted by a little known publisher and my life changed forever. By the time Mary and I were married, in April of 1980, I had written two more books and we had moved to the beautiful city of Bath, Mary finding work in the health authority's paediatric therapy department. My parents came over for the wedding, as did my sisters and Mr Rimbaud's niece Anna and her family, but I never returned to Belfast, not until the summer of 1999, when my mother became ill and finally rescinded on her instruction to me to leave my homeland's troubles to themselves. And of course, along the way, Mary and I were blessed with two daughters, Naomi, born in 1983 and Abigail, born four years later. For a time, in those early days, Janis was in my thoughts every day, but like with most things, I guess life took over. Days became months became years.

"I'm going to go up love, you need to wait for her." Mary kissed her husband and made her way upstairs to bed. "You look handsome tonight, Joseph Morrison," she said as she left. She meant it too. Something about his face when he was troubled always brought it home to her. Vulnerability was not something Joseph was

comfortable showing and yet, his distress was etched upon his face, like the lines on a freshly drawn canvas. Mary knew, more than Joseph would let on, that things could eat him up inside; he needed, as much for himself as for Naomi, to make peace with his daughter. Somehow she knew they would work it out. In twenty-five years of marriage, Mary had never known her husband lost for words; they were his daily bread, his morning tea and his afternoon nap. Opening her dressing table drawer, she picked up a lovenote Joseph had written her years before. Two lines to express a feeling most people couldn't find in two pages. Words were his forte; she just hoped he could find the right ones to say to Naomi. She yawned. It had been a long day, a hard day, but she had work in the morning and needed to get some sleep. Working as a therapist at a special needs school, Mary found herself tired every day. She loved it though and any thoughts of retirement were nowhere to be seen. Joseph had his writing and Mary had her therapy; it had been what she'd always wanted to do. She placed the note back in the drawer and looked at her face in the mirror, hoping Naomi would be home soon. "They're too alike for their own good," she told her reflection, removing the make-up from her face with a wipe. 'Akin in their wanderlust.'

Downstairs, Joseph was thinking the same thing. Memories of the past had reminded him of his own youthful passion and yet still it was hard to think of Naomi turning her back on the chance of a lifetime. Her music had become her life; moreover thought Joseph, it had become his too. His success as a writer had afforded him whatever time he needed to be at his daughter's concerts, recitals and revues and he had, over the years, taken on the roles of unofficial critic and chief cheerleader. Whenever she was away from home, he missed the sound of music that spread through the house, floating from the piano like dust from an angel's fingertips. Joseph leaned forward in his chair, shaking his leg nervously. He looked at the piano

by the window, Naomi's for her twelfth birthday. From upstairs, Mary could be heard pottering about. It made Joseph feel safe. The lid of the piano was up; the keys ready to be played. He longed to hear her play. The silence gave Joseph a headache.

Joseph looked around the walls of the sitting room. They were the story of his life; treasured photographs and collected trinkets filled the room with joy and humanity. Upstairs, his study was his private domain, but downstairs the house was a celebration of family life. He loved the girls both so dearly. More even than his writing, he ruminated; his daughters were his life's work. In his eyes, they were the marker by which he was judged. So far, so good, he had often thought to himself. Today though, he had not been so sure. He looked at the clock. It was a quarter to twelve. Mary would be asleep by now, as would Abigail, who had spent the evening upstairs in her room trying diplomatically to avoid the tension. In any case, she had said her piece at the river. Joseph had been shocked by her forthrightness, but he was proud too. She was her mother through and through and that, thought Joseph, was a fine thing indeed. Naomi, on the other hand, was a little more stubborn. That, Joseph knew, came from him. He went to the kitchen and flicked on the kettle.

The touring schedule for Naomi's forthcoming trip abroad lay next to the kettle. Joseph leafed through it ruefully, lingering on the names of the places his daughter was to visit, Stockholm first, then Oslo, Vienna, Munich and on through Rome, Madrid and Barcelona. It would be breathtaking, truly the chance of a lifetime. And yet Naomi would not be going. Joseph closed the booklet abruptly, folded his arms and let out a sigh. He thought of the events of the afternoon, of how Naomi had told him of her pregnancy and of his response. He thought of the reaction of Mary and of how she seemed so much more at ease with it. And he thought too, about Janis. His writing had returned her to his conscienceness. Orphaned at

seventeen, twenty-six years old when Joseph had met her and with no place to live, yet the strongest and most iron-willed person he had ever met. He thought about what they had been through together, the police, the fight, the dead body even and a tear began to run from his eyes. “Jesus Christ, old man,” he said quietly. “She’s not my baby anymore, is she? What the hell was I doing looking the other way.” ‘Twenty-two,’ he thought to himself. ‘I was living in France at twenty-two, for Christ’s sakes. When did I become the father I never wanted to be?’ As he poured the boiling water from the kettle, Joseph stirred his conflicts of interest into the cup; the disappointment of Naomi not travelling to Europe on one hand, and the shame at his reaction that afternoon on the other. The front door opened. Joseph returned to the sitting room. The outcome of that brew was about to be tested.

Naomi came through the door, looking worn out but defiant. The spark in her eyes was ready to go. ‘Just light the blue torch paper, if you dare,’ they seemed to be saying. She stopped and looked directly at her father, ready to face his diatribe. She had clearly readied herself for a fight. Joseph stared back at his daughter. He looked hard at what stood before him; at the child he had watched grow, at the little girl who had sat at his feet and at the musician who had blossomed before his very eyes. He looked for a long time, until what he saw near enough broke his heart. She was gone and in her place stood a woman; strong, determined and ready to take life on the chin, no matter what. Naomi Morrison, twenty-two years old and as beautiful today as the day she was born. Joseph furrowed his brow, puffed his lips together and raised his eyes in a look of apologetic resignation. ‘There would be no fight,’ thought Joseph. ‘Not today.’

“Dad, I don’t need to hear it, if you’re going to start on me,” Naomi began, motioning with her hands. “I can go and stay with Emma.” Joseph went to speak,

but stopped himself short. ‘Sometimes,’ he thought, ‘it’s good to let people roll with it.’ After all the shouting he’d done earlier too, he figured his daughter deserved the break. “I wanted to tell you Dad, you know?” Naomi continued. “I wanted you to be happy. I haven’t told anyone apart from you and Mum and well, Mum guessed anyway. Joseph allowed his lips to turn up slightly at this; his wife had always been the quick one. Naomi took her bag from her shoulder and sat down. Joseph sat too, keeping his distance ever so slightly. He wanted to ask his daughter where she had been, but again, he stopped himself and allowed her to have her say. “It’s just been crap, complete crap,” she complained. Joseph tilted his head slightly in query. “I’ve just been wandering around all evening ... on my own. I haven’t even spoken to anyone. Abbie ‘phoned but I just couldn’t take it, so I switched my mobile off. Huh, how to have the crappiest day ever by Naomi Morrison ... tell your parents your pregnant! That’s a book I could write.” She looked at her father, almost pleading. “I didn’t know what to do. I thought you’d kick me out.” Joseph dropped his eyes and shook his head. It hurt to hear his daughter in pain. Still though, he didn’t speak.

“It was like you were someone else this afternoon. You just lost it. I thought you’d be kind. I thought you’d be happy. Huh, who was I kidding?” Naomi paused. “I am not a kid, you know?” As she said this, her voice lost its edge a little and she ran her hands down the side of her face. Looking to the ceiling, Naomi drew in a heavy breath and slowly let it out. She could feel herself cooling. She was glad. She hated fighting with her father. In fact, she couldn’t remember a time when they ever really had done. Her mother had always told Naomi that she had inherited her father’s stubborn streak, but the two had always been as close as could be, happy to be in each other’s company in harmony or discord. Joseph leaned forward, to within touching distance of his daughter. She went to talk again, but her voice now was

faltering with the emotion of the conversation. “I wanted you to be ... I don’t know ... I wanted you to be happy, I guess.” She struggled to finish, but managed one last thing before almost breaking down. “Why aren’t you happy, Dad?”

Joseph could take no more. His daughter was hurting and she needed him. And Joseph needed her to need him. He moved to the chair in which Naomi sat and held her. She fit in his arms like they were made especially for her. Letting go of herself, Naomi felt her tears flow, soaking her father’s sleeve like a leaking tap. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d cried like this. It felt uncontrollable, spontaneous and foolish even, but her father’s embrace banished all feelings of daftness. He still had not spoken, but Naomi knew that things were halfway mended. Why hadn’t he spoken, she wondered? Was he still cross? Was he psyching up for a lecture? Did he know what to say? After a minute, Naomi regained herself enough to ask him once again. She sniffed and wiped and readied herself for his answer. “Why aren’t you happy?” To his own surprise, it took Joseph no thought to answer; the words came straight to him. “Because I was scared,” he said in a soft, almost ashamed sounding voice.

“Scared?” Naomi repeated, sounding surprised. “Of what?”

“Of change, I think. I’ve spent my whole adult life writing about other people’s lives, making them exciting, putting unexpected challenges in front of them and twisting their lives to create a good story, but I guess I’ve just got stuck in the mud where it matters ... real life.”

“But what’s to be scared of? That doesn’t make sense,” Naomi asked. Joseph was relieved to here that his daughter’s tone was now calmer too. “Do you know, love? I don’t know. Probably nothing, but it just happens. When I was young, I thought I

could do anything. Nothing was going to stop me. Do you know your Nan encouraged me not to go back to Ireland? I was only twenty, younger than you. She knew I'd be okay. And it didn't worry me. Thank God it didn't, too. I'd a' never met your Mam or been a writer or had you and Abbie if I hadn't have taken a chance. It felt good too. It was exciting. It didn't matter how old I was."

"So what changed?"

"The honest answer Nay, is you." Joseph shrugged a half smile away and pulled his arm tighter around his daughter.

"Me? How?"

"In a couple of years, this is going to be like teaching you to suck eggs, but the fact is that something happened when you came along. I didn't want to take the chances I once did. Having you two changed my perspective on life. I started to see the danger in everything. Do you remember the bikes?"

"The motorbikes?"

"Aye."

"I don't think me and Abbie ever forgave you."

"Well, I had a friend with a scrambler when I was thirteen or so. He used to take it down the old wasteland out towards Holywood. I'd go with him on occasion, not too often, but more than me Ma and Da would have liked. It was the biggest thrill, but it was dangerous as hell. Do you think I ever worried? There was no way. I had some scuffs and scrapes, but it was worth it."

"So why wouldn't you let us?"

"Because being a parent puts the fear of God into you. From the day you were born, I

was your lookout, Abbie's too. I was always looking one step ahead of you, trying to spot the danger before you got there. And that's never stopped. When you go out in the car, I worry until I hear from you or when you're at a concert and I'm not there, I fret until I know you're okay. I think that's what I was feeling this afternoon."

"But the orchestra ... and going to Stockholm. I'd be thousands of miles away. You're happy for me to do that. I don't get it."

"Well, that's the pay-off isn't it? Your mother and me will always worry about both of you, but we can't stop you from living. And we don't want to either."

"So what's the difference?"

"I suppose it felt safe and I guess I was expecting it. I've been dreading it all year because I don't want to lose you, but I want you to be ... happy." As he said this, Joseph felt his own equanimity begin to waver. His daughter felt it too. Looking directly at her father, Naomi, for the second time that day, told him her news. "Dad, I'm pregnant ... and I am happy."

For Naomi and her father, the next hour or two passed with a new strength of understanding. He would never let go of the little girl in his heart, but Joseph discovered a new awareness of the woman before him; as if he'd had his eyes closed and had woken from some self-imposed slumber. His fear of losing Naomi felt suddenly replaced by a far greater sense of wanting to be there for her when she needed him. His role in her life was changing; moreover, the very infrastructure of the life around him would soon be expanding. It was something he was completely unprepared for and that was something he hadn't felt in a long time. It was well past two o'clock when he slid into bed and into his wife's waiting embrace. He loved lying next to Mary. It was his favourite place. He kissed her on the side of her face

and ran his fingers through her hair, pulling her in to spoon. “What do you think?” she whispered. “Well, it’s not Stockholm is it? I’ve told her that.” Joseph’s tone was flat and sombre. “Oh, Joe,” Mary sighed, waking up a little more. “You didn’t fight again?”

“I think ...” Joseph began in mock annoyance.

“You think what?” said Mary, sitting upright in bed, expecting to hear the worst.

“I think,” replied Joseph, revealing himself with a broad grin, “That I’ve never been a grandfather ... and I think I’m going to like it.”

A copy of Jack Kerouac's 'On The Road' and a faded photograph sent to me through the post by Owen Lollis; that was all I've ever had to remember Janis by. Janis? Of course, that was never even her real name was it? Kate Nelson. Who was she? Kate Nelson of Luckenbach, Texas, no fixed abode, one carefully looked after Lincoln Continental to her name; have whisky, will travel. As the years rolled by, she could well have become less and less of a real person in my head and more and more of the spaced-out hippie chic persona she worked hard to hide behind. Maybe, one might think, it would be hard to distinguish those hot August nights we spent together from the thousands of pages of fiction I have written in the intervening years. But that's not even close. Of course, life moved on, but I've never stopped thinking about Janis and never stopped wondering what had become of her. Where did she go after we parted? Why did she leave so suddenly and, most importantly, did she survive her illness? It's a question that haunted many a sleepless night and five years ago, I finally decided to do what I could to find out.

The spring of 2000 found me in deeply contemplative territory. It had been a turbulent twelve months. The previous summer I had returned to Belfast, after an absence of thirty years, when my mother suffered a heart attack and then a stroke at the family home in Hyndford Street. She was critically ill in hospital for a fortnight and with my father struggling to cope, I spent a month with the both of them, doing what little I could to help. It was an unnerving time, as although they were both past eighty years of age, I had never considered my parents as old. It was a wake up call from mortality. Then, in the autumn, I was hit with the biggest fright of my life. On 22nd October 1999, I was diagnosed with early bladder cancer, after noticing blood in my urine. Frightening was not the word. I didn't sleep a wink for seventy-two hours

after the diagnosis. The prognosis, so they told me, was good; a stage ‘Ta’ superficial tumour, just in the innermost layer of the bladder lining would be fairly straightforward to remove, but that seemed little consolation at the time. Suddenly, every mouthful of my cornflakes or sunset seen was something to be treasured and the pace of my life, never fast to begin with, slowed to an almost eerie slow-motioned rate.

I was fortunate. I underwent a cystoscopy, while under a general anaesthetic and had my two tumours removed. The specialist told me there was a twenty-five percent chance of them reoccurring, but that they would be just as easy to remove again. Twenty-five percent. One in four. Seventy-five percent chance of them not returning, I figured. Cancer is all about the numbers, so they say; are you glass half-full or glass half-empty? Well, I was neither, but five years on and I’m doing good and that’ll do for me. I can’t say it didn’t shake me though. When I got the all clear, my writing took a dive; I just wasn’t interested. I would sit and stare at the screen for hours on end and not get beyond my choice of font for the day. Then one day, in early February, I typed a single word in bold letters upon the keyboard. Janis. Just that one word on an otherwise empty page. I stared at it until it began to move, until I could feel her coarse hands and smell the Southern Comfort on her breath. Janis? I reached up to the shelf above me and took down her Kerouac book. Opening the front cover, I looked at the photograph inside. Wilson, Louisiana, 23rd August 1969. Her and me. Peaches and Diesel. “Christ almighty,” I blurted out. “I’ve got to go back.”

Just six weeks later, in March of 2000, I found myself back in the United

States of America, almost thirty-one years after my last visit. Landing at Philadelphia International Airport on a bright and crisp spring morning, I felt both nostalgic and overwhelmingly nervous as I stepped from the 'plane. It was America, but not the one I remembered; that, had lived in a little pocket inside my head and had grown more rose-tinted by the year. The open highways of New York State, the rustic beauty of Tennessee; nothing would ever come close again, but this was a different trip. This time, I had unfinished business. Mary had encouraged me to come alone, for which I was grateful. It was something I needed to do by myself, but still, it was unsettling not to have her at my side. Weeks spent trawling through the American census, the electoral roll and finally the telephone book, had brought me to Philadelphia to look up the resident of an apartment in the nearby district of Harrisburg, a certain J. Nelson. I had traced the whereabouts of a Kate Nelson across Philadelphia through the late 1980s and 1990s and had telephoned the number given at the most recent address only to find that she was no longer resident there. The current incumbents though, did recall Ms Nelson as having a southern accent and of being in her fifties. I was given the forwarding address of a J. Nelson, who they believed to be a relation, but no telephone number was registered at the address. So, I would be cold calling. But, had I tracked down the right Kate Nelson? It would not take long to find out; the Harrisburg address given to me was less than ten minutes from the airport.

Catching a streetcar line north, passing both the Franklin D. Roosevelt golf course and the city's main gas works along the short route, I got off a couple of minutes walk from Snyder Avenue. It felt a little unnerving to be walking an American main street again, but that was nothing next to the butterflies flapping about inside my stomach. I soon found the right building, a shabby looking block

situated between Snyder Avenue and West Oregon Avenue and entered in through the scruffy and fairly ramshackle lobby. Two minutes later, I stood at the door. My luggage sat next to me in the hallway, while in my hand, I held clasp of Janis' copy of 'On The Road.' The photograph of the two of us was paper clipped onto the inside of the cover; testimony to anyone that knew Janis, that we were once acquainted, proof to anyone else that I met along the way, that I was not some crazy Irish blag. The door had a buzzer. I lifted my finger to it, but did not press it. What were the odds, I wondered, of finding Janis? Would she even still be alive? Would she remember me? Would she want to see me, after all this time? What if I had been tracking some other, anonymous Kate Nelson across the electoral roll? Was I about to impose my eccentric flight of fancy onto some hapless native of Philadelphia? And who could this J. Nelson be? Janis had told me her sister's name had been Roberta and with her parents both long deceased, there seemed little chance that the person on the other side of the door would, in any way, be connected to the family. I told myself all this and yet, there I was, my finger on the buzzer, just bursting to find out.

I buzzed and waited. "Hey, can I help you?" A young man of about twenty or so answered the door in a genial manner. His accent was pure Philly and wearing a hooded jersey over faded blue denims and a pair of basketball kickers, he looked as streetwise as they come. He reminded me of my brother Michael. His hair was messy, but well cut and he had a day or two's stubble on his face. He gave off the impression of a tough, but hard-working kind of guy and I liked the look of him immediately although, he was not what I expecting to find; he would certainly be too young to know anything about Janis. "I'm sorry, I'm looking for someone," I apologised. "Maybe you would, I mean I don't suppose you'd be able to help, but ... Are your parents around?"

“No,” he said, sounding a little suspicious already. I could tell that my bumbling British manner had no stock here. “Who are you looking for?” he asked.

“Is there a J. Nelson here?” I replied.

“Sure, that’s me,” he drawled sarcastically. “What have I won?”

“Ha, no it’s nothing like that. I’m looking for a Kate Nelson and I was given this address. I’m an old friend, well, I think ... if I’ve got the right one that is ... Anyway, I was told you might be in touch with her.”

“Sure,” smiled the lad. “She’s my Mom. I’m Joseph Nelson.”

I froze and stared at the young man. Suddenly everything about his face looked different. His eyes, the shape of his jaw, even the mop of hair upon his head reminded me of Janis. It was like gazing into a looking glass to the past and the poor lad must have thought I was crazy, so dumbstruck was I by his sudden change in appearance. “So, how do you know my Mom?” he asked nonchalantly. “She doesn’t owe you money, does she?” As he said this, he smiled again, revealing the broad grin of his mother when I knew her. It was both enchanting and uncanny at the same time. I composed myself and answered. “We spent some time together one summer, a long time ago. I’ve flown over from Britain. It’s been so long now, I’m not even sure your mother will remember me.” I brought the book up in front of me with both hands. “My name is ...”

“I know who you are,” the lad said confidently. He pointed at the book and grinned once again. “You’re Joseph Morrison. My Mom named me after you. Come in, man.”

Just a moment later, I found myself inside of the young Joseph’s apartment.

He sat me down excitedly and hurried off to the kitchen to fetch me a cold drink. I looked around, not believing where I really was. It was cluttered and sprawling, littered with clothes, cutlery and crisp packets. It looked like he'd had a party the night before, or even the week before for that matter. There were also, I noticed, a fair handful of medical textbooks. "Are the books yours?" I asked, as he came back into the room. "Yeah, I'm studying medicine at Temple University. I'm at the Harrisburg campus; it's just nearby. I lived with Mom 'til a few years ago, but this place is closer and kinda neat, too. I've been workin' shifts at the gasworks to meet my rent."

"Medicine, eh? What do you want to do with it?"

"I wanna work the E.R. I'm in my first year still, so it's a way off yet, but I ain't no quitter, you know?" I smiled. With Janis as his mother, I didn't doubt it.

"So," I asked, a little awkwardly. "We're two Josephs, then?" He handed me my drink, orange juice and sat opposite me. A mountain of books and magazines filled the table between us. "Mom used to talk about you all the time. She said you were the most decent guy she ever knew. That's why she named me after you. I can't believe you're here. I never thought I'd get to meet you." He paused a moment, blushed slightly and then said. "It's a pleasure, sir." As he said this, I felt all choked up. Since my brush with cancer, it hadn't taken much to overwhelm me and to discover that Janis had named a son after me was nothing short of remarkable. I just couldn't believe that I had meant so much to her after we had parted. Thinking back to that morning when she left, what, I wondered, was she thinking as I lay sleeping? How I wished, too, that I had told her what I'd wanted to the night before. I shouldn't have left it until morning. My eyes filled up and in front of Janis' son, a

young man who I had known for less than five minutes, I openly wept. I just couldn't stop myself. More than thirty years of uncertainty was about to be laid to rest and the prospect of that was almost too much. "I'm sorry," I sniffed, realising how uncomfortable I was probably making Joseph feel. "It's just that your mother and I parted unexpectedly. I never got the chance to say goodbye."

"Hey man, don't sweat it," nodded the young man. "You got a lotta history there. You know, Mom used to tell some wild tales about the shit she got into, but you was somethin' else to her. She didn't go sharin' that with just anyone. She told me one time, I must'a been maybe twelve, that you came and rescued her, just when she needed it most."

"How long have you lived in Philadelphia?"

"All of my life. Mom moved here in 1976, I think it was. She'd kinda been on the move 'til then, but I guess you knew that? I think maybe she got tired of living outta suitcases."

"A rolling stone gathers no moss," I said quietly to myself. "What had she been doing? I hope you don't mind my asking?"

"No, of course not. She was just doing what she'd been doing her whole life, I reckon. Rambling from one town to the next."

"She had a Lincoln Continental."

"I don't remember that. We had a black Cadillac when I was a kid. It was in real nice condition, but it was as messy as hell inside."

"That sounds familiar."

"I know she went to Europe before I was born."

“Europe? Where?”

“Italy, and France too. She said she did some sailing and plenty of sitting in the sun.”

“Huh, I was in France in the early seventies, you know?”

“No way? Imagine if you guys had met? That would have been something.” He was right. The irony of Janis’ rambling and my own drifting bringing us back together on a different continent would have been immense.

“So why Philadelphia?” I asked, not really expecting an answer.

“It beats me,” Joseph replied. “A city’s just a city, but then, I don’t know any different. I don’t think I could imagine Mom being in the country.” I recalled Janis’ early morning routines and how much she enjoyed nature; I don’t think I could imagine her any other way than that. “Do you know about where she grew up?”

“Yeah, Luckenbach. I’ve never been there. She never cared much for it, I don’t think. She said it changed though; kinda became the home of the eccentrics.” He was right. In 1970, enchanted by the hamlet’s tradition of quirkiness, former champion swimmer and columnist for The Comfort News, Hondo Crouch, bought the ten or so acres that made up Luckenbach and a legend was born. During the next decade, the rural community found itself at the epicentre of a shift in American country music, as the likes of Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings and Jerry Jeff Walker made it a spiritual home from home, attracted by its backwater charm and innocence. From then on, Luckenbach became synonymous with a unique kind of simplicity and sincerity, from its cotton gin to the annual Mud Dauber Wasp spotting contest, truly a place where everyone has a name. Today, it carves out its own little niche, as a bastion of old-time America, complete with authentic post office and visitors centre. It was ironic to think that the small community from which Janis had fled had at the

age of seventeen had now made an art out of celebrating the values of quaint nothingness. The troubadour in her would have appreciated it, I was sure.

Joseph and I continued talking for half an hour or so about his childhood and about what his mother had been up to, while I also shared with him my own recollections from the days that used to be. I couldn't believe how articulate and easy to talk to Joseph was for such a young man. "How old are you, Joseph?" I asked.

"Twenty just last month. February 2nd, Groundhog Day, you know?"

"Sure, I know the film. I didn't realise it was a real thing."

"Oh yeah, you bet. Mom took me to see that damn rodent three years in a row when I was a kid. How the hell she knew about it, beats me. She was always coming up with funny crap like that. It's like she was a walking encyclopaedia."

"It was 'Time' magazine," I said.

"Sorry?"

"Your mother told me she used to read 'Time' magazine when she was a child. Your grandfather bought it for her. She said it was where she picked it all up; all the trivia."

"Shit," he said, shaking his head. "I've never met anyone who knew my Mom back then. It's amazing."

"What about your aunt? Roberta."

"I don't think they saw much of each other for a long time. I guess livin' so far apart didn't help much."

"Where's your aunt now? I know she lived in Washington."

“She’s still there, sir. My uncle’s retired now and they spend most of their time driving an RV from one National Park to the next. Aunt ‘Berta says she’s finally doin’ what Mom did thirty years ago.”

“What about your father? Where is he? Does he live nearby?”

“Damn, he could be living downstairs for all I know. He never stayed around after I was born. Mom says he was an okay kinda guy, just not the parenting type.” To be honest, it was hard to imagine Janis as the parenting type, but then would I have seen myself with two teenage daughters thirty years before? Probably not. “She tried to find him again, when I was four or five,” continued Joseph. “She gotta hold of him, but he wasn’t bothered, so I’m not gonna lose any sleep over the matter. It’s kinda sad, I know, but some folks just ain’t built that way.” It sounded an out of the ordinary thing for such a young man to say; it was pure hippie, his mother all over. “So, you’re a writer?” he said, changing the subject.

“I am.”

“You know, Mom used to take me to the bookstore whenever you had a new book out? She used to beam and point and say how you was a good friend of hers. When I was really small, I wondered if she was just makin’ it up. You know, tryin’ to make me laugh? Like a game. But when I was a little older, I could really see how much it meant to her. Every time, too. We never missed a book.” Janis’ son looked me over, as if he were checking a used car. “Man, you two must’ve been close.” I felt myself welling up again, but managed to stifle it. Then, a picture caught my eye.

“This is you together?” I asked.

“Yeah, three years ago. We drove to Mount Rushmore. She was real sick too. The cancer had come back again. She was as stubborn as could be that it wasn’t gonna

stop her, but you could see it in her face ... she was scared. I'd never seen Mom like that." In the photograph, a typical holiday snap, Janis' face appeared gaunt and grey, her skin resembling a piece of paper that had been folded too many times. Her extraordinary mane of hair, still mousy brown, but with streaks of silver, was shorter and styled in a layered kind of way. She was smiling, but looked tired. I imagined overdue leaves on a wintry oak, outstaying their welcome but hanging on by the sheer will of nature. That was how I remembered her, ornery, rebellious and quite beautiful. The image before me was a shock. The leathery determination of old could still be seen, but it was cloaked in a fragile throw. Still, it was a revelation just to be seeing Janis again. For three decades, her image had been frozen in time, a snapshot of what I could recall; a fading memory of sixties hobo fashion. But here she was, a woman in her fifties, posing with her son. It was fascinating. I took the photograph in my hand and took a closer look at her face. It was creased with the lines of age. I rubbed my other hand across my own forehead and down my cheek, feeling the contours and valleys of my middle-aged face. I looked at Janis's son. He was probably about the age I was in 1969. I suddenly felt elderly. That youthful crossing of thirty years before had never seemed more distant.

"You said the cancer came back?" I asked in grave concern. "You knew she'd had it before, then?"

"Are you kidding me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Man, Mom fought cancer three times when I was in Junior High alone."

"Jesus, that's awful. I'm sorry, son."

"She had throat cancer twice, that was after she'd had it when she knew you and then

she beat cancer in her breast. It was that that came back three years ago. I don't think she knew what to do, but keep on fighting, but sometimes I guess, even a gladiator's gonna meet his match." Joseph's voice turned cold and his eyes distant. "She'd be spitting up blood and still be making jokes." As he said this, I felt sick inside; the same unsettled stomach I'd felt when speaking to my mother from a phone booth in Port Arthur, Texas, thirty-one years before. I realised that Joseph had been speaking about his mother in the past tense and had told me nothing about her current whereabouts. I began to sweat and feel panicked. My heartbeat became quicker and quicker. There are sometimes in life when you know what's coming next. My head felt faint and my eyes were all of a sudden heavy. Joseph's face was a mixture of poignancy and heartbreak. "That was the last vacation we took," he began quietly. "Before ..."

"Joseph," I said interrupting his hushed voice. "Is your mother still alive?"

"You'd better come in here," the young man said, motioning me to follow him. "I've gotta show you something."

I stood curbside in the Philadelphia rain. Taxis motored by and people hurried on their way. Nearby, an old hobo fished around the bottom of a newspaper stand looking for change. He wore a red bandana. Cheek Lake flashed into my head, the smoke billowing above that plateau like the spirit escaping. Having travelled over Walt Whitman Bridge, across Interstate seventy-six, I was in downtown Philadelphia. A wet Monday, just after two in the afternoon. Staring across the road, my gaze was fixed upon the neon lights in the coffee house opposite. It looked warm inside; a welcome refuge from the rain-sodden streets. I moved closer to the edge of the road, a car splashing a puddle up in my direction, soaking my trouser legs. My coat was soaked through too, but I barely noticed. I couldn't take my eyes from the windows of that inviting-looking place. I looked at the people inside, escapees from the offices and mothers with young children in pushchairs, all going about their business as if everything was normal in the world. They had no idea of what might be about to happen. No idea of the somersaults being performed with great gusto inside my stomach. I crossed the road, all the time checking on the staff. There were six, maybe seven, of them. Arriving at the door, I pulled something from my pocket, a card, and read it. I must have read it about thirty or forty times in the last hour alone. I looked up to check again the name of the coffee house, pulled open the door and walked in.

“Hi there,” said a friendly-looking girl, as I pulled up a stool by the counter. “May I help?” She was in her early twenties and dressed in a short black skirt with a white blouse over the top. “Hello yes, a glass of milk please.”

“You bet. That's two dollars, ten, please.”

“I have this complementary drinks voucher,” I said, handing over the card in my hand. “How’s the first week of opening going?”

“Great so far. People are always gonna want someplace to sit and drink, I guess.” I turned around to have a good look at the place. There were comfy chairs, settees and large coffee tables littered around the quite spacious environs. Behind the settees were bookcases, filled to the brim with paperback novels, hardback textbooks and leafy magazines. The décor was eclectic in its arrangement, giving one the feeling of being in the country kitchen of an old friend. Its charm was familiar and its familiarity was its charm. Like catching the scent of patchouli oil on a passing stranger or recalling the refrain of a well-worn song, I felt instantly at home. “Enjoy your drink, sir,” smiled the girl.

“Excuse me, I wonder, could I ... just before you go. Is the owner around?”

“Err, sure. Is everything okay?”

“Yes. I just wanted to pass on my compliments. It’s a charming place.”

“No problem. I won’t be a minute.”

The girl went through an arched alcove and into the kitchen, from where the clatter and bustle of orders being readied could be heard. My heart pounded with all the ferocity of a stampeding boar, while my mouth and lips were as dry as the arid lands of the Nevada desert. I listened intently to the voices coming from the kitchen, a rounded Philadelphia burr here and a clipped New England accent there. I still couldn’t anticipate what I was here to discover and I craned my neck towards the entrance trying hard to see where the girl had gone. Then, I heard it, sprawling across all the other voices like a late night lounge on the back porch and rising gracefully and unhurriedly above the sound of a whistling boiler; that sweet-honeyed Texan

drawl was unmistakably true, weathered and gravelly as time had told it, but one and the same, as three decades of absence fell by the wayside. Then the girl returned, followed through the alcove by a woman in her mid-to-late fifties. Time stood still, suddenly the coffee house was empty, save for the two of us, my eyes fixed firmly on her and her gaze surveying the room for recognition of the kindness of a stranger. Then our eyes met, the room was suddenly full of people again and the soundtrack of a dozen noisy conversations resumed.

Dressed in brown corduroy trousers, over suede boots, and a chiffoned cream blouse, she wore her hair tied back in a red paisley scarf, accentuating her bold cheekbones and heavy-lined jaw. Looking the very essence of boho-chic, with her eyes tinted with a faint trace of black liner, she could have stepped right out of the sixties. Who knows, maybe she did; that was where I had last seen her. For a moment, she just stared and then, with a sudden jerk, the clock caught up with her. “Holy shit,” she exclaimed, drawing interested looks from half of the adjacent customers. “Peaches, is that really you?” I raised my eyebrows and nodded slowly, more out of shock than coolness. At the same time, my mouth gaped open like a bewildered rabbit on a busy highway. She paused momentarily, as if steadying herself inside then dropped the ream of papers in her hand and strode confidently across to where I sat. Her eyes sparkled like the early morning rain. I rose to greet her, but before I was even half way up, she had flung her arms round me, squeezing me to within an inch of my life. I struggled to my feet and held on tight to thirty years or more of unresolved feelings. I don’t recall who cried first, but our embrace was soon awash with our tears, running down our clothes and spilling onto the table; the tears of two old friends separated by half a lifetime of parting.

“My Lord, say this ain’t no dream,” Janis cried, from within my arms. “What

the hell are you doin' here?"

"Just ordering milk," I half-heartedly joked through my tears. "I thought you were dead, Janis," I wept, my emotions spilling out. "Oh Christ, I thought you were dead."

"Man, I ain't dead. I just moved to Philadelphia!" she laughed. "Come on, Daddy," she said, pulling me away slightly to look at my face. "Let's get us sat down. You look like you need to get down an' cool the seat o' your saddle."

"What?"

"Let's sit." She kept hold of my hand and we sat at one of the tables by the window, just as we might have done three decades earlier. "Hey sugar," she called to one of the waitresses. "You wanna get me somethin' hot and strong?"

"Okay, boss," the girl waved back, looking very excited. My arrival at the coffee house seemed to have caused quite a hubbub of interest. "You wanna drink?" Janis asked, turning to me. I pointed to my glass of milk at the bar. "Jesus, your hair mighta got thinner," she grinned, "But you ain't changed none, have you?!"

We sat looking at each other for a moment, neither of us speaking, neither of us taking our eyes from the other's face. Janis looked amazing. I felt myself beaming. "You look so well," I offered. "You've hardly changed." Apart from the change in hair colour, which was now streaked with silver and the lines of age upon her face, this was no great exaggeration. "Huh, well my ass ain't where it used to be!" she quipped. "But I'm doin' alright, I guess."

"This is a great place," I said, looking around.

"What are you doin' here, Peaches?" she cut in. "You ain't here for no milk, you Irish rogue." Her tone was friendly, but insistent. No chitchat, no gentle way in.

Just the way I'd remembered her; cut to the chase. "I guess I've come to tie up a few loose ends."

"Loose ends?" She sounded surprised. "Shit, is that what I am?"

"No," I responded immediately. We'd barely sat down, but I needed to tell her what was on my mind. I had waited for thirty-one years to have this conversation and I knew it down pat. "You are the person I have spent the last three decades of my life trying to come to terms with," I said, near enough choking on my words. "The one who gave me a way of life, a state of mind, who shook my world to its core ... and then, disappeared. I don't think I've ever let that go, Janis. And I want to know. Why? Why did you leave?"

Janis' answer was quick to come back. I was obviously not the only one to have had this conversation before. She squeezed my hand tightly. "Peaches, you was too nice to leave me." She sounded sad, resigned.

"Too nice?"

"Yeah, I knew it. I got so as I was leanin' on you to stand up an' that just wasn't right. All that shit I used to hide behind, you never saw it. You spoke to me like I was a regular chick. I didn't get that much, not back then. I was always the crazy assed girl, the one with the smart mouth. You made me feel good about bein' me. I never told anyone what I told you. To everyone else I met, I was a closed book. I never got from anyone what I got from you. But, I couldn't take you away from your life. You was just a kid."

"I wanted to stay with you, to help you."

"I know. That's why I had to go. To keep on movin'."

“To keep on running?”

“To keep on fightin’, honey. I was lettin’ myself get soft with you an’ that weren’t no good for getting’ better.”

“You didn’t seem bothered?”

“Man, I was scared. I was so scared I couldn’t sleep at night. I figured if I kept on movin’, I could stay one step ahead of the man.”

“So what happened?”

“I got sick. About a week after I left you. I was down in Alabama. It’s one thing knowin’ you’re sick, but it’s another feelin’ your body lettin’ go.” Outside, the storm worsened, bringing passers by scurrying into the coffee house. Bad weather, it seemed, was good for custom. Janis barely noticed them. “What did you do?”

“I sold my house.”

“The Lincoln,” I smiled.

“That’s right,” she continued. “I sold it to some used automobile guy in Mobile, then I got myself to the doctor. ‘Fore I met you I didn’t reckon there was much worth getting’ better for; I figured I’d done most everythin’ I wanted to, but lookin’ death right in the eye changed things. It was damn near the biggest turn around of my life.”

I knew what she meant.

The waitress brought Janis her drink over. I could tell she wanted to hang around, but Janis was having none of it, shooin’ her back to work. “How long have you lived in Philadelphia?”

“Since ’76. Thought I’d check me out the city of brotherly love. I liked it an’ I been here ever since. I opened my own coffee house about ten years ago, on the other side

of the bridge; an' this one, we moved here just on Friday.”

“Hmm, you’re a respectable business woman? I’ve seen it all now,” I laughed.

“Well, I figured I couldn’t get thrown outta joints if I owned ‘em, ha ha,” she snorted.

“Anyhows, man. Weren’t I always respectable?”

“You were,” I smiled. It was true, too. “I’ve been to see Joseph,” I said as she drank from her mug. “You’ve seen my boy?” Janis replied. She sounded instantly proud.

“He’s a real nice kid. He told me where you were. You’re a hard person to track down Miss Nelson, you know? He gave me this drinks voucher.”

“Yeah, he’s the apple of my eye alright. Smart as hell. Kinda like a young Dr Kildare. Man, I never thought I’d be part of somethin’ as good as that.”

“He looks just like you.”

“He’s tough like me, but he’s good-lookin’ like his Daddy.”

“He said his father’s not around?”

“No. He was a sweet guy, but he weren’t never interested in havin’ a kid.”

“I’m flattered about the name. Well, I mean, I guess ... I should be, right?”

“He ain’t yours honey, don’t fret. I left you sleepin’ soundly, my prince. Ha ha, I bet you did the math quick enough! He’s only twenty, mind. The truth is, Peaches, I couldn’t think of a name that meant as much to me as yours. Not even close. It was like havin’ you around again. And he brought out the best in me, just like you.”

“Have you never married?” I asked.

“No, man. I ain’t never wanted to neither. You’re married ain’t ya?”

“Yes, to Mary. How did you know?”

“Peaches, you’re a celebrity, don’t ya know? I seen you on that magazine cover.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“I still got it somewhere.”

“I think you and Mary must have the only two left, then.”

“What’s she like?” I hesitated, thinking of Mary. We had not been apart since my illness. It had been she who’d encouraged me to come to the States alone. “She’s strong-willed,” I smiled. “She’s a great mother and she’s my best friend.”

“Kids?”

“Two daughters, Naomi and Abigail.”

“How old are they?”

“Seventeen and thirteen.”

“That’s beautiful, sugar,” she sighed. “I can’t believe you and me are all grown up with kids. Where did the time go, honey? Jesus, it feels like only last night I went to bed and I was twenty-five. Now look at me, I’m pushin’ sixty. No-one tells ya not to blink.” She let go of my hand and pushed herself back in her seat, running her hands over the scarf on her head. “I never thought I’d make it,” she said exhaling. “I never thought I’d get to here. It’s been a helluva ride!”

“So what made you come all this way to find me? Why now?” As she said this, a clap of thunder shook the sky outside. It nearly jumped inside of me as I recalled the previous year. “I was unwell last year, in the autumn. Cancer in my bladder. It wasn’t bad and I’m over it now, but afterwards, I just couldn’t get back to work. I kept thinking about you, about us, about the trip we took. I wanted to look you up to see how the story ended, I suppose. To lay some ghosts to rest.”

“Shit, Peaches. And you’re okay now? Are you sure?”

“I’m fine. But I never really thought I’d end up here. I figured I’d seen the last of you. I’ve spent all these years wondering if you made it. Joseph told me about your health problems. How have you coped?”

“Havin’ him helped. Losin’ my Momma and Daddy so young was the scariest thing I ever knowed, a real livin’ hell for me and ‘Berta. There was no way on earth I was gonna be taken from my boy. Cancer? It can go screw itself! That was how I got through it, baby.”

“But you must have been scared?”

“The first time, sure. When I knew you. And the last time, about three years ago, I thought I was a goner. Shit, the sun’s set on me more times than John Wayne. I just kept on getting’ up in the mornin’ though. I was a bitch to cancer. There ain’t nothin’ as beautiful as the early mornin’ sky. Besides, I got so much to live for. I ain’t got time for dyin’ no more. It’s taken me a lifetime to figure it out.”

“To figure it out?”

“To figure out that there ain’t nothin’ better to do than doin’ nothin’. Shootin’ the breeze, that’s all I’m after now.” The rain streaked down the windowpane next to us, forming pools where it met the sill. Janis followed one down with her finger. I’d never seen her looking happier.

“I’ve got something to show you,” I said, taking an envelope from my jacket pocket. “Do you remember this?” Opening it, I showed her the photograph sent to me by Owen Lollis. “Good Lord, I don’t believe my eyes. I’d forgotten this had even been taken. How did you get it?”

“Owen sent it to me after my first book came out. It’s us at the farm, thirty-one years ago.”

“Damn, they was some crazy folks. I wonder what ever became of them.”

“Maybe we should go look them up,” I joked. “Something tells me they won’t have moved too far.”

“Boy, I’ll tell you what? I ain’t been back to the ol’ south since then. And there still ain’t no-one I’d rather go back home with, than you. Maybe we should,” she laughed. “Get us an old automobile an’ head on down through Kentucky, pick up the Natchez Trace again. Whatcha’ gotta lose, Peaches?”

“You know, you said that to me once before, back at Yasgur’s farm? Look where it got me then!”

“I know, I know, honey. We’re too old for all that now. But I’m gonna take you out tonight an’ we’re gonna catch us a show. You know, Dylan was in Philly last November. He looks worse ‘an me! Do you like cheesesteak? It’s the local speciality.”

“It can’t be any worse than chilli,” I laughed. “Let’s give it a try.”

“Do you miss the old days?” I asked.

“The ol’ days?”

“Yeah, you know? You and the Lincoln an’ a bottle of whiskey?”

“You know, sometimes Peaches, I wonder if that was ever really me. These days, man, I’m just amazed that I’m still around. I’m happy to have a glass an’ leave it at that, but every now an’ then, I’ll get the wind in my sails an’ I’m outta the door. Shit, I never get further than a stone’s throw away now, but it feels good to remember it.”

“You’d do it all again, then?”

“Every fight, every drink, every crazy night an’ Amen.” I laughed at this. “What are you laughin’ at, pops,” she mocked playfully.

“I’m just so glad I found you,” I said, feeling suddenly tearful again. “Janis, you changed my life,” I said slowly. “How can I ever thank you?”

“Joseph,” she whispered, pulling me closer. “You’re here, ain’t ya? That’s all I need. And you don’t need to thank me. Sometimes, fate pulls people together for a reason. It was the right time then and it’s the right time now. Besides man, we’ve been livin’ under the same set of stars all these years, ain’t we. We’ll never really be apart. I think we can both rest easy now.” As she said this, her eyes glistened and twinkled with emotion. I leaned over and kissed her. Outside, a flash of lightening lit up the grey sky. It was a good day to be in Philadelphia.

And that was where I left her, a couple of middle-aged parents, chewing the fat over dinner and a show. I spent a couple of days with Janis and her son in Philadelphia, before returning home to begin work again. Renewed by the trip, I found myself caught by the muse, finishing my book in just seven months. It became my biggest seller and I sent a signed copy over to America, receiving a congratulatory telegram from Ms Nelson in return, very 1960s. I always meant to return the call, but as the months turned into years, I never got round to it. Then, five years later, on the night after my daughter had told me she was pregnant, I picked up a music ‘paper and came across something I knew I could not let pass. Bob Dylan was to play a show at Fort Worth, Texas on the fourth of July. Playing with him would be Willie Nelson, latter day troubadour and famed sponsor, no less, of Luckenbach, Texas. The time, the place, I just knew it had to be. I sprang up and

showed it eagerly to Mary, my love, and my inspiration. She knew my mind better than I did myself. Ten minutes later, I was on the ‘phone, the ghosts of a time gone by and the spirit of Dixie running through my blood. “Hello,” came a croaky voice down the line.

“Hey, it’s me, Joseph. What are you doing for Independence Day?”

“What the hell are you talking about? Do you know what time it is here?”

“I know, I know,” I said, my adrenaline running amok over all sense. “Just listen to me.” I swallowed hard, conscious of the unexpected disorder caused by my call. Then I threw my hat in. “Janis,” I said. “Get yourself a bag packed. I’m going to take you back home.”

The End.