

A hiker with a backpack is walking away on a dirt path through a dense forest of tall evergreen trees. In the background, there are large, rugged mountains under a clear sky. The scene is captured from a low angle, looking down the path.

H. B. WEST

TALES FROM
A LONG WALK

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BY:

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MUDDY WATER

The woods on the northwest end of Cool Springs Farm hid a surprise. They are about a half mile uphill from Love Springs, past the house and barn where General Hancock billeted his troops seventy, eighty years before. We found the crude sawmill last year. It was not much more than a saw blade hooked by a pulley to a Ford tractor. But not the house. Would not have found it had we not been on the wrong side of Meadow Branch trying to scare up a rabbit or muskrat.

Jingles and I heard the scream of the saw blade. Someone was working. I got a running start, jumped the creek, and came up short. Jingles splashed through it, up the hill toward the woods. Near the edge of the woods, Jingles pulled up short, hair on his back straight up all the way down. A two-story clapboard overgrown by scrub trees showed itself, windows half shuttered, screen door hanging by a hinge. It never felt the comfort of paint. Had Jingles not frozen up, I would not have seen the house. A hand-dug well with a bucket tied to a rope is off the back porch. No power lines ran to the house. It must have been an outhouse, but I did not see one. Firewood stacked under a strip of tin roofing looks like it is being used. There is a horse tethered to a post at the back of the house. An overgrown footpath leads down to Baust Church Road. Angry barking came from inside the house. Jingles barked back, ears pulled back, hair still straight up, hind quarters low and quivering, upper lip curled, circling me. My hands shaking, I drew an arrow, fumbled, notching it, and dropped it. Grabbed Jingles by his collar and pulled him up the hill away from the house. The barking from inside the house never stopped. We headed home double-quick without disturbing the sawmill crew.

SCOLDING

DINNER TIME

Jingles and I were late for dinner, muddier than the two ladies who run this place would have liked.

Mother said, “Don’t let that dog in the house.”

I fed and brushed him on the porch.

My grandmother, Mary B., as she was known, “Where did you get that muddy?” scolding.

“Meadow Branch, across from the Reddick’s.”

“Good Lord, boy! Take those shoes off, leave them on the porch.” Still scolding.

“I found an old house in Cool Springs woods. It sits in the woods and faces Meadow Branch. We didn’t see anybody, but they have dogs.”

“Oh, my Lord, that’s Sammy Hyle’s place. You sure you didn’t see anybody? Did anybody see you? He lives there with his mother. Oh, Good Lord, you stay away from there. Sammy’s mother has a shotgun.”

“Who is Sammy Hyle?”

Mary B., “Sammy is the only student I ever had that I could not teach to read. Poor soul.”

SOME MONTHS LATER,

Mary B gave me a quarter and told me to run down to Mr. Tom’s store for a loaf of bread and a quart of milk. When Mary B asked you to do something, it was best to make haste. A conflagration by the cash register caught my attention. I grabbed a loaf off the shelf. Milk was not self-service; they kept it behind the counter in a large red Coca-Cola ice box. I stepped over near the conflagration. Bob and Toots

surrounded Mr. Tom as he spoke to a man I had never seen. His face was unshaven. His dark, thinning hair lay flat on his suntanned head. He wore a long-sleeved brown heavy work shirt buttoned at the cuffs. There was a trace of mud at the bottom of his rumpled blue overalls but none on his shoes. He had stacked cold cuts, bread, and cigarettes on the counter. Toots took a step back. Mr. Tom kept the cash register as a buffer between himself and the man. Bob had stepped away to get the man an ice cream.

Mr. Tom asked, "When will your mother get her check?"

"Next week."

"OK, make your mark on this receipt, use an X, bring the check in next week, and I will cash it. You can take the groceries with you. Bob will drive you out the road."

The man gathered his stuff. He and Bob headed out of the store. Bob scoffed but did what his father said.

Mr. Tom, "Oh, and Sammy, take a bath." Delivered not as a suggestion but rather an order.

"I ain't taken no bath...water, am weaknin'," said with an attitude.

THE ORCHARD

As America's frontiersmen began to push westward, The Orchard became a recognized geographical area around 1764. It runs a little over a half-mile east to west, known as the National Pike, located at the fork of the main road from Baltimore to Hagerstown and the Buffalo Road, a major north-south route. The Buffalo Road is now extinct.

The turn of the next century brought buildings and brick sidewalks. Maple trees lined both sides of the road, forming a canopy and providing shade. Things moved slowly back then; there must be something in the water, as things still move slowly. As they have since the War Between the States.

JUNE 28, 1863

THE HILLS HAVE NAMES

Local legend has it that General Winfield S. Hancock chose to bivouac some of his troops at Love Spring on Cool Spring Farm, a short distance northeast of town, fresh water being necessary.

Under orders from General George G. Meade, Hancock had marched his troops under a boiling hot sun the thirty-two miles from Monocacy Junction, near Frederick, to The Orchard. General Hancock commanded the II Corps, Army of the Potomac.

He marched up Bark Hill to enter the town from the west. Had he turned onto the first road on the left, he would have gone up Lazy Hill. On a clear day, he could have seen Big Round Top from the cemetery that rests on the crest of Lazy Hill. Upon entering the town, a Yankee soldier in his company observed that it was a secluded village, patriotic but paralyzed just now by the nearness of the rebel army.

Hancock was looking for Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Instead, he damn near found J. E. B. Stuart and three brigades of his Confederate cavalry. The Orchard's townsfolk warned him. Stuart's camp was seven miles away in Westminster. General Hancock chose not to act on this local intelligence and did not launch what might have been a surprise attack. Had he heeded this information and headed east to Westminster, he would have gone down Polk Hill and changed history in the process.

When growing up here, Cool Spring Farm was one of my favorite places to roam around with my black and white English springer spaniel, Jingles. But, even if I had a dog, I could not do that now.

June 28, SOME YEARS LATER

THE ORCHARD

The Orchard, nestled into the green rolling hills of Carroll County, Maryland, is still secluded and patriotic. The purple hue of the Blue Ridge Mountains provides a beautiful backdrop on the

western horizon. The Stars and Stripes fly from many of the homes' front porches, not just on holidays. A closer look and you will see the stars and bars on the back porch. The Segafoose Hotel, where Hancock and his officers took their comfort, is now a private residence with a historical marker in the front yard. Love Spring is still there, I reckon, but too many locked gates and barbed wire fences keep the corn from fraternizing with the soybeans and keep me from exploring. Where dairy farms once flourished are now chopped-up horse pastures. Holding pens are now front yards.

The Rising Sun Tavern closed in 1842. That same year, the Crossed Keys Tavern also closed, leaving only the Segafoose Hotel, which had gained and maintained an excellent reputation for food and entertainment.

John Smith built my house in 1842. The timing is ironic, as my back porch has developed an excellent reputation for fine food, wine, entertainment, and excellent American whiskey. Maintaining The Orchard's long-lost tradition of fine food and drink is just about the only reason I can think of for living here.

The Orchard's heyday came to an end around 1885. The town almost died. The clockmaker, silversmith, hatter, cigar maker, several cabinetmakers, haberdasher, and the tannery had shut down. It was no longer the main thoroughfare from Baltimore to Pittsburgh. The railroad chose a different direction. Only three stores remained, three churches and one bank to serve the two hundred residents. Things stayed pretty much the same for eighty years. Most folks kept chickens, and some fed them table scraps. Vegetable gardens and outhouses are few and far between. Farm animals no longer graze in backyards. The nearest good golf course is thirty miles away and expensive.

In the 1970s, things started to change again. The two stores that sold gasoline closed; the surviving store housed the post office in the front corner. At that time, each house had its own post office box.

The store was not self-service. Penny candy, cigarettes, dry goods, assorted meats, gossip, and the world's most delicious ice cream were there to meet every need. The ice cream came out of an outbuilding behind the store with the cream of local Holsteins — unregulated, uncertified, and not homogenized. The store was the gathering place. A sign still hangs there today, declaring it to be Devilbiss's Store. Everybody called it Mr. Tom's. The Great Fire of 1976 reduced one church and several houses to ashes. The bank was bought by a more prominent bank and closed. Locals did not need to borrow money.

Today, all the stores are gone.

I could have most probably enjoyed living here in The Orchard's golden years, except for the lack of indoor plumbing. The Orchard is still a pretty town. It is not the same as I left it forty-seven years ago. The Orchard has not grown any; still, it is not as I remember. A long-time resident says, "It is all dressed up with no place to go." The Temperance Society disbanded in 1883, and no new taverns have opened in the ensuing hundred and some odd years. A politician moved to town, thought the road needed improvement, widened enough to cover the maple trees' feeder roots, and put a double yellow line down its middle. The maple leaf canopy is now gone. Three one-hundred-year-old maples in front of my house died from the time I first left till I came back. But we have a wide road with a double yellow line down its middle. Beginning two hours before sunrise, it becomes a super speedway for thousands of cars coming from somewhere going to who knows where. Not just commuter cars, there are semi-18 wheelers, farm tractors pulling whatever, those awful trucks that haul stone for road construction, of which there is none nearby, none of them have discovered mufflers. None of them can go through town under fifty miles per hour. Coming from any direction, you must go out of your way to get into The Orchard. It is not in a direct line from or to anywhere. The windows of the bedrooms rattle, and the bed shakes, but there are not enough votes to put a stop to it. There has always been farm equipment coming and going as far back as I can remember. The farmers were still milking before the sun came up, and there was still room on either

side of the road for the rain to drain off naturally, feeding the tree roots. Kids cannot ride their bikes in town as we once did or play pitch and catch in front of the house. This is still open farmland, as it has always been. There is nothing else here. But we have a wide road with a double yellow line down its middle.

When I was old enough to draw a bow, about seven or eight years before passing my driver's exam on the second try, I roamed the fields and woodlands with a quiver of homemade arrows slung over my back and a straight hickory bow pretty near every day. Jingles, who had a twenty-yard nose, was my constant and only companion, always anxious for me to get home from school. He ran free ahead of me.

There were bobwhite quail then; he knew their call. There were wild pheasants then, too. I missed a lot of flushes. Back before crop rotation became popular, there was a cornfield at the corner of Trevanion Road and Baust Church Road. During harvest, the stalks were cut and chocked, leaving rows of foot-high stubble. Jingles would hunt the chocked corn, running as fast as he could from one to another. One fine day he jerked himself to the right and flushed a cock bird from a row of stubble. I was not even close enough to get a shot off, but I did and missed and lost the arrow. I think he knew I could not hit a flushed bird with an arrow; the bird was too fast, and the archer too slow. The following year, in the same field, he went straight for the spot he had flushed the pheasant the year before. The bird was not there. He never quit.

There were few deer then, only in the mountains. It was early fall when he and I were headed home near dark in what had been a hay field just north of town. It was close enough to the house to hear my father whistling, beckoning us to dinner. A big buck and two doe bolted out of Devilbiss's woods, over the open field, toward the woods behind Clear Spring Farm. Jingles gave a short chase.

After supper, I scampered, as only a ten-year-old can do, down to Mr. Tom's, where the old people would gossip and enjoy the most delicious ice cream in the world. I excitedly reported the

extraordinary deer sighting because deer were rare, and hunting season was near.

“Don’t come in here tellin’ lies, kid.”

Everyone knew deer were only in the mountains. Nobody else had a bird dog, not even a respectable hound. Ill will abounds contempt, maybe even jealousy. I had never milked a cow or made hay. Fisher did, lost his right leg in a thrashing machine.

Jingles could be a rabbit dog. He scared up one in the chopped and shocked cornfield with knee-high stubble. He turned it back toward me, full speed, ten rows over. I knew it was a kill before I released the arrow. I still get that same sensation every time it is a kill shot. It took him a couple or three tries to figure out how not to stick himself with the arrow, but he brought it to hand. Mother would not cook or eat it, but the neighbor who kept pigeons would.

At Mr. Tom’s that evening, some old man remarked, “Heard you killed a rabbit.” “Yeah,” I smiled.

“Must have been a sick or stupid rabbit,” snarled some old woman.

Elbows jabbed ribs; backs got slapped, the funniest thing the old gossipers ever heard. Not one of them ever shot a bow or had a bird dog. I had never milked a cow or made hay. But I have since sailed up the Nile and made a par on the Road Hole at St. Andrews.

DECEMBER 1960

CARROLL COUNTY

I read every word of the NO TRESPASSING sign nailed to the tree as the headlights of the '56 Chevrolet flashed over it, even the small print.

“Please, Lord, do not let us hit that tree,” I prayed aloud.

Blackie, Doc, and I were at the Alguire girls' house in Wakefield Valley. Doc had come home from Montana, and I drove up from North Carolina. Blackie still lived in Union Bridge. It was some days after Christmas and a few before New Year's Eve. We had not been together since graduation in June. A party was in order, and we did. Around midnight, Arch thought his daughters should be in bed. He invited us guys to go home. We were too young to buy beer. So, we didn't. Arch drank scotch and did not share.

In those days when it snowed, it hung around for a week or more. A foot of two-day-old snow covered the fields. The State Roads Department plowed and salted the day before. The sun warmed the roads that afternoon and melted what residual snow the plow scraped over. They stacked the snow up in a two-foot-high berm along the edge of the road that ran from Wakefield Valley to Union Bridge. By midnight, the temperature dropped below freezing.

I was riding shotgun in Blackie's two-door hard-top Chevy with a white stripe down the side. It was a two-tone Belair. I do not recall the other color. Doc was driving his parents' four-door sedan, perhaps a Buick. Instead of taking me home to The Orchard, Blackie headed for Union Bridge. Doc followed, and a race broke out.

We made it as far as Linwood in, I suspect, record time. The road takes a slight right bend near where the Millburys lived and before the concrete bridge over a small stream. The back end of the Chevy caught up with the front end as fast as a '56 Belair would

go. We pegged the speedometer. Doc was right on our back bumper. The Millbury house sat back off the road. There was a large walnut tree at the start of their lane, just behind a wire fence to keep the cows in the pasture.

The Chevy hit the berm head-on in front of the tree with the “*NO TRESPASSING*” sign. He answered my prayer and cleared the fence. Silence, nothingness, flashes of searing white light as the car took flight. I think I saw Jesus; I know I called his name. It rolled and flipped and rolled some more, and spun around in circles on its top as it landed some hundred feet into the pasture and short of the creek. Then darkness. It did not wake the Millburys.

Blackie fell out mid-flight, landing in a foot of fluffy snow. The car and I kept on going. I rode it all the way down. I woke up, not dead, looking out at the only space that I could crawl out. Doc jumped the fence and ran to where Blackie knelt in the snow, helped him to his feet. They both hurried to help me out of the now flat-top two-door Chevy. My right pant leg turned red. A hunk of meat dangled off the bone. There was no pain. No feeling at all. Blackie, bleary-eyed, stammered that he was alright.

We woke Blackie’s parents, called the ambulance, and tended to my leg as best they could. I wanted to cut the hunk off. Blackie’s mama said, no, you don’t. She slapped the hunk back on the bone. Wrapped it up. Raw meat and bare bones are shown above the bandage. Still no pain, Blackie sat stunned on the couch, saying nothing, still bleary-eyed. Doc was on the phone with his parents.

The nearest hospital was in Frederick. I did not want to go; they insisted. Now, well after midnight, the ambulance driver and his EMT looked at me as if to say, “What the hell were you doing?” They were in no mood for this trip. Dr. Colour called for nursing help. A half dozen or more showed up.

“Bart?” surprised.

“Hi Patty, it has been a while.” Not since I took her to my senior prom. We had ended up in Devilbiss’s woods that night. Clearance

Dingle took a shortcut through the woods to his shack on Baust Church Road and started the rumor that I carried a gun under the front seat of the '54 Buick.

“You know this guy?” Dr. Colour asked.

Patty nodded, “Yes.”

“Get out.” Dr. Colour said without looking up from his work.

Two state troopers replaced her. They did not believe we were only doing fifty and hit a patch of ice. They questioned me at length. Dr. Colour was busy sewing me back together. A hundred or more stitches. He grew tired of the inquisition and sent the troopers on their way. Dr. Colour said, “No, you are not going home.”

Patty visited my hospital room every day for three days. The Alguire girls stopped by for a chat. Doc and Blackie came by to say the Troopers inspected the crash site.

“Black ice,” they said. Never saw Patty after that.

I was no sooner home when a neighbor who lived five doors down the street and worked for the State Roads Department came by my house. My father showed him to the living room and summoned me to join them. I hobbled in on crutches. The neighbor said he had inspected the road at the site of the wreck.

“There was no ice,” he said.

My mind flashed back ten years or more. I never made hay or milked cows; therefore had never worked a day in my life. Now, I'm in college and driving drunk. My father showed him the door. Rumors of the wreck, ice patches, alcohol, and speed persisted. I needed to be somewhere other than The Orchard. My parents loaded me on a train back to North Carolina. My leg could forecast rain.

THE BELLS HAVE NAMES

It feels like a beautiful Carolina late-September morning, except it is The Orchard, and it is late July. A gully washer of a storm blew through here yesterday and cleaned out the dreadful mugginess, leaving a pure blue sky. In the distance, a church bell calls parishioners to services. I recognize it as “Little Becky.” The bell that for one hundred and twenty-five years graced the steeple of St. Paul’s Lutheran Church. My grandmother, the daughter of George Washington Baughman, Pastor of St. Paul’s at the turn of the twentieth century, told me Miss Rebecca Mehring donated the bell to the church, and it bears a plaque to that effect. She told me the names of all the other church bells, but I had forgotten them. She wanted “Little Becky” to chime once, for every year she was old when she died; that would have been one hundred and two. It is the water. I did not remember in time to make that happen.

She also did not want the hearse carrying her coffin to pass by our house for fear her spirit would not want to go where it was going, preferring to stay earthbound. I suggested it but was rebuked summarily for my suggestion. Some people believe that her fear was justified and the hearse should have taken a longer route to avoid passing by our house. She now rests in St. Paul’s Lutheran Cemetery with a clear view of the town.

“Little Becky” now welcomes a St. Mark’s Orthodox Syrian congregation. Two years ago, they removed the Syrian from the church sign. The Lutherans did not propagate well.

Later, after eggs and oven-baked bacon, another, closer bell peals, signaling ten o’clock services at the Methodist Church. After the Great Fire of 1976, only two churches remained. The Church of God and the adjoining parsonage burned to the ground. The steeple collapsed, and the bell tumbled, crashing, ringing its death knell, sending shivers down the spine.

My house was next door to the church. Except for the charred rafters in the attic, the house remains undamaged. A young rabbit stopped by my breakfast table for a moment on his morning

journey, unhurried. It had been in the herb garden, nibbling weeds. James Galway is playing Mozart's Concerto for flute and harp softly in the background. The coffee is black and strong. A wren sings from the dogwood tree, shading the patio from the morning sun. A pair of red-tailed hawks circle overhead, glistening in the sun, shrieking at each other. The overstocked flock of English Sparrows have taken shelter. It is an otherwise quiet Sunday morning.

The catbirds showed themselves early, before coffee. They have become stealthy in their movements and quiet of voice. One paused in the dogwood tree, surveying the landscape before quickly flitting onto its nest in the variegated holly tree. It has an insect in its beak. It makes the meowing sound from which its name derives as it feeds the young in the nest.

They arrive here in late spring and have for the past ten years. Their spring song is a pleasant lyrical tune. They go to a quiet meow when their young hatch. This year, they built in the boxwoods as they have for the past nine years. A cardinal was building in the holly tree. They ran him off and moved into that tree, farther removed from the patio and my breakfast table.

Someone within earshot has cranked up a motorized yard tool. A choir of other such devices will join it as the day progresses. This peaceful Sunday morning has come to an end. Before motorized yard implements, they did not do such work on Sunday. The summer evenings must have been longer than. There were vegetable gardens to be plowed, cultivated by hand, planted by hand, fertilized by hand, an insecticide applied by hand, weeded by hand, and harvested by hand into wicker baskets. Chickens needed to be fed by hand, and eggs gathered by hand. Those who had a cow milked her by hand. Sam King took the whiskey while slopping his pigs by hand. His wife, Rosie, did Grace Fox's laundry by hand. A steady hand sheared Burrier Cookson's sheep. Wilbur Devilbiss & Sons Trucking picked up the trash every Saturday. Wilbur drove the truck; Fisher loaded the trash by hand and for free. People mowed their grass by pushing reel-type mowers by hand. They did it all quietly.

Sunday mornings were for church. Sunday afternoons were for fried chicken, iced tea, conversation, and visiting. Early Sunday evenings were for a drive in the country to escape the chimes that blared forth hymns from the Church of God steeple. Loudspeakers broadcast the Lord's music to the countryside from seventy-eight rpm records. Five miles away was a pleasant distance to enjoy the music. Thirty feet away on Wednesday and Sunday evenings were hard to endure. There were no more chickens, vegetable gardens, outhouses, or barns, and the chimes went down with the church. There's only grass that needs to be cut three days a week and always on Sunday.

The noise agitation faded into a quiet, peaceful Sunday afternoon with wine and Stephanie. Conversation was easy, being the lone patron at her bar in the Red Horse. It is now past sundown; I am back on the patio, reclined in the hundred-year-old white wicker rocker. There is still a glow in the western sky. The motorized yard grooming has stopped. Drifting in and out of a wine sleep, there was a presence at my feet, the young rabbit nibbling.

Saturday mornings in the fall were for gathering leaves with a leaf rake. The fallen maple leaves that formed a spectacular canopy of color throughout the town were raked into small piles in front of the house. There were fifteen feet of gravel between the brick sidewalks and the paved road, more than enough to allow car parking in front of each house and several piles of raked leaves. On windless Saturdays, the piles would be set afire. The spicy, acrid smell of burning leaves will always bring back memories. As the fires burned out and the smoke cleared, neighbors would gather in small groups to share the past week's happenings while awaiting Walter Renzler with his butcher wagon. A converted pickup truck with a chopping block for a bed and wood-paneled sides with meat hooks holding sausage, beefsteaks, lamb chops, slabs of bacon, sweetbreads, and a leg bone for Jingles. All fresh cut on the chopping block bed. All without refrigeration or even a fly strip, and all the best.

It is less than three feet from the sidewalks to the paved road. The sidewalks did not become wider. A leaf rake is no longer

necessary. The maple tree canopy is now gone. His son-in-law, Mr. Myers, eventually replaced Mr. Renzel. There has not been a butcher wagon in fifty years or more.

Mr. Myers' son Elwood became the owner of a supermarket in Union Bridge, specializing in custom-cut meats. Before Elwood left The Orchard, I remember racing him down the street. He was driving a red Farmall tractor, pulling a wagon full of hay, and me on my first two-wheel bicycle. Elwood left the red two-wheel bike in the dust. A big smile, the wave of a hand, salutes a skinny kid.

THE 1950s

THE ORCHARD

Elwood "Country" Myers started boxing while still in high school, training at the YMCA in Westminster.

The truce in Panmunjom was hardly a week old; the YMCA boxing team was engaged with a Marine Boxing team from Quantico. "Country" was the reigning Maryland and South Atlantic YMCA heavyweight champion. His second-round knockout of his Marine opponent caught the attention of a Major, and the next day, Elwood became a Marine. I was in the fifth grade and still riding the red two-wheel bike on the street without a double yellow line down its middle.

Christmas that year brought a new fancy red two-wheel Roadmaster bike with an enclosed double top tube with a button that activated a horn when pushed. It was geared to go as fast as I could peddle.

Jingles and I were still roaming the hills and woodlands back of town. World War II ended eight years ago. The secession of fighting in Korea helped Wimpy get out of the ammunition box building business, and he set up a barbershop at the east end of town. A weekly visit was necessary to maintain a proper flattop haircut; fifty cents included a straight razor trim around the ears and back of the neck. It was best to get there early in the morning. Wimpy was subject to having a nip or two or more; sometimes,

it was wise to forego the razor trim. There was a pool table. It became a place to gather on Saturdays and keep up on the news of Elwood's career. Elwood's successes inspired Junie Flickinger to take up boxing, also at the YMCA. Junie's career was short-lived, a broken nose his reward. He quit high school, joined the army, served two years, missed getting the Rockin' Pneumonia and the Boogie-Woogie Flu, returned to The Orchard with a new red 1958 Chevy Impala convertible, took Hattie and me to a local cornfield. He kept a souvenir pillow from Natural Bridge on the back seat.

He drove that same 1958 Chevy Impala to New York City after Christmas of that year. I was not allowed to go, forced to listen to the greatest NFL game ever played on the radio. The Colts' victory helped ease the pain of my beloved Milwaukee Braves' loss to the evil New York Yankees in seven games. Arron, Matthews, Mantle, Berra, Ford, Spahn, baseball is the way it is supposed to be played.

German prisoners of war staffed Wimpey's ammunition box business. Someone flipped a lit cigarette into a pile of sawdust. The ensuing fire was extinguished by the Germans, saving the first manufacturing business in The Orchard since 1890, when the Union Tannery closed. The Germans did not want to go home. There were still three churches. The Church of God had not yet burned down, St. Paul's was still a Lutheran church, and the Methodist Church was next to Grace Fox's house. There were three stores: Furmalt's on the east end sold dry goods, penny candy, and Flying A gasoline. The one at the foot of Lazy Hill, across the road from the Union Meeting House, sold AMOCO gasoline and had the air raid siren mounted on a light pole. Devilbiss's store housed the post office and sold everything else, including the best homemade ice cream in the world.

Slowly but surely, the stores closed. The Flying A went first. No one was moving out of town, and no one was moving in. There were no houses for sale, and there was nowhere to build a new one. A death needed to occur to buy a house; no one was dying of natural causes. It is the water. The Orchard had become stagnated, overripe. It has become essential to know your family tree. There

was incest at the east end of town. It was back off the road and stayed dark. There were still only two hundred residents and no occupying troops.

Elwood's boxing career was progressing nicely. "Country" was now the Marine Corps's heavyweight champion and had qualified for the 1956 Olympic Trials. He won the Southwest Olympic Regional Tournament.

In Yankee Stadium, September 20, 1955, Rocky Marciano v. Archie Moore, Elwood was on the undercard. He lost by split decision to the guy who lost a split decision to Pete Rademacher, who won by TKO over the Russian Lev Murkin to win the Olympic Championship in Melbourne. The Orchard had another hero.

Wimpey was finishing up Bus Smelser's weekly trim; I was racking another game of pool, having lost the last one. Bus was the manager of the Libertytown Little League team. I was playing for the New Windsor team, and the Cubs were incredibly good. In those days, there was no mercy clause. The Cubs would regularly score 20 or more runs a game. We had just beaten Liberty, something like 33 to 9. Bus wanted to know why we had to score so much. I responded we didn't set out to score 33 runs; it just happened. Nobody wants to make an out.

The 1954 Cubs were the first integrated team in Maryland and often employed a deaf umpire. The Cubs were undefeated that year, 22-0. It disqualified them from the state tournament. Apartheid comes to Maryland. If The Orchard had had nine kids twelve years of age or younger, we would have beaten the Cubs. It is the water. I was in the third-base line box seats when Frank Robinson hit the only ball ever out of Memorial Stadium in Baltimore, 545 feet out over the left-field light stanchion. Mickey Mantle hit one out of Griffith Stadium in Washington the day Franklin Nyman and I were watching from the right-field bleachers, 560 feet, I believe.

My favorite, and perhaps the most impressive, was off the bat of Sonny Brooks at the Union Bridge Municipal ball field. Cleared

the left-field fence and sailed over the roof of the second house up the street. It was not measurable; no one could determine exactly where it landed. He was twelve.

People from The Orchard could call Charles H. Smelser “Bus.” Bus was born in The Orchard. He graduated from the University of Maryland in 1942 and then joined the United States Army Air Force as a pilot. He flew 35 bombing missions over Germany in B-17s. Bus earned the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with 5 Oak Leaf Clusters. He was a true Renaissance man, farmer, state senator, banker, and all-around good man. The Orchard has another hero.

Clarence Lockard lived right across the street. He had charged up San Juan Hill and signed up again for the Great War. Got shot up at Argonne and kept a diary while hospitalized in France. Returned to The Orchard, started a flooring business, smoked Camels retired long after I moved on. The Orchard has another hero.

Bobby Weller was a grade ahead of me in school all our academic lives but still young enough to cast bait to the brim in the ponds at the farm on the southeast end of town. We were the closest in age of people to grow up with. He lived in a charming white house on the east end of town with a beautiful view to the south. Airplanes fascinated Bobby. He did not play sports; instead built model airplanes, worked summers on his Grandfather Ray’s farm just off Bark Hill Road, saved his money, and bought a couple-year-old 1952 red Plymouth convertible with white sidewall tires. Got a little in Grandpa Ray’s barn and fretted for twenty-eight days, all for naught.

In 1958, he joined the Air Force. Elvis joined the Army. A good many years earlier, his older brother Eddie and Dick Myers, Elwood’s older brother, brought my first real taste of tragic death to The Orchard. Oh, I remember my grandfather being laid out in a coffin in our parlor, but I was a sheltered seven-year-old. The Weller and Myers boys were star athletes in high school and had recently qualified for a driver’s license.

The State of Maryland decided to create a four-lane highway from Baltimore to Westminster. It needed a bridge over a river that would become Liberty Reservoir. Jim Taylor, who lived across the Street from me, worked on the project until the bridge was complete, retired, and shot himself.

With their newly minted driver's license, the boys started just this side of the bridge to see if they could set a land speed record. They may have but would never tell anyone. They out-drove their headlights. The unfinished road took a hard left. They did not.

After the Olympics, Elwood retired from the Marine Corps and boxing. Pete Rademacher turned pro and lost his first fight to Floyd Patterson. Many years later, my friend John Smith, who grew up in hobo jungles riding the rails, and I were the only two white folks in the Washington Coliseum the night Muhammad Ali beat the B-Jesus out of Floyd Patterson. It was on a big screen. We did not wait for the decision to exit the premises.

SEPTEMBER

THE ORCHARD, MARYLAND

Fall is in the air.

It was ten or more years ago now. I was working on a story at my desk on the back porch. It is a bar in the mode of a flying balloon basket.

The old double guns propped in the corner hutch, swabbed, conjuring up images of the dogs they shot over and the game brought to hand. I cleaned the Benelli Super Black Eagle this morning if someone calls and invites me to take advantage of the early goose season. I have already committed to Still Point Pond in late January.

I thought my wish had come true. There was a loud knocking on the front door. I shut down the computer and answered the knocking, hoping to find a fellow goose hunter.

“You must be Skip West?” using my childhood nickname.

“Yes, and you are Bobby Weller.”

“Yep”

“Come on in. I’ll get you a cold beer.”

He pulled up a bar stool and popped open two cans of Bud.

“This is the first time I’ve been back here since I graduated from high school around thirty years ago.”

“Lucky You. Where you been?”

“This will take more than one beer.” It did.

“No worries.”

“I joined the Air Force and took basic training at Lackland AFB in New Mexico. Afterward, they sent me to England, and I did not return to the U.S. for the best part of nine years.”

Bobby spent enough time in England to marry a young lass from Bainbridge and father three kids. One was born in Spain. Spent some time in Turkey looking for a lost atomic bomb and in Libya practicing dropping them.

Bob returned long enough to volunteer for Special Operations in the Air Force, which means SEAR (Survival, Escape, And Resistance). He found his way to Ft. Bragg and learned to jump out of airplanes, high altitudes, and low opening. Then, on to Homestead AFB for water survival, hung out with Seal Team 2 in Puerto Rico, and went mountain climbing with the Army Rangers.

President Nixon said there was no American military in Laos. Robert Weller became a member of the Embassy staff and trained the Laotian Air Force to direct A130 Gunship attacks at night. In civilian clothes, he carried Swedish assault weapons and wore a 9mm Beretta outside his pants in Vientiane.

The Ravens told the “Crickets” where they spotted enemy forces. The “Crickets” relayed the information to Tactical Air Command. Sargant Weller directed the F-4s to bomb the enemy. Sometimes, he flew in the second seat of a Raven O-1. Once a month, he visited the French Embassy in Vientiane for rest. After a couple more years of doing sleazy secret shit, Mr. Weller came home.

Up until now, The Orchards volunteers served their stints, fought their wars, and came home, not Bobby. He was in for the entire twenty. He is back now, married to his high school sweetheart. Like those before him, he distinguished himself with honor. It must be the water.

The Orchard had a whole lot of heroes. Back in the day, they were celebrated with a ceremonial parade every Memorial Day, some years on the Fourth of July. There were marching bands, fire trucks, antique cars, horse-drawn carriages, little kids bringing up the rear waving flags, and bigger kids on two-wheel bicycles with

red, white, and blue crape paper threaded through the spokes of the wheels. It was beautiful. It was America.

There was an Honor Roll made of wood, suspended between classic columns, with glass doors and scrollwork across the top. It displayed all the names of those who did not return from war printed and posted on the board. It was at the entrance to St. Paul's Lutheran Cemetery. They have replaced it with a sentiment chiseled on a stone. The names that were posted have been lost. The parades, too, are no more. The faces of The Orchard have changed. There are still only two hundred who do not know where they live.

THE ROAD TO FREEDOM

C.S. "Hunley" Johnson's call found me enjoying Happy Hour at the Tasting Room in Frederick, which would make it a Friday—faithfully observing a long-standing tradition. This one was the Friday before Memorial Day 2006.

Against my better judgment:

"Wassup?"

"I hired three new guys, good men. I've known them for years."

"Cool. Send me their info so I can pay them."

"Why don't you come out?"

"Nah"

"I can make you billable."

"I don't know," finishing my Jack Daniel's.

"Fly out Monday; I'll get you into the hotel and pick you up at the airport."

“Hold on, Hunley... Let me think on it... Billy. May I have another one, please?” “Give me a minute, Hunley.” In a flash, Billy has a fresh Jack in front of me.

I’ve known Hunley for a number of years now, and I should have known better. Hunley and I worked together at one of the world’s largest engineering/construction firms. We worked well together and built a business from nothing into something when a merger left us looking for something else to do. Neither of us was good at corporate politics. But we knew how to get business, and we did. I transformed my engineering company into one that performed commissioning and validation. Somehow or another, we landed a project in a suburb of Seattle. Magic.

Memorial Day found me in the First-Class cabin of Northwest Airlines from Dulles to Seattle. Hunley picked me up, and about 40 minutes later, we arrived at an unknown extended-stay place. We could describe it as semi-comfortable, with a lovely outdoor pool.

“We need to be at the job site at 6:00. I’ll drive. Meet me in the lobby at 5:30. We can get your Hertz car after work.” after work was twelve hours later. I should have known.

The hotel didn’t serve breakfast until 6:00 a.m., and we were on the job site at 6:00 a.m. Six guys were staying in this place for five months, and they could not adjust their hours. I’m not worth much without breakfast.

I’m jet-lagged and tired.

I stayed that way all summer.

We needed more people on the job. I called Chuck Smith. An engineer by education and an A-10 pilot, he would be anal enough to be good at this job. He arrived in early June. He fit in very well, a duck to water.

A routine of sorts settled in, twelve-hour days Monday through Friday, Saturday offered a break from the drudgery. We only

worked six hours, and then, oh joy, I got to play golf with our client and Hunley in the afternoon. Sunday was a fun day. The hotel did not provide breakfast on weekends. Chuck and I would start early searching out local wineries. Château St. Michel was five minutes away. The ferry to Whidbey Island was a short drive. It would have taken a month of Sundays to cover all the wineries adequately. We discovered Whidbey's American Port and bought the entire vintage. By the end of summer, we had amassed eight cases of wine that we had not yet consumed. I was way too tired; not feeling at all well. Not that long ago, the cardiologist diagnosed me with coronary artery disease. I was feeling my age, only a few months from Medicare.

The Wednesday before Labor Day Weekend, I bought Hunley dinner. "I'm firing myself."

"Hang in. We'll finish up by Thanksgiving."

"Sorry, but I'm tired, and I think sick. I'm going home this weekend."

Shaking his head, "Is Chuck going with you?"

"No, he'll stay to the end." I had already talked with Chuck, and we worked out a plan to get our wine back to Maryland.

On the Sunday of Labor Day Weekend, we loaded eight cases of wine, golf clubs, and a couple of Sage fly rods into the cargo area of a brand spanking new Range Rover.

On Labor Day itself, I headed my brand spanking new Range Rover west out of Seattle. Found a cabin overlooking Puget Sound, hired a fly-fishing guide, fished for steelhead in the morning, played golf at Mindomear Golf Club in the afternoon, and treated myself to dinner at the best restaurants. There was no shortage of great places to eat. Didn't like the guide, fired him on the second day, slept in for a couple of days, gave up golf, and continued enjoying fabulous dinners at The Oyster & Thistle, with good whiskey and great local wine.

The end of each day found me perched on a stool in a small neighborhood bar, at the short end of the bar's elbow, my back to a PBR neon sign, charming a leggy blond barkeep with dark brown roots, who wore her shirt unbuttoned enough to encourage an extra tip or two. A waspy waist and long, shapely legs that did not need to be propped up on a pillow. She was a few years short of meeting the Hemingway standard.

The first rule of road-tripping is: If you think you might want or need something, bring it with you.

Despite all this fun, I still didn't feel up to snuff. The prescription became clear over a nightcap with the leggy blond barkeep with dark brown roots. I had gotten to know her some; she did not smoke, and her hair smelled like wild lavender. I told her I had always wanted to visit the San Juan Islands. She said a nearby ferry can get you there, not us.

She was almost persuaded—something about the band of gold on my left hand.

Friday Harbor did not disappoint.

Charming rustic, the harbor filled with the tall masts of sailing yachts, shops, restaurants, and bars line the street, and if you're not careful, you might drive right through it without knowing it. However, it is a town for exploring on foot. I found a delightful inn on the outskirts, parked the truck, and set out on foot to find the bar I drove past that overlooked the harbor.

I felt this place was different as I walked toward the harbor. It looked comfortable, with a lot of charm. The warm air tasted of a hint of salt and felt heavy on my skin. I was excited to be here. Downriggers became my go-to place on those days that I did not walk past the Cask & Schooner.

I tasted the best oysters, petite and sweet, on the half shell, served with Château St. Michel chardonnay. A warm sun blessed the patio, sailboats gently rolled in the blue water, and wonderful

wine, fighting off thoughts of regret that the leggy blond barkeep with dark brown roots was not here.

Not to take anything away from Chesapeake Bay oysters, but these were exceptional. I don't know if they were Samish Bay, Olympias, or Kumamoto's, as I was too busy enjoying them to ask. I tried other places to eat, but I somehow managed to come back here at least once a day. I remember I varied from the half-shell menu and tried Westcott Bay Oysters, baked as a prelude to fresh pan-seared halibut.

The leggy blond barkeep with dark brown roots would have enjoyed this. I had bought a couple of cheap aluminum lawn chairs at a hardware store in Oak Harbor with hopeful thoughts that did not pan out. So instead, touring the island occupied most days, looking for a perfect place to relax and breathe in the scenery. I did not play golf nor fished, even though I kept an eye out for a likely stream while driving around but didn't find any appealing. I can say the same about the pickings at the local bars.

I parked the truck on the side of a narrow road, with no evidence of civilization in sight. No tourists, no locals, no evidence that humankind existed, only a Magpie fussing about for company. Unfolded a chair, set it up on the shoulder of a grassy hill with wild lavender running toward the water's edge, a patch of poppies here and there, with Mount Rainier filling in the distant horizon. A pod of Orca's played a few yards offshore. It could have been three or four. I awoke as the sun was falling behind the hill, setting the sky on fire. A chill had set in. I enjoyed more wine and oysters at Downriggers.

I don't remember how many days I was in Friday's Harbor, only that it was not enough. At some point, I decided I needed to visit Victoria, British Columbia. I leave Friday Harbor with an empty feeling. It would have been better if she had come along.

The ferry requires a customs inspection, and they levy hefty tariffs on wine, and I have eight cases.

Customs Station Inspector at the ferry terminal, “May I see your passport and driver’s license.” “Yes, sir.”

The officer peers into the cargo area of the brand-spanking new Range Rover.

Taking my documents with him, he strolls to the rear of the truck and opens the tailgate. Carefully, he surveys the eight cases of wine, golf clubs, and the two Sage fly rods still strung up. He paid little attention to my luggage.

“Mr. West, do you have any business in Canada?”

“No, sir, I’m just touring before heading home.” I heard myself say home.

“Mr. West, do you have anything in this vehicle that you plan to leave in Canada?”

“Well, officer, there may be a golf ball or two that gets left behind, but nothing else.”

“Have a nice day.”

“Yes, sir.” Right foot hits the floor.

I checked into the famous Fairmont Empress and set out to explore the beautiful Capital District and harbor area. Gardeners meticulously cared for the flower beds, not a wilted blossom in sight. Graffiti does not disfigure the architecture. Trash cans are in full use.

I discovered Murchie’s, a local landmark, for a fabulous lunch and a much-needed place to sit down and rest my feet. After that, more urban trekking around the harbor, into Old Town, found a bookstore, bought a map of Back Roads of British Columbia, then over to Chinatown and back to the Empress, named for Queen Victoria, Empress of India.

I found my way into the Bengal Lounge, tucked away in a far corner off the main lobby.

Plush.

British Raj. Elegant.

Gunga Din is here somewhere.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh holds forth over a cadre of hangers-on in a private corner, far from the lobby. Rudyard Kipling is sipping a cup of tea, nose buried in the latest edition of *The Northern Star*. Tucked in the corner with two lovely ladies draped in flowing sari and be-jeweled foreheads, Peachy and Danny, comfortable in tufted red leather sofas, legs crossed, pith helmets dangling from the toes of their knee-high leather boots, full dress uniforms, plotted another nefarious adventure. Dark hardwood floors littered with oriental carpets. Floor-to-ceiling columns encased in polished teak with brass sconces with a single candle, soft, romantic.

Slumped in an oversized leather sofa by the glowing fireplace, PH Jim Corbett, whiskey in hand, chatting with “Papa,” whose whiskey was half gone. He gestured at the full stretched-out skin and growling head of the man-eating tigress of Champawat, mounted above the hearth, mantel to ceiling. Champawat had claimed 436 victims before Corbett killed her after a harrowing stalk with two shots from his old black powder Martini Henry. Corbett specialized in only hunting tigers and leopards that were man-eaters and always alone. “Papa” gave a slow, knowing smile and raised his glass in salute, emptied it, and ordered another one.

A statue of a life-size black panther stands guard by the entrance, and a Raja Ravi Varma mural of sumptuous lakeside India hangs over the bar. Most of the half-dozen comfortable bar stools were unoccupied. Those that were spilled an aroma of exotic curries and Bombay Stingers—driving my nostrils to delusions. No unattached ladies presented themselves.

I do not like curry; nobody interesting at the bar has had too much fish and needs a steak. I left the Empress and found a steak house with a friendly bar and bourbon. Struck up some chatter with the locals, still no unattached ladies, and learned the road to Whistler is one of the most scenic in the world.

The road to Whistler is a narrow two-lane mountain trail bordering crystal blue lakes reflecting snow-capped mountains and was under construction to accommodate traffic for the upcoming Winter Olympics. I wished for a designated driver. The scenery is distracting my driving. I wanted a designated driver. In the summer, people had gone home or back to school, and the winter crew had not yet arrived. The shops, restaurants, and bars had already jacked up their prices. I found the golf course and got paired with a guy and his girlfriend and a timber baron to round out the foursome. A lonesome coyote looking for a meal joined us on the sixth tee. He went about his business unhurried by our presence.

I enjoyed a couple of beers with the timber baron and got a call from Chuck Smith, who said I needed to sign some papers and would meet me in Vancouver in two days. He had been home to Maryland and stopped by my house to pick up waders, vests, and other fly-fishing essentials. He brought them along.

Chuck found me at the Victoria Harborside Marriott at happy hour on the second day. Said I looked tired. Told him I didn't feel well but could not put my finger on why. After a couple of drinks, we headed out of the Marriott. As we climbed up the hill on Alberni Street, we passed a two-story Chinese restaurant. On the ground level, the cooks were making noodles by hand. Chuck insisted this was the place for dinner. We climbed the stairs to the mezzanine level and entered the restaurant proper.

We each ordered a whiskey to recuperate from walking up the hill and bide some time while surveying the menu. Again, Chuck insisted we have the smoked tea duck and a delightful chardonnay. Our server, an attractive Asian girl, told me she was spoken for and asked if I liked my duck. I did, indeed. To this day, Chuck says it was the best meal he has ever had. This is from a man who

traveled the Far East lavishly at our government's expense. It was memorable. I don't think either of us has ordered smoked tea duck anywhere else, knowing it would not measure up.

The next day must have been a Sunday. Chuck headed back to work with the signed papers, and I headed north to the backcountry with my fly-fishing gear.

Merritt is the Country Music Capital of Canada; a few miles southeast is Corbett Lake Lodge. It was a lovely three-hour drive to the Lodge. The lake and Lodge are world-renowned as fabulous fly-fishing destinations. It is well with stocked Kamloops trout tipping the scales between twelve and eighteen pounds. They are why I came here.

The Lodge sits on three hundred acres of ponderosa pine, spruce, aspen, and expansive wildflower meadows. No neighbors are in sight. The rustic log lodge provides a panoramic view of Corbett Lake from the dining room and the lounge.

I arrived at the Lodge mid-afternoon, booked in for several days, and settled into my room. I noticed a pier at the bottom of the hill stretching out into the lake. The jonboats docked on both sides. It would be possible to cast a fly off the dock, except for other guests tossing bits of food to several colossal trout. Disappointed and disgusted, I headed for the bar.

Instead of fishing the next day, I drove into Merritt. The town was quiet, with no traffic and a few Native Americans lounging on porches. The annual rodeo was last week. I found a pharmacist, described my symptoms, and told him as a child growing up in The Orchard, I was susceptible to hay fever at this time of the year. This sickness did not feel precisely like The Orchard's hay fever, which sometimes developed into asthma, but it was close. I walked out with a dozen pills of what, I don't know.

I stayed one more night at the Lodge. I did not make any friends and did not even strike up an interesting conversation with any other guests or staff. The pills helped some; I could sleep all night. I did not find a good way to fish the lake and didn't feel well

enough to cope with a boat. A guide service did not exist, moved on. The Lodge disappointed me.

The decision not to go to Banff was hard fought. I figured it would be like Friday Harbor, one of those places you need to be with someone special. So, I headed southeast, heading to the Elk River in Fernie, western slope cutthroat trout. I passed through some of the most spectacular scenery in the world, complete with sighting grizzly bears lounging in a meadow. Not a lot of roads leading in this direction. The one I was on took me to Kelowna, which, unbeknownst to me, was the home of some great wine. It was a total surprise, and I quickly put my miseries on the back burner. I think it is one of the most beautiful towns I've ever seen—a big blue lake surrounded by towering mountains with vineyards running downhill to the lake.

Here, the country is enormous, young, bold colors, rugged, and reaches out and slaps you, saying, "I am beautiful. Love me." The countryside at home is older, softer, gentle shades of purple and green. It is subtle. It sneaks up on you and seduces your senses into a love affair.

I knew nothing of British Columbia wines. The architecture of Mission Hill Winery reached out and drew me in, with a stunning archway entrance, and so are their wines. Pinot Noir is a favorite, with Merlot as their backup. Their restaurant was not open, but I managed several rounds of tastings and ended up spending more time and money here than I expected. I did not determine my favorite, so I bought two cases of each. Now, I have twelve cases of wine in the boot.

Several hours of daylight remained as I headed across the bridge out of town. Still, two days to Fernie passed through Penticton, Osoyoos, and several inviting wineries did not stop. Made it to Castlegar, stopped for the night, and was impressed with the cleanliness of all the towns and villages. Again, no graffiti and no litter; everything is clean and well-maintained.

Arrived in Fernie late afternoon the next day. Checked into the Park Place Lodge, smack in the town center, a hop, skip, and jump

from the Elk River Fly Shop. They provide guided float trips on the Elk River, native cutthroat on a dry fly, and booked a half-day trip starting the following afternoon. Perfect, I'm still sick; I get to sleep late. Brett Mason introduced himself as being my guide. He is a strapping young fellow with rugged good looks and a devil-may-care attitude. Brett suggested some flies that might work and joined me for a beer at the hotel. He turns out to be a good guy, has no toe ring, is a ski instructor in the winter, and knows a bevy of local beauties.

After lunch, we met at the fly shop, loaded my gear into his pickup, guided the boat in tow, and headed north for about an hour to the put-in ramp. The rain began halfway there—at last, a chance to use my new Sage 5#. Brett tied on a #6 Pink Lugger, barbless. It was cold, low forties, and windy. The Elk was dark and fast. No need to cast; just drop the fly on the water, and a cutthroat was on it like a New River smallmouth on cicadas. The action was fast and furious. The first one in the net was over twenty inches, fat, and fought hard, jumping and tail-walking, a great fish. Hooked three more before I landed my second fish, all fought hard, shaking off the barbless hook. Two black bears fishing along the riverbank took no notice. The rain had picked up; I was trembling and getting wet. After we netted a couple more, I lost count. “Hey Brett, how much longer till we get home?”

“About two hours.”

“No way. Put this thing in high gear; we're going to drink some beer.”

He did, and we did, and a couple of lovely local ladies joined us. I checked off the bucket list Western Slope Cutthroat and possibly one other item. I am unsure of her age.

It took much of the next day to get to Sweet Grass, Montana. Enough time to reflect that I should have gone directly to Fernie from Victoria.

U.S. Customs inspector, after inspecting my papers, without checking the luggage area, “How long you been in Canada?”

“I don’t know what day it is.”

“September 15.”

“About two weeks, I think.”

Now he’s looking at the golf clubs, strung-up fly rods, and twelve cases of wine.

“Did you spend five thousand dollars?”

“Oh, good lord, no.”

“Where you headed.”

“Home.” I heard myself say that again.

He walked to the front of the Range Rover and checked my license plate, Maryland.

Back at my rolled-down window, “Have a nice day.”

I exited customs slowly, with style, grace, and gratitude. Still had four more days of hard driving to beautiful downtown Frederick, Maryland. I stopped by Mount Rushmore just because it was there.

I passed by what the Lakota Sioux call the Battle of Greasy Grass; I did not stop. The vast emptiness of the prairie was not inviting. I regret not exploring the site of Custers Last Stand, but I did not know Ms. Sam then.

I arrived just before happy hour, parked my car in the garage, walked through the garden, and entered the house through the kitchen door.

“Hello, Love.” Arms extended, looking for a welcome home hug or a kiss, even.

“Yeah, well, I’m leaving you.”

I took a step back. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me that four days ago while I was still in Montana?”

I walked two blocks to the Tasting Room; it was Friday. Kat would have been working.

FEBRUARY 2007

38 EAST 2nd Street

FREDERICK, MARYLAND

I don't know how, but he knew.

Chuck and I were in the garage at the Frederick house, loading the last of my stuff into the Range Rover. It was nothing of note, but somehow Jack knew. He found his way into the shotgun seat of the truck. Chuck opened the door to get Jack out. Jack snarled, and Chuck closed the door. He was going wherever the Range Rover was going, come hell or high water.

Jack had slept in the kitchen at the Frederick house. He made it plain he was not sleeping in the kitchen here. On his first night in The Orchard, Jack placed himself in a defensive position between the bedroom door and the bed. He never slept in the bed.

The Orchard became our new base of operation. We trained with Jeff Brooks at Brookwood Kennels every week. Jeff worked with Jack to run field trials and taught me to handle him in the amateur trials. For the next several years, we were constant companions. We traveled to trials in Ohio, Wisconsin, New York, and closer to home in Pennsylvania. Jack would ride to the trials in Jeff's truck and come home in mine. We were living the life we were born to live.

FRIENDS' CREEK

CATOCTIN MOUNTAINS

MARYLAND

Trout live in beautiful places.

This chilly April morning, a chorus of spring gobblers greeted my friends' as we arrived before the sun had burned the dew off the grass. The chorus continued until they got wind of our being there. Ben Franklin claimed turkeys could not smell, but they heard darn good.

Friends' Creek meanders along and across the Mason-Dixon Line in the Catoctin Mountains between Antietam and Gettysburg. Camp David is over the next hill or two, and Site R is around the corner. You can find seclusion, beauty, and peace in this place. It is one of those places where you don't know where it is unless you have been there. The stream is narrow, with brier bushes and trees overhanging both banks. A series of waterfalls and riffles run for about a mile and a half. They form twenty-six named deep pools that sometimes hold fish over from one year to the next. The Friends' Creek Anglers Association has been around for fifty years, founded by families from Washington's legal and intelligence circles. Some of the original members still fish here. It is private water, members and guests only, on occasion violated by local poachers. The one hundred sixty acres through which it flows is private property. The landowner tolerates the anglers and does not countenance the shooting of poachers.

I first met Hil Mason on the Salmon River trip to Pulaski. A working Philadelphia lawyer and accomplished fly angler, he had not yet become Mike's father-in-law. I asked if he knew my cousin Peter Baughman, also a Philadelphia lawyer. No, he did not. One thing leads to another. He knew my cousin Bonnie Brook and her husband Ted as classmates at Gettysburg College. Ripe fodder for a bond of friendship. The trip to the Salmon River was

the first time we all fished together. We had not yet become The Campers.

Today, the stream was high, fast, and a weak tea clear. The creek would likely give up her trout grudgingly. It is a catch-and-release stream, fly-fishing only. Brook trout inhabit Pennsylvania's part of the creek. Mike headed downstream to try Hogan's Pool.

Hil chose the Alder Pool; it is the biggest and widest and has always held much fish. It is a difficult hole to fish, but big enough that two anglers can cast freely without confrontation. I decided to join Hil and climbed on a rock outcropping at the top of the pool. The water enters the pool fast and foamy, flowing over a long, steep riffle before flattening out. Hil waded in from the bottom and cast upstream into a vast expanse of deep, slow water.

Casting a San Juan Worn into the swift flow brought no results because, at some point, the fly had freed itself, and I was casting a naked tippet. Not deterred by stupidity, I replaced the worm. I plopped a short cast in the current upstream and started stripping out some line when suddenly the slack was gone, and my line headed rapidly downstream. A nice shiny rainbow had swallowed the fly whole. The line broke while trying to extricate the Woolly Bugger, leaving the fly hooked into the fish's gullet.

I released the trout back into the water and said a little prayer for him. Cursed myself profusely. I began gathering my line to tie on another fly and noticed that the top four inches of my 4# bamboo rod dangled at right angles to the other eight feet. Resumed cursing.

I advised Hil of this tragic situation and told him I had a spare tip at the Nutshell but would go upstream to fish the Swimming Hole upon replacing the broken one. The Nutshell is a well-maintained, large hut perched high above the stream that provides almost all the comforts of home. Kat and I have established a tradition here. It has nice-sized bunk beds, baseboard heat, an electric stove with an oven, and even pots and pans.

In the summer, there is running water in the toilet. A small table has ample space for four place settings and looks out through large, clear, glass patio doors onto a large wooden deck that rises fifteen feet above the aptly named Nutshell Pool. The deck is a well-aged brown. The hut is painted a dark green. Redbud trees on the downstream side surround it, in bloom, joined by just a couple more on the upstream side, next to large sycamore trees.

If the side facing the creek is the front side, then from the back, there are ten uneven stone steps curling down and under the deck to a sandy patch of beach where you can easily cast a fly to the ripple above the Kilimanjaro rock. Tiny, pointed, blue-eyed grass covers the rocks around the stairway.

The Kilimanjaro rock in the middle of the Nutshell Pool resembles a snow-covered volcano. Its sun-bleached tip rises above the waterline, and if its point is underwater, the creek is likely not fishable. Despite heavy rains yesterday, a good four inches of the rock shone above the pool this morning. Standing on the deck, we could see some fish hanging out by the Kilimanjaro rock. Downstream, a pair of mallards rose off Craig's Pool and flew upstream to where Hil had spotted some golden trout in the Swimming Hole.

A stair-step of three waterfalls roars into the Swimming Pool. It is deep and dark, bordered on one side by a tall rock cliff, perfect for a cannonball dive on a hot summer day, which it was not today. I realized it might be a tad too early in the season for fishing with a dry fly. The trout will not be looking up for a meal just yet. I have caught my full share of trout here. If the good Lord allows me to catch another, I wish it to be on a dry fly.

Concentrate, feel the wind, the flow pushing against your boots. Where will the big ones likely be holding? I was on the rocky point at the western end of the Swimming Hole, where the flow from the falls cascades into the pool. It quickly forms a foam line that doesn't slow down until it runs into the rock cliff and turns left thirty feet later. I cast a dry fly, a small, nearly always reliable yellow and white parachute stimulator, bounced it off the cliff, and let it drift on the foam line. My third cast presented a temptation

that a big brown could not resist. He put up a nice struggle. The trick is to turn them without breaking off. It requires a certain amount of patience gained through experience. I released this one back into the dark water without harm. My heart was pumping fast. The fishing gods may have forgiven me or figured a broken bamboo rod was penitence enough. I must have been a little too excited and forgot to pay attention; my very next cast hooked a tree branch twenty feet back and up. The gods were not yet finished with me.

As I walked toward the tree, reeling in the line, my feet got tangled up. This can happen on dry, flat land; it does not need to be in a swift-running stream with slippery, wet rocks. I tied the beaver stick wading staff to my belt, but the knot came loose, and it went downstream.

Mike and Hil, likely more than a mile away, downstream, and it was early. I was alone. It would not have hurt too bad if I had fallen into the water, but I did not. Instead, I went backward onto some large and jagged rocks. Everything happened in slow motion, as things seem to do with the advancement of age. As I was falling, the branch let loose of the fly, and it flew past me on my way down, still tied on the end of the line. It hit the ground before I did. The first thought that went through my head was the weather might have been just a tad too cool for the copperheads.

Somehow, I ended up with my knees higher than my buttocks; waders and heavy boots became an anchor. I could not get up or turn over. Struggling to get the leverage needed to roll over and get my feet back under me seemed to take forever, and I wasn't at all sure it was too cool for the copperheads. Nothing had broken; the snakes became my main concern. Hurt, yes; maybe a cracked rib or two, maybe my spleen. There was green moss covering a large rock to my right, by my head. I thought if I could get a hand on it, I could leverage myself out of the wedge. Green moss in an open wound, oh well. I finally rolled over and got my knees where God meant them to be, with my feet below them. Both of my hands were bleeding; maybe I cut them on the mossy rocks, struggling to turn over. I looked around and found my beaver stick

floating in the pool; it had a special meaning. I had fished it in two casts later.

It took all of thirty minutes to get back to the Nutshell and stop the bleeding. Grimacing, as putting one foot in front of the other, caused shooting stabs of pain throughout my back; was it organic or structural, or an aggravation of an old problem? Thirty minutes of self-incrimination followed: Would anyone have heard three short, three long, three short blasts on my emergency whistle? I found it still tucked in my vest pocket. Would they have thought it was Morse code or a songbird? How long do you pause before repeating the SOS? It matters not. I forgot I even carried it, much less remembered to tell anybody else to be alert for it. I was still worrying about the snakes.

No one was at the Nutshell. I made a bandage out of my kerchief. I administered the first aid as best I could and waited for Hil or Mike to show up for lunch. A local who deer hunts the property stopped by to see if he could get permission to hunt mushrooms, but the owner was not there. Hil got there about the same time as the mushroom hunter. He had some antiseptic and bandages. The deer hunter had adhesive tape. They cleaned my wounds, but nothing wanted to move. Mike finally arrived for lunch.

“Want some ibuprofen? Would beer be better?” he asked, knowing the answer.

Mike unpacked the lunch, unconcerned that I thought I might die. He pulled out a nice tablecloth to cover the old wooden picnic table where I was resting. Lunch would have provided more than what ten hungry folks could have eaten and enough wine for all ten. It was only the three of us, but Mike is a big man. The deer hunter had given up on the owner returning and gone home. Martin arrived with a bottle of wine as we were slowing down with the food. He was unaware of and remained oblivious to my plight.

He sampled some cheese and began to pull on his waders. Stringing up his rod, he asked for advice as to what fly was

working. I told him my dry fly worked but damn near killed me. The trout were not rising, so maybe a nymph might be a good idea.

Lunch was packed up and put in Hil's Chevy Suburban, including the tablecloth, allowing me to resume my flat-on-my-back position, lifting myself on one elbow for a sip of wine now and again. The beer was gone. I did not pee blood. The clouds had lifted, and the sun began to warm the air.

Mike and Martin went downstream, hoping for a hatch on the Alder Pool. Hil thought he would go upstream to try his luck in the Swimming Pool; it had been left quiet for a couple of hours. I tried to take a nap. "Maybe I'll just not wake up," I thought, but I only succeeded on and off.

The sun felt good enough that, after some time, I figured I had to try to get down to Alder Pool. I still had my waders and boots on, but it was a painful walk. Mike was having a good afternoon. He gave me his camera, and I documented some big trout in his net. I tried casting from the bank to a pod of trout about twenty feet out, hiding around a submerged log. A couple of casts and I hooked the only tree I could have, slipped, and fell again, not so hard this time. I mostly slid down the bank to the water's edge, saved the fly, and went back to the picnic table.

Hil never made it to the Swimming Pool. He stopped at the Swinging Bridge Pool. It is a difficult spot to access. He had to climb down a steep, rock-littered bank, over and around some giant boulders, to get into a position to cast to the deep pool where the trout might live and where I had spotted a large copperhead last year. He found that four big rainbows called this hole home. He released them, so they still do.

The sun was slipping behind the mountain to the west; dusk was about to settle over the creek. I heard Martin wading upstream, casting in pools that are generally empty of fish. He stepped into the shallow end of the Nutshell Pool, crouched down, lowering his profile. He moved slowly and quietly and cast the line into the current, just above the Kilimanjaro rock; a nice rainbow became the last fish caught that day.

Mike grilled the steaks to perfection. Cigars were lit up on the deck and enjoyed.

We decanted a delicious if I'm going to die tonight, vintage port. It was a bottle of my collection from the Pacific Northwest. Good, very aromatic, and pleasantly sweet.

Mike flicked the ash off the end of his cigar. It landed where his steak once was, just missing the last morsel of his dessert—time to go home. “Raising a final salute, I solemnly vowed never to fish alone again.

BAY POINT, PANAMA CITY BEACH, FLORIDA

THANKSGIVING QUAIL

Jack became another heartbeat in my home in July 2003. Age eight weeks. On the Friday after the Monday, my most recent ex-wife told me I may not have another dog. I had been without a field-bred Springer for about two years, which was way too long. The choice to spend this winter in Panama City Beach came about because Jack was no longer with me. The departure from this life of the only living one in the whole world you love, who loves you back, leaves an emptiness in the depths of my soul. Jack will forever be in my heart. My loneliness abated with memories of the joy he brought to my life. At times, I cannot recall the name of my first ex-wife but get teary-eyed as I recall the joy of the times afield with Jack. It dawns on me that this is the first time in over forty years that I have not had responsibility for another living soul. I am free and free I shall live. This is the first time in over forty years that I have not had responsibility for another living soul. I am free. And free, I shall live.

I am in Panama City Beach, not because I'm well off or well into being a septuagenarian and need not be cold, or because of the beautiful sugar-white beaches. Nor is it my hope of finding another rich widow to keep me warm. But rather, my good friend J.R. Pruitt lives in Albany, Georgia. He moved here about four years ago, shortly after we both joined Friends' Creek. We have hunted, fished, and sometimes even golfed together for almost twelve years, and southwest Georgia is the bobwhite quail hunting capital of the world. His son-in-law and daughter own a condo on the beach, so he visits regularly. Maybe I am looking for a new beginning for the rest of my life.

For the first eight of those twelve years, we both lived in Frederick. About every Friday at five o'clock, beginning in 2001, J. R. and I began our now long-standing tradition of happy hour at

The Tasting Room. These gatherings were much anticipated, so much so that we moved them up to Wednesday from time to time. We put the trials and tribulations of the business day aside, and the discussion was more concerned with the fun we had last week and where we were going to have fun next week.

J.R. and I hunted and fished together every chance we could. The first was a spring float trip on the North Branch of the Delaware River in 2002. Jeremiah Reddy Pruitt, J.R. for short, is proudly from West Virginia. His momma gave him Jeremiah because she loved the Bible. Reddy was his grandfather's mother's maiden name, and the Pruitts have been in West Virginia since before coal. The one leg is shorter than the other, jokes will raise a hackle. The retort is not pretty. Whatever bar we ended up in, the patrons noticed that J.R.'s accent differed from theirs. It was tense for a while until the guides we had been fishing with intervened when they realized Flynn had not yet paid them. Nobody ever called him "Red" more than once.

The T.R. was where I first met Katheryn Marlene, after her great-grandmother's maiden name. She prefers Kat.

CHRISTMAS WITH KAT

A FRIENDS' CREEK TRADITION

We have made this an official tradition. Kat and I go fly-fishing on Friends' Creek every Christmas. Friends' Creek is a beautiful mountain stream with a long and illustrious history, oversized bows and browns, and a good deal of privacy. It is where the first European settlers met with the indigenous people and declared a peaceful future.

The creek is truly mystical in the snow. The whole thing started the Christmas after my most recent ex-wife left. Kat was more than a lovely young server at the Tasting Room. She played Carnegie Hall before she was old enough to buy beer. The first year, I could almost look her in the eye. She plays net on the volleyball team and has the classic chiseled Nordic check bones and sharp nose of her name's sake. An aspiring fly fisher, she wondered if I would help her along. I invited her to audition for her skills. She said she would love to give it a go.

We only fished one year on Christmas Day, though it was always pretty much thereabouts, sometimes as late as mid-January, as it was the year that I brought Jack. Kat did not mind. She is a dog lover who keeps German Short Hair Pointers. Jack chased some browns in the icy cold of Alder Pool as if he were still a puppy. Two weeks later, there was something wrong. He was not himself, never complained, still young and happy, only not right. The vet said it had metastasized. I held him on my lap, rubbed his ears, wiped my tears off his muzzle, and told him I loved him. He went to sleep. I keep him in a handsome wooden box next to my bed. At the first frost, I put a fire in the kitchen fireplace, set him on the chest next to the red leather chairs, and pour Tennessee whiskey over ice. We reminisce.

From the beginning, fishing with Kat had always been not much more than the excuse for lunch. In the early years, we would always pull on our waders and boots. String up our rods, tie on a small nymph because trout like small flies in winter and open a

bottle of wine. Kat's job is to bring her violin, a baguette, and whatever cheese she might like. The Nutshell provides all the necessities for heating the lobster bisque I have shipped in from Maine and a cozy table to set Grandma's silver and crystal wine goblets filled with a fine French vintage.

We would fish the Swimming Hole, work our way down to the Nutshell Pool, and pause for a taste of wine. Then head down to Alder Pool and beyond. One frigid and snow-covered winter day, Kat spotted a snake sticking its head out of the south-facing rocks at the ancient spring. It was not a viper; white with black markings is how I remember it. We would work our way to the Nutshell for more wine and lunch.

The best fish I ever caught took a woolly bugger at the top of the Nutshell Pool. It dragged me from the top over the falls to the bottom, and he didn't stop till he was two pools down. The rainbow measured twenty inches and was fat. As the years progressed, all pretension of fishing was gone; it was about lunch and the violin. Kat did hook some big fish now and again but broke them off. I caught some less impressive browns, but my enthusiasm for waders and boots had waned after wine and lobster.

It will soon be spring, lots of fish will be stocked, and we plan to return to the original lunch menu and go back to waders, boots, fishing, and music. Last night, I said a little prayer for a late spring snowstorm to provide the magic on the creek. This year, I will need to look up to see her brown eyes.

It is good to love and be loved, if only a little.

TWIN RIVERS

MONTANA

“Having nothing better to do, I amused myself in fishing...”
Meriwether Lewis, July 10, 1805.

The river seems to end at the base of the arid Beaverhead Rock. The historic landmark rises over two hundred feet perpendicular to the willows and cottonwoods that line the river. A family of mule deer lope through the tall grass and disappear into the trees. Sunlight from a cloudless sky flickers on the swift ripple; a twenty-two-inch brown trout escapes the net and splashes back into the blue water. It was not the first one today. The wind is hushed and smells of the Idaho fires. We are drifting a guide boat on the Beaverhead.

J.R. and I arrived here last evening after a couple of great days on Henry’s Fork and a quick stop to visit Old Faithful. J.R. had talked about Montana when we were together at Bay Point. I had survived a long, lonesome summer at The Orchard.

“Can you find your way to Idaho Falls next week? I booked us some fishing in Montana.”

“What day do you want me there?”

“Come out Wednesday. We’ll be gone about ten days.”

Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery arrived here in June 1805. We arrived in August.

Not much has changed.

Captain Lewis recruited Sacajawea, her husband, and her infant son before leaving North Dakota to guide the Corps west, hoping to find a waterway connection to the Pacific Ocean. They sailed up the Missouri River in search of its headwater. Here in southwest Montana, the river is divided into three forks. Together,

they form the headwaters of the Missouri. Captain Lewis named the Forks, the Gallatin, the Jefferson, and the Madison.

Sacajawea recognized the Beaverhead Rock as a landmark from her Shoshone childhood. She told Clark he would see her Shoshone people and the river leading west from the top of Beaverhead Rock. It is said that Clark climbed the steep rock in fifteen minutes. The Jefferson flows west and takes the Corps to the land of the Shoshone.

It took several days of searching to locate the Shoshone and their horses that they would need to cross the Rockies. Sacajawea did not reunite with her tribe.

The river carries on past the Beaverhead Rock. J.R. and I are caught up in the vast emptiness of the dry yellow hills. The occasional post and rail fence is all that separates us from June 1805. We could feel the history in the swiftness of the current and taste it in the wind as we drifted toward the confluence of the Big Hole and the Jefferson River. We will find Lewis and Clark camped around the next bend in the river.



Our camp is upstairs of the Four Rivers Outfitters fly shop. J.R. fulfilled his official task of supplying Jack Daniel's for our adventure. We enjoyed some before crossing the street for dinner

at The Old Hotel. Our arms are heavy from a full day of casting and catching large trout. There is the aroma of steak coming from the kitchen. J. R. orders a bottle of Duckhorn Merlot. We relent.

Grilled Rib Eye Steak, A Full Pound of Boneless Beef, Done Medium Rare, and Served with Creamy Orange Horseradish, French Dark Chocolate & Kahlua Mousse topped off the evening.

The Old Hotel is also hosting an all-female fly-fishing group, with whom we shared some conversation after dinner. Did not get up with them again. The timing was a bit off. The diner at the end of Main Street is for breakfast. The sun rises too early in Montana.

The Jefferson River cuts a wide blue swath through the green valley. It flows slow, deep, and peaceful from Kountz Bridge to Cardwell, giving up an abundance of nice brown trout. A pair of sandhill cranes pass overhead, heading south. A golden eagle eyes our catch from a branch of a cottonwood tree. The valley is flat and lush until it reaches the high mountains in the distance. There is little evidence of civilization. Compared to the Beaverhead, it is a tad boring, beautiful, but boring. Our arms were burnt by the sun and heavy again from lifting big fish out of the water. A quick shower, a little Jack, and we stroll across the street again tonight. Who knows, we may never pass this way again.

J.R. always orders the wine no matter what. Tonight, he likes the Far Niente Chardonnay. We share a bottle. J.R. selects the Chili Dusted Pork Kabob, 8 oz. Skewer of Spice Rubbed Country Pork, grilled until Juicy and finished with a Sweet and tangy Mustard BBQ Sauce and Breton Shortbread Cake with Strawberry Rhubarb Purée.

I chose the duck.

Port Seared Duck.

Half Breast of Farm Raised Muscovy Duck Pan Seared to Your Liking with a red wine, Reduction, and drizzled with an Orange Bourbon Glaze,

French Dark Chocolate & Kahlua Mousse.

I really liked the dessert last night, so why not? Sleep comes easy tonight.

The morning regiment is the same: breakfast at the diner, meet the guide at the fly shop, drive to a put-in, and cast off. Frank was our guide on the Jefferson, and he is here again today for the Madison, a good man and great company. He consoles us for not having met up with the fly-fishing ladies.

The Madison meanders its way through the scenic countryside much the same, except there are prodigious amounts of rainbows that give themselves up eagerly to a dry fly. Most fish measured over 15 inches, some stretched out to over 20 inches and four to five pounds. We were busy all day. We floated from Barney Bridge to Burnt Tree, stopping occasionally to stretch out our legs and cast from the bank or wade in quiet pools. The grassy bank served as a resting place for hundreds of migrating Canada Geese. A quick walk in the water cleaned our boots before boarding the drift boat. The scenery is spectacular, with a fertile valley leading to 10,000-foot-high snow-capped mountains to the east.

We have established a routine. A quick shower, a little Jack and across the street we go. Except for tonight, we opted for the diner at the end of Main Street, Hamburgers and fries, and beer. J. R. drinks Miller Lite and Bud for me. We may be running out of gas.

Our last day starts at the Main Street diner, scrambled eggs and bacon again. Back at the Fly Shop, we team up with Troy, who will take us on the Big Hole.

“Last Best River in Montana” and perhaps the best river I have ever fished. J.R. might say the White River in Arkansas, but I cannot concur with that opinion. The Big Hole is known far and wide as one of the prettiest rivers in Montana. With that, I agree; the scenery is postcard spectacular. Snow-capped mountains in every direction, lush farmland, green cottonwood bottoms, deer and elk feeding along the bank, but there are no bison, unlike 1805. The Big Hole is home to 3000 fish per mile. Made up of six

species of fish, including the only habitat in the contiguous United States for native fluvial Arctic grayling. Brook trout, rainbow, brown, western slope cutthroat, and native Montana whitefish occupied various sections of the river. I caught a wild native brookie. He was born in the Big Hole, and I am careful to see that he lives on. The brookie was an unexpected treat and the last fish I caught that day. I stretched out in the bow of the drift boat, stowed my fly rod, and fired up a celebratory Arturo Fuente Lonsdale. My first of this week, I offered one to J.R., but he refused. Says he quit cigarettes ten years ago and is afraid that even one puff will get him hooked again.

An honest-to-God fisherman of any stripe will reluctantly divulge his favorite spot. I suspect most of the fly-fishing world knows of The Big Hole, so I am not breaking any rules by declaring it is my favorite.



The Beaverhead isn't bad, either.

Sometimes, your body tells you what it wants. Tonight was one of those nights. We ached in places where we did not know we had placed, sunburned and exhausted. Our minds lived over two

hundred years ago. We dined like kings, and we caught magnificent fish all day long, every day. Dinner tonight was easy. We did not want to be complicated, so we both ordered Carpaccio, A Classic Italian Antipasto of Herbs, herbs-marinated beef Tenderloin, Thinly Sliced, and finished with Capers, Shallots, and sweet Balsamic Syrup.

Filet Mignon:

8oz of All-Natural Beef Tenderloin Grilled, Medium Rare, and topped with a Classic French-style herb and lemon Compound Butter.

French Dark Chocolate and Kahlua Mousse.

There was some talk about not leaving. The Anchor Bar on Main Street was for sale, cheap, and fully stocked. I called Kat, said we would only be open from May to October, and it's a great location. I told her there is an abundance of strapping young fly-fishing guides, and a college is not far away.

The Anchor Bar is still for sale.

The Corps of Discovery stocked up with over two thousand trout before continuing their journey west. As they crossed the Rockies and reached the Columbia River, the troops grew tired of the taste of fish, preferring to eat dog meat.

EVEN IN THE BEST OF TIMES...

“Where are you?”

“North Georgia, fly-fishing with J.R.”

“Will you be home by Saturday night.? The Orchestra is playing Tchaikovsky. I’ll get you a ticket if you want.”

“I will be there Saturday night. Get me a ticket. Love ya, Kat.”

“Love you too,” Said with all the enthusiasm of habit.

HELEN, GEORGIA:

Hurricane Michael is whipping up the Gulf and is not expected to come ashore at Panama City Beach for three days. I was enjoying an overpriced German pilsner in a beer garden in downtown Helen. Franz crossed the main street, mixed in with a pack of tourists.

“Franz, over here, come join me.”

“Hello Bart,” shaking hands. “J.R. is trying to find a parking spot. He’ll be along shortly. He is not walking so well.”

“There’s J.R.,” crossing the street. “Damn, he is really limping.”

“Hey, old friend, good to see you,” I said as he hobbled his way into the beer garden.

“Bart, good to see you. It’s been a while. How have you been?” shaking hands with a shoulder bump.

“I screwed my arm up.”

“Which one?”

“The wrong one can’t lift a beer, but I can still cast.”

“What did you do to your foot?”

“Damn Bart, you know what it is, same as before.”

“Oh no, you gonna need your legs roto-rooter’d again?”

If looks could kill, I would be dead.

J. R. had gone under the knife two years ago. The doctors tried to put some stints in the arteries of both legs. Opened him up and sewed him back together without the stints. The doctors were not prepared for what they found. The arteries in both legs were too blocked to fix, almost one hundred percent in both legs, so they regrouped and rescheduled. Prayers were sent on high that he would live the week. He did, and the doctors studied up, and they opened him up again.

Some four hours later, he had blood flowing freely in both legs all the way up to and through the iliac. From his hospital bed, he sent me a note saying that he is having trouble finding a duck-hunting guide for our Thanksgiving get-together. It was still the middle of August.

He called last week and said he had rented a house for three days in North Georgia and asked if I could join him for some fly-fishing. I had spent the summer in The Orchard and would have accepted an invitation to almost anywhere.

Franz’s phone rang as we placed our beer order. Some long time later, he was still on his phone when the beer arrived. Hung up the phone long enough to order brats and another beer for lunch. Shortly, his phone rang again before the brats arrived. A second beer was served, both consumed with phone to ear, check presented, and J.R. paid. Hung up the phone to walk to the car.

“I am not leaving. I came here to fish. Mandy’s panicked over the hurricane; she wants me home right away. I’m not going; the storm is still at least three days from landfall, and nobody knows where it will come ashore. I’m not going.” J.R. and I share a dubious glance.

The rented three-bedroom, three-bath house sits high on the side of a mountain near downtown Helen. It is comfortable, with a large atrium looking out over the mountain to the west. The impending hurricane brewed up some fabulous cloud formations, giving us a beautiful sunset. We left a cozy fire in the large stone fireplace as the sunset faded and headed into Helen for dinner. Talk of the hurricane continues ad nauseam. We poured one short whiskey before leaving for dinner. The one quick whiskey turned out to be for the best. Two or more would have led to trouble. Both Franz and J.R. said there is a steak house that is the best restaurant in Helen. It is not a German restaurant. It is not the best restaurant in Helen, on this evening it was the worst restaurant any of us had ever experienced, anywhere. The problems began in the afternoon when Franz called to make a reservation and was told reservations were not needed. Indeed, they were needed; not having one resulted in a forty-minute delay in being seated. We settled in comfortably on the porch and made small talk. Franz and I are politically aligned. J.R. is the odd man out on politics, and more whiskey would have encouraged him to enumerate the deficiencies of the new administration. The waiter took our beer order, and another twenty minutes went by without the beer. We reminisced over Fern Valley, Quepos, and Montana. Franz put down his phone long enough to tell more of his Panama adventure. He did not say so, but we got the impression the island held more pleasures than fishing. The waiter quit his job and went home without placing our order.

Finally, we all ordered rib-eye steaks. Not one was fit for human consumption. I know coyotes that would have turned up their noses. Franz was still on the phone with Mandy.

“I’ll be home before the storm hits. It is still three days out”.

The manager begged me not to post on Yelp as J.R. negotiated the bill. I think J. R. only paid for the beer.

The next morning, we arrived at Fern Valley as Glad was leaving for an appointment. This has happened before. We exchanged hurried pleasantries. She introduced me to our guide, Steve. Known locally as “Big T”.

The first couple of times we fished here, a guide was not necessary. That was four or five years ago. J.R. and I scouted the river, reading the water, looking for a solitary spot with rising fish. We did not see each other or anyone else until the end of the day. Today, we have a guide. The days of solitary fishing are over for both of us.

“Steve, if I fall, I ain’t gettin’ back up.”

“I’ll take care of you,” as he checked my leader and tied on a new fly.

“Don’t do anything stupid.” I cautioned.

On an upstream cast, I hooked a big trout, lost my balance, dropped the rod tip, and the fish broke off. I would have fallen if I had tried to land him. With Big T on one arm and my beaver stick in the other, I climbed out of the river from the Adirondack chair by the fire pit and watched the others catch fish.

An hour or so later, my courage was restored. I climbed down the riverbank and stepped carefully into the fast-knee-deep water. Staying close to the bank, I moved slowly downstream past Franz and some twenty yards downstream from J. R.

“Let me tie on a different fly,” Steve said as he helped me get my feet settled.

“Wha’ch got?”

“White squiggly worm.”

“Watch, it won’t be long before J. R. is fishing my space.”

“OK, you’re good to go.”

It was right in front of me. J.R.’s line, smack in the middle of the current.

“Hey.” I yelled upstream with my arms extended in the questioning fashion learned on a golf course when the foursome ahead takes twenty minutes to put out.

“What?” a questioning look and the arm gesture was returned.

Shaking my head, I cast upstream, way short of where J. R. was fishing.

An uneasy peace of sorts settled in for a short while.

“Damn, Steve, this is getting old. That’s the second fish he’s hooked right in front of me.”

“That one’s not a trout, it doesn’t count.” A distinction without a difference.

Not long after that, as my line straightened out downstream, a fat rainbow took the squiggly worm on the swing, jumped, and did a little tail walk toward the far bank. With enough commotion for the other guys to get a glimpse of his size, it was a nice fight, and Big T got the trout into his net and snapped a photo.

“That’s it, I’m done.”

Steve helped me to the riverbank, and I worked my way out of the river, tree branch to tree branch, and back up the bank to the Adirondack chair by the fire pit. In the early days, Glad would have been waiting with a glass of wine.

Our half day of fishing was not quite up when Franz, who had caught a lot of fish all the while on the phone with Mandy, waved the white flag of surrender and announced he needed to go home.

The storm was now only two days from landfall. J. R., under intense pressure from his family, resisted. He and I went to Blue Ridge to fish at Noontootla Creek the next day.

“This is the same road we took the last time we went to Noontootla Creek. This is not the best way.”

“Yes, it is.” On the edge of definite, as we wound our way through, one kiss-your-ass switch-back after another.

“It is not the same road I drove back to Helen on.” Shrugging.

No point in continuing this. It is a quiet drive. An eagle drifts on the currents between the ridges as we wind our way over the mountain.

Yesterday, at Fern Valley, J.R. had a loud arm-waving rant about having never been to Noontootla Creek. Claimed I would lie about anything. It was ugly and public. Told him about the quail hunting trip where he looked for all the world like he was having a heart attack. We had to quit hunting, and I drove his truck back to Helen. Reminded him it was the day after we hunted quail with his nephew. He claimed it never happened. He had no recollection of the fun dinner we had at Mulley’s Nacoochee Grill.

Said that I was not arguing, just trying to refresh his memory. This unfortunate behavior has been going on for almost two years, made worse because I will not engage in political banter. He directed some personal ugliness my way during the Obama years, but I attributed those outbursts to an overindulgence in strong spirits. His wife told me he gets ugly when he drinks whiskey, and I thanked her for telling me as I was beginning to take it personally. I remember a time when he was funny when drinking whiskey.

“My wife says, lately, I don’t remember a lot of things,” by way of an apology, which he never does.

J.R. hired a guide out of Unicoi Fly Shop in Helen. A guide on Noontoola Creek is not necessary. They are for convenience.

Guides the world over try to assess their sport’s capabilities. Ray conducted our interview as we geared up. He did so by telling us of all the places and rivers he has fished. We said, “yea, yea, yea.” He got to the Western Slope Cutthroat on the Elk River in Ferne, British Columbia. He knew Brett Mason, the guide I had fished dry flies with back in 2006. Bona fides proven.

“Do you wear a toe ring?” I meekly questioned.

“What?”

“On the middle toe of your left foot.”

“No.”

The interview is complete.

We parked the trucks by the creek. A narrow strip of grass, beaten down from frost, separates a cornfield from the trees that line the creek. J.R. could only walk ten yards, take a few minutes' rest, another ten yards, another rest needed.

Fall had set in. The air was mild and still. The standing corn had turned brown, and a large flock of turkeys, forty or more, came out of the corn, clucking and squawking, toward the creek. They pecked and scratched their way through the saplings and scraggly pine, unrushed by our presence. Sounded like a squadron of Huey's taking flight as they crossed over the creek. A turkey in flight is a blessed spectacle. The gods are going to be good to us today.

Ray got J.R. positioned on the stream and pointed to a spot 20 yards downstream where he wanted me. I felt that was a mite too close to J.R. and moved further downstream around a bend and out of sight. I stepped into the dark water, mid-calf deep, cool, and swift against my legs. Checked the wind and backcast, flipped the line and dropped the fly in the upstream current.

Ray said he forgot something and headed back to his truck; he said he'd be right back. He was no sooner out of earshot than the barbless Pale Morning Dun disappeared in a great swirl of dark water. The reel was singing. Slack was gone and was headed upstream around the bend. Rod's tip was as high as I could get it. Turned him and jumped three feet out of the water. The big rainbow shook his head, trying to lose the fly, splashed down. Headed full speed downstream, ninety miles an hour, reel singing, he came out of the water again, reel in the slack, splash, jump,

splash, reel, jump, splash, reel in fast. He is now right in front of me, jumping and splashing. Somebody get a net!

I'm yelling for Ray. He's nowhere to be found. I was beginning to suspect he found the outhouse. J.R. hears the commotion, comes around the bend and starts yelling instructions. The trout jumped, giving him a beautiful aerial display. He continues yelling, "Reel in the slack," "Keep him out of the current," and "Keep the rod tip up."

"Shut the fuck up. Get a net."

The line went slack, weightless emptiness; I lost him for sure. Humiliated, I dropped the rod tip into the stream, exhausted and dejected. I fell to one knee, knowing full well I would need help to get back up, cranked in the line...whoosh, it snapped to attention. He was still hooked. I was back on my feet without help. The fight was now in deeper water. He was running downstream, not as fast now, but deeper. The deep water gave way to a shallow ripple. He turned back upstream, almost out of gas.

I counted nine jumps, completely out of the water, but I do not know when I started to count. Ray finally showed up with a net that was too small; we almost lost him downstream. Ray steps into the creek and gets his net near the fish, stumbles, and falls, the fish heading upstream. I turned to him. Ray, back on his feet, gets another shot and missed. Two more misses. Ray is in the creek, on his hands and knees, crawling, and gets a fifth shot at him before he nets him from behind.

With the photo taken, I kept him in the water. He was big and fat, a great trophy. Let him rest, released him unharmed.

J.R. has not shut up. I had escaped into the moment. The sound of the reel singing, the breaking of the water as he jumped, the splash as he came down, the line streaking through the water. The gods were good today.

The PMD was beat up, tied on a pink squiggle worm, and hooked a nice-sized rainbow on a downstream swing. He did not have the

energy of his pool mate. I called it a day and headed to the truck. J.R. came along a short time later. He cannot walk, but he can stand still and fish hard. We headed back to Helen on a different route than we got here on. At times, the obvious need not be mentioned.

Another terrible dinner at a new German place, one short nightcap before bed; there was trouble in my heart, but still a smile on my face as I fell asleep.

Next morning, “No, I don’t think I’ll be coming down for Thanksgiving this year. Most likely will be working.” It was not a response to an invitation but more a question asked.

“Ok,” he said as he handed me a nearly full liter of Jack Daniel's. “I won’t be needing this.”

“Thanks.” I offered with a puzzled look.

Hurricane Michael blew into southwest Georgia late on Thursday. J.R. made it home before the storm hit, gathered his wife and family and headed to Cumberland Island, stayed until the storm blew over. Went home to find a lot of downed trees but no real damage. Never heard another word from Franz.

The drive to The Orchard was long and tiring. Michael was west of me, and his outer bands were creating havoc on eighteen-wheelers on Route I-81 in Virginia. He turned the sky a deep pink from horizon to horizon and thought that, maybe, it was the second coming. Another visual treat on a trip that was memorable in many ways. I had lots of solitary time to reflect upon the last couple of days and the future, wished Sam were here with her camera.

Do not think I will be going back to Helen again.

Kat sat uncomfortably in the second violin chair. If you are going to hear Tchaikovsky, live in person, dress appropriately. Especially if your love is in the second violin chair, Kat has replaced Ole “honest eyes,” but she won’t tell me who or what.

At least I got to meet this one. Boyfriends would come and go, and I would never be introduced. On more than one occasion, I never knew she had a boyfriend. Sammy was one of those. I never knew about Sammy until she returned from what would have been a pre-nuptial trip to Israel with Sammy and his parents. Kat said she knew I would not approve of him. Kat changed her mind. Said, "he has more baggage than a mule train can haul."

We celebrated her flawless performance at the Red Horse. Told her I was going to the United Kingdom for a walk-about as soon as I got in shape.

She said we would not be doing Friends Creek at Christmas this year. A fifteen-year or so tradition of joy, peace, and love seems to have also run its course. No reason given, no discussion.

"We are not going." Firm, in the manner of her heritage.

Told her, "Fine" in capital letters.

This morning, Julie Pruitt called. J.R. is back under the knife. They do not know if he will make it out this time. They are going to make arteries out of his veins. If they do, he will be laid up for a long while.

I may not wait until I get in shape.

A LONG WALK

DUBLIN, IRELAND

“A Place to Fall Apart,” Merle Haggard & Janie Fricke, 1984



Dublin is booming. A local morning radio show announces the number of construction cranes disturbing the skyline every day. Today, the count is one hundred and sixty-five. Dublin is expensive. I found a reasonable room rate at a Marriott in the heart of The Liberties, near the Teeling Whiskey distillery.

Modern, trendy, well-designed and, unlike ten years ago, proper toilet paper.

The city is vibrant, cracking weather, markets full of shoppers, and pubs full of beer drinkers. The servers are all from Eastern Europe. The park benches next to Saint Patrick's Cathedral are all occupied, folks enjoying lunches on blankets spread on the grass.

Smiling young mothers, pushing carriages through the broad paths of St. Stephen's Green, pause by park benches to check on their charge. Romanians have replaced Irish bartenders, judging by their accents. None of them have a decent haircut, but then neither did anyone else, regardless of national origin, unless you consider a purple spiked mohawk decent. Still a fair amount of young folks living the punk rock style. Otherwise, folks were unhappily dressed: drab jeans, poorly cut, black waist-length down-filled quilted jackets, black shoes of no distinction, everyone the same. All were made in China.

The Aloft by Marriott had zero Irish employees that could be seen. Isabela, from Brazil, super cute, nice, and friendly, recommended a lunch beginning with roasted butternut squash soup topped with sour cream, followed by a large beef burger with a house pickle, truffle mayo, caramelized onion, jalapeño cheddar cheese on a brioche bun. Guinness. I needed to walk about five miles. The staff of Aloft were all from somewhere else: France, Italy and Hungary, all super nice and good at their jobs. The faces of Ireland have changed.

On my way to Shelbourne to see if any hen parties were happening, an old friend sent a message to my phone. She learned that my most recent ex-wife had been dead for five years. Cancer, she wondered if I knew, thought I should know. The last time I saw my granddaughter, she was eleven. I have not seen or heard from any of my former family or mutual friends since then. This year, she will be twenty. I did not know.

The blare from the cabby's horn did not drown out his cussing at me. I looked the wrong way, crossing the spider web of streets at the Bank of Ireland corner. The intersection is confusing, and I could have looked the wrong way on any other day. Today, I did not look and took a step too far.

The red-haired lady from Tralee, Maureen O'Hara, cut a fine figure dressed in a dark blue flowing V-neck silk dress splattered with printed yellow medallions that fell above her knees and the outsized sleeves caught the breeze. It accentuated her every move

as she grabbed my arm, jerking me back to reality and away from the front fender of the taxi.

“Much obliged, ma’am,” with a slight head bow as we stepped onto the first of the two pedestrian islands. She cursed the city traffic. Yelled something ugly back at the cabby. Said she was from the country and did not like city traffic. I apologized for being a dunce, and could I buy her a drink by way of a “Thank You”?

No, I could not buy her a drink. She was eager to get on her way to the Canadian Embassy for the third time, the second time today, to get a visa to travel to Ontario, where her father was on his deathbed. Every move flowed through the blue dress. She held my arm all the way to the steps of the Shelbourne. I was smitten, took exception to being turned down for a drink, and, with empathy, repeated my offer. She still held my arm as we entered the bar. Eyes popped from every corner of the room.

She ordered a dry gin, whatever, from one of the several waiters who eagerly asked for her preference. Anxiety abated after a couple more gin whatever’s. I kept pace with gin and tonic and a lime wedge. I told her of my visit to the Rose Festival in Tralee nearly ten years ago and said I regret not meeting her then. She told me about growing up in Canada, fishing with her father, how close they are and how much she wanted to hold his hand at the end.

She continued talking her way through more drinks, bolstered by gin courage. She felt she could face the Canadian bureaucrats with style and grace, and she could summon tears. An embrace, a fond farewell, two ships in the night, looking for a place to fall apart.

Gin and tonic have a different reaction in my brain, different from Tennessee whiskey; that is, I became a little nostalgic. When I was last here, the place was swarming with hen parties. No such luck on this trip. Pickings were slim at the bar. Mattered little. Nothing was going to measure up to what had just left. Slumped into one of the overstuffed lounge chairs, my mind drifted, tried to keep my eyes open. Ordered one more to keep from being deemed a

vagrant. Switched to Tennessee whiskey, I did not need to delve into memories.

It may have been that Hendricks' thoughts from my first visit to Ireland flitted in and out of my mind. The Malton in Killarney, Claire, Midleton Single malt with lamb meatballs...before flashing to Evelyn at Ballynahinch Castle, where I did not catch a fish. Had a great time, otherwise. Or maybe the real reason I am here is Sam.

MS. SAM

"Unforgettable," Nat King Cole, 1951

It certainly was not Waterville; stayed in Charlie Chaplin's favorite hotel and probably slept on the same sheets. Golfed and drank a pint or two with the two guys from Denver who owned a trendy line of women's shoes. Played golf better than I fished at Lough Currane with Tom, a famous local guide booked through the hotel, and enjoyed tea and sandwiches on the bank of the lake. We were both skunked, but I paid him cash, and so did the hotel, and put it on my bill. Tom left town and went to visit relatives — in Dublin.

Sam's photography caught my attention about a year ago. Superb action shots of working bird dogs, the likes of which I had never before seen. Four years ago, she had come to Ireland to finish a historical novel about an Irishman who fought for the Union Army in the United States Civil War, took to the camera instead, and doubted she would ever finish the book. She developed a passion for hurling and captured the action like no other.

Or maybe I want to catch an Atlantic Salmon on one of Scotland's storied salmon rivers. I suggested to Sam that I might live with an Irish Atlantic Salmon, but there was no chance; the rivers are too low. The salmon are not coming in, and Sam is not here.

Sam left Ireland and returned to the States, to her native West Coast, a few weeks before I arrived. She needed to seek a divorce

from a husband she had not seen since moving to southeast Ireland. He did not want to be a divorced husband. Sam wanted to be married. Married to an Irishman, specifically a gamekeeper and devoted fly fisherman.

Sam is a private person, fiercely independent, and thinks of herself as a bit of a tough cookie. Her momma was good-looking, and her daddy was rich. He led a Hemingway life, big game hunting in Africa and India. He taught her to shoot and ride a horse, to walk softly in the woods, and listen to the birds. She was ten years old when he took her to Mexico for deep-sea fishing. Sam grew up privileged with a view of the Pacific, developed a love of bird dogs, and learned to be true to herself. She was her daddy's girl.

She became my fieriest literary reviewer and most helpful critique as I shared my early musings with her. Sam, to educate me, shared her romantic novel. I liked her heroine but told her my heroine would not have ended the way her heroine ended up. Mine would have ended in the rack with the love of her life, not ending it all by walking into the ocean.

Sam is to return in late September to Kilkenny, and she agreed to meet for lunch. My schedule was crazy, and I booked and prepaid a nice Kilkenny hotel for two nights.

ISLE OF MAN

The ferry to the Isle of Man does not sail every day. Once a week is all. I booked and paid for my trip online, and a fair amount of confusion followed. The ferry company had me traveling from Douglas, Isle of Man, to Heysham, U.K., before I arrived in Douglas from Dublin, and the Regency Hotel in Douglas could not process my room payment. Eventually, with a great deal of persistence and pleasant English incompetence, the hotel got paid. And the ferry people had me in Douglas before leaving for Heysham.

Freddie Miller Jr. is a competitive fly-fisherman. He is also the driver of the taxi that carried me from the Aloft to the ferry docked in Dublin harbor. I was his first and last fare of the day as he was heading to a fly-fishing match where his Irish team would do battle with a team from Scotland. I told him I was heading to Scotland, hoping to fill a bucket list by catching an Atlantic Salmon on the fly. He opened the glove box of the taxi, fished around, stopped at a red light, turned around, and pinned a fly on the lapel of my tweed jacket. He called it a 'daddy long legs' and said he tied it himself last night and guaranteed it would catch fish. I never found out if his guarantee was valid. The fly is still on my jacket...

The ferry to Douglas was modern and sleek and left a beautiful wake as it said goodbye to Dublin. I did not know anyone from the Isle of Man. My heart was pounding.

Despite the pleasant incompetence of the front desk staff, native Manx, The Regency Hotel met and exceeded all my expectations. The lobby is quintessential English, warm and welcoming, with a floor-to-ceiling bay window providing an unobstructed view of the Irish Sea. An outsized fireplace occupies the far wall, with an original oil seascape hanging above the marble.

The lift safely carried me to the fifth floor. I had no reason to expect a room with an enormous bay window facing the sea, but by Jove, I had one. The view from the fifth floor was a lovely

seascape, a peaceful cove, threatening storm clouds on the horizon. The Queen's Promenade followed the coastline as far as the eye could see. Two good reasons to go back to the Isle of Man. The nostalgic experience of the lift at The Regency Hotel experience is one. Another is Queenies, Queen Scallops, beyond the shadow of any doubt, the best in the world. The hotel's kitchen perfectly prepares queenies, and the lovely Ela serves them in the dining room, earning them the deserving title of the National Dish of Manx.



THE ISLE OF MAN TT, THE HARDEST RACE IN THE WORLD, reads the route map posted on the notices board in the train station. It is also the deadliest, taking at least one life each week, every year, of the two-week event. Riders reach speeds of over one hundred thirty miles per hour while circumnavigating the island racecourse in a lap that is over thirty-seven miles. The Grand Prix event includes multiple special races, and this week was probably the Senior Race. The crotch rocket riders were all middle-aged with gray hair and potbellies.

They shut vehicular traffic down over the entire island. An electric tram provided the best alternative to tour the island, horse and carriage being the other. The breakfast room was full of excited chatter about today's race, starting at Snaefell, the island's highest mountain. The route map showed the tram following the east coast to Laxey before turning west to Snaefell. It said nothing about changing trains two or three times and taking a bus for the last leg to the base of the mountain and then hiking several hundred yards straight up, vertical, to the summit, which was covered in fog.

Stepped off the bus, assessed the climb, and got back on the bus. Took the train to Laxey, then on to Ransey for lunch. Along the way, the hills are steep and valleys deep. Sheep with full, curly horns dotted the green countryside. They meander freely.

The wolves are gone, and they have learned to avoid the tram. Lamb was not a regular feature on the dinner menu. I cannot believe I did not find a proper pub in Ramsey, settled for a pizza in a shady-looking bar, paid with a credit card, and promptly put a hold on future purchases.

Ela, only one L, came from Poland because jobs are plentiful here. Ela had served the Queenies for dinner the night before and the night before that salmon and had learned to pour a proper whiskey, and the night before that duck leg. And to not ask if I wanted another one, just bring one. I had repeatedly admonished her; I do not drink water but bring a large pitcher anyway. Nothing should disrupt the system. Last night, between the whiskies and the wine and before the Queenies, I had a brief allergy attack. The sneezing caught her attention.

“Maybe it’s the water?” ...smart ass.

Now, she is back for a full English breakfast this morning. I am still not going to drink the water. The Regency has a courtesy car that takes guests to the ferry or the airport. The Front Desk Manager reserved the courtesy car for me yesterday. He adjusted. It was ready to take me to the ferry this morning.



BEN-MAY-CHREE FERRY

DOUGLAS SEA TERMINAL

“God Damn American.”

“God Damn American,” louder this time, scraggly woman, Australian accent.

“What?”

“You an American?”

“Yep.”

“God Damn American.”

“Ma’am, excuse me, Ma’am but,” in a strong southern accent.
“The correct term is “God Damn Yank.”

The assembled laugh.

She turned away, thought about that for a beat, or two, turned to face me again. She had attracted some attention. We now have an audience of fifty folks, most all TT Motorcycle jockeys, more than a few on crutches, arms in casts and slings, no other women, no other Americans. The ferry from the Isle of Man to Heysham had not yet set sail.

“No, God Damn American. The crowd stops laughing. Could have heard a pin drop. I needed to put an end to this nonsense.

All eyes are on me. I lean forward, got a safe distance from her pock-marked face, looked her straight in the eye, calm, firm and softly southern. “And I’m damn proud of it.”

Built like a Quaker Oats box, gets up off her ample ass, heads toward the exit, finds someplace else to be for the four-hour voyage. The crowd goes back to minding their own business.

Disembarked at Heysham, my troubles were just beginning.

UNITED KINGDOM

The Heysham harbor is a light industrial complex surrounded by urban sprawl and low rent suburbs. Not a taxi to be found. No bus, no train. How the hell am I going to get out of here? Went inside the terminal and asked a ticket clerk and was told I needed to phone for a taxi. Well now, how am I to do that? No public pay phone, no telephone book, no nothing, except pleasant incompetence. At last, one clerk down the line offered to call. Thank you. How will I know when it arrives? Wait outside. They will find you. Oh, good.

“The Hotel George is no longer a hotel. It is a bar. They may have rooms upstairs, but I don’t know.”

“That cannot be right, it is a beautiful country house set by a river on five acres.”

“No, it is a dive pub in a bad part of town.”

The convenience store that advertises an ATM did not take Visa Cards. Another one ten minutes further on, it did, and the driver was somewhat happy, still not knowing where he was taking me. He thought it would be a good idea to bitch at me about gun control in America. It was not a good idea.

A few miles on, I found the address of the George Hotel, Hexham, one hundred thirty miles from Heysham. Thanks, Expedia. He was not going to Hexham and there was no other way to get Hexham on this day. Damn, I’m glad to be traveling alone.

“Ok, so where am I.”

“You are in Lancaster. The Royal King's Arms is a grand hotel. I will call and get you a room.”

He did, and indeed, it is a grand hotel. I gave him a twenty-pound gratuity because I was harsh on the Second Amendment issue. The

recent altercation with the scraggly Australian may have been an influencing factor.

I was due to be at Emmerdale Country House, Cleator Moor, in two days to begin my coast-to-coast walk. Lancaster has an impressive castle, a wide pedestrian shopping area, some friendly pubs with soccer on the telly, friendly fans, and a train to St. Bees. I needed to get to St. Bees to get to Emmerdale Country House.

Lancaster is not an idyllic country setting by a salmon river. Man United vs. Southampton occupied one afternoon, ended in a one-all draw, a psychological victory for Southampton, having played the second half with only ten players. Occupied the next afternoon by sharing a large high-top table at the Crafty Scholar Pub with two locals, Man City vs. Newcastle, a good match, do not remember who won, bought the two locals a pint. Walked about three miles before dark. Sam messaged me. We will not be having lunch in September as planned. She needs to stay on the West Coast longer than expected.

“Breast cancer,” I cried.

The bar at the Royal King’s Arms serves Jack Daniel’s. They ran out.

COAST TO COAST

The afternoon train to St. Bees followed the scenic west coast of England for two and a half hours. The Irish Sea to the port side and grazing land to the starboard. If this were the New Haven Line out of Grand Central, it would have been called a Local Express to St. Bees. We made twenty-two scheduled stops in small coastal villages: Barrow-on-Furness, Bootle, Seascape, and others, all charming villages, I am sure. The tracks do not always pass through the pretty parts of town. I am disappointed and saddened that I am relegated to train travel because car rental companies will no longer cater to folks my age. The coach car was comfortable and uncrowded. I took a seat on the landward side. Across the aisle, two rows forward, a grandfather and his fishing mate were spinning yarns for his mesmerized ten-year-old grandson. The grandfather, his fishing mate, and his mesmerized ten-year-old grandson had a packed lunch and were headed to the stop past St. Bees to fish for a few days. It was comforting to see folks still do that.

St. Bees is the trailhead for the Coast-to-Coast Trail. Again, no taxis were available at the train station. I dragged my forty-pound duffle several hundred yards uphill to The Manor. It was the first public establishment, pub, and hotel that I could find. I took a pint and asked the attractive proprietress of The Manor to call a taxi for Cleator Moor, disappointing her as she thought I was going to stay overnight. An older gentleman, who I assumed to be her father, placed the call and poured the draft, saying it would be twenty minutes. The first beer disappeared in short order, so I had another, downing the last swallow as the hired unmarked car arrived. The overweight female driver would rather have been somewhere else doing something other than driving me to the Emmerdale Country House. I asked her to stop at the Coast-to-Coast trailhead for a quick photo opportunity. She, not so politely, declined and sped off to Cleator Moor as if she might miss a sale at Harrod's. Upon arrival, she hopped out and sprung the latch on the boot, dragged out my duffle and stuck her hand out as if

expecting a tip. I looked at her, shook my head sideways to sideways and told her, “You lost it at the trailhead.”

You are not lost if you know where you are, even if it is not where you were headed when you set out.

In my formative years, back when drinking beer and driving were good sports, I drove a 1954 Buick Special, and it was special, a straight eight, three on the column and bench seats. It had about a million miles and bald tires, no radio, wind-up windows, and a two-tone paint job. It earned and proudly wore the moniker “*PATHFINDER*.” It was like an old horse; it knew its way back to the barn. Mary B referred to our garage as the barn. It was not a real barn like other barns in The Orchard, and it never stabled horses, but they attached it to a chicken house. The Pathfinder only hit the side of the house once, bounced right back to the driveway, and lightly kissed the barn doors twice when I was slow to find the brake pedal.

The Pathfinder is still a part of me, of my being. It broke down once on Falls Road in Baltimore, akin to simultaneously breaking both hind legs. She was dead. We loaded her onto a tow truck and deposited her in an old car graveyard outside Taneytown. Days turned into weeks, miseries set in, the sun did not shine, flowers did not bloom, birds did not sing, and depression can kill you quicker than any virus.

The Junkyard man sold her back to me for twenty-five dollars.

Today, she is with me as I start the nine-mile hike to St. Bees. This is going in the wrong direction, I know that. The walk properly starts in St. Bees, and this leg of the trail ends at Emmerdale House. But I was in Emmerdale House, and it is only a nine-mile stroll, and I know where I can get a beer and call a cab in St. Bees. I had trained all summer, climbing the four-mile loop to Wolf Rock in the Catoctin Mountains in under an hour. The best guess for the time is Cleator to St. Bees. I figured five hours. It was now late morning that would get me back to Emmerdale House for the cocktail hour. I packed rain gear in the sack on my back and

strapped a water bottle to my hip. Asked the desk clerk where I could find the trail to St. Bees.

Raising her right arm high above her shoulder, she pointed toward the front door with a flourish, "It's just over there, by the church."

Headed out, walked a mile or so, and came to the end of town without finding the church. Turned around, went back to town, found an open pastry shop, and asked the lady on duty where the coast-to-coast trail was. Raising her right arm high above her shoulder, pointing toward the direction I had come from, with a flourish, "It's just over there, by the church."

This time, I walked farther out of town and found a new church painted white, between a Fork in the road. No sign of a trail anywhere. A directional arrow pointed to Moor Row. 1.5 miles on the right spoke of the fork. My C2C map showed the Path going through Moor Row. I continued on the narrow country road into the quaint village, looking for the Path that my map showed I would find next to the Post Office. Never found the Post Office, but found an even more narrow road that provided a wide vista over the countryside. Thinking I could spot the Path from a high point, I sat on a stone wall and scanned the countryside. After a while, a middle-aged gentleman passed by, walking his dog. We exchanged greetings, and I asked where I might find the C2C Path, raising his right arm high above his shoulder, pointing toward the direction I had come from, with a flourish, "It's just over there."

Put the official C2C Path guide in my pack and followed my nose. The National Trust's attitude is that if you cannot read a map, you have no business on the C2C Path. Thus, they do not provide a signpost.

I retraced my steps through Moor Row and came to a Fork in the road. The right fork led back to Cleator. I took the left fork. In about a half mile, I stumbled onto a bike path, and I remembered from my map the C2C Path crossed this national bike path. After walking some distance on the bike path, I came across a woman in a yellow slicker walking her small black terrier. I asked, "Do you know where the C2C Path is?" Her reply was, "You passed it."

It's just there." Without an arm gesture, she tilted her head to a small opening in the weeds leading down a hill through a sheep pasture. It's not even a good game trail. At the bottom of the hill, on the other side of the sheep pasture, was a gate that led to the Path I had been searching for all morning. I was now three hours into my stroll and could see Cleator Moor in the distance.

Perched on the top rail of the kissing gate was a thin, shabbily dressed gentleman holding a quarter of an inch of a lit cigarette. He introduced himself as David puffed his cigarette down to one-eighth of an inch before, uninvited, announcing he would escort me to the village. I became cautious when it took him several attempts to get through the kissing gate before I could pass through. A kissing gate is so designed to prevent sheep from passing through and only one person at a time. Somehow, in getting through, you get turned around and face the next person in line, close enough that the gate is aptly named.

David was a left-handed smoker with a nicotine-yellowed forefinger, and the nail was black. He thinks in a couple of years, his breathing will improve, and he will resume walking the Path. He was an old man looking for company by being an unofficial Path guide. I need not have worried. The locals knew him and spoke to us as they passed by. As we neared Cleator Moor center, the path widened into a narrow street leading to the main road. We paused a moment by a large ornate double iron gate that held a hand-painted sign, "St. Leonard's Church Welcomes Coast to Coasters. Have a great walk."



Lianne, the stunningly beautiful bartender, poured my first whiskey of the day at Emmerdale Country House. My cocktail hour came early today.

Dark, heavy sheets of rain came as I was finishing my first whiskey. The bar in Emmerdale House is comfortable - tired, worn leather club chairs surround round wood tables, dark red carpet, and dark wood paneling warm the soul. It is a well-stocked bar. I found the ice bucket, well hidden behind a shutter in a dark corner, helping myself as needed. Lianne left. They did not appoint a steady replacement. Daphney popped in and out to keep account of my whiskies and set a dinner reservation. She is blond with her hair pulled back into a ponytail, a fine figure, well-covered by her uniform; she looks like an all-American girl. Appeared to be beyond the age of consent, evidenced by a small piercing a half inch below the right corner of her lower lip. It resembles the top half of a size 22 Prince Nymph on the lip of a properly hooked trout.

A pair of Coasters, pensioners, the wife assisting her husband, came straggling through the front door, shivering, soaking wet, covered in mud. The wind was howling at thirty miles per hour, and the temperature had dropped to the low forties (f). They had been on the Path from St. Bees when the husband had fallen, and the getting up was difficult on the slippery trail. The warmth of my whiskey took on a new significance. The old horse had found his barn.

She set dinner for eight o'clock. Daphney said I could take my drink to my room as I showered and dressed for dinner. Proper dress shoes and trousers, tattersall button-down shirt under the tweed jacket that sported a daddy longlegs on the lapel. The large dining room overlooked the formal gardens and was emptying as the early diners were heading to their rooms. The waitstaff set the tables with white tablecloths, properly placed silverware, and delicately stemmed wine glasses. A group of millennials arrived ahead of me and were seated, dressed in Bermuda shorts, tee shirts with no collar, and tennis shoes. This was for dinner at eight. Some people's children.

Daphney showed me to a window table set for four and said it was no problem. The New Zealand Sav Blanc was delightful and a wonderful complement to the confit of duck leg with chorizo, served on potato hash. At a table nearby, an older American couple was finishing their dessert as my main course was being served. They settled their bill and, uninvited, plopped themselves down at my table while I was still enjoying my dinner. As luck would have it, they were from Michigan and wanted to discuss politics. We were at different ends of the political spectrum. I wanted to finish the outstanding confit of duck leg in peace. They soon left me for my dinner without the customary farewell salutations.



The wind was still whipping the rain over the formal gardens. I was alone, deep in thought, contemplating the next days of my journey. The rain was a problem. Daphney, bringing a vanilla crème brûlée and wine, joined me for a wine, another wine, and some more wine. Then she stuck out her tongue, revealing a bright silver piercing the size of a Tums. There was no taxi service. She should not walk home in this weather.



PACKHORSE

Packhorse's job was to plan my walk from St. Bees to Robinhood Bay, an eighteen-day trek. Upon reflection, I had shortened it to three days ending at Grasmere. They were to book and pay for my accommodations and cart my luggage from one place to the next. Sometimes, the English and Americans share a common language, and sometimes, we do not. The Emmerdale Country House was the kick-off point. I had booked two nights, expecting Packhorse to pick me up on the morning of the third day, beginning my walk to Rosthwaite, then on to Grasmere. Packhorse misconstrued this and booked me in Emmerdale House for a third night. I found no objection to this whatsoever. Yet, another time, I did not regret having a traveling companion. Breakfast was with Daphney before the Packhorse driver arrived.

I was not about to walk nine miles with a twenty-one-hundred-foot ascent in the rain. Bill, the Packhorse driver, agreed to consider my luggage, so I jumped into the shotgun seat of the small van, except it was on the wrong side. The luggage section of the small van was full of other Coaster's stuff. Bill shuffled the other stuff around to make room for my stuff and advised me we would unload the stuff at other accommodations for the next several hours.

As a confessed lover of small back-ass country roads, I am Sterling Moss, in nirvana, with a British Racing Green Jaguar 120. The top is down, wind is at my back. I speed through the gears, tap the brakes and gear down for a hard left, back up through the gears, rpm's screaming, tires squeal as I slide into a hard right over a narrow-arched stone bridge, pray a red squirrel does not dash across the road. Further on, a lorry crests the hill just ahead. There is not enough road for both of us. I resume being luggage.

Bill is a Scot, a Remainer. I do not have a horse in that race, and he did not trash my country, which made him good company. It disappointed me we arrived in Rosthwaite as quickly as we did. I very much enjoyed the drive through the Lake District. Ancient stone walls line the roads that have not widened since the Romans

strode them in ox carts. Rugged treeless hills appear as dark clusters of pyramids through the rain and fog, jutting straight up from flat, lush green pastures filled with Herdwick sheep. Striking critters with coal-black bodies and pure-white faces. Bill says they are born that way; after one year, they turn gray, meat is not good, and neither is wool. They seem to be the breed of choice in this region.

Bill dropped me in front of the Yew Craggs and helped me get my baggage to the locked front door. There was a note with a code to open the door, written in local English. Bill broke the code, and the door unlocked. The proprietors of the bed-and-breakfast were nowhere to be found. I dropped my duffle and backpack in the center hall and walked the mile or so into the village seeking food and drink, found such at the Royal Oak Hotel bar. Rosthwaite is a lovely stone-built hamlet on not much more than an acre of land; everything is close at hand. Stone walls defined the roads and footpaths, and the pillars that once held an iron gate defining the entrance to the hotel were not wide enough to accommodate more than a horse-cart. The hotel is an eighteenth-century farmhouse that has been welcoming walkers for over one hundred years. It boasts that A.W. Wainwright called it “The most beautiful square mile in all of Lakeland.”

The entrance to the bar was not through the door to the hotel. I was told the door to the bar is around the far corner and in the back. While retracing my steps through the parking lot, I spotted an iPhone lying in the dirt. It looked a lot like mine, and sure enough, it was. It had somehow slipped out of the pocket of the red rain slicker, the same red slicker that my guide Scott D Free said would scare all the fish away when I last fished Alaska. It did not scare away Alaska’s salmon, and I do not think it will scare Scotland’s Atlantic Salmon.

This bit of good luck heightened my need for a pint. My thirst quenched; it took more than one, and my heart rate restored to normal. As it was getting late in the day, I had an early dinner. I did not want to walk the narrow footpath back to Yew Craggs in the dark. The bar was nicer than the average pub, so I ordered

dinner. The Emmerdale House did not have lamb on the menu. This was the first opportunity to try the lamb. I asked if it was Herdwick lamb. They assured me it was not. Instead, Slow Roasted Cambrian Lamb came with peas, buttered leeks, and roasted potatoes. Preceded by a delightful, once-in-a-lifetime Sweet Potato and Stilton Soup, where else in the world am I going to find this? And ending with a hearty portion of Apple Brown Betty with custard, another once-in-a-lifetime delight. The bartender's recommendation for wine was Château Jean Voisin Fagouet St. Emilion Grand Cru. Elegant. This meal deserved a better setting than a rustic bar. I should have moved to a table, but that seemed like too much trouble, and I had the bartender to help pass the time of day.

The Yew Craggs Guest House is hard on the bank of the River Derwent. It is a family-run business, managed by Anne-Marie and Colin and a contingency of house martins, coal tits, dippers, and red squirrels. A charming ancient arched stone bridge crossing the river is just in front of the house, and beyond is a green pasture holding a small flock of Herdwick sheep. I asked Colin if there were trout in the river, even though it was unfishable from all the recent rain. He said if I wanted to fish it, I would have to go to some distant place, get a license, and pay a fee. Then go to another location to pay a fee and get something else before going to another place to get something else, another fee to pay. He assures me that exercise would guarantee permission to wet a line. And yes, there were a couple of trout hanging out under the bridge. The bus to Grasmere picked me up on the far side of the bridge.

I do not recall when, but during my stay in Grasmere, Ph.D. Penelope wavered in her desire to spend some time with me. She claimed, meekly, that I did not give her enough notice. A weak excuse is hardly justified. This disappointment allowed more time in the charming environs of Grasmere.

William Wordsworth lived in Grasmere for 14 years and called it "the loveliest spot that man hath ever found."

The Packhorse folks booked me into Tweedie's for one night. It is in the center of the town. It is a sizeable, bland-looking structure

with large wooden letters identifying it as a Bar and Lodge. There are four unoccupied bike racks near the front entrance, which are not inviting, but Packhorse paid for them in advance. The best thing about Tweedies is its location. The village shops and walking paths are easily accessible, and I took full advantage by exploring them on foot.

Basic is the best way to describe Tweedies. There is not much to set it apart from the mundane. The bar and food service are understaffed. When understaffed, the standard system is abandoned, and the staff develop their own to cope with their work. At breakfast, a slovenly attired male server, whose mannerisms and pallor may have been gained in job training at Dartmore:

“Coffee, sir?”

“I’ll come back in a minute and get your order.” A minute drags on...

“Here’s your coffee; you still want eggs benedict?”

“Here’s your coffee; you still want eggs benedict?”

“Yes.”

“We only have bacon.”

“Just make it scrambled eggs and bacon.”

“Okay.”

Whether it was pride or guilt that moved me to hike the trail that circles the town’s lake, but hike it, I did. The walk satisfied my mind and body; at least I walked some trail in the Lake District. I had moved my lodging across the street to the Wordsworth. They packed me a lunch, which I enjoyed at the halfway point around the lake. Quite a lovely way to spend an afternoon before returning to the Wordsworth for happy hour. The staff has set the table by the window, especially for me, with real candles. The service was

very good and fast. I had to slow them down to linger and enjoy the view of the formal gardens. The Wordsworth is a wonderfully comfortable hotel. It suits my eye and my clothes.

I do not know who owns the Wordsworth, but Romanians manage and operate it. The husband is the General Manager bartender, and his wife is the front desk clerk and tends to the housekeeping staff, who are their children. A brother is working as a server/bartender, and several cousins are filling the same roles. All done with quiet efficiency, questions answered, and help rendered without a hint of arrogance. They were not understaffed.

I suspect it is the River Derwent that winds its way through the village, creating delightful vistas of lush vegetation and quintessential English architecture. The sheep pastures run right up to the town limits. The C2C Path winds its way down from a rugged hill and leads through the sheep into the town center. Behind the stone church, in a corner framed by the river, tended gardens and an arched stone bridge in the distance, they set Wordsworth's grave. It is a setting that demands reverence.

The poem on the headstone has meaning for me on this day. It captures how I feel about this trip and life going forward.

The lady who runs the town's only bookstore looks like she was born to run a bookstore, complete with wire-rimmed glasses. She was attractive, with several years ahead of her before reaching the declining years, friendly and accommodating to a fault. She steered me away from books written by Wordsworth to a small, pocket-size anthology by the valley poets.

The atrium in the Wordsworth holds at least one oversized, overstuffed brown armchair that is perfect for light reading while sipping excellent wine. At some point, I realized I had been here a day longer than I planned.

THE HIGHLANDS

Rookie mistake... took the high road.

Aberfeldy was a mistake, and getting there was slow. An expensive all-day trip that ended in disappointment. For reasons that I cannot explain, I had four days with no place to be. Remembering that I was here to catch an Atlantic Salmon on the fly, I headed to the Highlands of Scotland.

There are two bus stops in Grasmere; I soon realized I was at the wrong one to get to Windermere, where I would take the train to Bridgend. Through extensive internet research, I found what seemed the perfect destination for several days of exploring the highlands and fishing. The Royal Breadalbane Arms Hotel's map showed it located on the banks of the River Tay. Only one road leading to the hotel and no other structures nearby. The rate was very reasonable. The amenities offered included fishing from the bank, darts, a pub, a dining room, ensuite rooms, and breakfast. Perfect.

I could not find a train to Bridgend, but Pitlochry appeared to be nearby by expanding the map. The Ticket Master lady at Windermere asked me where I wanted to go. I told her Bridgend eventually, but Pitlochry looked to be the nearest train station. A man dressed in a train conductor's uniform had been listening to this exchange and volunteered that Bridgend was in Wales, not Scotland. The train to Pitlochry was within minutes of departing, and it was the last one of the days.

I presented my phone with the hotel reservation to the lady Ticket Master; she determined the hotel was in Aberfeldy, and Bridgend was the street's name where it was situated. That made perfect sense to me as the map showed a single road crossing the river and ending at the hotel.

She processed and issued a one-way ticket to Pitlochry. I hustled down the station platform, dragging my duffle, looking for an empty carriage. A Conductor directed me to the lead carriage at

the front of the train, taking my duffle with him. There were eight carriages, all filled with folks heading somewhere for the weekend. Only one seat was available when I reached the lead carriage; no sooner had I settled in that the lady Ticket Master tapped me on the shoulder, out of breath from running, said, “There you are. I’ve looked in every car for you. You are better off getting off at Dunblane. Here is your new ticket. You will need to change stations in Glasgow. You will leave from Queen Street Station.” She handed me the new ticket and a handsome refund.

“Thank you. Will you marry me?” I smiled as I stuffed the refund into my jacket pocket.

The train was pulling out of the station, and she jumped off without responding to my proposal.

She said nothing about a layover in Keswick. The Dog & Gun pub seemed to be closed, or I would have enjoyed a pint there. As it was, I roamed around an open-air market, looking for anything of interest. Keswick has more trekking stores than Seattle has Starbucks. Over the past several days, I have noticed many young couples with backpacks out and about on the many hiking trails in the Borrowdale region. This is still September, and these folks are of college age. Why are they not in school or working somewhere? Why did I not do this when I was their age? Mary B would not have approved. A fair amount of young folks still live the punk rock style, while others unhappily dress in drab jeans, poorly cut black waist-length down-filled quilted jackets, and black shoes of no distinction, making everyone look the same. All are made in China. Every exposed body part is inked.

Glasgow has only two construction cranes disturbing its skyline, and nobody is smiling. People are in a hurry to get wherever they are going, and I am taking up too much sidewalk dragging my duffle to Queen Street Station, which I do not know where it is. I followed other people who looked like they were looking for a train, judged so by whether they were carrying luggage or not.

Sir Christopher Wren may spin in his grave. Glasgow’s Queen Street Station is a modern glass and steel marvel. The interior is

sleek. Domed skylights and walls of glass provide abundant natural light. The folks who are paid to help travelers do so politely. I found my next train on Platform 6 and drug my stuff aboard a new carriage on the way to Dunblane.

There is a pub at the end of the station platform in Dunblane. I do not remember its name. The sign on its restroom door:



The matronly proprietor asked if I would like a pint. “Yes, a Tennent, please.”

There are no taxis, buses, or anything at the station. The pub is filling up with young folks, and yes, I would like a menu. I have attracted the attention of a patron who is almost my age.

I looked lost, and he inquired where I was going. I answered, “Aberfeldy.” “You can’t get there from here. It is seventy miles or more.”

“See if anybody wants a drive in the country, or is there a taxi in town?” I did not ask if he had a car. He looked to be already a bit over-served.

“I’ll check around,”

I ordered another pint and some food. Dunblane did not seem to have the charm of most Scottish towns. It looked more like suburbia, with strip shopping centers and drive-through banks. It is infamous for the 1996 Dunblane Massacre when a crazy person shot and killed sixteen school children and one teacher, which eventually led to the British government banning and confiscating all handguns and rifles. The cowardly bastard shot and killed himself.

I could see my new friend and concierge outside the pub with his phone to his ear. Presently, he found his way to my table and proclaimed he had found a taxi that would drive me to Aberfeldy for the tidy sum of one hundred fifty British pounds. Tell the driver to give me a few minutes to finish my lunch, and he will need to stop at an ATM. He agreed to this, and before long, a nice new car pulled up in front of the pub. I bid farewell to the matronly bartender and passed my concierge a five-pound note as the driver loaded my stuff into the boot.

My driver was a young family man from Hungry, and I was about to pay him the largest fare he had ever received, for which he was grateful. There is an almost direct route to Aberfeldy that is mainly back-ass country roads. The countryside is untouched by civilization. Shortly after leaving Dunblane, a signpost indicated Auchterarder was only five miles to the east on a narrow country road.

“Young man, please pull over and stop at that intersection?”

“You need to pee?”

“No, no, back in 1981, I was playing golf at Glen Eagles, King's Course. There was a howling gale out of the east. My first tee shot was against the wind. I struck the ball with my usual slice swing; the ball went straight up. Turned right, the wind caught it, and it climbed out of sight behind me, still rising. I think it may have landed near here.” He did not stop. There goes his tip, I reckoned.

We traveled north, through Crieff and the small village of Milton, still unspoiled countryside. It seems odd that there are such vast expanses of countryside not littered with one-story brick ranchers. The road winds its way down a steep hillside into Aberfeldy. My new Hungarian friend took a left off the main street in the center of town, into an alley, then a right into a parking lot.

“You are here. This is the hotel.”

“No, can’t be.

“Yes, sir, it is.”

“No, it is supposed to be on the river in the country.” This place is, in the center of town, a dump. Newly renovated, it said, bullshit. It looks like a four-story version of the Bate’s Motel.

My new Hungarian friend grabs my stuff, and I follow him into the hotel through the back door. There is a Bates brother at the reception desk.

“Yes, I know I’m a day late. Do I still have a room reserved?”

“Yes, you are on the fourth floor.”

“Where is the lift?”

“There is none. No worries, I’ll carry the duffle up.”

“Thank you.”

During my stay, I counted the steps up to the fourth floor, seventy-six, made more confusing by not being contiguous. The stairway would be at one end of the building on one floor and the other end of the building on the next floor or in the middle of the building on another floor. My room was too small for me and my duffle. It found a home under the bed. The W.C. was so small they mounted the toilet paper holder on the wall, behind the toilet, and above shoulder height. It was the last place you would look for it if you did not notice it before taking your place. Not to get personal, but

that would put the holder somewhere above and behind my left shoulder; for someone with torn rotator cuffs in both shoulders, this was an unwelcome challenge.

Before I eventually found the River Tay, I found The Black Watch Inn & Croft Restaurant. It was a short uphill walk from the Royal Breadalbane Arms Hotel, which locked its front door at 10:00 pm. The room key would unlock the back door after hours.

The Bates from the Reception Desk was its one and only employee.

The Black Watch Inn was on the pub side, and The Croft was a decent restaurant next door. The pub part was a typical pub: a dartboard, a pretty young bartender looked over by her mother, and a Springer Spaniel with a tennis ball. I shopped around town for a more convivial establishment without success. One other restaurant on the square looked from the outside; it might be good, but appearances were deceiving. They advertised Scottish Venison on their menu. I tried it for lunch; shoe leather would have been more tender. They served on the burned side of well-done. I told the server it was fine, but when they hit me up for £7.50 for a pint of Tennents, I protested they were too proud of their beer. The going rate for a pint in most of Scotland was £4.00, and £3.75 at The Black Watch.

What was not to like? With a pretty young bartender, a Springer, a cheap lager, and a dartboard, it became my go-to spot. It was on the nineteen eighty-one St. Andrews trip that I first took the game of darts seriously. The Echo Lake Country Club golf professional, Keith Mohan, me, and two other members were the foursome. He entered us in a tournament sponsored by Black & White Scotch. The tournament started at Glen Eagles, and that is where we found our first dartboard and Bo Derek.

We played darts worse than we played pitiful golf. Playing Carnoustie was difficult for us, as it wasn't as well-maintained as it is today. The rough was knee-high, and I fell into the wee burn on the seventeenth. Jim, my caddie, refused to take my money. It was pitiful. Eventually, we adapted to our new environment,

haggis, scotch, rain, wind, and cold, and won a flight at The Old Course at St. Andrews. I have the trophy crystal mug, twice broken, in my kitchen cabinet.

The tournament was a week-long event, and when it was over, I sent my clubs home with Keith and hopped on a train for London. Spent the better part of ten days touring England. I was young enough to rent a car; at some point, I visited Chester, York, and have fond memories of a train ride to Salisbury. I do not remember her name either. When I returned to Echo Lake, there was a new dartboard hanging in the pro shop, which probably did not contribute to the longevity of Keith's job. Several years later, after many hours in the pro shop, I moved to Maryland, Keith moved to Battle Creek, and much of the good times were over.

Dartboards the world over possess a magnetic quality, drawing beer drinkers into fantasies of grandeur. The dartboard at The Black Watch was not in play. There were house darts on a shelf nearby. I asked the pretty young bartender if it would be okay to toss a few. She said it would be fine and there would be no charge. I retrieved the house darts, took my spot at the mark on the floor, aligned my body, cocked my arm, and tossed the dart.

The pretty young bartender was playing fetch with Alfie, the Springer. She had not witnessed the toss. There were no other patrons within earshot of the bar; no one had seen the toss. I tossed a second dart, the same result. I took three steps halfway toward the board, kneeled, picked up the darts from the floor, and sheepishly returned to my seat at the bar. My embarrassment went unnoticed. The pretty young bartender had refreshed my pint and left it a little out of reach. She noticed I was having difficulty picking it up, took pity, and moved it to the bar's edge.

In the dining hall on our last morning at Glen Eagles, the hundred assembled golfers suddenly fell silent. Gasps spewed forth from dropped chins. Tableware dropped to the floor, and bloodshot eyes popped from faces with stubbly beards. Bo Derek came to breakfast. Ms. Derek was traveling with her husband, John - *who cares* - and another couple. If Bo is a 10, the brunette girl of the

other couple is a 20. They were at an adjoining table, one morning only.

Sir Robert Burns, a life-size statue, sat comfortably on a park bench at the entrance to The Birks of Aberfeldy, holding a small book on his lap. The park bench is long enough that if you would like to sit and instill some inspiration from Sir Rabbie, you are welcome to do so. The Birks circuit is over two miles, and I completed it with a broken walking stick. The walk begins with a steep uphill climb. The path is slippery, rock-strewn, and narrow, with a sharp drop to the swift-running stream that flows out of Loch Tay. Halfway up, there is a rock outcropping upon which it is believed that Sir Rabbie took repose as he wrote his famous poem, The Birks of Aberfeldy.

My last night in Aberfeldy has thankfully arrived. I could have left anytime, except the room was cheap and paid up. I had already paid for too many hotel rooms that I did not sleep in, so I stayed. I would enjoy dinner at the bar in the Black Watch. There was one unoccupied stool near the end of the bar when I arrived. A guy dressed as a cyclist occupied the seat next and spoke with an English accent. We struck up a conversation once he heard an American accent of sorts. Tony was riding the Lands End to John O'Groats Challenge, an annual test of cycling prowess, to complete the round trip in as few days as possible. The mother of the pretty young bartender said it would be all alright to move his dinner reservation from the decent restaurant to the bar. He did, and we had a friendly chat over a wonderful dinner of homemade steak and ale pie served with peas and chips. He had worked extensively in the States and, in particular, for IBM at Tarrytown in a facility I built in the nineteen seventies while working at Brown and Matthews. We talked about British politics politely. I told him I was not pleased with being in Aberfeldy. He told me about Kenmore. A town just over the hill or two that was on Loch Tay. At the headwaters of the river Tay, there is one of the most beautiful towns in all of Scotland. If I had gone there, I would probably still be there. A week later, he emailed me announcing he had made it to John O'Groats and safely back to his home in Bristol.

GRANTOWN-ON-SPEY

In the morning, I caught the #24 bus to Pitlochry for the tidy sum of £3.10. The driver was most generous with his time, giving me explicit instructions on the transfer in buses that would occur in front of Fishers Hotel. A grand hotel in the Scottish tradition. Architecturally impressive and comfortable in every sense. I waited for the bus at a street-side table and enjoyed a pint in the shade of a blooming Rowan Tree. Suffered considerable regret that I was just passing through this beautiful city. Had I taken the proper train from Windermere, I could have had a day or two to explore and buy a tweed jacket at the House of Bruar.

The bus transfer was flawless. I arrived in Grantown-on-Spey in time for lunch at the Garth Hotel. Opted for the Cairngorm Beef with Caramelized Onions served with Smoked Red Rooster potatoes, buttered baby vegetables, and rosemary-crusting pastry.

All washed down with a Tennent's draft.

The staff was gracious and helpful when I told them I was not a proper guest and instead needed a taxi to the Craiglynne Hotel, about a mile away. The Garth is a small hotel exuding warmth and charm; it had served travelers since before Queen Victoria stopped by for tea.

The Craiglynne is much larger and, at one time, a grand country house. It has become a bit tired and could use some sprucing up, yet it still is charming and comfortable.

Eilidh, in English Alie, is from the Isle of Lewis and welcomes guests to The Craiglynne at the front desk. Gaelic by birth and heritage, has blond hair, blue eyes, a sturdy frame, and is a believer in unicorns by birth and heritage. She found me the bus schedule to Banchory and directions through the woods to the river Spey. She said if I should encounter the Sidhe Fairies while walking in the woods, be nice to them. They will bring good luck.

I could live in this town. It suits my eye. The town square is well-tended, with no trash, no graffiti, and no noise except on weekends when packs of motorbikes pass through town. The unmuffled fast ones spoil beautiful scenery worldwide. There is one grocery store, one pharmacy, and one sporting outfitter who said there is no salmon here. Four hotels and a couple of food carry-out shops, one bookstore, and the Claymore Bar have billiard tables but no food.

To my dismay, I found no food service on Saturday afternoon while looking for a late lunch. The barmaid said she would save my seat while I went to the bakeshop. They had a pastry with minced meat and one with chicken and cream sauce. I figured the minced meat would go better with a Tennent's draft. Returning to the Claymore, I took my seat at the long end of the bar, just before the elbow. No sooner had I finished the minced meat pastry than a gentleman took a seat two barstools down on the short side of the elbow. He carried a walking stick, suffered a limp, wire-rim spectacle perched on a round bald head, was generally round all over, and could have passed for a rotund Peter Lorrie.

A nod of the head acknowledged his arrival. I needed another Tennent to wash down the pastry. The brief chat with the barmaid gave away my nationality. Norman began the conversation by declaring he did not want to talk politics, but he is good friends with Donald J. Trump's first cousin, Allister. On his mother's side, Trump's grandmother is from Tounge of the Isle of Lewis, and Allister lives in the ancestral home. Norman may have had a few before he arrived at the Claymore and offered to buy a round. I did not object and, sometime later, returned the favor. Whether he did, I do not know, but he claimed to like Trump. Norman and I did not discuss the topic. Norman began repeating himself about Allister; it was time for me to leave. Norman invited me to dinner the next day. I declined and offered we meet for drinks at two o'clock at the Claymore. He agreed.

I arrived back at the Claymore ahead of the appointed hour. Norman was not there. There was a different barmaid. Two o'clock came and went without Norman, and I asked her if she

had seen Norman that day. “You mean Norman with the stick?” I did.

“No, report is the police, and an ambulance was called to his house about three this morning. Don’t know anymore.” Finished my pint, returned to the trail along the river Spey, and kept a sharp eye out for Bean-Nighe washing Norman’s clothes. If Norman had died. She could be seen washing his clothes. I did not see her or a single salmon.

On the path back to the Craiglynne, the owner of a lovely house stopped me, perched high on a hill with a river view. He was out for an afternoon stroll with his Australian Collie, Willow, who did not look a thing like Lassie. I do not know his name. Both he and Willow were friendly. Willow’s owner wanted to discuss America. We did in friendly terms despite the dribble the BBC has fed him.

I have been here for over two weeks and find the radio and television news intolerable. The BBC is the most anti-American broadcast since Toyoko Rose and Lord Haw-Haw trashed the United States from Japan and Berlin during World War II. Willow’s owner did not invite me to dinner, shook my hand, smiled, and wished me happy travels. The Brits hung Lord Haw-Haw after the war. I am hoping history will repeat itself.

A couple of whiskies at the Craiglynne led to the mile walk uphill to The Garth for dinner. Suzy was tending the bar; there was one seat available. I asked if it was possible to have dinner served at the bar. She allowed it to be. Charred filet of haddock served with wilted kale, sugar snap peas, roasted cherry tomatoes, and a fine Sauvignon Blanc were enjoyed as the other bar patrons retired to their rooms. Pony-tailed blond, blue eyes, finely structured, age-appropriate, half my age plus seven or less, Suzy poured a respectful drink in defiance of the regulations.

The Garth hosts an annual weeklong symposium for writers to meet and greet. They usually hold the event in February, and Suzy said she would introduce me to the organizers. For reasons other than the pandemic, they canceled the symposium. That pretty

much also canceled any hope for Suzy. I had nothing much else to do, so I headed to the river Dee for serious salmon fishing.

Brian Brogan was waiting for me in the lobby of the Banchory Lodge, dressed to the nines. He was in Saxony tweed plus fours, a matching waistcoat over a Shetland crew neck sweater, and Barbour gaiters. A genuine Scottish ghillie. There is no need to inquire about a toe ring. So far, everything has exceeded my expectations. I arrived here last night in time for local scotch before a dinner of crisp duck and wonton salad. Sharon, the marvel who attends the front desk, showed me to my room on the second floor with a River Dee view.

Brian loaded my gear into his car with his two black labs and drove into town to the Orvis store for rental waders. I emailed the Orvis store a week ago inquiring about wader rentals and was told they do not rent waders. They do if you are with Brian Brogan.

An easy rhythm descends on the fishing hut. There is no hurry. There is no pressure. They offer tea, black, accepted. Jeff and Stuart were two other paying clients, relaxing and sipping their tea, and a couple of townsfolk popped in and out from time to time. They conducted the conversation in the local Scottish brogue. I got about every fourth word until they started talking about Prince Albert and Jeffrey Epstein. My understanding of the vernacular picked up. It took a bit of time for me to be directly included in the conversation. I broke the ice when I asked Jeff to help me out of my waders. He allowed as how he did this for his mates and was happy to help me. Today was a few days past the eighteenth year of the remembrance of nine-eleven. Brian recalled he was working a different beat on the Dee. His client was a senior executive with Cantor Fitzgerald. He had caught some salmon in the morning and paused for tea at the Lodge. He did not return in the afternoon.

Before lunch, we decided to walk down to the river to catch some fish. Brian had rigged my Orvis nine-foot, eight-weight with a green and yellow, size 10, double hook traditional Scottish fly, promised it would catch fish. It did not. For sure, it would be after lunch, which was brought to the hut by Brian's wife. There were

no fish to catch after lunch or the next day. If you are not going to catch fish, this is a damn nice place to do it.



Jeff was still knee-deep on the far bank of the Dee, casting to water empty of fish. A red sun was setting over the bridge's rim, and dark clouds were slipping in from the west. I headed to the Lodge's bar. Allister was tending bar religiously, pouring not a drop more of Fettercarin 12 than legally allowed. He says they distill it just over the hill on the dark side to the south. The Queen is at Balmoral over the back of Bennachie to the north.

“Allister, my friend, it is a terrible waste of time and energy to pour one ounce.”

“That’ll be £9.20 for a double.”

“Pour it.”

I took my double scotch down to the river’s edge, cupped my hands around my mouth, and called his name. Jeff waved and showed with a broad sweep of his arm that nothing had found its way into his net. There was a slight drizzle of rain as I sipped my Fettercarin in a wrought-iron chair overlooking the river. He spots me again and gives one last farewell wave.

Finished the whiskey and headed in for a refill before dinner of a perfectly prepared rib-eye steak and a delightful large Merlot. After a dessert of flourless chocolate cake with ice cream, I stayed with the Merlot back at the bar. Allister was not busy. My best guess is that he is about ten years my junior, not tall, not short, and in good condition from running ten miles a day. He served twenty-three years as an officer in Her Majesty’s military police, did three years in Belfast and four years in Londonderry during the “Troubles.” Spent some time in the Philippines operating underwater vehicles around the oil rigs after a stint as a ski instructor at Stow, Vermont. Later, became a bird dog trainer.

“You can tell a Springer what to do, but you have to ask a cocker.”
True.

More truth, “A cocker must like you, or it’s not going to do what you want.” I know for a fact that is also true about at least one Springer. Told him how Remington would not retrieve Cacchio after Cookie got shot and left.

A couple from Kensington, Maryland, shows up at the bar. They were not very chatty but discovered we have a mutual friend from Frederick, who is also not very chatty. They are from Kensington.

On the Last Day, I fished in the morning, a beautiful warm short-sleeved day, same results. Quit for lunch at the Lodge of Lollipop Prawns with a Staropramere pilsner, awarded it four stars. Allister had the day off, said goodbye to Sharon, and asked her to call a taxi to carry me to Aberdeen. Brian was washing the hut’s

windows, yelled across the Dee, waved goodbye, and thank you. Never have I not wanted to leave a place more than I did not want to leave here.

Not much to say about Aberdeen; I did not see one construction crane. The taxi took all the back roads to get there. I do not know if it was the best route or not; it was a lovely trip. The loudspeaker voice at the airport spoke a language that I had never heard before. Nobody there could translate. Somehow found my way to a two-propellered plane with the faded word “Piedmont” peeking through the paint job. It flapped its way to Dublin and landed as far away from the bus stop as it could.

KILKENNY, IRELAND.



Knowing that she would not be here, Sam had given me two bars that she thought I would enjoy. I told her I would pretend she was there. The Hole in the Wall, which I must have walked past twice while exploring the city, the other, Dylan's, she described as a unique whiskey bar with no food service. After crossing the river Nore bridge and hanging a left on the path that parallels the river, I found it. It is too far from the hotel. One quick Jameson and I had had a light lunch.

Kilkenny is the proper size town to enjoy exploring the sights and sounds. Growing up in Maryland, schoolboys carried lacrosse sticks made of hickory everywhere they went. It was comforting seeing the boys of St. Kieran's College carrying hurling bats in much the same manner.

Across the street from the Kilkenny Castle gardens, overlooking the river Nore is a touristy food place. I enjoyed a cup of tea with milk and a chocolate chip cookie before finding the Black Kat. The largest stained-glass window in all of Ireland occupies one wall. The interior construction is an interesting array of fan vaults, providing an eerie atmosphere.

The Kilkenny Hotel, about a mile from the city center, was a modern lodging catering to business travelers, large gatherings, and weddings. There was a long-polished wood bar and an amble staff of four bartenders who would also serve dinner. No matter where you go for food, the Irish are determined to make up for the famine. The portions are generous.

It was Monday night; I returned to the hotel early to take advantage of Happy Hour. I took my customary seat at the short end of the elbow at the far end of the bar. Habit: I still do not like sitting with my back to the door. A neurosis picked up while working in the construction business in New York City. The bartenders were between shifts, so they ignored me until the new shift entirely took charge. One bartender was cutting up some fruit directly across from my place at the bar; I struck up a conversation and was regaling him with my Middleton story when he wandered off with the cut fruit. He stayed gone for half an hour. Upon his return, I rejoined my story and finished with a funny punch line, which sailed way over his head. There is a system, and nothing should disrupt the system.

While waiting for my Smithwick's Red, Carol Baile, my friend of fifty years, messaged me, said it was her husband's favorite, and told her I had never tried it and would give it a go. A guitar player took up a bar stool two down from me. Russ said he knew some country music, passed him a fiver, and talked about life in general and his travels in the States. It became apparent that I was an obstruction to

his equipment when his gig started, so I moved to a round table some distance away. He knew some classic Glen Campbell and was good at it. Tried Hank the Great, but not so much. He was into his music for about twenty minutes when two late twenty attractive ladies stormed into the room, and a party broke out.

One was a blond, and one a brunette; I do not remember the blonde's name. She twerked Russ, much to his amusement, and then turned her attention to me. She twerked the back of my head as I sat in the club chair. I did not turn around. The brunette grabbed me and pulled me out of the chair. Come on, man, dance. And we did; for most of the night, I sent a subtle hand signal to Russ to slow it down, which he did, a fiver well spent. We were in a more intimate mood when a group of ten or more ladies of an older generation arrived and joined the fun. The pace picked up again; complete and utter chaos broke out. This is the stuff of every traveling salesman's dreams.



Several Smithwicks later, I realized it had a familiar taste. Brandon, at Bushwaller's, a beer joint with an Irish flare in Frederick, had been pouring me Smithwick's for years. I did not know. Never got to tell her husband. He died before I got home.

The next morning, over breakfast, Linda remembered my name.

GOING HOME

"Got No Reason for Goin' Home," Gene Watson, 1984

Southeast Ireland is where Sam began a new life four years ago. This is her province. Southeast Ireland was the home of her hero, her love, not the gamekeeper, but instead a military man of distinction. It was his life she wanted to immortalize in her novel. The one she will never finish. He had served with honor in the War of Papal States during the War of Italian Unification in 1860. His bravery and heroism inspired American Bishops in Rome to recruit him for the Army of the United States during the Civil War.

Sam had researched her novel. Read every word ever written about him, chased down and copied every photograph she could find, conducted genealogy studies, and visited his living ancestors. Sam left no stone unturned.

Ms. Sam has walked the battlefield at Gettysburg three times, where her hero fought as a cavalry officer: a Major under General Buford who held off the rebel attack that saved the battle for the Union. Ms. Sam traveled to Montana and spent a week contemplating the battleground at the Little Big Horn River, where the only survivor was his horse" Comanche." They found "Tuck," his Scottish Staghound on Custer Hill, dead. She traveled to Auburn, New York, visited his grave, and prayed in reverence to the man Chief Sitting Bull pronounced to be "the bravest of the brave." When Sitting Bull died at Wounded Knee, he wore the Papal Medal he scalped from the chest of the last man killed in the Little Big Horn. Sam had got the pocket watch he wore in his last battle. Upon her arrival in Ireland, she returned it to his family.

The taxi carried me to the bus stop for the trip to Dublin for my flight home. I did not want to go.

I asked the flight attendant for a whiskey, and she brought a Jameson Castmates on the rocks. I checked my phone, and I saw a message from Sam, "admitted to hospital in California to prepare for surgery in the morning."

"Major Myles Keogh,"—— Ms. Sam.

THE ORCHARD

I found my way home to The Orchard before the pandemic struck, took a shower, changed clothes, packed my upland hunting and fly-fishing gear, hopped in the back of Hil's Expedition, and headed to Vermont on the way to Grant's Camp. A little cast and blast before dealing with the umbilical hernia that developed along the way.

Standing in the River Dee, downstream from the ancient bridge, with the sunlight bouncing off the ripples in the current, casting to waters that may or may not hold fish, will please my mind forever. With luck, the next time there will be fish.



This, I hope, will not be my last visit to Scotland. Grantown-on-Spey, Banchory and the Highlands. There is much trampin' left to do. The next time, I should not do it alone. I should stop over in Ireland and see if Ms. Sam will come along.

My birthday was last Tuesday, Pearl Harbor Day. A commentator will announce it is the umpteenth anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and I will know how old I am. Betty, the tailor, came over to clean the kitchen and some rusty pipes because Hil and Mike are due here today. She has many ways to remind me of my age, most of which I enjoy.

Mike sleeps in the upstairs guest room. I changed the sheets and put a king-sized mattress on a queen-sized bed. Hil inflates an air mattress in the living room. This has been going on for a good number of years. We drink a lot of brown whiskey every Friday night as part of our annual tradition. We support the whiskies of Kentucky and Tennessee equally and in prodigious amounts. Mike fixed supper tonight. It's spaghetti and meatballs with wine.

We made it to Friends Creek mid-morning. A flock of turkeys crossed the ridge above the creek, twenty or more. No waders for us today, wellies and boots.

Mike said he'd be back in an hour as he headed toward the Alder Pool. It almost always holds fish. Hil walked back up the lane to the Swimming Hole, a reliable pool. My hands were shaking so badly I could not tie on a fly. By the time I did and got to the Swimming Hole, he had already caught two good-sized trout. He was casting from the shallow end toward the middle. I picked a spot on the far end where I had suffered a serious fall a couple of years ago. I had my beaver stick for support. The black woolly bugger was not working; I thought I would move to a better spot.

"Hil," I yelled, "I need a hand."

Even with my stick, I could not climb back over the rocks. He worked his way around through the brush and pulled me to level ground. I gave up and walked back to the Nutshell and waited. Hil caught two more, and one got away. Eventually, Mike showed up and said he caught four.

It was early afternoon, and the sky was getting darker. Rain threatened. We drove over the mountain to Blue Ridge Summit and Orvis's Hill Country. I asked Matthias, the trapper, if he minded if I did not shoot, just ride along and heckle the other two. He wanted to know why I was not shooting. I held out my left hand, the one that aimed the gun. It shook like a leaf in a tornado. The trigger finger did no better. I blamed it on the torn rotator cuff on both shoulders. Fifteen sporting clay stands and a hundred shots from each shooter later, it was happy hour.

They asked me to cook the filet Mignon. I did, to a barrage of directions, while enjoying a great bourbon with Hil. He gifted me four “Camp Crew” custom-designed high-ball glasses with trout, quail, a crisscrossed shotgun and a fly rod, perfect. Mike was into his red wine. Hil and I about wore out the new “Camp Crew” glasses.

MS. M

SUNDAY MORNING

Sunday breakfast is scrapple and eggs at Baugher's. I told them not this trip. I have a date on Sunday morning, and I am taking her to Friends' Creek. They could join us if they wanted. They declined. Mike added that if I didn't take her to the Alder pool, it would be an injustice. The Old Town Diner in Woodsboro offered us a booth or a table. The table offered more room. It took both hands to get the large glass of milk to my mouth. I told Hil I should get my shoulders looked at and could not keep the food on my fork.

We finalized plans for the seminal cast and blast birthday celebration upcoming in January. Quail shooting on a proper Georgia Plantation and trout fishing at Fern Valley on the Soque. There will be formal attire at dinner.

Ms. M was already at the Red Horse parking lot when I pulled in fifteen minutes early. Someone introduced us a couple of days ago and concocted a fly-fishing lunch at Friend's Creek. It is almost Christmas. Some traditions die hard.

Today, the stream was low, fast, and weak tea clear. The creek was stocked with nice-sized rainbows and browns two weeks ago. By the looks of the Nutshell Pool, they are still here.

My hands betrayed me; I could not tie on a fly. Tried to buy some time, hoping they would settle down, unloaded the lunch boxes from the car and set the table in the Nutshell Hut.

The small table had a tablecloth, real napkins, crystal wine goblets, silverware, and wine arranged on it. I placed the pot carrying the lobster bisque on the front burner. This would be Ms. M's first fly-fishing adventure. She is a very stylish lady, more at home on Fifth Avenue than dressed in waders, standing in a stream waving a stick. I hoped the lunch would provide a modicum of civility to the rustic environment.

Verbally, describing how to attach the fly to the tippet is not my strong suit. Ms. M got a black woolly bugger affixed in spite of my directions. We climbed down the steps to the Nutshell Pool. Several casts later, there was enough line out to reach the Kilimanjaro rock where the fish were yesterday.

Feeling emboldened, she made a nice roll cast upstream. The reel fell off its saddle, landing in the stream. She recovered it, and I returned to its place on the rod. Another cast caught a tree branch. She untangled it.

I thought it would be a good idea to try the Swimming Hole, give this pool a rest. Stationed Ms. M at the shallow end, where Hil had good luck yesterday. The reel fell off again, put it back wrong, making it a left-hand retrieve for the first time in its life. Ms. M did not notice. Lots of trout circled, chasing, bumping the fly, but not eating.

Time for lunch. I opened and poured the wine, turned on the front burner, and arranged the canvas folding chairs around the table. The green one had a tear and would not support either of us. We moved the table toward the bunk bed, spilling the wine into an empty soup bowl. It captured most of it and returned it to its goblet. We sliced the bread. Checked the bisque to see if it had reached temperature. It had not found the circuit box and flipped the breaker on. Ms. M divided the chunks of lobster equally. My hands shook the chucks back into the bowl and spilled the soup on the tablecloth. It was delicious. Cleaned up the dishes and the soup pot without using running water. Ms. M conducted a thorough interrogation, including a cleverly worded question to determine my age.

I replied, "Not too." Seems she has a medical background and concluded that I did not have a life-changing condition; rather, I am dehydrated. She prescribed sixty-four ounces of water a day. Told her I do not drink water.

I secured the reel to the rod with a right-hand retrieve. The trout were rising to feed off the surface. Together, we tied on a small parachute stimulator. Back at the Nutshell Pool, Ms. M tried, but

no luck. I made two casts, caught a branch near the top of the tree, and recovered the fly without climbing the tree. The day has worn me out. I need a drink.

Sunday is Tessa's day to work the bar at the Red Horse; I asked her for a Sav Blanc, and Ms. M ordered a martini.

Ms. M being an emphatic, "Bart, drink some water."

"I don't drink water."

"Tessa, bring him a glass of water, please."

"Water am weaknin'."

Ms. M finished her martini, rolled her eyes, and left the bar, leaving me with a half-empty glass of water.

KABUKI MEDICINE

I most likely would have ignored the umbilical hernia if it had not caused my navel to protrude as though I was nine months pregnant. I am having enough trouble impressing the ladies; explaining a protruding navel is no help.

The COVID-19 pandemic had not yet shut down the world. The surgeon said he wanted a chest X-ray and an approved EKG for surgery. No problem, say I. I dealt with the X-ray quickly, but my private insurance and Medicare did not cover it. I am out-of-pocket hundreds of dollars. The surgery scheduler said my Primary Care Provider could do the EKG. They did and approved it for surgery.

The X-ray showed the hernia had captured a bowel. Surgery has now become essential and immediate. The surgeon rejected the approved EKG. He would only accept an approved one from a cardiologist. COVID-19 shut down elective surgery at Frederick Memorial Hospital before I could arrange the procedure. Essential and immediate became elective. No matter if the hernia strangled the artery, I would be in deep trouble, even dead.

Twenty years have passed since I last saw the cardiologist. The one who kept my father alive for fifteen years after his first heart attack. The same one who hospitalized me at the tender age of fifty-eight because he thought I was having a heart attack kept me overnight in Frederick Memorial Hospital. The next morning pronounced that my condition had deteriorated, and he was sending me “down the road” for the catheter examination.

The surgeon said, “If they find a blockage, which I think they will, you will go immediately into surgery.”

I called the person who would become my widow if things did not go well and told her that if I were going to die, I would like it to be in silk pajamas. They were dark blue, and I never wore them again. He later prescribed a cholesterol-reducing drug I forgot to

take when J.R. went to Grant's Camp in Maine. That was a long time ago, and I have not taken it since.

His office had not moved but had grown larger with more doctors, and his name was now at the top of the totem pole. Yes, he remembers me, but he cannot see you for two months. We will assign you a younger doctor whose name was at the bottom of the totem pole. I showed the young doctor a copy of the approved EKG. He said he would do one and did, and it did not look like the approved one. He needs more information, he says and prescribes a Holter Monitor for twenty-four hours, which I am to come back next week to be fitted. And then come back the next day for him to send the data off for analysis. They will not know the results for a week. I remind him of the hernia. He says once he sees the results, he will order more tests and see me again in a month. I reminded him again of the hernia. I declined the Holter monitoring. He then suggests a regiment of tests that will take four months to complete.

I fired him on my way out of his office. The surgeon who refused the approved EKG would be next. Asked my walking buddy Linda if she knew a cardiologist. She referred to a general practice in Westminster. I made an appointment. The cardiologist, after an EKG, said you need to wear the Holter monitor for fourteen days. I will call you with the results.

The call came at 10:30 pm on a Wednesday.

“Be at Sinai Hospital at noon tomorrow. I have made an appointment with a surgeon for you. You will not be going home.”

“I’ll think about it and call you in the morning.” I found some fresh ice and poured a splash. Thought about it awhile, downed the whiskey and went to bed. Called him mid-morning and said I could not get there on short notice but would go on Friday.

“Be there at eleven. Ask for Doctor Hiwaykashia.”

Called Bobby Weller and asked if he would drive me. He said he would. He did, and we got there on time. The directory said Dr.

Hiwaykashia's office was on the fifth floor. I introduced myself to the receptionist and said I had an appointment with Dr. Hiwaykashia,

"We don't have a doctor by that name."

"Really, why is his name on your door?" Pointing to it.

Sanai Hospital is in Baltimore City.

The phone rings, "Hello," she answers it.

He is running late. He'll be here in fifteen minutes. After a while, a nurse motioned me to come to an examination room. Does a blood pressure test and straps me up for an EKG. Dr. Hiwaykashia shows up and says he cannot do the surgery because my insurance will not cover it at Sinai Hospital. But will cover it at Westminster, but he will not drive to Westminster. It is a twenty-minute drive. I will need another doctor to install the pacemaker.

Bobby takes me home. I called the Westminster cardiologist and got his administrative assistant. Explain the situation to her.

Jennifer said, "Where do you live?"

I gave her my address.

"Stay there. I will come to get you. I will drive you to the Emergency Room."

"Go through those doors and tell them you are having a heart attack. Do not tell them how you got here." I did as she said. The triage unit takes over.

"Yes, you are. We are going to admit you."

Jennifer is buddies with the nurse of another heart surgeon. She calls her friend. They scheduled surgery for 8:00 am the next morning in Westminster. I had a lovely room on the seventh floor with drop-dead beautiful Filipino nurses.

There was a twenty-day waiting period because of Covet. Twenty days later, Bobby Hdrove me to Westminster Hospital for the hernias. There were two of them by then. Doctor Lisa fixed them both at the same time. Bobby took me home the same day.

Westminster cardiologist, “You would have died on the operating table without the pacemaker. The Holter Monitor showed you had four, class three heart blocks.”

Tell Jennifer, “I love her.”

PURA VIDA

Voltaire, “Wherever my travels may lead, paradise is where I am.” *Le Mondain* (1736)

Dear Kat:

A few days ago, I fished Friends’ Creek for the last time. I thought about you and said a little prayer of thanks as I left. I hope the path you have chosen will lead to happiness. I still love you, as I did then.

Bart

I November 2022

FAREWELL THE ORCHARD

Yesterday, I broke into Remington's plastic urn. Drove his ashes to the farm. I always hoped I could get him back there. We welcomed a stiff breeze off the mountains, like the day his Daddy flushed a pheasant out of the honeysuckle a long time ago now. I parked the truck at the top of the lane that leads down to the house. Past the patch of woods where Remy would hide, waiting for me to fall over the mogul, run out and steal my hat. There is a car parked in the short grass in front of the house. Someone must be living here. It is best if we do not disturb them.

The breeze carried his ashes over the fields we once roamed every day. Remy knows where the loose board is on the barn door. If he wants shelter, there will be hay in the barn. I told him I did not think there were any birds here, but you could hunt them up if you want to. Told him I loved him. Said it will not be long before I see you again.

Last night, there was a hearty fire in the hundred-year-old fireplace used for cooking. Yesterday, it provided comfort for two hunters home from the hills. Jack and I hunted pheasants at Hill Country in the afternoon. He is far too intelligent, blindingly fast, blessed with a keen nose, knows stuff is going to happen before it happens, and loves to hunt. He quartered within range, remembering who he was hunting with. Jack flushed and retrieved all the birds I shot.

After the second missed bird. Jack stopped, turned, and looked at me with sad brown eyes, an unmistakable expression of sympathy. He knew my shooting would not improve. We were in our second hour of walking the hills and rows of corn stubble, tall grasses, and weeds. I stumbled once or twice, getting my feet under me for the shot. Whistled him to "hup," called him in, and ruffled his ears. "Good boy." He headed to the truck. The sun was dropping over the Appalachians. I longed for the comfort of the red leather wingback in front of a roaring fire.

The first killing frost happened in late October. I put a small fire in the kitchen fireplace and have kept it glowing since. Another heavy frost last night. Scenting will be good.

“Let’s go to Hill Country this afternoon to get a few pheasants. We have not been there in a long time. What do you say?” His tail thumps on the hearth. The English did not dock his tail. He took great pride in it. One summer, while still living in Frederick, I gave him a haircut and trimmed the bushy white feathers off the last five inches of his tail. He moped around all summer with his tail tucked tight between his legs.

There is a handsome wooden box beside the crystal snifter, full of ice, covered over by Tennessee whiskey, resting on the small chest next to my chair. Tonight—a wood fire, good whiskey, and a tired Springer make a perfect ending to a great day. When growing up in this kitchen, they boarded the fireplace up. A coal-oil stove with a fuel line running out its backside provided heat and precious little comfort. Jingles would have loved Jack’s cushioned bed resting on the hearth. It is still there. I have not moved it. My thoughts drift back. Jingles and I could walk out the back door. Roam at will, the springs and coverts of Cool Springs Farm, Devilbiss’s Woods or as far as Crookabout Farm. Jack has his own door leading to a big yard, which I fenced to keep him safe. It is not the same. It is not better.

I find myself wishing Jack and I were someplace other than here. I filled the sniffer with fresh ice and covered it with three figures of Mr. Daniel’s Old #7. Conjured up some tales of Jingles and me roaming the fields, flushing quail and pheasants. Jack has heard them all before. It is that time of year. The annual fire truck invasion was last week. I have learned to turn the front lights off so they pass by without stopping. No chance of any townfolk stopping in. They never do. I still have never milked a cow or made hay and have lived somewhere other than here for most of my life.

Jack has heard this rant before and goes outside. He does not stay long. He knows I am tired, and the whiskey will soon put me to

sleep. One more story before we call it a day. I promise, “it will not be about trout fishing.”

Tomorrow evening, I will stoke the fire, pour Tennessee sour mash over ice, and plan a road trip to get us out of here. A traditional Midwestern walk-up hunt in Nebraska would be to his liking. I have done that. He will like it, all wild birds.

Dale was waiting for me in the kitchen. He had taken the tags off the Chevy and fixed himself a cup of coffee. The sun was not yet up. I think I have taken care of everything important. We had a half hour to kill before we left for the airport. Trembling hands spilled some coffee and did not clean it up.

The fire in the fireplace burned out last night. I closed the dampers this morning.

“What have I forgotten?” loud enough so I could hear it. Paced back and forth through the dining room, the crystal chandelier was still hanging there. Paused, remembered how it got there, “enough,” louder this time. I sold it along with everything else. There are still some of the bigger pieces in the living room. Not even memories remain. The buyers will pick up their new belongings next week.

“Did you turn off the propane?” Dale questioned.

“Yeah. Last night.”

“I’ll go check it.”

“Good, meet me out front.”

I locked the front door and took the key across the street, put it in the neighbor’s mailbox.

“Let’s go,” as I tossed my backpack into the back of Dale’s truck.

An audible sigh of relief as we went by what was once St. Paul’s Lutheran Church. There is still a swing on the parsonage’s front

porch, past the Methodist Cemetery, where Ms. Grace is buried. Climbed up and over Poke Hill. The Orchard is behind me.

Good God. I hate airports.

I have not been in one since late September, before Covid-19. That was over three years ago, and I have been incarcerated at The Orchard since. Today, I will suffer through three of them. This one was once known as Friendship International Airport. It is now something else, but its call letters are BWI. Departure time is 6:05 am. I am told I will need to change planes somewhere before finally arriving in San Jose. They guess around 8:30 pm local time. I am flying in the back of the plane; I have not done that in decades. Doubt there will be Jamison on the rocks. I could afford an upgrade, except I do not know with any certainty what awaits me at the other end.

The Powers That Be instructed the unfortunate travelers to be at the airport two hours before their international departure time. Dale unloads me a little after four o'clock. I have two pieces of identification that alert security to my pacemaker. I follow the directional signs to the nearest TSA checkpoint. The queue is fifty people long. There is far too much prosperity in this country. I wonder why Greyhound Bus Lines did not evolve into the airline business. I think they did, but they call themselves different names now. I showed my pacemaker identification to the TSA worker. "We have a special machine for pacemakers. You must go to Check Point One. It's at the other end of the terminal." Why must I walk a half mile carrying a twenty-pound pack if I have a heart problem?

"Is this the pacemaker checkpoint?"

"Yes, step in here, put your hands over your head."

Bells and whistles explode.

"Sir, step over here. You may not proceed. You are carrying hazardous material." says a very large TSA Agent as he points to a screen on the kiosk. There I am, silhouetted, lit up like a

Christmas tree. A bright red crotch, front and rear. “I am going to have to search you in your private parts physically. I will use the back of my hand to touch you. Would you prefer to do this in private.?”

“Oh no, here will be fine,” as I pull up my shirt. “Hernias, two of them, see the holes.”

The touching continues in a gentlemanly manner.

“The pacemaker is up here,” pointing to my shoulder.

“Ok, you are good to go.”

“Thank you.”

Yes, my departure gate is back near the first Security checkpoint.

Is there a Greyhound to San Jose? It is alright because I still have some portion of the allotted two hours to diddle away. Breakfast is not worth a month’s pay. Prosperity, there is too much of it. It is out of control.

I find my way to the announced departure gate only to find the boarding desk, says Dallas. My ticket, I check it twice, says Houston. What the hell? They are both in Texas and the right direction.

There is no Jamison on the rocks or much of anything. I do not change planes in Dallas. It is Houston where the change occurs. The designated plane needs repairs, and another one is brought to the gate an hour and a half later. I spend next month’s pay on cheese dip and a beer.

As we were taxiing for takeoff, I used WhatsApp to tell Sarah Elena to tell the driver that I was going to be very late. She is my in-country concierge. “No worries,” she returns my message.

“I’m Alex. Sarah Elena sent me to meet you.” He was waiting twenty yards down from the baggage door, holding a sign with my name hand-printed on it.

“Hi Alex, it is late. Would you rather do this in the morning? I can get a hotel. Jaco is a long drive from here. You will drive all night.”

“No, it’s only an hour and a half. We will be there by midnight.” So much for me knowing where I am.

“Let’s ride, amigo.”

We arrived after midnight. Alex stopped his car in front of a locked iron gate, ten feet high and as wide as the road, topped with razor wire. There was a pedestrian gate on the far left, leading to a guard house manned by two guys with guns.

“Give me your passport.” I hesitated too long.

“I need it to get in,” with his hand outstretched.

Shortly, the guard stepped out of the gate and motioned for me to come forward. In Spanish, he motioned for me to stick out my left arm. I did without hesitation. He placed a yellow paper bracelet around my wrist and said, “Do not take it off.” In English.

He opened the gate and waved Alex through. We found my small one-bedroom unit at the far end of the condominium complex. Alex lives in San Jose. He was quick to say that he would be back on Friday to take me to Atenas.

The bracelet identified me as a temporary resident, and for the next four days, I could not get in or out of the condominium compound without displaying it to the guards.

So, this is what they mean by a gated community? This whole security thing has me on edge. My concerns deepen in the morning when I get to the main street for breakfast. They locked every building up with high walls and razor wire. All the doorways have

steel doors and iron bars on the windows. There is no open access to anything.

La Artesanal Coffee shop was the only business open. It was not that early. Coffee and an omelet are the first food since Sunday. The rain is soft and warm, making the air heavy and breathing difficult. Lots of stray dogs roam the streets begging for bits of food at the coffee shop.

I had asked Sarah Elena to schedule some time for me In Jaco. When J. R. and I were down here fishing five or six years ago, we drove past Jaco on the intercontinental highway. Sitting on the beach, facing the blue Pacific with the tall green mountains behind it, appealed to me. What I found did not appeal to me. Alex had advised me not to go out after dark. Jaco is the closest beach town to San Jose and attracts an undesirable element. Aside from prostitution being legal, drugs are commonplace. There is a small, safe, redeveloped area: “The Walk,” which has business offices and good bars and restaurants. I bought Sarah Elena a lunch of fresh mahi-mahi. She ate it like she grew up in an orphanage. She is a single mom trying to be an entrepreneur. It is close to the two high-rise condominium towers that caught my eye. They would have a view of the hills and the ocean. There are no vacancies.

Alex did not need to ask twice if I was ready to leave on Friday morning. The trip to Atenas was four hours of roads that made the mountains of North Georgia look like I-95. We could not locate the resort Sarah Elana had booked me into until late afternoon. The town square has a nice park, and the village church reminds me of the country churches from home. The hills and sidewalks are too steep for me to walk with or without a stick.

Alex says he will be back Monday to take me to El Coco for an all-day drive. It was indeed an all-day drive, and I pleaded with him to please find a straight, flat piece of road. He said in about thirty minutes, more like an hour.

The rest is a blur. I stayed in a condo supplied by Airbnb and walked the town and beach for a couple of days. The property manager of the condo informed me that she had a long-term rental

located around the corner and up the street. Would I like to see it?
“Yes, I would.”

“Yes, I will take it.” Two bedrooms on the second floor of a two-story complex painted red. The Canadians, of which there are many, tell me it is burnt orange. My first Canadian friend was from Newfoundland. We told me if I stayed for two months, el Coco would change how I feel forever. “It is something in the air,” he said.

THE FIRST 30

I have been here two weeks, wrote everyone to say I felt great, happy, and confident. I had a great day and walked four miles, all on a cup of black coffee and two small chocolate chip cookies. It was 95 degrees early on the beach, so I got some sun. Ended up doing some shopping in town and stopped at Coconut's for a breather and a beer. Maybe two, about one o'clock, still 95 degrees. Thought some southern barbecue would hit the spot, headed to the Buzzed Monkey, not much less than a mile from downtown. My feet were not touching the ground as I turned the corner, climbed the hill, picked up my pace on the downward side, and stumbled over a pothole. Cussed myself for not seeing it. Get yourself a walking stick; nah, you are not that old. Told myself, you are still twenty-five. You can do this. Wiped the sweat off my brow with my shirt tail. Leaned both elbows on the outdoor bar and took some deep breaths to keep my head from spinning. Climbed on a bar stool and gave the bartender a thumbs-up. It is the one Spanish expression that I do not mispronounce. Wiped the sweat off my arms with a paper towel.

Ordered an Imperial regular and chicken figures with fries, ate half of them, and put the rest in a box for dinner. Arrived home in time to catch the second half of the second World Cup game. I do not remember who played; I had some help from Susan. She saw me struggling along the road two hundred yards from home and picked me up in her golf cart, for which I am eternally grateful. I told her so and would have hugged her except for being soaked in sweat. Took a nap and awoke around five, finished my chicken figures and some fries, and found a part of a brownie and Merlot for dessert. Wrote notes to myself and my friends about how great I felt, watched some television, and put the brownie back in its wrapper and the refrigerator. At about eight-thirty, on my way to bed, my head went blank. Dry as a bone. I was out before I hit the night table on the way down.

At some point, I regained consciousness, my head in a pool of blood on the white tile floor. I turned my face down, hoping the coolness of the tile would help stop the bleeding.

I was in dire straits; I got to my feet, found a bandage, packed ice into paper towels and applied it. That stopped the bleeding. Washed my face and went to bed. Thursday morning, I was unable to get out of bed, congratulated myself for having a full-blown concussion, was nauseous, dizzy, and stayed down all day. Wondered, was it a heart block that took me down? On Friday morning, somewhat better; I am no longer nauseous. Found my way to the street and thumbed a ride to the emergency doctor. The doctor was not in. The receptionist called a taxi to take me to the main El Coco Medical Clinic. I collapsed into a chair and waited.

It was of indistinguishable origin, old, beat-up, and two-tone, like so many of the stray dogs that roam the streets and alleys of El Coco. The thing had not seen a drop of water since the passing of the green season. It had four wheels and doors, and a permit taped to the left rear window was all that indicated it might be a taxi.

” Si, taxi.” The girl nodded, opening the rear door for me.

The woman driver had rolled down her window. She and the receptionist exchanged excited Spanish. I recognized “Medical Clinic.”

The sedan had at least four on the floor, and she tried them all before landing in reverse and backing into the oncoming traffic. She ground the gears before finding whatever got her going forward.

At break-neck speed, we headed into town and did not stop or yield at the main intersection in front of Z’s Lounge. Sped past restaurant row, she turned left onto a dirt road that led deep into the jungle. I thought, “Am I going to come out of this alive?” But like an oasis in the desert, a modern building appeared out from amongst the trees. She parked the taxi haphazardly alongside an overgrown ditch with weeds and scrub trees near full of casual water.

“OK, the buzzards will never find me in there.” But neither will anybody else. The driver helped me out of the taxi and led me to the Clinic door.

A young intern asked me what was wrong. “I fell, hit my head and have a concussion.” “Give me your passport and write on this notepad your name, where you live, and your phone number. “I have just realized that I broke my thumb.” It is twice as large as normal, and I cannot hold the pen. Together, we managed to gather the information. We had more help than we needed. Chaos, everywhere I looked. A couple of people were helping me print my name, and several were holding me upright as I was wobbly.

Out of nowhere, a vision of loveliness appears. Even with a face mask, she was beautiful.

“(inaudible) Rojas.” She spoke. “When did this happen? How are you?”

“Wednesday evening, about 8:30, not good.”

“That was two days ago. Why did you not come sooner?”

“Because I could not move until today.”

“Did you vomit?”

“No, but I could have.”

“Do you have insurance?”

(First thing first)

“No. Are you a Primary Care Doctor?”

“Yes.”

“Do your hands always tremble like they are now?”

“No.”

“Do you always speak the way you are now?”

(What the hell is she talking about, my accent?)

A long pause, “Oh, I forgot my teeth.”

Dr. Rojas laughs, “Yes, I will be your Primary Care Doctor.”

“I need a cardiologist.”

“I am sending you to Liberia for a CT scan.

“OK, how?”

“In a special ambulance. That will be \$983.00 now.”

The doctor hooked me up to a monitor and an IV with some fluid. They staffed the ambulance with a live M.D. Thirty minutes later, they unloaded me in the Emergency Room of St. Rafael Archangel Hospital. In the triage unit, two MDs and support staff hooked me up to an EKG and blood pressure wrap. Five minutes later, I was in the CT machine after approving a \$2000.00 hit to my bank account. The M.D. who read the EKG said it looked normal for someone with a Pacemaker. I asked him to look again. He did; the same answer.

The results of the scan took four hours. While waiting, hunger set in. The IV solution must be working. I had nothing to eat since 5:30 pm on Wednesday. Relieved, you do not become hungry if you are going to die. I asked for a hamburger and a beer. “No way,” they said. So, I asked for a hamburger and a Coke. Still no way. Beans and rice with a pork chop came within minutes. The pork chop resembled the heel of my field boots, and I was still without my teeth.

The results, delivered by yet another vision of loveliness, said everything was normal.

We will call you a taxi.”

Never once did I wear the mandatory mask.

Sarah Elana has no plans for me after Playas Del Coco. Fortunately, she found a long-term rental in El Coco. At this time

of year, they are as scarce as hen's teeth. This one has turned out to be a good, if not a great, find. In Costa Rica, a long-term rental of one year will get you three. Three years is the minimum residency required to apply for citizenship. The government wants new citizens, and they restrict the homeowner to the amount of increase of rental rates in years two and three.

The Happy Oasis complex is in the upscale Las Palmas neighborhood of El Coco. As a crow flies, I am two blocks from the beach. I cannot get there as a crow flies. It is a five-minute walk. There is always a Buenos días and thumbs up from the gardeners as I pass the other condos. It is six hundred steps to Java Coffee, where I enjoy breakfast every morning, sometimes served by Alejandra, whose smile is worth the walk. I hold court at my table by the potted pink Veronica for an hour or more. A half dozen regular morning walkers will stop by for a chat. There are new arrivals every week. International football is a popular topic. Costa Rica's team has had better years. For the World Cup final, France v Argentina, Alejandra said she was favoring Argentina.

“Why?” I asked. “Because they are American.”

It is a short walk down the beach to Coconuts for a hamburger, a beer, and a ball game on television. Up the beach is Café del Playas. Sunsets, ceviche, and Sauvignon Blanc have replaced the Tasting Room, and there is a lovely young server whose musical skills are, as yet, unknown. The first time we met was on a Friday at Happy Hour. A tradition was observed, and adjustments were made. J.R. will not be passing this way anytime soon, and whiskey is too harsh for the ambiance. The tide was in. The waves crash on the beach a few yards from my table. A floral breeze drifts from the hills, refreshing the air from the heat of the day. She came to my table wearing a dazzling smile, shorts, and a T-shirt with the Café logo.

“¿Te gustaría tu costumbre Sauvignon Blanc?”

“How did you know it's Sauvignon Blanc?”

“The boss told me,” With a nod toward Emanuel. “He said you are a good guy.”

“You are very handsome. How old are you?”

“Gracias,” returning her smile with a blank stare as an answer.

“Si, por favor, el Sauvignon Blanc sería buena.”

She turns, her ruby red lips wide in a smile, coal-black hair, and eyes that would tempt any man. She heads toward the bar. She knows I am watching and struts for a few steps.

She returns with a tall glass of wine. There is a large frozen grape floating in the wine.

“Gracias.”

She told me her name. I did not hear fast enough to catch all the syllables.

“That’s beautiful. It suits you. My Spanish is not good. I will call you Smoke.”

“Are you sixty-four?” She gets another blank stare and a shoulder shrug as an answer.

I tasted the wine. Offer her an approving smile.

“Is sixty-four good?”

“Si, sixty-four is good.”

“Sixty-four it is.”

She plays a six-string guitar.

It has been ten years since Jack died. There is a handsome wooden box resting on a small chest next to my bed. I do not have many

more years to waste. I have not yet caught an Atlantic Salmon on a fly.



THE END

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a man in outdoor attire, including a hat and a light-colored jacket, walking a dog on a leash. He is standing on a paved surface, possibly a sidewalk or a path, with a white van parked behind him. The scene is outdoors with greenery in the background. The text is overlaid on this image.

TALES FROM A LONG WALK

Travel with H.B. as he sets out alone to see what is around the next bend in the road and what lies beyond the next hill. Follow him on the cobblestone streets of Dublin to the top of St. Stephen's Green where he is saved from a tragic accident by the red-haired lady from Tralee and on to the rugged hills of the Isle of Mann and "Queenies" with the lovely Ela. Stand by him as he defends his country and his dignity on more than one occasion. Enjoy the charms of Ennerdale House, and the trials of the Coast-to-Coast Path. Feel his excitement as he touches the waters of the Spey, the Tay and the Dee. Taste the wine and delight in friendships of Banchory. Hold him as he says farewell to a hundred years of history and a lifetime of memories and some Kabuki medicine. Feel the warm sun, on the sandy beaches of Costa Rica. There is a little mischief along the way. An adventure for the mind's eye.

Other works by the author: "Tales from The Orchard", 2020.

H. B. WEST