

## On the Road

*Master, this is Thy Servant. He is rising eight weeks old*

*He is mainly Head and Tummy. His legs are uncontrolled.*

*But Thou has forgiven his ugliness, and settled him on Thy knee ...*

*Art Thou content with Thy Servant? He is very comfy with Thee.*

'His Apologies,' Rudyard Kipling

A white Japanese rental car threaded through a backroads ribbon, heading nowhere in particular, as you can still do semi-guilt-free these days in a hybrid vehicle. The car disappeared in dips and valleys, reappeared on peaks and dissolved in a sunset the colour of three pears (raw, ripe and rotting), an apricot and a plum.

One car, five occupants, two human, one canine, two ursine.

Jetlag overtook the young woman. Her head lolled on her shoulder.

The male driver punched the digital radio looking for news, hyper-alert. He was spoiled by Australian radio. It wasn't very good in this country except for National Public Radio, as he wanted to tell Deirdre for the hundredth time but she was asleep again.

His wife loved just driving around but Peter needed a destination. He'd got one now. He'd tell her about it as soon as he saw the whites of her eyeballs and her mouth snapped shut. He hoped she'd go along with it. She seemed so different from when he left her.

Perhaps he was the one who'd changed.

No question about that.

It was she who insisted on this drive, up from Los Angeles through the high desert around Bishop, forsaking the road to Yosemite for the one leading to their present location. What was it with her and the need for remote locations?

They were somewhere in Nevada. Spanish for snow-capped. Peter craned his neck, keeping his eyes on the road. Nothing remotely resembled snow on distant mountains. Climate change probably. It had certainly affected the virus he'd gone to Africa to hunt.

The silver state. Mining. Hacking away at the earth. Hacking reminded Peter of his computer. He'd need to find an Internet café tomorrow at the latest to check on what he needed to talk to Deirdre about.

The sagebrush state. He thought he smelled the pungent *artemisia*, which puffed through the windscreen by the pummelling wind.

State of mind, that was the Wild West for you.

The scientist wanted to clamp his eyes closed against the unignorable. Was it really just a week ago the steamy greenness of the West African horn had claimed him? Why did he feel so alone, almost abandoned? He'd been counting the days until Reunion with the four beings in this vehicle, who loved him far beyond what he deserved. Gratitude flooded his brain like a broken vein, bringing the semi-paralysis of resentment and guilt.

Peter watched himself finger his new red beard in the rear-view mirror. He wished it were lush. He thought he saw movement on the back seat: two bears and a dog. He might be homesick for his virus work in Africa but the love light in his eyes told the animals as no words could how much he'd missed them.

'Trying to keep the memories alive, Boz Master?' Sturgie asked.

'All she wants to do is sleep,' he said, jerking his head at the sleeping art historian. 'I'm the opposite.'

'You're experiencing common Re-Entry Syndrome symptoms, Master,' Bluey said. 'Try to understand the limits of your high expectations and be realistic about your goals.'

'The year is already receding, boys,' he whispered.

'Pretty soon it will hop off into the sagebrush, a souvenir to be trotted out in times of nostalgia,' Mikey said.

'I can't decide whether to bury myself in work or run us off the road,' Peter said. He draped his right arm over the steering wheel and scratched his scalp with a clawed left hand.

'Don't be too hard on yourself, Master,' Bluey said. 'Give yourself some time to ease back into being a family man in the affluent West.'

'As opposed to my Wild West,' Mikey noted.

'And my general wildness,' Sturgie chuckled. 'You may call me General Wild.'

The purple-and-white bear looked out the rear window at a wedge of chaparral and dust stained purple by the setting sun. He thought he saw a movement in the distance. A wild horse ridden by a black man? C'mon. He was hallucinating, he admonished himself.

Meanwhile, Deirdre was dreaming. Tapping had invaded her subconscious. She was tap-dancing while simultaneously working the computer, in the way of dreams. LDL rans through her brain to her fingertips. Long-Distance Love.

Gottaprocesstogottaprocess. I think I can I think I can.

GoogleGoogle ... Long-distance relationships need special willingness and understanding ... test love like no other type of relationship ... constant communication and commitment required ... using the only real tool you have... your words.

GoogleGoogle ... Surviving LDR ... Making long-distance relationships work for you ...

GoogleGoogle ... When being in love does not mean being together ...

Bluey Bligmund floated through the monitor, special tartan, crystal-studded dog collar reflecting pompous shards. Intellectualising. That was his game. Apeman chest-beating, K9-style. Male bonding kept the interpersonal relationship joints from rusting ... go to Male Shed. Do not pass Go. Go to rootssearch weekend. Bring money. Come Ramo, come Inchmartin, come Conor ... Come Lassie ... Come Rin Tin Tin and Sam ...

Sturgess Ursule fluttered past, flailing passionately at every passing babe and wailing for his son The Big Cock.

Mikey Kerowack flinched inside a bubble, isolated but reaching out to other Mikey Kerowacks inside infinite bubbles. He was bubble-wrapped. Couldn't break free, despite being determined to process his mental illness by looking for love. Autism huh? He almost pierced the membrane with an elbow, but irresistible drugs infiltrated like flakes in a plastic snowball.

Deirdre's dream observer chirruped about the neatness of life. All five members of the Brownlow family fell into their own slots, pursuing love twenty-first century-style. Smack dab precise centre landing. Lucky Lepidoptera would have approved. Bluey intellectualised, Sturgess flailed passionately, Mikey Kerowack jabbed outward with a needle from inside his impenetrable bubble.

And the humans?

Deirdre's observer was reeled into the dream by a slender silken thread. On the way down she saw Peter. It was dawn and he was crowing. Cockadoodle doos shot through a thousand spokes on the crown atop his head. His wattle morphed into a ruff and he became the beloved pet sheep she had as a child. He jumped a fence into the hoggery where, as a serious and sombre man he assiduously sliced slabs from the flank of a protesting Bessie, one-eyed sow of Lin Boggs the Desert Watcher. Yes readers, dutiful husband was bringing home the bacon.

Dreamtime Deirdre was in full flounce mode. Fifties flip hairstyle. Frilly apron, fully starched. Flutter the eyelashes like Lucille Ball. Flitter flitter over dinner dinner: beef fillet, potatoes, carrots and pear flip with a fillip of rum. Fiddle with flames on the gas cooker.

Sixty-four thousand dollar question: what was this woman doing?

And the answer is ... she was keeping the home fires burning.

So now we've speared the humans, canine and ursines in the hybrid vehicle threading through the backroads ribbon of the Wild West.

Frank Sinatra's voice pervaded every atom of her dream being ... Is that all there is?

A big puff, expelled like a noisy fart, unfurled a banner across the dreamscape. Wavy letters spelt Love 21<sup>st</sup> Century Style, then morphed like maggots into the early twentieth-century French circus alphabet.

For several heartbeats Deirdre didn't recognise the next transmutation.

Who were these people?

Then it clicked.

Ah.

The circus performers became the inhabitants of Mikey's opium-soaked dreams.

We're in the Wild West!

Come Ida, Kathy and Inky — the women.

Come Lin Boggs, Les Beaumont, Bobby Slopes, Jeff, Warden Frank, Steve Kazinsky, Bill Easton and Euliss Grimes — the menfolk.

Don't forget the two wild horses.

Or Bessie the one-eyed, who is hungry again.

Speaking of being hungry, Peter rifled with his right hand through a white box with green polka dots wedged into the well between the seats. Left hand and both eyes

remained on the road, mostly. He was trying to be extra alert in the land of left-hand drive.

He'd been too embarrassed to tell Deirdre about his craving. During one of her jetlagged sleeps at the lovenest near the airport, next to the neon blinking H..EL sign, he located a Krispy Kreme donut shop and twelve long months of longing came to an end. He bought two big boxes — two donuts per month — all filled with Original Glazed except for one Powdered Strawberry, because he thought it was too eccentric to buy twenty-four of the same kind. He salivated at the thought of his teeth penetrating the thin sugary crust of the O.G. A nice big chunk, sticking to the roof of his mouth ... ahh ...

Deirdre refused to eat donuts. Why she preferred the tooth-chipping crunch of biscotti was beyond him. Probably came from the mother. The pear never fell far from the tree. Perhaps that family of hers'd change their minds if they knew these donuts were the creation of a French chef in New Orleans before the first store opened in Kentucky in 1937. Deirdre would like that. He knew she wanted to work in a museum in the Bluegrass State. He doubted she'd ever get there, not while she was married to him, but you never knew. He rached the Psych-Up state of mind one notch toward Heaven. He'd inform her of their destination as soon as she awoke.

Peter thought he saw a two-vehicle collision way in the distance ahead. What was it with these visions he was having? These back roads were never that busy, and who'd be stupid enough to drive a massive motorhome out here?

He checked the rear view mirror. With this curvy road something could creep up on you rather quickly, and he had the sacred care of four beings. The scientist liked to know what was behind him. You never knew out here. This was the Wild West. Fleetingly he understood the grip of the gun lobby in these parts. You had to take the law into your own hands because of distance. Simple as that. And everyone liked it that way.

'What are you smiling at, Mikey?' he asked.

The animals sat quietly in the backseat, lulled by rocking and rolling road rhythms. The dog perched between the bears, separating them from mischief.

'I know all about New Orleans and Krispy Kreme, Boss,' the parti-coloured bear replied. 'They started it all for me.'

The pear colours had disappeared from the sunset. Apricot deepened to burnt orange and blended with almost-black plum, making the bodies of the animals glow.

'You got lost in Cut-n-Shoot, Texas on your way to New Orleans,' Sturgess reminded his brother.

'The truckie stopped for a donut and you wandered into the dry cleaning establishment next door, probably the only one in Cut-n-Shoot with an opium den in the back,' Bluey added.

'Possibly,' said the secretive Mikey Kerowack.

'Was it Mistress's idea that you exorcise your demons through writing?' Peter asked.

'I don't remember,' Mikey said.

'Let's blame her because she's asleep,' Sturgess said.

A tapping grunt from Deirdre's dreamtime depths was their reply. Her head lolled to the other side and rested on the window.

Peter looked over to make sure his wife was comfortable, then glanced in the rear view mirror again.

Nothing coming.

'Eyes front, Master,' Bluey said. 'We've come to a particularly windy bit of road.'

'Right you are, Bluey. Thanks for the reminder.'

The dog was right. Peter knew that. For a few minutes he did not remove his hands from the steering wheel or his eyes from the road.

Pretty soon Peter decided that enough was enough. More right-hand rummaging in the white box with tiny green polka dots. 'Here we are, Mikey, driving through your Wild West,' he said. 'Life imitates art.'

The combination of foraging and talking to someone in the back seat caused him to swerve.

Deirdre started awake. 'Be careful, darling,' she murmured, mind still sunk in Dreamtime. 'Did you know that donuts are Number Eight on the list of the Ten Most Dangerous Foods, just after fried chicken and before soft drinks?'

'I know that, Deirdre,' he said severely. He'd been the one who told her, he was sure of it. 'And it wasn't just donuts, but jelly or cream-filled ones.'

She couldn't be bothered to reply but knew that Peter required some response or he'd sulk all day.

So she snorted.

'You sound like a sow,' Peter muttered under his breath. Must be Re-Entry Syndrome.

'I wanna see a pig,' Sturgess whined. 'I haven't seen anything but a wild horse with a headless rider.'

'Don't be absurd, Sturgess Ursule,' Bluey Bligmund admonished. 'You're hallucinating.'

'Maybe not,' Mikey Kerowack said. 'Remember in my saga how convicts Bobby Slopes and Jefferson break out of the prison by riding wild horses to freedom? In this light you couldn't distinguish a non-Caucasian from the chaparral.'

'I'll give you a special rate for my Clinic at the Top of the Stairs, Sturgie,' Bluey Bligmund said.

'No thanks,' the purple-and-white bear replied. 'Who wants to fit in?'

'Quiet boys,' Peter ordered from the driver's seat. 'I need to concentrate.'

He also needed to teach his wife another lesson. Peter reached for the one rounded mound dusted with powdered sugar in the box of glazed holey donuts. 'See, Deirdre? Watch.'

As happens with husbands, Peter was so busy proving a point to his wife that he got carried away and allowed reality to recede just a tad too far.

*I pined for one year for this?* Deirdre snorted. Must be Re-Entry Syndrome.

Whatever Peter was thinking made him take a vicious bite out of his Krispy Kreme. Strawberry jam shot onto his jaw, near his right ear. It felt like a worm invasion, reminding the young scientist of what crawled into bodily orifices in Africa.

Reflexes took over. He twitched his head and lashed his face with the back of his closed fist. Right fist.

This was enough to distract him from what awaited round the next bend. That accident he knew he hadn't seen.

Deirdre was too groggy to think of grabbing the wheel. The sunset and Dreamtime claimed her.

Peter was going too fast to slow down.

Good thing they were all wearing seatbelts, even the dog and bears.

Most Dangerous Food Number Eight: Jelly or cream-filled donut: *Jam can be difficult at best to remove from car upholstery.*