

## Letters from a shuttered country Chapter Eight

### Steve's story

"So what happens next?" Jack asked, as the by-now weekly rezooming session was under way?

"Not sure at this moment" replied Bill with an electronic shrug. "Would anyone like to suggest how my little story unfolds?"

"Could think of several ways the story could go", offered Steve.

"Just like life then!" The yellow marker around the video screen had come from Liam. "Not sure it's all mapped out for us, determined in advance the cast of characters we will meet and what we do".

"Our Dad was rear gunner for a Lancaster when he was twenty" Jack remarked. "He reckoned he was safe until it was his day to go and a German bullet had his name on it!"

"Interesting" Bill said. "He survived though didn't he? Otherwise you guys wouldn't be here now."

"He did" said Steve. "He was sent to be a rear gunner because he had learnt to shoot straight aiming at rabbits on our granddad's farm. Ten years after the war when my Mum died and he married the lady who went become Jack's Mum, he was only just able to speak about his war experiences."

"I remember the one about him cycling round the base when he fell and broke his collar bone", Jack added. "He was grounded. That night his squadron went on a raid and guess what?"

"His plane got shot down?" Liam volunteered.

"That's exactly what happened" Steve said. "Made him adamant that when it was your time to go, that was your fate!"

"Not sure our lives are mapped out", said Liam. "As a not-so-reverend I get to see a great many people when I go into the hospital as a Chaplain. Covid is scoring random, countless goals" he added.

"Speaking of which", Steve interjected, "our eight-year-old grandson Peter, mad about football, has drawn himself in goal, stopping the virus getting into goal. Mind you", he added, "playing the sport with his school friends is what he misses most. He's even having his PE classes online. He turns on laptop camera and copies the teacher's moves. We move the chair and desk as once he fell over!"

"Seems to be quite indiscriminate". The yellow marker made it clear Jack was speaking. "I know some groups in society are getting it worse than others but this thing strikes anybody down. Doesn't matter what you've done in your life and whether this is payback. It gets anybody and everyone."

"Look guys" said Steve, moving swiftly on. Mandy is calling me and I've got to run. But I'd like to offer a story for next week if we're going to be creative."

"This going to be about you?" Jack with a casual throw-back to the tension that been there for years.

"Not sure how much of me there's going to be", said Steve. "Bill didn't give much away".

And so it was decided. Steve would offer the next piece of creative writing and circulate on email.

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It was a night when diamonds lay sparkling on the waters. Flower sellers plied hotel guests as they sat drinking on the terrace, touched by a warm breeze that caressed and played with them. In every direction, 30- foot high matted date palms spread across the grounds. The moon climbed out of the sea with an orange glow that, at first, barely tipped the gathering night and then slowly rose into a Tunisian evening.

For a while, Wally watched, fascinated, as the moon climbed higher.

It was the first place Wally had ever found that he would want to die in. During the last few troubled months, he had caught himself wondering what it would be like to slip gradually and easily into unconsciousness. When his time came, Wally could think of nowhere he would rather slide away than here on this hotel terrace.

"You like a rose Monsieur?" enquired a flower boy, standing before him with a white coat, a basket and a cheeky grin.

Wally smiled at him. Last night, he had struck up an acquaintance with this young man, who was studying mathematics by day and in the evenings, sold flowers in the many hotels that lined the beach so as to raise money for his course.

"Do I look in need of a rose?" Wally asked. Roses were Sharon's favourite flower but he doubted it would keep for the return without becoming faded. The 'rose of Sharon' is what people called her.

The young man tried a different approach.

"To take back to your woman then!"

"Yes but which one!" thought Wally.

The flower seller moved on to another table, leaving Wally with the dilemma that refused to go away. He found himself rattled by the question; disturbed, unable to shrug off his troubled thoughts and settle back to enjoy the softness of evening. Perhaps he would take that cancellation that came up at the meal table earlier on. When offered to him, a two day safari had seemed an elephant bite out of this idyllic week's holiday, especially when he had promised himself he was getting away to think things over. But Wally wasn't very good at thinking things over. Two days of bare breasted Germans, two days in which the major decisions were to use the pool or the sea, two days of over - enthusiastic traders were all suddenly enough for him and he chafed at the inactivity.

Now, he noticed what he had not seen before; couples with not much to say to each other and local teenagers looking out at another world. Wally glanced up at the hotel windows. On the seventh, or was it the sixth floor, a light was turned on and a couple stepped out on to the balcony. Even from that distance, their embrace was mutual and obvious.

Wally felt a sudden pang for what he had lost with Sharon. To think things over, he had returned to the hotel, the scene of a family holiday rich in memories. Not that everything was straightforward then. But this thought jostled for supremacy against another. On a night like this, two years ago in San Francisco, he had waited outside Julia's home, watching with hunger for a sight of her at the window. Then she had stood at the balcony and Wally knew she had something he wanted.

The arrangements made for the safari, for a while he paced his own balcony on the ninth floor, restlessly listening to the music that filled the night from the terrace below. He awoke to a red sunrise. It was worth paying a bit extra to connect with this slice of painted creation. If only he could chase the dawn and capture it forever.

The next morning, Wally and his companions were bounced around in the back of a four-wheel drive jeep in a convoy that sped along the coast road. They climbed into the lunar landscape of Matmata, Star Wars country, where ranks of tourists peered curiously into the homes of troglodyte Berber women. Wally was the alien tourist from another world, visiting his own inner country also.

At Zaafrane, on the borders of the Sahara, the group had taken the statutory camel ride, courtesy of the Adhera tribe who were translating desert skills into experiences that lasted anything from half an hour to eight day treks for instant nomads.

"I've never experienced such fine soft sand!", someone marvelled, descending from her camel.

"I feel so free," thought Wally. The effect on him was compulsive and instantaneous. For a few minutes, he ran amongst the sand dunes and tumbled down their hot slopes. Dust-like sand trickled luxuriously through toes and fingers.

With heat already building remorselessly, the vehicles swung off the road into open desert. In a few moments, it became clear what their drivers were aiming for. At the crest of a dune, stood a row of land-cruisers, white sentinels on a golden landscape. In four-wheel drive country, this was evidently a spot for the tourists to experience the thrills and spills of plunging over the hills of sand.

It was a sequence of images Wally was to record photographically among the corridors of his memory. He had always flipped when death crossed his path. Death had been a taboo subject ever since that fateful day so many years before. Vivid pictures were hung on the walls, immovable

pictures, scenes of fellow travellers bouncing around in wonder and apprehension, of camera wielding tourists, of local tribes-people hawking sandstone rock carvings and that roller coaster ride through what seemed to be a clear gap in the ranks of battered land-cruisers and tattered people. But then came sudden transformation of emotions from pleasure to panic, cries of "watch out for the child", the crunching of gears and brakes, the insufficient turn to the right and the look of horror on a boy's face as a Toyota flew down on top of him.

Passengers screamed and doors flew open. A Bedouin boy lay crumpled and inert on the desert floor. There was nothing anyone could do though everything was tried by the crowd that assembled from amongst the serried ranks of 4 WDs and their occupants. Within two and a half minutes, the life of the Bedouin boy had run into the Sahara.

Suddenly, from amongst the tribes people standing to one side, a woman emerged. She ran to the lifeless boy and began to wail. Someone in the convoy had a satellite phone. Police and medics were summoned. People stood around listlessly, exchanging impressions. Tourists kept a respectful distance, except for Wally. After a while, moved by a sudden impulse, he went forward to put his hand on the shoulder of the wailing mother. Everyone else looked on in suspense, devoid of the convention that ordinary protocol would dictate. But the woman looked round at Wally. He was confronted by a contorted expression as of someone on a rack, not accepting what had happened. Desperate depths of her eyes drank in comfort from the European who was reaching out to her.

"What's your name?" Wally thought he had asked in his best French.

"Habib." The lips moved.

The moment passed. Other Bedouin were gathering round and so were police vehicles. The jeep was OK. The driver was detained for questioning and a replacement driver sent out. It didn't matter that the safari was called off. No one was in the mood anymore. As if in a funeral procession, the three jeeps drove back to the resorts of the north.

"Habib" exclaimed Wally. "Her name was Habib".

"No" said the guide. "Habib was the name of the boy".

For the next two or three days, Wally walked heavily. He meandered round the city souks but ignored the pressing invitation of numerous street traders. "Have a looksie, have a butchers", they said in mocking sales English.

But Wally did not respond to their bantering tone. He couldn't get out of his mind the face of Habib or that of a wailing woman who stared back at him. Wally had always been a survivor, always landed on his feet, always conceived himself to be invincible, possessed of an indestructible quality that gave him mastery of life. But now it bore upon him that life hung by a slender thread. He had never really troubled himself with lonely questions of existence. Life's mysteries were for others to ponder.

But now the need to sort out his own mortality was urgent and pressing. Maybe someday he must seek out the Bedouin woman and express to her his sorrow.

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Julia drove back across Golden Gate Bridge, lost in thought. As she neared her home in Marin county, she tried to suppress her pulse from racing in anticipation. Yes, the familiar Mercedes was parked outside. Wally had returned from Tunisia.

"What kept you?" he asked. Then he remembered. "The first Friday of the month. Your ideas group. Are you getting drawn in?"

"Don't be jealous" said Julia as they embraced. "We had a very interesting evening".

"Look, I've only got an hour," said Wally impatiently.

"Then let's make the most of it," said Julie. They went inside. A slow movement ensued between them rather than the passion that sometimes engulfed them. It was a full two hours before Wally got into the Mercedes and drove away. For the hundredth time, Julia felt how much she hated this bit. Invariably, she was sad when over. It was always going to be like this. Why had she let him in?

Silicon valley; a 50 mile corridor running south from San Francisco, the hub of the high tech revolution. Back in 1957, a group of eight people founded a firm to work exclusively with silicon. It was the California Gold Rush all over again. Almost 40 years on, Silicon Valley was host to 7000 firms. It was the greatest concentrated creation of wealth in all history. A new technology company was going public every five days. 62 millionaires were made every day. Among them was Wally, who had gone to live there after moving from the south of England back in the 1970s. In that autumn of 1996, Wally was not a happy man, ripped apart between a rack of constraints. At one end, his feet were about to be pulled away and set down in the Britain of his boyhood along with his software design company, his family and his wife Sharon. But his heart was being wrenched away towards Julia. There were times when he burned to defy rationality of common sense that was constraining him to relocate; moments when he wanted to call down curses on doing the right thing and remain. The nearer the time came to re-locate, the burning grew fiercer and louder grew the imprecations.

Meeting her had been a time bomb. It was about to explode in his face and bring destruction. Yet the alternative was loss of life: his life. Julia had found the secret of what opened him. Instinctively, he knew the key was two-way. Now Steve sat in the office of his software design company thinking about the growing concern about another time bomb in the system. Ed Yourdon, a programming genius with 24 books to his name was talking about relocating his family away from New York because on January 1st 2000, he expected it to resemble Beirut.

"What have we created?" Wally asked his Operations Manager.

"It's not looking good" came the reply. "As we cross the threshold into the new millennium, we may be looking at ruined data, airplanes crashing into the sea, Y2K looters roaming the streets, financial stock calculations going kooky, whole systems going down and millions of computers ceasing to exist. It's going to cost hundreds of billions just to fix the endless lines of coded information, never mind clearing up the mess".

General Motors had just closed down one of its automated plants and decided to run a Y2K test before doing so. The clock had been set at December 31st 1999. At the stroke of midnight, the whole factory ground to a halt.

"My buddy says the screen just went blank," said his Operations Manager. "Everything from alarm clocks to power stations could fail; all because the computers don't know what time it is".

"Maybe that's what we do with our lives" wondered Wally to himself, "we're emotional terrorists who place bombs set to detonate and bring the world crashing round about us. "Hey, do I know what time it is?" he said to his Operations Manager, looking suddenly at his watch. It was gone 12.

"There's that guy from Britain speaking at a lunchtime talk. Julia was insistent that I go to hear him".

"You're not getting religious surely?" asked his Operations Manager. "No I gave all that up for Lent one year" said Wally flippantly. "I've never thought it makes much difference".

Deeper down, the nonchalance was less secure. Until Tunisia, he had regarded himself as a spiritual person without being religious. But now life was up for grabs.

Wally felt a pang like a toothache for the closeness he had forfeited with his children. Tension between him and Julia over that trial separation three years ago had resulted in their eldest son moving to the UK to live near the British grandparents. Sharon wanted to be near him. Dad was frail and her mother was struggling after her stroke. Wally extending the business to London coincided with a being house built for them on the outskirts of London.

That Sunday, Wally went for a long walk along the seashore at Point Reyes, north of San Francisco. It was a wing shaped piece of shoreline that once lived near Los Angeles and, like an old beachcomber, had drifted to north California. Francis Drake had landed here. Point Reyes was the epicentre for the earthquake 90 years before that reduced San Francisco to rubble.

In the setting sun of evening, birds soared and danced, flaunting their untrammelled freedom with a boastfulness designed to impress the inhabitants of the flat earth.

Suddenly, Wally felt trapped, yearning to fly upwards and be lost amidst the blue heavens but held fast to the flat earth. Faintly, he heard music play in his inner being. It was a song that called him to soar into the heavens and leave the restrictions of the horizontal world.

But then a burning log distracted him, the remnant of an earlier picnic on the beach. Steve felt at that very moment another pull, the lure of a lady a short drive away. How often had Julia sat before him as they watched a hungry fire consume a log while Wally ran his fingers through her dark curls. Why did forbidden fruit have to taste as sweet as Julia? Attraction, even an affair was one thing! Why did they have to fall deeply in love? It had begun as a helter-skelter excitement. Then it had gone deep in a way that had got to him profoundly. Wally was resolved. At the earliest opportunity, he would tell Julia that he wasn't going back to Britain. If he couldn't stand the heat, he could always get out of the kitchen.

The man on the rack looked up at the birds mocking him in their soaring gliding movement. Chalk cliffs backdropped a coastline, wet and windy. This place, epicentre to the 1906 quake, resembled the south coast of England he often walked in during term time at school, before the earthquake came for him. On that occasion, Jerusalem had been the epicentre.

What on earth happened here?" he thought, looking at the scene around him. He shook his head again at the processes that have shaped the landscape. Since birth, the planet had been dented, compressed, eroded, folded, faulted, spilt apart and re-moulded. He knew that the world had not been a peaceful place where landscapes are formed by silent procession. Planet Earth had a violent history, often ripped apart. Titanic forces are struggling for supremacy underneath us; storm battles above and battles beneath, waged under our feet. Awesome powers are on the move.

Wally remembered when he and Julia went to Iceland once. That had been a good holiday. Together, they had witnessed the Earth bleeding with an open wound. Hot larva blood oozed out with a hiss

and steam to become one with the wind. New rock was forming. Iceland sat on a seam fissuring the Atlantic all the way down to St Helena. An entire sea-floor was broken in two.

Nothing could be relied on. Nothing was firm. But that was also true of the solid ground. As a five year old, Wally had looked at an atlas and noticed that South America and Africa fit together like one of his jigsaw puzzles. By then, science was waking up to the weird idea of continents wandering around! That was the day before yesterday. Today, Wally stood on a living world. And still the birds vaunted and flaunted their gliding freedom as the man on the beach felt a pang for an flat-earth life.

"I wasn't expecting you" Julia said. And she burst into tears.

"What's the matter," asked Wally, "aren't you glad to see me?"

"You just come barging in like that and then you're going to put me down. I'm fed up with being your kept woman. I can't ask you to leave Sharon but I can't go on like this. You'll be back every once in a while, walking through that door as if I was a prize you have come to claim. You can't keep me dangled. I need a life. I've just got to accept you're not going to be a part of it".

"Spending time with you is still the most valuable appointment that goes into my diary" Steve said, instantly realising it was the wrong thing to say.

Julia stormed at this. "I don't want to be an appointment in your diary or anybody's diary. I want...I want to be the most valuable person in somebody's life with no rivals and no competitors. I want to have a relationship I can be proud of openly like a garden that's the envy of all the neighbours. I want to be loved!" she shouted through her tears.

"I love you more than I know how to say," said Wally tenderly.

"I know you do," said Julia as the storm abated. "And I feel like that way too. But I need a permanent relationship, someone who will be to me an oasis not a mirage."

They held each other tightly, eyes blinded with tears. Wally wept. It was the first time he had wept openly since Jerusalem. Something broke in him. Julia responded to his vulnerability, aware that this man was giving her something that was incredibly rare and therefore valuable. They found the bedroom. She said it was the last time. Urgency and tempestous passion erupted until words and thoughts were drowned in a heaving sea.

When it was all over, Wally persuaded her to meet one other time before the flight to Britain. Staunch sanity returning, Julia was adamant. Their relationship had gone as far as it could. Then she relented. He could come before Christmas- say goodbye.

Wally did not return. The day before Christmas, he and Sharon drove to say goodbye to Sharon's brother David. Wally was intending to leave her there for a while and then find some pretext to slip away. He craved for Julia. Sharon was sweet and lovely but she was not a warm person. Her mother was not a warm person. Her mother's mother had not been a warm person. But Julia was different.

"What's she got that I haven't got?" asked Sharon suddenly, as they turned off the inter-state highway. There was no rancour, no explosion, just a quiet voice, "what's Julia got that I haven't got?"

Sharon had seen them out together once though they had no idea they were being watched. From the way they held hands, laughed and looked at each other, she knew with unsubtle intuition that Wally loved the other woman. A rough and tumble between the sheets was one thing. This was far worse. Slack jawed disbelief led to an explosive concoction of tears and anger. Ever since, Sharon's life had been on hold, waiting for something to happen. She couldn't settle into anything.

Uncertainty drained the colour off the walls and painted her room with uneven colours. Often, Sharon convinced herself that she was entirely to blame. Other times, she declared independence of him and asserted her freedom to get on with life without him. But today heard only a quiet voice.

It reached him as nothing else could. Wally drove on in silence. He felt wretched and split, as if the inquisition had been working on him.

"What do you see in her?" repeated Sharon.

"Don't say that Sharon" pleaded Wally.

Then Wally added, though he wished he could pull his words back even as they sprang out of his mouth, a collection of deadly daggers. "I've met someone who listens to me, who notices me. It's as simple as that. You haven't noticed me for a long time".

"You're telling me you've fallen in love with someone and it's my fault? Sharon was indignant.

"No. Of course not. I'm to blame too. I haven't valued you as I ought. Julia gives me something".

"Do you remember that beautiful book you gave me?" asked Sharon after a while. "It was an antique book about Old England. That's how you treated me then, a book gift wrapped and to be treasured, open especially for you," said Sharon through her tears. "But now you want me on your mantle-piece, sometimes admired but rarely touched. I don't want to gather dust. I want to be taken down".

And she cried for the loneliness of being unread.

Wally reached out to comfort her. At first, he didn't notice the girls running into the road. Then he did. He swerved. A lorry was coming from the opposite direction. There was no chance to swerve a second time. The vehicles collided with a combined speed of 120 miles an hour. Nothing could have been more unexpected. One moment, a man was reaching out to comfort his stricken wife. Then this great object had appeared from nowhere and blotted everything out, carrying them down the slope. In slow motion, Wally watched. Then the world stopped spinning.

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For ten minutes, the world stopped spinning. Wally and Sharon were stunned into semi-consciousness, blood pouring from a dozen cuts from a shattered windscreen. For ten minutes they sat, unable to move, pinned by the wreckage. But their eyes could move. Each saw blood pouring from the other. Each of them thought the other must be dead. Both were wrong.

It took an hour for firemen to cut them out of the wreckage. Wally and Sharon sat, trapped. They didn't attempt speech. No words would form themselves and leap from their cut lips; only thoughts, unexpressed and unformed. But Wally was sick at heart. Sometimes he had hoped Sharon might resolve his dilemma by conveniently passing away. Then she could be the honoured dead, a martyr to his cause, attended with flowers and devoutly spoken and wrapped in whispered memory.

But all that was now gone. Wally sat there watching his own thoughts take shape from his brain. In that wreckage, a detached emotional retina was jolted back into position. Though he could see little of Sharon beyond a sideways glance from a trapped head, in his mind's eye, suddenly he could see all of her. She looked beautiful to him again and he realised how much he did love her. He would give anything to have her back, to take that book down once more from the shelf and to start from page 24 or wherever he had left off.

Blood was oozing from his polo sport pique through the zip jacket that would be khaki no longer. Sharon could just turn her head enough to see that much. Wally had been a great guy. Despite everything, she loved him fondly. Once they were soul mates. Then their souls changed. Now Sharon would never be read. And she couldn't feel her left leg.

While both were thinking of each other in the past tense, someone (they never knew who) moaned softly. Even as they were being cut out, they received each other as back from the dead.

When it was all over, they talked long into the night.

Within a few weeks, Julia's friends said she was smiling with a secret confidence. She was pregnant.