



# **Cruising the South**

**K J Tesar**

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## Chapter One: Escape from Eden

With a growing smile on his face, Matt checked the street number on the note he had written himself, and stopped the van in front of the house where Sandy had told him he was staying. He was just about to toot the horn when he saw Sandy waving out to him from a big bay window to one side of the house. He waved back, and settled in to wait. He couldn't help but admire the house. It was a beautiful building, built in the typical style of the old colonial wooden houses of Christchurch. The front doorway had a little porch protecting it from the elements, with its own small roof cutting into the main roof, giving the front of the house, along with the two symmetrical bay windows on each side, a very imposing, unique look. Matt mused that back in the old days they really knew how to build a house. Back when style counted, not just cost.

The front door opened and Sandy came running down the steps, smiling broadly, with his backpack loosely slung over one shoulder. Matt jumped out to greet him.

‘Matt, you bloody bugger, how the hell are ya?’

The two friends warmly embraced each other.

‘Looking good there Sandy! I was surprised when I saw you that you hadn't got fat over these last couple of years.’ joked Matt.

In point of fact Sandy was as slim as he had always been.

‘You’re looking good too, man. I can’t believe you’ve lost the beard, and moved into three-day stubble territory. How’s that working out for you?’

Matt shrugged his shoulders, and laughed.

‘Pretty easily really. It just means shaving every three days. A bit of a page out of your copybook. It seems to work pretty well for you.’

Matt opened the side sliding door of the van.

‘Here, throw your pack in, and let’s get this shebang on the road.’

Sandy dropped his pack in, walked around the front of the van and got in.

‘Nice wheels, Matt. I can’t believe we will be travelling in such style.’

Matt thought he detected an ever so slight hint of sarcasm in his friend’s tone at

the sight of his rather aged form of transport.

‘Hey, don’t take the piss out of the old girl. She’s pretty sensitive. Treat her well, and she will look after you. That’s if you want her to get us there.’

‘Well anything is better than how we used to do it with the old thumb out. That was hard work. Let’s do it Matt, let’s get this road trip out on the highway!’

Matt pulled the van back out onto the road.

‘Actually you were staying on the right side of town for making a quick getaway. We’ve just got to head across a couple of streets, through the Port Hills tunnel, and in no time at all we will be on the main road south.’

‘Nice one. Man am I tired! I had a bit of a late night with my friends last night. They put on a farewell dinner for me, with plenty of booze. I’m not even sure if I bloody slept at all. Or, if I did, it wasn’t for long.’

‘Plus, you’re not as young as you used to be, so you can’t handle the pace any more.’

Sandy laughed.

‘Yup, that’s it alright. Actually I think it’s all about getting used to your New Zealand booze. What I’m used to is...’

Matt cut him off, mid sentence.

‘Hey, don’t start that shit! Don’t tell me you’ve become a bloody moaning Aussie!’

They both laughed.

‘It looks like I still can’t put one over you, Matt.’

‘Try as you might.’

Matt reached over and slapped his friend on the arm.

‘Really good to see ya, man.’

‘Yeah, you too. It’s been too long.’

Matt couldn’t wait to pull out onto the main road south, and to put the city in the rear view mirror. The trip was on.

‘Where exactly do you know those people from?’

When he got no answer he looked over at his mate. Sandy had fallen asleep! Matt laughed to himself, and set about burning some kilometres.

As the Kilometres flew by, Matt felt a growing sense of release. The lush green pastures brought him a sensation of well being. The cows lazily grazing seemed to put things back into the right perspective for him. All the built up drama he had experienced in Christchurch seemed to ooze out of his body. He had escaped. He

was free. It was over. The further they got away from the city, the better he felt. Finally he felt that he could breathe. He glanced over at his travelling companion. He couldn't believe that he was dozing away in his seat, with his head wobbling from side to side, front to back, in coordination with the movements of the van. Matt laughed out loud. It seemed that Sandy had really overdone it, farewelling his friends in the 'Garden City'. Matt, himself, had had little to regret about his departure. Things had seemed to almost disintegrate all around him. Debris of a failed undertaking had seemed to litter the very floor beneath him. He had left behind only the amassed rubble of what had constituted his failed attempt at putting something together in that lovely place. There had been the ever worsening situation with his flatmate, although, in reality, that could have been easily resolved. He could have just moved house. The real sensation of devastation had come from the collapse of the business he had been slowly building. It had been early days, but still there had been a great feeling of promise there. Things had been looking good, and growing constantly. He sighed, as he looked at the picturesque farms of Ashburton. He had to let it all go. There was no point dwelling on it any more. Things had gone the way they had gone, and that was that. He would throw himself into the road trip he had embarked on with Sandy, and just leave all the rest of it behind. Spilt milk, and all that. No point in crying over it. He certainly had left a lot of spilt milk behind him. Enough for many tears of milk. He laughed again, and glanced over to see if his laughter had awoken sleeping beauty. Not a chance. Then it struck him. He was actually laughing. How good was that? It seemed like the distance that he was putting between himself and ground zero of his exploded life was actually working. He felt liberated. He realised that it was all over. He was free of its burden. A new chapter was beginning. Who knew where it would all lead? If nothing else he had sure learnt a few valuable lessons back there in the burning ruins of his modest attempt at being self-employed. Lessons that would stay with him for a long time to come, burnt into his very fabric. As he saw the food shops of Timaru pass by, he felt some pangs of hunger. By the time he had loaded up his gear, and picked up Sandy, it had been around midmorning when they had actually started to head out of Christchurch. The kilometres had been flying by, although considering the old rundown state of his van, flying by was a bit of a relative term. His van's version of flat stick was fairly slow compared to most of the rest of the traffic. Still, he had managed to crash out enough distance to feel as though the trip had begun, and

there was no turning back. Not that in any way he wanted to.

‘My God, my neck is killing me. What’s the time? Where are we?’

Matt laughed again as he looked over at his friend. He had always been called Sandy because of his blond hair. Matt couldn’t even remember if he had actually ever known his real name. Maybe even Sandy didn’t remember it any more. That blond hair was shoulder length, and generally pretty unkempt, although it made for a wonderful picture frame surrounding his always stubbled smiling face. Sandy was one of life’s happy people.

‘Welcome back, my friend. Welcome to the ‘Sleepers Road Trip’. Are you intending to sleep your way around the South Island, by any chance?’

Sandy was rubbing his sore neck.

‘Very funny. How about some lunch? I’m starving. Where are we? Shall we stop in Timaru for something to eat?’

‘Been there, done that.’

Sandy laughed.

‘What? I doze off for a few minutes, and we have already just about gone halfway around the South Island? Are we being chased by someone? What’s your hurry?’

Matt inwardly grimaced momentarily. Maybe he did feel that he was being chased. Chased by the demons that had been unleashed on him back in Christchurch. He shook the dark thoughts off.

‘Don’t worry, I’ve got everything organised for a fair banquet. Besides, State Highway 1 from Christchurch to Timaru goes inland, so there weren’t any good beach views, just a lot of farms. Green grass, and all that shit. Do you care for lunch at St. Andrews, dear fellow?’

Sandy replied, also entering into the jocular formal banter.

‘I do indeed, kind sir. What have you got in mind?’

‘Hey, look! There’s our first view of the sea. What do you reckon? Looks good, eh?’

‘Yeah nice one, Matt. It does look good. Probably those farms back there did as well.’ Sandy replied sardonically.

‘Yeah? So what was I supposed to do? Yell at you? Hey, wake up, dude, there’s grass, green green grass!’

Sandy laughed.

‘Good point. Well, I must admit I do feel better after a little nap, so..., anyway,

tell me more about this banquet you are about to prepare?’

‘You, my friend, are in for a fair culinary delight.’

‘I like it already.’

They both laughed. Yes, thought Matt, it was all behind him. He would hold onto it no more.

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The cold air of the early morning was giving way to more of an acceptable chill. It was time to start painting. Matt walked around the back of the house, looking for Roger. As he turned the corner he saw him placing a long ladder against the wall, right below the window that had been the focus of much debate and discussion.

‘Don’t even think about it.’

‘Hey, listen, Matt, she was just there. It’s not as if I was spying on her.’

Matt frowned, and shook his head as he looked at his business partner. Roger had a sort of look of eternal innocence about him. With his youthful looking face, and earnest expression it was difficult to ever be angry with him. He was just too nice a person.

‘Yeah well, Roge, she probably hadn’t been expecting to see someone leering in her window at her up on the first floor.’

‘I wasn’t! I was just painting outside her window, when she...’

‘When she strutted around in her undies, yeah I get it. Do me a favour, and just stay away from her window.’

Roger, without a word, gave a forlorn glance up at the first floor window where he had seen that beautiful vision, just the previous day. Matt decided that it would be better if he were to finish painting around the suspect window, making sure his ladder was never in a position that would let him look in through the window. It was true that most of the residents should have realised that the outside of the property was being painted, but someone living on the first floor was probably used to having total freedom from being intruded on. That is, until Roger turned up at their window, peeking in. Obviously the woman had complained to the property manager, who had then called Matt looking for an explanation. Matt had gone into damage control mode, and had tried to explain the situation in the best light possible. He had told him that normally during the day most of the residents were

out at work, or otherwise engaged, so they hadn't been expecting to catch anyone unawares. The manager had accepted his reasoning, but had made it clear that he didn't want a repeat performance. Matt would make sure that there wasn't one. Even though he and Roger were equal partners in the business, Matt had really assumed the leading role, being the one who mainly found their jobs, and the one who was in charge of working out the pricing, which was not an easy thing at all. It was all uncharted territory for him, but at the same time it was a challenge that he enjoyed. For the most part they had been painting the outsides of houses, but recently they had moved into doing some landscape gardening as well. And of course there was the small house they were fixing up. In fact, work was piling up, and things were looking good, notwithstanding the occasional scantily-dressed-woman-through-the-window incident. Matt looked at his watch, and then said to Roger.

‘Hey mate, I’m gonna shoot off and look at that lawn job. We better finish painting here by noon, to let the paint dry before the cool air of the evening sets in, so if the other job is a go we can start on it this arvo. What do you reckon?’

‘Yeah, good idea. In the meantime I’ll finish off around the side.’

Just then the window of much contention up on the first floor opened, and the two of them looked up. An absolutely beautiful woman, dressed in her nightgown, poked her angry-looking face out at them. She saw the ladder, still leaning against the side of the building, just below her window.

‘Again? I thought you would have got the message by now?’

Matt went into apologetic mode.

‘No, don’t worry, we aren’t working around here today. We will finish it when you aren’t at home.’

The woman, with even acknowledging what Mat had said, simply slammed the window shut.

‘Wow,’ said Matt to his partner, ‘she is definitely good looking, apart from the disgruntled look, that is.’

Roger smiled, and replied cheekily:

‘Yeah, hard not to take a peek, don’t you reckon?’

The two of them laughed. Straight away the window of pain opened again, and the indignant woman leaned out, glaring angrily at the two of them. Matt was just about to say something, when, in a flash, she slammed shut the window again.

The two lads tried desperately to stifle the building laughter.

‘Don’t say anything.’ warned Matt. ‘Off you go. Come on, move it.’

Roger, still smiling uncontrollably, grabbed the ladder and walked around towards the side of the house.

‘You would have done the same.’ he called back.

Matt glanced back up at the window. Actually he probably would have.

Matt took a couple of steps back, and sized up the building. Christchurch had some very beautiful examples of old colonial style houses, built in wood with fine detailing, but that definitely wasn’t one of them. It was more like a two-storey rectangular box, which had perfunctorily been separated into flats of the lower quality, cheaper kind. Still, it was a pretty big job for them, so he wasn’t complaining. Plus the property manager also looked after some other places, so it could lead onto some more work for them. He walked around the side of the house past Roger, and out towards the front, where their truck was parked. He smiled as he looked at their new truck. New, not in the sense of brand new, but new for them. They had traded in the old bomb of a truck that they had initially bought, using it as a deposit for the new one. The payments were fairly reasonable, as long as work kept coming their way, but that certainly didn’t seem to be a problem. The old truck had been broken down more times than not, so, apart from the cost of always having to get it fixed, they had also lost out on valuable work days. The choice before them had been easy, it had been time to take it all up a notch. For the painting side of things probably a van would have been more than sufficient, but with the growing amount of landscaping they were getting into they had both agreed on getting another small truck. They had picked up the first one mainly because it had been cheap, but then the two of them had realised that if they wanted to expand the business, a small truck was definitely the way to go. So the truck parked right there in front of him represented their hopes for the future.

Driving round in the truck felt good. He felt that he had achieved a lot, he was getting somewhere. Matt mused about getting a business name painted on the door, or on the side of the truck. Maybe ‘The Bunglers’, or ‘The Botch-up Boys’. He smiled to himself. Well, true as that may be, they were probably not the sort of names that would inspire great confidence in potential customers. Now that he was in his early twenties Matt wondered if it was time to become a bit more of a serious person? Not too much so, he hoped. He still wanted to always take life with a grain of salt, so to speak. But it did feel good to be achieving things. He pulled up outside the house where he had arranged to do the quote, and turned off the engine.

What a grand entrance, he thought, pulling up in his truck. It was funny how people assumed you were what you said you were, just because you fitted the prerequisite appearance. If you said you were a landscape gardener, and then pulled up in a truck, wearing work clothes, well... you probably were. When you take your car to a mechanic's, and a guy walks out wearing overalls with grease on his hands, you really just assume he's a mechanic. Appearance mattered. Appearance inspired confidence. The unassuming man who had come out to greet him seemed friendly, and well disposed to his apparent landscape gardener in disguise.

‘Hello, I’m Matt.’

They shook hands.

‘Hi there, come on round the back, and I will show you the disaster we call our garden.’

They walked down a driveway running alongside the house to the rear of the property.

‘What we would like to do is to turn this mess into a lovely lawn. If that’s possible. What do you think? Big job?’

Matt eyed up the patch of barren land sitting where a beautiful lawn should have been. He quickly summed up the situation, and instantly went into his classic, confidence inspiring, no-worries-mate mode.

‘Well, what we have here is a lack of good topsoil. Grass won’t grow in these conditions, but actually the solution is relatively simple. You have a few bumps and hollows, so we would just need to level it all out, then bring in a few inches of good quality topsoil, seed it with a nice lawn seed, and finally roll it all down flat. Then, with just a few days of lightly sprinkling on water the seeds would germinate and, ‘Bobs your uncle’, you’ve got yourself the start of a lovely back lawn. Once it had started to grow you could continue with the daily watering, to save yourself some money. It would need to be watered for around a few weeks, in all.’

The homeowner nodded in pensive agreement.

‘No wonder I couldn’t get anything to grow. I never thought of the soil quality. How much is all that going to cost?’

‘Let me go out to the truck, and I’ll work out some numbers for you.’

Matt walked back to the truck, and got out his pad. He had already priced, and completed, another job similar to that one, so he was pretty confident about easily working out an acceptable price. All it really needed was a few truckloads of

topsoil, a couple of boxes of lawn seed, and a couple of days of elbow grease. They could hire a grass roller for half a day to roll it down well, before starting with the water sprinkling. An easy one, finally. His thoughts drifted to the small house they were fixing up. That definitely wasn't an easy one. In fact, each time they went there the amount of work that needed to be done just grew and grew. He and Roger almost hated going there. Matt knew he had seriously blown the pricing on that job, but they just had to get through it, somehow, and move on. In point of fact they had to go there the following morning. The owners were going to be doing one of their regular, and always intrusive, checkups on the progress being made. He felt a sinking feeling in his stomach just thinking about it. He tried to shrug it off. He jumped out of the truck, and walked back to the waiting client, quote in hand.

‘Here you go.’

Matt handed the guy his quote. The prospective client carefully read the numbers.

‘Is this a fixed price, or an estimate?’

‘Fixed price. Not a cent more. This takes us through to when the grass is starting to grow, and then you will have to keep on watering it every day yourself for a few weeks. If you want to think about it...’

‘No, no, it’s a good price. When can you start?’

‘Well, this afternoon if you like. We can start levelling it out, and begin to spread out some topsoil. Is that alright with you?’

‘Brilliant! I’m not here but my wife will be home, and anyway you’ve got good access down the driveway here, so just help yourself.’

‘Good one. Me and my partner will be here after lunch then. See ya later.’

‘OK, bye, and thanks.’

Matt smiled as he walked back to the truck. If it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, it probably is a duck. He wasn't sure exactly why he still felt like a bit of an imposter, he was actually doing the work. What's more, he was doing it pretty well. He had convinced everyone else of his ability, but he himself was still slightly sceptical about it all. He thought of another possible name for the partnership, ‘The Bumblers and Stumblers’.

The afternoon had gone well, extremely well. After having picked up Roger they had got stuck into the new endeavour, levelling out the back yard, and even bringing in the first load of topsoil. It was good to have an easy job for a change.

He looked over at Roger, who was drinking water from the hose.

‘Hey, man, it went pretty well today, don’t you think?’

‘Yeah, shit yeah. This job is a piece of cake. Good one, Matt, well found.’

‘Unfortunately, I think we gotta put in an appearance at the house of horrors tomorrow.’

Roger groaned.

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, they said they would drop in sometime late morning, so we better be there, cracking on with it.’

‘I just can’t understand what the hell is going on with that side wall, I must have painted it five times already.’

‘Yeah, it’s a bloody strange one.’

They both fell into an uneasy silence. The so-called house of horrors was a job that was definitely not going as well as had been hoped. Every time they went there the amount of work they had to do seemed to just grow, and grow, but the quote Matt had given for the work remained the same. To top it off there was some strange thing happening with one of the side walls of the house. It was east facing, so they would wait until the sun was on it, having dried up the morning dew, before painting it with the vivid blue colour the owners had chosen. For some reason, even though it was a water-based paint, it just didn’t seem to dry sufficiently before the evening chill set in, and it would then turn into a pale blue shade, contrasting badly with the other walls of the house. Each time they repainted it, the same thing happened. Roger broke the silence.

‘Are we actually still making money on that place?’

‘Nope, we have pretty much already done more work than what it’s paying us. Anyway, tomorrow I will ask for another part payment, but we are really just going to have to finish that one for free. Sorry, man, I guess I fucked up on the quote.’

‘Hey, it’s not your fault. Anyway, no way could I price these jobs. The occasional set back is only to be expected. Don’t worry, we’ll get through it.’

Roger was a rock.

‘Thanks man. Do you want me to pick you up in the morning, or shall we meet up out there?’

‘Yeah, give me a lift, if it’s no bother.’

‘Sure. Listen, Roge, throw all the gear on the truck, and I’ll go and tell the wife that we will be back the day after tomorrow.’

The day's work was over. It was time to head home.

Matt was pretty tired as he pulled into the driveway of his house, the house he shared with one of the biggest pricks he had ever met. It was dark, and cold, so Matt was slightly reassured to see smoke coming out of the chimney. Usually ding-back Derek, as Matt called him, would leave it up to him to do things like getting the fire going. It appeared that small miracles could happen. Matt watched with wonder as the smoke rose out of the chimney, did a perfect U-turn, and flowed back down to ground level, dispersing itself in the light mist of early evening. That couldn't be good for your health, he thought, even though it looked really good. Just breathing the air would be like smoking a six-pack of fags. Yet another strange atmospheric condition he had to put up with, like the mystery wall of the house of horrors. He wanted a beer.

When he entered the house he went straight to the fridge, and grabbed a cold one. The first half of the can didn't even touch the sides as it went down. He had really needed that. He saw that ding-back was sitting in the lounge room, watching the TV.

'Hey, Derek, you should go outside and have a look at the smoke coming out of the chimney. It's turning straight around, and coming back down...'

Derek quickly interrupted him.

'There's always something for you to moan about, isn't there? You could at least have thanked me for getting the fire going, but no, something always has to be wrong.'

Matt stopped mid-sentence, and decided not to bother explaining about the interesting phenomenon with the smoke from the chimney. He wasn't sure why he had even bothered in the first place. He turned to go back to the kitchen, to find something to eat. Derek, on the other hand hadn't finished yet.

'For a hippy you always seem to have something to moan about. I thought hippies were supposed to be positive people. What went wrong?'

'Hippy? Dude, it's the early 80's, there are no more hippies. Haven't you been reading the papers?'

'You look like a hippy.'

Matt struggled to stop himself from replying to Derek, and telling him that he looked like a bloody moron with his yellow pants and green shirt. His man-about-town look, or so he thought. The disco wonder boy. The way things were going Matt knew that eventually they would come to blows. It was inevitable. In any case

that evening he was too tired to bother with it all. He made himself a sandwich, grabbed some beers from the fridge and wandered over next door, to see if Marianne was at home. Not that she ever wasn't. Where else would she be? When she came to the door she was pleased to see him.

‘Matt! Come on in. Hey, I have something to show you.’

Marianne rushed off to the kitchen, and quickly returned with an odd piece of woven fabric in her hand.

‘Look at this, isn't it beautiful?’

Matt looked at the piece of fabric in her hand, not having any clue as to what it was.

‘I like the colour,’ he said vaguely, ‘what actually is it?’

‘A teapot cozy, silly!’

‘A what?’

‘Look, I'll show you.’

Marianne went and got a teapot from the kitchen. She then placed the fabric over the top of it.

‘You see? It keeps the teapot warm.’

Matt always felt terribly sorry for Marianne, she obviously had some sort of mental health issues, but she was a perpetually bubbly, very happy person. She was incredibly likeable.

‘Oh, nice one. Where did you get it from?’

‘From a charity shop in town, it was only \$1. I love the coloured flowers on it.’

‘Yes, the colours are great. Do you want a beer?’

‘Yes, please! I'll get a couple of glasses.’

‘No, not for me. I'm a straight-from-the-can sort of guy.’

They settled down on Marianne's old worn-out chairs, to have a natter. Marianne had a pretty face, with medium length brown hair. Unfortunately, she was seriously overweight.

‘What were you in town for? Just to have a look around?’

Marianne's usually smiling face turned a bit wistful.

‘No, I was actually looking at second hand cars. I would really love to be able to drive around, but none of the used car dealers would let me sign up to their never-never payments. I saw a lot of cars I liked, and I have the deposit, but no one would give me finance. Probably because I'm on welfare payments.’

‘That's a real bummer. Yeah, those bastards can really give you the runaround.

You wouldn't believe the problems we had trading in our old truck for this one.'

That, of course, had been a total lie. The dealers had been lining up to give him and Roger credit, but Matt didn't want to make Marianne feel even worse. Apart from the fact that she was on welfare payments, it was obvious by her demeanour, and way of talking, that she had some sort of mental problems. That was the real reason she couldn't get financing for a car. Not that Matt was going to be so cruel as to mention that.

'Well, I've still got a few places to try. I would just love to drive around town. I haven't driven in years.'

'Keep on trying, Marianne, never let those bastards beat you down.'

'You know me! The eternal optimist!'

Matt smiled in return. He sat back and listened to the music playing on Marianne's stereo. Another beer and he would hit the sack. He was worn out, and he knew that in the morning he would have to face plenty of challenges. He didn't even want to think about it. He went to the fridge to get another beer.

'I thought you were in a hurry to get there?' said Roger, between mouthfuls of his cooked English breakfast.

'What's the matter? Don't you like your bacon and eggs, and whatever the hell else you have there?'

Roger laughed.

'Noooo, I'm loving in. I just thought you were in a hurry, that's all.'

'Actually, I ended up having a few too many beers with my neighbour last night, you know Marianne don't you? So I really felt like a greasy fry up to help with the hangover. Besides, until that bloody wall doesn't dry out from the dew, there's not much painting to do. Hopefully, I can finish off the rest of the never ending list, and we will eventually get the hell out of there.'

Roger's face turned morose.

'The nightmare that never ends.'

The two of them finished their breakfasts in silence. Neither was in any hurry to hit the house of brutal surprises. They slowly supped their coffees, dragging it all out as long as possible. Eventually Matt looked at his watch.

'Come on then, muggins, let's do it.'

In silence they paid for their food, and jumped in the truck. The house of no remorse was just around the corner, so there was no escaping their destiny.

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