

JASON R. HEMMINGS

Perfect Times



Share The Greatest Moments And Memories

Perfect Times

By

Jason R. Hemmings

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Author

Jason R. Hemmings

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Dedication

A million dreams ago I met an angel.

She is the sweetest, kindest person I have ever known. To be in her presence is to feel a distinct glow of Heaven. My best friend for over 20 years, I have travelled the world with her, followed my dreams, had countless perfect times and a million dreams later, I love her more than ever.

This book is to say thank you to her, for all the perfect times, through the years.

My true love, my angel, Emma.



Author
Jason R. Hemmings

Preface

Perfect Times

Prepare to set sail on adventures around the world.

This special edition offers you the chance to share some of the greatest moments, days and times in my life. From The Orient, Far East, Indian Ocean, Europe, Caribbean, The Bahamas and the USA, the stories fly across the globe. With city life, countryside, desert scenery or stunning coastlines, there is a place and a time for everyone to enjoy.

Now, in my mid 40s, I have been travelling the world for over 16 years. It has been wonderful. I am so lucky to have had the opportunity to do this in my life. I have met interesting people and visited the most diverse scenery. I have a carousel of memories from places and moments enjoyed.

Life should be something to enjoy, as often as possible. Having adventures, discovering new places, finding new friends and making treasured memories, is what the world should be about.

The world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page.

With twenty five chapters across this special edition of Perfect Times, the choice is yours where to start and which place to go.

Climb aboard and enjoy them.

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Chapter 1

If I Could Give You The World



As I came to, the sound of the engines found me.

I looked through the window to see cotton candy clouds beneath me, tinted pink by the morning sunlight. It was dawn and I was on board a plane crossing the Indian Ocean, heading for my destination, Mauritius.

Emma and I had been travelling for what seemed like forever, but now we were only a couple of hours from landing.

Little did I realise, that this trip, the first long haul journey I had ever made, would change my life.

You know when you stop to think about it, as big a place as the world is, with the passing decades and advancement of modern day technology, it is actually getting smaller. The wonder of travel, these days, is taken for granted. For what used to be vast continents to cross, are now a hop, skip and

a jump for most commercial jets.

I feel very privileged to belong to an era where travel is so easy and offers us all the chance to do something previous generations only dreamt of, unless incredibly rich. You can have adventures, experience different landscapes, cultures and capture perfect moments to remember always. For me, travel is to feel alive.

Finally, we landed in Mauritius.

At this point, I was wondering if my legs still remembered how to walk? But sure enough, they did. Stepping from the aircraft, the balmy atmosphere greeted us.

After an epic trip through customs, we boarded a beat up vehicle, that we discovered joyously was to be our transfer to the resort, for an hour and a half. Were we ever going to get there? A few others joined the bus, then we set off.

By this time, Emma and I were looking at each other with despondent expressions written all over our faces. What had we let ourselves in for?

For the following hour, we bounced our way along the patchwork roads, passed sugar cane and banana plantations. Huge piles of volcanic rock sat in the fields, accompanying skinny cows and goats. We drove through village after village of half finished houses and curious faces staring at us from the streets, then out into the more attractive scenery of the open countryside.

There was an ever-growing sinking feeling inside of me. By now, I was ready to get back on the plane and go home. Emma said nothing, but somehow I knew she was feeling the same, by the look in her eyes.

A little while later we arrived at the resort. The bus pulled into a long sweeping drive lined by palm trees, then up to a beautiful looking building with thatched roofs and marble pillars.

On entering the cool air-conditioned reception, we were quickly swept off our feet by the friendly staff, into the welcoming arms of some comfy, soft cushioned, giant wicker chairs. We were served with warm scented towels to freshen our faces, then fresh pineapple cocktails to indulge ourselves.

I sat there beginning to wallow in the unexpected wonder of it all. Gazing at the soft red petals of the hibiscus bush next to me, sipping my rum cocktail, I

turned to find Emma with a smile on her face.

Maybe, just maybe, things might work out alright after all.

The following morning, Emma and I raced from our hotel room, down onto the empty beach. Everything we had endured over the last two days, for this single moment alone, was worth it.

Picture the scene: I stood on the soft, powdery white sands, with the topaz waters of the Indian Ocean in front of me. Coconut palms reached high up into the clear blue skies, whilst the sun cascaded down gently onto the face of an angel standing next to me. This was Heaven.

It was also the first time I became aware of ‘the perfect moment.’ Time becomes irrelevant. All that matters is the moment you are living in, the perfect moment.

The remainder of the holiday was enriched with adventure, excitement and wonder, as we explored this gorgeous island. Mauritius etched numerous perfect moments on the canvas of my memories, to this day. Since then, I have been lucky enough to go on many other wonderful trips.

If I could spend my whole lifetime touring the globe from east to west, I would only just begin to know the magnificent planet we call home.

Every day that we have been given here is a gift.

Chapter 2

All Paradise In A Day



When I was growing up, I loved to read short stories by my favourite author, Ray Bradbury. For me, he is a literary artist. He paints with words. He was my inspiration to write.

One story that forever stays special to me is called 'All Summer In A Day.' It is about a school on another world, with a classroom of children who shut one of the pupils in the cupboard, whilst playing a game. On the planet it is always raining. The sun only comes out for just one hour every seven years and as it appears the pupil is forgotten, when the others rush out to play in its warm rays. The dead landscape is rejuvenated by the sunlight, like a desert when the rain falls.

Suddenly, at the end of the hour playing in summertime and flower filled meadows of vivid colours, the children remember the other pupil. Feeling

guilty of what the student had missed, they take them out into the rain, give them flowers gathered from the sun blushed fields and make them the centre of attention.

I called this chapter 'All Paradise In A Day,' after this story and for the one very special day I spent, that has remained such a fond memory to me.

It was mid February. Once again, Emma and I had left England's dreary wintertime behind, for some west coast Floridian escapism. Fun in the sun! After being entertained by the splendour of the west coast for a couple of days, we were heading further north towards a thin, finger-like shaped strip of land.

We had been travelling very slowly on the coastal road for nearly three hours, much longer than expected. But soon after, we reached the tropical island. To be honest, I had quite enjoyed just meandering along the roads through interesting scenery. As we crossed the flyover bridge and started driving onto the island, I knew that this was going to be something very special.

A blend of America and the Caribbean thrown together. Colonial style buildings and cottages lay sprinkled in between pine fringed roads. Glimpses of sun bleached bays with tall palms sunning themselves by the Gulf waters, teased our curiosity with a tempting finger of seduction. At the end of the island, where the roads went no further, seemed like as good a place as any to stop.

I found myself sitting under a cream coloured parasol on a wooden chair, with palm branches overflowing above, the warmth of the midday sun to mellow us and the sound of steel drums playing softly in the background. Lunch at 'The Terrace,' a charming, bright painted chattel, was wonderful. Tucked down a quiet country lane, I spent lunch at the gateway of paradise.

Rather than leave the island, we booked a room for the night by the sea. As the afternoon passed, we watched otters playing by the kelp and scores of pelicans dive-bombing the waves, filling their bottomless bellies. The warm tropical waters washed over my toes, as I gazed out across the calm bay.

Daytime drifted into dusk, as the dolphins played by the shoreline. The day finished with exclusive dining and the company of candlelight.

The following morning, we returned to the little cove we had found the day before. This was one of the best mornings that I had ever lived. For me,

nowhere on Earth could have beaten here, this particular morning. Emma and I relished every moment.

The sun kissed bay and blue skies, went hand in hand all day long. Hour after hour washed by, as I collected shells, watched boats sail softly by and simply savoured a perfect day with its changing moods, through to late afternoon. I did not want the day to end.

But the time had come to leave this place. Just at that moment, I would have given anything for another day like the last one. To this day, it remains one of the most perfect days I have ever lived.

Chapter 3

Let's Go Topless



She has got great looks, rich body colour, lovely curves and does not mind going topless whenever I want her to. Alright I confess, I am talking about my car. But it is lots of fun all the same.

Cars have become such an important part of our lives. The independence and freedom of travel. We express our personalities with them and they can even become like friends.

Now the car I really hoped I would be lucky enough to own and ever since I watched James Bond driving one, was a BMW Z3 convertible.

An elegant but sporty lady, with fabulous looks and a personality to excite or sooth, anytime. After so many years of waiting, the day we would finally meet, came at last. It was one of the most perfect moments in my life.

I thought I was dreaming, as I sat in the sumptuous leather seats, the dashboard lights standing by, the roof off and the paintwork gleaming in the sunlight. I turned the key and the lady awoke. As the six cylinders purred away, my face shone a smile that grew larger with every second. Emma shared my sentiment too. From that moment on, any journey with our new

friend would be such fun. So journey we did.

The year continued to mature like a fine wine and with it, the ripeness of summertime. We took a ferry across the channel, drove through the vineyards of Champagne, passed castles and lakes, then on for the French Riviera's coastline.

With the roof flung off, the fingers of the warm winds caressed our hair, as we enjoyed the contours of the winding roads. All I wanted to do was drive.

The days came and went, as did the scenery of endless reds, purples and golds, with a handful of rustic cottages in between. We went through villages and towns, climbed hills, then passed lakes covered with sailboats, all to the distinct sound of the engine behind us.

The long elegant bonnet led on, until it found the coastline of the Riviera. At least we would arrive in style to this millionaire's playground by the sea.

The azure blue of the Mediterranean befriended yacht after yacht, as the cocktail hour drifted on and on through the afternoon. Time meant nothing to the wealthy, only that they grew a little richer with every minute.

Beauties in bikinis posed on the beaches and the onlookers gladly admired. The beauty we drove by in was amongst the sights to be adored. It made us feel exclusive and special. After a promenade through Cannes, we left it behind us and the next morning, we would find ourselves in St Tropez.

It seemed like the car and its colour were made for the place. Emma and I parked our new friend with a view of the sea and some shade from the palms. We found a boardwalk to watch the sailboats on the topaz waters and a beach bar to celebrate our arrival.

Chapter 4

When You Wish Upon A Star



When you make a wish, whether it is cutting a birthday cake or on a shooting star, what do you wish for?

One wish I have always had was to go to Walt Disney World.

At 28, after waiting this long, I thought the desire to go to Disney would have subsided, but it had not. Maybe a part of me missed out on something in my childhood or perhaps I am just a big kid at heart really.

Eventually, after re booking the trip three times, on September 11th 1999, I made a dream come true. In fact, I made two dreams come true; I had always wanted to go to America too.

Emma and I arrived in Orlando, Florida, for the start of a two week vacation. Oh yes, to get married too. Almost forgot that. Just kidding Emma!

For the next two weeks, our life turned out to be some of the most eventful and thrilling times, but not without a couple of very sobering, almost disastrous days in the middle of the vacation.

The following day came along, as days often do and I found myself standing at the ticket gate outside Magic Kingdom, Emma beside me. I felt like a child inside, excited and with a generous splash of freedom added into the recipe too.

As I walked into Main Street USA, I was greeted by a wonderfully magical, innocent scene: A long road filled with horse drawn trams, smiling crowds and Disney characters dancing about. It led passed colourful old-fashioned shops, to the majestic Cinderella's Castle in the distance, all to the Floridian backdrop of blue skies and endless sunshine.

As I stopped for a moment to take it all in, a teardrop fell from my eyes. But I was not sad; this was a tear of joy. After all these years I never thought I would come, I was here.

A day of adventure, smiles and childhood innocence followed. The day ended with a sparkling light parade and fireworks, to show off the castle in all its beauty.

Few people stand out so prominently for making a real difference in this world. Walt Disney is one of them. What a wonderful legacy he has left behind, for all of us to enjoy.

Tuesday 14th September 1999. We had taken a trip to Animal Kingdom, safaried through both African and Indian territories.

As lunchtime approached, the skies grew stormy and the palm trees started bowing from the strength of the wind. This was something I had thought may happen. The change in weather was being caused by hurricane Floyd, that sat presently just off Florida's southeast coastline. With gusts threatened in the region of 155mph heading directly towards us, our holiday was in danger of being trashed on an epic scale.

We sat in a café. It was about 2.30pm. An announcement came over the tannoy that the park was to close due to the approaching hurricane. As the wind began to double over the palm trees and the rain pummelled the windows, we decided to leave.

To top everything, when we arrived back at our resort, we were told our wedding, scheduled for the next day, was now cancelled. We were handed flashlights and provisions from the hotel staff, then told to barricade ourselves in our room for the night.

The hurricane was due to hit Orlando at about twelve midnight. It had already begun ripping up the east coastline in an unforgiving manner. We battled our way through the driving wind and rain to our room, then awaited the worse.

We had put off our wedding plans for years, but now we were within hours of tying the knot, it seemed we would be lucky to escape with our lives. The airports were closed, the highways jammed and suddenly Orlando seemed to be the most unfashionable place on Earth to be.

Around 11pm that evening we fell asleep somehow. Probably the best thing, oblivious to all around us. Just before I fell asleep I prayed for a miracle.

The following morning, I awoke to find the room untouched, no broken windows and the roof still on. It was unusually silent outside. Nothing had happened. I leapt out of bed and ran over to the window. All was peaceful. The trees were still, the rain had stopped, everything was normal. What was going on? I turned on the weather channel and do you know what? Miracles happen sometimes. At the last minute, Floyd turned north and stayed out in the Atlantic, missing Orlando completely. The damage was bad on the east coast, but inland was unbelievably untouched. It was amazing. What could have ended in tragedy instead became only a small inconvenience, thankfully.

The next morning, September 16th 1999, was one of the most perfect days I could have ever imagined. An enormous stretch Limo whisked us off to a tropical garden retreat for the ceremony. At midday, my Emma, dressed like an angel in white, joined me at the sun-kissed floral gazebo, to finally be married in true style.

The atmosphere was angelic. It was a fairytale setting in every way.

The remaining days of the holiday, gave us stories to tell of treasured moments shared with dolphins, soft sandy shorelines and Floridian splendour.

Chapter 5

My Mona Lisa



A busy street scene with traffic flowing by, crowded pavements of smiling faces and tree-lined avenues surrounding the Eiffel Tower, could only mean one thing, Paris. The midday sun beat down onto the city, as we walked beneath La Tour Eiffel.

Emma and I had spent the morning at the Musee du Louvre, then meandered aimlessly through the romantic Parisian West Bank. By the riverside, we passed shops with brightly coloured canopies, restaurants and endless stalls that sold souvenirs.

By this time, our overworked feet were pleading with us for a rest. A rather charming little café caught my attention, just at that moment. It beckoned lunchtime.

Nevertheless, as exciting as Paris was, lunchtime at the side of a busy road, left me desiring a little retreat from the hustle bustle of city life. We crossed to the other side of the street and took the steps down to the river.

As we reached the bottom of the steps, a pleasant surprise greeted us. Even though the street was only a little way above us, the din of the traffic retreated and was replaced by the soft sounds of the riverside. Here was a delightful, peaceful corner of Paris we had stumbled upon.

The river glittered in the afternoon sun, as one boat after another went by. Artists lined the stone walls with every easel telling a different moment. One in particular interested me. The artist was painting the portrait of a young girl. It was remarkably good.

We sat down on a nearby wall and watched as the artist put the finishing touches to his masterpiece. By now, it was mid afternoon and Paris seemed to sigh softly, content with a perfect summer's day. After a little negotiation, which was not easy, as the artist's English and my French were embarrassingly poor, we agreed on a price. Emma took her seat and began posing for the portrait.

It was a perfect moment that began to unfold. For once, I had some precious time to savour. It is at times like this, that you actually stop and realise how up-tempo life is, all too often. I sat there reflecting on my accomplishments in life and my travels around the world so far.

As I gazed between the Mona Lisa emerging on the page and my Mona Lisa, the trees swayed gently in the breeze. The sun warmed my skin and wave after wave of contentedness washed over me. The artist continued to sketch away, uninterrupted by the crowd of onlookers that had stopped to admire his elegant handiwork and Emma appeared to be loving the attention of it all.

Time just seems to disappear so quickly, when you are in a perfect moment. For what I thought was five minutes, turned out to have been nearly two hours that had drifted by. I could hardly believe my watch. I stood up and walked over to the portrait. It was exquisite. There she was, my angel, captured beautifully. Her image, the afternoon, a perfect moment to cherish always.

The portrait was stunning. It was as if I was looking at the real thing. The painting almost seemed alive in a way. Emma was thrilled with it. We thanked the artist repeatedly. He was very pleased that we liked it so much. We said goodbye and with the picture in hand, boarded a boat, then took an unhurried cruise along the Seine back towards our hotel. Perhaps the glitz and glamour of Parisian nightlife would seduce us a little later. But for now, I was

treasuring every second of what was left of a charming afternoon. Hand in hand, we sailed along the river smiling all the way.

Now and for many years, Emma's portrait has been hanging from the lounge wall by the stairs. I look at it often. Whenever I do, I think of the afternoon in Paris, the summertime and how lucky I am to have someone as special as her.

Chapter 6

Does Snow Make Your Head Hurt?



Dawn in the Valley of the Kings, Egypt.

A crimson red light brushed softly onto the rock faces that surrounded me. I felt majestic and honoured to be here, where thousands of years ago, the ancient Egyptians had crossed the same ground. It was a very special morning.

Later that day, I was sitting out on deck, sailing gently down the Nile towards Aswan. The sky was sapphire blue and the river glittered like a million diamonds. The banks were thick with lush green vegetation, all set against a backdrop of purple tinted hills and golden sand. This was peaceful and elegant.

Over the next few days, we visited ancient monuments and were even taught how to read hieroglyphs. Eventually we arrived in Aswan, by the city.

Early the following morning, we had a choice. To fly to Abu Simbel or to take a day of leisure in Aswan. We went for the day in Aswan. If I had gone on the trip, I would never have met a modern day King of the Nile later that day.

It was late afternoon. Emma and I were enjoying watching the world go by from the top deck of the boat. I gazed across the blue waters of the Nile. Feluccas, one after another, made their way casually up and down the river.

After a while, I decided to charter one from the quayside, for an hour.

It was then that I met a man I would never forget. His name was Cabtin Abdula. He welcomed us aboard his boat, the 'Captain Abdula,' named after him, although it was spelt Cabtin. We sat down in the felucca. It was surprisingly large, big enough to take maybe twenty or even thirty people, yet it was complete with just us three. The wind, slowly but surely, took out the sail and we began to drift softly into the Nile.

Emma and I sat back to enjoy the experience. The waves gently hugged the boat, as the Egyptian sun mellowed in a golden afternoon sky. It was beautifully romantic meandering across the Nile, the fast pace of European life long forgotten.

As we sailed, we shared experiences from both of our worlds. He told us that it had not rained there for three years. Hard to imagine, coming from England. He asked us, "Does snow make your head hurt?"

Abdula had never left the country or travelled further than the Nile. He dreamt of many things, he told us. He wanted to travel the world, to feel snow on his face, to shop in a big city, like London. But he confessed that in his heart, he knew it could never be more than just a dream.

It was at this point, I found myself conjuring up images from around the world to tell Abdula. Perhaps I felt guilty, because I was young and I had experienced so much already. It was as though I was trying to give him a gift, in a way, to try and satisfy any questions he had about the world he dreamt of.

Yet the simple life he led, he seemed content with. He lived and worked on his felucca, it was his home. He survived from week to week, his meals only came from a charter. He was dressed in simple clothes, but for the hour I knew him, he wore a smile big enough to fill an ocean. He danced, he sang, he joked. It was as if we were his friends for life.

Here was a man who seemed to have very little, yet he was full of life and happy. Perhaps our lives were so busy and cluttered, that maybe sometimes there was too much going on, to appreciate anything we achieved. For that moment, a simple lifestyle or at least simpler, seemed so appealing.

As we made our way back to the quayside, I could feel a sudden touch of sadness inside, a perfect moment drawing to a close. I could see it in his face

too, as we said goodbye and stepped ashore, thanking him for his time.

To this day, a pleasant cruise down the Nile has taught me another perspective in life. Whenever I am feeling blue, I spare a thought for Cabtin Abdula, a radiant smile beaming across his face. Someone with so little and yet so happy.

I try to be an optimist in life, because the sun is always shining somewhere.

Chapter 7

Where East Meets West



Feel privileged, if you ever get the opportunity to spend a little time at opposite sides of the chess board we all play in. I do.

It is a pleasure to visit both East and West, but quite a revelation when you compare one against the other. For such a comparison, try Las Vegas in the Nevada Desert, USA with Thailand in the Far East.

Las Vegas can be extravagant, has bright city neon lights, shows beckoning and thousands of dollars being thrown across the casino tables. I watched in astoundment while people did this, sinking further with every turn of the wheel. I enjoy a bet or two just as much as the next person, but for some, the old saying about a fool and their money are easily parted, still held true.

I could not forget this, when I sat waiting for the lights to change, in a taxi at a crossroads, in Bangkok, Thailand. A small boy was trying to sell a beautiful dragonfly he had made from palm leaves, to anyone passing by.

One of those chips from Vegas would not be missed here and yet no one stopped to brighten up his long day of waiting. Feeling more than a note of sympathy towards the boy, I went to find some loose change, but before I could take my hand from my hip pocket, the green light blazed. All that I

managed to take with me, was a feeling of guilt and the image of a disappointed child's face. Perhaps he would be lucky tomorrow, like the person playing the tables in Vegas.

I hired a soft top, red Ferrari out one afternoon and posed my way up and down The Strip, in Las Vegas. Head after head turned in admiration, of someone who had made it in life. Well that was the illusion anyway.

In Bangkok, I drifted by the wooden houses built on the water, in a long tail boat, passed the owners who washed their clothes and themselves in the river. I was greeted with as many smiles here as in Vegas.

Vegas is brash, vibrant, glamorous, tacky and fast. Thailand is calm, elegant, dressed in orchids and soft linens.

It is like one was cut from plaid, the other from silk. Yet they are both wonderful in their individuality.

Something I rarely indulge in is taking afternoon tea, but in the open air pavilion, I could hardly resist. Limestone rocks stood proudly as the backdrop. Lush coconut palms and the milky emerald stillness of the Andaman Sea, brushed the golden sands next to this exquisite, hand carved structure. I rested in rich coloured, silk cushions, dressed in light linens, sipping teas. After tea, I learnt a new skill; sculpting flowers and butterflies from vegetables, then making insects from palm leaves, like the little boy in Bangkok.

My travels have taken me to places I only dreamt of and I have learnt so much from my experiences.

Chapter 8

Always Chasing Rainbows



For all of my travels around the world and the wonderful perfect moments that I have discovered, one rainbow I am still chasing is a place I truly call home.

But what exactly is home? Is it a place or a feeling? Most people would say home is a place where their property is, their family, friends or somewhere to retreat from the world. Whilst that is certainly true, home is also a place where you feel content, protected and at peace. So I guess it is both. I believe you have to find a place that you love to be and company to share it with, to really call a place home.

Rainbows to me, are one of the most beautiful gifts that nature shares with us, from time to time. I am not sure whether you do this, but when I look at a rainbow, it is like I stop to dream whilst I am watching it trail across the sky. The old story about gold being at the end of every rainbow or at least the answers to a dream, is one we all like to believe in. It is the impossible just out of reach, something we would all love to get our hands on, so near and yet so far away.

Let me tell you of the three homes I dream of.

I have always loved the movie, 'Lady and the Tramp.' For me, it is an age of innocence, elegance and a simple life. Tree lined avenues with beautiful houses, a quiet town, friendly and welcoming. Love and friendship are everything. By chance, I found a charming town just like this one, for real.

Emma and I took a trip to coastal Maine, USA, years ago in the autumn. We chose a bed and breakfast by chance to stay at, that became a wonderful memory to this day.

It was October and the fall in New England was at its peak. Colour danced in crimsons, oranges and golds, everywhere you looked. Pretty wooden cottages with flowers lined the peaceful streets. Pumpkins trimmed the doorways, while horse drawn surreys with fringes meandered by. A clock tower chimed a quarter to one to greet us, as we mailed a letter and leaves brushed softly against the sidewalk that we stood upon.

We arrived outside the place we were staying. It was gorgeous. A white wooden clad house, large but still homely somehow. Huge tree canopies wrapped their branches gently around the house, almost like they were hugging it. Children were cycling past and as they went, their laughter could be heard. A picket fence and gate led to the front door, where the owners welcomed us. Little did we know, they would become our very good friends.

This was the place I wished I had grown up in. In a way, I almost felt like I did being there. We stayed in a lovely room with sash windows, that candles glowed through at night and let sunlight in during the day. We spent the days enjoying walks through the town, buying souvenirs in charming gift stores, the company of the sea by the beaches, watching sail boats and candlelit dinners through the evenings.

It is one of the few places in the world that I have felt completely at home. I fondly remember those days there, for the last ten years. As with every place I have visited and loved, I feel like I take the memories with me to treasure. In exchange, a small part of me stays in that place too.

The second place I call home, is the actual place I spent most of my life. It is a countryside town in England, set on a hillside, with old cottages that overlook a river. A bridge, decorated with flowers, crosses the water there. On a summer's day with boats drifting by, it looks so lovely. It is the place I

came from and will always be home to me, wherever I end up in the world. I fell in love, bought my first house there and have had so many years enjoying its welcoming arms.

The last home I dream of, is a home by the beach. For me, there could be no better place.

It would be a wooden cottage and a garden filled with colourful flowers. Every morning, I would open the windows to be greeted by the sunlight, blue skies, palm branches and bougainvillea blossoms resting against the shutters. I would watch sailboats, dolphins and pelicans flying just above the waves, then stroll along the beach collecting shells. Spend afternoons on my yacht, then a candlelit dinner outdoors with soft jazz playing in the background and the company of an angel all day.

Always remember, at the end of every rainbow there is a perfect moment.

Chapter 9

Angels Of The Sea



The future is like reading a book, in a way. You only discover what is written on the pages when you get there. But do you write them or are they written for you? What if I showed you the future? Would you really want to know?

A number of times in my life, I have seen small moments of my future from my dreams.

Years ago, I dreamt I was on a square shaped boat, not very large, with a canopy over half of the top. I was on the bottom deck watching the sea and a nearby island go by. Suddenly, my wife Emma called to me from the top deck to come and see something. I raced up to discover dolphins jumping at the side of the boat. The dream was so clear and even in colour, that I thought it was real. I awoke, feeling so peaceful, told Emma about the dream and got ready for the day. Unbeknown, what I dreamt was part of my 40th birthday that happened over one and a half years later.

And so, a week from my 40th, I found myself next to Emma on board a 747 flying to Florida, USA.

A few days later we drove our rental car, a Mustang convertible, down to our beloved island on the west coast and stayed at a wonderful hotel. We had a luxurious room, with a balcony that looked over a waterway with sailboats and the beach to the front. As this is my favourite place in all the world to be, I could think of nowhere better to spend my 40th birthday.

I was unsure as to whether I would enjoy turning forty, but there was not much I could do to stop it from happening. I thought the best policy was to have an open mind and try to enjoy the day. After all, it only happens once.

Let me tell you about the day.

I opened the drapes and pushed the French doors apart, to discover the perfect way to start the day. The wooden balcony that I stood upon was brushed by colourful hibiscus flowers and tall coconut palms. The waterway in front of me had sailboats moored next to it, with one sailing gently away to the sea, while manatees fed and dolphins played alongside. Was this Heaven?

For breakfast, we sat outside under cream parasols enjoying pancakes and sugar waffles with maple syrup. After, we walked along a path that led through the dunes passed sea oats and grasses. It revealed the soft warm sands sprinkled with shells that rested next to the turquoise waters of the gulf. Our striped coloured cabana awaited, along with a morning of blue skies and warm Floridian sunshine to entertain us.

I sat there at midday, sipping a cocktail with Emma. She wished me a Happy Birthday. As the waves lapped onto the shoreline, the hours drifted by seamlessly from lunchtime to mid afternoon. It was then that Emma told me she had another surprise in store.

We took the car and left the resort for a short trip two miles away. I wondered what Emma had arranged? We drove down a long driveway, onto a sandy forecourt that was next to a lovely wooden cottage with bougainvillea flowers, birds of paradise and palms nearby. What was this place? Emma insisted that I would like it and all would be revealed in a moment. Then she handed me two tickets. My bewildered face changed to an expression of joy, as I read them. 'Dolphin cruise, 4pm today.' The day was just getting better!

I love dolphins. I call them angels of the sea. I was very lucky to swim with them years ago in the Bahamas. What a fabulous day that was and here was another. They are the most wonderful creatures who always seem like they

are smiling. To be in their presence is to be filled with happiness, a sense of healing, calm and friendship. I even wear a ring with two dolphins to remind me of them every day.

It was just before 4pm. We sat on a boardwalk by the boat. The warm afternoon sun made the wood creak softly and pelicans watched over us from the skies of blue. Then I realised something: The boat was square shaped with a canopy over half of the top deck. It was the boat from my dream. A chill ran through my body for a moment, as I realised my dream was about to come true.

We boarded the boat and set off. An hour and a half cruising the ocean, with the hope of dolphins joining us at some point along the way.

About half an hour passed by without anything happening. Emma had gone to the top deck to buy refreshments. But then, I heard a ruckus from upstairs. Emma called to me to come quickly. I leaped up the stairs to discover the reason for the outburst of excitement. Jumping alongside the boat were a handful of dolphins. I grabbed my camera, then took shot after shot to try and capture an image of them. Was this real or was I dreaming? A little of both perhaps. One dolphin kept jumping after the others left and seemed to smile at me each time they surfaced, as if to say "Happy Birthday." This was the photo that turned out to be the best one. Then, as quickly as they appeared, they left.

What a wonderful way to spend an afternoon, what a place, what a birthday, the best ever.

Later that afternoon, I found myself on the now golden sands of the gulf shores back at the resort. The pelicans fished while the sun melted into the sea, leaving the skies rich with pinks, peaches and pale blues.

For the evening, I spent it in the company of candlelight, jazz and another angel; the one who made the day I had just enjoyed as special as it was.

As I blew out the candles on top of my birthday cake, I could not have asked for a more perfect day.

Chapter 10

The Cocktail Hour



Birds of paradise and bougainvillea sat beside me for breakfast. Yellow coloured butterflies danced in the air, as I fed small birds that landed on the table in front of me. The cool breeze moved the branches of the coconut palms and shells on the sugar sands were washed gently by the Caribbean Sea.

After breakfast, Emma and I walked to the beach in front of us. I took off my sandals and let the warm soft sand brush my toes, before allowing the waves the same privilege. A wonderful contented feeling filled my spirit and a large smile could be seen on my face.

I sat on the empty beach watching the waves, one by one, lap against the shore. Someone was fishing not far away and a man by us started climbing one of the tall palm trees that reached up to the sky. Within seconds the soft thud of two coconuts could be heard, as they landed from the tree onto the sand. With ease, the man returned to Earth, collected the coconuts and began

walking towards us. He split the coconuts in half, put a straw in each and handed them to us, then went on his way back to the hotel.

We were somewhat surprised at the event. Although it was early for the cocktail hour, we decided to embrace the moment and enjoy the complimentary drinks. As we did, a sleek white object that resembled a huge flying swan went by the bay. It was Concord, making a final approach before touching down on the south side of the island.

We decided to take our hire car, a rustic open topped jeep, red coloured in the places it still had paint, to discover Barbados. So we left our resort and began driving along the dusty tracks. We passed sugar cane plantations and went through small villages, with occasional locals waving to us from the side of the road. We followed the lanes across the hills, until the blue waters of the west coast could be seen.

Just then, I noticed a sign for a shell gallery at the side of the road. So I pulled into the entrance, with the hope of finding a souvenir. It was a charming, brightly coloured chattel with shutters and a cool air conditioned interior. Inside were displays of the most beautiful shells from around the world and the Caribbean. We chose a few, the lady in the store explained where each one was from, then delicately wrapped and boxed them for us, before we left.

Not long after, we reached the peaceful bays of the exclusive west coast. I drove slowly down the road, taking in the scenery: The pretty colourful cottages, the inviting open air restaurants, the palm fringed beaches with glimpses of fisherman and sailboats under the shade of the mango trees.

I found a parking space on some dusty ground under the trees and turned off the engine. The ocean could be heard, the palm leaves rustling and steel drums coming from the whitewashed school building across the street. With it came the sound of children laughing and playing.

We crossed the road, found a gap through the trees and followed a sandy path until it led to the opening of a gorgeous bay. It was empty, except for us. With turquoise waters and warm sands, this was paradise.

We sat together without a care in the world. The midday sun was high in the clear blue sky, while sailboats came and went, all to the music of steel drums.

An hour later and a pleasant walk along the cove, we found a quiet place to

have lunch. Some welcome shade and cool breeze refreshed us. Open air sea front views, barbequed food and rum cocktails joined us, along with pleasant conversation.

It is days like these, that you wish the world could be this perfect all of the time.

That afternoon, we drove to the more rugged north side of the island. Emma likes to ride horses and a dream of hers was to ride a white one along the beach. So that is just what she did.

She borrowed the most beautiful white coloured filly, with a blonde mane and tail. She had a velvet pink nose, soft looking face and gentle manner. With Emma in a long summer dress and hair blowing in the wind, the two ran free together along the sands through the edge of the waves, like an image from a lovely dream. As she rode up and down, I watched her. Beyond the beach were sun blushed fields of golden grass, a distant mill with sails and small cottages scattered across the hillsides of sugar canes.

A while later, Emma reluctantly said goodbye to her new friend and joined me in the beach buggy to return to the calmer waters of the west coast.

And there, I found myself a horse powered friend for a while too. Namely a jet ski. I skimmed across the bay, while Emma rested on the beach. The trade winds restyled my hair, the salt air cooled my face and the coastline flew by.

I slowed down and came to a stop. I shut off the engine and watched a shadow just beneath the water. As it surfaced, a small face smiled at me. It belonged to a lovely turtle. It swam gracefully nearby for a few minutes, glancing at me from time to time. So innocent and gentle, it had me entranced until it left.

I felt at ease and free on these settled, coloured waters. I slowly made my way to the shoreline and covered my feet in sand once more.

Golden tones began appearing in the sky and pink clouds formed out to sea. The cooler late afternoon had arrived and with it, a white sailed catamaran that dropped anchor in the bay. Seagulls fished and glided on the warm wind, while some local children played at the other end of the beach in the shallows.

Once again, the cocktail hour was upon us. We found another charming

restaurant a few miles away for just this and a beach barbeque.

‘Underneath the Mango Tree,’ was played on steel drums, as we sipped rum cocktails and enjoyed the remainder of the peachy glow in the skies, from a Caribbean sunset.

Chapter 11

New York, New York



Breakfast in America on a sidewalk in the city. Sunday morning, the sun shining, the streets peaceful, the place, New York. Bacon, eggs, hash browns, pancakes with maple syrup and freshly squeezed orange juice, just the way to start the day.

The tall proud buildings stretched up to the sky, with a small strip of blue in between. Yellow cabs, limos and a handful of cars passed by. Blossoms lined the streets along with tulips and the cool breezes of a spring day.

With breakfast finished, we began exploring this fascinating city. Unlike the previous day of hustle bustle, today the city was quiet for the present. It gave you time to savour.

So we wandered, block after block, passed the Empire State Building, Tiffany's, Bergdorf Goodman and The Plaza, a stunning hotel, with a well dressed doorman to welcome guests from their expensive cars. Fifth Avenue came and went with the stores preparing for another day of designer shopping.

A few streets away, we found an enticing coffee shop. The windows were filled with delicious pastries and it was too tempting to walk on by. We could spare some time for such an invitation. I could tell it was going to be the kind

of day my belt was in for a stretching.

Refreshed and refuelled, we were on our way again. This time to leave the streets and find an oasis of spring colour in Central Park. We decided to take an old fashioned surrey ride with a beautiful white horse. We crossed over bridges then went by ponds, all enrobed in a delicately scented perfume of pink and white blossoms from the trees.

As we followed the pathways, the skyline of buildings caught the morning sunlight. Couples rowed boats on the water and we passed balloon sellers, while others read newspapers on benches. The ride returned us near to the roads again.

It was almost lunchtime and we had not eaten in ages, well at least for an hour. Just a few streets away we found a deli store and why not? With stacked sandwiches that awaited us in a bustling restaurant, very New York.

Inside we sat on tables bunched together, the sound of cutlery and cooking was ever present. Our order came. The biggest sandwich you could have, almost a skyscraper by itself. We made conversation between mouthfuls with the other guests at the next tables. As the sandwiches grew smaller, our waistlines got larger. We managed to squeeze them through the entrance doors and back onto the street.

I had an idea and called a taxi cab, a yellow one, naturally. It seemed only appropriate to take a trip over the Brooklyn Bridge. After watching people do it in so many movies, it just had to be done.

A little later, we were parked by the other side of the river, taking photos of Manhattan, then the moment itself, finally to cross the Brooklyn Bridge. The city was a great big toy to play with and speaking of big toys, another one was waiting for us. Namely, a helicopter to fly us passed the Statue of Liberty.

Not long after, we were onboard, rotors fluttered and the engine purred. Seconds later we were birds, flying alongside the face of liberty and freedom. It almost did not seem real being so close. At that moment, it was like being at the gateway of America, the doorway to opportunity, a life of free spirits and hopeful dreams. It was nice to see the city from the air; it gave you a better perspective.

We touched down after this brief trip to the unexpected company of soft rain.

It had arrived unnoticed from the other side of the city. The wet pavements led to Times Square.

Now the city was alive again, the streets were filled with traffic, coloured umbrellas decorated the sidewalks and the rain added atmosphere, reflecting the buildings like watercolours on cement. The stores were like a huge chocolate box of many flavours, the lid open, waiting to be chosen and enjoyed.

With the change in weather, it seemed a good time to indulge ourselves for a few hours in the retail sector. Later, we left the shops, bags cascading from our tired arms. The light was fading as we returned to our hotel, the taxi brimming with goodies. Sometimes it amazes me how much you can get into one day.

As we travelled I started thinking. The engineering that goes into this world is staggering. For all the perfect moments and days I have enjoyed over the years, I just realised that it was only possible through the help of so many different people in the world. The countless millions who prepare the stage of life we all play in everyday. I played a small part too, but just then I sent a silent thank you to all the others who had played their part, in making my world a fabulous place to enjoy and spared a thought for all the ones who would never get the chance to be this privileged.

I have been very lucky to spend so much of my life travelling the world. I have not taken it for granted and every place I visited, I always tried to savour all that was possible, for the time I was given there.

From that moment in the taxi, I have helped charities, planted trees, adopted endangered species and tried to live my life with a greater understanding of the world.

In a way, the cab ride made me a better person from then on.

New York had offered indulgence, excitement, a romantic interlude and been a valued philosopher for the day.

Chapter 12

The Wedding Day



I always knew that if I ever fell in love, it would be forever or I would never fall in love.

It is the kind of love you only find in old movies, I thought. I could have searched the whole world looking for the one. I took the opinion that if I was meant to discover that special person, fate would find a way to make us meet, one day.

I wanted a girl like the ones from the old movies, a Lauren Bacall, Grace Kelly or Audrey Hepburn; to be classically beautiful, intelligent, kind and my best friend. Not much to ask for really?

I mailed my request to Heaven and awaited their reply. Thankfully, they had an angel they could spare and luckily sent her my way. From the day we met, she wrapped her wings around me. I have cherished every moment with her and hope that if Heaven ever wants her back, she takes me along too.

We have been together for over twenty years and she is still everything I could ever ask for. I have travelled the world with her, followed my dreams and have the best friend you could ever imagine. I love her so much.

After years of the wedding being delayed and a hurricane that almost ruined our plans, we finally got to the morning of the big day.

It was September 16th 1999, the place Florida, mid morning with clear skies and about to begin the journey of the day. Dressed in my tuxedo and Emma in her wedding dress, we got aboard our enormous white stretch limo, that would take us to the tropical grounds for the ceremony. This was the first limo we had ever been in. It was excellent. We felt like movie stars. I spent the first ten minutes playing with all the gadgets, putting my head out of the sun roof and waving at people. Then I decided to return to the cool air conditioned interior and watch the scenery go by in a more refined way. I was a little daunted, not actually for getting married, but that it would go right or even happen. I decided to trust in fate. If it was meant to be, the day would be perfect.

An hour later, we arrived at the gardens. We were greeted by the minister and photographer. The grounds were beautiful. Large trees lined the edges and manicured lawns were trimmed with borders that colour blossomed from. A lake glistened to the side and a pathway led to a cream coloured, open air gazebo, with bushes behind covered in purple flowers. It was perfect.

So I waited in the gazebo with the minister. He was perfect too. A large gentleman, a little like Santa, with a jolly manner and an understanding happy face. He joked with me and asked about us, while we waited for the star of the show to appear.

As I turned around to look, the wedding song could be heard from the piano playing a little way off. There she was. Emma slowly made her way elegantly until she joined me in the gazebo. She looked like an angel, with flowers in her hair and a smile of contented happiness on her face. The sun shone on us through the ceremony. At that moment, it was as if Heaven bestowed the full power of true love into the gazebo. An almost overwhelming essence of goodness filled our souls. I felt like I was floating a few inches above the ground.

As the ceremony concluded, we returned to Earth to begin our married journey together. The old saying about your wedding day should be the happiest of your life, I have never agreed with. It should be one of the happiest days with plenty of others, before and after.

We thanked the minister, then walked hand in hand through the grounds. We posed for photographs. One in particular became a classic; the two of us on a bridge with a lovely waterfall behind us. We stopped for lunch and of course

cake. With peach and cream frosting to match the wedding flowers, it was the most delicious cake we ever had, all washed down with a glass of champagne.

It had been a truly special afternoon in a lovely setting, peaceful and charming.

The evening came, as it often does and we stepped from the limo to enter a majestic hotel for our wedding dinner. Emma sat in the reception, whilst I sneaked off to collect a rose I had ordered earlier. Just then, a jazz band playing on the gallery gave me an idea.

On returning to my new wife, I presented her with the rose and the band started playing 'As Time Goes By,' from the classic film, 'Casablanca.' Emma began to cry a little from the sentiment, then thanked me with a kiss and a warm smile.

We spent the evening in an elegant dining room, with the music of a harp player in the background, then sailed through seven courses and a sea of champagne. Our private chef gave us a handmade chocolate wedding card with our names on, the date and best wishes for the future. It was the perfect way to end the finest meal ever.

And so, the only ones left at the tables, the candles almost gone, our champagne glasses touched softly together, as we celebrated the last few moments of the day in style, with those three magic words.

Chapter 13

Ahh..Venice



The September sunlight poured through the open shutters, casting shadows on the marbled floor I stood upon. Coloured flowers gave a sweet scent through the air and the distant chime of a church bell could be heard. Milky green waters filled the space between the buildings, that seemed to watch with interest the many who had passed by them, through the centuries. A lone gondola slowly made its way towards me, with the elegance and poise of a swan.

Just then, the gentle arms of an angel wrapped themselves around me and lips, that had a touch of honey in their kiss, invited me to enhance the enchanting scene I gazed upon. Ahh..Venice.

A champagne breakfast later, I asked my angel to join me in the timeless wonder that lay just beyond our windows.

So we began strolling, hand in hand, along the waterways of green and over arched bridges. Long streets of buildings were aged by time and the elements, but despite the ageing, they had somehow retained their charm. The narrow street began to open into a small courtyard. Voices could be heard as we grew nearer. Large coloured parasols shielded market stalls from the warm late

morning sun that sat high in an azure blue backdrop.

I asked my angel to wait whilst I bought a rose from a stall. Moments later I returned and offered the flower to her as a gift. She accepted and the taste of honey could be found on my lips again.

So the three of us continued on our journey, until we discovered the bridge at Rialto. Many steps led to the peak. From there, a procession of craft could be seen of differing shapes and sizes that filled the Grand Canal. A row of restaurants with floral covered canopies followed the curve of the water. We followed the curve of the footpath until we reached one.

A luxurious lunch later and a short walk away from the crowds, we rejoined the peaceful ambience of the side streets once more.

Resting gently on the calm waters, against a wooden pole, was a hand carved gondola. A man, dressed in a striped top and straw hat, beckoned us to drift through the afternoon in style. We accepted. We eased into the oversized cushions and as we set off, our spirits seem to sigh.

Venice had cast its spell on us. The world had become an old fashioned elegance, timeless and unhurried. A place where the notes of a million love affairs could be heard softly in the air, if you listened carefully and a million smiles on contented faces could be seen in the quiet streets.

The distant chimes of a church bell could be heard again. To spend an afternoon with an angel is to be honoured; to spend a lifetime is to be truly blessed. As I looked at her face, a delicate smile of innocence and happiness seemed to caress me with its silent hand. Ahh..Venice.

For an hour we sat side by side, without many words, as the gondola edged its way along the canals, then at last moored at the main square by the sea. Now late afternoon, the September sky began to cast tones of gold onto the buildings.

After acquiring an exquisite pastel painting from a nearby gallery, we celebrated the afternoon sun with a glass of Bellini, a blend of peach juice and champagne, at Harry's Bar. Peach colours painted the sky as daytime drifted into dusk.

As candles on the tables were lit in the square, we found one and sat outside in the warm evening. Jazz played alongside, while champagne poured and

conversation filled the air. Fascinating coloured silk costumes, with painted masks disguising the illusive owners, danced a little way off.

The evening sky was embedded with a thousand tiny diamonds that caught the moonlight. The cooler air found my one cheek; the warmth of an angel's lips the other.

After dinner, we stood watching the sea. Countless gondolas slept peacefully, while moonbeams danced across the water behind them.

The distant chimes of a church bell could be heard, once more. Ahh..Venice.

Chapter 14

Sundae In San Francisco



One thing in life I really love is an ice cream sundae. I think it is because I missed out on them when I was growing up. But at least I have caught up over the years.

What is your favourite? Chocolate, fudge, strawberry or vanilla, whipped cream and of course, a cherry on the top. Perhaps a milkshake to accompany and one or two chocolate squares?

I had been searching for years to find the best and today would be the day I discovered sundae paradise.

The morning air was cool but pleasant, as Emma and I stepped from our hotel lobby into the street. You could tell it was going to be a lovely day. September is one of my favourite months. The year has mellowed by then and the world always seems to be a little easier. And by chance, today was a fine day in September, in San Francisco.

Thousands of miles away from England, yet I felt completely at home and free here. It was Sunday morning, the skies were blue, the city was quiet by the seafront and it was California. It was the kind of morning when you feel like it is the first day of the rest of your life. Anything seemed possible.

So we began the adventure. The first day of three weeks, San Francisco, Monterey, Pacific Coast Highway south to Los Angeles, Malibu, then onto Catalina Island, Laguna and San Diego, a Californian dream.

We took a tram up one of the steep hills to the top. A seat was available, but it seemed more fun hanging onto the rail outside for a few minutes as we went. At the top was the famous Lombard Street, lined with attractive houses and flower boarders. Car after car wiggled like snails down the curvy road. When we reached the bottom, we headed for Fisherman's Wharf. After a seal chorus, some fresh crab and a few photos, we walked until we reached a quiet street half a mile away. There was a charming restaurant built from rustic bricks. Outside were terracotta pots filled with colourful flowers. We sat outside and enjoyed an early lunch.

By now, the Californian sun had some warmth to it. We watched the world go by as we dined. The owner told me I was a very lucky man to be married to such a lovely lady. I agreed with his compliment and Emma blushed a little.

After lunch, something in the dessert department was to be our next purchase. But not here, tempting as the menu was. I had something else in mind that I noticed earlier.

We made our way along the waterfront and passed sailboats, with the small distraction of a jazz band playing on the street corner. We reached the hillside that overlooked the sea. On it was an old building with a sign outside advertising ice cream sundaes. They did not need to ask me twice.

Like a pair of children, we raced each other to the store and burst through the doors at the entrance, much to the surprise of the other customers. Suppressing our sniggers, we gazed like kids on Christmas morning at the indulgent wonder around us. A rich scent of chocolate filled the air with joyous sighs. Menus or rather picture boards of sundae after sundae flamboyantly flaunted their allure. We stood there deciding where to start. Every sundae had a name and different flavour. Would it be strawberry, caramel, chocolate or even a huge plate of every flavour, every topping? In the end we succumbed to a vanilla ice cream sundae with chocolate fudge, caramel sauce, fresh whipped sugared cream, a warm brownie and a cherry on top. Oh, yummy! It was the best sundae we ever had, well until we ordered the next one and the one after that too!

An hour later, we fancied somewhere peaceful to retreat from the city for the afternoon. As we drove along, we noticed a sign for a Japanese tea garden. That seemed as good an idea as any, so we followed it. Not long after, we joined the peaceful ambience of the gardens with pine trees, interesting bridges over streams, ponds and flowers to add a splash of colour. It was charming. I had not yet visited the Far East or The Orient, but an idea for our next trip was being planned as we enjoyed the gardens.

As I gazed at one of the Oriental bridges, it occurred to me that there was another bridge nearby we still wanted to see. With that we left Japan, returned to California and did something I have always wanted to do, drive across the Golden Gate Bridge.

And there it was, in all its splendour, reaching its arms across the bay. As we crossed the bridge, it was a wonderful moment. Once again, that essence of freedom was present. This was fun.

We spent the afternoon at Muir woods admiring the huge redwood pines. I enjoyed the place. It had one of those quaint ideas of saving trees not building on them. One I agreed with very much.

My first day in California made me think I was really going to enjoy the other adventures over the coming weeks and I did.

For the evening, we spent dinner at an open air seafront restaurant. After that, there was just enough time to watch fireworks across the bay and one last sundae under a moonlit sky.

Chapter 15

Slow Boat From Thailand



I awoke to find myself in a beautiful room, with sunlight peeking through the shades, casting striped shadows onto the floor. The room was decorated with palms and rich coloured furniture with Far Eastern detail. Emma was sleeping peacefully next to me. A small lizard was seemingly glued to the ceiling next to a petal shaped fan. As I opened the shades on a window, it revealed a view of other thatched roofed cottages that sat between high canopies of palm tree plantation. Through another window you could see tail boats resting on the beach.

It was our fifth year wedding anniversary and we had taken a trip to Thailand to celebrate. After a few days in Bangkok, we had flown to Krabi, then taken a boat to a secluded peninsula only accessible by the sea. The resort was set amongst thick palm vegetation, a tidy jungle if you like. Individual cottages were nestled between the trees and one of them had our name on it for five days.

We had been elephant trekking the day before and now wanted a more

relaxing time. So we chartered a boat.

Dressed in light Thai silks, we strolled along a brick pathway, through tropical gardens and passed beautiful flowers. As we enjoyed breakfast by the orchids, silver grey coloured monkeys skipped across the roof tops of the pavilion. The limestone rocks looked as if they had started rusting away and stood proudly around a golden sandy beach that lay a few yards from us. As we looked out to sea, a large Thai junk glided ever closer on the milky emerald bay.

Just then, as we finished breakfast and the junk dropped anchor by the beach, a voice from behind told us that our boat had arrived. After a few moments of disbelief, Emma and I were invited to board this beautiful craft. Our own ship for the day, Oh my..!!

We were treated like Royalty. It was now over 100 degrees in the shade, so a cool virgin cocktail was a welcome relief from the heat. We set sail and left a crowd of onlookers. I could only assume they thought we were someone famous.

So the gentle winds caressed the sails and we slowly left the bay. I stood on the top deck and one of the crew let me take the helm. At that moment, I understood why anyone became a captain. I felt empowered, like I owned the seas, free to go wherever the winds would take me. Second palm to the right and straight on until teatime.

After a while, I gave back the helm, probably best before anything happened. The ship meandered into a long bay, with a sand bar joining one beach to the next. We dropped anchor and the crew took us on a row boat just a few yards from the junk. They gave us bread to feed the fish. As we dropped the pieces into the water, large ball shaped clusters made up of small orange and blue fishes, came to the surface. Emma decided to join them for a swim, while I watched from the safety of the boat. After a few seconds she started laughing, as the fish nibbled on her toes. Funny as it was and harmless, I thought it might be a good idea to retrieve Emma from the water, before anything larger decided to have her for a late morning snack.

The row boat took us to the sand bar and the crew explained that if we followed it through the shallows, they would meet us at the other end, about half a mile away.

By now it was midday. The water felt refreshing on our feet and cooled us down a little. This was amazing. For all the years I had spent in dull meetings, offices and ordinary scenery, it was like I was in a fantasy or a film. This place did not seem real. The huge rock formations, empty coves, emerald coloured waters and a junk sailing beside us as we waded, hand in hand, along the sand bar.

How many days do you get to spend like this one in life?

An hour later we joined the crew and set sail again.

Emma returned to the top deck to sunbathe of all things, in 110f sunshine. I had a sneaky plan to put in place. I had ordered a bouquet of flowers for the day that Emma knew nothing about. I took the bouquet from its hiding place and made my way to Emma, who I expected to be just a puddle by now. But surprisingly and thankfully, she was still there. She looked up to see me carrying the bouquet. A small grin quickly became a huge smile as I grew near. I presented her with the flowers, five red roses, palm backed and wrapped with taffeta. We wished one another a Happy Anniversary, stood arm in arm and sipped a glass each of champagne, as we sailed the sea.

Later on, the junk arrived back at the beach we had left earlier that day, to the setting sun and another crowd of interested onlookers. We thanked the crew and stepped ashore.

A glamorous evening of fine dining awaited us, but for now, we stayed to watch the junk sail slowly away and off into the sunset.

Chapter 16

To Have And Have Not



“You know how to whistle, don’t you Steve?”

Anyone who is a fan of the movies will remember this line from my favourite Bogie and Bacall classic, ‘To Have And Have Not.’

I grew up on old movies and jazz. I love them to this day. Films like ‘Seven Year Itch’ with Marilyn Monroe, ‘To Catch A Thief’ with Cary Grant and Grace Kelly or Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon greats like ‘The Odd Couple’. I am a huge jazz fan too: Nat King Cole, Vince Guaraldi, Ben Webster and Peggy Lee to name a few. I think I would have liked to live in the 1950’s in America; an elegant era, classy, well dressed, great music and cool cars.

With this in mind, as my wife Emma is also a big fan of all these things, we decided to try and find some, if indeed they still existed in today’s world.

So we headed for Key West, Florida, USA, home to the author of ‘To Have And Have Not,’ Ernest Hemingway. Maybe not Hemingway, but at least Hemmings in Key West.

After we left Miami, we headed south on Highway One, for the four hour drive through the keys in our convertible we had hired for the trip.

The weather was perfect; the skies, as usual for Florida, deep blue and clear. After cruising passed Key Largo, another favourite Humphrey Bogart film, we went through island after island, with pelicans flying next to us at times and sailboats on the turquoise waters. It felt so free to be meandering along on this journey.

A few hours later, we passed a sign saying 'Welcome to Key West.' We were here. Houseboats on the outskirts turned into old fashioned cottages and flower gardens with picket fences that lined the road. Classic 1950's cars went by. There seemed a calm and unhurried way of life to this town.

Just then, we found our place to stay. A large Poinciana tree with orange blossoms stood next to a whitewashed clapboard cottage with pink shutters. The entrance was draped with red coloured bougainvillea. It was gorgeous. Our room was like the one Humphrey Bogart had in 'To Have And Have Not.' This one though had a view of the swimming pool. There were only a few rooms to this bed and breakfast which was nice, as it made it quiet for the stay.

After a dip in the pool, we borrowed two bicycles and rode into town. It was like we had gone back in time. We had discovered a place just like the movie that existed in a modern world. The quiet streets were decorated with galleries and restaurants. One caught our interest and as it was about 2pm, we were ready for a late lunch.

We parked our bicycles against a lamp post outside and went in. I could not believe it as I entered. It was like being in the hotel from the movie. Old fashioned paintings filled the walls. A polished wooden floor was scattered with tables and chairs, with a grand piano off set to the one side. From it came the enchanting music of an old jazz song. French language could be heard softly between the notes.

The next two hours were spent enticing our appetites and soothing our spirits, until we decided a bike ride to the beach on this delightful summer's afternoon, would be the next chapter of the day.

Smathers beach, with its white sand and calm waters, only added more wonder to this place. We walked along the beach for a while, as the seagulls

played by the waves. The sun shone through the branches of the palms casting shadows of cool relief. It was the kind of town I would love to retire to, one day.

But for now, a sunset cruise awaited us in an hour. Just enough time to freshen up and change into our island evening wear.

It was so lovely to live like this. All the years I watched the old movies and listened to jazz, dreaming of being in that era, I had found a place I could have just like it.

At the pier, an old fashioned sailboat with huge sails waited to take us to admire the sunset. On board we had cocktails, as the skies turned into an oil painting embellished with golds, oranges, peaches and dusky pinks.

Later that evening, I found myself gazing across the table of a romantic restaurant, into the face of my old fashioned gal, Emma.

“You know how to whistle, don’t you Steve?” came the line from the film, “you just put your lips together and blow!”

And with that I smiled, as the candle blew out on the table in front of me.

Chapter 17

Old Fashioned Elegance



The only difference between modern life and old fashioned, is time. Everything was new once, but the hands of time gradually turn what was modern into period. There are only a few years of new and thousands of years of old. Chances are, there will be more good old things than there are new.

I believe you should enjoy today and preserve the good things from the years before. At least someone else thinks like this or there would be no Shakespeare, old buildings, history books, paintings, classic cars or cherished photographs of perfect days. Without the past, there would be nothing to learn from.

Elegance is a word that still means something to me. I grew up in a world that it was very present in. Now it seems, only the remnants exist in a few places. It would be nice to embrace this 'Belle Époque' or beautiful era again.

I had a few days holiday coming up and felt in the mood for an elegant European trip. After much thought of where to go, we decided Switzerland may offer what we were looking for.

So a few days later, we were on board an airplane touching down in Geneva. We had taken an early flight, so breakfast was at 20,000 feet with miniature croissants, glasses of orange juice and pastries.

Once through the airport, we took a lovely old steam train to our destination for a few days, Montreux on Lake Geneva. Emma and I sat on a delightful small carriage. Just us, the train was empty. Beautifully restored and immaculate, we watched through the window as white clouds of smoke trailed from the engine in front. Paddleboats decorated the water and snow capped mountains could be seen on the far side of the lake.

After an hour we arrived in style at Montreux. We crossed the street to our hotel. We were impressed as we entered the marbled reception with chandeliers, a grand piano being played and elegantly dressed hotel staff to greet us.

Our room was on the second floor, tastefully decorated with a 1920's style, regal and refined. The French doors opened to a balcony, which offered a panoramic view of the lake and mountains in the background. One of the steam paddleboats, also from the 1920's, was moored by a jetty to the rear of the hotel gardens. We stood on the balcony, taking in the amazing scenery. This was truly elegant, old fashioned and romantic. We ordered room service and enjoyed lunch in the sunshine on this warm afternoon in June.

I always used to think of Switzerland as covered in snow, cold and just a place for skiing. But this was another side of the country and another season. Lunch, a piano player to entertain us and a spectacular view from our hotel, was a very pleasant way to spend a couple of hours.

After lunch, we took a promenade by the lake, dressed in summer attire. The pathway followed the curves of the lake's edge, with small cottages hidden behind large trees to one side. The lake glittered in places, while the paddleboats came and went, as we walked towards the castle a mile away. It looked like something from a fairytale. You could almost imagine a knight to be rescuing a princess from one of the windows.

When we reached the castle, a paddleboat was waiting at the jetty. It was a handsome craft, cream coloured, over a hundred feet in length with two paddles and Swiss flags flying proudly from its stern. We paid a little extra and sat in first class on the top deck. Restored to its beauty of the Twenties, this elegant lady danced her way across the lake gracefully.

Why did we let a time like this escape us? An era of elegant dress, manners, romance, innocence and style.

Four o'clock said my time piece. The hotel promised afternoon tea about now. So we said au revoir to the gracious lady and returned to the grounds of the hotel. We found a table, silver service, choice of teas, delicate pastries and the heavenly sounds of a harp played next to us.

The following two hours, we savoured the ambience of the setting and the afternoon sun.

At six o'clock, a few people passed us carrying a large basket and what looked like a huge table cloth. What were they doing? Then I remembered. I had booked a balloon trip for that evening.

By the time we had changed and returned, the balloon was waiting for us, along with quite a crowd of onlookers. The pilot greeted us and we climbed aboard. It felt a little like 'Eighty Days Around The World,' about to take off to travel the globe, well at least the lake.

A long flame shot up above us into the balloon. The basket lifted slowly then away we went, to the whistles and applause from all on the ground.

We drifted silently over the lake. It was so peaceful. People waved to us from the boats below. The pilot explained we would land on the other side of the lake and return by boat. But there was no hurry. What a view of the lake. After a soft landing and a champagne toast, we returned across the lake, this time by water, to our elegant hotel for a candlelit dinner.

The whole day had been a gift from a beautiful era, forgotten by most, but not here and not by us.

Chapter 18

My Island In The Sun



For all of the places in the world and all the ones I have been so lucky to have visited, the best place for me is the beach.

A sun kissed bay with warm sands, palms nearby and the gentle waves lapping at the shore is the best day. It is even better when you have someone special to share it with.

So there I stood admiring her lovely lines, sleek and beautiful, in the water next to me. I watched, as one thousand horses that powered the half a million dollar speedboat came alive. This was to be our stylish transportation for the day.

Once aboard, we elegantly meandered our way from the harbour and gradually edged closer to the open waters. We passed by mansion after mansion that tastefully decorated the shoreline, along with yacht after yacht.

The day was perfect, not a cloud in the sky. The sea was gentle and inviting

the patiently waiting water stallion to begin the sprint. At last the moment came. The engines roared, the bow rose and huge crests of white foam trailed behind us. Were we flying or still on the sea?

The hands of the trade winds ran their fingers through our hair, the taste of salt freshened the air on our faces and the sun warmed our skin as we went.

Before long, a few small islands appeared on the horizon and a little after that we reached them. Uninhabited islands, palms and white sandy coves flew by, as the boat tilted one way then another, in a refined fashion. The colours of the deep blue waters were suddenly replaced by turquoise and topaz. Did a place like this really exist on Earth or had we stumbled into the Bermuda triangle for a while? At that moment I did not mind at all.

Just then, I noticed the engines began to ease and the boat started to slow down. The fringe of my hair, for the first time in an hour, rested back in place, the mile long trail of wake dissolved and we began heading slowly for a wooden jetty not far away. A few minutes later we pulled alongside, ropes were tied and the engines died.

At once, the peaceful serenity of this small untouched tropical isle found us. A lush interior of green surrounded by white sands and clear waters, backed by topaz interludes, led to a small wooden building with red bougainvillea next to it. Birds of paradise grew nearby and a lady in a summer dress waved to us, welcoming our arrival. Maybe this was Heaven?

It was so peaceful. We stepped ashore and made our way to the lady by the building to be greeted with a smile, a cocktail and an invitation to enjoy. The island was ours for the day.

By now it was mid morning. We paddled in the warm shallow waters, as endless small fishes of bright colours brushed by our feet. We sat on the sands that resembled the appearance of white flour. A little distance away were two other small islands with a sailboat moored in between. We went for a swim in the lagoon and then bronzed ourselves in the rays of the Bahamian sun.

Before lunch, the low tide uncovered a sand bar to walk along. Emma came from the sea wearing a bikini similar to Ursula Andress in James Bond. After capturing the moment on film, we decided lunch would be a good idea. After, we fed the leftovers to the grateful fishes and a delightful spotty pink pig that

swam across to us from a neighbouring island.

We spent the afternoon strolling the coves and enjoying the natural treasures this cay offered. Time seemed unimportant here, the real world forgotten. If Heaven was this good, all I could think was if there was any chance of checking in early.

Late afternoon, brought with it the last few grains of sand through the hour glass that I was granted. The lady in the long summer dress waved farewell, as we started our journey away. As I said goodbye, I hoped I would return to this wonderful place again, one day.

Since then, I think of this lovely island often, like an old friend, the spirit not far away despite the distance. All the days like this one touched me and changed me, in a good way.

Perfect days etch a picture board of fabulous memories on your soul, to enjoy for a lifetime.

Chapter 19

Magnolia In Springtime



Soft rain brushed against the windows and coloured leaves drifted silently by, as the mail arrived for the morning. But as I thumbed through the letters an uneasiness found me, as I came to the last one. It was handwritten, scented and on old fashioned stationery. The post stamp said Tennessee. It was from an old friend, although the writing seemed different this time. Upon opening the letter, the words “It is with sadness..” began the first line. I never like letters that start that way, they always seem to leave me feeling blue and this one was no exception. By the time I had read the remainder, a teardrop smudged the ink on the page.

I began to reminisce of a time many years ago. It was a lovely spring morning in Tennessee. A meandering driveway led passed meadows filled with coloured flowers and trees with pink blossoms. The delicate scent of their perfume was in the air, while the warm sunlight shone on a magnificent magnolia mansion that stood proudly in front of us, as we arrived. It was white coloured with large pillars, placed one after another along the front. In between the sash windows were shutters, decorated now and again, with roses. It was so beautiful.

Emma and I had booked a few days here at this romantic, charming bed and

breakfast. We had hoped for a peaceful escape from the real world, for a while.

I turned off the engine of the car. As I looked around, I savoured the atmosphere of this quiet countryside retreat. So peaceful, only the sounds of a nearby fountain, birds singing and bumble bees flying by, could be heard. There was a spectacular view across the valley to the front, the Smokey Mountains to the rear. Flower borders emitted rainbows of colour, while the late April sunlight felt warm and comforting.

As we made our way to the entrance, we noticed the door was open. So we shyly tiptoed into the enormous hallway, with a marble staircase sweeping up to a gallery landing and doors leading off to many rooms. Old paintings and antiques tastefully decorated this lovely home. Despite its size, it somehow felt at once welcoming and homely. An old gramophone was playing a Nat King Cole song, 'Almost Like Being In Love.' We called out above the notes to announce our arrival and waited.

From nowhere came a cheerful greeting with the mellowed tones of a southern accent and a beaming smile from an elegant lady beside us. She took us by surprise. She had long grey hair and a face that shone out a glow of kindness. Her name was Charlotte, but she insisted we called her Charlie, as all her friends did. We told her our names, but she never used them during our stay. She lovingly referred to me as 'Dear' or 'Pumpkin' and Emma as 'Bunny.' We became very fond of the names and of Charlie from that moment on.

As she showed us to our room, she explained we were the only guests; in fact we were the last guests. Her husband had passed on a year earlier and the house was too much to look after by herself these days. We felt honoured to be the last ones to spend time here in such a wonderful place.

Our room was delicately dressed in lilac and cream furnishings. There was a four poster bed and near the windows was a chaise longue, with three teddy bears sitting on it. The scruffy larger one with the oversized belly, undoubtedly filled with honey sandwiches naturally, was called Uncle Slurp, because he liked milkshakes. The two smaller bears he looked after were the Button Bears, as they had buttons on their bellies. These were her favourites from the teddy bear collection she kept scattered around the house, from when she was a child.

Our front balcony looked across the driveway, the fountain and the valley; the rear across a courtyard with a gazebo, swimming pool, a flower meadow with a stream and the mountains.

We had only known Charlie for a few moments and yet we felt as though we had been friends for twenty years. Some people you meet are just like that I guess.

After unpacking, we wandered downstairs to the Lounge. A large painting of a beautiful young woman gazed down at us from the wall. She wore a red dress and her hair was golden, like the sunlight on the meadow through the windows. Then I realised it was Charlie, in her twenties. Time may have added a few laughter lines, but the innocence and happiness had not been eroded away. A grand piano stood at the end of the room with photographs on it of Charlie's late husband, her children and friends.

Just then, Charlie came into the room with a tray of freshly baked soft cookies and a jug of lemonade. I asked if she played the piano and she happily obliged us, while we shared the refreshments. She played 'A House Is Not A Home,' for us. It was exquisite and delicate. Her hands danced lightly like a ballerina over the keys and as she touched the notes, they caressed our spirits.

I began to appreciate the wonderful life she must have had. It was like something from a dream. The French doors wide open, the sunlight present on the terrace, the meadows of endless colour swaying to the light winds or maybe it was the song.

As I looked across at Emma we said nothing, but instead dreamt that maybe we grew up here or fell in love sometime long ago, in the meadows outside. Either way was unimportant, we were suspended in a bubble of escapism, far from the real world that lay a million sighs away.

After another song or two, Charlie asked Emma if she would like to collect some flowers for the vases. Emma indulged her. She took a floppy cream hat and a basket then smiled to me as she made her way to the garden.

I remained momentarily to admire the painting. Charlie asked me if I would love Emma as much when she was old and grey, as I did now. I smiled gently then reassured her that my love, unlike so many things that wither away in this world, would be there forever and a day. She put her arm around me,

smiled and invited me to join Emma.

The scenery outside was also something from an enchanted daydream. I watched Emma, as she collected flowers that stood high to her waistline and placed them delicately into the basket. The passing rain, some way off, had left the Tennessee sunlight to cast a rainbow behind the meadow. I had fallen in love with this place already and did not want to leave.

I joined Emma in the oil painting she stood in and we watched as the rainbow's colours faded slowly away. We strolled hand in hand, by the stream, where ducklings played and fishes jumped.

Later that day, we helped Charlie in the kitchen. We spent the afternoon as the three chefs, baking brownies and a vanilla peach pie for supper. The scent of pastry and chocolate was Heavenly. As we discovered, Charlie was as talented in the kitchen as she was on the piano.

We had planned to do other things during our visit, yet seemed blissfully content to stay in Charlie's welcoming home and her delightful company.

The evening concluded with a hug from the three bears and the moonlight outside our window to watch over us all night.

The next couple of days were spent telling old stories, taking bike rides through the quiet lanes, picnics by the stream, swimming in the pool and relaxing on sun loungers next to the rose garden.

Each morning, Charlie took us in a vintage open topped car to the nearby town, to get ingredients for dinner and something sweet for the late afternoons.

That afternoon, she brought us peaches with amaretto cream and mint juleps as we sat in the gazebo. She told us how much happiness we had given her by staying there the last few days and how she would miss us when we had left. We agreed. The days here had been some of the most special in our lives. I knew I had to wake up tomorrow and go back to reality, but for now, I could indulge in the make believe for a little longer.

For our last evening, we sat on the terrace in the warm air, with candlelight on the table, the pinky golden tones of the sunset and endless old jazz songs from the piano. Ever present were the notes of friendship, unspoken but not unheard.

Why do nice dreams always have to end? I suppose they all get stored up in Heaven, waiting for you to join them one day when you hopefully arrive.

As Charlie stood by Emma and wished us a peaceful night, I realised something. It was as if I was almost looking at the young and old versions of Emma. Charlie reminded me of her in years to come and I looked forward to the journey together. She left us to the fading candlelight and the sounds of the crickets.

When we reached our room later, there was a present with a large bow on the bedside table. The note read, 'Thank you both so much for making my life so happy the last few days. Take your new friends home and think of me when you hug them. I will be thinking of you both, love Charlie.' Inside the box was a rose, a brownie and the three bears. Our eyes began to well up from the touching sentiment. All five of us stood on the balcony, watching the moonlight reflect on the fountain.

Goodbyes are never easy and the one the next morning was one of the most difficult I ever had. The problem with time is when it grants you something that special, its cost is high too. So we waved goodbye, the blossoms danced in the sunshine and the driveway gradually dissolved us back into reality as we went.

We stayed in touch through the years, but never returned to that place, except in a dream. Maybe that is where it always was anyway.

As I gave Emma the letter to read, I looked across the room at Uncle Slurp and the Button Bears. I sat at the piano and softly caressed the keys, as the autumn leaves drifted by the window. The storm had passed by and a rainbow stretched across the fields to the back of our house. As I watched, I dreamt of springtime and smiled, content that Charlie would be walking with her sweetheart somewhere through the sun filled meadows of happiness, once more.

Chapter 20

Free Spirit



My feet could feel sand beneath them, my lips the taste of champagne and my eyes watched the moonlight reflecting the sails of a boat, on the ocean in front of me. To my side stood an angel; above, the starlit heavens, silent and vast. The sound of the waves could be heard, along with quiet conversations nearby.

Then the silence was shattered with a thousand tiny explosions and the vibrant lights of colour in the night sky, danced suddenly along with all on the ground. Glasses touched, faces shone and a triumphant chorus of delight rang out across the sands, to welcome the arrival of the New Year.

Midnight in The Bahamas and just the beginning of the annual festival, Junkanoo. Costumes overflowed along the streets, as the party had until dawn to dance away. But for the jet lagged and weary, consumed by tiredness, we would have to wait for later in the morning to enjoy it.

So the sun rose and so did we. For almost a year, the costumes are handmade for this festival. A celebration of life, love and freedom it seemed, as I watched endless displays dance by. Faces of happiness and friendship shone as brightly as the sun. Colourful and creative, we were captivated by the atmosphere.

As the morning grew of age, the streets grew in their emptiness. We left the town for the quayside, a seaplane and a mid morning rendezvous with an out island. Then a daytime of sails, sea, sandbars and Bahamian blues.

After arriving at the out island, we waved goodbye to the pilot, then boarded the catamaran that sat in the clear waters with its sail, tall and flowing, in the breezes that carried us on our way.

The sounds of seagulls joined us, while the waves lapped gently against the boat. We sailed amongst the small islands on topaz waters with the light winds to sooth us. The occasional turtle would swim by.

Many spend their lives never knowing that small pieces of Heaven, like this one, exist on Earth. I was very lucky not to be one of them.

Emma lay peacefully on the deck bronzing herself. Maybe she had a dream worth keeping. Maybe I was dreaming too. We sailed across the calm seas, as the Bahamian sun seemed to kiss all that it touched.

As we neared one of the islands, Emma joined me and the sails lowered, until the boat came to rest on an untouched cove with pink sands. Our own island for the day. I must have been dreaming.

We stepped ashore, while the crew set up lunch for us on the beach. Imagine the most peaceful place in the world and you would be here. Just us, the fishes, the sea and the trade winds. It was like a dreamy watercolour painting looking out to sea, with the catamaran anchored alongside greeny blue water, a pink coloured sandy cove and some seagulls to complete the skies.

We paddled in the warm shallows, as we walked together. Colourful fishes swam by our toes. Coconut shells and occasional driftwood accompanied the sand in places. The lush green interior of the island cast small shadows onto the beach.

The crew announced lunch was ready. After, as we fed the leftovers to the fishes, I noticed something larger had entered the bay. Several fins surfaced

from the water. To my relief, they belonged to a half dozen dolphins that swam next to us, satisfying their curiosity. They were so graceful, their faces glancing at us as we watched. We swam next to them and they let us touch them, from time to time. It was almost overwhelming to be in their unexpected company. Now I was definitely dreaming.

The dolphins jumped and played next to us. Like angels of the sea, an essence of friendship and healing shone out from their presence. Then as quickly as they had arrived, they were gone. The waters seemed empty without them.

Emma and I returned to the beach, smiling at one another in disbelief of this enchanted meeting.

As the afternoon mellowed in the golden sunlight, we collected shells and savoured the paradise that was ours for now. Before long, the hands of my time piece waved goodbye to our island, as we set sail. I watched without words as we left.

I have always thought that friendship is something you do not have to go looking for in life. Somehow, it always seems to find you. Our new friends had a language I did not understand, but a sentiment as clear as the waters they lived in. There has never been another creature in this world that has touched me in the way that dolphins have.

And for a second unexpected meeting, our friends joined us again, this time alongside the catamaran as we sailed. The memory of their gentle manner and smiling faces never left us, long after they did.

Even when I eventually woke up, this was one dream I would cherish for all time.

Chapter 21

The Road To Somewhere



All roads in life lead to somewhere, even when you think they are not. I like to believe that no matter which road you choose, your dreams and hope somehow seem to take you to the place you were meant to get.

En route to The Grand Canyon and Monument Valley, through the desert scenery, I had to try something. I stopped the car at the side of the road, found an appropriate rock, took an egg I had bought earlier and cracked it onto the stone. Sure enough, as I stood there watching, the egg started cooking itself on the natural stove in front of me. As I walked back to the car smiling, my shoes left imprints on the ground as the soles began to dissolve.

I retreated into the cooler air conditioned cabin and continued driving along a road that stretched as far behind as it did in front. It was the kind of road you travelled on for an hour and the distant scenery did not seem to get any closer.

America, 'A Horse With No Name', played on the radio as we went. In every direction, sand, rocks and dust. I spared a thought for the workers who had laid the road I drove upon, in my cool comfortable interior.

Emma was taking forty winks, as I wondered if it had ever rained here. It is moments like this, you have time to dream and reflect on the years. Sometimes you cannot believe how far you have travelled in life. The places

you have gone, the people encountered, the adventures, how you got where you are today and where you will travel next.

The Grand Canyon, is one of those places of natural beauty that you read about or watch on television, but I never thought the day would come, that I would look at it for real.

Many hours and eighty winks later, the pine trees we drove next to left a gap and to my surprise, suddenly there it was in all its splendour. I parked the car and walked over to get a better view. Everyone tells you how impressive it is, but it is not until you stand there for real, that you appreciate there is no need to exaggerate. It is vast. Sculptured rocks of rusty colours and cream tones that stretch on and on, as the afternoon sunlight redraws their appearance, hour on hour. Now I know why it is called grand. We spent the afternoon on horseback, like a western movie, following the trails and marvelling at its rugged charm.

To watch the sunrise at first light here, was truly magical. Its silence and the beauty of the morning bestowed across its face.

We left the ancient sands of time and followed the road to somewhere else. The sun was threaded into the blue, like a silvery gold buckle. The red coloured sands warmed gradually and the road stretched on like a thirsty tongue, longing for a cool glass of iced water. We continued on, through the desert on our horse with no name, it felt good but there still was no rain.

Right now, a sun lounger, a cocktail and a gentle bay, were beginning to gain appeal, but then when you get that you usually start thinking of the next adventure. At least I do. I suppose variety really is the spice of life and you should try to enjoy as much of it as you can.

As we traded places, the counts on our winks must have reached the hundreds by now. I hoped our faithful steed would not fail us. Ending up like the egg was not part of the plan.

Then suddenly, a sandstorm blew up from nowhere. It was like trying to drive in fog. The cabin rocked from the winds and tumbleweed bounced off the windshield. Thankfully, it was only brief. The blue skies and clear views returned. As they did, so too did Monument Valley, like the backdrop to a western and in fact so many westerns. Our stallion and we had survived the journey. It was worth it.

The road snaked along the land between unusual shaped rock formations. It was stunningly desolate and beautiful. We drove onto a side road and parked. Once outside, it was like standing on the surface of Mars. Red sands for carpet, giant rocks as armchairs and a view to watch that would impress anyone.

We would stay in a small hotel run by Red Indians, complete with western movies, scorpions and snakes, all complimentary of course. That said, how many days do you get the chance to live in scenery so spectacular? We decided to embrace and enjoy it, as it would probably never come again.

To wake up in the city is one thing; to wake up in the desert is something else. Our brief tour of the canyons would not be forgotten.

We began our long journey back to civilisation, with time to reflect on this adventure and hopefully look forward to many yet to come.

Chapter 22

Oriental Dragon



Who goes to Hong Kong for a long weekend? You guessed it, me. After watching the movie, 'The World of Susie Wong', it left me with a craving for The Orient and that would never do.

Sometimes in life it is nice to plan adventures and look forward to them. Others it is just better to get two free frequent flyer mileage tickets, pack two suitcases, sit on two seats and thirteen hours later, arrive the other side of the world for that long weekend!

Yes I know what you are thinking. But you only live once, unless your name is Bond.

Emma and I stood on the ferry, from Kowloon to Hong Kong Island, with the illuminated city skyline in front of us. Despite its lack of the old fashioned Orient, you know, the junks, sampans and rickshaws, the modern city still seemed to give off an Oriental glow.

We left the city for the evening and returned to our hotel, which definitely had more than a suggestion of The Orient throughout. We were offered an upgrade, for the unbelievable price of back pocket change. I became fond of the Executive Club. It was a high floor lounge to relax in, while watching the

city, day or night. Complimentary caviar and champagne softened the atmosphere, with canapés to choose from.

The following day, I indulged in a Chinese breakfast, if there is such a thing? Dim sum with noodles, made a change to bacon and eggs. Then we made our ears almost pop in the elevators on our way to the lobby, from fifty six floors up. I think my dim sum followed me sometime later.

We left the quiet oasis of the hotel and joined the sounds of the city outside. As we walked the streets, scaffolding made of bamboo could be found, along with old trams driving by and Oriental signs that seemed more like artwork than writing.

But the strive for progress left the city lacking in the past, at least for my tastes. Perhaps I could find one temple that still existed. A difficult task, but thankfully not impossible.

Sometime later, we found an Oriental temple we were allowed to visit. A peaceful retreat from the city, interesting and enchanting.

It was now midday. After a climb up The Peak, courtesy of a tram, we arrived at the top for a view of the city and Hong Kong harbour, surrounded by skyscrapers. It seemed like a city with secrets, hidden behind a welcoming face. At last, we found a rickshaw to enjoy the view from. An artist ended the Oriental bike ride as we exchanged coin for canvass, before getting on our way.

For me, The Orient has always been a place of interest and mystery. The ancient buildings, the language and its culture. Even in its modern era, The Orient can fascinate and thrill.

We rejoined the city in search for some souvenirs. They were easy to find. As we walked through the streets and by market stalls, we collected a beautiful wooden dragon, that the seller said would bring us good luck, decorative scrolls with Chinese writing, then a red coloured, silk Oriental dress. Wandering through the city was an adventure.

We returned the souvenirs to the hotel and while there, the concierge recommended a boat trip to Lantau Island to visit the Big Buddha. It was as good an idea as any. So we took a taxi to the quayside and caught the ferry.

It was a pleasant afternoon and the sun felt warm, as we slowly cruised the

short distance to Lantau. Another taste of the ancient Orient, temples and a Big Buddha with steps to the top, that overlooked the bay. A welcome relief to enjoy some peace and quiet in an interesting setting, away from the city.

Emma was longing to try on her outfit. So when we returned to the hotel, she put on her Oriental dress and I my silk shirt with trousers, that we had bought from the markets. Both cost only a few dollars, yet they were exquisitely tailored.

We needed somewhere appropriate to wear them. Thankfully, the hotel had a Chinese restaurant. How remarkable, what are the chances of finding such a restaurant in China?

The corridor we walked along, led to some large red doors with dragons painted upon them. Once opened, they revealed a secret room with tasteful furnishings, hand carved tables, Oriental lanterns and a sculpture of a dragon as a centrepiece.

We were waited on like emperors, a banquet indeed with a surprise for dessert, which was in a tall glass trimmed with greenery and even dry ice that floated around the base. It was a work of art and fascinating to watch.

We finished the day on the Executive Floor, looking down on the city and its illuminated skyline again. All those people who came and went every day. It is funny, when you look down on the world from somewhere, all the petty differences seem so trivial. I wish everyone would get along better. The city and in fact much of today's world, has such a pace so many try to keep up with. Sometimes it is fun to run through life and others to stroll.

It was still hard to believe I was the other side of the world, in The Orient and the adventure created on a whim.

The next day, I stood gazing from the window of the fifty sixth floor, as the golden sun climbed above the tall buildings in the city.

The time had come to trade The Orient for a magical bird that would fly us later that day, through the night skies and back home.

Chapter 23

Off To See The Queen



It was summertime in June, in England and it was raining. How refreshing, it had not rained since at least yesterday and the few weeks before that too. I think that is one of the main reasons I travel so much, to find a sunny day.

It was the Queen's Jubilee celebrations and I wanted to be a part of them in some way. I knew I had to visit London, but that was going to be an event in itself, with half of the roads closed in the city and millions of people there. But in true British spirit, Emma and I were not to be deterred from it by the weather or other cause.

So we started the morning in Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare's town. A charming, old fashioned place set by the river, with the theatre, classy restaurants, souvenir stores and river boat cruises.

We decided to have a little breakfast in a lovely restaurant that overlooked the river. By the time we finished, the rain had stopped and amazingly for the first time in weeks, the sun came out. It was wonderful to see blue skies again.

On the way to the riverside, we were distracted by a handsome teddy bear, lounging on a chaise longue in a shop window. We could not resist. We named him Bertie. He was slightly scruffy and had large arms, just right for hugging. He joined us for the day.

We boarded an elegant old boat and began cruising up the river together. I suddenly remembered how nice the summer sun felt. It relaxed and soothed me. The water glittered, as we sailed by swans with their fluffy grey offspring and passed large houses that met with the riverbanks.

After this delightful way to spend the morning, we took our Smart car, just what you need to get parked in half a space in London, threw back the roof, let in the sunshine, then began driving to the city through the Cotswolds and back to the 1950's. The English countryside went by. Fields of red poppies and ripening golden corn along with thatched roofed cottages became the background scenery.

We reached our intended village to discover a vintage car rally was taking place, with Rolls Royce and Bentley making some of the appearances. After parking our car and admiring some others, we made our way to the water mill that was next to the river. Built from stone and even with its own wooden water wheel, this charming old building was to be the place we chose to have lunch at.

We sat on the rear terrace, with a lovely view of the riverside. The setting was so peaceful. Old music from the 1950's played quietly. Every now and again, fish jumped playfully in the river.

So with lunch finished, we left the retreat of the countryside and travelled south for an hour, until cornfields were replaced with buildings. London's skyline came into view, along with a long line of tail lights from the queue of traffic on the roads heading into the city. What should have taken us half an hour, took hours to reach our hotel. It gave us time to enjoy the streets, all decorated with flags and Jubilee tributes, but left our arrival too late to get to Buckingham Palace for the main procession. By now, it was almost seven o'clock. The rain had returned and the moment passed to have watched the

Queen in her Royal carriage ride up The Mall.

We had been to local celebrations and watched The Royal Water Pageant on the River Thames on television, but we had wanted to be a part of the tribute in London. Now we had missed out.

After leaving the hotel, we crossed Piccadilly and the now empty streets. Everyone else was leaving London, just as we had arrived. We took some steps down onto The Mall. Union Jack flags flew the entire way up to the Palace. A handful of people came and went as we walked up the long road, with our umbrella sheltering us from the rain storm.

Minutes later, we reached the gates of Buckingham Palace, with grey skies behind the majestic building. The grounds had merely a few guards on duty and it seemed only us for onlookers.

The rain eased and the storm began to pass by. To my complete amazement, as I watched one of the windows of the Palace, a regal figure, wearing a white ball gown stepped onto the balcony. They stood there for a few moments gazing across the park. It was the Queen. I looked across at Emma in disbelief. After missing the main event that afternoon, we had what seemed like a few private moments with Her Majesty. We waved gently to her and a small Union Jack we had carried with us. She smiled to us, raised her hand and waved back, then returned into the Palace. Fate had redeemed itself for the cheated opportunity earlier. It had gratified us far more than we could have asked for. It was very touching and I smiled broadly as I realised we had not been too late, but just in time for the conclusion of The Jubilee.

We strolled through St James Park with the company of rain again and for that moment, the only place I wanted to be in the world was here in London.

The park became Westminster, Parliament and Big Ben. We stood next to a red phone and pillar box, waiting for the London chimes, as double decker buses went by. The huge time piece called out nine times and then went silent again. We ended the day with fish and chips walking in Piccadilly Square, to the bright lights of city life.

The next day, was yet another good day to do something indoors; umbrella free events, if you like. Shopping could wait until tomorrow. Today, food seemed more appealing.

We took a cab ride through the soggy streets with flags flying from every

building, until we reached Harrods in Knightsbridge. Diamonds and designer clothes were not what we were after. Once inside, we found the chocolate room. Exclusive cocoa paradise, like a fabulous jeweller's store but edible. Then onto gelato Heaven next door. After devouring a designer ice cream sundae, we climbed the floors to a restaurant with a Victorian garden. Strawberries in champagne, entertained us.

Back on Earth and in the street next to the store, a stall sold roses of every colour. I chose one for my princess. By the time Bertie had ordered room service back at the hotel, another cab ride left us outside Fortnum and Masons. A stroll through this regal store returned us to the street, this time with a box of pastries and a new friend for Bertie. We called her Hope.

We had missed lunch, for a reason. Afternoon tea, at The Ritz. What could be more regal and refined than that? To take tea in one of the most beautiful hotels in the world was a privilege and an honour. We enjoyed finger sandwiches, then scones with clotted cream and strawberries. You could imagine yourself sitting at The Palace.

We left The Ritz and meandered our way across parts of the Monopoly board, in the rain of course. The rain added atmosphere to the wet streets and bustling city. London always seemed to offer something special each time we visited. This trip was no exception.

Wimbledon and The Olympics were soon to come, but for now, I felt content to have celebrated the reign of a remarkable and very special lady. God Save the Queen.

Chapter 24

First Class All The Way



“Cabin crew, seats for takeoff,” are some of my favourite words ever spoken in the English language. The beginning of an adventure, somewhere fabulous in the world. The thrill, as the engines of a 747 roar, you tear down the runway and fly up to the peaceful skies.

Flying coach is okay, better to get there than not at all, but flying first class in any respect for that matter, always makes the journey somewhat better. This morning was to be one of those better ones.

Standing at the check in desk, we were delighted to find out that someone had double booked our seats. It meant the only ones they had left on the flight were in first class. Being good sports, we graciously accepted our replacement seats for the inconvenience. Now I would have to fly in first class, the endurance of it all!

So we climbed the stairs of the aircraft, into the bubble as I call it and the

luxurious comforts the other half took for granted. No longer a battle to get to our seats, wide aisles led to large leather lined recliners that at the touch of a button, became flat beds for a nap. Instead of the sardine can I usually flew in, room to stretch and even a cocktail bar to sit at to enjoy complimentary champagne at forty thousand feet. How nice would it be to live at this level all of the time? Now the eight and a half hour flight to Florida, USA, would be even more enjoyable. Emma and I were flying before we left the ground.

We photographed everything, just in case this was a one-time offer. Before takeoff, champagne; after takeoff, more champagne. I spent the first hour playing with the gadgets, making my seat a bed and then a seat again. Maybe I had sipped too much champagne for the time being.

We were presented with menus this time, not a slop tray in coach. We chose our meals. You could even decide what time to have it during the flight, unlike coach, where it is shoved in your face when you are asleep. It was an A La Carte restaurant in the sky.

Anyway, well fed and watered, a nap was definitely in order, followed by a movie, then some time at the bar. The flight had seemed like five minutes, as we taxied into the gate. We were off the plane, through the airport and in our hire car, before anyone in coach had got out of their seats. I forgot to mention our luck was still in. We got a complimentary upgrade to a convertible too.

With the roof open, sunshine on our faces, hands on the wheel and feet on the pedals, we were off. We had not booked a hotel for our stay; we thought we would make up the trip when we got there. We fancied the coast; high living for low cost and maybe another complimentary offer.

South west it was, for the drive to the coast. With its power, refinement and looks, this was a car we would enjoy driving.

After a few hours, we found by chance a stunning new hotel not far from the beach. A long flower lined driveway with fountains led to a tasteful Mediterranean style hotel with striped canopies and palm fringed frontage. A little out of our budget, but my lucky touch was still working. The hotel had only opened a week earlier and in mid July, the rates were ridiculously cheap. For the same price as a three star hotel, we ended up with a suite overlooking lakes and a golf course.

This was first class all the way. I love it when a day goes like this. The cherry

on the cake, downstairs, was an American pool room with full size tables and next to it, a cocktail bar. We spent the evening shooting pool and the breeze.

The next morning, Florida did not disappoint. It rarely does. Oh those blue skies and breakfast on the balcony watching early morning golfers on the immaculate course below. It was a week to remember.

Every morning, we would walk on the soft sands a short drive away. The ocean is a wonderful place to begin and end the day. Shopping interludes and lunch al fresco became common place, along with frozen grapes, lemon scented towels and an irresistible pool to cool off in each afternoon at the hotel. A round of golf was not to be missed either. It was just one of those times in life everything you touched turned to gold.

And speaking of gold, we found ourselves watching the sun that resembled the same colour, as it set on dusky pink skies.

I love the beach. It had been wonderful to spend so much time in its company again. One day, I hope fate lets me stay in the place I belong the most, by the sea. For all of the wealth in this world, I would trade it in a moment, to sit next to the lapping waves on warm soft sands, with palm trees nearby and an angel next to me.

Emma asked me what I was thinking, as I looked out to sea.

I replied, "To be the day we had every day together like this, to be free and to be home at last."

Chapter 25

Life's A Beach



I collected coloured leaves for souvenirs, from the sidewalks of the prettiest town I ever knew. My time here was through, but the memories would last a lifetime of this place. Teardrops fell along with the autumn rain, as we waved goodbye to our friends and walked one last time, through the place I had grown so fond of. The clock tower chimed one, whilst the fall winds scattered colours of crimson, orange and gold.

It all began a week ago on an almost empty beach, with a picket fence, a picnic basket and the afternoon I fell in love again. A small hound played next to the waves at the shoreline. The sun was warm for that day, the remnants of summertime to savour. I sat there enjoying the fruits of the hamper, my true love next to me.

Life all at once seemed innocent and easy. The seagulls called out to one another, as a sailboat made its way home for the day. We skimmed stones as the sea came ever closer with each wave. A mood of reflection always

seemed to arrive without invitation, in the autumn. Perhaps it was a good thing, to teach me to remember the perfect times in my life.

For all of my travels, I sought a constant, to go home. Something I dreamt of every day. A place where I finally belonged. I could give up my roaming and settle down. To have a house by the sea that was so beautiful and special, that I never wanted to leave. For me, life was a beach.

Late afternoon began to cool the sun, so we left the bay and window shopped in a nearby town. The stores were closed, but the windows were open and it cost nothing to look inside. The autumn leaves danced on the wind down the coloured avenues we followed, that led back to the place we were staying. We said little as we went, but then sometimes words have nothing to say.

It was a great big house with windows and even more windows. The grounds stretched to the bay and the fields were home to a pair of elegant ladies. One named Hera and the other Medea. A mare and her foal, greeted us on our arrival. Gentle faces and creatures, like the meadow flowers they stood next to. My first name is Greek. An adventurer, like 'Jason and the Argonauts,' the Greek Goddess Hera helped me at times through my life. Someone had to for all the adventures I survived through the years, thankfully. I smiled to watch my angel's happiness, as she spent time with her new friends.

We spent the evening in a quiet restaurant, with candles and compliments. The day ended with the soft chimes of the clock on the mantle and the distant sounds of the ocean.

In the morning we left as the soft rains fell. We spent the day crossing covered bridges, then following winding roads edged with autumn colours, through picturesque towns and villages until we reached the mountains. More hillsides of endless colours with long reflections cast on the lakes. Any artist would have loved to spend the day capturing its beauty.

By evening, we found the town that I fell in love with. Set on a river to one side, the ocean to the other, every building and home was perfect. There were old fashioned houses, with sash windows that candles flickered in during the night and let sunlight in through the day. Fall foliage with pumpkins dressed the doorways and children played in the gardens, where their laughter could be heard. We took a ride on a surrey for a friendly introduction to the town, before finding our home for the day.

And there was the house anyone would fall in love with. It was elegant and charming, built from wood with cream coloured shutters. Old trees painted with the season's colours stood watch over the home with happy memories. A picket fence and open gate led to the entrance. The owners stood on the doorstep, with smiles to welcome us and that contented feeling became present, of the moment you realise you are home.

The owners spoiled us with milkshakes and brownies. Their kindness was like the face of an old teddy bear, sitting hopefully in a store window on a rainy afternoon, you could not resist it. We became very fond of their cooking, their home and their company. We stayed friends through the years to this day.

We sat on the balcony, off the upstairs sitting room. Old lanterns and fairy lights made the quiet street seem to glow, as the leaves brushed on the windows. The distant sound of the ocean could be heard. I sat there amongst friends and loved ones cherishing every moment, so grateful of the gift fate had handed me.

But as the hour neared eleven and the fairies cast sprinkle dust on our sleepy eyes, one by one, we retired for the day, until only I remained in the night air.

All my life I took time for granted, like the next day, it would always be there. I guess as I grew older each year, reflection was something that became a new friend too. One day, there would be no more sunrises, a comforting hand to hold, seasons to write memories through and dreams to fulfil. The sands of time would be blown away by the autumn winds. If tomorrow came, it would be different. I would never take anything for granted anymore.

The Gods of Fate smiled at me through the face of the sun, at first light. Cool breezes found their way through the open windows, the scent of salt air on their fingertips. The world seemed a different place this morning. It felt young, fresh and full of promise again. Time had become a companion, as I watched my angel rest. Her delicate face with childhood innocence awoke. Her eyes shone love like the sun and her smile made my spirit sigh. I had fallen in love again, with an angel and the world.

The days that followed were filled with happiness. Life by the beach was the essence of freedom, friendship and a dream filled with hope. I had found a place I would love to call home. But now, the autumn leaves were almost gone and the last moments in this place were fading. We embraced our

friends as we left. I bid farewell, for now, to a time I would dream of often. We walked slowly down the lane from the house, waving at times, as the clock tower chimed one.

I collected coloured leaves as souvenirs, from the sidewalks of the prettiest town I ever knew. My time here was through, but at least not yet in life. I would keep searching and hoping that one day, sometime not far off from now, I would find a place as special as this one. I would settle down with an angel then finally sit on the beach together on a summer's day and call there, home.

Thank you so much for joining me for these adventures. I hope you enjoyed the journey?

May I wish you many happy perfect times of your own, to discover.

My kindest wishes,

Jason.