
THE ACCIDENT



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Whether young or old
we are in peril and may
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The young, especially,
refuse to believe this.

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The Accident

Vulnerability. We are all vulnerable. Whether young or old we are in peril and may be struck down at any time. The young, especially, refuse to believe this.

It cannot happen to me – this is the widespread notion, bolstered in the western world by an unsubstantiated belief in the transcendent power of the human will. Nevertheless, at heart we know ourselves to be vulnerable from the cot to the grave. So we set out to obliterate the truth, to place a stranglehold on reality, aided by the modern macho image which suggests that it is case-hardening to drink and drive, to drive without due regard for others, to lash out with fist and tongue in a show of unrepressed violence.

I was one who was stupid enough to think it could not happen to me. Then suddenly it did.

While cycling into town one chilly Sunday afternoon at the start of winter, I had come to a near halt at a crossroads, the traffic lights ahead having turned to red. There was little traffic about and a few pedestrians. But then there came a prolonged screech of tyres failing to grip, indicative of a car coming up fast, directly behind. Oh surely not in the same lane as me, not coming up fast on me. The screeching grew in volume. Then crash! An almighty jolt from the rear sent me hurtling onward out of control, then heavily down. Oh God!

From the rough tarmac road I turned and said, to the indistinct form of a man standing beside a car in the background, “Why did you have to do **this** to me?”

I don't know how long I lay in the roadway unattended, but at one stage I tried to struggle to my feet, only to be restrained by a young woman who had come to my aid, the first person to do so. I heard a voice say “Send for an ambulance”. This was the first intimation as to the seriousness of the occasion. I saw, as through a mist, the face of a woman who knelt beside me, and I gathered afterwards that I had been able to provide, falteringly, my name and address before losing consciousness.

Later I was told that the ambulance was late in arriving, the driver having taken a wrong turning. That would have to happen to me, not the luckiest of persons.

The next thing I knew, a uniformed nurse was arranging a tinsel-like wrapping round my frozen body while I shivered uncontrollably. Whether this was before or after surgery, I could not tell.

My first clear recollection is of lying abed in a ward with a doctor sat beside me. Without preamble he said, "I have some bad news for you" It transpired that a hip had been broken and an elbow, and these had been operated on. "Enough for the time being". My shattered shoulder could wait until later, all the damage being to one side, my left. Also, there were numerous abrasions and bruises.

I was grateful for the doctor's forthrightness. It was better for me not to suffer any delusions. Even so, his words made no immediate impact. I was dressed in a suit of pyjamas, not my own, for I had not worn such things in years. My left arm was in a sling, lying on top of the bedsheets. My left leg was numb and could not be moved. My shoulder lay out of sight, and the better so.

It took fully three weeks for the enormity of my injuries to sink into my tired brain. Meanwhile I lived as in another world, not so much of pain as of sheer physical discomfort. Although the damage to my hip was severest of all in terms of lasting effect, my elbow was in poor shape, so much so as to necessitate a second operation. Even so, my shoulder gave rise to most distress whenever I caught sight of it inadvertently, reflected in a mirror. It seemed to epitomise a lost cause, for hitherto I had prided myself with possession of a body unmarred by a single breakage. Now there were many and it hurt me to feel that a lifelong regimen of strenuous exercises had been proved unavailing. The blow was only softened by medical and nursing staff's remarks upon the obvious care devoted to my health, the general consensus being that I was fitter than most men younger than ten or twenty years. Nevertheless my shoulder vexed me, depicting as it did a fractured body if not a broken spirit.

It was four weeks before anything like a normal pattern of sleep was restored. It was five weeks before my bowels functioned of their own accord; I thought they had gone on strike forever. It took longer for my memory to be restored. It had taken a severe battering in its involvement with the subduing of unendurable pain. The shock to my system had been so great that tufts of hair at the front, above my forehead, had turned white. What once had been black had turned beyond grey to white.

Quite honestly, I would rather have been run through and through with sword or bayonet by a wartime enemy than be mangled and left for dead by a peacetime motorist who stood in the background, unmoving, gazing down at me without coming to my aid or ever once visiting me in hospital.

I am left with mixed feelings about war and peace. The bloodshed of war is no worse than the carnage on the roads. And what is to come of us if war should be outlawed and we are left to the manoeuvrings of power-besotted politicians and business tycoons who show no more regard for us than did the warlords of old, hastening the masses to their doom by means of sharepushing and other contrivances without ever leaving the plush comfort of their boardrooms.

Of visitors I had only one during the first week or two. She was Vivienne, unknown to me until then. She came breezing in, smartly dressed and full of vivacity, and announced herself. To my astonishment she was the young woman who had been first to come to my assistance as I lay helpless in the roadway on that fateful day. She had gifts of flowers and homemade cookies, and thereafter came twice weekly despite work and other commitments.

In the course of time we talked about all sorts of things, but she did not probe into my past. She accepted me as I was. We touched upon many topics, but not religion. As week succeeded week, I expected her to start proselytising, but no, she did not do so. It would have been disappointing if she had. I wanted her continuing good deeds to spring from the heart, without thought of accountable gain. And so it proved. She was Christian sure enough, thoroughly Christian, but it was not until she said grace before my first meal at her home that her Catholic leanings became known. Only a Christian would have come to my aid as she did on that dreadful day and go on rendering assistance. Although not a churchgoer myself, I like others to be so. This may be a selfish attitude, but I like to think not, because although I am not a worshipper indoors, I do a lot of communing with nature in my outdoor cathedral which is all the more dear to me due to the fact that it demands nothing for its upkeep except a give and take reciprocity. It rewards a true humility to an extent commensurate with the sense of oneness which it invokes.

In the Hospital

Rest came fitfully when most needed. After a few days of seclusion I was moved into a 4-bedded ward, there to endure incessant rugby talk from bed to bed and back again, while adding to the miseries of the night were the raucous snores of overweight men who slept flat on their backs. Not for the first time in my life I was made to wonder how any woman, no matter how driven by desire, could form a relationship, let alone share a marital bed with a persistent snorer.

With the sheer discomfort of being unable to turn in bed, together with the prolonged agony of sleeplessness, many were the times when I wished that the motorist who had led to my plight had made a more thorough job of things. Often I wished not to see the light of another day. But death keeps its distance from those who would embrace it.

What to do, under known circumstances, what to do for the best? In a way I knew, but at this stage in life there was no room in which to maneuver, no room for mistakes – and accidents had to be avoided, or that being too much to ask, the risk of further damage had to be minimised as far as possible. One more heavy fall and it would be the last. I knew what had to be done, but the doing it was difficult indeed. Now, while the going was good, I had to practice what I preached – Acceptance. What had happened, had happened, and nothing could unhappen it.

Hard, it was hard, but it had to be done.

There were some well-intentioned folk who, thinking to be helpful, tried to give heart by downscaling my injuries. But it would not work. According to my surgeon, my hip breakage was a bad one, and events were proving my elbow to be recalcitrant. Then there was my shoulder. All things considered, I was in a mess. Better to face up to facts rather than try to gloss over them. It was hard to accept shattered limbs in the place of sound ones. It was hard to accept an accident for which I was not at fault. It was hard to come to terms with a fate so cruel, to accept a near-fatal calamity as one might accept a lover to one's breast. It was a brutally hard task, but it had to be faced.

Meanwhile I caused the nursing staff as little bother as possible. Instead of ringing for a nurse I struggled out of bed and made my way unaided to the high-seat loo beyond the corridor, though to reposition myself in bed afterwards involved a five

or six minute battle with blankets and pillows and recalcitrant limbs. In contrast, in a bed opposite, there was a patient who drank copiously of fruit juices and kept nurses on the hop coping with the consequences. Eventually he received a reprimand, deservedly. To my left, a powerfully built lad in his early twenties moaned and groaned although his only injury was a superficial one requiring no surgery. His language in conversation with his girl friend visitor was uncouth, full of uni-syllable terms, which was surprising in view of the fact that she was a nurse at the Home of Compassion. His vocabulary was so limited as to make me wonder if our advanced civilization has advanced as far as it can and is now heading for another grunt and growl era. As one who tries to control language and not be controlled by it, I was not sorry to see the complaining illiterate go, leaving me to wonder what his attractive girl friend saw in him, and why she could not, in this free and easy age, make a better find. Perhaps as with so many modern misses, she had mistaken the moment for the hour, and rushed too soon into a liaison she was doomed to regret at leisure.

Even in the hospital, in New Zealand, there was no getting away from apartheid South Africa. The house doctor and my anesthetist were ex-South Africa, and from what I gathered they had left while the going was good, before conscription ensnared their teen-age sons, enforcing white youths to treat as targets their black brethren. We had some interesting conversations, but my radicalism had to be restrained, not because of my vulnerability but in account of the ineffectualness of argument concerning an issue so fraught with animosity.

Eventually I was moved to a rehabilitation ward where I had a cosy room to myself, but not before two dreadful nights, the first in a four-bedded ward where one patient, the least physically impaired, seemed determined to keep others awake with his ceaseless chatter, from which could be deduced the selfish aim – “If I cannot sleep, I’ll make sure that others can’t”. A voice from a bed opposite told him to “Stop talking”, which only made the situation worse. His language was on a par with that of the younger man, as though he too was bereft of any alternate means of expression. If indications are anything to go by, future dictionaries will be concise, limited to a few pages of four-letter words. My second night of travail was spent in a large ward with two other patients, both loud snorers. It was as though I had insufficient agonies of my own.

Finally I had a room to myself and the added benefit of a ‘music room’ in which to indulge my taste for music. The latter was in fact an office used by a speech

therapist, but I was given permission to occupy it at night. Two nurses, learning of my preferences, supplied me with records from their home collections. A woman patient did likewise. In this manner I was enabled to while away the hours of darkness and hide my deep distress.

My favourite vocalist was Jim Reeves, for two reasons. His clear diction and easy, relaxed style of singing helped to sooth me. In particular I liked his rendering of Dark Moon, a number which was new to me. Secondly, I owed atonement to an Afrikaner girlfriend of old for my unfeeling, ignorant dismissal of her favourite singer. She idolised him, and I came to understand why. Here was a chance for me to apologise as best I may. Also there were records of The Seekers, with vocals by Judith Durham. I must have been somewhere off the map when this superstar gained prominence, and she had drifted into relative obscurity before I came to know of her. So this was my chance to catch up, with Moringtown Ride, The Carnival is Over and When the Stars Begin to Fall played over and over again in an attempt to make up for lost time.

One day while sitting reading in the main lounge, a young nurse who had seen to my needs with especial care, came and seated herself at an easel and with only a few glances in my direction proceeded to paint a remarkable likeness, recognised by all who saw it. The portrait is with me to this day. I wish it could have been a reminder of happier times. Not only was the lass a good nurse and an excellent artist, she even found time to cut my hair, quite outside the course of her ordinary duties. Made a skilled job of it too.

Some people claim to have no interest politics. I cannot share their disregard.

Politics should be the concern of all, not only of voters at election time. But one does not expect, in the ordinary course of events, to participate in heavy-metal politicizing while undergoing treatment in hospital. However, I made the acquaintance of a political activist well known in union circles in New Zealand, and we indulged in long and earnest discussions in which I had to be the listener for most of the time. There must be something about me which attracts portraiture and politics.

To be the right person in the right place at the right moment! Alas, for the majority it remains but a dream, for the most part kept hidden within. Usually, I find myself in the reverse situation, as on this occasion. While in the orthopedic ward there had been disquieting talk of its imminent closure. It was the same when I was

transferred to the rehabilitation ward. Its future was in doubt. Nurses, tea ladies, cleaners, their future in jeopardy, were upset, unable to contain their despondency at a bleak future filled with uncertainty. Staff meetings took place almost daily. There were forebodings of further ills in a land where rail services had been curtailed, 432 post offices closed, police forces reduced at a time of rising crime, the slashing of health services. It was not the best of times to be in hospital, dependent upon others. Meanwhile, parliamentarians had voted themselves a very considerable increase in superannuation and were on the point of spending billions on the purchase of new war toys in the shape of frigates, despite the fact that Mikhail Gorbachev was hot on the peace trail. Indeed it is a strange world we live in, and fate can play some cruel tricks.

Vulnerable? Yes, we are vulnerable at all seasons, in all weathers. But the impoverished are the more so, lacking as they do the protection of strong fortifications and surrounding moats.

Many times while immobilized I recalled the little I knew of my father's agony, seven long years bedridden, unable to move unaided, unable to be moved without accompanying pain. And none the less my mother's wearying battle against poverty. Death where is thy sting, merciful death why your tardiness?

I tried unavailingly to dismiss the words of William Blake:

**Every Night and every Morn
Some to Misery are born
Every Morn and every Night
Some are born to Sweet Delight
Some are born to Sweet Delight
Some are born to Endless Night**

There is no escaping our destiny as individuals, and often I think the same logic applies to whole families, some of which are doomed to suffer more than others, endlessly.

Accepting what Happened

I remember a senior nurse saying to me “You should be able to walk without a limp by now”. Her words hurt. **Not being ready with biting one-liners or superficial retorts of any kind, I was without defense and had to bide my time. A few days later I chanced upon her in the corridor and said “Nurse, stand over there”. Then I waddled towards her and declared “This is the best I can do. I am not in the habit of giving in easily, and much less of putting on a show of pretense. Think of me as a drunken sailor; I’ll sober up before long”.**

Later she became a staunch friend and ally, and one day I heard her say to a group of colleagues, “You know, Mr Denman is doing the very best he can. He exercises daily and helps us endlessly”.

If she could have seen me months later, I wonder what she would have thought. Still rockin’ and rollin’, would she have realised how deeply frustrated I felt?

After a considerable delay I had written to friends of long standing. My handwriting was squiggly and my news as hurtful in the telling as it must have been to the unprepared, astonished recipients. Those who knew me well expressed a keen regret and did their best to lend encouragement, calling upon me to show patience, a virtue difficult enough under such trying circumstances. “Given time, I’m sure you will make a good recovery” ... “You have kept fit all these years and I am sure that will pay off” ... “Hope you’re recovering from your past ordeal. Don’t let your spirit flag” ...

Meanwhile the signs were not encouraging. For every step forward, I took a backward one. If given the choice, still I should have preferred death. Only the struggle kept me going.

In spite of all, there was the necessity to accept. This was my fate and it had to be accepted without demur, unreservedly. As with true friendship, with acceptance there is no room left over for deception.

But after acceptance, what? Mere acceptance presupposes resignation, the relinquishing of pride, vanity, egoism. But of itself, resignation provides no lasting solution. It is essential in relation to the past, but what of the future? How to avoid complacency? Between caution and courage there is little to declare.

To accept the past with all its ills, and the present founded in the past, and be resigned to the future – but how to be propelled onward by a measure of discontent which may be accounted divine? How not to be discouraged, how best to be emboldened?

After acceptance which constitutes a grasping of reality, there needs to be something more, something which lies a stage beyond mere acknowledgement of hard facts. Ideally, the past, the present and the future should be discernable as a continuum, each a link in a chain of events which, when seen in the whole, provides a logical pattern. An accident, by its very nature, disrupts the pattern.

Earlier in life I had tended to look upon the past as something over and done with, and best forgotten, along with my birthday and the sum of all my birthdays. Best not to be encumbered with the past. But the past cannot be disavowed so easily. It tends to insinuate itself into small crevices of the mind when least expected. Now I was forced to take cognizance of it.

While confined to bed, incapable of self-help, it had to be a case of acceptance., of complete submission to fate. But towards the end of my hospitalisation it became a case of requiring goals, aims, ambitions, if tangible progress were to be made. However, as soon as ambition intrudes, inner peace and contentment recede. This constitutes a very real problem to which there is no ready solution. It presents a paradox seemingly beyond human resolve. The old quandary of whether to be or not to be.

If ever there was a crux in my life, this was it. In view of my hard past there could be little time ahead, not enough for the least error of judgement, not enough for ‘just one more round for experience’. I had to make sure of doing the right thing at the right time, of knowing who I was, where I stood and where I was heading. To this end the complexities of life had to be faced, the tangled skein of contradictory opposites, which lead to confusion, had to be unraveled as far as humanly possible.

Repeatedly we are prevailed upon to look to the future, not dwell in the past. This is easier said than done. For, to look to the future with any surety, there is the need to develop a respectful awareness of the past. Otherwise one courts a repetition of errors, a continuance of wrongdoing. As a former boss of mine used to say when in his cups, which was often; “There is only one way Billy Boy, and that is the right way”. (To him all apprentices were Billy Boy). No matter how full of

failings in himself, his message rings true to this day – Only the one way, and that is the right way.

Having suffered multiple injuries, they wrought a significant change in me, making most things possible, even acceptance and whatever was demanded of me beyond that point. They brought a greater sense of awareness. Already inclined to oneness, they fostered a fuller understanding of it. They engendered a sort of rebirth, a reincarnation, call it what you may. My injuries, being so many and so gross, could have destroyed me – or revitalised me to the extent of renewal. A new spirit of adventure stirred to life. Time was seen in a calmer light; there was enough of it left. There was no great sense of elation, much less of joy. Only a deeper feeling of oneness, with acceptance serving as a bridge between past and present, between sustained fitness and crippling disability. As for my future, it had to be less a matter of maintenance than of mission, not so much a matter of eking out as of making the most of what remained.

It is difficult to define, this turning of disadvantage to advantage. It could not have been the same if I had suffered but one injury, and that of no great severity – say a broken leg. That would have aggravated me, infuriated me, that and no more. As things were, I had experienced a near brush with death, had been to hell and back, had been shaken out of a lethargy born of boredom. I had been jolted to my senses. A new purposefulness had been found, a determination to rise from the ashes of a seemingly spent existence.

Acceptance was like a fount of life, a virgin spring, a restoration. It led to a better understanding of the one and only right way. It had set me back upon the track. Ever a believer in destiny, now I had only to fall in line with it. No minor misfortune could have brought out my metal, could have steeled me to so great an extent.

Going Home

There exists in New Zealand an Accident Compensation Corporation, the object of which is to provide cover for injury, and where necessary hospitalization and surgery. Further, there are lump sum awards for permanent damage to bodily functions and effect of injury upon one's way of life.

Also, as brought to my notice by a no-nonsense friend, there is an underlying intention to preclude any American style multimillion dollar claims for incapacitation and loss of life-style. A large proportion of the injuries involving broken bones derive from contact sports, especially the rough and tumble of rugby. It does not matter. Nor, in the case of road accidents, does the apportionment of blame enter into consideration. An accident is an accident, no matter how or where it happens. There was a celebrated instance of a man suffering a broken limb while attempting to escape from prison. It made no difference, he received full coverage.

From outside sources and neighbouring hospital beds I heard many stories of the extent to which people will go in order to rip of the system. For the first few weeks I was too preoccupied to bother about anything apart from coping day to day. Later I was forced to take into account the rapid, drastic change in Government policy, with hospital ward closures, the clampdown on social services, reductions in health spending – the global inclination towards fascism. Already the Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) had been instructed to cut down on its expenses and awards. I had chosen the wrong time to be in hospital. It was the 'Denman luck', or lack of it, at work again.

The truth struck home during the latter part of my stay in hospital, when it was made clear that my room was preferred to my company. My surgeon had done his best. ACC had played its part. Physiotherapy had provided, on loan, a walking stick.

I was about to be thrown on the slagheap and left to decay. I was due to become a computerised statistic and thereafter another forgotten victim of the road toll.

If it had been hard for me in hospital, it was harder still when I left.

Nursing services were made available for a limited period. The first nurse breezed in and out, the second swept through like a hurricane. The third, intrigued by the

wall maps decorating my living room, wanted to talk about travel. I did not. Calling again next day, she brought with her a companion, and headed straight for the main wall map. With travel for me a thing of the past, I was in no mood to talk about it, stirring up memories best forgotten. Maybe I was too harsh on this occasion, and brusque. But who to blame? A new sling was required for my arm, and it was surprising to find that no nursing sister had the necessary skill, leaving me to do a two-handed job with only one hand available. Thereafter no more visits were made, and indeed there was nothing that could be done for me, save to organise meals on wheels, and this was arranged begrudgingly. Even so, I was made to understand that provision could be made for two weeks, or three at the most. At the same time I was told bluntly, "Why don't you get rid of this place and move nearer to town!" Well, I had been considering the idea, but to be told in such an abrupt manner did not go down well. After all, my home was important to me, and having been mine for a year at the most I was loathe to leave, the loser all round. To quit would have entailed selling at a loss in a depressed market and buying at an inflated price, in order to be near a shopping centre.

All the same, my greatest problem lay with shopping, and at this time, as though to accentuate the fact, there was a car on the roads bearing a rear window sticker declaring 'Born to Shop'. How true, how pathetic. And what an indictment on modern living.

I had been hopeful of leaving for Taupo within a day of my discharge from hospital, but due to a misunderstanding I was left flapping in the breeze, with the consequence that the next two weeks were the longest, loneliest and hardest of my life. The steep slope to my house, standing on a hilltop, was beyond my capabilities. I was virtually a prisoner in my own house. I, who had climbed mountains, could not get down from, nor up to, my home.

Most people, upon leaving hospital, have relatives at hand. I had no such help. How I could have survived without the continuing kindly ministrations of Vivienne, who had come to my side as I lay stricken on that fateful day, and John who had phoned for an ambulance, I do not know.

Once I was with Ginny in Taupo the going was easier, the house on level ground, while for me there was temporary relief from the curse of being born to shop.

Diary Entry - Taupo

Saturday September 9th, 1989

A red-letter day. I was a toss-up as to whether or not I should join Ginny and friend on a walk alongside the Waitahanui River, which discharges into the eastern shore of Lake Taupo. The river winds sinuously and we followed its course closely; I contrived to keep pace by means of my indispensable stick and the considerate dalliance of Ginny who stayed beside me. At our lunch stop I elected to remain behind rather than hold up the others. As an excuse I said I may explore the possibility of a swim, though we had neither swimming togs nor towels with us, summer being some time ahead.

When the others were gone I was alone with the water, and as ever was tempted. The challenge was there and had to be met, with no time for reflection. So, hurrying out of my clobber I waddled in and fell rather than plunged down a steep slope and into a deep channel where the current ran swiftly. Then all was action as I turned to meet the full force of the water, then had to fight to keep from being swept across to the far bank. There was near panic, and I had to head for and grasp a clump of grass and haul myself out. I felt dreadfully vulnerable in opposition to the strong current. The temperature of the water, cold though it must have been, did not register with me in the turmoil of the occasion. After that it was a matter of hand-towelling myself and waiting for sun and wind to do the rest while exercising. Only when dressing did I become aware of the presence of a trout fisherman who had approached from upstream, casting and re-casting as he neared my swimming spot. He appeared to be having no luck, while for me there was the invading glow that lends satisfaction to any out-of-season swim, especially this one, my first in months, my first since 'it' happened.

When the others had caught up with me on their return, they wanted to know if I had braved the water or chickened out and I allowed them to think the latter. Then I came clean;

"Yes, I done it and I'm glad I done it. When you asked me to join you on this tramp I hesitated, not wishing to hold you back or be a burden in any way. On the other hand there was the urge to meet a challenge and I'm glad I came. It's the

**best thing you could have done for me.
Yes I did have a swim under difficult
conditions, and nothing could have
pleased me more. You can't imagine how
I feel. It isn't the physical overcoming of a
challenge so much as the inner feeling of
satisfaction, of having triumphed over fear
and doubt, that pleases me".**

"Its an obstacle surmounted" said Ginny.

To me it was a major obstacle. I was back in the swim. In a swift flowing river, what was more. It was a day to remember.

Losing Hope

There were days of deep depression, too. With multiple injuries such as mine there could be no let-up. If my hip and leg did not hurt unduly, there was my elbow to give me gyp, or my shoulder, one or the other or all at once. One day it was possible to declare a gain, the next day a loss. Forward to square two, back to square one. It was most frustrating. The power of mind over matter did not apply. There were two distinct areas, the physical, the mental, and there was no meeting point. Each unto itself. Not until later could the one be made to serve the other.

At that time I wrote, despondently: I know what it is to live with pain, in bed and out, by day and night, and the thought persists, 'If this be all of life, then its better to be out of it'.

I am sufficient of a fatalist to realise that what had happened just had to happen. And I like to think that life prepares us for whatever transpires. Be this as it may, it was an inbred stoicism which enabled me to pull through, to overcome and not give in. It is not that I am indifferent to pain and suffering, but many times I have subjected myself to avoidable discomfiture, even pain, if only because I was born into plenty and reduced to poverty while yet a child. As a result, self-denial comes easily to me. The luxuries are left to others, I have no need of them. If there is anything that has come my way gratuitously it is the wisdom in recognizing the One as the Other, here the pain and so the pleasure, now the sorrow and soon the joy. In the bare fact that I have been case-hardened, steeled to endure the one and await the other, there is neither loss nor gain, but a forbearance and endurance which stand the test of time.

Whenever I tried to dispense with my walking stick, my prop, my life support, even on the shortest of walks, there was a penalty to be paid at night, with aches and pains from limbs whose wordless message was 'Enough! Sufficient for the while, tomorrow is another day'. On sunny occasions it was vexing to see the lurching shadow accompanying me. There, on road or pavement, was this reflection of a sailor home from the sea, listing heavily to port with every stride, endeavoring to regain composure by means of a compensating roll to st'b'd. One day a fair wind blowing, the next day into the doldrums. Elation giving way to despair. We like to think ebulliently in terms of will power as a human attribute, invincible, but what of the extraneous forces over which we have little if any control, and of which it can

be said that they exert a life-force peculiar to themselves, assuming as it were a force and direction all their own. Do we, or they, possess the greater power? Recurrently I was forced to think in terms of limited hopes and attainments. On the one hand, the urge to overcome my disabilities, on the other hand the necessity to accept the slings and arrows of misfortune. Only one thing was certain, I could not defeat time at its own game. Recovery, even partial, was going to be a long process.

Trying to Recover

A hospital friend had warned me not to ride my bicycle again. It was sound advice, for the rush and roar of heavy traffic made me cringe, and any screech of tyres made me tortoise-like in wanting to retract into a shell of privacy. But I disregarded it. I had to know if I could master the peddling motion which, as with swimming, invokes muscular movements and a rhythm of its own. To satisfy myself, rather than give into fear, I experimented with Ginny's bicycle. All went well while keeping to the straight and narrow, but when turning there was a moment of difficulty and a hasty dab had to be made with my left foot. The resultant stab of pain led to my retirement on the first lap. Then Ginny had her bicycle stolen. So that was that for the time being.

During this, my first day in Taupo as an invalid, I could see the lake shimmering in the distance but could not think of reaching it on foot, much less of having a swim. Consequently my one river swim, in the Waitahanui, had to suffice. Wherever I went, my stick had to go with me. We had become inseparables.

My planned return to Wanganui, principally for an appointment with my surgeon, brought with it my first sea swim, and that with a risk, for the Castlecliff beach can be treacherous, with lashing winds and surging seas, rips and holes, the lot. It was a mere dip, but represented a minor triumph, another hurdle taken. Next it was necessary to prove that I could manhandle the lawnmower down the steep slope to the roadside lawn. Disturbing doubts about this were set to rest, and another hurdle was behind me. Then there followed my first cycle ride, all the way to town and back before the early morning traffic hit the road. This represented a significant 'first', providing me with a degree of independence. Now I could be a born-again shopper. The peddling motion came surprisingly easily, though mounting and dismounting proved tricky, taxing my leg joints to their utmost.

My appointment was kept and I had my lines at the ready. "Look", I said to my surgeon, "I can run on the spot (as demonstrated) and do starfishes (another demonstration) and I can swim, and ride a bike – but I cannot do the first thing we do as babes, I cannot walk". It was true. I could do all those things, but could not dispense with my walking stick. Even with its aid, I lurched rather than walked. I gathered from his demeanor that my surgeon was far from satisfied. So was I. He tried to soften the blow to my pride by explaining how the torn muscles had to be built up to strength, which would take some time. At X-ray beforehand, the young

woman in charge had mentioned a protruding wire in my bothersome left elbow, and advised me to bring it to the surgeon's notice, which I did; then we discussed my shoulder, and from it all I gathered that full recovery was out of the question, while partial recovery would be a long, long process and a demanding one. It was not an easy time for me.

A week or so later it was back to Taupo, and upon arrival I made straight for the lake, with a walk there and back, plus two swims and a round of exercises for good measure. It was good to be back in the swim, in cool, calm waters, the snow-capped mountains serving as a backdrop. I like nothing better than to swim in winter months and be able to glance up and see snow.

Soon I achieved a walk back from the lake without use of my stick. A few days later I arrived home breathless to proclaim "I've done it, I've done it" – a two-day walk unaided. To me it represented a major achievement, made all the more difficult by doing it barefoot. Usually I walked to the lake and back at early morning, and sometimes Ginny took me by car to different beaches for further swims after work. Before leaving Taupo on this occasion I had clocked more than a century of lake swims. Mad, quite mad. But it was for a purpose, the strengthening of leg, arm and shoulder muscles. Swimming is good therapy.

But to what end? My distant project relating to southern Africa had to be held in abeyance. At this stage it was enough to think in terms of repaying debts: I owed it to the surgeon and house doctor at Wanganui Base Hospital; I owed it to Vivienne and John, my Good Samaritans – John had followed my progress in relation to an acquaintance, a man of similar age who had a broken hip, no more, "Your progress is streets ahead of his" he said; and I owed it to Ginny.

But there was never any room for complacency, let alone self-congratulations. One afternoon while sitting at table, unthinkingly I crossed my left leg over my right knee. Ooch! It was a reminder not to do it again. It was why I kept a pillow or cushion between my knees while in bed. When putting on or taking off a cardigan or pullover, there was need for care, otherwise the sleeve, sliding over my left elbow, sent pain like rapier thrusts coursing through my body. I may have been sitting reading, unmoved, and a sudden stab of pain, arising in elbow or shoulder, made me wince. For every hurdle taken, denoting progress, there was a reminder of the cost to follow, a night or more of sleeplessness. For each gain, always there was the threshold of pain to be crossed. Forever on the road to recovery there

was the accompanying anguish. In order to achieve any one goal there were the besetting aches and pains of the night to be endured. In order not to stagnate, or slip back, I felt it necessary to drive my limbs across the borderline of hurt in search of a painless tomorrow. Often, to overcome a perplexity associated with either hip or elbow or shoulder, I had to devise means of my own, for in this conflict I was alone. There was no-one to turn to for guidance, no reference manuals, and sometimes I had to dig deep for answers to my problems. For example, there was an occasion when I was hanging out washing, a simple enough task, but my shoulder objected in no uncertain manner. It set me thinking, to this effect – that all my arm exercises were confined to nether regions. Now they must be extended upward, lending strength to clothes-line activities above shoulder height. Then, in a flashback of thought, I recalled some arm exercises I had performed as a boy scout, and they provided the answer. My memory, though under recent stress, had responded with recollections of a distant event, dormant for decades.

At one stage I decided to give my aching limbs something to complain about. I could have remained passive, but at what cost? Before long I had to endure no more than a single night of pain, and all was well with the stressed parts. Thus I came to bear with pain and see it as an ally.

Friendship

It was time for me to branch out, to go bush, to head for forest trails. Nothing was pre-arranged to this end. It just happened to come about of its own accord, though it could not have done so without Ginny's deep and abiding interest in tramping. Initially we took to a graded forest track intending only to go part way, whereas we completed the circuit – and I was venturing forth for once without my hitherto indispensable walking stick, which had been left behind – whether by accident or design, I do not know. Ginny made a vigilant, knowledgeable companion, and I came away with a newfound ability, that of being able to identify Totara, Rimu, Matai, Kahikatea and their accompanying perchers. Only one thing is absent from New Zealand forests as compared with their South African counterparts – snakes, which I miss more than I can tell. I like them because of their honesty of purpose, their graceful silent progress on land or in water, and not the least because they add a spice of danger, so essential to us if we are to be kept on our toes, prevented from degeneration bred of a careless approach to life.

This was but the precursor to a more notable occasion a week later, when our intention was to head north to Urewere National Park. However the weather turned sour and we went in the opposite direction to Lake Rotopounamu, which nestles out of sight from the roadway near the larger Lake Rotoaira. The rain pursued us. As we parked the car, so it set in with gathering intensity and no sign of relenting. We pressed on, not having come this far for the ride only. There was a choice of trails, one leading to a beach, the other circling the lake. A swim being out of the question, we were as one in selecting the roundabout route.

"Think you can make it?" asked Ginny above the sound of the wind and lashing rain.

The trail led up and down, up and down, and though I had brought my stick in case of need, it was not used except for a dab or two here and there. My footwear was not of the best, and together we sloshed through mud and water until stopping for lunch at half distance, whereupon the rain pelted down undeterred by the dense forest cover. Ginny had thought of everything, including a portable stove, and we contrived a cup of tea apiece and some soggy sandwiches.

Once were home and dry there was cause for reflection. Ginny was pleased to have completed a tramp which she had done in part only before. For me there

was the pleasure of having accomplished the walk under conditions foreign to me. As I explained to Ginny, in Africa where the sun seldom fails to shine, there would have been a long, hard trek, and curses to all eternity if a few spots of rain had dampened proceedings. I had to acknowledge that, although a lifelong outdoors man, until now I had been mollycoddled, one of nature's fair-weather friends. Suddenly the wet weather bogey had been laid to rest and I had become an all-round friend of nature. In fact our lake tramp in teeming rain had brought a sense of achievement enhanced by the inclement weather. It provided a feeling of unimpeded oneness with nature in all its moods, fair or foul. We had gone so far as to stand beneath the giant trees and let the rainwater fall from overhanging branches into our open mouths. Lovely.

With little time for respite, on the following day we visited the Waipunga Falls, which Ginny had not seen before. It had been one of my hobbies to 'collect' waterfalls, mostly in Africa and India. Then we took a rough forest trail, covering a greater distance than on the previous day, but this time in fair weather.

Despite this week-end gluttony my hip and leg did not complain, as might have been expected. But my shoulder did, suddenly and viciously. While sitting idly in reminiscent mood counting my blessings, it struck. Perhaps it was objecting to the back-pack which I had carried. Maybe it was reminding me that across the way from pleasure there is pain, and not to become too complacent.

Ginny had her problems also, Mention is made of this because life is not a one-way trafficking, and together we were able to complement and sustain each other. Although I had vowed never again to go to a cinema, it was a vow made to be broken. There was little we could not talk about, and although relieved of shopping chores I was able to make up for this in other respects. There was one evening when she arrived home from work admitting to being in the dumps. We had a long talk late into the night. Next day she nipped home at midday, something she had not done before. She looked radiantly happy, and I wondered why.

Time stretches out to all eternity when each day brings variety, a feast of sights and sounds and activities, with always something new to say or do. This was especially so because there was a typewriter for my use, and a creative writer seldom is bored to tears. The consequence was that, instead of staying three weeks as intended, I overstayed by the same amount of time. But sooner or later I

had to go solo in the home which had been occupied so briefly. In any case, there was a further outpatient appointment with my surgeon to be kept early in the new year.

So it was back to Wanganui, with a stop to greet Vivienne and John, whom Ginny had met once before, though only briefly. There was much to discuss, for Ginny, as secretary for Mountain Safety, had been busy o' nights organising a 17-strong, 2-week Guides camp deep into indigenous forest to the west of Lake Taupo as part of the 1990 Asia and Pacific Scouting Jamboree, while John was officiating as quartermaster at the Hamilton camp, the centre of Jamboree activities. Their mutual involvement showed how tight a circle our globe is, people-wise as well as in terms of distance.

Before leaving, I was invited to join the family for Christmas dinner, less than two days ahead. Deliberately I was led to believe that it was to be a small family gathering, whereas it turned out to be an extended family affair. However, all was forgiven when it proved to be one of the most enjoyable Xmas Days of my life, with the family now extended to include me. As explained in a letter from Vivienne afterwards; "Sorry I didn't tell you about everyone coming but I thought if you did you would not come. We enjoyed your company and were pleased you could meet our extended family".

Politics

At the outset I revealed how political activities led to my ouster from South Africa, the land to which I belonged by proclivity though not by birth. So be it. I hold no regrets for the lone stand I made in the face of enormous odds. On the contrary, to this day I feel a glow of satisfaction if not of pride, though for long I suffered muchly, as all must do who are robbed of their homeland. Indeed for most of my adult life I have been politically caring. No doubt this faculty registers, deeply etched in my lined face, making me appear older than I am. Even in hospital, as already told, I was singled out by a firebrand of New Zealand politics, no longer young or active but widely knowledgeable and possessed of a retentive memory. Also I have professed a heightened sense of awareness, of understanding, of oneness overall. In view of all this, if I should have failed to take stock of the political scene, being now on the mend, there could be the rightful accusation of negligence, or worse, hypocrisy.

Being no quitter, once I was on my own again I took a look around and was filled with apprehension. Fear did not intrude. For, to be truthful, all fear had fled, gone, save that of another road accident, with a compounding of breakages already received. That was a very real fear, turning me into a cringing coward on crowded roads. Apart from that, some things filled me with forebodings of ill, but of fear itself I was beyond its reach – save for that one.

What appalled me was a mass hysterical jubilation at the unprecedented upsurge of so-called democracy, and with it the decline of socialism and demise of communism. (I say so-called democracy, for where is there a true democracy in our world of today? Come, tell me! And do not cite the US, where the choice lies between Republican – far right – and Democrat – far left. That is, no democratic choice at all).

It struck me as odd, if not unseemly, that the word democracy should be used to supplant the more appropriate one of capitalism. Is capitalism too strong a term? Does democracy infer an all-embracing new world order, does it appeal more to mass hysteria?

However, a capitalist system, under whatever name, relies upon fascism for support. For the perpetuation of profit, on and on, fascism is essential if capitalism is to survive indefinitely. It provides a sort of rallying point for the sustenance of otherwise spent forces.

(Without entering into fuller detail, modern technology has outstripped the marketplace; more countries are becoming producers of manufactured goods; hence the underseller is favoured; recession sets in, whereupon resort is made to fascism. Stated bluntly, production for use must supplant production for profit: but this entails a tightening of the belt – so fascism wins hands down).

Heading into the 1990s, I see a darkening future, growing fascist by the day, with little talk of capitalism and less of socialism. It will be fascist in all but name – it would not do to confront the susceptible masses with the truth.

It will be the youth of tomorrow who must pay the price – another war of liberation, another war to end all wars.

What saddens me is the gloating satisfaction of bloated money-grabbers who work hard by day and night, shuffling, shifting make-believe paper money from here to there with disregard for those of a latter generation who must pick up the pieces. Their gloating does not become them. For even a dog, when it gets its assailant down, backs off. It does not dig in its fangs or stand and gloat.

And where shall we ourselves stand in relation to the law of opposites, if there is fascism rampant, with no reverse side as with sadness and joy, loss and gain, defeat and victory?

The truth is that with unopposed fascism, though it discards the capitalist tag and assumes the name of democracy, we shall live as aliens in a world once leavened by a law of opposites.

As with politics, with equal tenacity I have remained loyal to the wild creatures, especially birds (who are nearest of all to the creative force in life) for they have taught me as much or more than any humans; also those humans whom I deem to deserve remembrance along with them. There is only one night when I have failed in my devotions, call them what you may, and that was when I was dead to the world, as yet to recover from the rather drastic surgery which changed the physical and mental course of my life. That one sad lapse can surely be forgiven.

A New Start

If the misfortune which befell me has brought recompense it is in forgetting as much as anything else. In order to make a fresh start in life there was the need to do an awful lot of forgetting. In order to accept and start anew I had to be willing to forgive and forget. Here was an ending – or a new beginning. It is difficult to explain in words, as difficult as trying to describe toothache. A great deal of self-denial was called for in order to let in the sunlight, and that meant stripping away a lot of the old undergrowth. If earlier I had thought of myself as a stoic, now I had to be one, shorn of all pretense.

The notion of having suffered so much that I could suffer no more has served as a sort of armour enabling me to venture where I dared not go before. It has given me to appreciate the sufferings of others and be at one with them. Strangely, I have become more caring. I say strangely, because I have just been reading that we live in a basically uncaring society, which generally speaking is true. Since long back I have cared for the dispossessed, the poor and backward, the politically oppressed, the wild fauna and flora. A wide range of caring, a lot of consideration directed outward. The difference is that a new-found intensity is involved, yet with less stress and strain than hitherto. This despite all that we are led to believe about the ageing process, that we become more and ever more withdrawn if not more cynical. In a world surrendering to greed for quick and easy gain I am more than ever satisfied with little and able to count it enough – a trend which must be more widely accepted if our already overpopulated world is to be saved from wanton exploitation, pollution, deforestation.

If the political scene is a mess, the economic scene is worse, with superlatives of wealth and costs escalation in next to no time from millions to billions and now to trillions. Where next? Whereas it was considered wrong for people to live beyond their means to the extent of indebtedness to others, now it is commonplace for most nations, including the wealthiest, to live massively in debt. Where will it end?

Diary Entry – A Day to Forget

Monday January 8th, 1990

I had thought the bad days were over, but no. During a late evening walk I set about trying to correct the heavy list to port by keeping my right foot as flat as possible and rising almost to tiptoe with the left while thrusting to st'b'rd. This difficult procedure served the purpose, though at the cost of considerable strain to the calves of my legs. In bed at night there was the penalty of sleeplessness. No matter which way I turned there was pain, pain, pain from ankle to crotch, the more so in my poor left leg. Oh I had thought positively right enough, and look at the result – forward to square three, back to square one.

The truth is that there is a limit to all things, and I was skirting round the fringes of possibility.

Giving

When the cycle of life is broken, by accident or war or illness, the result may be declared tragic. My life has been spared such affliction. And I have written as I have in order to make objectively real to others that which is inwardly real to me. Another reason is that I would not wish upon others the pain and hardship that have been my lot. Perhaps others, faced with similar trials, though of a different nature, may be able to gain from my experiences, and so ward off consequences which could be dire. To lose one's home is bad enough, to lose one's homeland is worse. To suffer multiple injuries could prove devastating. Yet through it all there can be gain.

How to triumph over seeming tragedy, which can befall at any time?

Through contemplation, turning inward and looking about. There has to be recourse to other than oneself. By turning inward, there lies the answer, and by looking outward, there the thought is made manifest.

The problem is how to explain this in terms easily understood by others. Perhaps the most appropriate way is to resort to the all-pervading idiom of today, which starts and ends with sex. Almost always, sex is portrayed as self-indulgent fun, and this is misleading. Treat sex in that manner and it will exact its penalty. Mentally, physically, it will take its toll, sooner or later. We hear so much about the need for earlier and ever earlier sex tuition, a bombardment that has been going on for so long that children are now denied an innocence that should be a part of carefree childhood. This is saddening, for there is little to be said, save this – that sex is at its best and most meaningful when shorn of selfishness, whereupon the gift is to the giver and comes back most to – the giver. Or say, Give and it shall be given unto you; but firstly **Give**. It is the same in all walks of life. Thus, despite the gravest of seeming misfortunes, loss may be turned to gain by turning inward for the truth and looking outward for its fulfillment. When selfishness gives way to unselfishness, through loss comes gain. Or say, when the One becomes the Other, where's the loss in giving?

**Otherwise, how to keep from despair,
how not to feel cheated,
how not to give way to nihilism
and as a last resort
a longing for death?**

No Ending

Most quests have no ending.

Certainly mine has not, it just goes on. Others may know the outcome, I shall not.

Meanwhile the struggle suffices. For me it means;

- 1) A rigid round of daily exercises – to what end?
- 2) Completion of some unfinished manuscripts – with what likelihood of success?
- 3) My project in Africa, calling me to where my roots lie deep – but there are obstacles, the restoration of physical fitness, the mustering of sufficient resources, outer and inner.