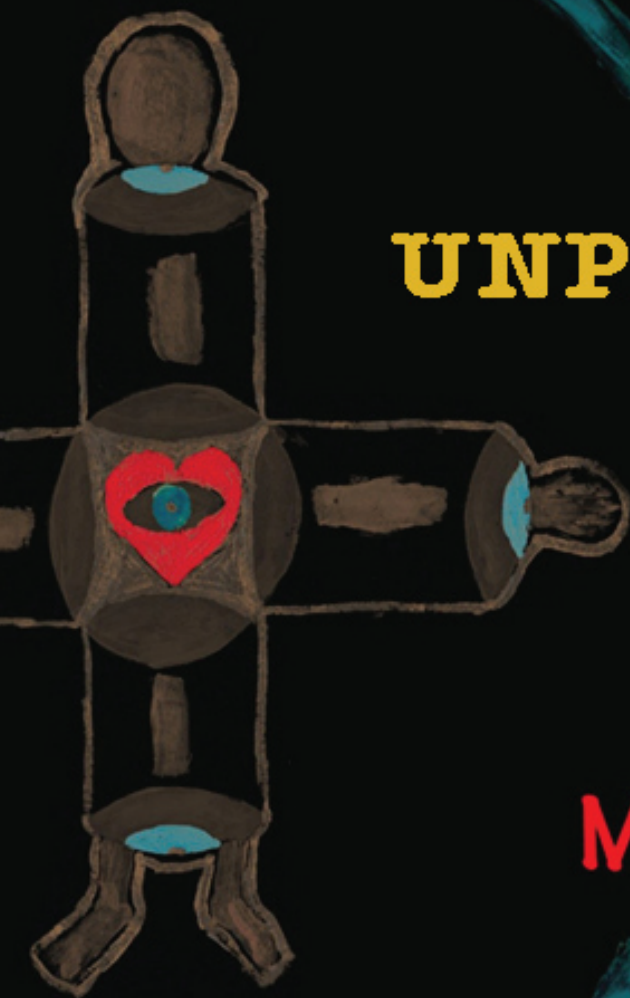


Menopause Man

UNPLUGGED

Mel Mathews



Menopause Man— Unplugged

THE CHRONICLES OF A WANDERING SOUL

Book Two

Mel Mathews

il piccolo editions

by



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Suffering isn't noble—It's humanity's birthright.

Chapter 1

After pushing the button of the electronic opener, the door rose and the MG coasted into the garage. I lived in a studio apartment below the home of my landlady, Mrs. Shams. She and her husband had purchased the house thirty-nine years ago, the same year that I was born. Her husband had been dead for nineteen years, and now she lived alone . . . well, sort of.

Mrs. Shams was a feisty eighty-year-old weighing in at a whopping eighty-six pounds—with the attitude of a heavyweight. Her hair was white and her eyes a crisp, clear blue. She went to yoga three times a week. When she talked, her head loosely bounced around on her shoulders.

A friend had told me that the studio was soon to become available. I called immediately after receiving the tip. In Carmel, nice little studios were hard to find even at nine hundred dollars a month. This one went for three-fifty. There had to be a catch.

“What do you expect from me?” I asked, figuring that it might entail taking out her trash or doing some yard work.

“Well, we’re not going to be chums or anything like that,” she answered cautiously. Fine with me. I hated yard work, and befriending a grumpy little old lady certainly wasn’t on my to-do list, not in this lifetime anyway. Perhaps the ol’ bird just wanted a token man around the place so she’d feel a little more secure at night.

The home was built on a hillside. The studio was part of the lower foundational structure that supported Mrs. Shams’s living quarters above. It had a separate entrance on the downhill side of the property. The small apartment was completely self-contained. Later I learned that her son had lived in the lower apartment as a teenager and used the quasi-kitchen as his darkroom.

As time passed, I learned more. In the year and a half that I’d been living there, I had yet to witness a visit from her son. Actually Mrs. Shams had only mentioned him twice, once when she asked me to fax him a copy of his birth certificate because he had lost his passport.

“It’s beautiful,” Kate said, admiring the yard as she walked out of the garage onto the driveway.

“Wait ’til you get to the other side,” I answered, while unloading

the trunk and setting the last of the bags on the ground behind the car. After everything was unloaded, I closed the trunk, grabbed a couple of bags, and walked to the stepping-stone path. It led down and around to the opposite side of the house, into a gardened courtyard, the entryway to the studio. Kate hesitated, looking first at the car and then at me.

"Don't worry about that black bag. I'll come back after it in a bit," I said, pulling up the strap from the duffle that had slipped from my shoulder.

Kate reached for her purse and overnight bag, then followed.

"Careful of this loose stone," I said, teetering back on forth on it so she could witness its instability. A root had grown up under it. It had been that way since I'd moved in.

"Thanks, I see what you mean," Kate answered, taking her turn on the concrete teeter-totter. "Wow, look at that!" she added, viewing the mouth of Carmel Valley. She looked down at Carmel River Beach to her right and then swept left taking in the grassy green mountains that rose a thousand feet above the Highlands. Then she dropped her gaze. "What's down there?" she asked, pointing to the intersection of Highway 1 and Rio Road.

"Crossroads."

"I mean the buildings."

"It's the Crossroads shopping area, and over there's the Barnyard," I answered, pointing to the left of the Crossroads. "It's all shops and restaurants."

"And you live up here above it all."

I nodded with a smile.

"It's lovely."

"Wait 'til I take you back there," I added, pointing east toward the valley.

"What's back there?"

"Carmel Valley."

"Where's Big Sur?"

"South of here about thirty miles."

"What's *it* like?"

"I'll show you sometime. Words don't do it justice," I answered, dropping the bags on the brick patio just outside the apartment door. After opening the screen door and wedging the doormat under the wooden frame to hold it open, I sliding the key into the door lock, jiggled it as if whispering a secret password, and before taking another breath the

door swung open, granting passage into the secret hide-away. I held the door for Kate to cross the threshold before me.

“How about a tour?” I joked, making light of the small apartment.

“Please,” she cordially insisted while standing just inside the door.

“Directly in front of you is the closet,” I announced, standing right behind Kate and pointing to the west wall of the apartment. “The door to the right is my kitchen,” I explained, ignoring the dresser on the north wall. A framed poem: *The Definitive Journey* by Juan Ramon Jimenez hung over a replica of a dresser that I had as a young boy.

She went towards the kitchenette and stepped in. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Hey, it’s all I need.” It was simply a closet beneath the stairway that led up to Mrs. Shams’s home. A sink was to the left. Above the sink was a shelf that held a microwave and a coffee pot. Below was an old bookshelf used for a few plates, cooking utensils, and a couple of dusty canned goods that had been purchased at the grocery store a year earlier—remnants of a few other good intentions that had been discarded shortly after discovering Tillie Gort’s and the Pink House in Pacific Grove.

“Come on, let me show you the rest of the palace,” I offered, walking around Kate and pulling her by the elbow from the kitchen. On the opposite side of the clothes closet was a desk.

“That’s quite a computer,” she said, looking directly at a lime colored iMac.

She ignored the painting over the computer. The “Trickster” had the silhouette of a human-like coyote shadowed onto the sidewalk in front of a city café. Red and blue mountains rose up behind the city, the setting sun reflecting from an infinite string of golden stratiform clouds that appeared to have no beginning or end. The painting had a magical quality, like it wouldn’t be difficult to fall into—lost to another world.

“It’s an odd looking thing, huh,” I answered, just to confirm her reaction to the iMac. “I’ve been thinking about getting a bigger place, one with a little more space and a real kitchen.” Kate’s gorgeous smile grew. “This is the living room,” I explained, pulling her three steps from where she was standing.

With the exception of a small casement in the bathroom, the east wall had the only window, but it looked down and out into the mouth of Carmel Valley. Beneath this picture window was an imported Italian black leather Natuzzi couch. The couch was fifteen years old, the first nice piece of furniture I had ever purchased. In spite of its history, the

leather couch appeared to be in the same condition as the day it had been newly delivered.

Against the south wall was a queen-size bed. Two small wooden bookshelves held several classical novels, books on myth, archetypal symbolism, and the analytical interpretations of the human condition—not that any of this literature had yet to deliver me from evil.

Above the bed was a large, black-framed painting of Sydney Australia. Brown paper had been painted completely black, and then the artist had scratched off the black paint to reveal a light brown silhouette of the Sydney skyline, including the famed Opera House. The painting was finished with highlights of bright colors emanating as reflections from the city's towering skyscrapers above and water from the bay below. The painting had been purchased in Sydney several years earlier. The artist was supposedly an imprisoned petty thief who was allowed to paint and sell his work for the benefit of charity.

A door in the west wall led into the bathroom. To the left of the bathroom door was an original painting by a good friend—two dancing coyotes, one black and one white, opposing each other face-to-face in a dance, both playing a flute or horn, in front of a crimson sunset that melted into a blue sea.

To the right of the bathroom door stood a pine armoire that housed a seldom-watched television and a CD player. On top of the armoire were speakers and a glass picture frame with a photo of a naked old man riding a horse.

"Who's that on the horse?" Kate asked, gazing oddly at the old man.

"My grandpa," I lied. The picture had actually come in the frame and I had failed to replace it with one of meaning. The naked old man had drawn so much attention over the years that I decided to leave him as a conversation piece.

"Your grandpa?"

"Yeah, he was a crazy old fart," I answered, continuing the innocent deception. "The bathroom's here," I said, pointing at the door to the left of the armoire.

"Excuse me," she said, and walked toward the restroom.

"Make yourself at home," I replied, as she removed the towel that hung over the door top in order to close it behind her. "I'll get the rest of our stuff," I volunteered, as the door closed.

The bathroom had a full size tub and a showerhead. Pale green tile covered the floor as well as the bottom half of the walls. What wasn't

tiled was painted the same color as the rest of the apartment, a creamy off-white. The sink and toilet were a pale yellow. A mirrored medicine cabinet that was beginning to rust from the inside out was mounted over the sink.

A screened, crank-type window on the south wall was always left cracked open for ventilation. In the windowsill were a few boxes of stick matches, collected from the local restaurants, to use as air freshener or to light a candle in the event of losing electricity in a winter storm. A bottle of glass cleaner and mildew remover hung from a rail between the sink and toilet.

Running bath water could be heard from the bathroom window as I teetered on the loose stepping-stone on the way back down to the studio. Once inside, I threw the bags down on the floor, lay down on the bed and closed my eyes. A few minutes later, the bathroom door creaked open a couple of inches.

“I need a towel,” she said in a soft tone.

“Check the wooden stand in the corner.”

“How about some soap?”

“Below the towels.”

“I think I need your help,” Kate said, having slipped an arm through the cracked door, beckoning me with her index finger that rolled open and closed.

Her long brown hair hung down over her breasts, the ends dangled over her nipples. Two clean towels had already been folded over the edge of the sink. A half bar of soap was in the tub’s dish. I looked into her blue-green eyes, followed her hair down to her breasts, dropped my gaze further down to her bush, and finished the downward trend admiring her thighs, calves, feet, and toes. There was nothing on her petite, yet solid, young body that I didn’t want to consume.

Eighty pounds heavier, I leaned in to kiss her and she supported me effortlessly. Our love affair was still new and she was always ready to receive me. Kate never needed to be warmed up; our coming together lacked any awkwardness. When I kissed her, she was all there, completely present. It was like the whole world stopped and all of its energy flowed back and forth between us.

Kate pulled the sweaty blue T-shirt over my head and arms, and when my head popped out, I leaned forward trying to mouth one of her nipples. She pulled away and dropped down to help me step out of my jeans and boxers. She stood up, reached for my hand, turned, and started to step into the bath. I reached around her, grabbed her breast

and pulled her back. She pressed her ass cheeks up into my groin, and I tried to enter her from behind, but she quickly evaded me and stepped into the bathtub. She turned to face me with her melting smile, and like a loyal pup, I followed her into the tub of warm water.

Chapter 2

A week had passed since Kate last phoned. Her father had died, an unexpected heart attack. He was in his early fifties and had no history of heart trouble. She'd flown back east for the service. I had offered to accompany Kate but our relationship was too new. She felt it was better to go alone so that she could give full attention to herself and her family. It made perfectly good sense. Bringing an older man home to mom at a time like this wouldn't have been inappropriate, especially considering the history of Kate and her father's unstable relationship.

Against her father's wishes, Kate had moved away to school. His overprotection and her rebellion had proven a bad combination. The two probably wouldn't even have been on speaking terms if her mother hadn't been acting as a mediator. Anyway, Kate's rebellion had brought her to California, and I was damn happy about it in spite of her father's indignation.

I first met Kate while she was working at a coffee house that served soup, sandwiches, and salads. The place looked more like a bar than a coffee house. Lewis, Devin, and I would meet there for a late afternoon bullshit session over an iced tea. Lewis's wife had nicknamed us the TWA's—Time Wasting Assholes. We never could quite figure out the reason for this tag. I suppose she considered us TWA's because we were keeping Lewis from bowing to the queen.

Kate worked afternoons at the local watering hole and had to tolerate us TWA's. Her then-current boyfriend would occasionally stop by to visit. I called him Pretty Boy: a blonde, blue-eyed twenty-three-year-old punk who believed his destiny was to be a movie star. She never appeared to care all that much for the guy. It seemed that something other than love and admiration kept the two together. At first, I thought it was jealousy on his part, thought I had dreamed up the story about Kate and Pretty Boy just to believe I stood a real shot at her, but my initial take of the situation eventually proved to be right.

Learning to trust my instincts had taken a while, but it took even longer to learn patience, not to over-react, and to let fate run its course. Fortunately, the wait-and-see method had worked with Kate. Had I pursued her like my body and senses demanded, she'd have probably ended up married to that little blue-eyed sweetbread.

It was odd how we eventually reconnected. It was late January, a

year has passed since I had moved to the coast. All the women whom I'd been involved with back in the Central Valley had moved on. I had walked to the Pine Inn in downtown Carmel for a morning coffee. It was the AT&T classic and I was pissed about the crowds. Actually, I was pissed off about everything—that's what happens when one lets go of old identities and dreams.

I'd been up reading and watching television the night before until three in the morning, restless about what to do with my life, uncertain of how to support a woman and at the same time honor my call to freedom. Divided, I didn't know what I wanted and was afraid of becoming a failure, afraid that I wouldn't find my next calling, and afraid of spending my life's savings.

It might have been easier going back to tractors, but I wasn't up to selling my soul. Then again, maybe I really didn't have a choice. Perhaps my soul was really running the show, and had been all along. All the stuff in the outside world, the call to conventional duty, was just a distraction. Anyway, that's what was going on in my mind.

On the way back to the studio from coffee, I decided to sell the airplane. I'd considered selling off this piece of myself for sometime, but it had only been a fleeting thought. Walking back to the studio that morning, I finally resolved to let go of this particular attachment, too. I'd left that old dream a year earlier, but had held on to N1MC like Kate's father had clung to her.

I was actually selling the airplane for three reasons. It no longer served me economically, and the proceeds from the sale would earn enough interest to more than pay the rent. I was also finished with the identity that went along with owning and flying the Beechcraft, but the most profound reason for selling the airplane was that I'd become afraid of it—frightened beyond a healthy respect.

Years ago Bonanza's had been nicknamed Forked-Tailed-Doctor-Killers because they were fast slippery airplanes that took low-time pilots, like inexperienced doctors who could afford the airplanes, to an early and untimely death. I was also aware of how many men in the midst of a mid-life crisis cracked up airplanes or killed themselves in some other stylish fashion. These weren't intentional suicides, but the men couldn't grow up emotionally or psychologically. For some reason, certain men were unable to make the transition into adulthood and eventually their short-looped psyches got the best of them. Consciously, their deaths appeared to be an accident; unconsciously it was suicide.

Two weeks later, I pre-flighted N1MC, pulled her out of the hangar, and departed from the Carmel Valley airport on runway three-zero with

full power. After gaining altitude, I turned crosswind and then downwind before adjusting the propeller and manifold pressure to twenty-three inches square. Next I proceeded to call Monterey approach to pick up flight following.

“Monterey approach, this is Bonanza One Mike Charlie.”

“November One Mike Charlie, remain clear of class C airspace until advised.”

I was at twelve hundred feet and class C airspace was at fifteen hundred feet. I leveled the plane at fourteen hundred and flew a couple of three-sixties hoping to gain clearance to transit the protected airspace, but after making two more unsuccessful attempts at contacting air traffic control, I gave up on the buzzards.

It was a clear day, so I flew east through the valley at fourteen hundred feet until out of protected airspace and then climbed to seventy-five hundred and leveled off. After leaning the fuel to air mixture, I switched on the autopilot, set the heading bug to zero-one-eight, and let the Bonanza guide our final flight home.

The man who cared for N1MC was based in the Central Valley. I had decided to have Ryder look after the plane. Ryder had one of the most reputable Beechcraft shops in the Western U.S. and often received calls from people looking for a well-kept Bonanza. It would also be handy for any routine maintenance that the plane might need before it sold.

After making one of the smoothest landings in my flying career, I taxied up to the gas pump to top off the airplane. I leaned out the mixture to shut down the engine, turned the key off, pulled it from the ignition switch and then climbed out of N1MC to chock and ground the aircraft before refueling. While topping off the fuel tanks, Ryder walked up and told me to leave the plane where she was, said he'd put her in a hangar before the day's end.

While retrieving my bag and cellular phone from the Bonanza, I discovered a voice message from Mom. I returned her call.

“I'm alive,” I announced when she answered the phone.

“Why don't you hire someone to fly you home if you're nervous?” Mom suggested, knowing that I had been anxious about this final voyage, this letting go. Little deaths, that's what they are, these 'letting goes,' and they can be the source of a great deal of fear and anxiety.

“I'm already here,” I announced. Fear or no fear, I wouldn't have let someone else pilot me home; that would have been a defeat.

“Where are you?”

“Airport.”

“So then you haven’t heard?”

“Heard what?”

“A plane just went down,” she said in a sad, yet relieved tone. “Three people died and a fourth is in the burn unit.”

“No, it wasn’t me,” I said in a choked up voice as a few tears came. I had no power to create what had happened, but the timing of the plane crash was enough to validate my decision to end a flying career. I’d had a lot of fun in N1MC, had flown places and done things most people only dream of doing in a lifetime, but now it was over, that part of life, anyway.

Lewis drove up a few minutes later and we headed for lunch.

“Hey, whatever happened to Kate?” Lewis asked, after we’d been on the road for about ten minutes.

“I don’t know. I called her several months ago, but she never called me back,” I answered. “I’ve got her number programmed in my cell phone. I’ll call her right now,” I announced and keyed up her number. Her voice mail answered. “Kate, this is Malcolm. I called you a few months back, but you never called me back. Call me. I really want to know what’s been happening with you,” I said in a direct, authoritative tone. “Well, we’ll see if that works.”

“Man, I sure hope you can tap into some of that shit,” Lewis encouraged. Lewis was married with two children. He was always hoping that I could tap into some of whatever he couldn’t.

After lunch, Lewis brought me back to the airport to get my car. I kept a Chevy Tahoe in Carmel and the MG in the Valley. That way, when I flew back and forth between the two destinations, a set of wheels was always waiting for me after touch down.

Several months had passed since I’d last started the MG, and she was a bit stubborn. After a few prayers, and cranking on the sporty mid-life crisis bucket-a-bolts until the battery was nearly dead, the stubborn Brit fired on one cylinder. She choked and coughed until eventually all four were firing.

I had just left the airport when the cell phone rang. It was Kate and the call threw me at first because I’d forgotten about leaving her a message. She apologized for not getting back to me a few months earlier. We visited a bit and then I test her with an invitation for a coffee. She couldn’t because she had plans that evening, so I invited her to lunch the following day and she accepted.

At lunch, I learned that Kate was still seeing Pretty Boy off and on. They were still doing the same ol’ break-up then get back together

routine. Over the next several months Kate and I stayed in contact by e-mail. Whenever I returned to the Valley, I'd phone ahead to make a date with her for lunch or dinner. I didn't push anything with her, mostly just listened.

Then one day, Kate phoned to say she had dumped old blue eyes a month earlier, and that this time it was for good. I kept in contact with her, but figured it best to sit back and let her seesaw for a while longer. The following month, I did another Valley run. It was a Friday afternoon, and I phoned her on the drive over. She wanted to get together that evening for dinner. That was the first night I didn't leave when I took Kate home. Actually, I didn't leave until the following Monday morning.

Kate and I had only been seeing each other for about a month when her father passed away. She was employed by the county as a social worker for child protective services and still had her apartment in the Valley. We'd spend weekends together. Things felt good between us, but it wasn't time to be living together, not yet anyway. But now Kate was back east burying her father, and I was slumming around Carmel, living alone in a three-hundred and fifty dollar a month studio, pretending that I was a retired millionaire like the rest of the locals, and wishing the hell that I wasn't feeling lonely and missing Kate.

When she last phoned, Kate said she planned to stay with her mother for a while. I understood, but wasn't so fond of the idea. I wanted to ask her how long she planned to be away but didn't want to burden her with my neediness. I'd been alone for a long time. Having Kate come into my life had raised a hope that my life as a single man had come to an end.

* * * * *

Bored and lonely, I set off to seek solace from a good friend. Unfortunately, no one was home. I let myself in with a spare key, poured an iced tea, and turned on the television in hope that someone would soon return. Named after his maternal grandfather, Judas Turner despised his birthright, and at an early age chose to be called by his surname. We were the same age and had been friends since our freshman year of high school. Turner was a few inches shorter and twenty pounds lighter than my six foot, one hundred and ninety-five pound frame. We both had very fine, sandy hair. Turner had blue eyes; mine were green. I had been

Turner's best man twice, and Turner had been mine once. If I was ever foolish enough to do it again, it would be Turner standing next to me whispering into my ear, reminding me of what a stupid ass I was, and singing a little tune that would sound something like: "I do, I do, I do. I don't know why I do . . . but I do."

Cassandra was ten years younger than Turner. She was from the South. They had met when Cassi was visiting her grandparents in California. After her initial two-week visit she returned home and that's when Turner showed up on my doorstep—love struck. Hell, I hadn't seen Turner in months, so something was up.

"I met this girl a few weeks ago," Turner said, as he settled into the black leather sofa in the den, having found the last beer in the refrigerator and a non-alcoholic beer at that.

"What's she like?" I asked, reaching to put my iced tea down on a coaster next to the couch.

"She's cuter than hell," Turner said, before taking a swig of the O'Doul's.

"What's her story?"

"Lives in Memphis."

"Memphis? Where the hell'd you meet her?"

"At a party here in town. She was out visiting her grandparents."

"You goin' to Memphis?"

"No, Memphis is coming here. I've been on the phone with her every night since she got home. You ought to hear her voice. She just drives me wild . . ." Turner went on, eyes all glazed over.

Hell, Turner was gone. He was like a wagged-tail puppy close to peeing himself every time he started mimicking her cute southern "hi y'all." Cassi moved out to California a few weeks later. More than ten years had gone by, and now they were a happily-ever-after story with two little boys, four and two, and a third kid in the hopper, ready to pop out of the chute anytime.

They had married a year after Cassi had moved to California, but not long after, she and Turner had moved to Memphis, only to return to California six months later. Turner's old company rehired him and transferred him to the Monterey Peninsula to run a facility that had been failing because of poor management. I was divorced by then and had no woman in my life, so I started visiting Turner and Cassi on the occasional weekend. One Christmas, I had come over to celebrate the holiday with them and the following day I drove Cassi to the Del Monte shopping center in Monterey to exchange some gifts. Turner

hated shopping; I didn't care for it much either, but still had a woman to cross off my list.

So, Cassi set off on her gift-exchanging mission, and I bought a cup of coffee before settling into one of the heavy cast iron chairs that were scattered around outside of Starbucks. Sipping coffee, I watched the women scurrying about in a frenzy as if it was the last shopping day on earth. It was my birthday. I turned thirty-six that day, the day after Christmas; it was Boxer's day in Canada and St. Stephen's day in other parts of the world, or so I'd been told.

Gleaning for remnants of bagels and scones, a black bird landed on the cast iron table less than a foot from me. The bird bobbed its head a few times, danced an odd little dance, and then flew off, drawing my attention up to the coastal mountain range. I felt a bit odd, took a deep breath, and then it hit me. I was thirty-six, single, no kids and had been living my entire life back in the San Joaquin Valley. It wasn't a bad life by any standard, but I'd become a prisoner of an identity. In other words, all that I had become and acquired was running me instead of me running it.

A sweet southern "hi there," woke me from the trance.

"Oh, hi Cassi. You done?"

"No, but we better go before I spend what we don't have," Cassi answered, smiling her smile.

When we arrived back at their apartment, I picked up the newspaper and found the classifieds. In the new-today section, was an ad for a studio apartment in Carmel. I phoned and asked to see it and was invited to come and have a look right away. Two hours later, I was writing a check to rent the studio for the month of January.

I returned to the Central Valley and told my manager what I'd done and of my plans to take off the next month. After putting my business in order, I returned the following week for a month long sabbatical that would hopefully cure me of the same discontentment that three years later I was still trying to escape. After a couple of years, Turner and Cassi purchased a home in Monterey, about a month before I had quit my job and moved into the studio below Mrs. Shams. And now, that's where I was, sitting in their new house, sipping an iced tea, watching television and waiting for Turner, Cassi, and the boys to return home.

Chapter 3

Turner's work truck was gone, but Cassi's suburban was in the driveway. I parked, walked to the door and knocked, but no answer, so I knocked again. You could hear voices inside, and I had a key, so after unlocking the door, I showed myself in.

Cassi was walking down the stairs. "Hey you," she said, greeting me with a warm hug.

Cassi was as beautiful as ever. She had sandy-blonde shoulder-length hair. Her bluish-green round eyes sparkled with or without her genuinely warm smile. She was an inch or two over five feet and, between babies, kept herself fit and trim. She was nearly full term with her third child.

"Turner should be home anytime," she said, as I followed her into the kitchen. "Mom and Aunt Cindy are here," she continued, as both women walked in from the back yard. Karen, Cassi's mother, had been outside dragging on a cigarette, trying to satisfy a nicotine fit or calm some other invisible demon.

"Hi Karen. Hi Aunt Cindy," I greeted, never before having met Aunt Cindy.

"Hi Malcolm," Karen said, in her southern way, then greeted me with a warm hug.

"Nice to meet you, Cindy," I said, shaking her hand to appease my initial flippancy.

"Nice to meet you," she courteously responded, still a bit uncertain.

"You stayin' for dinner?" Karen asked.

"Well, I didn't come for dinner. I just stopped by to . . ."

"Yes, he's staying for dinner," Cassi interrupted. "Why else do you think he's visiting at this time of the day," she added, with her head in the cupboard looking for something to pacify her youngest son's restlessness.

"I . . ." She had me pegged, so why argue. Besides, it was a home cooked meal, and a free one at that.

"How you feeling Cassi?"

"I'm ready for this kid to be out!"

"I bet you are," I answered, marveled, as she danced around the

kitchen as if she was at ballet rehearsal. If I ever married again, the woman would have to be a whole lot like Cassi—she could put up with a lot of crap.

“Why don’t you call your mom and ask her what I can do to hurry this along,” Cassi suggested.

My mother had been a nurse for the past thirty years. Cassi handed me the portable phone, and I dialed the direct line to the maternity ward.

“Hi Mom!”

“Hi . . . Malcolm?” she asked hesitating a moment before guessing which of her boys was calling.

“Hey, Mom, I’m at Turner’s. Cassi’s ready to pop, but the baby isn’t. She wants to ask you something,” I said, handing Cassi the phone before Mom could respond.

Mom and Cassi visited, while Karen and Aunt Cindy cooked dinner. Turner got home and ran up to shower. I sat down on the love seat that was in the dining area of the kitchen and watched television. Carson, the four year old ran in, changed the channel to Scooby-Doo, and jumped into my lap. He then stood with his feet on my knees, put his arms around my neck, and pulled our heads together until we were nose to nose. “I love Scooby-Doo. I just get so wound up when Scooby comes on,” Carson screamed into my face, danced a little jig on my knees and then turned a flip onto the vacant side of the love seat, landing right side up next to me. I put my arm around Carson, pulling him to my side, and we watched Scooby-Doo.

Carson soon grew restless and walked to the television to turn up the volume. The remote was hidden under my calf and as soon as Carson turned up the volume, I would change the channel. Carson would change the channel back to Scooby and I would lower the volume. This went on for about five minutes with Carson trying to figure out why the television was acting so oddly. Aunt Cindy looked on without letting out a peep as I tortured the boy. His father walked in and Carson finally began to throw a fit.

“Dad, something’s wrong with this TV! I turn it up and the channel changes,” he whined.

“Where’s the remote?” Turner asked, looking to me. We swapped smiles.

“Uncle Malcolm!” Carson screamed.

“What?” I asked, handing him the remote.

Turner walked over and sat with us to watch the rest of Scooby. Dinner was ready shortly after we had all settled into the love seat.

“Malcolm . . . Turner . . . come on, fix a plate so you two can go in the other room and talk,” Karen offered. She’d been there for a couple weeks and had really taken a load off Turner and Cassi, cooking and caring for the kids. Aunt Cindy had been there for five days in anticipation of Cassi delivering on her visit. Cassi had two more days to fulfill her aunt’s wish before Cindy’s return ticket to Birmingham expired. Nothing like putting pressure on a pregnant lady.

Cassi carried her plate in and joined us at the dinner table in the formal dining room. “Have you ever met any of my Mom’s sisters before?” she asked, opening up the dinner topic.

“No, but I believe I met Morgan’s brothers,” I answered, acting dumb.

Morgan was Karen’s husband, Cassi’s stepfather. Turner’s move to Memphis had supposedly been on a promise from Morgan to bring Turner in as a partner in the restaurant business. A couple months later and two thousand miles from home, Turner figured out that he’d been suckered. The slightest reference to Morgan always sent Turner into a spiral.

“Which one?” Turner asked.

“I don’t know. It was that time I flew out to Memphis to see you on the Fourth of July. You called him Shovel Head. I think he was a preacher.”

“Jerry, that shovel-headed goofball, thought he was a faith healer,” Turner said, rolling his eyes.

“You met his brother Henry, too,” Cassi added, trying to shift away from Shovel Head.

“Henry was pretty cool, but old Shovel Head was something else. He tried to heal me. Remember that Cassi?” Turner asked, turning to see her reaction.

Cassi shook her head slightly to acknowledge her husband and then kept on eating dinner. She was trying to keep him from a sudden outburst, just like she did with her two little boys.

“He tried to heal my hernia,” Turner continued.

“One of them, huh?” I asked, helping to fuel the fire.

“It worked,” Turner claimed, and then paused briefly before adding, “For ten whole seconds!”

“Was it a hands-on experience?” I asked, egging Turner on.

Cassi swallowed another bite of food. “How’s Kate?” she asked, trying to shift the topic. They’d met Kate a few weeks after she and I had started seeing each other. Cassi and Kate had hit it off from the start.

“Well, fine, considering . . . but her mom is really taking things hard.”

“He said that it didn’t work because I didn’t believe,” Turner interrupted, with a give-me-a-break dumb-ass look.

“Was it a hands-on thing?” I asked again.

“Turner! Mom’s right in the other room,” Cassi scolded, a scowl on her face. Then she turned to me with the same look, shaking her index finger, “You too!” She was used to my provocations, and I was used to her reprimands. Like the rest of her boys, I savored the attention.

“Oh yeah, sorry, Jerry, that’s not my hernia. Or better yet, hey, Jerry, how about getting your thumb out of my ass? . . . And it didn’t work just because I didn’t believe. I could just hear them after I left. Dumb Californian just didn’t believe . . .” Turner continued his banter and by then, Cassi and I were both choking with laughter.

After dinner, Cassi seemed restless and went upstairs. A while later, she poked her head over the rail and asked Turner to come up. This was my cue to leave, so I thanked them all for dinner and said goodbye.

* * * * *

The phone rang shortly before midnight.

“Malcolm, we have a new baby girl,” Turner announced.

“Everyone alright?”

“Everyone’s fine.”

“What’s her name?”

“Mallory Catherine.”

Chapter 4

It was a Tillie Gort's night. I'd gone for a cup of tea, hoping to run into Carly. Tillie's was celebrating their thirtieth year of business catering to the health conscious natives, as well as a few straggling tourists who were looking for something other than fish and chips, or who were avoiding the upscale chic restaurants scattered throughout Pacific Grove, Carmel, Pebble Beach, and Monterey.

Tillie Gort's was casual and open 'til ten-thirty in the evenings. I had befriended most of the wait staff and attended a good many of their off-duty birthday celebrations. I knew the menu by heart. Years ago, I'd substituted alcoholic binges with sugar, so, needless to say, I had become intimately acquainted with Tillie's dessert selection.

A sizeable photograph hung over the swinging doors that lead back into the kitchen—a picture of Tillie's staff and a few locals who were hanging out there thirty years earlier. The staff photo shoot had become an annual event and along the wall in one corner of the adjoining dining room hung smaller framed photos taken in later years.

After parking right in front of the restaurant, I walked in to the coffee counter and said hello to Chloe and Kristi, two of the waitresses. Things appeared slow and they were both sitting at the counter.

"I sure like your Tahoe," Kristi commented.

"Thanks, me too . . ."

"Hi there," Carly said, surprising me as she popped up behind the counter.

"Hi Carly. You're a pleasant surprise." Carly was always a pleasant surprise. I had met her in a psychology class during my first semester at the community college. She was a twenty-four-year-old half Panamanian and half something else, a natural beauty with long brown hair. Her brown eyes and slightly crooked nose were just part of her natural beauty. She was five-eight, had narrow hips and a healthy topside. She would age gracefully. She spoke fluent Spanish and it threw me every time she communicated with the cooks in the kitchen. It just didn't seem right, this Spanish fluency flowing from the lips of a young woman who seemed so American.

"So, whatcha been up to Malcolm?" Carly asked.

Chloe and Kristi sat a couple seats away in their own little world.

“Oh, this weekend I went back to the Central Valley and had lunch with my fishing buddy, Rob.”

Carly listened intently as the other two girls still remained wrapped up in their own thing.

“After lunch, I headed over to visit friends and bring their three-year-old son the John Deere peddle tractor I had bought for him last December but failed to get to him for Christmas. His baby brother was born just a few months ago. Being the firstborn son who lost Mother to a younger brother, I figured the John Deere might soothe the soul of this neglected youngster.”

“How thoughtful of you!”

“It was a timely opportunity to redeem myself,” I added, not wanting to appear too overly empathetic and compassionate.

“After that I headed over to my parents’ house and spent the night. We barbecued Sunday afternoon. Then I went on to an ex-client’s daughter’s birthday party.”

“That sounds like fun.”

“I got to see several people that I haven’t seen since quitting the tractors. It was really nice. They were a huge part of my life for many years. I kind of just chopped them off.”

“Yeah, that must be hard,” Carly answered, validating the fact that she was actually listening to the long-winded account of my weekend.

“I planned on leaving the party by nine, because of the two-hour drive back to Carmel from Tranquillity, but I didn’t get out of there until eleven.”

“Where’s Tranquillity? It sounds like a really neat place.”

“It sounds a hell of a lot neater than it really is. The name’s about all it has going for it.”

“Really?”

“That’s not entirely true. Some very fine people live there. It’s a small farming community on the west side of the Central Valley.”

“What’s it like?”

“The farmers meet for coffee at the hardware store when it opens at eight in the morning. I used to arrive there every day between eight and eight-thirty. Sold a hell of a lot of tractors there. There’s also a grocery store, drive-in hamburger-burrito joint, a Chevrolet dealership where everybody buys their Chevy extended cab four-wheel-drive pickups, and a card-lock gas station where all the Chevy trucks can get fuel twenty-four hours a day. There’s a few other small businesses

and about a hundred homes that make up the remainder of the town. Oh, I almost forgot the Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, and the United States Post Office where the mail is almost always out by ten-thirty. People start arriving around ten-fifteen checking their boxes and complaining about having to wait. I had a box there, too. More than anything else, it was an excuse to meet up with clients.”

“Why’d you need an excuse?”

“I guess excuse isn’t the right word. It was convenient. I sold a lot of tractors and cotton pickers outside on the front steps of that Post Office, too. I used to get teased about conducting business on federal property. My comeback was that it was the only way I could recoup a small portion of the tax money that Uncle Sam so willingly collected from me.”

Carly probably wished she had never asked what I had been up to, and the boring tale was certainly not the topic that would tempt Chloe and Kristi away from their own rumor-mill. I started to tell Carly of the entangled relationships I had built out in Tranquillity.

“Being an outsider gave most of my clients some sense of security. They told me things they’d never dream of sharing with their neighbors. With me they had a captive audience. I had to keep my mouth shut because if I didn’t, I’d lose their trust and three million dollars a year in machinery sales.”

“Wow!”

“I’d just shut up and listen, never peeping a word to another person. Many of them lived lonely, reclusive lives. They trusted me. Had I not kept my mouth shut, I could have become an outcast just as easily as I’d been accepted into their community.”

“Sounds like a movie script or something.”

“It’s a drama for sure, but boring. Nobody would waste the time or money on the theatrics of Tranquillity’s inflated dramas. Anyway, enough Tranquillity.”

Tillie’s was slow that night, or I would never have had so much of Carly’s undivided attention. Normally at that time of the evening, she’d wait on the local Alcoholics Anonymous members who came for coffee after their twelve-step meetings. A younger couple in their twenties came in. Carly seated them, and returned to the coffee counter.

“When did you get back to Monterey?” Carly asked, carrying on our conversation.

“One this morning.”

“Got any plans for the summer?” she asked, wanting to tell me about some plans of her own.

“Sleep ‘til I wake.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“Going fishing in July with Rob. Steelhead fishing on the North Umpqua in Oregon,” I answered quickly, an unconscious attempt to stay focused on myself instead of allowing Carly to tell me about her summer plans.

“That sounds like fun.”

“What’ll be even more fun is missing my twenty-year high school class reunion because of being knee deep in the North Umpqua, flinging flies at steelhead. I hate the goddamn things.”

“Steelhead?”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve yet to catch one,” I laughed. “I hate class reunions. Can’t stand the phoniness, the masks people hide behind. I don’t like the keeping-up-with-the-Joneses crap either. I hate getting all wrapped up in that sense of being superior to some and shame for having accomplished so much less than many of the others.”

“Aren’t there people you’d like to see?”

“I still see the ones I want to see. Don’t need a class reunion to do that. If I went, what would I say when we started talking about wives and children? I’d really be batting zero. I haven’t got either of them to brag or cuss about.”

“Sounds like you’ve been to one before.”

“I went to my five-year reunion. I was still drinking then, but fighting it and at the same time trying to resurrect a lost faith in my childhood religion. I was scheduled to publicly make a profession of faith with my good friend Samuel the following evening in front of the entire congregation. Thank God it was scheduled for the evening service instead of in the morning. Hell, that preacher knew I was a drunk . . . Anyway, after arriving and shuffling through the crowd of former classmates, I ended up having a few whiskeys,” I explained, as Carly’s smile grew bigger. “Generously poured whiskies, too. Crown Royal on the rocks, and after a few Crowns, I was publicly professing my religious faith to the whole goddamn class. Telling people that I could only have a couple of drinks, and that I had to stop because of my renewed faith in God and the commitment I was about to make in church the following evening.”

“This sounds pretty interesting. I’m getting to see a whole different side of Malcolm,” Carly said, her eyes lighting up.

"If you've got the time, I've got loads more of this bullshit . . ."

"Come on, what happened next?"

"After a few more Crowns, I really began to publicly profess my faith. I was tangled up with Kathleen, an old classmate, lip-locked back in the corner of the bar. I mean we were all over each other."

The story about making out with Kathleen in the back of the bar was enough to stop Chloe and Kristi dead in the tracks of their own little rapture. I followed Carly's eyes over to the two gals and found them both mesmerized with dropped jaws, fully engulfed in the recap of my five-year reunion. Up until that night, they probably thought I was some boring, lonely old man who came in late to Tillie's for dinner and companionship. At least now I had their attention, even if their prior suspicions held a much greater truth.

"I woke the next morning and realized that I would never need to go to another class reunion for as long as I lived."

"Oh, I almost forgot about that couple. I'll be right back," Carly said, as she hurried off to take their order.

Earlier in life, I had become what I now most disdained, a Bible thumper and an alky. As far as I was concerned, reformed alcoholics and religious fanatics were cut from the same cloth. Both usually wanted to make everyone else into what they were, just to justify their own conversions. I was still carrying the shame and embarrassment of having made such an ass of myself that reunion night, and I damn sure didn't want to have to rehash that evening with any of my fellow classmates ever again. I could see myself with my future wife, bragging about one of my life's accomplishments when someone would interrupt: "Hey, Malcolm, remember that reunion when you were high on Jesus, drunker than hell on whiskey, and lip-locked with Kathleen back in the corner of the bar?"

I reached for the newspaper at the edge of the coffee counter and perused the classifieds, picking over the jobs that looked interesting. Carly's man, Leonard, walked in. That was reason enough to shit-can the whole work-idea. Leonard was in his early thirties. He was short with a slight build. Probably didn't weigh a hundred and fifty pounds. He had shoulder-length, thin brown hair with a receding hairline. He was a real wiener—a complete mismatch for Carly.

"Hey Leonard . . . how's it going?"

"I'm beat."

He was at it again. Last time he came into Tillie's, Leonard started telling me about all his projects, complaining of how he was overworked.

Then, when he began to get the idea that I might be interested in his girlfriend, he started telling me all about how much he and Carly did together. No matter where the conversation went, Leonard kept bringing Carly into the topic. “Carly and I did this. Carly and I did that . . .” I suppose his intuition was serving him properly. After all, I wouldn’t have minded a run at Carly. Yep, he was right, and he was pathetic, and it was time to leave.

“Gotta go Leonard,” I said, sliding out of the stool.

“You take care, huh?”

“Yeah, you do the same. I’ll catch you later,” I said, patting him on the back as I walked away before having to listen to anymore of Leonard’s problems. I was only interested in Carly, not her wiener boyfriend or any of his trifles. So I left Leonard alone to wallow in his own self-doubt and to bear the misery of his own insecurities. Well, Carly most likely had to bear a chunk of Leonard’s load, too.

Also by Mel Mathews

LeRoi

The Chronicles of a Wandering Soul: Book One

SamSara

The Chronicles of a Wandering Soul: Book Three

About the Author

Mel Mathews is the author of *The Chronicles of a Wandering Soul* series. A volume of novels that portray a modern man's struggles as he goes against cultural and religious norms, and the grains of his upbringings, to emerge a renewed man guided by his own inner truth and hard-won wisdom. His articles and reviews have appeared in many syndicated publications.

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