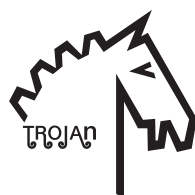


KEEP GOING!

A MEMOIR

Chester Eagle



I want to tell you about someone I once knew, whom I shall call Simone. The best part of half a century ago she told me to keep going, and I did, knowing that the words had cost her dearly and that someone else would suffer even more. Forgive me if I approach this in a roundabout way, because I'm just as interested in the words, and their meaning, their applications, as I am in the story of Simone.

When Simone told me to keep going, she was a passenger in my car, the first I ever owned, we were driving to the capital of our state, away from the town where we were teaching. We were very young, the preparation we'd been given for our appointments was abysmal, and we were in what we felt was an unsympathetic town. The town, I'm sure, saw no reason to adapt. Each of us had a job and it was our 'job' to do it.

Job, job, job; it's a word with many meanings, and this brings me to the reason why my story's moving slowly. The reason's this: I'm using language, and it's supposed to be clear, but words can't be clear unless meanings are clear – to someone! – and meanings can't be clear until the implications of an action, a decision, have been given time to reveal themselves. These things, as you know, take time. Shall I keep going?

Hoping that you will say yes, I shall ... continue. Simone and I were determined young people and we had no intention of letting a town which, deep down, we despised, bring us undone. We would sustain ourselves in wretched circumstances, and we would succeed. Simone and I – no, we were not a couple – valued ourselves too highly to be judged as failures by people we didn't deign to understand.

We drove to Melbourne as often as we could. It had an orchestra, parties, great libraries, and a dignified sense of itself. Some cultural life could exist there, as it could not in the bush. The bush, the bush, the bush ... are you starting to listen to words as I do, the overtones as important as the thought itself?

We drove to Melbourne every three weeks. I had places I could stay, I had a girlfriend, a girlfriend, a girlfriend, and Simone had her family home, and she had two boyfriends, two boyfriends, to see at various times in the two days before I drove to the pick-up point which was the start of our long, and usually despondent, drive to our country town.

Two boyfriends. In later years, when I re-met her, she told me that she'd sworn never again to be involved with two people at the same time; she hated to be divided by claims from two directions. It's very natural to wish to be undivided but the fact is that life does it to us all the time. I sometimes think that people who by nature have low expectations have been given an antidote to the unhappiness that follows high passions demanding to be fulfilled. It's easier to take what you get than struggle for what you want in a world that hasn't been trained to be generous.

Simone was in love with two young men, Richard and Don. Richard had been in her life for two years, and she'd met Don only a few weeks before she had to take up her appointment. She rented a room in a house that was only a block or two from me, and I visited her occasionally, but I had to stand outside the door because Mrs Whoever-it-was didn't allow men to enter the rooms. More often, Simone would visit me, because no such restrictions encumbered us, and we would listen to music together, music being the positive that joined us, while distance and loneliness, separation from everything we loved and knew, were the other parts of our bond.

We listened to Mozart, Nielsen, Beethoven's quartets, Palestrina, Victoria and Bach. European civilisation had produced some mighty peaks, but we were far away, our minds wrestling with our situation: I avoid the plural because our positions were the same. We were away from love, embroiled in dislike of many of the people we had to work with, in a situation not of our making,

in a town that didn't care for things we thought important, we were employed to offer the town's young people certain qualities which we hadn't had time to absorb – not fully, anyway – before we'd been sent out to teach.

To teach, to teach, to teach!

Simone had two boyfriends, Richard and Don. I'd met both of them in Melbourne the previous year, when we'd been at university. Now Simone and I were four hours drive from the city and when I drove to the pick-up point I never knew whether she would be waiting there with Don, or Richard. Some weekends it was one, sometimes the other. Richard, who lived near Simone's mother, was perhaps a little more likely. Sometimes Simone rang to tell me to pick her up at Don's parents' garage, which stood on a busy corner of the highway we had both to travel. If I picked her up at this garage, the journey back to enslavement, or was it adaptation – words, words, words – had already begun. Don's father, if that was where I collected Simone, would ask if I had a tank full of petrol. 'It's a long trip,' he would say, 'and I don't want you running out.' What was he doing, when he said that? He was being attentive to me, he was wondering if I was as prepared as I should be to take his son's girlfriend into the darkness, the unknown destiny that shadowed anyone who lived in the bush ...

... the bush, the bush, the bush ...

Mountains hemmed in our little town, and if we listened to people's stories we heard about the 1939 fires, and how you could hardly see from one street to the next, there was so much smoke. People also told us about trainee pilots crashing when they were being made ready for war against Japan. Fumes were getting into their cabins without anyone realising, they were blacking out and planes were smashing into the ground. Sabotage, people suspected, seizing on their fear of spies and subversion rather than finding the problem and fixing it. It sounded like the place where Simone and I were working; nothing much had changed.

One Sunday night, Richard brought Simone to the pick-up point, and told me about a concert they'd been to. His happiness shone out of him, and I found myself thinking that perhaps he was better suited to Simone than Don, even though the latter was more congenial to me, probably because he was easier to understand. I said something like 'Long road ahead of us, Simone', she nodded at Richard, and let her eyes rest on him for a moment before she climbed in. We drove silently for twenty minutes, then, as we passed the garage which Don's parents operated, she called out 'Stop! Sorry,' she said, using my name, 'but I saw Don standing by the pumps. He was looking for me. I won't be long.'

I pulled over and she walked back. I sat in the car. A few minutes later the door opened again and Simone got in. 'Thanks,' she said, and used my name again. Then she lit a cigarette. Everybody smoked in those days, but she always asked if she could smoke in the car and I always said yes. I didn't think I had any right to say no. Today, sitting at my desk, I am inclined – inclined, inclined – to think that people back then were not the same as people today. You may say that people never change, we're the same as we were in Shakespeare's day, but we aren't. Everybody used to smoke, and today we don't. Simone smoked her cigarette in a brooding, drawn-out way, then she stubbed it in the ashtray. 'I couldn't leave him there without stopping,' she said. 'I didn't see him all weekend, but he found out I was down. Someone must have told him. And he wanted so much to see me that he stood there when he knew I'd be driving past, hoping he'd catch a glimpse.' I thought his cause was lost, but there had been other weekends when it was Don who brought Simone to the car, putting her luggage in the boot, and Don who received the glowing glances of

farewell before I started the engine. On those Sunday nights it was Don who held sway in her heart ... or so it seemed.

I pause. It's a simple enough story, and I don't know much about it from what we will call the inside, but I was there, I did have eyes and ears, and memory, and the events of that period of my life keep drifting back to me, fifty years on, as if they matter in a way that I can't quite understand. If I can't work out what was going on in my life back then, how can I know about myself right now? Not an easy question, is it?

Humans don't like being surrounded by mystery, but we are. We like certainty, but we can only have it for a fraction of the time. We make choices, and we don't know where they lead ...

Simone married Richard a couple of years later, not Don. Don took out a master's degree, then a PhD in economic history. He got a job at Sydney University, then he went to America, Pittsburgh, I think. I know this in the roundabout way we keep in touch with our generation – gossiping, snippets here and there, people telling us scraps of this and that. The last time I saw Don was in the moment before Simone told me to keep going, of which more in a minute. She set her course that day, firmly and finally, but neither she nor I knew that at the time.

Or possibly we did? Who can say?

Simone was more introspective, and harder on herself, than most. One of the reasons that we got on well was that we both relied on awareness, rather than belief systems, to sustain us. She was wary – we both were – of the church, with its towering structures of thought, each part buttressing another, its systems interlocking, everything dependent on faith about this and that. 'I'm suspicious of ready answers,' she used to say. 'When people answer quickly, you know they're not thinking.' She liked to think about historical method, or the alterations in the ethos of different periods which caused literature and music to take different forms. 'There's so many ways of doing any single thing,' she would say, 'that you have to ask why they're done in this way at that time.' Then, after that first year, she left the town where we'd been working, and in the second year of my exile, I travelled the highway alone. Simone, now, was in the group of people I heard about, distantly, whenever I ran into someone who'd known her, or someone who'd known someone who'd known someone ... We're dependent on networks, aren't we, networks, networks, to keep us up to date. Informed ...

She was on the other side of the state, now, and was reconciling herself to the idea of marrying Richard, but I, not being in daily contact, had no idea how this relationship – a word that wasn't much used at that time – was faring. I was in the town of my original appointment, and travelling up and down to the city, every three weeks or so, just as I had the year before, with Simone as my companion, when ...

... when, when, when ...

... something happened.

I was twenty minutes into my drive, it was a shining afternoon, the weekend lay ahead, my new car, so much more reliable than the old, was travelling well, my girlfriend was expecting me, as were my musical friends, when I looked out the window to my right and felt the presence of the mountains there.

The mountains, the mountains, blue in the afternoon light, deep in their mysteries, only scappily explored, even by those who knew them best, the mountains seemed full of mystery waiting to be, first, discovered, and second, expressed. I looked at the highway and I said aloud, 'Why am I doing this?' I meant driving on a strip of road, a length of string connecting my country set-

ting with my city destination, my job in the bush with my circle of friends, my isolating loneliness with the young woman I thought I loved.

If we're not ready for love, we're not ready for life. Or is it vice-versa? Both?

I didn't say anything, even to myself, but I knew I'd made a decision. I'd go through with everything I'd arranged to do that weekend, without upsetting anybody at all (I thought this was decent, and proper, of me), and then I'd disappear. I'd answer the beckoning call of the mountains and leave the city to look after itself.

I was, though I didn't know it then, changing ... no, finding ... the direction of my life.

The young woman who thought I loved her, on realising that there was something wrong with the silence, the absence of messages or indications, began to go around my other friends to ask them what they'd heard.

They'd none of them heard a thing. I'd not even spoken to myself. I'd written nothing down. I'd set myself to open up the mystery of the mountains. I was in love with the generality of life, not a particular person any more. I'd been heading along the path that leads to marriage, a family, home, convention, when I'd been distracted by the appearance of a fate, a destiny, a direction, that declared itself appropriate for me. If I'd understood what was happening I'd have been able to explain myself to those who needed to know, but I didn't and I couldn't.

I disappeared from view. I didn't, of course, I did my work, I sat at table in the guest house where I resided, I had my car serviced and I went in and out of shops, as courteous as civility required, but my heart was elsewhere. I was still listening to music but there was another music that I was beginning to hear, and I wanted more. I wanted to know it better. I wanted to be the vehicle, the instrument, through which this music made itself. I wanted a life that was itself a song ...

My girlfriend – my ex-, my ex-, my ex- - wrote angrily to me. Why had she been made to go around begging people to tell her things she didn't know? Why hadn't I told her what was in my mind? Why didn't any of my friends know what was going on? Hadn't I stopped to think about the pain I was inflicting? How could I possibly have visited that last weekend without giving any indication of the change, whatever it was, that was taking place in my mind? My feelings? How could so much be happening inside me without any indication to anyone else as to what might be going on?

And more, every word of it right, justified, true. I read the letter several times. I knew that everything she said was right. But I couldn't find it in me to change my mind.

I think now that what I did was terribly wrong. I should have said to the young woman in my life that something was happening inside me, that my life's direction was changing, that I was replacing one set of conventions with a new set of goals, and that I'd be grateful to her if she'd be patient for a while, until we could both see what effects this change was having on her, and me, and us. That is what I should have done, and I want to condemn my younger self for keeping these changes out of sight, hardly admitting them even to himself ... I want to condemn myself for the insensitivity I showed to a lovely person, but I have a feeling that to judge in this way would be hypocritical, and that something in me was determined to make the changes I am talking about because it was necessary for me to do so if I was to become the individual I am. To find myself, I had to step away from what I'd been. I fell in love with the mountains, and out of love with the companion with whom I'd shared ...

...the illusion that we had a future, when the future was around me, in those mountains to the right of my car, with their many, many pasts which I had still to find; I fell in love with the

mountains, they became a part of me, so that I was falling in love with myself, and this, I now see, was the beginning of my submission to my destiny as a writer. I don't expect you to like what I'm telling you, but I feel helpless rather than apologetic. I had begun to realise what I was fated to become. Even fifty years later I am unforgiving of myself for entering the transition silently, instead of sharing its every stage with the woman who'd been close to me, expecting me to visit every time I was down, expecting that by us taking various steps and turns we'd find ourselves linked for life in marriage, as might well have happened, had I not felt the mountains pulling me one sunny afternoon, one Friday in autumn when I thought my way ahead was clear.

You may think at this point that I've forgotten Simone, but no, she is very much in my mind as I take this excursion to talk about a decisive something that I did, all those years ago. She did much the same as me. I picked her up at about four in the afternoon for one of our Friday drives to 'town', as people said, she put her small case in the boot, with mine, and we got onto the highway. There was a spot a little way west of the town where Simone used to feel free of its clutches, and it was there or thereabouts that she would loosen her tightly bound black hair. She might or might not go on to have a smoke – the taste of freedom! – but it was the untethering of her lovely hair that meant she felt a breath of freedom in her nostrils, and that there were two days of it before we made the latest of those returns to restriction. On the day in question she wasn't smoking but her face was showing just a little more of the happiness within than her normal grim smile of self-acceptance, when ...

... when, when, when ...

... we saw, both of us, advancing from the other direction, a car which we both recognised, heading our way at speed. It was a large American car, low, shining chrome all over the place, and with curvaceous bulges as if it wanted to be as feminine on the outside as it was horny under the bonnet. It was a car owned by Don's father, and it was heading our way. Don must have left the garage a little under four hours earlier, and he must have wanted to reach our town when Simone got home from work. He was late, and he was hurrying. The big car was riding the rises and falls of the highway as if it was skimming surf. I half expected Don to recognise my car, or the people in it, to swing around and come after us, but he didn't. He rushed past as if he hadn't noticed. I must presume he didn't ...

... notice, notice, notice.

I knew; Simone knew; and each of us knew that the other knew. I slowed the car and looked at her. We were only ten minutes from the town where we worked. I could take her back, following Don, and catch him at the house where Simone had her room. That was where he'd be. Or I could go on. Did she want to turn around? To stop? To give up whatever she'd planned for the weekend, and accommodate herself to Don's purposes in rushing to the town where she taught? Did she want to go back?

Posing this question here, as I write, I find myself wondering whether, if she had decided to go back, she'd have gathered the long black hair and bound it tightly around her head as it had been, a couple of minutes before. Or would she have gone back unbound, as it were, and been that different woman she became on the highway in the streets of our constricting town?

It's a futile question, because she looked straight ahead, at the highway that led to the city, our escape, and she said, tersely, tensely, tightly, 'Keep going!' Yes, there was an exclamation mark in her voice, quietly as she said it. Keep going! It was costing her to say it, and she knew, and I knew, that it would cost Don more when he found someone at the house where she boarded to tell him that she'd left a few minutes before. It may be that when this was said to him he'd have

searched his mind for the cars he'd passed as he thundered towards his disappointment, his rejection, and then, perhaps, he would have remembered that he'd passed Simone, and me, in my car, which he'd seen often enough, and then, if he remembered that we'd rushed past each other, he'd have realised that, since we hadn't signalled, or turned to follow him, that he'd been ...

... dismissed, dismissed, dismissed. Could anything be more final than that?

I can no longer remember where I dropped Simone on the times when we travelled to the city together. Our Sunday night pick-up point I remember well; our drop-off point, not at all. I must suppose, however, that we passed Don's parents' garage in both directions of that weekend trip, and that means there must have been a moment, going west, going east, when a question hung in the air. What had she done, and why? If she said anything at the time, I don't remember now. One forgets a lot in fifty years. Mind you, I think most forgetting is done at the moment, in a flash, because something unbalancing is in the thoughts and the mind takes action to shut out what it doesn't want. Simone had made a decision. Simone moved to another town the following year. Simone married Richard, eventually, Simone and I never talked about the thoughts that had gone through her mind that day. Why was Don in pursuit of her that weekend, when she was on her way to the city where he lived? Any number of questions come to my mind, others, no doubt, to yours, and I have no answers. I drove on; this was in the old car, the first car, as I said before, but it performed well enough that afternoon, and got us to the city in good time for me to visit my girlfriend, to listen to music, to go out, to live as if the ground was not, as we know it is, forever moving under our feet, sometimes shifting, lurching, towards disturbances that we fear, sometimes firming up because we've made decisions which we hadn't realised were rushing at us to be made.