

The Longest Distance

A Novel

DAVID SCOTT

The Longest Distance

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book...
To all who have shown me Love...
And have received Love in return.
You know who you are.
You are who you know.

*'There is one thing in this world which you must never forget to do.
If you forget everything else and not this,
there is nothing to worry about,
but if you remember everything else and forget this,
then you will have done nothing in your life.'*

– Rumi

I am going to enjoy this ride with you.
And I with you.

You are a sweet, sweet Soul...
And I will reveal with you your loving form.

1
C-C-C-COURAGE

‘One, two, three... he’s not breathing.’
‘Keep trying. We must keep trying.’

‘But I can’t. I don’t know how.’

‘But you do, Jeremy. You just don’t know it yet.’

The voice inside haunted me. It held out hope, when all seemed hopeless. It believed, when I had no reason for such. It saw in me what only it could see.

I would have screamed of my own discontent, self-loathing, if it were not for the screams of another; one with much more cause indeed for screaming.

Her shrieks were defining, unnerving; piercing every veil of security for those around. Our presence gave her hope through the hopeless state of the man who lay before us.

My skills offered no reason for such.

This was not in the script—his, hers, mine. A fortnight had passed since my brother Thomas and I had set course for Kenya, ready to let go of our adult realities and live the dreams of children. We had ventured to a land filled with mystery, unknown—the Dark Continent. If there was light to be had, there were no signs for such. For only shadows loomed.

‘Please! Somebody help him! He’s dying! Oh, Sebastien! My poor Sebastien. Please! Someone. *Anyone!*’

I panicked. I was the wrong person to be given such duty. Life. Death. My hands were not gifted for measures as determining what may live, what may not.

Sebastien’s wife clung to both his aged hand and memories nearly fifty years in the making, overcome with a fear that finds its origin in the darkest corridors of what lies beyond the known, the familiar. Thomas and I worked feverishly to save the life of a man we barely knew, and of a fate intertwined with this horrid event.

‘One. Two. Three.’ I felt his withered chest collapse with each thrust of my hands.

‘Nothing. Jeremy, give him more air.’

His lips were dry. Mine, as reluctant as they were required. The air that breathed life into me, taken for granted time and again, was transferred into the parched mouth and empty lungs of a man we had only come to know through a serendipitous adventure through the Serengeti.

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‘He’s still not breathing,’ I exclaimed to Thomas.

‘Again, Jeremy. Try again.’

I offered what air I had. His lips were cold. His mouth dry. His eyes tearing in the intensity of the midday sun that would provide no reprieve in the matter. I felt his life slipping. I could do nothing to keep this from being so. I never could.

‘Oh my God! Sebastien! Please don’t leave me!’ Anika’s screams gave way to a helpless pleading, a desperate recognition of all previous chapters in her life story being ripped from her heart in one singular moment; the collapse of an entire novel into one darkened page and memory. Her pleas were frightening. Her husband, motionless, except for the twitch of his left arm, and a set of eyes glazed over by the sudden realization of a life in retreat. His shirt, drenched in sweat as cold as the reality in its undoing, of one man’s battle for one more breath.

I sat back. My brother took over.

I looked to the heavens, as if awaiting an intervention from some higher power. The wings above were not of angels, but of vultures looming. The vultures were always looming.

Thomas and I continued. Each taking turns providing what basic training we could recall from our early years. Sebastien’s pulse was slowing, his eyes fading into that murky haze when form gives way to formless. His lungs straining as he battled for a breath that eluded him. We continued with the CPR, at the insistence of his beloved—

nearly twenty minutes beyond the time it took for Sebastien to leave his wife, and journey on.

Poor Sebastien. This was his dream, a vacation into the wild side of one's inner nature through nature herself. And here he lay, lifeless, having suffered a fatal stroke. In one quick stroke, as well, we were reminded of the delicate balance between life, love, and our awaiting departure.

Africa—as with life—was a contradiction. One moment I sat mesmerized by the beauty and grace of this predatory paradise for those seeking emancipation in some form. And in the very next, I was ready to pack up and never return to a hardened land that modern science had not yet fully embraced.

The sky above provided a fitting metaphor for life in its fated unfolding. One cloud, then another, all traveling, none allowed to stay in one place for too long; all against a backdrop of deep blue, hazed over by the impurities of this place. Life was in motion. In constant motion. Even when it was no longer.

I lay there in the dirt torched by a merciless sun. I lay there, in thought, sweat pouring down my forehead, hands clenching the soil of a land that claimed yet another as its own. Would it have made a difference, I queried within? If, back in the Netherlands, with updated equipment and available assistance, would it have made a difference in allowing Sebastien one more chance at life's romance?

We, of course, will never know. We are not graced with such information. Perhaps, we are simply undeserving. I

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knew I was.

One thing remained painfully clear, as Anika lay collapsed over the carcass that was once her husband, weeping...

Life as she knew it was no longer.

‘Please! Somebody help him! He’s dying!’

The body lay there, motionless, face down in the earth beneath. I rolled it over, the form barely distinguishable. The clouds above made their way across the sky as if in a hurry to dismiss this day for another. The trees chatted among themselves in their own sacred language. They seemed to pay little attention to what was occurring under their watch. The body began to disintegrate, each particle of the person evaporating into the nothingness.

‘Wait! I can fix this! Just give me a moment...’

And the moment was...

Gone! He was—I was—gone!

I jumped up, drenched in a cold sweat. I was dreaming. It was just a dream, a very disturbing dream. The face was not that of Sebastien, but my own. It was my body that lay helpless. It was my life held in the balance.

The stillness of Sebastien’s body played curse upon my mind. I lay there, shaken, within the netted sanctuary of my earthly bed, as if in some manner protected from the world surrounding by a thin veneer that only served in reminding me of our inevitable vulnerability. I lay there, troubled, not

by the pretense of a death, but by the life that proceeded. Was it a good death, a painless death? More important, was it a good life?

The crescent moon provided little in the way of illumination through the rustic windows framed by years of co-witnessing the events on either side. On the tree branch just beyond the window, a spotted owl presided over the darkness. What he spotted was me. What I saw was the vastness of nothingness. Darkness was the winner this evening, casting a grand shadow over the safari. I feared the darkness. I always have.

I knew not what lay beyond the boundaries of the known, the familiar. Does darkness loom just beyond the corridors of our comfort levels? How can one find comfort when what we see we do not like, and what we cannot see is what awaits us in the shadows? So many questions invaded my inner sanctuary as I tried to erase the events of earlier.

Within earshot of a cast of mosquitoes who sought to pierce my skin with a thirst for something more basic than the answers that elude, I looked over at my brother. He was off on his own inner travels amid a periodic snore that served as a deafening anchor to this world. Thomas was a good man, a good father, a good brother.

I was none of these.

As the elder, I had the unique privilege of being the first to everything. And Thomas was always second. What a tortured life conceived merely by order of conception—and

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thus the contrived pecking order. This I thought, as I gazed upon my little brother, my only brother, curled up as if to protect the innocence that remained of the boy we can neither escape from nor so easily recapture.

Destiny or merely life as a series of unfolding events through choices made, it mattered not.

One is graced, another cursed, and that is that.

‘Boys, we go now. We go... and see what she has in store for us today.’

She was nature. Wilson was our guide. Wilson was his Christian name. He was as short on words as he was tall in stature. Six foot four, a mountain of a man, a mystery in most measures of matter, his size spoke volumes. His words—his few simple words—only what mattered in the moment.

Wilson looked over at Anika, who sat in silence in the passenger seat of the nearby Range Rover. She sat with two policemen who would escort her back to Nairobi. Her own destiny further unveiled through that of her husband’s. What awaited her was a series of interviews—more like interrogations—with government officials. This would be accompanied with bribes of sorts to expedite the process of simply getting Sebastien’s remains back to the Netherlands. They were his remains. They were hers to deal with. This was not their country.

Wilson turned to me. ‘Her life will go on. Life goes on.

It is the way.'

Wilson was right. Anika's life would go on. For each of us, the journey would continue. It had to.

As we watched Anika being driven away, her face aged a year in one night, I was reminded of a man by the name of Paracelsus that once dared to mix the medicine of his time with a mysticism that included the understanding of the role that astrology and alchemy play on illness and the treatment thereof. He was quite the controversial figure during the rather dark period of the Middle Ages, often emphasizing the importance of our dream state in providing clues as to our purpose—and possibility.

'Dreams must be heeded and accepted. For a great many of them come true,' Paracelsus once declared.

With Sebastien, he was tempted by something inside that beckoned him to follow his heart to this most distant land, and live in an awakened version of himself. One could question whether Sebastien chose an earlier death by coming here. Perhaps he chose a greater life by having the courage to do the same.

'It is time for us to move,' Wilson instructed.

We pulled away and continued on. The plume of dust kicked up by our tires helped to cloud any remaining visions of a recent past we all would choose to leave in the past.

The past was precisely what I did not want to include in my present. I had enough baggage to fill our van ten times over. But this type of baggage was the kind that no suitcase

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could hold. My life to date was a series of dates. Each chance to make “more,” I found “less” as more convenient. Love came and went, returning again in another form, with a most predictable outcome. Life gave. I took, giving back far less.

I closed my eyes. The image last captured remained upon the screens of the inner. I began to drift off.

‘What choice do we have, but to go on.’

‘Well, yes, I imagine this is true,’ I retorted, as a dialogue between myself and some other Self began (more like continued, if one were to admit to how often such inner discourse and debate would arise). It was the same inner voice that remained with me since my youth—source unknown.

‘But what of the purpose in it all? Why continue, when so many of us have lost our way, if there is in fact a “way” at all?’

‘To fulfill a promise.’

A promise? What promise? Whose? This was no longer simply a conversation between me and myself. I would not be able to conjure such a moment. This I knew.

‘The only promises I have known were the ones made, and broken, time and again.’

‘Between you and another.’

‘Between me and every other.’

‘Ah, yes. There have been many that have graced the place known as Jeremy’s love chest. One would think with the chest so close to the heart itself, we would find the door we seek.’

‘A door? More like a revolving door. One that always places me right back where I began.’

‘Perhaps it is in the beginning where we may find our end.’

‘Perhaps. But in the meantime, there is more to uncover. A lifetime of moments that await my senses... as senseless as this may be.’ My response, a mix of sarcasm with perhaps a bit too much in truth.

‘The senses deceive from time to time...’

‘Jeremy, are you with us?’ My brother broke the dialogue, as the sound in the silence gave way to the chatter of the world.

‘What? Yeah. Yeah, I’m here.’

‘Well, don’t be here. Gaze over there.’ Thomas pointed west, in the direction of the late afternoon sun.

Grace. That is the one word that captures the movement of the giraffe as it cascades across the plain, softening our troubled minds with a canvas painted by their gait and beauty.

Ease. As we play witness to the gerenuk, as it stretches upward, balancing on its hindquarters, using its long neck to nourish itself by way of the offerings of the acacia tree.

Grace. Ease. And that which moves us to more basic callings.

‘Look,’ Wilson pointed. ‘In the brush. Two brothers. One thought.’

The party in our van peered through the dust-laden window. Barely distinguishable were two cheetahs, crouched low to the ground. They were thin. They were attentive.

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They were doing what cheetahs do.

‘These boys. They are in hunt.’ Wilson paused for a moment, then whispered, ‘And there is their prize... if God wills it.’

The gerenuk was taking in the leaves about thirty meters from the cheetah brothers. She was not taking inventory of the boys who were taking inventory of her. They moved in, slowly, each muscle in accord with the other, stopping from time to time as to go undetected. They would begin again. Slowly, with each measured step, they shortened the distance between themselves and the meal deprived them for some time now. Slowly, slowly, until such time as temperance gave way to intolerance with such.

The one brother took off, followed quickly by the other. Their movement—majestic. Their stride—measured. Each muscle put on display. They flowed with a rhythm and symmetry that could only be found between two brothers. The gerenuk saw none of this at first; then moved on instinct alone. It appeared to have shed its would-be suitors, making one gallant leap over a small bush. The first brother met her in midair. His jaws found her neck. The second helped wrestle her to the ground. It was over. In seconds.

One would live. The other would sacrifice so that it would be so.

‘They did not heed the warnings,’ Wilson offered. ‘The taller ones let the little ones know. But they did not heed, so they must go. It is the way.’

I sat there, both mesmerized and mortified in the same.

It was remarkable. It was horrible. It was “the way.”

He had a way. Wilson had a way of looking at the world through a simple pair of lenses. Life to Wilson followed a basic set of rules—live, learn, and when it was your time, leave.

‘We go now. There is more to see. There is no more to see here.’

There was so much more to see.

The following day we were on the move once again.

The rough terrain and natural displays served to both shaken and awaken. The dust kicked up from our van clung to me as if it, too, preferred to journey forward as opposed to wither in its own stillness. I faded off from time to time, exhausted more perhaps by a troublesome mind than by the wear and tear of the heat upon our bodies. Hours of travel along the rough patches of the developing world demanded from the body what it offered to the eyes in return. An occasional patch of trees would break up the monotony of the journey. The baboons along the roadside seemed to watch us with the same curiosity we held for them. The flies were impartial in their chosen hosts. The trees swayed to a light breeze that reminded each of the song that plays within the soul that is Africa. It was magical, mystical, and maniacal all in one.

I toyed again with the thought of never returning to Los Angeles, my current home. LA was filled with oppor-

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tunities for the imagination to both reveal and conceal. It was my home for the moment, this was certain. But like a gypsy who moves with the prevailing winds—and promise of change that rests in the unrest of the heart—I had once again driven a stake in a ground whose soil was soft enough to ensure only a temporary commitment to the ground beneath. My feet wandered. My heart wondered. My mind left to spin tales of love while in a tailspin.

‘We stop here,’ Wilson informed. ‘There is a tribe. Samburu. They have a rich history in dance. You will like.’

We exited the van and were immediately under siege by a parade of young entrepreneurs masquerading as children. Their smiles masked their true intentions. The good nature was genuine; the transaction, essential. They escorted us to the village center while peddling Chiclets gum and other Western goodies that had penetrated this seemingly virgin territory.

As we walked, I took notice of the women of the village. Each wore a series of beaded necklaces, their faces marked for the occasion with traditional tattoo embroidery. They sat amid the shade provided by the sparse trees, weaving baskets and threading bracelets. These were also for our benefit—and purchase.

The men were in a circle, performing a ritual dance, dressed in *shukas* made of red cloth, wrapped around like a skirt, draped with a white sash. Their faces were painted using patterns that accentuated their striking features. Their chest and ears were enhanced with colorful beaded

necklaces, earrings, and bracelets. And the dance itself was a rhythmic jumping up and down, using their lungs as a sort of accordion. Like the wind section of a small orchestra, leveraging the gifts of nature in harmonic accord with one another. The symphony of sound was astounding. The composition from the lungs—breathtaking.

A large, gray cloud emerged between the midday sun and ourselves. A wrinkled woman approached me, her eyes glazed over. Covered with the same traditional bead bracelets and necklaces, she was moving with both an awkwardness and purpose. She studied me from arm's length then moved closer. I was taken aback by the clarity of her character that shot forth through her decayed outer form. The strange visitor proceeded to grab me by the face with both hands, pulled my eyes open, gazing deep into my windows...

'This boy—he is on a journey. Where you are going, *nooo* one else can go.'

She pulled back, eyes remaining transfixed on my own. The old women studied them further; then laughed.

'Don't forget to take the little boy *with* you.'

She moved away, glancing back several times in her retreat.

““Don't forget to take the little boy with you”?” I stood there, eyes attempting to refocus through the series of purple spots that were disrupting my view. What could the woman have possibly meant? “Little boy”? I had no children—and preferred to keep it as such. At twenty-seven,

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I was hardly what one would consider a suitable candidate.

My brother asked me what was up. I hadn't a clue so had little to offer. Wilson informed me she was a tribal witch doctor, highly respected by the Samburu people.

'Her visions,' he said, 'always come true.'

Africa was an escape. At least that was the plan. Problem was we brought our minds along with us.

We sat there in silence, my brother and I. The Kilaguni Serena Lodge along the Tsavo River provided the latest setting for reflection. The sturdy teak wood chairs afforded the only real sense of stability. The wooden railing that played footrest for the weary offered little protection from the wild life just beyond and in plain view. It was the end of the dry season, so there wasn't much of a waterhole at all; just parched earth to go with our parched palate. The motivation to resolve my thirst was met with a lingering contemplation of the tragedy which consumed my mind. Thomas was equally quiet, an untouched glass of Kenya Gold liquor awaited his senses, and the perfect moment for its consumption—one that had yet to arrive.

I stared up at the wood beams that held the thatch roof in place. My brother gazed beyond the stone walls and toward the horizon. Neither had a word for the other. I had plenty for me. I usually did.

My mind was restless. My heart cursed. My life could not possibly have been mine in its design. Blessed with a

life that was anything but a blessing, I could make sense of relationships of the professional kind, solving problems, “building bridges” along the way. What I was not so good at were those of a more personal nature. Each valve of my heart a mere turnstile. So many women. So many moments. So many lusts forward; steps backward. I loved them. I loved them all. I loved them in all ways. I did not know love.

I felt imprisoned by my own actions, my nature. Perhaps an adventure in Africa might free me of whatever it was that felt so eviscerating, so incarcerating, and allow me to know myself better. This was what I thought. This was what I hoped for, the intention for a new direction. This I did know...

My mind would torment me while I did. My heart until I did.

‘What did you make of what Wilson said to you yesterday?’ my brother broke the silence.

‘What? You mean about the old woman?’

‘Yeah. “Her visions always come true.” Kind of spooky, don’t you think?’

‘Especially if there’s a child in my future.’

Thomas laughed. I did, as well. Yet within me, there was no laughter to be found.

I took a sip of my drink, closed my eyes, hoping to erase from my memory a life that had ceased to excite; the image of Sebastien in his final breath; and of the old woman that haunted me still.

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That woman...

Her eyes. Clouds of gray with streaks of purplish blue. Eerie. Like gazing into the haze of some protected secret. Revealing as they were piercing.

Her hands. Dry as the earth itself. But vibrating. Transferring.

And her words. What was she seeing? How did she know? What was the source of her information?

“Where you are going, no one else can go.”

“Don’t forget to take the little boy with you.”

A faint chirping noise captured my attention. It was as if a handful of crickets began their melody in symphonic harmony within my ear. It was early evening, a setting not unusual for such natural performance. But the source of the sound was not out in the world.

The wind kicked up, scattering the parched earth, providing a drape across the landscape, and a reentry into the world external.

‘Jeremy,’ my brother began, ‘I can’t get Sebastien out of my mind.’

‘Me neither.’

‘Do you think he was happy? I mean, with his life?’

‘I don’t know. Are you? Am I? I’m not quite certain what happiness looks like.’ This was for certain.

‘Different. For different people, I suppose.’

Well, I was certainly different, I thought, while taking in the herd of wildebeest along the edge of the river—or what was left of it. So perhaps happiness was not so elusive after

all.

‘I know he had the courage to follow his dreams.’ I said. ‘Coming to Africa was a childhood dream of his, one he never gave up on. He shared this with me.’

‘We all have dreams like this.’

‘Yes, but with Sebastien, he worked his whole life to give himself this one dream. And even at his age, he still believed.’

‘And had the courage to follow it.’

Thomas was perhaps reflecting on his own life, as he spoke these words. My brother was also fidgeting. He had this habit of grooming his nails with his teeth, as if unnerved by life’s moments that seem to beckon us to go deeper. Thomas was more comfortable with the shallow end of the pool. Not happier, just more comfortable. Or so it seemed. He was a typical man in that fashion. One could not argue with the comforts of such, even when tempted by wave after wave of possibility to delve into the depths of the unknown.

We had moved back into silence. Deafening in its prolonged state, as each awaits the other; words frozen in time and an opportune moment that ceases to exist. My eyes readjusted to the diminishing light as day gave way to night. Looking up, I saw the vastness. Looking down, the grounding of my own reality. A growing restlessness in the revelation. The simple truth that I was not what I could be.

I disturbed the silence. I had to.

‘It is time.’

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‘Time for what?’ Thomas asked.

I took a sip of my drink.

‘Time to make something more of my life.’

‘Your life seems pretty good from here, brother. What could you possibly want for?’

‘I have no idea, and that’s the point. Something’s missing. I watched Sebastien’s eyes give way to lifelessness. Did he know before he went? Did he find the answers to his questions?’

‘What questions?’

‘The questions. *Our* questions. We all have them. They’re not the same questions, but we all have these unanswered questions that stand between our lives and what we came here to know—to do even. I don’t want to die without knowing.’

‘Knowing what?’

I moved the glass to my lips, but did not drink. I sat there quietly for a moment. The pause was perhaps longer than I may have known. The air was stifling. The land wanting. Mount Kilimanjaro offering only the melt waters to quench the thirst for something more. The words that followed escaped my lips before they could be vetted by the limited mind.

‘Knowing love.’

Thomas chuckled. ‘Jeremy, you have studied this subject enough for us all. I imagine you have earned a PhD by now.’

‘No. I’m talking about a different kind of love, not the

many lusts that masquerade as something more. I want to know. I want to know what awaits me... with this thing called *love*.'

Thomas raised his glass. It met with my own. The clang of two gave way to the sound of silence, one that echoed through the airwaves and into the chambers of a longing heart. It also served to shift the moment, if for but a moment.

Out of the darkness of an African evening, within the peaceful stillness of the wild, one flicker, then another, from the fireflies that emerged played timely reminder to the light that was available, if for but a fleeting moment. And perhaps of an awaiting illumination within the darkened consciousness of a man in search.

There was nothing more to be said.

It was time—to do.

The stars made their presence felt as we made our way to the airport. The crescent moon was in full tilt, beckoning one and all to elevate and enjoy the world from a better-seated vantage point. The ghostly trees that lined the road pointed the way—to where I did not know. The streetlights acted as flashlights through the corridors of the unknown; dusty houses and makeshift shops merely markers for the traveler. The shadows lurked just beyond the incandescence, the same shadows that seemed to haunt me wherever my body and mind would take me—the heart left

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to follow.

I glanced over at Thomas, set adrift upon a sea of thoughts. The adventure nearly over, the reality of my own life once again was upon me. There was simply no avoiding the shadows.

Through my windowed view, I watched a group of children playing along the roadside. Filled with laughter and oblivious to the conditions that would make their lives challenging in many ways to come, they were in the moment, with five minutes before and five minutes to come the only span of time worthy of any real consideration. They were young, free in spirit, full of life, energy and possibility. Impossible had not yet entered their vocabulary. They were simply being who they were. And they were filled to the brim—with Him.

I felt envious.

God knows I seek the truth.
God is Truth... and so are you.
Seek not what already is.

2
THE CITY OF ANGEL

'I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.'

– Michelangelo

I gazed. The distant horizon offered hope. The spectrum of colors remained unaltered by man's deeds on earth. The scenic array as we descended on Los Angeles ushered in an emotion that stirred my inner being, and beckoned me to tears. These were not tears of joy and appreciation for yet another example of nature's limitless capacity to upstage herself. Rather, through the fullness of this moment, I was again reacquainted with an emptiness, a loneliness, that breached the walls of my own security, and found an unwelcome home within me.

My throat tightened. My eyes welled further. I could not speak what I wanted to say. I could not see what lay before me. I was lost. I was alone. But I was intent on not being

lonely. And there were others, many others, who were intent on the same.

The whitecaps across the turbulent waters below seemed to echo the sentiments of a man adrift upon the sea of my own humanity—and vulnerability.

Too far offshore to cast a line back to what was known, familiar. Too immersed within my own fears to see with clarity what awaited me.

An ocean of possibility
And a boat with but one oar to traverse it

Africa's momentary emancipation was met with the reality of my life. Kenya provided a wakeup call; a much-needed wakeup call. It gave me perspective, a better life to be conceived. It provided a blueprint—or at least the beginnings of such—through the imprint left from the final footprint of a fellow traveler. Yet what to do with this was all mine in choice.

My choice...

I awakened to the crow outside my window that found it necessary each day to ensure that I did just that—awaken and begin. I awakened, as well, to the familiar sound of yet another companion, and incarcerating pattern.

'Mmm, mornin'.'

'Yes. It is. Another one of those mornings. The sun seems to make certain of it.'