

Bourne toWrite...

creative writing
workshops

A Lifeline

by Garf Collins

“You think it will never happen to you,” muttered Graham. He pulled the blanket more tightly around his shoulders as he crouched in the doorway he inhabited at night.

Graham had suffered a broken night’s sleep, not only because of the cold, but also the foul smell of the companion who had joined him. He declined the offer of a cider/meths cocktail but wondered how long it might be before such a drink was more of a benefit than a threat. He looked down at his Jermyn St suit now crumpled beyond credibility for any job interview. Recent emails in his phone had given him no vestige of hope. Now he couldn’t even afford a pay-as-you-go SIM card.

Once again he recalled the path to this degradation. His ascent to the board of his company had been rapid. Movement had always been upwards and he suffered no setbacks to warn him of a possible decline in his fortunes. He remembered himself at the summit of his career - admired by his colleagues for his success within the booming mining business. That man now seemed like another person.

“What an idiot,” he thought. “How stupid to part from Janet and submit to the flattering admiration of Tracy - a trophy wife to complete your self-regarding image.”

The years with her now seemed a blur of consumption: the country mansion and town flat, the ridiculous motor yacht moored in an expensive marina in Majorca, her designer clothes, their foreign

holidays and expensive dining. He reproached himself for agreeing to such debt fuelled excesses in exchange for fewer and fewer opportunities to sublimate his lust.

Then the bust. Almost overnight the seemingly insatiable Chinese demand came to a grinding halt. He lost his job and couldn't replace it in the mayhem of his industry. Tracy as quickly fell out of love with him and sued for divorce. After the manic music stopped he found himself eking out an existence in a miserable bed sit. Even that had been unsustainable as the little money he had been left with drained away.

Now in the drab reality of early morning, Graham packed his few belongings into a soiled backpack and wandered down to the embankment. His thoughts, now frequent, of seeking oblivion in the waters below, were interrupted by a familiar voice,

“Good gracious Graham. I didn't expect to find you here.”

“Oh, Hullo Terry. Sorry to appear like this. I'm somewhat down on my luck.”

“Well look old boy. I'm in a bit of a hurry but I will certainly see what I can sort out for you.”

The brief surge of hope soon vanished as Graham realised the rapidly disappearing Terry had no way of contacting him. With black despair he stared again at the swirling river...

“Most of us I have only one story to tell. At least one main story that led to you being here.” The group leader looked around at the oddly assorted participants in the meeting. They were all individuals who had been brought into the Hostel for the Homeless. They had come to value the bed and shower, an address and use of the telephone. The workshop was designed to help them move on from mere existence.

“We believe it helps to tell that story and hopefully some idea of how you see your future.”

Graham had sat quietly through previous sessions. The stories, some of which had optimistic endings, had stirred in him a belief that he might emerge from thinking he had used up all his luck. He raised his hand and said simply.

“This is mine.”

“Thank you Graham. We'd love to share your story.”

“Well. When I came here I had no hope. All possible ways out of a desperate life on the streets seemed to have disappeared. It's not until it happens to you that you realise how hard it is to rise from the gutter.”

“You're dead right there mate,” said a young man. “I came to London with a job offer in my pocket. But I paid most of my money on a deposit for a flat.

When I contacted the company they said they were sorry but they couldn't take me on. Business had turned down. Then I found out that the supposed landlord didn't own the flat so I lost my deposit.

A few weeks in bed and breakfasts desperately looking for work and I was skint. No option but sleeping rough.”

“Thank you Kevin. Back to you Graham.”

“I was a fool. I thought I had got it made with a very well paid job. Then I made the mistake of leaving my family for a young woman who was very attractive but avaricious in her demands. After I was sacked from my job a bitter divorce followed. I lost my house and almost everything else as the debts I had built up to fulfil her ridiculous demands wiped me out. I was suddenly destitute and on the streets. I tried to get a management job but no chance. No address and a suit that rapidly began to show my wretched existence.”

“What brought you here then?”

“The final straw was the day an old friend passed me and said he might be able to help. As he disappeared I realised my phone was useless - so no way of communicating with him. I was standing on the bank of the Thames ready to end it all when one of the volunteers from this centre started talking to me. She persuaded me to come here. It’s given me a lifeline. I was able to clean up and get Jobseekers Allowance with which I can just about survive and pay for a phone.”

“Well thank you Graham. We’ll end today’s session on that optimistic note and look forward to hearing later how this proceeds for you.”

Graham continued his search for employment but not in what he now thought of as the rat race. He was looking for a role in which he could feel he was contributing more directly to society. He wanted to aim for happiness rather than boosting his ego. Alongside his job search he was volunteering at the Centre where he found great satisfaction in helping other desperate people.

One day, as he was out on duty, he noticed a young woman begging. Moving towards her he almost stumbled into a woman who was also about to speak to the unfortunate girl.

“Good gracious. You look just like..... Surely it can’t be you Graham?” she said.

“Yes it is indeed me,” replied Graham, realizing he was speaking to his first wife Janet. He hadn’t seen her since his exit with the gold digging girlfriend. “People rarely look how you expect them to, even when you’ve seen the pictures,” he added, surprising himself in making a joking reference to the lurid press coverage of his downfall.

“But you seem so different and I’m surprised to see from your badge that we work for the same organisation.”

After they had cooperated in dealing with the unfortunate girl, Janet, intrigued by the change she saw in Graham, Janet said. “Perhaps we should meet for a coffee. I expect you would like to hear how the children are, and I would be interested in how you came to be doing this.”

They agreed to meet the next day. He walked away thinking about this turn in his new life.

“Maybe, we could” he said to himself, but dared not continue the train of thought.