

Distant Voices
A Novel

By Roy E Edwards

Novels

Celtic Sunset

A Trace of Blue

Brotherhood of the Book

The Egyptian

Dark Wind in Eden

In Shadows Fall

The Gunfighter

The Outlaw

Distant Voices

Work in Progress

Verkolis

(a novel of good triumphant over evil)

The Mercy Gift (a novel)

Forthcoming

The Shootist

(From B W Harding's Barroom Tales)



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Acknowledgments

This one is for Julie my lovely wife who, for more than forty years has simply loved me without reservation.

You take my breath away.

Also, if not for Julie's sheer determinism to bring Distant Voices to completion it may never have happened and for that I thank you my joyous lady.

Roy E Edwards



In Memory of

Ronald Joseph Bastow 1941-2009

Catherine Ann Turner 1973-2009

Florence Ruby Chopping 1915-2009

Willy DeVille 1950-2009

Crispian St Peters 1939-2010

Glowing embers of the sun dissolve in charcoal drift

The deepening sky burnished fading light

Summer leaves whisper in the grass

The world turns and turns again

In the balance of an echo

In the melody of an evening song

Go gently

Gently we gather roses at the edge of dawn

Crossing fields of silence

We place them in memory

Gently with love.

R E Edwards



Introduction

An Interrupted Journey

The Black Hills, South Dakota USA

Autumn 1987

THIN AUTUMN SUNLIGHT WASHED THE HILLS IN pale gold. Above the hills the blue sky had a scrubbed shiny look, as though the recent heavy rains had washed it clean. He breathed deep of the moist air as he hiked along, his back pack a comfortable weight tugging at his shoulders. He walked the Black Hills, revelling in the quiet mystery of the land.

The hills were sacred to the Sioux and had been for more than a thousand years. Few believed that, but he did and he had no doubt that he was probably trespassing as usual, and as usual, no one bothered him. The elders had agreed that he walked the ancient trails in harmony with the land and the spirits. He listens, they said, to the grandfathers, to the spirit song in his heart. With this in mind, the Sioux allowed him to walk the hills in peace, and he completely unaware of the courtesy gifted to him.

The trail he followed was faint and growing fainter. He wondered how far it would take him before disappearing completely or ending abruptly, as so many of the ancient trails had a habit of doing. When that happened he would

think of it as ‘that Indian thing’. He used the phrase to cover anything and everything that couldn’t be explained, or otherwise recognised as having a logical reason for being. Like the ghost trails he loved so much to follow, he would gaze around in baffled surprise when the trail ran arrow straight towards a featureless hillside or to a jumble of rocks too carefully positioned to be nature’s work. He loved the hot, dusty mystery of it all and the occasional uneasy thrill of fear.

As he walked he thought back to when he first started using ‘that Indian thing’ to explain what otherwise his mind and senses could not. It was about thirty years ago he recalled, late summer 1957 when he made a spur of the moment decision. Throwing camping gear, food and water in the back of his ex-army jeep he headed out for Arizona. Crossing the state line he spotted a desert trail meandering away from the highway. He swung onto it and followed the trail for three days. It led him deep into the desert, a timeless land of heat and silence. At night, rolled up in his sleeping bag, his last sight before sleep claimed him was of a night sky ablaze with starlight.

During his second night in the desert he awoke suddenly, his heart pounding, inky blackness lay thick around him. Unsure of what had woken him; he fumbled around for his torch. As his questing fingers touched the cool metal case he suddenly had an eerie feeling of being watched, as though somewhere out there in the darkness unseen eyes followed his every move. A small fitful breeze blew across his face. Somewhere, a stone rolled

and clicked against another, the sound small and far away. For a few moments the wind gained in strength sighing across the land in a whisper of secret voices, leaving behind a deep well of silence, and an achy empty feeling inside him of something lost.

He fell into a fitful sleep. He dreamed of sunrise spilling red-gold light over an empty land, and in his dream a weathered face, cracked and seamed with age, smiled down at him from out of a pure, deep blue sky. The face was framed as though it peered through a window. Oddly, when he awoke, the dream stayed with him like an autumn memory of childhood.

Eager to be on his way, he fried strips of streaky bacon in a skillet over an open fire, soaking up grease with chunks of hard bread, drinking scalding coffee straight from the pot. He stowed his gear in a frenzy of haste and drove hard through the day, knowing he must soon turn back before he ran out of gas, food and water. He wasn't sure why he kept on driving deeper into the wasteland, other than to acknowledge that he must, and that was strange and just a little bit weird. Three days in. Three days out. Six days alone in the desert wasn't quite what he had in mind in the way of a vacation. He cursed himself for continuing, and yet at the same time he felt compelled to drive just a little bit further. By late afternoon of the third day the trail had completely disappeared; vanishing, or so it seemed, into a maze of jumbled rocks and clumps of sere desert grass.

Satisfied that he had reached the trail's end he turned the jeep around. Hot, thick sunlight poured through his windscreen momentarily blinding him, his eyes sore and gritty from the day's drive. He didn't relish driving into the sun for the next hour or so; besides, he hadn't realised the day was so far advanced, what was left of it that is. Cursing, he decided to make an early camp, and away with the dawn, he thought tiredly, as he dragged himself out from behind the wheel.

Later, after eating and feeling somewhat more energized, he decided to explore. What he had mistakenly taken for a jumble of rocks, turned out to be on closer inspection, a man made mound, a burial mound maybe, he thought as he fossicked around in the fading light. A dim trail led to the base of a small boulder with a flat, smooth top. "Like an altar," he mused out loud. In the lurid glow of a blood red sun, the face of the rock caught the slanting rays, light pooled on its surface, shimmering like molten glass. He moved on and as he walked slowly around the mound he felt a faint dampness waft across his face. The desert cooled rapidly as the sun went down. What warmth remained insufficient to evaporate moisture drawn up from somewhere within the mound. Intrigued, he began to poke around. Wary of snakes, he used a stick to move small rocks as he searched.

He found it a few paces from where he began. On the opposite side of the altar a small spring bubbled in a cup sized depression. He knelt down, cupped his hands and drank. The water tasted cool and sweet.

The sun slipped away, purple shadows hazed the desert. The night stood cool and still. He sat for a while in a drift of starlight. Later he crawled into his sleeping bag and fell into a dreamless sleep.

Time passed.

He awoke with a start, his heart thudding against the wall of his chest. Stars, aloof and cold, shed a faint glimmer of thin light. Silence ached in his ears. The night held its breath. Something had disturbed him, reaching down into his sleep. His heart raced, his mouth felt dry, his gut hollow and jumpy. He climbed out of his sleeping bag and slowly looked around; nothing, the night was empty and not a breath of wind stirred the air. He heard it then, a soft, melodious sound, a gentle rise and fall of voices in unison, faint with distance. Like a radio signal fading in and out, the chant rose and fell. Somewhere a night bird called out, the sound trembling in the air like a promise.

He didn't feel threatened or otherwise spooked in the darkness. He turned a full circle, slowly, eyes questing, quartering the dark terrain, nothing, just the empty desert veiled in starlight. He felt safe but damn it was eerie. For a few moments the chanting seemed to be all around him, as though he stood in the middle of a procession making its way towards the mound. Mouth dry, he turned, facing directly toward the mound, his heart raced. The chanting seemed to emanate from above the altar, as though the sound was drifting through an open door. He felt, with a

sense of wonder, like a guest, unexpected but welcome nonetheless. He stood transfixed as the chanting rose and then slowly faded into silence. He tried to make sense of it and failed. Time passed by unnoticed. Finally he stirred and in the faint, pearly glimmer of dawn, realised he had encountered a mystery he could not even begin to explain. 'It's an Indian thing,' he thought to himself, and spoke of it to no one. That was then, he thought with a rueful sigh, and this is now.

*H*E'D JUST ABOUT FOLLOWED THE TRAIL AS FAR AS he was prepared to go. Removing his back pack with a sigh of relief, he sat down to rest his aching joints. He wasn't, he admitted to himself, as spry as he used to be. He shivered in the cool afternoon sunlight.

His name was George Pemberton and he was fifty eight years old, of medium build with a scholar's thin aesthetic face. He wore his hair unfashionably long and was considered to be slightly eccentric. His life and position at a small Midwestern university specialising in archaeological studies, epigraphy and sundry other related subjects, was unexcitingly comfortable. His salary, whilst not large was adequate: A rent free cottage situated in a quiet corner of the campus, more than compensating for his meagre bank balance. He was, in his own quiet way content; at least that is what he repeatedly told himself, because if he didn't, he would have to admit that he made a mistake and he wasn't sure he could live with that.

Twenty eight years ago he had graduated with honours in the field of archaeology, from the very university where he now worked. After graduation he had fully intended to pursue a field career. His sudden and unexpected application for a soon to be vacant position, came as a complete surprise to everyone who knew him. The university's board of directors offered him the position with alacrity. They were only too pleased to have such a bright young man on their staff.

He gave no reason for his sudden change of direction and in the following years more than fulfilled the board's expectations. His solitary hikes into the wilderness occasioned no undue comment and, if the board of directors were aware of his sometimes on, sometimes off, affair with one particular female staff member, they gave no sign of it.

Margaret Wilder was a small, slim woman on the wrong side of fifty. Her habits, like her dress sense, were neat and precise, and like George she was unmarried. George found everything about her attractive, from her cool grey eyes to her generous lips and thick mane of dark brown hair shot through with silver. Occasionally she and George went out for dinner; occasionally they enjoyed great sex together. Neither one nor the other suggested a more permanent relationship. And like George, Margaret had her own area of expertise. A skilled epigrapher, well known in her field, and often published, she was considered to be one of the university's most valuable assets.