

**“NIGHT TRAIN TO DESTINY”**  
**Author: Jonathon Freeman ©**

Capturing part of one youth’s existence in the 1950’s

**BASED ON A TRUE STORY**

There was no question in John Rayner’s mind when he boarded the Adelaide bound night train from Mt. Gambier on that cold mid winter eve in 1958, Merle had become not only his best female friend but an obsession as well. He was not really sure, being a rational young adolescent, why the obsession existed; but he could understand the affection. Immature for age, distinguishing affection, love and obsession remained a somewhat vague enterprise for him, but he knew Merle fitted in there somewhere.

The journey John was embarking upon was not an unusual experience for either him or the dozens of other passengers who then relied heavily on the power of steam in those dowdy post war years. It was a socially acceptable and normal way to travel.

This particular trip yet for this teenager, was distinctly different from the numerous others he had made on a Friday night from Mt. Gambier. The town was then a small regional city in the south east of South Australia. Such journeys were allowed to well behaved boarding school students at the local Marist Brothers College, so they could visit their parents at home on a monthly basis. The majority of the boys from the single sex college had parents from either farms or small businesses. The fee schedule ensured it was not an educational facility for the masses. John’s monthly passion was going home to Merle in Murray Bridge; a township some three hundred miles away adjacent to the River Murray. This once important river boat/railway freight junction was about fifty miles east of the State’s capital city, Adelaide. His father was a share farmer; his mother, a renowned pre-war ballet dancer, had a volatile personality. Both knew they were unsuited for each other early into their rocky marriage. The youth knew, for whatever reason, that college fees were most usually in either some, or substantial arrears.

Because of what Brother Eric the College Principal had told him only that morning about the previous evening’s demise of Merle, young Rayner was still in a state of shock.

This particular trip represented to a reflective intelligent fifteen year old, what could today be likened to being in a lone manned space shuttle flight to determine the exact nature of space. Not only this, but also its suspected black holes of apparent nothingness; associated with their envisaged destructive capabilities. In his own mind at that time he could never have seen or felt that way of course. Another form of similar fear and uncertainty existed, of which, only he knew how absolutely terrifying it was and how much it was inwardly tearing him apart.

And so a single unoccupied compartment was selected by the young upset traveller. He continued to romanticize about Merle, to remember how good she had been to him and ponder about what post school personal life would be without her. This included what his long-term commercial future could now be. For whatever reason, up to that night John felt he could look forward to an almost endlessly adventurous life. At least that was what he thought each evening when retiring to the austere steel framed army bed in his dormitory. He detested most that so far had been dished out to him in life. His Merle became his anticipated saviour.

Not for one second did he consider himself to be socially disjointed, or an emotionally immature country kid. His day to day stability in his own mind was the strong sense of logic he placed in and around himself as a person, his capabilities to perform under pressure and the fulcrum of it all: Merle. The past eight hours and the long night ahead especially, was to set not only a challenge to all these notions but potentially “blow him away” as well – whatever that meant in those times? Every generation places different meanings on such language symbolisms, but John certainly understood the potentially devastating effects that could flow from this major catastrophe in his life.

What Brother Eric had earlier told the youth in the cold dispassionate manner only Catholic clerics of the time could muster, was that the motor vessel ‘Merle’ berthed at Murray Bridge, had burnt and sank at her moorings.

This ninety-six feet long passenger vessel was antiquated even for that time. Having been built in 1904, her loss should not have impacted so heavily on a normal male teenager of the day; unless there was some other unidentified

unusual and perhaps unhealthy attachment that no one understood including the young college student himself.

Tears had long dried up for the time, but inner rage and frustration prevailed. Although normally excited at this point of departure, this particular night the hissing of steam, filthy black engine smoke and all other previous trip reminders of impending adventure for the lad, went completely unnoticed. Smoke and flames from a stricken burning Merle took charge of his vivid imagination, as did her envisaged gurgling final life death throes as she sank into her coffin of vile Murray River mud.

Despite this confronting of the worst, John's visit to the death site was more than simply nostalgic. It was also to see if the miracle of resurrection could be repeated for his best friend. After all, the Catholic brothers told him and his fellow students such things were possible if prayer was constant and sincere. So he planned with rosary beads in pocket, the night time journey to Murray Bridge was to be one perpetual requiem for a true mate – albeit an ex floating sister in the marine sense.

Young Rayner placed considerable faith in religion. Before becoming obsessed by Merle he had often thought of becoming a Catholic priest. This was despite the ridicule he received from teaching brothers and peer group students alike, for being a Protestant in a rigidly Catholic College. This also subconsciously helped him to understand his entrancement to Merle when having to deal with associated bullying and victimisation so frequently handed out to himself and the minority handful of other Protestants in the College. A dominant hard core of bullish teaching brothers also helped perpetuate the antagonism with unjust use of their cane, or vindictive use of their tongues in periodically drawing classroom attention to the suspected only, separated status of his parents and other Rayner siblings.

John had no knowledge where his junior sister and brother were. He assured himself his father was probably caring them for. He knew they were not with his mother. Although so frequently reminded of this unhappy state of affairs, the young man remained determined to swim, not sink himself. Confidence gained on and about his sole true friend saw to that, as well as a profound belief in the only area the brothers successfully convinced him the relevance of. That was Christ Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Often he felt more Catholic than the so-called genuine brand of kids, whom in the

main he considered were hypocrites to themselves, the system and the taught vast multitude of saintly Almighties.

Was it so fanciful young Rayner therefore thought, his friend Merle and he could and would once again sail away together in the sense of enormous freedom enjoyed by Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer on their raft a century earlier? For all these supposed honourable reasons, the teenager felt quietly confident that justice from the Almighty and His supporters would ultimately prevail in one way or another and his loyalty to the faith would be rewarded. He only hoped it would be through the resurrection and saviour of his friend!

Such romanticism perhaps should not be considered unreal for either Rayner or most of his fellow students in the College: It provided hope of a type Robin Williams engendered within his sceptically wayward students in the film 'Dead Poets Society'. The only difference for Rayner and his colleagues was that no enlightened Robin Williams existed to instil or demonstrate realistic romanticism within the Marist College; nor often from within a majority of parents' ranks either. They mostly expected the Catholic system to provide all things in lieu of their own total ignorant, or self excused inability to do so. There was rarely any in between position. Regardless, such views often passed through John's mind at the time, as he knew it did with other students as well. Student runaways and other forms of violence, sometimes self-inflicted, evidenced this.

Mario Lanza, although still dubious; as an Italian singer, was an acceptable replacement Robin Williams idol within the school. Harry Belafonte certainly was not because of his Marist opinionated sinful dirty movie 'Island in the Sun', nor was Elvis Presley because his gyrating hips were equally unnatural and sinful. Merle was clean! She never spoke profanities! She provided fun and adventure! She provided hope! Was a youthful swing to her arguably, so un-natural? Heaps of kids John knew would give their precious jewels for some of the joyous experiences he had had on the river. His own male-based luckiness within his wider adversity therefore, did not go un-noticed in his mind. Wasn't this, after all, what this trip was all about – desperately trying to re-establish an environment of non-repression?

Being individuals, John knew students had to all create their own such spaces. His screaming difficulty was in losing his best mate; he had no fall back position of significance. His family did not have the funds to ever

create anything similar to what he had found and established, furthermore he did not want to ever return to his family's living environment anyway. Is it so unrealistic, he thought again, that drifting into the obscurity of faith only driven prayer for his mate would be so unusual either?

As the long train edged out of the station into the night at 8.45 p.m., the confused young man knew the trip ahead would take seven hours and that he would arrive just ahead of dawn. Because it was usual for him not to be met, he reflected on what it would feel like next morning when he walked from the Murray Bridge Railway Station to the riverside boat wharf. Already he had faced death when his Moma died in Mt. Gambier a year earlier. This had been his first encounter with death and its direct implications to himself and all of universal human mortality. The funeral itself upset him immensely. John's mother was there. He could not understand her apparent indifference to the whole event – especially as the deceased was her own mother. He still missed his grandmother, greatly. The questioning college student reflected whether his reactions would be similar or even more profound next morning when he confronted the corpse of Merle? Somehow an inner strength so far prevailed that ensured at least, some faith of sorts, existed amongst sadness, anxiety and confusion.

The carriage the teenager occupied was less than half full. By College compulsion he was still in a uniform: royal blue blazer, grey melange pants, white shirt and a striped blue tie. He felt highly conspicuous in that attire, especially so when he elected to sit alone. Somehow it seemed safer this way because he didn't want to be drawn into any outside conversations. He hoped there was no one else in the carriage that knew him, or Mt. Gambier High School kids were not aboard. High school boys and College kids never got on together, with street scuffles between the two being not all that unusual. When realizing he probably occupied a safe zone, he started to relax a little as the power of the great engine flexed its energy through the carriages as forward momentum increased. It wasn't just the environment or speed that contributed to this wind down, it was the often previously felt experience of moving ever further away from his hated school environment.

As steam power with her carriages chugged noisily and dutifully into the night and the clickety clack of the wheels on the rails became ever more monotonous and acoustically hypnotic, the usual array of sidings passed by: Tarpeena, Nangwarry, Struan, Hynam, Kybybolite and a host of others that serviced the needs of country folk along the line. Young Rayner knew their

importance because he lived as a pre-schooler near Struan and often visited the siding's flimsy tin shed after a train had passed to pick up mail, food, or parcels from the big department stores in Adelaide. They were an important supply line to country people. He reflected that night on how often his mother had walked with him to that particular siding in tears when conducting her domestic duties for the family.

“Oh God”, he thought. “When will all the shit in my life come to an end. Why did you betray me and dump this lot on me too Merle? You're a bastard like all the others!”

The extreme coldness of the night seemed to exaggerate brain drama of this type. The carriages were not heated and were drafty. Only an old overcoat provided him with any additional measure of warmth and privacy to his feelings as he forlornly tried to snuggle into it to rid himself of both his mind grievances and earthly discomforts. He knew he should have been better prepared because it was always like this in the south east of the state this time of year. At the time of packing such considerations were unimportant. Young John wanted to travel light to be free of the burden of luggage. That's exactly what happened and how he worked it. The consequences were unimportant and would remain so. After all wasn't he a Taurus? His mother often reminded him from toddler days that Taureans were a tough, stubborn lot and they therefore should never complain.

Rayner learnt never to do so to others. He only ever did to himself and his perception of the Almighty and its cohorts, whether male or female. Somehow praying to females seemed easier to him because he thought they were more likely to understand where he was coming from and the legitimacy of his often placed miracle requests.

As the evening moved on a combination of tiredness and cold seemed to render the purpose of the trip in the first place more and more obscure. The more significant fire of passion felt before departure had waned into a state of mind for the boy that could be described as melancholy remorse. Nothing was going directly to plan. The prayer requiem had not commenced, nor had the vast written list of questions that needed to be answered over the weekend been started. It all had become just too hard and furthermore an attitude of what the hell anyway prevailed. All these things made the youngster feel even worse. Whereas before departure he felt his whole future depended on the trip, this was no longer the case. He now felt

doomed no matter what. A sense of deep loneliness gripped him in his turmoil that he could never remember having ever experienced before.

Bitterness about his upbringing prevailed, especially the cruelty of his father to himself and his mother through physical lashings. No reasons were ever apparent for these assaults. He thought being thrown into boarding school aged eleven unannounced was a deliberate extension of the same cruelty. In his more senior years he realised how and why he had learned to cope with violence, when as a pre-school toddler he, often in home crisis, packed his dilapidated billy cart with water and a few bits of bread and jam, or bread and cooking fat with salt and pepper to complement; to visit England for the day. Taffy, his somehow acquired, faithful dog accompanied him on these frequent journeys across paddocks to a dam some eight miles away. The joy and romanticism of such trips had become a survival strategy, with an elementary knowledge of the presence of England itself having been gained through regularly listening to "The Air Adventures of Biggles" on late afternoon ABC radio.

This night he remembered all these things, including when Taffy unexpectedly disappeared one day when he was aged around five or six. Although he never knew exactly what happened to him, no explanation for his disappearance was ever given by either one of his parents. Young Rayner was astute enough to know, however, his then best friend probably suffered a similar fate to cats, dogs and other farm animals that were regularly slaughtered by his father. Cats and dogs were always shot. From a child's viewpoint, this was always in a callous indiscriminatory way. The necessity for culling of animal stock was not then understood by young John, but the crudity of the handling of Taffy's disappearance by both his parents was still strong in his memory on that lonely journey to visit Merle. It seemed to symbolise a lot about both his parents and reinforce his view that they were not fit to be parents anyway.

Merle had replaced his parents. Merle had become his girlfriend. Merle had become his best mate. Merle represented why his parents were wasting money sending him to useless schooling. Didn't all involved know his personal survival, self-confidence and achievement ranked above all things in that order? Didn't they know his dismal academic results proved all these things?

Although he didn't quite see it in such philosophical terms at that time, John realised in later years Merle had become like a girlfriend, partly satisfying his opposite sex requirements for self fulfillment; as well as becoming his best mate for practical day to day male orientated activities. Merle's owner, an ex WWII flying officer, with the vessel itself; jointly in his eyes therefore, became everything for him to live for from the age of thirteen years.

What Rayner did not know all during this time was that his mother was favourably nurturing this and another relationship from behind the scenes. She seductively and carnally ensured her overall interests were at least primarily, if only occasionally fulfilled; as were the social interests of her eldest son. A most attractive woman, no doubt she found this not at all too difficult to achieve with a status oriented, Jaguar driving, self assured male egotist like Merle's owner.

In naïve total ignorance of this connection, John took Merle's owner Romaine as he saw and found him. He was caring, trusting and in his company, acted responsibly as a father figure to him. At the age of fourteen, John found himself being encouraged to call him by his accepted nickname Ro, which was most unusual for the still prevailing conservative values of the times. The whole relationship seemed to provide a future way out of self acknowledged misery for John. If nothing else, it provided hope and that meant everything to a searching young man! After all, he assured himself, how many men would allow a mere fourteen year old to risk his prize asset by allowing such a person to navigate his three deck ninety six foot monster on his own; bring her into a wharf berth, take navigation control in heavy weather on 168,000 acre Lake Alexandrina, effectively navigate vague channels in the 1956 floods and entertain a full complement of 21 residential passengers for full five day cruise excursions?

John was then not aware that Romaine was cash starved during the flood period and that he was receiving no support from the Bank of Adelaide, his traditional banker. What seemed to the adolescent as an act of gross generosity from Ro at the time was more than likely subvertly driven by the harsher consideration that no excess cash was available for fully paid experienced staff. The gamble taken with John was better than not sailing at all. Such action, if this were true, would have caused the complete closure of the business.

As the volatile teenager thought about all manner of relevant things, the deafening noise of Merle's twin six cylinder Buick engines seemed to override the immediate noise of steam and harshness of metal to metal train track noise. It was an illusion of course and John knew it. His whole life suddenly felt illusory and unreal. The dismal nature of this fact saw him visit the carriage latrine to ostensibly urinate, which he did. Subliminally he knew there was another reason, which he had been taught by the Marists was not only sinful but ensured a direct route to hell after death. Regardless, self-gratification did occur and he did not care a fuck about hell – nor about anything else. This single act was as close as John could have come to suiciding without actually having done so because of his strong religious beliefs about such matters. In a more practical sense, however, it signalled the beginning of an act of strong willed rebellious defiance against all that was not in his interests.

By midnight young Rayner was in total revolt against not only the world and its people, but religion as well. A window was opened to discard the Rosary beads, but second thoughts took charge. Subconsciously he knew he had to hang onto something. Religion seemed to be real, as abstract as it was to a young man. May be being a priest could replace Merle? Yes he thought. That's it! I think I would make a good priest he said to himself. The rosary beads did not go back into his trouser pocket because that area was too close to where he had shown such total disrespect to the Almighty. They went into his small roughly packed overnight bag.

Although tired, John still had not slept. Meat pie and lemon squash refreshments obtained from the Wolsley stop over at midnight perked him up a little, but he decided prayers were still out of the question. For some obscure reason, his mind now shifted into college life and all the duplicity it seemed to represent at all levels. As a senior student, he wondered for example, why he and his student colleagues were given Agricultural Science books depicting the sex lives of pigs, cattle and plants, but the reality of human procreation and love were never discussed. He questioned why senior schoolers were never allowed to visit the local girls' convent to attend their socials and why to be seen fraternising innocently with them in the street attracted full-scale corporal punishment.

Merle suddenly became unimportant at midnight! Other things like family and sex did. Why did his folks never talk to him about such things and why did Ro his new middle-aged friend have to take it upon himself to render at

best, a broad perspective to him on the topic. In fact, he asked, although clandestine illicit smoking groups at school talking about such taboo subjects was personally stimulating to most; because the accuracy thereof was highly questionable, what was the real benefit of it all anyway? No one seemed to know, even the most senior kids. Only more unneeded confusion prevailed it seemed to John. He used to envy the High School boys who appeared to have absolutely no hang ups about such matters and were rumoured to be sexually very experienced. It was only very few college boys who felt High School boys would therefore not all end up in hell for their misdemeanors of being both non Catholic, as well as being wildly promiscuous. This self-righteous attitude amongst all college students, including himself, John realised, was incorrect and stupid because it was only further compounding the problem.

Is this the reason why, he rationalised, he was never comfortable being too close to females? The older ones he figured were all bossy bitches with the younger ones being great to admire at a distance but definitely threatening up close. He knew he could shout at and scream at and then nurture Merle. Obediently she would never answer back and that's how young John liked it. In return for this obedience he complemented Merle as caringly and respectfully as possible with words and an occasional pat with the hand. The reason Merle burnt and sank, he reasoned, was that no one except him took the time to fully understand her and her whims. Someone else had seriously mistreated her and she had revolted. There could be no other reason for her demise. It all seemed so simple! Yet deeper inside, he realised this persistent shallowness of thought was both superficial and extreme folly. The truth was he was merely wishing he were a rough diamond like the high school kids. Life then would be then ever so much easier and probably much more fun too – especially if Merle was involved as well.

Conflicting rational and irrational thought patterns dominated the youngster's being during the long four-hour haul between Wolsley and Murray Bridge yet somehow to John everything was now totally in perspective and there was no room for further anguish, and tears. Logical or not logical thoughts were now irrelevant. It was not lost on him again, he was travelling yet further and further away from the dreaded college, and what ever confronted him at the Murray Bridge wharf site could never be worse than that existence!

Such was the emotive non-focussed state of his mind!

At 4.30 a.m. arrival at Murray Bridge seemed to come from nowhere for John. Not only bleary eyed tiredness, but also his incessant mind ramblings saw to that. The time for his own self confrontation was now near. He rose to the occasion by muttering to himself “What ever will be will be”.

Leaving the train in the dark, he wandered down familiar streets to the wharf area passing Noske's Flour Mill and the Shell Depot. Where the ghostly silhouettes of railway carriages stood near both these buildings, he reflected upon how much he used to enjoy rowing in a dinghy all about the area during the massive 1956 flood and how he caught giant cod fish amongst the buildings. Soon the stench of recent burning was quite strong as he approached the wharf in the dark. No streetlights existed. Only the light of a half moon amongst clouds provided any insight to final direction. He knew possible danger existed on and about the nineteenth century wharf.

Taking what he considered was a safe distant position, the now sombre John saw regular small protrusions extending about two feet above the water line where Merle would normally have been. Realising getting closer to see more was dangerous, he elected to wait until daybreak before proceeding nearer. This was to be less than an hour away, during which time he sat on his overcoat dangling his legs over the side of the wharf. Stone silence existed except for the noise of an occasional hungry fish breaking the river's surface. No thoughts came to his mind. Any outsider would have considered young Rayner was preparing himself in solace for a funeral. More accurately, it was a wake for a partly buried metaphorical corpse.

Early morning sunshine soon shimmered through in a brilliance of orange and yellow. It became then visually clearer to the teenager what trauma had occurred. Protrusions out of the water were in fact charred timber studs where once outer cladding caneite was attached. The wreck had settled at about 30 degrees to the wharf, with the bow, although still largely submerged, remaining tethered to the wharf with a heavy hawser. Merle's stern section was out of sight all together. The wharf, although charred, was only superficially damaged. What was once the telephone cable for wharf side hook up lay over the side of the structure with a singed burnt ending where once a connecting plug had been. Strangely to John, this once actual and symbolic cable of life over which he had so many times spoken from

Mt. Gambier, seemed to say “Its all over - Death prevails”. “This is the end of the line young John”.

A further hour passed before a 1952 Holden Utility arrived with a single occupant and scuba gear packed in the rear. The driver introduced himself saying Romaine would be there shortly. Minutes later the great headlights of Ro’s black Mark IV Jag appeared amongst a cloud of dust, with its unique guttural engine sound. At that time, a twin exhaust 3.5 litre push rod engine would distinguish itself distinctively from more sedate but popular Holdens, Austins and Volkswagons of the day.

Ro appeared shocked and devastated. Only the presence of the Jaguar, with its great power and ability to perform to an emerging young man seemed to instil any sense of positive normality into the situation. Ro on his arrival only curtly acknowledged the teen’s presence before taking up conversation with the by then fully attired scuba diver.

At a distance, John heard most of the conversation between the two. It appeared that whilst Merle had sunk, her valuable hull was not irretrievable. Sinking had occurred through her being flooded by the attending fire department. Her 6 inch thick hardwood hull was only slightly scorched. Simple mobile buoyancy tanks for lifting and a large pump would have been all that was necessary for a refloat and later, an above hull rebuild and refit. Then she could have lived yet again as he had so hoped but not prayed for.

What followed was, the diver was instructed by Ro to ensure the wreck did indeed become valueless for retrieval.

Young Rayner was mortified. Despite his tender years he knew exactly what that meant for him and his future life! Any reasons Ro may have had for giving such instructions were totally irrelevant to John, but from discussions in part overheard at earlier times, he knew a fellow by the name of Butcher from Mount Barker probably figured strongly in the decision.

With a chest filled with anger and eyes flooded with tears, he ran off as fast as his youthful legs could carry him to the north. There was a clump of willows with the wreck of the paddle wheeler “Bejo” nearby. She too was nearly covered with water, but at least visually her remains appeared to remain largely in tact.

Within this isolated much earlier a time discovered, seeming environmentally friendly womb of protection; John sobbed, shouted profanities against Ro, his own family, the college and the world at large. All previous hopes, dreams and desires about being a future river man were now over. As hours past, Romaine had not come near him. He was obviously suffering his own adult grief. John knew Ro well enough to know he would never deliberately abandon him in such circumstances. Or would he?

Young Rayner never allowed him to be put to the test!

By mid Saturday afternoon the teenager came to the conclusion somehow, some rebuilding of ideas and structures had to occur in and around his life. Within his zone of protection, he became rational enough to realise he was now definitely a loner again; regardless of what anyone ever said to him. His logic argued, may be Merle's death was necessary to conclusively reinforce that notion and that's what his destiny was anyway. Furthermore he had better learn to live with it! This was only one thought of hundreds that dominated the thinking patterns of the young man that day. Suicide had been another. Immaturity ensured the multiplicity of intriguing wider connections between the violent perceivable course of events; Ro, his mother and Butcher were to remain a mystery until he himself attained adult maturity; with all frivolous passions within and around that state having been experienced and given reluctant, but respectful honour to, by himself.

Psychologically, it is with little doubt the wreck of the Bejo, for so long so glaringly inert and with only decadent symbolism as a reminder of her once past glory and usefulness, which finally and so harshly ground full blown maturity into John. Her wreck within such a beautiful mausoleum like setting seemed to convey a certain majesty to all forms of human crafted organic material decay as she slowly rotted away under the willows. This included the grand piano aboard her remains; which without meditative contemplation seemed to John's dry wit, was subtly, but yet ever so favourably, most symbolic for the occasion. With all this, inner humour suddenly prevailed. He started to unwillingly smile. A smile turned to controlled laughter. Controlled laughter turned to an uninhibited outpouring of combined laughter and tears. John himself realised he had at last taken the first important step to manhood and social reality. All vagaries still implied within this self-recognition were totally unimportant. The new world, whatever it proved to be, would be totally of his making. Emotion of

this type poured endlessly out, probably hours. Within this environment, time was totally irrelevant. So was any notion that covertly or otherwise, divine influence had at last intervened. Only swollen, blood stressed eyes and a filthy, damp, snot drenched handkerchief remained lingering testimonials to trauma as twilight closed in; to one confident new adult.

Merle now rests in some 80 feet of water mid stream in the Murray River at Murray Bridge and with Bejo, slowly decays away out of both sight and public memory. A periodically seen riverside visitor returning to a certain spot amongst the willows seems to continue to bear witness to the power and influence of the times to one at least.

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