

THE WORLD 'IS' FLAT

Eighty six year old Douglas Trubshaw wore his purple heart with pride. Tied around his neck with a piece of string, the ribbon had worn away many years ago. Having met with a regular group of friends for lunch he only half listened to their conversation whilst downing mushroom soup and a chicken sandwich. The stories were generally the same. Arthur, who everyone called Arty claimed to have been visited by aliens virtually every night. Bill being bigger than most people enjoyed going into shops and intimidating the store clerks. When the manager was eventually called, he left politely rather than have the police summoned and risk ending up in a cell again. Whilst the other men exchanged stories on the imaginary looks they had gotten from women half their age, the ladies discussed the fashions in the shop windows and reminisced over their previous love lives.

Soup and sandwich gone, Douglas dabbed around his mouth with his serviette trying to impress Pearle who as usual kept glancing across the table at him. Her nod of approval sent his heart racing. The same thought as always crossed his mind; if only she wasn't still in love with her recently deceased husband.

His attention was suddenly caught by Sam who did not usually have much to say but when he did, always told his story with great gusto. "I don't know what station it was on, but it was on some vendor's radio in the market. They've apparently discovered that the world is flat after all." Every body's opinions were expressed so enthusiastically that one of the staff came

over and asked them to keep it down. Sam was quite convinced by what he had heard on the radio and it did not take him long to put doubts into the minds of some of his friends.

“Hey guys,” Douglas reminded them, “I was in the navy for twenty one years and I spent most of that time on the sea.”

“Well lucky for you, you didn’t go over the edge then.” Sam told him with a definite look of concern spread over his face.

Douglas was speechless, not knowing whether he wanted to correct their theory or console Sam over his concern. As his eyes caught Pearle’s, their heads bowed to hide their grins.

“It’s a good job they know now,” said Hattie. No-one knew her real name because of the amnesia she had sustained in an accident, but she earned this one as soon as she met the group.

“Now no more people will disappear from their boats and no more airplanes will just vanish from the sky.”

“You’re thinking of the Bermuda triangle,” Reggie laughed. “It’s got nothing to do with this. Tell you what, let me cuddle up to you tonight and I’ll explain it all to you.”

Hattie glanced across at Pearle whose eyebrows were raised well above normal.

“I think I’ll go to the library one day and look it up instead thank you.”

“You in a library; what makes you think anyone would let you in a library?”

“I can still read Mister Harvey; my accident didn’t take that away from me.”

A familiar shadow spread itself across the table. All eyes looked up despite knowing who to expect and what he would say.

“Hope you all enjoyed your lunch ladies and gentlemen but the soup kitchen is closing now so I’ll have to ask you all to leave. Remember we’re open again tomorrow at eleven a.m. just like every other day so we look forward to seeing you then.”

They knew there was no point in begging to stay in the warm a little longer, having tried several times in the past. Each with their bags and or shopping carts, they left the comfort of the big hall and stepped out into the winter weather.

“These are the days it’s worth going to jail,” Bill told them. “Not only do you get a warm cell with a bed off the floor, but also ‘three’ meals a day. Nowhere near as good as the soup kitchen food, but you actually get three meals.”

“Yeah, and nice warm showers with naked men who demand you bend over and pick up the soap,” laughed Artie.

With a giggle everyone went their own way, some alone and some (mostly the ladies) in couples. Douglas headed for the market with his blanket and his other charity provided outfit in a black bag. Begging was second nature to him now. He no long flinched or cringed when people refused; adding their thoughts on who and what he was despite his Purple Heart dangling for all to see. So many times he had been asked where he had stolen it from. Not too many people considered that a great many devoted years’ service had been what had put him on the streets.

Douglas had been taken prisoner after his ship was sunk. For two years and many months, he and hundreds of other service men were tortured. When they were not being physically persecuted, their captors lectured them on what failures they were for having gotten caught; good for nothings because of their nationality and many more degrading dressing-downs for just existing.

Six months in a hospital only helped slightly, but his self-esteem and confidence had been shattered. The small pension he received hardly paid the rent of the apartment social

services had placed him in after his treatment. Getting a job with mental health issues was impossible.

Then came his second chance. His older brother Eddie who ran a small construction company, building designer houses not only offered him a job but invited him into his home. He was hardly through the door when he was made aware of his brother's wife's disapproval of a man with mental health issues. Work went well, long, hard hours, great workmates. He seemed to have it all except for Elizabeth continuing the emotional torture that he had endured as a prisoner. Even his confidence in his work started to suffer and no amount of reassurance from Eddie or the others could compete with her cruelty. Before long he refused to join the family except for meals which was mandatory. The remainder of the day was spent in his room crying over what a useless failure he was. Silently one night he slipped out, not even leaving a note.

Displaying his purple heart, it only took a little while to be accepted into a group of street people, most of whom had been through something similar. He found these people to be honest and non-judgmental, unlike most other people he had met since having his uniform ripped off his back. As always when darkness started to fall, Douglas returned to what the group regarded as home. He was looking forward to sitting close to the fire with the bottle of vodka he had managed to scrounge enough money for.

As usual there was a space saved for him next to Pearle. There always had been even when her husband was alive. After wiping the top of the bottle on his dirty glove, he passed it to her. As always, she only pretended to take a drink, not wanting to risk offending him with a refusal. Douglas raised the subject that had been bugging him all day.

“Why would anyone believe after all this time that the world is flat? I have sailed across the ocean from one part of the world to another. Ships in their masses did and I’m sure even more do now.”

“I heard the program too Duggie. I really don’t think it’s anything for us to worry about,” she said squeezing his hand. “I see you met enough nice people to buy you a bottle today.”

Reaching into his pocket he said, “And I got this for you Pearle.” Smiling sweetly at the rosy apple he was holding up, she wished she had the teeth to eat it with. In an effort to distract his attention she pointed out that she noticed he was more doubled over than usual; his hand wedged more tightly into his side. She was fully aware that his attempt to shrug it off was just bravado.

Only a month or so ago, Douglas had collapsed on the street. The hospital would not allow any of his friends to visit him, but Pearle had waited by the entrance night and day until he was discharged. His brave face did not come close to convincing Pearle. She knew there was something seriously wrong and she had been determined to find out what. When he told her his sclerosis was killing him and he only had about a month left, she hugged him and promised she would be there till the end.

Usually the group was left alone in the alley between a row of derelict shops but that night they had company. They first became aware of their unwelcome visitors when a metal bar was dragged across the wall of the brick building. Both personal items and garbage were kicked around whilst comments about filthy, smelly hobo’s were spat in all directions. The group stayed together hoping the intruders were just passing through. However, it was not long before one of the thugs knocked Hattie’s large pink flowery hat across the alley. Bill rose slowly from

his seat hoping that his large build would discourage any further action from the thugs. Two of them knocked him down and sat on him. Sam leapt up but was sent crashing into the brick wall.

Before feeling the hand wrapping itself around his collar, Douglas felt himself being dragged backward. “You’re in my spot. Take a hike and find yourself somewhere else to sleep in future.” Pearle was up on her feet in an instant telling them that he was sick and needed to be by the fire. “I’ll go instead,” she said. “Oh no the pretty lady stays.” After a good kicking and beating Douglas crawled away, still wrapped in his blanket and bottle in hand. Pearle’s screams, filled him with shame and anger despite knowing there was nothing he could do. The sound of the paramedics shortly after gave him the consolation that she was getting all the care she needed. He knew she would want him to look after himself and that meant finding somewhere safe to spend the night.

Not far away large white cliffs overlooked the sea. From the embankment it did not take long to find a ledge that was just his size and relatively flat. As he struggled to get warm under his blanket, he watched the sea sparkle in the moonlight. It brought back memories of those proud days when the moonlight glistening was all he could see. Picturing many of the faces he served with, he managed to ignore the now chronic pain of his liver and how unwell he had been feeling all day. The cold seeping through his blanket was also easy to ignore as his mind faded back to the happiest days of his life.

A familiar voice caught his attention. There on the beach glowing as he had never before seen her was his friend Pearle.

“I thought you had been hurt or even killed,” he shouted down to her. She beckoned him with her arm. Sitting up, he asked if she was alright.

“I am better than ever; come down and join me.”

“I can’t climb down there. I’ll have to go over the top and around.”

“You can make it down there. It’s easier than it looks.”

Douglas suddenly realized his friend was right, there was nothing to fear. No longer holding his side, his body almost slid down the rocks and he landed right beside her. Pearle having taken his hand led him toward the silver waves, but he stopped suddenly before they got too close. “I don’t think I still have the ability to swim,” he told her. “Not at my age.” It was then that he noticed all of the other people who were walking into the water, some staggering, others crawling, and some with walking sticks. Many others were in wheel chairs making their way into the never deepening salty water. Not everyone wore a smile but they all had a glow in their eyes.

“Come on Duggie. It’s our time. See I told you I would be with you till the end.”

As they made their way to what Douglas could now only assume was the end of the world, his friend Sam’s voice rang out. “See, told you the world was flat didn’t I?” All three of them stopped as they approached a flight of steps that the sea trickled down slowly. Looking around, they saw that people had climbed out of their wheelchairs, dropped walking sticks and were now walking up straight as they disappeared off the end of the earth.

“Come quickly,” said a voice beneath them, “Before the world resumes its normal shape and the entrance to heaven closes up for the day.”

The newspaper reported the next day that the body of Douglas Trubshaw had been found on a cliff that morning. Holding onto his purple heart, it was believed the hero died of natural causes as he looked over the ocean where he had served for over twenty years.