

# ***ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE***

**By Michael Ventura**

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***“Old age ain’t for sissies.”  
-- Bette Davis***

I’ve learned the hard way that there’s a crucial difference between problems and trouble: you can think your way through a problem, but you have to do something about trouble. Sure, sometimes, you can consult a therapist and *understand* your way through to the other side, but if you’re addicted to drugs, nothing will work until you *do* something – change your circumstances, clean up your act. Running out of money is trouble. If you’re going to land on your feet you *must* act – your circumstances must change.

So let me state it plain: the money ran out – not all the way out, but I could no longer afford to live as I’d been living. When you’re pushing 60, as I am, and your money runs out, as mine had, that’s more than a problem. That’s trouble.

For 20 years, I’d lived in Los Angeles and had long ago learned the difference between being what I call “Hollywood-broke” and “broke-broke.” Hollywood-broke: you’ve got just enough to make expenses and live more or less as you like – no European vacations, no splurging on the latest high-tech, but things are manageable. Broke-broke: it’s a week until rent-day and you’re sweating. For years, I’d been Hollywood-broke, but pretty soon I was going to be broke-broke.

It was clear that I had to leave a city I’d loved for many years – and leave people I loved and things I loved to do. It was clear that I had to move someplace where my newly reduced earnings would keep me afloat.

I’m 59 years old. A friend of mine said recently, “At our age, people set up their lives so that they never have to leave their comfort zones.” My comfort zone had turned into the red zone, where if you leave your car unattended it will be towed. This isn’t what

any of us expect at this age. Yet, in my more reflective moments, I pondered that my situation was a 3-D metaphor for being my age. Call it the age of “pushing 60.” The age when, like it or not, admit it or not, we’re about to be old. Our fundamental comfort zone – a body and mind in more-or-less working order – will become an increasingly red zone as time goes on, and that time is short. Even if we have money and try to do everything right, our bodies (and perhaps our minds) will soon change beyond our ability to will them otherwise. Trouble is on the way, and much of it will be trouble we can do little about.

So the practical question of “Where do I go from here?” became also an existential question, a question that most of us who are pushing 60 try to avoid. My checkbook was doing me a kind of favor: to think about moving to another place forced me to think about moving into another, unavoidable passage of life.

A friend to whom I related these musings said, tongue-in-cheek, “Hey, Oprah said 50 is the new 30, and now they’re saying 60 is the new 30!” Well, that may be what Oprah thinks, but there’s nothing “middle-aged” about being in your fifties. Fifties ain’t the middle. Average life expectancy these days is holding at about 76. For most people, fifty ain’t half, or near half. Fifty is about two-thirds of the way to the end. When you’re pushing 60... you’re getting old. I was getting old and going broke, and the one seemed not unlike the other.

I needed to think. Well, there are many ways to do that. Meditation is one – I’ve meditated every day for many years. Another is just sitting down and trying to be logical – I’d done that and it had taken me to a certain point, but that point wasn’t as far as I had to go. Another is to wait for the solution to present itself, but I didn’t have time for that. And there’s yet another way that sometimes works for me: just say “The hell with it!” and do something that under the circumstances some might say was, to borrow one friend’s favorite word, “wacko.” So I called up Dave – who’s about six months older than I, and who’s been my trusted friend since we were 10 – and I suggested he fly down from Oakland while I drive up from L.A., and we’d meet in Vegas and tie one on. Dave’s a normally sober individual who does taxes for a living, but he’s been having his own problems lately, and he readily agreed.

The odd thing is... it turned out that in impulsive trip to Vegas was, after all, the mature thing to do – probably because I'd left my familiar surroundings, my familiar strictures, my familiar lies, and gone out into an open-ended situation in which something new could enter my awareness.

As I drove into the desert at night, a thought came to me – as they sometimes do, suddenly and without warning. At around 1:00 a.m., I rounded that curve on I-15 where suddenly Vegas is laid out before you in all her gaudy glow, looking like an aging whore with a heart of steel and neon eyes who lives by the proverb, “Scared money never wins.” And this is the thought that hit me: It takes fierceness to grow old well.

When I arrived at our room at the Stardust, I couldn't turn on the light because Dave, who'd arrived earlier, had fallen asleep hours ago. (Tax-men go to bed earlier than writers.) I threw my gear on the empty bed, took a yellow pad from my satchel, sat by the window 20-odd stories up, and wrote by the reflected glare of Las Vegas' frantic night, trying to run the thought down. I wrote:

It takes fierceness to grow old well. It takes a fierce devotion to the word *goodbye* – learning how to say it in many ways – fiercely, yes, but also gently, with laughter, with tears, but, no matter how, to say it every time so that there's no doubt you mean it. When you're pushing 60, the rest of your life is about saying goodbye. Your greatest work may yet be demanded of you (though odds are against that). You may find more true love, meet new good friends, and there's always beauty (if you have an eye for it) – still, no matter what, slowly, you must say goodbye, a little bit every day, to everything.

Goodbye, for instance, to your face. Sometime in your early twenties, you developed the face that's yours, give or take some wrinkles, until your late forties or even your early fifties. But, gradually, that face becomes a different face – and you'll never see the other, younger face again, not in a mirror. Even in photographs, the face you had for so long will begin to look like a stranger's. And you're saying goodbye to the faces of your friends – the faces they had when they became your friends. If you haven't seen them in a while, it can be a bit of a shock, these new faces of theirs, and their sagging wrinkled skin and grayed or dyed hair. Something hasn't been so much taken away as added to their visages: the approach of Death. Call it whatever you like, but that's what it

is, that's what we politely call "aging." Seeing Death slowly mark the faces of your friends, you reluctantly recognize its mark upon your own.

Goodbye, face that was mine. Hello, Death – near? Or still a ways off?

By your late forties, you're losing your looks; by your late fifties, you're losing your capacities.

You're saying goodbye to your body every day now – or it's saying goodbye to you. You can choose to live with the face or hair you now have or you can play tricks with it, force it to look younger, but you can't do much about your hands. Or your feet. The skin changes. The toenails change. The belly. The ass. The slackness. Hello to that, and goodbye to the body you'd assumed was yours – you never realized how much you'd assumed that you'd always be smooth and quick and strong. A silly assumption, but you didn't know that. Smooth, quick, strong, svelte – goodbye to that.

And you're saying goodbye to things like... how you used to drive a car. I stop a lot more to pee, and I learned the hard way (skidding off a Nevada two-lane) that my night-reflexes aren't what they were. And the gas-pedal knee throbs after a couple of hours. Once you could run with no pain. Walk with no pain! Now there's that twinge in the knee that sometimes turns into real hurt. Hello, pain. Something always hurts now, a little or a lot. You hardly notice it anymore. When you see people in their seventies walking so slowly and carefully, you realize now, in your flesh, that they walk that way because it HURTS. You'll walk that way, too, one day.

And then you begin to learn to say goodbye even to your memory. It's no longer so dependable, no longer at your beck and call. It's weird and scary: you *know* exactly what it is you don't remember, but, somehow, you can't actually remember it – you just feel a blank space where the memory should be. Then the name, or whatever, comes to the surface, hours or days later – but one day maybe it won't. Alzheimer's? "A senior moment"? You get used to it and hope for the best. Ain't nobody can do a thing about it anyway. Goodbye.

I'd come to Las Vegas and something about "fierceness" and "goodbye" had been given to me. Now what? For I was still in trouble and there was still something to do. Clarity begets clarity, contemplation begets action – if, that is, one's contemplation is rooted in the real. Move from L.A. I must – not in dejection or defeat, but fiercely.

Where? Three decades ago, I'd wandered into Lubbock, Texas. I'd found good friends there, and they were good friends still. I made inquiries and, yes, rents in Lubbock are half of what they are in L.A. In fact, everything's cheaper in Lubbock. Restaurants, movies (\$5 for a first-run movie on a Saturday night), gas, groceries, and even a scarce commodity in that part of the country: water. Why, a manual laborer – a mechanic, a plumber, a trucker, even a teacher – might still afford to buy a house in Lubbock! Lubbock, then. As Lubbock's most famous son, Buddy Holly, once sang: "Rave on!" Hello, I said to fate. Hello... Lubbock.

Within weeks, my stuff was packed, my arrangements were made, my goodbyes were said. The movers had carted off my belongings, to be delivered in Lubbock after I arrived. All that was left was the choice of a road. I wasn't looking for the most direct path. Rather, I was thinking of a line from an Edward Albee play that "sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly." So I chose Route 50. They call it "The Loneliest Road in America," and they know what they're talking about. It winds through the center of the country, from the Pacific coast up the Sierras on the old Pony Express Trail, through Tahoe, down into the Nevada Desert at Carson City, and then across Nevada, up and down the barren basin-and-range country, where it's often a hundred miles and more between towns, through spectacular Utah (still a hundred miles between towns), climbing the southern Rockies in Colorado, across the Great Divide, down onto the High Plains – then, at Lamar, Colorado, you hang a right and head due south to Lubbock.

In the California mountains, climbing toward Tahoe, you're in a thickly wooded world with occasional startling vistas, a world of life all around – trees, lakes, rivers, animals, people – the world as most of us wish it to be, grand but human, a live exchange between our nature and Nature, wild enough to be invigorating, but settled enough to be secure, fairly safe, with fun to be had and help never far off. And isn't that how most of us imagine the ideal life? But life never remains that way for long. Nor does Route 50. Past Tahoe, the road winds down into the Nevada desert, where nothing is safe, where the sun can kill, where often there's no one in sight for miles and miles and miles – yes, a hundred miles between towns, and the towns so small. And each has saloons, joints with

names like Old Fogey's Saloon, Break-a-Heart Saloon, and the prize, a saloon named with jaunty sense of heartbreak, Kathy's Somewhere Else.

She sure is. I thought of all the "desert rats," as they call themselves, who drive miles and miles to saloons like Break-a-Heart and Kathy's Somewhere Else for comfort, company, and whiskey. These are joints for old fogeys indeed – the jukeboxes play old songs, hair is mostly gray, and most of the patrons are over 40. Way over. Bars for people pushing 60. It's an old American adage that "nobody takes anything small into a bar." What the desert rats took into these bars was the old dreams of love that keened from the jukebox.

At our age, we're a bit amazed that romantic love is still a problem – a problem that, for many of us, stubbornly refuses to pass. I thought of my late father – past 80 and recovering from a major operation when he drove his pick-up in the wee hours through torrential Florida rains, mad with jealousy that his girlfriend hadn't come home yet. Kind of funny, a little pathetic, but proof for me, if proof was needed, that the demons of romantic love are no respecters of age.

It takes a special fierceness to face love at this age, when so many of us have seen too many of our relationships and marriages become, to put it mildly, untenable. Most who've stayed married have a fierce resignation and acceptance of all that marriage isn't. It isn't, for instance, a solution to loneliness. They've said goodbye to dream after dream after dream... they've met their spouses over and over again as the years passed, as each changed, as they've had to accept and/or reject, love and/or avoid, each new version of themselves and each other. They've had to accept (or reject) their children as the strangers that children really are – hello to that, goodbye to the hopes and dreams of those shining little people on whom we could project anything. Most marriages that last are equal monuments to surrender and fierceness.

And those of us who are alone now, yet still looking for love... I like to remember something my brother said: "A young guy loves a woman with his dick; at our age, you love a woman with your *life*." I take that to mean: you never lose what you've done – the good and the bad of it, the large and the small of it. To be this age is to have done a great deal – not in accomplishment, necessarily, but simply in the days and nights of one's life; and to love at this age, really to love, is to love with the momentum and gravity (as in

“force of gravity”) of all you’ve done. (To not have done accompanies you, too.) Whatever the joy of love at any age, there’s also a kind of solemnity to it now. It’s like the joyful, solemn wonder of watching a sunset. It’s glorious, but it’s most definitely not a sunrise, though the colors may be the same. But these colors will be followed, soon, by darkness – and you’re facing in a different direction. Goodbye to the coming day. You won’t live to see it. There’s something to be said for a love with little future – that may be a love with more room for the truth than any other. But truth takes fierceness, at any age.

Route 50, Nevada. There’s nowhere for the eye to rest, your vision just goes on and on and sees – nothing. Desert, desolation. The day is terribly bright, the night is just as terribly dark. At night on Route 50 in Nevada, you can’t see past your headlights, there’s nothing but you in the vastness. No help anywhere. You feel your psyche attempting to expand to meet the expanses, you feel your psyche strive to assert itself here, something in you tries to say “I!” but it comes out as squeak. You’re small. You’re a little, tiny being, surrounded by Universe. What could it possibly matter if *you* grow old and die?

Then, driving in the harsh daylight of Nevada’s Route 50, you notice that beside the road, in the middle of nowhere, truly Nowhere, for miles and miles there are – names! Names written in stones and in pieces of broken glass. It must be high-school kids, the lonely kids from the tiny towns, leaving their mark. I’ve worked as a high school teacher, and I can imagine the kids filling their cars with beer and booze, driving out into the vastness, partying, playing their car radios loud, making out, choosing the stones and broken pieces of glass, adding their names to the miles-long line of names. Their “I” isn’t a squeak, it’s a mark.

And so it is: we meet the Universe with the fragility of our identity and insist on leaving our names, somewhere, even here. What were those kids trusting? The stars. They were placing their names to face the highway and the stars. Hadn’t I done the same on every article and book I’d spent my life writing? And all the writers of all the tomes ever written, hadn’t they done the same, all the way back to Plato and the Upanishads? This is what the Universe calls out of us – a response. That’s all that’s required: a response. To the vastness.

But every one of our responses is, finally, tentative, temporary. That may be the hardest lesson that we who are pushing 60 must learn. We must say goodbye, too, to the usefulness of our response, our knowledge – not our wisdom, but our terribly temporary knowledge. Things move so quickly now that a skill once essential often becomes replaced by something beyond your ken -- yet instantly mastered by a teenager. If you're lucky, there are some young folk who value your wisdom, maybe even a little of your out-of-date knowledge. They ask you for help. You give them what my teacher George once called "bread-crumbs."

Goodbye to the dream of who you thought you might one day be. You *are* who you'll be. Hello to that.

Goodbye to so many dreams. Most of them just got in the way of you really are. Not that they weren't helpful. After all, your dreams are important not because they come true, but because they take you places you'd never have otherwise gone, and teach you what you never guessed was there to learn. And wasn't that what this journey to Lubbock was really about? A test of faith? Faith that my reversal of fortune would take me where I never would have chosen to go, and teach me what I didn't know was there to learn?

And then, on a nameless stretch of Route 50 in Nevada, I came upon The Tree of Shoes. There must have been an underground spring somewhere about, for in the middle of the wasteland was an enormous tree, and from that tree hung strings of shoes – shoes tied together by their shoelaces, strands of five and ten and twenty shoes, hanging from every limb. You've got to love high-school kids. They remind you of what it is to be alive. Their names weren't enough to offer the Universe. They – and who was the first to think of it?! – came out here, took off their shoes, tied them together, climbed the only tree in this part of Nevada, precariously, and hung their shoes. Whitman said in his "Song of the Open Road," "Here a great personal deed has room." "Great" doesn't have to mean that everybody knows your name or is affected by your actions. A great personal deed. Personal, private. The response called forth by the Universe doesn't have to be something the world takes note of. It can be as humble as a shoe – and yet be grand.

I'm an old man on a long drive into what is, in all humility, the Unknown, and I can think of each word that I write, each word that I say, each feeling I have, as a shoe hanging from a tree in the middle of nowhere, but marvelous for all of that by, as



Kierkegaard would say, “virtue of the absurd.” It’s as absurd to expect a life to have meaning, in contrast to the vastness of the Universe, as it is absurd to take off your shoe and hang it from a tree, but both are wonderful in their way – for I assure you, if you could see that tree, you’d think it wonderful, you’d approve, you’d think that in a wacko way something had been done, something worth doing. And I wondered how long those shoes would hang from that tree.

For that’s the deepest of all our goodbyes: goodbyes to all the friends and family who die. Getting old changes more than our bodies and more than our relationship to ourselves; getting old changes our relationships to everyone, everything, the living and the dead. Whose shoes were those, really? Mine? My parents’?

My parents are dead; nevertheless, my relationship to them changes as I get older. My parents were in their early twenties when they married and began to commit the mistakes that became the foundation of my life. But now, when I see people in their early twenties I think, affectionately, “Babies!” Not babies as infants, but as innocents. Just as I was in my early twenties, my parents were committed to ignorant certainties and hopelessly unrealistic hopes – and bitterness leaves me as I realize that those babies – my parents – can’t be condemned or blamed for inevitable innocence. I forgave them long ago, but what I feel now is more than forgiveness; now I join them, as the 20-year-old I was – I join them, stand beside them, am one with them in my impossible 20-year-old assumptions, and there’s no longer a question of forgiveness or blame. It was just life, as they lived it and as, later, I lived it.

My mother was 35 when psychosis first struck – a relatively young woman in my eyes now, in poverty, with four small children and a failing marriage, who succumbed to pressures she couldn’t bear. My 8-year-old feelings of abandonment, nursed for most of my life, are finally gone. How do I see her from the vantage of my present age, this 35-year-old woman young enough to be my daughter – and who, somehow, by the alchemy of age, becomes daughter-like in my heart? I feel a tenderness and sympathy I didn’t think possible: Oh mother, daughter, I only wish you’d had the help and friends to withstand your trial, and I hope to God that now you’ve found your peace, or at least an

oblivion where there's no suffering. And when I think this, the bewildered and terrified 8-year-old I've carried so long within me fades away and is freed.

My father was 40 when he abandoned us – I was 10. I can't help but wish he'd been a stronger and a better man, but I'm now far too experienced to expect anyone to be anything other than they are. And now I know what it is to be 40 and to feel an utter sense of failure and futility and an unquenchable desire to run. I've failed enough people myself that I can look back on my 40-year-old father and, again, join him, in his guilt and shame and inability. So, yes, I'm much older now than my parents were when they made their worst mistakes, and if I've made less of a mess, perhaps it's only that I didn't take on as much. So I'm happy, at last, to say goodbye to them as “parents,” and goodbye to the younger man I was who could see them as nothing else. And within that goodbye is a hello. As a friend put it, “What the ‘hello’ is, is that at this point in life, you can really be a fucking grown-up, maybe for the first time in your life, and that's no small thing.”

With my parents' death, I'm the eldest in my direct family. With my father's death and the death of my mother's brother, I'm the oldest male in the entire extended clan – the oldest of the Venturas and the Scandurras. Who's left to answer my questions about them? The gaps in my knowledge are now permanent. Parts of my history are now irretrievable. When, as an elder, I'm asked certain questions, I don't know the answers, and I don't know because I didn't take the responsibility of asking enough questions. So: goodbye to those stories I neglected to learn. They're gone forever now.

When Aunt Mary, Uncle Jack, and Aunt Laura die, there'll be no one left who remembers me as a small child. I was too young to remember and my siblings are too much younger than I to have a clear memory of me before I was 10. So, in a strange way, I must say goodbye to my early childhood. Except for some dreamlike fragments and some photographs, that little boy is almost gone from the world. For when there's no one left to remember, what's left? The effects of that history live on, but they live nakedly, orphaned, stripped of story, stripped of memory.

So much dies with each of us when we die. A great gift of getting older, of becoming old, is to realize that I, too, am a precious vessel – quite apart from any idea of self-worth I might have, quite apart from anything I may have accomplished, I'm a precious vessel because of all that I've seen, all the stories I know, all the images and

memories that will die with me. In this way, we're all precious vessels. And it isn't that we must get frantic about preserving all we've seen and all we know. Preserving all the stories isn't a human possibility, for all will be forgotten one day. But to know that I'm such a vessel, and that you are, makes me more attentive, makes me more available to anyone who asks for what I know, makes me speak more carefully, with less of the judgmental and more attention to nuance – makes me try to speak more slowly and reflectively, and to be like... an older man, the kind of older man I once admired: tolerant, receptive, at ease in his age, not trying to be anything he isn't, not trying to be younger.

Miles and miles later, in Utah, I stopped by the side of the road in an area called the San Rafael Swell. There's no describing it, not adequately. You're a bit higher than 7000 feet. The geological formations all around you, as far as the eye can see, are so massive that it's as if the grandest cloud formation you've ever seen had turned to stone and the rounded shapes of the clouds were carved sharply by some unsentimental sculptor into shapes that have nothing to do with human aesthetics, human values. A helpful plaque teaches that 180 million years ago this was the shore of a great sea – a sea level that rose nearly a mile and a half into the sky! What unstoppable forces could accomplish that? And what's a human being beside that? Those forces are still at work! It's all still going on. The swamps of Florida could be the top of the world one day. The rock at the top of Mount Everest is limestone formed 5,000 feet beneath the surface of the sea; somehow, that limestone rose 35,000 feet into the air! And they've recently discovered that underneath the Arctic's ice are the remains of a tropical forest. Yes, that process continues as we speak. And what does that mean to an aging man? That I'm part of something so much larger than myself; and I'm part of how that "something" happens. Surely, that's enough, whether I can pay the rent or not.

The next day, I drove up and up and up. There seemed no end to the steep incline, until I rounded the top and the sign said: "Monarch Crest – 11,312 feet." Another sign said: "The Great Divide." All rain that falls east of the Great Divide flows ultimately into the Atlantic Ocean; all rain that falls west of the Divide flows into the Pacific. There I was, at the top of the world, crossing the Divide. Again, geology became psychology;

before this stage of my life, all the "rain" – all my experience – had fallen in the direction of my birth, my youth. Henceforth, all the rain would fall in the direction of my death.

The late songwriter Townes Van Zandt sang, "You cannot count the miles until you feel them." ...adding, in that same tune, "I'm thankful that old Road's a friend of mine." It sounds corny, but even so, the statement is simple; the reality it describes is highly charged: if you can accept death – the death of anything and of everything, for there's nothing that won't die – then all the parts fall into place, even failure.

And so I arrived in Lubbock. Older. Old. And new. "Goodbye" and "hello" met in a harmony that was no less harmonious for being dissonant.

And I remembered that night at the Stardust writing beside my sleeping friend... I could see the two or three miles to the Rio, its crimson and purple neon, where Dave and I sat on the 19<sup>th</sup> floor the year we turned 50. That night, I saw that room from the same time in the morning, 4-ish, and he'd said: "We're 50 and we're better than I ever thought we would ever be. I didn't expect that." I replied: "Indian summer, baby."

Nine years later, Dave slept as I wrote by neon glow. Indian summer is over. Say goodbye to what was, so you can welcome what is. Death approaches with something like a smile. Smile back. That's the only way Death will respect you. It's no small thing to be respected by Death.

Goodbye and goodbye and goodbye. Hello and hello and hello. It takes fierceness to grow old well. In Lubbock, I remembered that Vegas dawn when I was tired and a little drunk, when, appropriately for Vegas, lines from forgotten stars in forgotten films came unbidden to my vigil – this, from a noir relic, *Walk Softly, Stranger*: "They say you haven't lost anything important until you've lost your nerve."

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