

Rite of passage, aged 56.

The last bar of the Star Spangled Banner fades, the clenched fists slip from across chests as people resume their tasks. Stall holders are unpacking their wares: native Indian jewellery, fine art, western hats and clothing, boots, horse tack, western movie and civil war memorabilia, fudge, taffy, peanut brittle and Doc. Holiday's Homely Remedies. In full Mountain Man buckskins and a magnificent beard, a tall man is arranging CDs by the main stage, whilst the first country and western band is tuning up. Over at the far end of the cavernous pavilion a number of ladies are claiming the front row seats at the Celebrity Question & Answer stage. This would be called a convention, if the theme had been science fiction, or a homage to Star Wars. In Scottsdale, Arizona, it is a festival celebrating all things western, in a State that boasts 'the Town too Tough to Die' and the bloodied remains under Boot Hill.

That was in the 1880's, this is 2008, and despite the lack of comprehension and warnings from my dear family, I am at the eighteenth Festival of the West. I settle my newly acquired hat back on my head. A real buffalo felt, pinch front, stone coloured cowboy hat, with a decorated band of turquoise beads. Next on the shopping list are proper cowboy boots and I'd like a fringed jacket too. Perhaps not, hide jackets are costly and weigh several pounds, and I couldn't imagine it would look right when I'm back doing the weekly Sainsbury shop.

'Howdy, Pard!'

Unlike the wasp-waisted costumes and prim hats of the souvenir sellers outside, Cass wears all black, which sharply contrasts with her white hair. She is volunteering, she says, so that she can park her aged Cadillac for free.

'What do you think of the new spurs? Dang nearly fell over 'em earlier. Ya gotta take care when bending down. Did Dorothy arrive yet – she wants to hire a cart?'

She eases her gun belt with its incumbent Colt .45 further down over her hips and belly.

'You look great,' I say. Then more tentatively: 'Is it loaded?'

Cass has a way of wrinkling her nose to indicate scorn. 'What do you think? Honey, the organiser's son is a cop - I'd get busted for sure. Oh, I've used live ammo in it, but it isn't much compared with some of my other guns.'

I remember she also volunteers as a kind of civil defence vigilante in her home town nearer the Mexican border. An interest in guns seems endemic here, and so alien to me.

'OK - you two stay here. I'll see if I can round up Desert Rose.'

Victoria hitches her fringed blue suede bag onto her shoulder and saunters off towards the main entrance. 'Desert Rose' is our nickname for Dorothy, a proud Texan, whose health issues demand a disabled buggy to get her around at an event such as this.

I value Victoria's company more than anyone else. She is Scandinavian by birth, truly international by virtue of a father whose job took him and his family all over the world, and she is American - as she will be sure to tell you - by choice. Witty, attractive, and with a high tolerance to gin and tonic, and a lethal spirit called Aquavit, she welcomed me into the group like a long-lost sister. I watch her expertly dyed blonde hair disappear amongst the crowd and hope that she will be back soon, because today seems so extraordinary that I feel vulnerable without her. 'Greenhorn', that's me.

At the restaurant the previous evening I had felt comfortable, despite it being the first time any of us had met in person. How easy it was for us to pick up where our internet chats had left off. We had been 'speaking' to each other via our internet Western Group for the past five years. There are members from all around the world, but ours is a small inner circle: Victoria, Dorothy, Cass, Patsy and the only non-American, me. A phenomenon of the internet age, we probably know as much about each other as our own families do, maybe more. We chat, whinge, use our imaginations to write western stories, share jokes, avoid politics, post pictures of the grandchildren/pets/holidays, and pray for each other when times are bad.

Our international group is bound together by a love of the Western genre. A myth promulgated by Hollywood, but made real for us when we were young and impressionable, in the heyday of the TV western in the late 1950s, and throughout the 1960s. It's an enduring fascination which confounds our families, considering that most of us are now in our sixties. It began for me when I was about eight years old in England. The stories of those early westerns thrilled me. I was transported to a chivalrous world of heroes, horses and desperadoes. The good were good and the bad were just plain mean and nasty. It helped, of course, that the actors who starred in the westerns were athletic, handsome men. Was I - am I - impressionable? Oh, yes.

Like the parting of the Red Sea before the Israelites, the gathering crowd gives way as Dorothy, in a small motorised buggy, bears down on Cass and me. I hear Victoria call out:

'Hey, slow down! Do you remember how to stop it?'

It's evident that Dorothy doesn't remember. With a shriek, she ploughs into a wine tasting stall, toppling barrels around her. The stall holder shows magnificent equanimity, as though this happens to him every day. We disentangle the flustered Texan and her buggy as Patsy joins us.

Tall and craggy with hair a peculiar mix of shades of auburn that reminds me of curtains my mother had, she lives alone in the New Mexico desert with her horse, two dogs, dozens of rescued tenrecs (apparently some kind of hedgehog) and the inevitable firearms. In her case these are probably necessary – it is a sparsely populated area littered with disused mine workings and favoured by drug cartels.

'Reckon they're all set to start signing – so if we get along there now we can beat the queues.'

We head off to where the celebrities are seated at their 'booths', actually just tables, signing photographs and chatting with their fans. It is now that I know why I had to come all this way alone to meet the heroes of my childhood. This moment has been a dream for fifty years. I am as nervous and tongue-tied as a gauche teenager. Victoria pushes me towards the actor, whom she knows I have had a crush on since 1958. Dorothy, I discover later, is capturing the moment on video camera. My generous friends, who have experienced this thrill themselves at previous festivals, get almost as big a kick from watching my 'first time'. Perceived fears that reality will disappoint quickly evaporate. A spry, distinguished, 75 year old moves from behind his table to give me a hug.

'Well hello. What did you say your name was? Ahh, so you're Sue, from England? How long have you been over here? I see you've hooked up with this gang - they're the best. I couldn't wish for better fans. I'm so glad you have been able to make it over. Now make sure you get a good seat for the forum later and there's barrel racing this afternoon in the arena. Now see that these ladies don't lead you astray. Who's gonna take a picture of us?' There's no formality. He exudes natural, gracious charm and professional ease. I'm in heaven, mumbling incomprehensible inanities, with a foolish grin plastered across my face as he poses with me, his arm around my shoulders, as Victoria take pictures of us.

Outside, there are food vendors selling burgers and sandwiches with names and fillings that I have never encountered before. There are Indian tepees, a chuck wagon cook-off competition, a troop of Buffalo soldiers and the rodeo arena. These will wait for tomorrow. Today, it is all that I can do to remember just some of the witty stories being told by these stars of the TV and silver screen. Natural raconteurs all of them, they entertain the crowds at the Q & A sessions, recalling stories from their acting careers. These last remaining actors who starred in the popular TV shows Bronco, Cheyenne, Wyatt Earp,

Laredo and Laramie portrayed the brief heyday of the American cowboy and have themselves become the last of a certain kind of rugged studio actor, one who had to be a stuntman, horseman and sharp shooter and followed in the tradition of Wild Bill Hickok.

Later, over some good Chianti, and much laughter, in an Italian restaurant in downtown Scottsdale, we recount the demolition of the wine bar to some of these same veteran actors. Sitting opposite my heartthrob (yes it does), I wonder whether anyone at home will believe me when I say that I had dinner with my hero? Later I am so star struck that I don't notice that the restaurant has emptied and the veteran stars are pulling on their jackets and stetsons whilst one of the waiters is vacuuming the floor around our feet.

Before I leave Arizona, there are plans for next year. Dorothy wants to go back to a Dude Ranch in the Texan hill country where she had a fling when she was seventeen. Our body clocks tell us we are running out of time to do these things, crazy as they may seem to others. I think to myself - well, why not?

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