

Corroded

A Game of "Long Haul 1983"

21st September 1983, Wednesday, Dunedin

The ice-cold flannel slapped against my face snaps me into some semblance of wakefulness. I stare into the tiny bathroom's scratched mirror. A day's stubble on my chin, framed by my moustache and beard. It can wait. Besides the Lemmy Kilmister look suits me.

Back in the shabby bedroom, I stamp on my boots, shoulder my travel bag, grab the keys off the bedside table, and step out into the chill darkness. All is quiet. The only sound is the crunch of gravel under my boots as I walk to the motel office. I'm envious of the few other guests, still warm in bed with an hour or two of sleep still ahead of them. With a jingle, the keys fall to the office floor when I post them through the slot.

A million sodium-lit sequins cover the *The Gibson* resting in the layover across from the motel. I brush the dew from the rear-view mirror as I climb up to the cab. At least it wasn't frost. That bodes well for the day ahead.

As I settle into the familiar vinyl, I pull out my log book, and note down the time. I have a long way to go today. If I'm lucky I can make the *Arahanga* and get some shut-eye on the crossing. At least the navigation is easy – just stick to State Highway One. I slip the key into the ignition and turn. The starter whines, the engine catches, with a satisfying rumble. No traffic, I smile to myself, and pull away from the curb. Climbing through the gears, the big motor roars and sighs in a familiar rhythm.

The street lights reflect off the velvet dew dusting the road. No other tracks mar the even jewelled coating. The city slides past me, an orange tinted blur of brick, dark trees, and dew covered cars. There isn't another soul on the road. This is the best time of the day. The road is mine.

As I begin the grind up past Pinehill, I realise I still haven't seen a single vehicle. Had I mis-set my alarm, and got up too early? That would suck. I check my watch. Five fifty. It wasn't some holiday that everyone else but me, knew about? I shake my head. That seems unlikely. Maybe I'm just going to have a dream run up the island. The four-wheel vermin will be crawling all over the road, soon enough. At least I'll be out of the city by then.

I top Leith Saddle, and begin the long descent to Waitati. Still no-one. I turn up the heater to ward off the sudden chill that is creeping up my spine. Where is everyone? I switch on the CB radio. Static. Just static. None of the early morning banter from other truckers hitting the road early.

Waikouaiti, Palmerston, Moeraki. the horizon brightens, washing away the stars in purple and red brush strokes. I thunder through Oamaru, and the first glint of the sun's edge finds its way over the low layer of brown fog far out to sea.

Still I have seen no-one. Suddenly it occurs to me that I've not seen any animals, or birds – other than the occasional dead possum. Fields are around me as I leave the Waitaki River behind. Empty fields. It's as if every living thing has been told to hide from me. Well, they're doing a bloody good job of it, and starting to freak me out. It reminds me of that book. What was it? *The Quiet Earth*?

I shudder. That book is too close to the mark. What if I am the only one left? Trace! Her face comes into my mind. What about Trace? She must be there. I've got to get to her. Let her know I'm on my way. That I'll be there for her. My foot pushes to the floor, and *The Gibson* charges away. So far away.

"I'll be there baby." I whisper. "We'll make it through." *We'll make it. We gotta make it.*

It's not until I hit Ashburton that I spot a phone box. I'm shaking when I pick up the receiver and put what few coins I have in the slot – each one a hope.

The phone rings for an age, then Tracy's voice, "Hello. Leave a Message." There is a tinny beep.

"Hi Trace. It's me ..."

I gather my thoughts, and shove down my fears.

"I've finished my run to Balclutha with the dairy processing equipment. It was a smooth run all the way. I managed to find a back load of second-hand tractor parts in Dunedin, and now on my way up ..."

I struggle.

"... Er ... Heavy dew this morning and clear skies, if should be fine all the way up the Island ..."

I try again.

"I don't know what it's like up there, but things are seriously weird down here ... I haven't seen anyone or anything ... nobody! It's as if everyone's just vanished. The rapture ... and I missed it!"

I choke on it. My desperate joke slapping me back hard.

"I'll make the ferry tonight, and be in Wellington tomorrow morning. Hopefully that brown fog out to sea isn't forewarning bad weather for the crossing. The Gibson's running well. I wish I could say the same about myself. It'll carry me through. I'll drive all the hours I can, and be back with you tomorrow night, to hell with the regs. Hang in there baby."

I swallow hard.

"I'll be there soon. Hasta luego."

I put the receiver back in its hook, and rest my forehead against the cold glass surrounding me.

Passing through Christchurch, I decide to fill up. It feels weird, wrong, just pulling away without paying for it. I can almost feel eyes upon me, judging me. I look around. There's nobody here. No one calling the cops. No cops to call.¹

Amberley, Cheviot, and the hills of the Hurunui enclose me. I ease my rig through the curves and grades of the Hunderlees. Today they are interminable. Up and down, swirling around this bend and that. The shadows are becoming long and there is a smokey reddish tinge to the light. After what seems like a lifetime I glide down the slope to join the coast. The sea looks heavy and sickly grey, the tiny waves lapping halfheartedly at the pebbles. I eye the sea with distrust and a tiny twinge of disgust. I've never seen it like this before. Out to sea the brown fog is closer now.

Rocky outcrops, pebble beaches, the occasional bach set in amongst wet bush, run by one after another, the heavy sea is my only companion. Gradually the colour leeches from the sky, to be replaced by the cold hard stars. I glance at my watch. That can't be. It's nine thirty. I should have reached the ferry by now. I should have passed through Kaikoura, hours ago, but here I am, still beside the sea.

Rounding another black crag, I spot a tidy old villa tucked into the bush on the other side of the railway lines. I squeeze my eyes shut and push back the weariness. This looks like as good a place as any to stop.

When I try the door, it's unlocked. There are plates and cutlery on the draining board, and fresh food in the fridge. Whoever lived here, was here yesterday. The bedroom is empty, but the bed is rumpled as if it had been slept in last night.

In the hallway is a phone. I pick up the receiver and call Tracy.

The phone rings for an age, then Tracy's voice, "Hello. Leave a Message." There is a tinny beep.

"Hi Trace.

"I thought I'd be on the ferry by now, but I've not made it past Kaikoura."

No that sounds wrong. I don't want to worry her.

"I'm not sure what's up. The Gibson is running well, it's just that ... I dunno ... the land is changed."

Well, that'll set her mind at ease. Numbskull.

"The only other thing I've seen was a dead seal beside the road a few k's back. It looked scabbed and almost twisted. I didn't stop. Here, there is a brown mucky mist not far off the coast. Hopefully it won't roll in tonight. It looks pretty impenetrable and would really slow me down."

"I'm looking forward to seeing you soon. I don't think I could stand the isolation, if I were the only person left."

1 Cards drawn: 6 Spades, 3 Hearts, and 8 Diamonds.

"Look after yourself. I'll see you soon. Hasta luego."

I'm uncomfortable in someone else's house, so I return to *The Gibson*. Without the crash of waves and call of gulls, the coast is eerie quiet. I prepare a meal; bacon and baked beans – familiar and warming. Any other over-nighter on the road, I'd sit on the running board and have a beer. I do *not* want to be outside listening to the sucking and *flupp* of that obscene grey sea. Throwing my hat and jacket into the corner, I stretch out on the bunk bed in the back cabin, and fall asleep hoping for the new day to bring a better, more familiar world.

22nd September 1983, Thursday, Kaikoura Coast

My watch alarm goes off, yanking me from sleep. Sitting up in bed I can see through the front windscreen. A sickly ghastly light spreads across the sky, as if preceding a diseased and fouled sun. Sullen layers of cloud soon swallow the few rays that make it through, leaving an oppressive gloom. The sea still undulates; heavy and lethargic swells licking the shore, leaving a tangled residue of blistered kelp along its edge.

I turn the keys, and am rewarded with a roar from *The Gibson*. I let it idle, while I collect my thoughts. Maybe today I'll get somewhere. It's then I notice the trees around the villa. The leaves look grey, brown, and drooping. Maybe it's just the blighted light from the sky.²

As I continue North, along what ought to be State Highway One, the trees grow sicker, lose their leaves, bark peeling in ragged strips. Even the grass loses its colour and sags in listless clumps. The brown fog is pressing closer to the shore. I am glad when the road eventually turns inland, and a low range of hills blocks my view of the fog and the foul sea. What became of Kaikoura? I have no idea. Will I pass through Ward? See Lake Grassmere? I have no idea.

Wincing, I shift my right leg to ease the stiffness. The old break has decided now is a good time to haunt me, dammit. The dull ache is persistent, and no matter what position I try, it clings tight, digging its talons into the core of my leg. Pulling over into a picnic area, I massage the old injury site. Slowly the pain eases, and my leg relaxes again.

I look at my watch. It's four o'clock already. The cloud cover is a bit thinner here and the picnic area is a bright oasis against the gloom of the coast. I can feel my exhaustion. Here, seems like a good place to have a snooze. I retreat to the warm cabin in the back of the cab, and shut my eyes.

It's six, by the time I open my eyes again. The last of the light is ebbing from the sky, and I need to get going. I can make another couple of hundred ks before I'll need to stop for the night.

The world around me is pitch black by the time I roll into a small township. Is it Ward? If, it is, they've done some major changes to the layout since I was through here a week ago. Beside the only petrol station, stands a phone box. I'm all out of change. In the petrol station, I push through the unlocked door, the bell tinkles a merry greeting. There's nobody here. Behind the counter, I stare at the phone on the wall, and take a deep breath. She'll be there this time.

The phone rings for an age, then Tracy's voice, "Hello. Leave a Message." There is a tinny beep.

"Hi Trace.

"I think I'm finally getting somewhere. I'm heading inland now. I must have missed Kaikoura in the gloom."

I chuckle, "I imagined picking up a hitchhiker.

"He said he was backpacking from Gore to a job in Blenheim. He was going to work on the Vineyards there. I told him I thought Gorians were only interested in beer. He said he lied to his parents about the job, saying they wouldn't approve. He likes rose wines, you see.

"The imaginary people you meet ... I guess you had to be there ...

"I miss you babe. I'll be there soon."

I replace the receiver and stare at the wall. *Am I doing something wrong? Is there a way out of this?*

2 Cards Drawn: 7 Hearts, 10 Diamonds, and 9 Spades.

23rd September, 1983 – Friday, Ward?

My watch alarm goes off. I awaken to dust. A brown dust is gathering on the windscreen wipers. Dust billows across the road, settling in brief drifts against the lampposts, and piling up, forming skirts around the surrounding building's ankles. The trees are bare of leaves in the hideous brown light, their branches drooping, cracking, falling to the dust strewn ground. Holding a rag against my face, I do an inspection of the truck in the streaming wind. It looks sound.³

I am relieved to be back in the cabin. The familiar vinyl seat, is a welcome bit of normality. Turning the key, *The Gibson* rumbles to life. At least there is one other alive in this hell.

Who knows if I'm on State Highway One. The compass says I'm still heading North, and that's all I need.

I drive through dust. It obscures the road ahead, it smothers, and deadens. The trees are dead, and collapsing. There are branches and leaves everywhere. When *The Gibson* touches them they disintegrate into black and brown ash, swirling in the wash of *The Gibson's* passage.

I drive and drive, filling up at another lonely station, who knows where. I've lost hope of recognising the surroundings. I only know that I must keep North. Keep to the main road.

Feeling as dead as the surroundings, I pull off the road near a farm house. I can't go any further tonight.

In the hallway, I find the phone.

The phone rings for an age, then Tracy's voice, "Hello. Leave a Message." There is a tinny beep.

"Hi Trace.

"I'm still coming, though god knows how far I've got.

"I hope you're safe and doing okay ...

"There is dust everywhere now. Brown dust. I think it was the trees.

"It's been a rough day. I just about crashed today. There was a massive rupture in the road. I managed to avoid it. I must have been distracted by a flash of white out of the corner of my eye. I thought it was someone, but when I looked it was only a dress on a washing line moving in the breeze. I was lucky not to pile into the hole.

"There was also a large fire on the road ... Wither Hills maybe ... you know winding stuff. It looked pretty bad but I was moving too fast to do much. I just had to hold the line and hope like hell there was nothing solid in the centre. As it happened it was just some light branches and dried vegetation, and so I ploughed through it safely. Yeah. It's been that kind of day.

"I entered some long straights across a dry dusty plain and had some time to relax. It wasn't the Wairau. Far too wide, and Blenheim never showed up. With the stunted and decayed trees it almost looked like the central plateau.

"I got to wondering what's going on. Surely there must be an explanation. The brown fog, now this dust – the decay of the trees. It's like the whole world has been blighted with something. What I can't figure is, why am I here? Why am I the only one here? Is this a personally tailored hell? I don't understand. I don't know what I can do to fix it or escape from it. I wish I could talk to you. We might be able to figure it out together.

"I miss you.

"I'm still coming ..." but I don't know when I'll be there. I hang my head at the admission to myself.

I replace the receiver and walk slowly back to *The Gibson*, my head down, shoulders slumped.

24th September, 1983 – Saturday, Where the hell am I?

My watch alarm goes off. At least the wind has stopped and the dust settled. The light is a baleful reddy-orange. Somewhere over there the sun is about to rise, but the murk is so thick, I cannot tell.

3 Cards drawn: 7 Spades, 9 Clubs, and Queen of Diamonds.

Key in the ignition. Quick turn, and *The Gibson* shudders and coughs, the engine catching then settling into its comforting rumble. I am thankful for the reliability of the beast. At least something is working okay.⁴

Out on the road again, the land around has become rucked up into rocky scabs, and ruptured blisters. What trees are around are dark skeletons of dead wood. It almost looks like a fire has gone through here, but the occasional farm houses standing stark amongst blackened trunks are intact, though their paint has peeled, and there are blisters disfiguring the fabric of the building. They look diseased, just like everything else.

"I'm taking too long." I mutter under my breath, and push my boot down on the accelerator just a fraction.

"I'm taking too long."

"I'm taking too long."

"I'm taking too long."

I become aware of the roar of the motor. My foot is flat to the floor, and *The Gibson* charges along the asphalt. I glance at the speedo. One hundred and sixty! I ease off the gas, and *The Gibson* hisses. "Easy, easy, easy," I tell myself as the needle slowly returns to sensible speeds. My hands are shaking. I need to take more care. Again "I'm taking too long." floats across my mind, and I push the accelerator down a touch.

While I never make it to one hundred and sixty ks again, I still need to ease myself back down several times that day.

Eventually, I pull into another small unrecognisable town. The buildings are thick with dust. Fallen branches litter the streets and yards, but over everything are blisters and cracks. Some of them seeping with some kind of ichor. It is a corrupt, and foul place. I stock up on fuel, grab some food from a *Four Square*, and retreat to my truck.

With a bit of food in me, I'm reinforced enough to go looking for a phone. I soon find one in a nearby house.

The phone rings for an age, then Tracy's voice, "Hello. Leave a Message." There is a tinny beep.

"Hi Trace.

"I'm on my way. Probably not much further to go."

Who am I kidding?

"I'm in somewhere that could be Ekatahuna. I'm not sure."

If this really is Ekatahuna, then I'm badly off course, and where in hell was the Strait, and Wellington?

I feel I've easily covered the distance to be there. Hell, I should be with you by now, but I seem to have been ... diverted.

"I'm kinda missing the CB Radio. That constant chatter and occasional good yarn, was reassuring. I knew there were others out there. But now ...

"I don't know why I think this is Ekatahuna. Maybe it's the same size. The layout is different from when I was here as a kid. Dad would always stop at the dairy on the main street, and we'd get a Tiptop of something. I should look for a Tiptop when I next see a dairy.

"Are you doing okay?"

"I'd like to hear your voice, babe.

"I miss you.

"Bye"

I replace the receiver, and leave the house; it's peeling paint, corroded carpets, and scabby surface. I look at the *Four Square* and decide against going after a Tiptop.

25th September, 1983 – Sunday, Ekatahuna, but probably not.

My watch alarm goes off. I gaze out of the windscreen. The buildings across from me have thick tumorous growths distorting their façades, blisters, and cracks. Their frames sag. Roofing iron is covered with patchy yellow growths gnawing holes in them.

I bolt down some food, and slide into the driver's seat. The engine starts easily.

4 Cards drawn: 9 Diamonds (Rolled 4,2,1,1), 3 Diamonds (rolled 5,4,3), and 6 Diamonds.

I am sickened by the changes that I see about me. Blisters in the land, weeping some sort of black liquid, scabs on the road, fissures in the dirty ground. The whole world looks diseased. Even the sun looks sick. I almost counted myself lucky that I caught a glimpse of the sun today, but there was no warmth. When I squinted against the glare I could see the sun's face pockmarked by sunspots. It's not just us that's affected.

I drive and drive to the point of exhaustion. Another thousand ks. I should be halfway to Australia by now. I don't know what's real. Am I in some sort of delirium? I have no idea. There's no way I'm still in New Zealand, anywhere.

With night closing in, I stop beside a half-collapsed supermarket in a rubble-strewn corrupted town. I help myself to packets of chips, salted peanuts, and coka cola. I figure they will last forever. Behind what remains of the counter I find a phone.

The phone rings for an age, then Tracy's voice, "Hello. Leave a Message." There is a tinny beep.

"Hi Babe.

"I wish you'd pick up, or at least change your answer-phone message. Anything to let me know you're still there..."

"I'm still progressing North, but I don't know where I am. The outskirts of Hamilton maybe..."

I know it's not.

"I thought I saw someone dead on the road today. As I got closer, I could see it wasn't. It was just a pile of rubbish bags, blown against a fence. I felt sickened initially ... the first person I see and they're dead, bloated, and distorted. I was relieved to see it wasn't, but also hollow and lost ... The bags were blistered and horrible, like everything else around. Whatever the corruption is, it's all around me now, touching everything.

"I almost wish that I didn't have eyes to see the degradation. I think I'd be happier. But then maybe not. Without eyes, I couldn't drive, and I wouldn't be able to find you.

"Driving is a little uncomfortable. You may remember me saying I managed to graze my leg when I slipped on black ice in Gore ..."

Did I mention that? I can't remember.

"It was getting hot and swollen. I think it had become infected. I picked up a bottle of Detol from the supermarket, and tried that. It stung like fuck, but I think that cleaned it okay.

"I'm still heading your way. I'll see you soon.

"Hold tight Babe.

"I love you.

"Bye."

26th September, 1983 – Monday, Buggered if I Know Where

My watch alarm goes off. I rub exhausted eyes. The sky outside looks swollen, sullen, and ugly. The supermarket has collapsed further, the support beams now just corroded stumps. As I watch, what remains of a tree trunk disintegrates into a wet pile of rot. I drag myself into the driver's seat.

I turn the key and the starter whines. The motor coughs, but doesn't start. I try again, and this time it roars into life with a belch of black smoke that envelopes the cab.⁵

Travelling North, I feel on the edge of being sick. The world is rotten. Where there were scabs, there are now weeping sores, hideous organic looking threads drip from what remains of street lights and where the pavement has rucked up, I can see what looks like some sort of cancerous flesh. Driving is getting treacherous. Despite my desperate will to go as fast as I can, I'm forced to pick my way along the decaying road. There is a smell. It turns my stomach.

I drive. I have a tee-shirt tied around my face to ward off the worst of the smell.

5 Cards drawn: 2 diamonds, Ace clubs, and 7 diamonds. The seven diamonds roll is 6,2,2, so I re-rolled using the advantage given by the 2 diamonds. I get 1,4,4, still a fail. I'm now down to two dice.

Eventually, I can't drive anymore, and pull off the road by a collapsed petrol station, that looks like it has merged with some sort of amoeba. Why do I bother pulling off the road? It's not like there's anyone else on the road.

In the rubble, I find a phone. Despite everything, it still works ... or at least, I think it does.

The phone rings for an age, then Tracy's voice, "Hello. Leave a Message." There is a tinny beep.

"Hi Trace.

"Please give me a sign you can hear me. I'm scared for you. I want to know you're okay..."

"I don't know what's real anymore. Today I thought I saw a replica of The Gibson. It was just standing there beside the road. The same in every way, but in better nick than my one. Maybe it belonged to a better me. Someone who hasn't made the mistakes in life that I have. I considered swapping for his - it would serve the smug bastard right - but I can't abandon The Gibson. It's still going well. When I looked again in the rearview mirror, it was gone.

"As the sun was setting ... well, what little of it I could see ... I watched the banks of brown smog, not far away. It was coiling and writhing into weird tendrils. It almost looked like it was trying to form a face. It looked at me. This mighty, corrupt-looking face, sneering its contempt for me. It chilled me to the core. I haven't warmed up since.

"Hopefully a night's sleep'll see me right.

"Good night, babe.

"I hope to be with you soon.

"Bye."

27th September, 1983 – Tuesday, The Border of Sanity?

My watch alarm goes off. Damn that thing! I wake to a bruised looking sky streaked with angry red. This doesn't look good. A packet of chips and coke serves to wake me up. I'm exhausted, tired, sore, and helpless. All I can do is drive, and hope that I can push through this. Somewhere out there, the old world still exists, and this is just some twisted nightmare reality.

In the driver's seat, I turn the ignition. First time, the motor kicks into life. This is a good sign. Maybe today will go better.⁶

I'm almost jubilant ... almost. The sky has lightened a touch, and the festering lands have petered out. That's not to say normality is returning - far from it. Around me the world is twisted and warped. The corruption-blasted tree trunks and power poles are frozen into disturbing curves and whorls as if they're a stream cigarette smoke that has solidified. Fun-house mirror buildings bulge and bend in ways even the most fevered architect could only wish to match. All that aside, the roads here have almost a familiar feel to them. Maybe I'm just getting used to this craziness.

The land begins to rise again as I approach a range of hills, made weird by the distortions. The road steepens, and the engine begins to strain. I don't want to spend any longer in this place than I have to, so I push the accelerator down. As we climb, so too does the temperature gauge. It's deeply into the red when I'm forced to stop, without having reached the crest. *The Gibson* wheezes into a scenic lookout, complete with picnic table, completely untouched by the corruption.

While the engine cools, I take a moment to rest and reset. I feel the need to get some of my thoughts down in words. Eyes closed I consider what I want to say. In my logbook I begin to write.

I don't know where I am, but I know where you are.

I can feel you out there somewhere, waiting for me.

I see you as we were, when we were happy.

Will you see me when I finally get to you?

So far away, and distant.

6 Cards drawn: 5 Clubs (rolled 2 and 2 and so fail. I'm now down to one dice), 3 Spades, Ace of spades.

*I care for you. I love you.
I'm sorry for anything I've done that hurt you.
Forgive me.*

As the sky darkens again, I pull into the remnants of a small town. I go into a nearby house and find the phone.

The phone rings for an age, then Tracy's voice, "Hello. Leave a Message." There is a tinny beep.

"Hi Trace.

"It's me. I feel I'm getting close. Things are still weird here, but not the disturbing weird it was yesterday or the day before.

"It was funny. I stopped for a piss in another small town a while back. I could hear this noise. I followed it and found this corroded car - Datsun 180B, I think it was under all the blistered paint and rust. There was this boombox on the hood. It was still playing. I was listening to it, the first other voice I'd heard in days, but then the music stopped, the batteries finally running out. All I could think was, "God, I'm glad that's stopped." The music was truly horrible. I flipped out the cassette and the song was "Future Shock" by Herbie Hancock. Never heard of them. Never want to hear from them again either.

"I'm feeling hopeful. I'll be with you soon, and we'll figure this out.

"Take care of yourself.

"See you soon."

28th September, 1983 – Wednesday, The Outskirts

I wake to a featureless dusty sky. The sun is barely a vague brighter patch of yellow. The buildings around are covered in fine dust. There are no trees, no hills, nothing much.

I settle into the driver's seat, and think about the road ahead. We must surely be there. I've been a week on the road, and still haven't seen any signs of Auckland. Maybe today. I turn the ignition. The engine coughs and belches smoke. I try again. This time it catches and settles into its familiar rumble.⁷

We drift like a ghost through the dust shrouded outskirts of a major city. The shapes of the building have been softened by the corrosion and dust. The cars are half buried. No tracks break the carpet of dust across the road. I listen with all my being for any sound over the rumble of the engine – anything to suggest someone trying to hail me, or signs of anyone else. But nothing. The dust swallows all sound as it swallows the surroundings. A rueful smile touches my lips. I might be able to hear better, but my sense of taste has been severely dulled by days of eating packets of chips, and drinking Coka Cola.

As I come down off some low hills, a brief break in the clouds lets in a shaft of sunlight. In that brief instance, I see skyscrapers looming out of the murk far ahead. My heart lifts. And suddenly the road begins to take recognisable shape in my head. Relief washes over me. This is Auckland. I'm not going to be spending the rest of my days sleeping in my cabin, fearful of what disturbing manifestation of the corrosion will present itself to me.

I pass through the city centre, and out into the suburbs, dust trailing in my wake. I don't need to think about the road, my instincts guide me to your house.

Dust washes against the door, and floods in after me as I push open the door.

I call your name, but there is no reply. I search the house, but there is no sign of you having been there. I search again, calling. Not a whisper. Not a sign.

I slump to the floor, exhausted, and empty.

1st October, 1983 – Saturday, Auckland.

I am back in the driver's seat of *The Gibson*. Auckland is behind me. Was it ever Auckland? It looks like it, but then, without the trees, covered in choking dust and collapsing, it could have been anywhere. I am

⁷ Cards drawn: 8 Clubs, 4 hearts, and 4 spades.

driving, with no destination in mind. After a while I pull into the ruins of a petrol station. There is a phone in the office.

The phone rings for an age, then Tracy's voice, "Hello. Leave a Message." There is a tinny beep.

"Hi Trace.

"It's me Where are you? I cannot find you. I understand now that I'm truly alone. What do I do now? Well, I'm a trucker so I'll do what truckers do and keep moving on. I wish I could have seen you again to say I love you and I'm sorry."