

# The Chronicles of a Wandering Soul

Book One



Mel Mathews

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Book One: LeRoi

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by



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*The Chronicles of a Wandering Soul*

**Book One: LeRoi**

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## CHAPTER I

The MG overheated, blew a radiator hose was all, I hoped. By some stroke of luck it happened within a mile of a remote service station on the desolate highway. It had to be pushing a hundred degrees outside when I coasted into the station. The wind was beginning to pick up as the branches swayed and the leaves rustled in a lone oak tree that was rooted twenty feet opposite the barbed wire fence in a dry grassy field just east of the station. Across the street was a diner. That was it, a service station and a diner plopped right in the middle of nowhere. Dry hills rolled off in all directions from this bumpy, worn out highway running east and west, connecting similar sparse settlements like a dot-to-dot game along this landscape that was leading me home.

It's harder than hell to get a mechanic to look at an MG. They know that checking the oil can make the back bumper fall off, the mechanic getting the blame. The wrench at the service station said he couldn't look at it until after lunch, said it needed time to cool off. Guess I needed the cooling off time, too, so I headed for an iced tea and lunch at the diner across the highway, if it looked safe.

The diner had a gravel driveway with a couple of old telephone poles laid out about ten feet from the front door and two plate glass windows that made up the front of the faded white building. The west corner had been damaged by a wayward vehicle, the remnants of the past having lived on, un-repaired. The telephone poles must have been an after-thought to protect the diner from the potential of another run-in.

I opened the door and walked in, my presence announced by the un-oiled creaking hinges. Without looking around, I walked to the coffee counter, slid into the end seat next to the cash register and ordered an iced tea with lots of ice. The woman in the booth behind me must have been immune to the non-smoking section that she was sitting in—I wasn't.

"Excuse me, I wonder if you could put your cigarette out?" I asked, assuming she knew that it was a non-smoking section.

She ignored me. A few minutes later she lit up again and set the just lit lipstick-coated Virginia Slim into the slot of the amber ashtray. I stood up, walked around to her booth, grabbed her pack of smokes and the ashtray and walked out the front door. I dumped the ashtray and stepped on her lit smoke. Then, I dropped her pack and stomped them as well, and walked back inside.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" she asked, sliding her pink polyester two-ton ass out of the booth.

I slammed the empty ashtray down on the coffee counter and sat down looking straight ahead. I could feel her breathing over my shoulder.

"Lady, you don't want to find out!"

That was enough for her. The remnants of 'spoiled little bastard' could be heard as the door swung shut.

A petite pony-tailed brunette walked up with the iced tea pitcher to refill my glass.

"Can I have some more ice please?"

"Sure," she answered, turning to the ice machine behind her and scooping a glass full while I admired her finely proportioned hindside. "I'm sure Flo will be out in a minute," the brunette said, as she turned around with the ice.

"Who's Flo?"

"The boss-lady."

"What does she want?"

"You'll have to ask her yourself."

Flo walked up behind the sweet little brunette. "Sarah, could you catch that back booth with some decaf?"

Flo wouldn't have been half bad in her day. She could have passed for Sarah thirty years earlier. She wore very little make-up behind her black-rimmed reading glasses that rested about halfway down on her nose and were clipped to a strand of cheap miniature pearls that hung around her neck. Her eyes were hazel with bluish flecks, and she had long straight brunette hair held up in a clip. She had the gray that accompanied a fifty-five plus year old woman. She was tan, trim and took care of herself, in spite of her age. She wore cotton pants and a simple uniform-type, button-up-the-front blouse. She looked like a boss-lady should look—in control.

I waited for Flo to go first.

"Howdy."

"Hi," I answered, before taking a swig of tea.

"Purdy hot day, huh?"

"I can stand the heat. It's the stray cigarette smoke that sets me off."

"So that gives you the right to run off one of my regulars?"

"I asked her to put it out."

“Did you ask her or did you beat around the bush with some rude indirect comment?”

“Lady, I really don’t need any more crap today.”

“Well kid, right now you’re in my diner, and you’re runnin’ off my patrons . . .”

“Oh great,” I muttered.

“I’ve dealt with your kind for years, so let’s just cut to the quick.”

I’d run the weak one out the front door, but this one wasn’t going to scare off quite as easily. Guess it would be pretty hard to throw the queen out of her own palace.

“Look, lady, I’m sorry if I offended anybody here, but I’ve got some problems. My MG is broken down across the street,” I said, knowing that the mechanic waiting for it to cool would have come up with a pretty damn good excuse for not being able to work on it by the time I returned.

“So what?”

“Besides that, I keep playing telephone tag with Janie, one of my lady friends.”

Flo stood there and stared at me dumb-founded.

“It’s her birthday this Sunday, and I need to get her address to send her a birthday card. Jenny’s coming this weekend and I won’t be able to sneak a phone call to Janie. Well, I probably can get that done, but . . . Anyway, things just aren’t falling into place today.”

“Would you like some chocolate milk little boy, or how about your ass wiped?”

I just stared at this piece of work as a shadowy figure looked on from behind the kitchen window.

“Yeah, you heard me. In this cafe the world doesn’t revolve around you.”

“I don’t expect it to,” I flashed back.

“As a matter of fact, for you, I think it has a way of stoppin’ all together. There’s not a waitress in the world, let alone any other woman, who will ever live up to your demands. We just can’t sit in front of you all day waitin’ on or guessin’ your every need, demand, or desire.”

“What?”

“You heard me Mr. Needy-Never-Enough who thinks the world ought to revolve around him. It never has, and it never will. Besides, gettin’ around doesn’t sound as if it’s a real problem for you anyway.”

“What do you want?”

"Get over it."

"Get over what?"

"Bein' a helpless little boy trapped in a grown man's body."

"Wha . . ."

"Your kind stumbles into this place all of the time. Grow up. Get over it," Flo interrupted.

"Get over what?"

"Feelin' sorry for yourself and shruggin' your crap off onto some woman with a cigarette or any other woman for that matter."

"It was a non-smoking section!"

"I'll bet you're one of those that doesn't like to be told NO."

"No I'm not."

"I'll bet that great big word NO pierces your heart every time you hear it."

"You think I'm too sensitive?"

"I think you overreacted. Had you given her a chance, she'd have put out the cigarette."

"She lit up a second smoke after I asked her to put the first one out."

"Did you ask her to put it out a second time?"

Standing up, I reached into my pocket for a couple of bucks, threw them on the counter, stumbled out of that beehive, and then walked back across the street to check on my car.

I only went in there for a goddamn glass of iced tea and to try to unwind. Now I had this self-righteous mama trying to tell me how to act. Who in the hell did she think she was anyway? And how in the hell did it go from me not putting up with used cigarette smoke to me not respecting women? That's all I needed, another run in with a die-hard feminist who felt responsible for defending the rights of all womankind. God I hoped my MG was up and running.

"How do things look?" I asked, standing a few feet back, not wanting to take up too much of this guy's space.

"Not good."

"What did you find?"

"Well your radiator has troubles for starters, and it either has to be repaired or replaced."

"Doesn't sound so bad. Why can't we run it down to the radiator shop and get it worked over?"

“What radiator shop you have in mind?” he asked, cocking his head back, pulling off his glasses and then crossing his arms over an embroidered name patch that read ‘Okie’.

Great, a mechanic with an attitude: they loved being needed—made ‘em God. God was wearing a pair of dark blue coveralls and was pushing sixty. His graying sandy-brown, Brill-creamed hair was combed back and parted to the side. When he looked at me, his left eye drifted away in the opposite direction. Obviously, this glass-eyed son-of-a-bitch who couldn’t see straight liked to argue.

“I don’t care which one you use. Who’s the quickest?”

“None of ‘em are the quickest because we ain’t got one.”

“So what do you do for radiator repairs?”

“Send ‘em out.”

“Can’t we just drive it over to the next town?”

“No, we can’t just *drive* it over to the next town because there ain’t a repair shop in the next town either, and because I’m the only one here. This is the only gas station fifty miles in either direction. I can’t just up and leave.”

“So what am I supposed to do?”

“I’m gonna pull the radiator, clean it to make sure it is repairable, and ship it out.”

“How?”

“UPS, and they’ve already been here today, so cool your jets kid. Besides, that might not be the only problem. Your water pump has a leak and as dry as you ran this little hot rod, it wouldn’t surprise me if you cracked the head.”

“Hell, I was less than a mile from here when the hose blew. How could I have a cracked head?”

“Son, I don’t break ‘em, I fix ‘em, and this one’s not gonna get fixed overnight. If I were you, I’d make sleepin’ arrangements. It’ll be at least a week before I’ve got your radiator back and whatever other parts I’ll have to order.”

“Hell, I haven’t got a week. I got a girl coming to my place for the weekend.”

“Well, maybe you better think about havin’ her meet you here.”

“Mister, I live in California. There’s no way in hell she’ll drive twenty hours for a weekend roll in the hay.”

“Well kid, looks like you’ve just had a change in plans. I can fix your car, and I’ll get it out of here as quickly and inexpensively as possible,



even if you are one of those impatient hotshot Californians.”

“So that’s as good as it gets, huh?”

“That’s as good as it gets, and you might as well start trustin’ me right now. You don’t have much choice. You can tow it to the next town, but you know as well as I do that not many mechanics will even pop the hood on this British tub to check the oil. Count your blessin’s, I’ve owned a couple myself. I’ve had plenty of practice wrenchin’ on these moody critters.”

“Fuck,” I thought, but kept it to myself. “All right, any suggestions on a room?”

“I’d see Flo across the street at the diner. She runs the place, lives upstairs and usually has a room to rent.”

“What other possibilities are there?” I asked, realizing that I’d been fighting with my new landlord and had yet to even fill out an application.

“If that doesn’t work, I might be able to set you up on a buddy’s cattle ranch, but the accommodations won’t be nearly what they are across the street, plus you’d probably have to work and you don’t appear to be the type that likes to get too dirty.”

I wanted to stomp the cocky old man’s little toe along with the rest of his smart-ass self, but I needed him just like I needed Flo across the street. It was time to shut up and start kissing both of their asses. While waiting to cross the highway, a semi roared by, leaving me in a whirlwind disarray to match my frustration and anger that was rapidly turning into helpless despair.

Days like this caused me to question why I had left my hundred thousand dollar a year company job selling tractors. I always had a new Chevy extended cab Silverado that drove more like a touring sedan than a pickup truck. I had traded it all just to be able to sleep in as late as I damn well pleased and for the freedom to do business on my own terms.

I walked back in and sat down at the coffee counter. Sarah was scooping some more ice. I watched her until she turned around and then shifted my gaze to the daily special board.

*Fish and Chips with a cup of clam chowder for \$4.50, tea or coffee included,* had been scribbled in pink and blue chalk on the blackboard. Friday in Five Points was just about the same as anywhere else.

“Hungry?”

“Yeah, I’ll try the special.”

"Tea?"

"Yes, please, with . . ."

"Lots of ice," Sarah interrupted.

"You got it. Is Flo around?"

"She's upstairs. I can call for her."

"Only if she's not busy. I don't want to bother her."

"I'd say you've all ready done that."

"I'm sure of that," I said, feeling like a fool for having argued with the woman.

"Can't see what a little more could hurt. Let me get your soup and then I'll go after her."

There was no changing the past, even if it was only twenty minutes earlier. There wasn't much of a choice. Okie was right; I wasn't into punching cattle. A few minutes later Flo walked back up to the counter.

"Well, look who's back for dessert," she said with a smart-ass, now-I-gotcha, grin.

"Okie across the road says you might have a room for rent."

"Sounds like Okie across the road had more bad news than just that. Things got to be pretty shitty if you're back here for a room."

"Yes ma'am, I suppose you're right about that." I answered, wanting to tell her to fuck off in the worse way.

"Why does this not surprise me? Okie's always stickin' me with your kind. Guess it isn't his fault that guys like you always end up broken down in these British sports cars that you try to run away from life in."

"Lady, I know it seems I've left what little courtesy I have back at home, but I really would appreciate your help."

"Yeah, I got an extra room. Sarah will show you upstairs when you've finished lunch?"

"To the non-smoking room?" Sarah asked with her back to me facing Flo. They both broke out in a giggle.

"Guess we'll have to try to be nice to him," Flo said, as she turned from Sarah to me.

"How much for the room?"

"I don't know yet. Depends on how many more of my patrons you run off."

## CHAPTER 2

After lunch it was back to the service station to get my duffel, laptop, and cellular phone. Okie was at the gas pumps.

"Just need to get my goods out of the car, and I'll be out of your hair," I told Okie as he watched me walk up to the station.

"I'm gonna need some money."

"For what?"

"For fixin' your rig. What do you think?"

"You haven't done anything yet."

"And I won't if I don't get parts. No money, no parts, no fixed car."

"Can I put it on my VISA?"

"Cash or a local check," Okie muttered.

"How much you want?"

"Couple hundred . . . I've got to pay the radiator man . . . that'll be at least fifty bucks. The rest ought to cover the water pump and hoses."

I pulled two crisp hundreds from my money clip and handed them to Okie. "Do I get a receipt?"

"If I had a receipt book you would. But like I said, you're gonna have to start trustin' me."

About all I trusted Ol' Deadeye for was slipping it to me, but I didn't have a choice. "OK, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"You can talk to me, but it won't do you any good. I don't wrench on Saturday or Sunday unless it's a quick fix just to keep a car on the road. Otherwise, I clean the shop and take care of stuff 'round the house."

Okie lived about two hundred yards behind the gas station in a mobile home. It appeared that a house had once burned down where the mobile home now was. It made sense. The yard and everything else he needed was in place. Instead of trying to restore the remnants of the past, he had done the smart thing—moved into a new home. Hopefully he had more faith in his trade than he did in his domestic repairs. He had faith in something though, because it was a wonder that the whole damn station hadn't gone up in flames when his house had.

Done with our business for the weekend, I hoofed it back across the highway to the diner. The lunch hour had passed and the place was empty with the exception of two old men in the back booth who were playing gin. Sarah was waiting when I walked in with the duffel and

portable office.

"Would you like me to call a bellhop?"

"A bellhop won't work for what I have in mind," I grinned.

I followed Sarah toward the stairs, curious to know what she was really like after she had showered off Flo's influence.

"I've always heard that it doesn't make much difference to you Caliboyes."

"Well it's your lucky day. You don't have to hear about us Caliboyes second hand anymore."

"More like unlucky."

"You've got yourself a real live one now," I answered, following her up the stairs.

"More like a puff of second-hand smoke."

"You get to see first hand what pulls the rope of this Caliboy. If you're lucky it might even be you."

"A true California dreamer."

"Dreams come true."

"Well it's time to wake from this one," Sarah said, as she stepped up onto the second floor.

There was something about Sarah that I liked, maybe more than just something. She was sassy but wholesome. She was in her mid-twenties, about five-four with long dark brown hair in a ponytail. She wasn't one of those anorexic looking model types, but she damn sure wasn't overweight by any standards either.

Sarah had natural beauty. If she wore make-up, I couldn't tell, and it was quite apparent that she took her health seriously. She was full of energy—almost too much energy. I say too much energy because that's what attracted me to her, but it also scared the hell out of me at the same time. I doubted my ability to keep up with a woman like her, to keep her happy.

"This is your stop. There's no key, and it only locks from the inside with a dead-bolt."

"Well now, how do you know that?"

"It's where I stayed when I first arrived."

"Broken down car?"

"I wish," Sarah said, as she turned to walk back downstairs.

I decided not to probe too quickly. That was one thing that always seemed to scare them off. Although, I'd been known to use the scare

tactic to see how quickly they spooked, just to cut through the crap and save a lot of time and grief. I walked in and set my goods on the bed.

The room was about fifteen by fifteen with a double bed, a dresser, and a desk with a red rotary dial trim-line phone. I looked for the phone jack so that I could access e-mail to do business from my new loft, but it was the old style wiring. The room had wooden floors and an area rug. A few pictures with American Indian motifs hung from the walls. I had my own private bathroom with a huge cast-iron bathtub, the type with claw feet. I wouldn't be taking a shower for a while.

There was a small bookshelf with a handful of paperbacks. None seemed to reach out and grab me. Still, it wouldn't be long before I picked one up to pass time. The room had two windows that came together in the northwest corner. Okie was piddling around in his shop across the street to the north. I thought about shooting the grumpy old fucker to put him out of my misery, but I needed him. To the west, remnants of a sunset melted into the dusk of rolling brown hills. It was time for hot bath to soak off the weather I had collected while driving the convertible.

After toweling dry, I stretched out on the bed, exhausted from the day, and relaxed. The bath was good for my aching bones as well as my aching mind that had been fighting everything that had happened that day—actually, everything that had been happening for most of my life. Seldom, if ever, could I nap, but felt no choice, as if something else had taken over. I woke an hour or so later, watered down my hair, combed it back, and went downstairs to see about dinner.

"Where's Sarah?" I asked, greeting Flo.

"Just missed her. Why?"

"I don't know. I guess if she's gone it's too late to eat?"

"Well things don't just stop because Sarah gets off work."

Why should Flo's attitude have changed? I was the one who'd had the hot bath and nap.

"Can I get a French dip and a green salad, please?"

"What kind of dressing?"

I wanted to ask her what type of dressing she had, listen to her rattle them off and then ask her to repeat them, but I was too scared of her.

"You have Catalina or French?"

Flo just looked down through her glasses over her nose and, with a disgusted, wake up dumb-ass, you're stranded in the middle of nowhere look, shook her head from side to side.

"I'll have the house dressing," I conceded.

Flo scribbled onto a pale green ticket, tore it from the book, snapped it under the clip of the chrome order-up wheel and spun it around.

"Order Jimmy. French dip, no fries. I'll take care of the salad on this side."

Jimmy was at least six and a half feet tall, but hunched over to six feet, having had to duck under everything for the last forty-two of his sixty-year life. Jimmy wore a white faded T-shirt that was starting to unravel from wear, not over-washing. Under his tan colored, Big Ben work pants spurted his black Reebok tennis shoes that housed a pair of size fourteen feet. A grease-stained dingy white apron, that for most people would cover their knees, hardly cleared Jimmy's waist. The slender face housed his deep, sad looking blue eyes, and his bridged nose made his eyes appear to be sunk further back into his head than they really were. With arms as long as Jimmy's, there wasn't room for another cook.

Jimmy slid the French dip under the hot lamp and slapped the bell a few times, summoning Flo, but there was no sign of her. While finishing the last few bites of my salad, I decided that next time Flo would have to offer something besides ranch dressing.

Jimmy stretched his neck through the opening above the counter out into the dining room to see if he could spot Flo. His Adam's apple bobbed around over my French dip. He didn't shave it very well or couldn't shave around it and the graying whiskers protruded out around it like grass that grew out from under and around a rock. I waited for him to say something, knowing that if he did, he'd end up dipping his goiter in my au jus sauce. Not a peep came out of Jimmy, nor was there a sign of Flo.

A few minutes later, Flo walked in through the front door. She headed straight over to my sandwich, picked it up and set it down in front of me. The thought crossed my mind that this old bitch was testing me. Maybe she had walked out the back, around to the front and just stood there watching to see how I handled having to wait while the French dip went stale. She was actually fucking with me, but my mind sure wanted to believe so.

"Been putting out a fire?" I asked.

"Is it cold?"

"In here?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, its fine." The French dip was still warm, and if I hadn't watched it sit there, I never would have guessed it had been under the hot lamp

for more than a minute, but 'its fine' was all I was giving her. I had no intention of fighting her, but I also wasn't about to rave about how delicious the dip was either. Besides, I'd lost a good portion of my appetite watching Jimmy's goiter dangling over my plate. I could only stomach about half the meal and pushed the rest aside.

"Eyes bigger than your belly?"

"Just like a hungry little boy who piles it on before his siblings have a chance at it."

"Sounds about right for you."

We both smiled at each other for the first time.

"Dessert?"

"Whatcha got?"

"Bread pudding with loads of California raisins."

"I'll pass on the dessert, but I would like a cup of coffee."

"Cream?"

"Low-fat or non-fat, please."

Flo reached into the refrigerator below the counter, pulled out a pint of half-and-half, and set it down next to my coffee.

"You'll have to pour it from the carton."

"Exactly how I do it at home."

While drinking the coffee I contemplated the evening's possibilities. I thought about asking Flo for some suggestions, then reconsidered. I wasn't in the mood for another one of her smart-ass answers and didn't want to open myself up to another one of her attacks.

Instead of hanging out and drinking more coffee than I should, it was back up to the loft, to hang out with myself. Since there was no television, I tried to settle on a paperback, hoping to get lost in the drama of some other less fortunate fool. Falling into the life of some fictional character would have been great, but shuffling through the books, all to be found was the happily-ever-after-fairytale stuff. That fantasy I'd given up on long ago. It was close to eleven when I went downstairs to look for a newspaper. Flo was sitting at the coffee counter when I stumbled off the last step.

"Whatcha need?"

"Couldn't sleep. Why are *you* up at this hour?"

"Tryin' to balance this checkbook, but now you made me lose my place."

"Sorry."

"Guess I needed a break anyway. What's your excuse?"

"Don't know."

"This place too quiet for you?"

"Maybe. I feel . . . I don't know, maybe a little rejected tonight."

"Rejected?"

"Yeah, Janie never called back with her address and Jenny never called to get directions to my place for tomorrow, even if I won't be there," I explained on the way to the coffee pot.

"And you don't have any others at your beck and call out here either, do you?"

"Sure doesn't look that way," I answered, pouring a decaf. "Guess I feel a little lonely, too."

"Yeah, problem is, when you're stuck out here, there's not many ways to escape it."

"Something's not right . . ."

"You're needy," Flo interrupted.

"I'm not needy."

"Yes you are."

"Bullshit."

"You'd like to have a woman, but without any obligations."

"Without any obligations?" I asked.

"You don't want to have to fake it anymore! You don't want to worry about losing her because you can't fulfill her every wish and desire."

"I'm not worried about that."

"Yeah you are, but you don't want to get lost in her."

"I what?"

"Like tryin' to get your mother's attention, even if it was just a fleeting response."

"Don't drag my mother into this shit."

"I'm not."

"Yes you are."

"You just need to look at how you relate to women."

"How's that?"

"How many kids in your family?"

"Four boys."

"No sisters?"

"No sisters."



"No wonder you don't know how to have a woman in your life."

"Don't know . . ."

"Kid, I've seen a whole lot of grown men just like you that have a little boy trapped inside of them. A little boy who still runs the show."

"Yeah, right."

"The way you relate to a woman and the type of response you usually get is like dope. If you don't get your fix, you go away mad, and if you do get your fix, you wake up the next day longin' for more."

"You've lost me." I said, thinking about all the idle time Flo had for watching Oprah and reading self-help books.

Flo put a stack of bills and a checkbook back into the clear Tupperware container, snapped on the blue lid and slid it under the counter below the cash register.

"I think we've had about as much of each other as we can stand for one day."

"You got that right . . . maybe even a little more," I answered, thinking about the suffering I was going to endure while the MG recuperated.

"Pleasant dreams," Flo said, walking back into the kitchen.

"Yeah, you too," I answered. Pleasant dreams—hell!

Upstairs, lights from the parking lot shined into the loft. My boyhood bedroom had windows that came together in the northeast corner. No American Indian art hung from my walls, but for some reason this place was stirring up old memories. I put on my sweats and a loose T-shirt before crawling into bed and drifting off.

Mom had once sent me to my room for something that I'd done wrong. I was pissed off, sitting on my bed that was under both windows. After finding a pencil, I left a note saying that I had run away, then opened the window, and crawled under the bed. Not long after that, Mom started calling for me. When I didn't respond, she came looking. I watched her feet coming towards my bed, a few seconds passed before she discovered my fugitive status and proclamation of freedom from her tyrannical rule.

Mom climbed up on my bed and stuck her head out of the window yelling for me. I let her carry on for a few minutes with her idle threats and realized that she loved me in spite of herself. Then I started belly laughing. I don't think she spanked me that time, but she damn sure didn't run off to cut me a piece of chocolate cake.

I was actually laughing out loud, but soon the image of Flo staring down through her glasses returned.

Flo was right; I'd had all of her that I could stand for one day . . . Hell, I'd had enough of her to last a lifetime. Who made her the queen shrink anyway?

## CHAPTER 3

Once asleep, I dreamed about a few old girlfriends, but nothing exciting. Of the fleeting passionate and erotic dreams that so rarely blessed a lonely night, my lovers appeared as unknown figures. I never remembered the details of seduction from or towards any of these images, but always recalled how after we had symbiotically melted together making love, she always seemed to evade me, leaving me in pursuit.

Waking life was usually the opposite. After making love to a woman, I ran like hell. There had only been a couple of women in my life with whom I had actually let myself go.

Lying in bed, I tried to plan the day. My watch read eleven-thirty; I had slept long and hard. I wasn't hungry but needed coffee. It could be six in the morning or twelve noon when I woke up, but I always needed coffee. I slapped my ball cap on and walked downstairs.

"Well, well, well, look who we have here," Sarah greeted.

"Morning," I mumbled.

"For another ten minutes."

"For you, but mine's just started. Could I get a cup of coffee please?"

"I don't know, *could* you?" asked Sarah, as she filled a cup.

Some of Flo was oozing out on to Sarah, and she didn't wear it well. Flo didn't wear it well either, but she had been wearing it so long that her smart-ass suit was the only thing left that fit her.

"Thanks Flo." The jab didn't raise a peep out of Sarah, so it worked. "I'll be back down in a while for lunch, after the regulars have left. That way I won't run off my mouth and anymore customers."

Once upstairs, I drew a bath, using shampoo for bubbles. It never bubbled up like real bubble bath, but it was close enough. I climbed into the hot bath and stood in it for a minute waiting for my nerve impulses to register. Standing there naked, I looked up, discovering myself in the full-length mirror on the back of the half-open bathroom door, to find the image of a standing, six foot, hundred-and-ninety pound bullfrog, with long skinny legs and a fat-bellied short body. Good thing there wasn't a fly buzzing around the room.

I looked old—my bare-ass naked self, the hairy, long white legs, which ran up into my skinny thirty-eight-year-old buns. I stared at my shriveled up thing that in my mind never quite measured up. On top of my hips sat the hairy white skin of a sucked in belly. I had developed

## **About the Author**

Mel Mathews is the author of *The Chronicles of a Wandering Soul*, a series of novels that portray a modern man's struggles as he goes against cultural and religious norms, and the grains of his upbringings, to emerge a renewed man guided by his own inner truth and hard-won wisdom. His articles and reviews have appeared in many syndicated publications.

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In Book One of *The Chronicles of a Wandering Soul*, Malcolm Clay, a rather ornery but ‘successful-in-life’ character, finds himself stranded in the middle of nowhere, his fancy MG allowing him to limp into a gas station with a diner-cum-motel on the other side of the road. Subtly layered in symbol and metaphor, one soon realizes that the simplicity of this novel is only skin deep. The old mechanic, a study in laissez-faire and cool disdain, tries the patience of our hero. As a matter of fact, all members of the cast including the Queen who rules the diner; the pretty waitress and the lanky fast-order cook are highly complicated human beings. The enigmatic and moody old Chevy half-ton pick-up truck Malcolm borrows is unreliable in the conventional sense, but does grant him the freedom to escape the confines of the motel and the frustration of his broken down MG. ‘Ol’ Reliable’ guides him over a cattle guard, a mysterious unseen gateway into sanctuary, the oasis of a river that cuts through this otherwise barren wasteland where he can cast a fly into adventure—and misadventure—yet beyond that, healing waters for the soul. Could this perhaps be a modern day model of a questing Perceval and the Grail Legend’s Fisherking?

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