

Barney Roper, in his early 70s, has been on a quest since his retirement. It has taken him to the Far East and back and still he remains puzzled as to what he should be doing with this 3rd age of his life. In A SINGLE STEP he first plunges into working at his local hospice, but leaves to go to West Africa in pursuit of answers to how a man shall live.

A SINGLE STEP

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A Single Step



**A novel
for Boomers & beyond**

Terry Oliver

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CHAPTER 1

Barney Roper knew the rules. Keep your mouth shut. 'Smile and smile and be a villain.' Trust the 2nd law of thermodynamics – the inevitability of things to break down. In divorce, this was the only way forward, he believed.

He also believed that things happened in threes. So when he saw the flames from his canal boat he was not too surprised. Because in the space of a few hours, his on-going argument with his wife Alice, over her continued refusal to divorce, first led to him losing his temper and secondly to drinking too much in the Bridge Inn this evening – both things he vowed, at the age of 72, he would not do. And now this.

As he stood on the canal lock gates at King's Cross basin in central London, looking down towards his boat on the darkened towpath, he thought the flickering lights were coming from a neighbouring boat.

His mind, dulled by the unaccustomed drinks he'd had at the pub after the argument, took its time reacting. It was only as he got nearer that he realised the boat was his own, the *Iron Sea Horse* and that the flickering lights were flames. By the time he arrived at the side of his old steel-hulled canal boat, the fire was already spreading throughout its 40-foot length and the pine-panelled interior had ignited.

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He clambered aboard the front deck and felt in the usual place for the magnetised door key under the metal seat locker – gone. He wasted precious minutes on his hands and knees fumbling in the dark for the missing key before his muddled brain abandoned the search and changed tack.

Water. The surface of the canal lay three feet below him and he hunted about on the front deck for a bucket. Nothing. He climbed back over the side to the canal bank and ran to the stern. He tried the rear hatch but knew it too would be locked. Through the brass porthole he peered inside, seeing only a wall of flame as the wood panelled interior fed the fire. The back deck was bare – no bucket, only a deck mop. He hopped off onto the towpath and stumbled towards the neighbouring narrowboat. If only Alf were aboard. He banged hard on the roof and shouted. A dim light flicked on.

“Alf – Alf! It’s me, Barney – quick – my boat’s on fire –”

Alf’s bald head poked out through the front entrance of the old wooden butty boat to stare at the flames creeping out through the roof ventilators of the *Iron Sea Horse*.

“I can’t find my bucket – where’s yours?” shouted Barney.

The old man ducked back inside and reappeared at the rear of his boat holding a plastic pail on the end of a short rope. He handed it to Barney and they scooped water from the canal in turns to throw onto the roof of the steel-hulled narrowboat.

“This is no good, Barney. We need a hose to shove in the roof vent,” puffed Alf.

“What if I smash a port-hole and pour it in that way?” said Barney, looking about for a rock or tree branch.

Alf shook his head. “Christ, no – that’ll make it worse, just feeding in more air. Look, I’ll grab my bike and ride down to the pub to call the fire department.”

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“Okay, but hurry – this is getting out of control,” said Barney, flinging more water through the small roof ventilator. Alf re-emerged out of the darkness with an ancient pushbike and stopped beside Barney.

“I don’t think this was kids – I’ve seen somebody goin’ in and out here the last few days – thought it was a friend of yours. He had a key.” He wobbled off down the canal towpath and Barney bailed more water from the canal – still thinking about smashing a window but frightened of causing a real inferno... He could see that his efforts were ineffectual and paused, gasping from his futile bailing with the heavy buckets of water. His mind raced from one idea to the next, still muddled from the unaccustomed drinking.

If he got up on the roof of the boat, he’d be able to pour water straight down the brass vent. He heaved a full bucket of water from the canal up onto the roof and hurried to the rear to climb up the folding stirrup steps on to the top of the narrowboat. His heart thumped from the exertion and he told himself to be careful. In the clutter of boathooks, flowerboxes and odd bits of loose timber, he could easily trip and end up in the canal – or worse, on the concrete towpath.

He reached the middle of the roof and watched the flames licking round the brass dome covering the vent. Without thinking, he started to unscrew the brass cover. With a yelp he snatched his hand away from the hot metal, the tips of his fingers scorched. He swore and plunged his hand into the bucket of water, then poured some of it on to the metal until it stopped sizzling even though flames still darted out around the brass dome. With his other hand, he felt the metal gingerly, then unscrewed it by spinning the dome off with quick flicks of his unburned left hand. The dome spun off and rolled down

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the roof into the canal. At the same time, a jet of flames spurted up into his face from the small opening. He grabbed the bucket and threw the remains of the water down the four-inch hole.

The rope was just long enough to reach the canal surface and he hauled the heavy bucket up onto the roof and poured it into the opening repeatedly. Sometimes the fire seemed to abate, only to flare up again and shoot out the vent even higher. His heart hammered against his chest wall and the arthritis in his hands made them ache from his exertions with the heavy water bucket. The steel roof began to heat up and he could feel it through the thin soles of his shoes.

With a last glance at the fire pouring out of all three brass roof vents now, he turned and fumbled his way back to the stern. Something Alf had said stuck in his mind and distracted his attention. As he reached the edge of the roof, his foot caught the sliding hatch cover and he pitched forward in the blackness onto the steel rear deck, four feet below.

CHAPTER 2

Alice woke with a jolt, her eyes wide, staring up into the dark canopy of the four-poster bed. The faint flash of light was not enough to illuminate the bedroom and she lay watching it flick on and off, sometimes with a hint of blue. Was it the dream that had wakened her, with the same heavy feeling of dread she remembered from that night in the other four-poster in Rome? She tried to shut it out by closing her eyes and then heard again the faint knocking sound and sat upright in bed, listening hard. The pulsing light was definitely blue, then white. Police. She held her breath, waiting for the sound again.

Her first thought was Cassie – oh God, it's finally happened. The free-floating anxiety about the fate of her youngest child, away in Africa, that never left her but lurked in the crevices of her daytime mind and only came to the fore at night, flooded her consciousness. Don't let it be Cassie was all she could repeat to herself.

Beside her, the big four-poster lay empty. Heck had not returned yet – what time was it, anyway? She peered at the old alarm clock and made out the hands in the pulses of blue light – 3:29 am. He should have been home ages ago – maybe it's Heck, he's been caught again with those crazy anarchist

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students, spraying slogans on 4x4s. No, he promised her – swore that he would never go out with them again. It would be insane. It had already cost him his career as professor of archaeology at St Anne’s College in East London. His attempt at helping student activists protest against huge gas-guzzling Hummers had backfired and landed him in court, just as Alice had warned. If he were caught a second time the magistrate wouldn’t let him off with community service work. He’d surely go to jail.

The thought made Alice clutch compulsively at her chest, at her missing breast and she felt a choking sob rise in her. She made herself breathe deeply while she counted to five. The familiar framework of the Rome dream rose in her mind as clear as if it had happened yesterday. Heck’s big bony fingers fondling her breasts – then stopping, probing, withdrawing. She gulped hard, swallowing the rising fear, her hand moving again to the reassuring shape of her other breast.

If only Netta were here. Why hadn’t she agreed to let her stay when she offered to keep her company until Heck’s night duty sentence at the Mile End hospital finished next week? But Alice had said no, she’d be fine. The recurring nightmares were diminishing and her daughter should concentrate on her own treatment. She and Philip still had several more sessions with the fertility clinic to complete. Had Alice been just a little selfish in refusing Netta’s offer, knowing how churned up she felt to see her eldest daughter keep the hurt of her infertility bottled up inside?

The knocking became louder, insistent. Someone banging at the front door. Alice grabbed her dressing gown and switched on the upstairs hall light. As she descended the curving elm staircase, she could make out two shadows

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through the glass door panels and beyond them the flashing blue and white lights of a police cruiser. She opened the door on the safety chain.

"Mrs Roper – Mrs Barney Roper?" A plain-clothes policewoman held out her ID photo while the uniformed policeman stood beside her. Alice nodded.

"We're trying to locate your husband, Mrs Roper. Is he at home?"

"No, he left this afternoon. What's happened – is he in trouble?"

"We don't know for sure, Mrs Roper," said the policewoman. "I know it's late but we need to ask you some questions. May we come in for a minute?"

Alice unfastened the chain, opened the door and switched on a light. The two police officers followed her into the living room. She stood there waiting.

"Please sit down, Mrs Roper. Now, do you know where your husband went?" said the policewoman.

"Not exactly. He mentioned that he might go to his boat. It's at King's Cross canal basin."

"And did he say when he would be back?"

"No. We had an argument. He just took a bag and said he would sleep on the boat."

"Is the boat called the *Iron Horse*?"

"The *Iron Sea Horse* – yes. Has it been stolen or something? What is it?" asked Alice, perching on the arm of the sofa.

"There's been an accident, Mrs Roper – a fire. The firemen rescued a man from the canal boat and took him to St Pancras hospital. We don't know who he is. His clothing was too badly burned. No ID they could find."

"Oh my god – and you think it's Barney – my husband?"

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“That’s why we’re here, Mrs Roper,” said the policewoman. “We got his name and details from the Waterways Board computer system as the owner. And a man on a nearby canal boat said he spoke to him earlier at the fire.”

Alice stood up. “And he’s in the hospital now. Is he badly burned?”

The woman nodded, “I’m afraid he is, Mrs Roper. And he inhaled a lot of smoke. Can’t speak, his lungs may be damaged. We don’t know how long he was in the fire before they got him out.”

“But you still don’t know if it’s Barney or not? Oh God, I wish Heck was here.”

“Your son?”

“No, my partner. My husband and I are divorcing. That’s what we were arguing about when he left. Can I see him – at the hospital?”

The policewoman nodded again. “Yes, we’d like you to come to St Pancras with us and try to make a positive identification, if you will.”

Alice was already starting back up the curving elm staircase. “Just give me two minutes to get dressed –”

Detective Sergeant Esther Parry led Alice through the A&E department and up to the intensive care floor of St Pancras hospital.

“They brought him here because they have a Special Burns Unit, Mrs Roper,” she said. She stopped before they approached the nursing island. “The doctors said to warn you that he has extensive burns and is heavily bandaged. You can’t

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see his face. They wanted to know if he has any identifying body marks – tattoos, scars, birthmarks, earring. Anything.”

Alice stared at the detective, her mind a blank. “He had a scar on the back of his hand. His left hand from when he was a boy.”

The detective nodded and spoke with one of the intensive care nurses. The nurse shook her head and the detective turned and came back to Alice.

“His hands are completely bandaged she says. Was there anything else – anything at all, Mrs Roper?”

“Well, he had several moles on his back and chest,” she said. “He’s seventy two,” she explained. “Can I see him, now?”

The detective glanced at the nurse, who raised her eyebrows but said nothing. “I’m not sure we can identify him, but...” She gave the nurse a nod and they all three entered the dimly lit room. Alice stared at the body in the bed, uncomprehending. The head and upper torso, both arms and hands were completely swathed in bandages. Only a slit for the eyes and nostrils was uncovered. The eyes were closed. Alice turned to the detective who motioned her closer to the bedside. She stepped cautiously nearer and peered at the closed eyes, the only thing visible, then turned a questioning look at the nurse and the policewoman. They conferred in whispers then beckoned Alice to them.

“The nurse said would you recognise his feet?” asked the detective in a low voice.

“His feet? I don’t know. Why his feet?”

“He was wearing leather boots and they protected his feet. They’re not burned, at least not badly.”

Alice stared at the pile of bedding and bandages, trying to feel some sense of Barney from the heap of white cloth and

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shook her head. She turned away and the nurse opened the door as they all tiptoed out. Halfway to the dim-lit nursing island, Alice stopped.

“His birthmark. It’s on the sole of his foot. A cherry birthmark, beneath his little toe.”

“You sure?” said the policewoman. “Which foot – left or right?”

Alice shook her head. “I can’t remember.”

The intensive care nurse turned and led them back into the room. They stood at the end of the bed while the nurse carefully undid the sheets at the bottom end and lifted them up to expose first one foot and then the other, looking back at Alice.

For a minute, Alice stared unbelieving at the mahogany skin and pale yellow soles confronting her. She looked at the two other women and said in a puzzled voice, “My husband is not black.”

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