

Chapter 2: **THE SATELLITE DISH.**

When the girls returned from their tea party with the nobles, they found us sitting on the back terrace. We were watching a big Toyota laboriously dragging the deflated, green-slime covered balloon, back across the stubble covered field.

‘God knows how long it’s going to take them to clean that slime off,’ mused Mike. He was now as clean as a pin and smelling strongly of tropical fruit sweets.

‘I wonder how you get a thing that size dried?’ Alun frowned. ‘You can hardly hang it up in the garage, can you.’

‘You ought really to employ the word “one” instead of “you” in that context,’ said Mike annoyingly.

‘One could not hang it on the washing line either. Could one?’ I volunteered.

‘One certainly could not. One agrees, entirely,’ Nodded Alun.

‘Anyhow. I bet that basket is going to stink to hell for years,’ added Mike.

‘Yep. A good job we didn’t get dragged into the salvaging manoeuvres,’ smiled Alun.

We nodded agreement.

‘Oh. So you three are already drunk, are you?’ shouted Margaux, through the open window.

‘Nearly there,’ called back Alun. ‘Nice tea?’

The girls appeared.

‘Well, as a matter of fact, we were given a guided tour of the chateau. Not only that, but we were shown some articles that are never shown to the public.’

'Was that a sneer Margaux?' I asked, but Alun interrupted before she could reply.

'My God!' he exclaimed, 'don't tell us that old tweedy devil let his trousers down.'

Mike and I burst out laughing.

'You, one-track-minded idiot,' she sighed.

'It would have been a noble gesture if he had.' I laughed.

Margaux replied to this remark with what we supposed must have been her idea of a noble gesture. She then turned to my wife, 'shall we give it to them?'

My wife nodded and stepped indoors to return almost at once. The manoeuvre was accompanied by a scraping and metallic clanging noise, as a large object was dropped to the ground.

'Seen, this before?' she asked.

'Looks like a satellite dish to me.' I said, 'What do you think, Mike? You're the technical one.'

'Yep. That's the one off the roof.' He nodded. 'I recognise that dent.'

'Off this roof?' nodded Margaux.

'That's right,' said Mike, sipping his iced wine.

'Oh! By the way Margaux,' Alun butted in, 'could you have a look at Mike's buttock please.' He paused. 'It got bitten.'

'Bitten?'

'No, not by one of us. By a swan.'

'By a Swan?'

I looked over at them, 'Yes. I know what you are thinking. And we agree. It's not much compared with viewing a Count's private parts, in private. But

apparently the swan knew a thing or two about snapping buttocks.'

'Experienced, was it?'

'Yes. But for some reason, Mike won't show us,' added Alun.

My wife sighed one of her best, resigned sighs, 'all right. Come over here, Mike. Let's have a look.'

'What here? I mean out here on the terrace?'

'Well, the swan did bite you out there in the middle of the field. There were dozens of people.'

'Yes, but I had my trousers on when it did it. What if the neighbours look over?'

'Don't worry, Mike, they won't do it twice,' snorted Margaux.

'Very funny.'

'Come on Mike,' said my wife, 'Let have a look at the damaged area,'

Mike stood up reluctantly and, casting a worried look at the fence, slipped down his trousers.

'And the pants,' said Margaux, and he sighed and did as instructed.

There was a sharp intake of breath, from behind him.

'What is it? What's wrong?' cried Mike attempting to crane his neck around to get a look at his own buttock.

Alun and I jumped up and slipped behind the girls.

'Hell!' cried Mike. 'This isn't the local cinema, you know.'

'Well that swan certainly knew what he was about,' nodded Alun. 'You'd better keep the inflatable bed tonight.'

Margaux tapped Mike on the shoulder, 'up with the trousers Mike. You'll live. The skin's not broken, but that swan must have one hell of a set of beak muscles.

'Is it that bad?' asked Mike, secretly hoping that the damage would be something to write home about.

'It's a nice sort of mauve colour for the moment. Would you like a mirror, or perhaps I could take a photo?'

'No, thanks. Do I have to put something on it?' He asked.

'Apart from trousers?' asked my wife. 'No. I'd leave it at that for the present.'

Alun smiled, 'I believe that pond-weed poultice is what the locals recommend.'

'Shut up,' grumbled Mike.

'No, you'll just have to suffer in silence, I'm afraid,' said my wife. 'You can stand, though?'

'More or less.'

'And suffer in silence?'

'Yes. I suppose so. If I must.'

'Suffer in silence!' I cried. 'Are you joking? Surely you realise that you're talking to Mike.'

'Alun tut-tutted, 'Mike won't stop complaining and reminding about his dangerous encounter until Christmas.'

'Complaining is ingrained in his DNA.' I added.

'Shut Up,' sighed Mike

In the meantime, Alun and I had moved a little downwind from Margaux and my wife. We thus had a full front view of the half-naked Mike. Alun shot me a look and started to lift his phone to immortalise the moment.

'Oh no you don't!' cried Mike spinning away from us.

'Hello! Now, what have we here?' laughed Margaux.

Then, unexpectedly a new voice was heard.

'I couldn't help overhearing. Perhaps I can be of assistance.'

Then an oval, woman's face appeared over the top of the fence.

'Mrs Yamamoto!' cried Mike.

'Oh! good heavens. You!' came the reply. 'All of you! Naked too.'

'God!' cried Mike, trapped between two sets of all-seeing eyes.

'We're not all naked. Just Mike here.'

'Well, what a lovely surprise,' Margaux smiled. 'And what brings you to these parts, Mrs Yamamoto. How have you been since our meeting in Mexico?'

Mike twisted back to us, and Alun's phone clicked.

'Give me that, you idiot,' cried Mike, but Alun had already taken refuge behind a prickly looking bush.

'Oh dear!' tutted Mrs Yamamoto, 'Perhaps I should pop round and take a closer look at that bruise. We wouldn't want it to get infected, would we.'

'It won't get infected,' Mike called over his shoulder as he tried to out-manoeuvre Alun, 'I'll look after it.'

Now, out-manoeuvring someone, while one's trousers and pants are wrapped around one's ankles, is not all that easy for the novice.

'So, what are you doing here?' repeated Margaux.

'Oh! My husband's mother's brother's son invited me.'

I frowned but gave up the search of what this meant in terms of relations.

That's nice,' smiled my wife.

'Yes. He wanted me to see...' here she hesitated, searching for the correct term, 'to see his inflated balls.'

'His what!' cried Alun opening his eyes wide.

'Hot air balloons, perhaps?' suggested my wife.

'Yes. That's it. Hot air balloons.'

'Balls are something else.'

'Yes, of course,' nodded the Japanese women, 'Like bugger balls.'

'Bugger balls!' exclaimed Alun, halting in his evasion techniques around the bush.

'Rugger Balls, perhaps?' suggested Brigitte.

'Or rubber balls?' added my wife.

'Yes.' Nodded Mrs Yamamoto. 'Rugger balls.'

'Rugger.' Corrected Margaux.

'But I met your husbands after Mexico, you know. At the Hotel in Bucharest.'

'Oh! did you now? They must have forgotten to mention it.'

By this time Alun had moved around to the Japanese side of the bush. He then jumped the ornamental pond and stepped up to the fence. 'I got a photo of the bruise. Shall I show you?'

'Stop,' cried Mike.

'It's crystal-clear. You'll be able to see if it needs professional attention.'

'I think it will.' I contributed.

'Shut Up,' cried Mike hopping back around the bush towards us.

'Goodness.' Whispered the woman. 'Isn't the Image clear, what incredible definition.'

'Oh, sorry... Wrong photo. You'll want to see the back of him really.'

'Never mind,' she said quickly, 'does this thing zoom in?'

'Oh yes. Watch.'

But Mrs Yamamoto did not need to be told to watch. Her eyes were riveted on the small screen.'

'Give me that damn thing,' shouted Mike hobbling towards us.'

'That's the zoom button there,' pointed Alun, ignoring Mike, 'zoom away...'

Mike made a dash, or at least he started to. His left foot hit a rock at the edge of the pond.

'Margaux opened her mouth to warn him, but it was too late. His two inter-connected feet stopped where they were, while the rest of him carried on. The top of his body then described a graceful arc ending in a huge splash.

This was followed by an impressive thrashing about and spluttering.

We all turned to watch the performance except Mrs Yamamoto, who had a firm grip of Alun's phone.

'Yes, that is very nice,' she said, 'I had better come round and look at that bruise too, I think.'

Mike rolled over and sat up, wiping pondweed from his face. 'Oh, God! My head.'

'Why did you do that, Mike?' said my wife as he pushed himself, warily onto his knees.

As usual, Alun was already doubled up with laughter and was by now rolling on the grass, unable to speak.

Mrs Yamamoto, by now had mastered the zoom tool, 'Yes the image quality is excellent,' she smiled.

'Oh God!' wailed Mike, carefully getting to his feet.

The dripping man bent to pull up his pants and trousers, bringing a further yelp of laughter from Alun who by then could hardly breathe.

'I see you opted for the pondweed poultice after all,' I laughed as his slime-covered bottom was projected towards us. 'That'll do it a power of good.'

Oh. Shut up you lot,' he sneered and slopped into the sitting room.

'Go and take a shower, Mike,' called Margaux.

'And leave you cloths in the bath,' added my wife. 'I'll burn them.'

Mrs Yamamoto handed the phone back over to Margaux, 'He is very clumsy, your friend. Very peculiar too,' she volunteered.

'Yes. We noticed that, too,' nodded Margaux.

'Some very wealthy men are like that.' added the woman.

'Wealthy?' Margaux frowned.

'Rich,' said the woman.

'Oh!... Rich.'

'Yes. Didn't you know? He has an Aston Martin and a big house full of valuable paintings.'

Alun and I were sidling away towards the open door.

'Where are you two going?'

'Just going to see if Mike's OK.'

'I'll go in a moment.' She frowned at us, 'What's all this about Mike's wealth?'

'Sorry?' Alun pretended to be brushing grass from his knees.'

'Don't you remember?' asked the woman, 'You told me all about him and his eccentric behaviour. You remember. When he jumped over the balcony into my room in Bucharest.'

'When he did What!' cried my wife.

'Surely, we mentioned that?' frowned Alun...

'Yes.' I added, 'I distinctly remember telling you in our debriefing session.'

'You did not.' my wife shook her head, 'You also neglected the bit about his being rich.'

'Wealthy,' I corrected.

'Be quiet.'

'Perhaps that term in the damp prison cell drove it from their memories,' suggested my wife.

'Which term was that? The first or the second?' asked Margaux.

'The first, I believe.'

'Prison!' cried the Japanese woman.

'They often lodge in foreign prisons,' said my wife.

'They seem to be irresistibly drawn to them for some reason.'

'Really.'

My wife nodded, and the woman pulled a face. This face seemed to say, "How odd", or at least the Japanese equivalent of this.

'Mike!' called Margaux.

The bathroom window opened, and a soap-covered wet head appeared, 'yes?'

'Are you by any chance a very wealthy man?'

Mike took in my wide eyes and eager nodding head, the frowns of the Girls and the expectant upturned face of the Japanese Women.

'Ah! Well...' he hesitated.

'Yes?'

'Well, not so badly off, as a matter of fact.'

'Not so badly off!' echoed Margaux.

'Well, no. As a matter of fact.'

'Wealthy men are often embarrassed about talking about their money to less well-off people,' said Mrs Yamamoto. 'My husband is like that too.'

'Is he?' frowned Margaux. 'Not so badly off then, Mike?' called my wife.

'No...'

'And you've got an Aston Martin too?' she smiled. 'I didn't know that either.'

Alun made an expressive gesture with his hand behind the Girls.

'You have got a nice A.M., haven't you, Mike.' Then turning to the girls, he added, 'we connoisseurs call them A.M's for short.'

'Do you now?' nodded Margaux.

'Yep.'

'So, you have a nice A.M., do you, Mike?'

Mike frowned then the penny dropped, 'Oh Yes. Lovely A.M. Racing Green, in fact. Don't take her out often, though. Too valuable. Too expensive to repair too.'

Luckily, he spotted that we had called his Austin Mini that. We sighed.

'But as you're very wealthy. Well, that shouldn't really matter, should it?'

'Waste not, want not,' smiled Mike edging away from the window.

'Wise words Mike,' said my wife. 'I suppose all tycoons are careful like that's.'

'I suppose we are. That's how we get wealthy.'

'And your house is choc-full of valuable paintings, is it?' smiled my wife.

'Well... Some of the better ones might well be quite valuable. Depends on the purchaser really.'

'Really?'

'Yes. Sorry, I'm getting cold.'

Margaux nodded up at him, 'perhaps it would be wise after all, to ask Mrs Yamamoto to pop up and have a good look at you. What do you think, Mike?'

'I agree,' nodded the woman. 'A very wise precaution.'

'Yes,' said Margaux, 'Her being an experienced nurse.'

'Ah!' said Mike.

'Yes?'

'No. I honestly think I'll be all right.'

'And you'll explain everything about your collection of valuables, will you?'

'Ah!'

'Yes?'

'Well. Oh, all right,' and with this, Mike shut the window and turned on the shower.

My wife turned to us with a wry smile, 'Why don't you go and prepare Mike a drink while we chat about old times with Mrs Yamamoto.'

'Will do,' smiled Alun, pleased to make such an unexpectedly easy escape.

'You must all be tired after all the exertion.'

This sounded ominous, and I hesitated, shooting her a questioning look.

'That's a pity really,' she continued. 'But still...'

'Oh?'

'Yes, but first a nice midday meal and a drink.'

'And then?' I asked, knowing that something unpleasant was about to be announced.

'And then. When fully recovered, you'll be able to get up on the roof and put the satellite dish back. No doubt, the little fellow enjoyed the balloon trip with

Mike, but will now be impatient to get back to work again.'

'Hey!' cried Mike, flinging open the window again 'I heard that. I didn't take it. It took me.'

'Same thing,' said Margaux. 'But, on reflection, I suppose it's far too difficult to set up for you. We'd best get a pro in.'

'Yes,' said my wife, 'because tonight they'll be showing the European Judo championship finals.'

'So?' I asked.

'That's my favourite sport,' said my sister in Law through the open kitchen window.

'Oh!'

'So?' said Margaux, if it's too tricky for three grown men to do, we'll have to pay a pro to do it.'

This was one of Margaux's favourite tricks, so Alun and I tried to catch Mike's eye and warn him off before he got himself hooked.

'Something wrong?' said my wife, noting our arm-waving antics.

'Oh No. I was just thinking that you are entirely right. Setting up a satellite dish, without the right equipment is nigh on impossible.'

'Is it?' cried Margaux, 'even for a brilliant boffin like you Mike?'

Mike, as usual, took the hook, 'Pffff, of course I can do it. Easy.'

'Oh, god!' I sighed.

'Sorry?' asked my wife, smiling.

'Nothing.'

'Will steak and chips be OK for you?' called the sister-in-law.

We brightened, 'with a nice drop of that Burgundy?' asked Alun.

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'All right, but not much. We don't want you three falling off the roof.'

'Are you sure we don't?' murmured my wife.

'A moot point,' agreed Margaux with a laugh.

It was about half-past two when we finished our coffee and set about dealing with the satellite dish.

The girls were headed for the shops to buy food for the evening meal.

'A TV dinner for once,' they had said.

'We'll need some beer then,' said Alun.

'Tonight, is a white wine night.'

'Not just a can or two,' pleaded Alun.

'No.'

We sighed because the Girls favoured rather sweet white wine. Not only that, but as they drank sparingly, they invariably bought far too little for us to be able to appreciate it to its fullest.

'When we've got the food, we're going to do some window-shopping at Grenoble,' announced Margaux.

Alun smothered a laugh and his better half swung around, 'yes?'

'You won't need to take your bank card, then will you?' he smiled.

'Come on, funny man. Let's have it. I presume you are going to try and be comical.'

'Well. Strictly speaking, one does window shopping from outside the shop. You then come home full of great ideas and plans. I suspect though that you are going to do your window shopping from the inner side of the window rather than the outer one.'

'And save time by bringing the ideas directly home with you,' I added, having been through this as many times as Alun.

'I have to admit, it does save time.'

'Shut up you two, or we'll window shop for the wine from the outside of the wine shop.'

'That's unfair,' scowled Alun.

'Definitely, below the belt,' I added.

'We'll be back at about half-past six, and we'll expect to see the TV working. If not...'

At this, the three women swung out of the house and left us to meditate.

'Oh well,' groaned Alun. 'let's get on with the job then.'

'Oh, come on, Alun!' said Mike, 'this is going to be fun.'

I shot Alun a look full of pity and, blowing out our cheeks, we followed him up the stairs, dragging the rusty dish.

Well, naturally enough, the satellite dish wouldn't go through the roof window, so we had to let a rope down over the guttering and haul it up.

Mike got up on the roof and sat astride the ridge.

Down in the garden, we knotted the rope around the fixing bracket, and Alun tugged at the rope to let him know he could start hoisting.

There was a cry, and a scrambling slithering noise. Then Mike's legs suddenly came into view.

'Hell!' cried Alun. 'What on earth are you doing, Mike? Quick!'

By this time Mike was hanging dangerously over the plastic guttering.

I shot up the stairs and through the skylight. Grabbing the rope that Mike had wound around the chimney and to which he was clutching desperately, I called, 'Hold on Mike. We'll pull you up.'

Alun slithered down beside me, and we put our joint weights against the rope.

Luckily for us, Mike had wrapped the rope around his wrist, and as we pulled, he gradually slipped up the tiled roof on his bared stomach.

We pulled again, and he slid a few tens of centimetres further up and he got his knee over the plastic guttering. He managed to get his right foot in the guttering gave a strong upward push.

This propelled him up further, and out of immediate danger, but was accompanied by an ominous cracking. As Mike slid up the tiled surface, the guttering went the opposite way. A twelve-foot-long section went flying down into the garden, landing directly on the flower bed below.

'Oh, Hell!' cried Alun.

We gazed down at the damage and exchanged looks. 'I'll go down and try and sort it out.' I sighed. 'You two start to get the dish up. Send me down the rope as soon as it's free so we can haul the gutter back into place.'

I slipped quickly back through the roof window, down the stairs and out into the garden.

The Irises were all knocked flat, and although I did my best, they refused to stand up again. With a resigned sigh, I cut them all and stuck them in a big vase I had noticed in the garage. I'd tell the Girls we thought it would be a good idea to decorate the dinner table. My wife would smell a fish, of course, but nothing could be proved.

Most of the other flowers responded more favourably to gentle stretching. I finished the task with the help of a few hidden sticks and a length or two of kitchen string. In a day or two, they would all wilt, of course, but by then we would have had time to work out an intelligent explanation. Catfights seemed a good answer at the time.

By the time I climbed back onto the roof, Mike and Alun had bolted up the dish and had pulled the gutter back into place.

It would leak when it rained, but we would be long gone by then, so the risk of any direct retribution was low.

Mike had hunted out some aerial cable connectors from a drawer in the garage and had repaired the cable.

'All we need to do now is to point the dish at the satellite and Bob's-your-uncle.'

Alun scanned the horizon, 'and where exactly is this satellite of yours, Mike? The one we have to point at. I can't see it.'

Mike shook his head and sighed, 'Of course you can't see it. It's only a few meters in diameter and at about thirty-five-thousand meters altitude.'

'That's interesting. But you know where it is, though?'

'Of course I do,' here he hesitated. 'Well from home in the UK I know where to aim. Just above the village church steeple in fact.'

I nodded, 'so, in fact, you don't know where it is.'

'Well... Not exactly.'

'So... Pointing at it presents us with a good number of options then,' I said.

'How long have we got?' asked Alun. 'Before the Judo Finals, I mean.'

'About six hours.'

'So... That's six hours divided by three hundred and sixty degrees horizontally and a hundred and eighty vertically.' He frowned, 'how long does that give us per trial?'

'About four seconds per test,' I said.

'And how long does it take for the system to synchronise and show the picture on the screen?'

Mike thought about this and hummed and hah'd and rubbed his chin a bit, 'about six to ten seconds, I should think. Roughly, of course.'

'And at what time does the homeward flight from Lyon leave?' asked Alun. 'Roughly, of course.'

'In about four hours,' I said. 'We'll have time for a few beers in the lounge too.'

'Let's get going then. See you Mike...' we smiled.

'Don't be stupid. You two always give in so easily.' sighed Mike. 'To start with, we know the little devil is a little south of south-south-east, and then a bit above the horizon.' He shook his head. 'Just above the mountains, I expect.'

'Have you got your bank card for the tickets Alun?'

'Yes.'

'I honestly don't know how you two ever got anywhere in your careers,' sighed Mike.

'By taking the right decisions at the right time,' retorted Alun.

'You two make me sick.'

'Worry does that to me.' I said.

'Me too,' agreed Alun.

Mike sighed, 'so?'

'Well... There remains another option,' I said. 'Although it might be considered revolutionary and a little risky. Anyway, it might still be worthy of a technical expert's opinion.'

'Come on, brainy,' said Mike. 'Let's have it.'

'Well, we could always try pointing our dish in the same direction as the neighbour's.'

'Well done Holmes,' laughed Alun.

'Don't be ridiculous!' sighed Mike. 'The neighbour's house is not at all in the right direction.'

Alun and I exchanged looks.

'I'll explain, shall I?' said Alun.

Then the penny dropped, 'OH! Yes, of course...' cried Mike. 'Silly me...'

'Exactly...'

'Come on,' called Alun. 'I'll go down and put the telly on, and I'll give you a shout as soon as the picture comes on.'

Well after half an hour of adjusting and shouting, and shouting then adjusting, we discovered something interesting. Each time the image appeared, Alun watched the pictures a bit more then strolled leisurely out to call up. However, by that time, we had already shifted the direction again.

About halfway through this initial phase, he came out with something odd decorating his upper lip.

'What's that on your lip, Alun. You not drinking the last cans of beer, are you?'

Alun's hand shot to his mouth. 'No.'

'So what's that white foam on your lip, then?'

'Toothpaste,' he replied.

'Toothpaste!' shouted Mike, 'If you drink all the beer, I'll burn your...' here he came up against the

obstacle of not knowing what to say next. 'don't do it, you...'

'Toothpaste,' repeated Alun.

'My eye,' said Mike.

After a little more trial and error, with error taking a strong lead, I went down. I stood in the middle of the garden while Alun watched and shouted to me then I called up to Mike.

This method did not work much better either, so after an hour of cursing and sweating, we decide that we were in trouble.

'What time did you say the flight leaves?' asked Alun.

'Wait a minute,' Mike shouted down, there's an old portable TV in our bedroom.'

'So?' I shouted back.

'Well, go and bring it up here. On the roof. That'll avoid shouting.'

I glanced at Alun, and we pulled faces.

Anyway, we lifted the small old white Grundig up onto the roof, and Alun sat with it on his knees while Mike messed about with the dish again.

'The other dishes seem to be pointing just above that jagged peak over there. Let's try that, shall we.'

'What time did you say the flight left?' whispered Alun.

'We've still got an hour,' I reassured him, and he nodded back.

Mike sighed again, 'no guts. No guts at all.'

'We prefer keeping our guts inside our bodies,' retorted Alun. 'So, get on with it.'

Mike made a puffing noise and gazed skywards.

'Have you any idea why the old sis-in-L is so enthusiastic about watching the European Judo championship finals, Mike?' I asked.

'Probably because she forced her kids to do Judo when they were far too small to say no,' he replied.

'Well, that may be true,' I agreed. 'But there is another reason.'

'Is there? That's great then.'

'Yes. She likes to keep up with things,' I said. 'Having been a member of the French national team for five years, which is quite understandable, I think.'

'What?'

'Interesting, eh? Not only that, but she has a fourth Dan, and is still coach to the regional champions.'

'Ah!'

'Yes. So, she would not appreciate missing the program, as you can readily understand.'

Alun nodded agreement, 'It's also just possible that she might forget herself. In a bout of anger, I mean. I wouldn't be surprised that, were that to happen, that she would direct that fourth Dan anger at a specific person. The one who had failed to complete the perfectly simple job of supplying her with what she desired.'

'Especially if that person had declared that he could do the job with his fingers up his nose,' I nodded.

'I never said that!' cried Mike.

'Well, you certainly gave that impression,' frowned Alun. 'What would you say?' he added, turning to me.

'Absolutely. But perhaps "with-one-hand-behind-my-back", was the impression you got,'

'You may be right there.'

'Oh, shut up, you two.'

'Will do.'

'Anyway, it's your damn wife's fault Alun. She tricked me.'

'Yes. She is pretty good at that sort of thing, I agree. But the Sis-in-L is not interested in all that. She just wants her TV operational... tonight.'

Mike screwed up his nose and frowned. 'Better get on with the job then.'

'Good idea,' said Alun with a wry smile in my direction.

So, we messed about like this for another half hour, gradually homing-in on our target and then homing-out again.

Then suddenly, a voice called from below, 'Hello. What are you three doing up there?' It was Mrs Yamamoto.

'Oh! Hello Mrs Yamamoto. Were watching the television,' called back Alun.

'Oh!'

'Have a nice afternoon,' called Mike, and we all waved and smiled.

This naturally put the woman out, and she was obviously at a loss as to what to say next. So, after studying us in silent astonishment for a few instants, she turned and walked away.

'God knows what she will be thinking?' said Alun.

'About Mike's whatsit probably,' I said.

'Shut up, you two,' Sighed Mike.

Then suddenly and entirely unexpectedly, the picture jumped up on the TV screen, 'Freeze!' cried Alun. 'For god's sake, don't move a muscle.'

'Quick. Get the pencil and mark the mast. Quick,' shouted Mike. 'I can't hold this damn thing stable all afternoon, you know.'

'The pencil? Which pencil would that be?' I asked.

'Oh, god! Do I have to think of everything? For god's sake, go down and get a pencil. Quick.'

I scrambled across the roof and through the skylight, then back again with the required object.

'OK. Now put a line each side of the bracket here, and one on this inclination indicator, just there.'

This done, he gradually tightened the retaining bolts, and we let out a mutual sigh as we laid back against the sun-warmed tiled surface.

The "simple and easy task" had taken us two and a half hours, perched up on the roof in the sun.

Then suddenly a man's head appeared through the skylight of the neighbouring house, which was semi-detached to ours.

'Hi. Having fun lads?'

We smiled at the man, 'Just finished,' called back Mike.

'Well done. Doing it without proper tools is a brilliant job. You deserve a drink.'

'A man after my own heart,' called back Alun.

'Would a drop of iced Alsace white go down all right?'

'It would,' we echoed.

'Stay where you are then. I'll bring it up.'

We exchanged appreciative looks, 'A man of the world, obviously,' nodded Alun.

'Exactly,' I agreed.

A short time later, Frantz reappeared and handed up a basket holding all the necessary equipment.

So, there we sat, two against the chimney and two astride the roof ridge sipping our iced wine the TV screen flickering happily to itself.

The view of the jagged mountain summits ten kilometres to the south was breath-taking as they gradually pinkened in the setting sun.

Behind us, a few hang-gliders were making their way down to base camp and the distant noise from the "Fete des Montgolfiers" wafted to us on the light breeze.

Frantz filled our glasses in a proper neighbourly manner, which means, to overflowing, 'cheers lads,' he smiled. 'Best to avoid annoying a Black Belt, whenever possible,' he smiled.

'Exactly.'

'I expect you'll be going up to watch the hang-gliders taking off from the plateau tomorrow.'

'We were debating on it,' I admitted.

'Well if you, there's an interesting walk back down you can take. You'll need someone to drive you up though.'

'Really?'

'It comes down across the cliff face and through the forest. Along the old postman's track, in fact. In the old days, the poor man had to walk all the way up to the village every day.'

'That's about a two thousand five hundred foot climb every morning. Must have kept him in good shape.' I said.

'Yep. Until the day, one mid-winter, he slipped in the deep snow on the way back down. It took all week to find the body.'

'I bet he wasn't in such good shape after that,' said Alun.

'Exactly. Also, the man's body was frozen solid in exactly the shape the fall had left it in. They had to snap a leg and an arm to make him manageable.'

'That must have been a pleasant job.' Frowned, Mike.

Frantz laughed, 'I don't expect there'll be that much snow tomorrow though. You could slip along and have a look at the waterfall, on the way down too.'

'Ah?' I said.

'There's a ledge halfway down the cliff where the waterfall has hollowed out a deep pool in the rock. The place is called the Hermits bathtub because that's what it was at one time.'

'Really?' Said Mike sipping his wine and staring at the cliff.

'Yes. In the mid, eighteen-hundreds, a hermit lived in a cave on the ledge. You can still see the place. Nice deep overhang and well protected from the wind. Look.'

We followed his outstretched arm and could just make out a dark patch against the grey rock wall.

'There's a tricky bit halfway along where you have to skirt around an old tree, but otherwise, it's easy. Unless your scared of heights that is.'

At this moment, a voice called from below. Hearing it, Frantz dived below the level of the ridge and flattened himself against the roof, 'My Wife! I'm not here.'

We nodded.

'Have any of you seen Frantz?'

Alun smiled down, 'Oh, yes. We just spotted him going around the side of the house over there. He was looking for you. If you hurry, you'll just catch him.'

'Thanks', she called and hurried off.

'Quick, Frantz,' I said. 'Go the other way around, and you'll meet halfway. We'll hide the glasses in the back garden, and you can collect them later.'

'Thanks. See you,' and with this, the man crawled across the roof and disappeared through his skylight.

'Time we were getting down ourselves,' said Alun.

But as we started to load the glasses into the basket, the bottle slipped from Mike's hand and shot down the tiled roof.

Once it had gathered plenty of momentum, it collided with the TV, which in turn began to slip.

'Oh hell,' cried Alun, dropping the basket but recovering it just in time.

I scrambled and slithered towards the TV as it began to slide. Luckily, I just had time to catch the end of the power cord and stop it going any further.

'That was a close one,' whistled Mike. 'hold on, and I'll come down and grab it.'

However, at the same instant, the mains cord freed itself from the socket. With a squeak, cable and TV parted company, and the TV shot off down the roof.

It hit the guttering we had replaced, and together with it, off they went together down towards the garden.

As we watched in horror, the TV made a B-line for the pond where it ended with a splash.

'Oh, hell!' shouted Alun. 'Quick, get it out before the whole thing fills with water.'

'Why can't you be careful for once, Mike. Now What?'

'Come on,' I said, 'let's see what can be salvaged.'

'Stay up here, Alun,' said Mike and haul the guttering back into place. We'll deal with the TV.'

We waded into the pond and extracted the dripping TV. As we lifted it, brown water cascaded from hundreds of little ventilation holes.

'No hope,' sighed Mike, 'The thing's full of muddy water. That'll dry, but the mud will stop the thing working.'

'So?' I asked.

'I suppose we'll have to take it to pieces and wash the whole circuit board. Then dry it.'

'And we'll get all that done in the next half hour, just in time for the Girls return.' I said.

'Oh no. It'll take hours.'

I turned to Alun who had just returned for putting the guttering back, 'It's time we were heading for the airport. Mike is going to stay and explain.'

'Are you two mad!' exclaimed Mike. 'Do you realise what will happen?'

'That's why we're going,' sighed Alun.

'Look,' said Mike. 'All we have to do is to dry it a bit then make certain no one plugs the thing in.'

'It'll go up in flames if they do, will it?'

'Probably. Not instantly, of course, but after a while, yes.'

'And how, pray, do tell us, are you going to dry it.' I asked.

'With a hairdryer of course.'

Alun and I exchanged glances.

'And that'll be enough?'

'Oh no. I doubt if it will ever work again.'

'Your "Sis-in-L" doesn't watch judo in bed with this TV, does she?' asked Alun.

'Possibly when she has no guests,' I said.

'Then she might go up in flame with the TV.'

Mike nodded, 'that's possible too.'

'So?'

'I'll cut the plug off.'

'And what if she just changes the cable?'

'Ah!'

'Yes. Any other ideas?'

'I could smash the screen.'

I sighed, 'Yes that would work but mightn't she just spot that. Before we leave, I mean...'

'Yes. Not such a great idea, Mike,' said Alun.

'I know. I'll use the old pin-trick.'

'The old pin-trick?'

'Yes. You know.'

'No, I don't.'

'Don't you two have any technical education at all?'

'Clearly, we lack certain old-school techniques,' I agreed.

'Well, it's easy,' smiled Mike. 'You take a pin...'

'Which is why it is called the "old-pin-trick", I suppose,' suggested Alun.

'Do it rely on the pins being old?' I asked.

'Shut up. Well, you take your pin. Old or new, and stick it through the cable to short-circuit the mains. Then you snip off the two ends of the pin so that it's invisible.'

'Ah! I see,' I smiled 'Then if she plugs it in, it'll blow a fuse or trip the circuit breakers.'

'Exactly.' Said Mike. 'Clever, eh?'

We nodded approval, 'and nobody would ever suspect that the trouble could be with the cable.'

'Exactly,' smiled Mike. 'An old pro's trick.'

'An old con-man's trick really,' Nodded Alun.

'That's another way of looking at it,' I said.

'And if she's really very fond of it, she'll take it to a local repairman,' said Mike.

'And being an old pro too, he'll spot the pin, and we'll get blamed.'

'No,' Mike, who knew precisely how the trained technical mind functions, shook his head. 'He won't try to spot it. He'll keep it on the shelf for a few days without looking at it. Then he'll announce that the thing is irreparable and sell her a new one.'

'A real pro.' I said.

'That's how repairmen make a living nowadays,' smiled Mike. 'Things last far too long as it is, without trying to repair them so that they last even longer.'

'So, in fact, we'll be upholding local industry. I feel better about this already,' I laughed.

'Me too,' agreed Alun. 'Get on with it then Mike. While you're applying the old pin-job, I'll go and get the hairdryer.'

True to their word, that Girls returned on schedule, laden with bags, overflowing with window-shopping.

'Show us the results of your afternoons work,' frowned my wife, 'then we'll show you the result of ours.'

The "Sis-in-L" checked the TV and specifically the channel which was to show the evening's Judo event.

'Well done lads,' she said and handed us a heavy carrier bag. 'For you.'

The bag held several good bottles of wine and enough beer for a week.

'Thanks,' I said. Are we allowed an early aperitif?

'It was absolute hell up there on the burning tiles,' added Alun. 'So much so that at one stage Mike almost fainted because of the heat.'

'I suppose you had to revive him with beer, which is why there are a glass and an empty beer can, hidden behind the TV.'

'Come here, Alun,' cried Mike. 'I knew that's what you were up to down here alone. Toothpaste indeed!'

'Toothpaste!' frowned my wife.

'A technical term,' I said. 'It's a sort of gunge specialists put on satellite dish cable joints. Mike always has a tube on him when he travels.'

'Stop talking rot,' sneered Mike. 'I don't know why I put up with you idiots.'

'Neither do I,' smiled my wife.

Alun skipped behind the sofa, carrying the carrier bag. 'That can of beer looked so lonely, all alone in the fridge,' he smiled, 'I took pity on it.'

'You're going to look lonely too, once I've locked you outside.'

'With the beer and wine?' he laughed. 'I'll survive. Here,' and he handed Mike a big bottle of beer.'

Mike grumbled and headed for the glass's cupboard, 'Next time I'll be more careful of your helpful suggestions.'

'You've been saying that for more than forty years mike,' laughed Margaux. 'I'd give up the struggle if I were you.'

Mike sighed and poured himself a glass of beer.

'Hey! Aren't you forgetting the "weary travellers three"?' called the "Sis-in-L". 'That means us.'

The Girls prepared a lovely meal, and no one made a remark about the bouquet of irises, I had placed on the table.

Once the time was right, the TV was powered up, and we sat and watched men and women throwing each other on a pale green floor, for about an hour.

The “Sis-in-L” explained everything in great detail, and I have to admit that by halfway through we started to understand what was happening.

‘I wouldn’t want to meet that blond girl down a dark alleyway at night,’ remarked Alun.

My wife turned to him, ‘Yes you would,’ and burst into laughter.

‘He’d have to practice his “Wasa-matter”, and “Ipomea” throws before though,’ chuckled Margaux.

‘It’s “Waza-Ari” and “Ipon” if you please sneered Alun.

‘Well done,’ said the “Sis-in-L”. ‘You’re learning.’ Then turning to Mike, she said, ‘while we’re waiting for the second part of the program, I’ll get the dessert. Put the flowers on the shelf above the TV Mike, and then go and bring in a bottle of champagne from the garage.’

Now, that’s not something one has to say twice to Mike. He was on his feet in a fraction of a second. Before we had time to draw a breath, the flowers were moved, and he had disappeared through the back door.

Unfortunately, however, the flowers seemed to want to remain with him. As the back door closed, the unstable vase slowly started to topple over.

‘Oh hell!’ cried Alun jumping up and making a dash for the vase. Incredibly, by stretching his long arms, he reached it just in time. However, the laws of mechanics being what they are, the rules of physics must be obeyed. An unstable state requires a stabilising force or else it stays unstable. In this case, no stabilising force was forthcoming. Furthermore, we

were able to prove conclusively that brain waves do not transmit physical forces across free space.

Alun lurched forward holding the vase high above him. He collided with the TV, which went over backwards, followed by Alun then the vase and finally the contents, including the water.

The latter cascaded over Mike and from there, onto the exposed back of the TV.

This was followed by a brief high-pitched whistling noise, then a crackling and the whole place went Black.

At the same time, from somewhere behind us, Mike called, 'got it... Oh hell!' and this was followed by a crashing and bursting-bottle like noise. 'Christ! My bum!'

A light sprung up as the "Sis-in-L" found her phone. In this stark light, I saw a pile of rubble in the corner, which must have been the Alun-TV-flower assembly. Closer to us, it showed the two girls leaning back in the sofa red-faced with laughter.

'I'll go and put the circuit breaker back on,' I said, jumping to my feet. 'Are you going to stay there, Alun?'

There was a growling noise from the corner, 'Oh, you're coming out then. Good,' laughed Margaux.

I stepped over Mike, who was sitting on the kitchen floor in a puddle of foaming champagne. 'I'd get another bottle if I were you. That one looks as though someone has already opened it.'

He made to grab my leg, but I was through the door before he could even make a snide remark.

In the dark, I felt my way along the rough breeze-block wall in the garage. After some searching, my hand found what must be the panel-board.

A bit more feeling, brought my fingers to what must be the main circuit breaker. I gave this a firm push, and the place sprung into light again.

That's better, called Mike. Christ, what a mess.'

Then suddenly there was the same high-pitched whistling again, a crack and the place went black once more.

In the kitchen, there was a new crashing noise followed by a wail, 'Oh hell. Straight on my bum again!'

Mike had stepped on the champagne bottle and had managed to fall directly on it for the second time running. I believe that the record holds, to this very day.

I shouted through the open door, 'Unplug the TV Alun. The water must have short-circuited the damn thing.'

'You well nigh short-circuited me too, switching the juice back on like that without warning.'

There was a crash followed by a peal of laughter from the Girls.

'Unplugged it OK, then?' I called.

Alun's reply will not be recorded here. Suffice to say that it carried with it the proof of many years of experience of swearing, in numerous languages.

I felt my way back to the circuit breakers, 'Can I switch on now?'

'Go ahead,' called the "Sis-in-L".

The place sprung into light, and as I returned to survey the damage, there was a sharp knock at the front door.

'Can you go?'

'OK,'

Outside stood Franz, 'Everything OK? We heard a big crash.' He stepped inside, 'Great Gods! What happened?'

Margaux stood, 'Hello Frantz. Alun didn't like the TV presenter, so he threw the vase of flowers at the TV.'

Frantz nodded and pulled a face. 'The box looks well and truly dead.' Then he glanced at the "Sis-in-L", 'you can come and watch the end of the Judo with us if you like.'

'Thanks, Frantz,' she smiled. 'Don't worry, I've got a spare TV in the bedroom.'

The three of us froze, and Frantz shot us a worried look.

'Well...' started Alun.

'As a matter of fact,' took up Mike, 'it had a sort of accident.'

'A sort accident?' frowned my wife. 'What sort of accident?'

'Well, you see, it sort of fell off the roof, in fact.'

'It "sort of" fell off the roof!' mouthed the "Sis-in-L".
'My TV?'

'And into the pond actually,' he ended.

Margaux looked more astonished than I have seen her look for a long time, 'Oh! Well, that's interesting.' She nodded, 'But let me make certain I've got this right. So the TV fell off the roof and into the pond, did it?'

'That's right,' Mike brightened.

My wife rubbed her sister warmly on the shoulder, 'Well that's got that cleared up then. These things do happen, I suppose,' She then turned to me. 'I know it's going to show up just how ignorant women are about technical matters, but could you clarify something.'

I nodded.

'Would it be too much to ask what your three idiots were doing with the TV on the roof?'

'Watching TV,' said Frantz, 'I was with them.'

The three women exchanged glances.

Before things could get worse, Frantz glanced at his watch, 'come on ladies. The second half starts in thirty seconds.'

"Sis-in-L" was up and across the room in a flash, 'Bring the bottles of champagne Margaux, they can have beer.'

'Once they've cleared up their mess,' sneered my wife.

As the Girls followed her, carrying the last two bottles, my wife turned back.

'You'll explain later, no doubt?'

We smiled a few lame smiles and nodded.

As the door closed, Alun turned to me, 'When does the next flight leave?'

'We've just got time to catch it,' I said.

'Mike will clear up and explain,' nodded Alun, heading for the front door.