

Building the Patio

While we were trekking and storming castles, the Girls did a bit of Brainstorming.

Unfortunately for us, their sessions were highly fruitful.

Thereafter, they were the proud possessors of a list of innovative ways of keeping us out of trouble. Or so they thought.

These included plans for filling any excessive amounts of free time we might have and fending off bouts of boredom.

Margaux wasted no time in opening hostilities on our return.

'Do you remember our holidays in Croatia last year?'

Alun shot me a look, "Watch your step. Trouble looms on the horizon", it said.

'No,' he muttered, 'I don't.'

'Croatia?' I pretended to search my memory. 'Oh Yes...' I replied guardedly, 'last year, wasn't it?'

'Well done. Exactly. Last year. And you might just remember how pleasant it was on that covered veranda?'

'Covered veranda?' I frowned. 'I can't say that it struck me particularly.'

'Me neither,' lied Alun, taking a prudent defensive line.

'Pergola,' said Mike 'That's probably what she means.'

'Thank you, Mike.'

'My pleasure,' he smiled. The fool...

'But you certainly remember sitting together, protected from that hot sun, sipping our chilled white wine together,' smiled Margaux.

I pulled a face, but Alun picked up the narrative.

'Well, at least we don't have to worry about getting out of the hot sun here,' he said. 'There is none.'

'And...' continued Margaux, 'you must also remember, that even when it did rain, we could partake of those eminently relaxing moments all the same.'

All this harping on about chilled aperitifs and relaxing moments was a low trick. It was, in our opinions, under the belt, and possibly even lower than that. Furthermore, I considered it unethical to attempt to influence a man in such an underhand manner.

My wife shoved her oar in, 'But perhaps they've gone off aperitifs.'

'Or,' added Margaux. 'They may have taken a vow of abstinence. Brought on no doubt by the shock of their recent encounter with the long arm of the law.'

'Trespassing!' breathed my wife.

'Shameful,' added Margaux.

'Under the circumstances,' sighed my wife. 'I suppose I'll have to decline your generous invitation, Margaux.'

'I understand,' replied the latter sadly. 'Never mind.'

'I fear that my poor husband is pining for home. Like many men of advanced age, he must feel the call of the comfort of his own warm armchair.'

'And his woollen slippers,' nodded Margaux. 'It's so sad. But what's to be done, my dear?'

'Invitation!?' I said, brightening.

'I'm sorry, Margaux,' she continued. 'I suppose we'll have to scrap the idea of staying on for those extra few weeks.'

'What's this?' cried Alun.

'I'm not pining for anything,' I cried.

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Mike had been wandering about the room and was messing about with some small object on a low table. He looked up.

'Put that down at once, Mike,' called Margaux. 'Gently. That's right. Now don't touch anything else, please.'

Mike sighed, 'I suppose you two have concocted some unpleasant tasks you're now preparing to land us with.'

'Ah!' smiled Margaux. 'At least one of the three Musketeers has grasped the idea.'

'We all did,' cried Alun, 'and a pretty sneaky, low-down way to be going about it.'

'Things are simply not done that way,' I nodded.

'So, what is it?' asked Mike.

'We thought,' smiled my wife, 'that a few extra weeks together would be good for your psychological well-being.'

'I don't like the sound of this at all,' frowned Alun.

'But you will,' smiled my wife. 'Once we have fully explained.'

'I don't like the sound of that either,' re-frowned Alun.

'Especially considering all that preparatory rubbish about aperitifs,' I added.

'As I said,' repeated my wife, 'we have your mental well-being in mind.'

'If you could avoid mentioning mental well-being, I'd be grateful,' said Mike. 'It brings back unpleasant memories.'

'Would those be recent memories, Mike?' asked Margaux.

'Fairly recent,' replied Mike, realising he had made a faux pas.

'Oh well. You'll no doubt explain about that another day.'

Mike grunted a non-committal grunt.

Alun and I exchanged smiles. We still remembered the astonished look on the noble aunt's face when confronted by two mad gardeners.

'Well,' said Margaux. 'You'll agree that hanging around the house for weeks on end is bad for you.'

'That depends,' said Alun guardedly.

'You end up getting bored, and then you find some way of getting into trouble,' said my wife.

Mike let out a snort of laughter. 'They don't need to get bored to get into trouble. I can assure you of that.'

Ignoring this interruption, my wife continued, 'we decided that what you need is a nice project.'

'No, we don't,' I cried.

'What I mean is that, if you want to stay on here, there are certain conditions...'

'This is downright bribery,' cried Alun.

'You grasp the situation nicely,' smiled Margaux.

'I'm astounded,' I added, 'at how low you two can stoop.'

'I'm not,' sighed Alun. 'Not at all.'

Mike had wandered over towards the shelf and was reaching up. 'Don't touch that either, Mike,' called Margaux, 'It's fragile.'

Mike retracted his arm and started wandering again.

'Come and sit down here, Mike,' commanded Margaux. 'And don't pick at the threads of the chair cover.'

Mike did as he was told and continued gazing around the room for things to touch later on.

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My wife sat forward in her armchair, 'Now. You three would enjoy a few more weeks together, wouldn't you? We appreciate just how important this is for you.'

'And,' said Margaux. 'It just happens that we have a certain task that requires the combined talents of the three of you.'

'You want us to go to the pub?' cried Alun.

'No. Something rather more useful' added my wife.

'Like keeping out of your way?' I suggested.

'Something even more useful than that,' smiled Margaux.

'You're perhaps going a bit far in affirming that, Margaux,' said my wife.

'Yes. You may be right. Anyway, this task is something that we are certain you'll enjoy because you three can do it together?'

'I feel a fever coming on,' groaned Alun.

'Me too,' I said.

'Does it include being shut up in a prison cell?' asked Mike.

Ignoring this, Margaux continued, 'we want you to build something.'

Alun glanced up, a glimmer of interest in his eyes, 'build something?'

The Girls nodded.

'Ah! What sort of something?'

'We would like you to build us a covered terrace. A terrace just like the one in Croatia.'

'A pergola.' suggested Mike again.

'Something like that.'

I sat forward and shot a look at Alun, then at Mike. 'Hum. That might be fun.'

'Yes,' smiled Alun, 'Fun.'

'Oh God,' sighed Mike, 'I don't know why, but I have a premonition of impending disaster.'

'Don't worry, Mike,' laughed my wife. 'We'll be near. We won't allow anything to go wrong.'

'You'll bail us out of prison then?' said Mike.

'You won't end up in prison. At least not this time.' Smiled my wife rubbing his shoulder tenderly.

'We want that terrace, you see,' added Margaux.

Mike shook his head sadly, 'You don't understand these things as I do.'

The Girls exchanged amused looks, 'You'd be surprised, Mike...', said Margaux.

'I'll be surprised if nothing goes wrong. Astonished, in fact,' he finished.

'Don't worry, Mike,' said Margaux. 'Just leave that coverlet alone, will you.'

'Oh! Sorry. It's my nerves,' He sighed. 'I wasn't always like this, you know.'

'No, of course not. It's only the last fifty years since you first met these two,' suggested Margaux.

Mike nodded sadly.

'Come with us,' said my wife, getting to her feet. 'We'll show your what our ideas are.'

'Admittedly,' said Margaux. 'In the past, your little trio has shown a stronger leaning towards destroying things than in building them. But there's always a first time.'

'Very amusing,' I said.

'Well,' she continued, 'the best place for the terrace would be along the fence over there,' she pointed.

We screwed up our eyes, surveyed the lay of the land, and nodded approval.

Now. All experienced men know that choosing the right place for anything is by far the most testing and

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stressful ordeal in family life. Be it a rose bush, an occasional table, a swing, or a birdbath, positioning inevitably ends in a heated argument. So, if this delicate phase of negotiation has been bypassed, all becomes plain sailing.

Margaux was watching us keenly as we sized up the allotted space. 'And, to avoid any misunderstanding as to what we would like,' she said, handing me a brochure, 'this is exactly what we would like you to build for us.'

Mike and Alun crowded around me. After a few minutes of study, we exchanged appreciative looks, 'this is going to be fun,' smiled Alun.

'Yes,' I said. 'An interesting project.'

My wife came over, slipped her arm through mine and smiled, 'I told you, you would like it.'

Mike just sighed a long, sad, resigned sigh.

'Wouldn't you prefer some sort of Folly?' asked Mike at breakfast the following morning.

'No, Mike. You have the plans...'

'I was just wondering....'

'Don't wonder, Mike. Just "Do",' laughed Margaux.

So, after breakfast, we donned our oldest clothes and tramped outside.

'The shed will have to come down,' said Margaux.

'Shed!? That's not a shed,' cried Alun. 'That's my workshop?'

'Well, you can see for yourself that it's in the way.'

'But where will I do my DIY work?'

'You can build a new one at the end of the terrace,' said Margaux.

'A better one,' added my wife.

Alun brightened, 'Yes. It was always a bit on the small side. Yes,' he nodded, 'OK.'

'She said a better one, Alun,' said Margaux. 'Not a bigger one.'

'Oh, all right. Perhaps marginally longer, though.'

'Marginally, does not mean double,' said Margaux.

'No, no. Of course not,' replied Alun, already sizing up the available space.

And so, we got to work.

First, we emptied the shed's contents.

We made three piles.

The first contained essential bits and pieces. These were irreplaceable things that could not be done without. So, naturally that pile held nearly everything from the shed.

The second pile contained things destined for the Tip and the third things which required a little thought.

This little job took all morning.

We then pulled a tarpaulin sheet over the piles in case of rain and tramped into the house for the mid-day meal.

We dug out the heavy sledgehammers at half-past one and got on with the most enjoyable job known to man, demolition.

Demolishing things has always given us inexpressible pleasure, so we did the job with gusto.

By the end of the afternoon, the garden was littered with piles of splintered wood and debris. We even discovered a forty-five-year-old copy of Playboy, which brought back boyhood memories until Margaux confiscated it.

There followed six enjoyable trips to the Tip.

These always consumed more time than expected because, as everyone knows, a Tip is a place for men

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to pause and meditate. It is a place of wonder and delight.

This over, and after a good deal of raking and sweeping, overseen by the Girls, phase-one was deemed complete. As a direct consequence, we were treated to a highly agreeable evening meal.

The following day, we were out early, full of enthusiasm. We were keen to get to grips with our ball of string and wooden pegs.

We carefully measured Alun's small sailing boat and trailer, and Mike ensured we would have the space to get it out once the building was finished.

We then towed it down to the end of the garden under the weeping willow.

A reinforced concrete foundation would be required, but we hadn't realised quite how much digging this needed. Margaux declared that the farthest corner of the garden would be the resting place for the tons of earth we extracted. Luckily for us, however, the earth was easy to dig. So, by taking turns with pickaxe, spade, and wheelbarrow, the footing was finished by midday.

Having calculated the volume of ready-mixed concrete we needed and tramped off to get a quote.

We got a bit of a shock when the manager had totted up and pushed over the slip of paper. Alun almost fell over backwards, 'How much!?' he cried.

We looked over his shoulder, drew in our breaths, and pulled faces.

'On top of the cost of concrete, you've got delivery charges plus the extra cost for the overhead boom pump,' nodded the man. 'It would have been much cheaper if you had built it in the front garden.'

'I haven't got a front garden,' grumbled Alun.

I frowned, 'Do you think Margaux will cough up for that?'

'No chance,' sighed Alun. 'Don't forget it was us who rejected their idea for wood decking.'

'You rejected it, Alun,' said Mike, 'Not us... You said concrete would cost next to nothing.'

We left the manager shaking his head sadly as he watched us go.

'You two drive back,' said Alun. 'I'll be along in a moment. I've got a friend who might lend us a cement mixer.'

'So that we can exhaust ourselves mixing a hundred tons of cement.'

'Concrete, Mike,' I said. 'Not cement.'

'A hundred tons of anything has the same effect on my back muscles,' replied Mike.

'Oh! You have muscles then?' smiled Alun.

'Shut up.'

Back home we settling down to eat, when there was a huge commotion outside, followed by scraping and rumbling noises.

We followed the Girls outside to have a look just as Alun hove into view in the back garden, dragging an outsized, dented, rusty cement mixer.

'Dan agreed to lend us his spare mixer. He says he won't be needing it,' smiled Alun, giving the flaking yellow paintwork a friendly slap.

'Any man who can lie like that has no place amongst your friends, Alun,' said my wife.

'I bet he was pleased to get the eyesore out of view for a few days. It must have been giving his road a bad name.'

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'Maybe,' said Alun, 'but it's free. So, we only have to pick up a few bags of cement, ballast and sand and bob's-your uncle...'

'A few bags!' cried Mike. 'And we have to transport them?'

'Oh, come on, Mike,' said Alun. 'Only a few minutes ago, you were boasting about your huge iron-hard muscles.'

'That's right,' I said. 'I heard you.'

'I did nothing of the sort. Have you any idea how many bags you'll need to fill that hole?'

'Tenish,' said Alun.

'So, we're building a Tenish Court then, are we?'

Very amusing,' groaned Mike. 'Closer to forty, I'd say.'

'Forty!' exclaimed Alun.

'And,' asked Margaux, 'Just how much will these few bags of cost?'

'Concrete,' I corrected, 'Not cement. Cement, in fact, is....'

'We're not interested in *What* it is,' interrupted my wife, 'but how *Much* it is.'

'Oh....' Alun pulled a face, 'Next to nothing I should expect.'

'You'd expect that, would you?' said Margaux.

Alun nodded, 'A few quid, I suppose.'

'A few quid!' exclaimed Mike.

'For the lot?' frowned Margaux.

'No, of course not. Per bag.'

'A few quid!' Margaux nodded. 'These "quids" of yours. Are, I suppose roughly the same thing as English pounds.'

'More or less,' nodded Alun.

'And,' she continued, 'what is the current official conversion rate for "a few" on the stock exchange?'

'Well. Fiveish or so.'

'Five-ish or so?'

'Thereabouts,' nodded Alun.

'Or perhaps closer to ten?' she suggested.

'Possibly. Depends really.'

'Does it?'

'Yep,' nodded Alun, wishing he hadn't started this conversion.

'So, what you really mean,' said my wife, 'is that you have no idea at all.'

'Well. Maybe a hundred.'

'A hundred what? Bags, Quid, euros, pounds kilos?'

'Pounds.'

'So at least we have one thing clear now,' smiled Margaux. 'For each "few" one pays one hundred pounds. That's right, is it?'

'No.' sighed Alun, 'A hundred pounds or so, for the lot.'

'For the lot,' nodded Margaux. 'And does "the lot" mean all the concrete you'll need for the job?'

'Yep. Thereabouts.'

'I'd quadruple that if I were you, Margaux,' said my wife.

Margaux shook her head sadly, sighed and looked over at my wife. 'Well. Directly after you three have finished with your nosebags, you can go and find out.' She paused. 'And phone us *before* buying anything. I want to know if we'll have enough money left to buy the food for tonight's meal.'

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Well, to cut a long story short, the cost was duly communicated, accepted and we borrowed a lorry to bring the stuff back.

'I'll take the wheel, shall I?' said Mike.

'OK, but you'd better take the spare. We'll be needing the other four?' I chuckled.

'Funny man,' sighed Mike. 'It's just that I'm more used to lorries than you two.'

'You drove them during the war, I suppose,' said Alun.

'That's it...,' Mike frowned. 'Oh, shut up, Alun. You're getting me confused.'

'In that case,' smiled Alun, 'I think I'll walk back.'

'Yes. I think that'd be safer,' I agreed.

'Come on, let's get going. We haven't got all afternoon,' sighed Mike.

'Oh! So it's early closing day for undertakers, is it,' said Alun.

'Come on. Jump up.'

So, we jumped up and, incredible as it might seem, got home safely.

Backing into the drive was a delicate manoeuvre because of the presence of Alun's flimsy wooden manhole cover.

'Why don't you have a decent cast-iron one like everybody else, Alun?' asked Mike.

'Firstly, because I'm not like everyone else....'

'I noticed that,' grunted Mike.

'And secondly, because I happen to be a clever, profoundly thinking man. That's why.'

'I don't see the link,' frowned Mike.

'Because that hole is particularly well placed.'

'And that's why you replaced the good, solid iron cover with a few planks of rotting wood.'

'They weren't rotting when I put them there. They chose to rot of their own accord.'

I nodded, 'It's nice to have given them a free choice like that, Alun.'

'Yes,' he smiled. 'I like to spread a little sunshine whenever possible. After all. Why should they not choose their own destinies?'

'That's rather profound, Alun,' I nodded.

Mike stared at us with pity written across his face. 'You are both profound. Profoundly mad and in need of being shut up in a mental care home.'

'An asylum, you mean I suppose?' I suggested.

Mike made a puffing noise.

'So why the wood Alun? I suppose I have to ask, even though I know that you are going to spew forth some utter nonsense.'

'Well, the hole is deep.'

'That clarifies everything then,' he snorted.

'It's deep and well placed for inspection.'

'That's what inspection holes are for. Inspecting.' cried Mike in exasperation.

'But I use it for inspection upwards,'

'For what!?' exclaimed Mike.

'For inspecting underneath my cars...'

'Oh god!' cried Mike. 'Squatting in a drain? Couldn't you simply have said so to start with instead of wasting valuable time?'

'I could have. Naturally. But it wouldn't have been half as much fun.'

I leaned against the lorry, and laughed, 'come on, Mike, we'll guide you back in.'

Mike got the lorry into position and I offloaded the bags into Alun's pre-industrial rusty wheelbarrow. Alun then pushed it around to the back of the house,

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squealing all the way. The wheelbarrow that is, not Alun.

After an animated debate, we abandoned our initial idea. Instead of employing the untidy-heap-on-the-lawn method, we opted for the tidy-pile procedure.

The latter is admittedly far less pleasing to the experienced eye. However, we felt that a well-stacked pile, especially an out-of-sight one, was less likely to encourage wifely wrath.

We had learnt that "Wifely wrath" was something best avoided when nearing mealtimes.

The job finished, we jumped into the lorry to take it back. Well, that's what was intended. Instead, we moved forward six feet, then down two.

As we turned, the outside back wheel encountered the rotten manhole cover, which declined the invitation to support it.

There was an ominous cracking sound, and we were tumbled sideways against the passenger door.

When he recovered from the shock, Mike pressed the accelerator, but the engine raced fruitlessly.

One front wheel was two feet into the air, and the other span unimpeded on the wet grass.

'Oh well!' sighed Alun. 'I was going to change those planks anyway.'

'Great!' said Mike. 'Now what?'

We ambled around the lorry to inspect the scene.

'She's stuck,' announced Alun.

'Really?' nodded Mike. 'I wondered what had happened. Stuck then?'

'Yep,' said Alun. 'Stuck.'

'Well, well, well.' added Mike.

'All we have to do...,' started Alun.

'Oh god! Save me,' cried Mike.

'All we have to do,' continued Alun. 'Is to lever the thing up until the other wheel grips the ground.'

'And,' said Mike, 'Bob's-your-uncle.'

'Exactly.'

'And how, pray, do you intend to lever a two-ton lorry up out of a two-foot hole.'

Alun shook his head sadly, 'Aren't you forgetting your basic physics, Mike?' he smiled. 'As Matthew Slam once said, "Hand me a broomstick long enough, and I'll dust the moon".'

'Don't you mean Methuselah?'

'That's the guy.'

'What a load of rubbish,' cried Mike, 'It was Isaac Newton, 1642 to seventeen twenty-something. He said, "Give me a lever long enough, and I'll move the moon."'

Alun smiled, 'well, I knew there was a long bit of wood in it somewhere.'

'You twit,' sighed Mike.

'But a good idea?'

'Yes, yes. All right. For once, it's a good idea,' he admitted. 'Unless all the wood you have is as rotten as these planks.'

'More or less,' nodded Alun. 'Most of it, yes. I prefer to refer to it as "matured" wood.'

'Matured!' cried Mike. 'I've heard everything now.'

'Are you sure of that, Mike,' I smiled.

'No. I am not,' he groaned.

'But,' I added, 'What about the terrace kit the girls have purchased. There are a few lovely thick beams.'

'Yes,' agreed Mike. 'I suppose they'd do.'

'Just pop around and choose one then, Mike,' said Alun. 'You know better than us.'

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'Are you kidding?' laughed Mike. 'You're just worried that one of the Girls will spot you.'

'OK,' sighed Alun. 'If you're that scared of a couple mere women, I'll come too.'

'Mere women!?' cried Mike.

'Yes, Alun. That's rather a colossal understatement,' I said.

'Oh Well!' sighed Alun. As usual, when there's a man's job to be done... I see I'll have to do it myself.'

With this, he sneaked back around the wall. He next crouched manfully and slipped under the window to avoid detection by the mere women inside. He was soon back dragging a long roofing beam.

'That'll do nicely,' I said.

'OK,' said Mike. 'I'll get the engine going. As soon as you two have levered it up so the other wheel can bite, shout.'

'What shall we shout?' asked Alun.

'How about something like, "go".' sighed Mike.

'OK.'

'I'll accelerate slowly, and you two try to follow me along to keep her upright.'

'Got it,' said Alun.

'Me too.' I added.

Mike frowned and looked doubtful. 'Oh well...,' he sighed.

We lodged the long beam on the lip of the manhole frame and levered it up. Then, to our astonishment, the lorry tipped up, and the front wheel came down. 'Hell!' said Alun turning to me, 'we're stronger than I thought.'

'What's going on back there,' shouted Mike.

'Accelerate,' Alun shouted back.

'Go,' I corrected.

Mike let out the clutch, and the lorry lurched forward. In doing so it dragged the beam off the lip of the hole. The freed beam shot out of our hands into the manhole, and the lorry followed it.

Mike disappeared from sight. However, he almost immediately appeared again, falling headfirst out of the passenger window into one of Margaux's prized rose bushes.

'Garrgh!' he cried.

However, we had other things to think about.

At the bottom of the manhole the beam made acquaintance with the water main. A fine spray of water was shooting upwards under the lorry.

'Quick,' shouted Alun. 'Get down and hold the two bits together. I'll get a wrench.'

'From under the pile?' I shouted back.

'Oh Hell!' groaned Alun.

I jumped down and grabbed the pipe. But as I did so, the two parts decided to part company.

The pipe gave a joyful yelp of pleasure and shot out of my hands.

An astonishing jet of water shot skywards, arching high over the next-door garden and into the road beyond.

'Great gods!' shouted Mike. 'Get a "thing" and turn off the whatsit in the road.'

We gazed at him for a fraction of a second.

'Good idea Mike,' shouted Alun. 'Will do. Now, where have I put that "Thing"?''

At this moment, the jet of water must have met something human. There was a roar from up the road and a series of fruity oaths, closely followed by the sound of the heavy footfalls of someone running.

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'What on Earth is going on here...?' a big, drenched policeman appeared and stopped short. 'Oh! It's you, Alun. And your friends. I should have guessed....'

It was John, Alun's daughter's last boyfriend. We had met before.

He took in the lorry, with its wheel in the air, me in the manhole, Mike in the rosebush and the geyser of water spouting out of the manhole.

'Yes,' he nodded slowly. 'I should have guessed.'

At this moment, we heard a roaring noise further up the road. John, recognising this, darted out into the street.

A fire engine was approaching on its return trip from some other catastrophe. He waved it down, and the men jumped out. They had the manhole in the road up in seconds and the main sealed off in next to no time.

'Lucky we were passing,' said the Commander, then he caught sight of us.

'Oh! It's you, Alun.' The man took in the scene with the same slow look as John. 'And your friends too. Well, well, well!'

'That's exactly what I was just saying,' nodded John.

The two men came over and looked down into the hole.

The Commander gave a few sharp instructions to his men. With a quick nod, they dragged over a traction cable, attached it to the lorry and towed it out onto the road, where it stood dripping.

A fireman jumped down into the hole with the appropriate tools. He pulled the pipe back into position and tightened it, turned the main stopcock back on and checked that everything was in order.

All this took less than a quarter of an hour.

Then, after a few words of thanks, the firemen jumped back into the engine. 'Can we drop you off, John?'

The dripping Policeman John accepted, and off they roared.

'Weren't those the same firemen who dealt with that incident with the flaming turkey last Christmas?' asked Mike.

'The same, I'm afraid,' sighed Alun.

'Ah. Margaux will learn about all this then.'

'That's inevitable,' sighed Alun. 'As usual...'

The atmosphere in the cab was a little subdued as we drove the lorry back to the DIY shop.

However, once back in the comfort of our own cosy car, we relaxed a little.

'Say what you will,' said Alun, who was driving, 'that was good fun.'

'Stimulating,' I added.

'Maintains the little grey cells and promotes their constant renewal,' Alun agreed. 'Just think of how depleted our stock of grey cells...'

'Neurons and axioms,' Mike corrected.

'Just think of how terribly depleted our stock of neurons and axioms would be if left unstimulated,' he sighed.

'We would be barely more than cabbages on legs,' I said.

'Or brainless molluscs,' added Alun.

'OK, OK,' interrupted Mike. 'I've got the message.'

'You have to admit, Mike,' I said. 'That your little grey cells are kept in better form by hob-knobbing with Alun and me.'

'Better?'

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'Yes. Better than if you spent all your time at home. Building one-tenth scale models of football stars with matchsticks doesn't stimulate anything.'

'Football stars don't use matches; they use cigarette lighters.'

'Cigar lighters, nowadays, Mike,' I said.

'Big ones,' added Alun.

'Oh God!' sighed Mike.

Alun and I exchanged looks but, for once, decided to let this brilliant chance of clever repartee slip past.

'Anyway,' said Alun. 'That sort of activity causes atrophy of everything.'

'Except for little grey morons perhaps,' I suggested.

'Little grey morons!?' cried Mike.

'Moron is perhaps not the word you were searching for,' said Alun.

I reflected on this for a few moments, 'No. or do I mean, yes?'

'An interesting question,' nodded Alun.

Luckily for Mike, at this point, we arrived home.

Alun dragged out some of his "matured" planks which appeared to be only partially rotten, and repaired the manhole cover.

He then brought out a jerrycan of petrol and filled the mixer tank. It overflowed and petrol cascaded back onto the grass and inside Mike's rubber boots.'

'Hell, Alun! You twit.'

'Oops,' said Alun. The filler pipe's come undone.'

Mike got down on his hands and knees, 'It has not come undone. It's rotted away. Completely. There's hardly any pipe left at all.'

'Don't worry, Mike,' smiled Alun. 'I've got plenty of bits of plastic tubing.'

'In the workshop?' I smiled.

'Yep. Ah...!'

'In that pile somewhere,' I said, pointing to the tarpaulin that now covered the contents of the dismantled workshop.

Mike emptied the petrol from his boots, and we trudged down the garden.

Half an hour later, we found what we were looking for. Then, after a bit of squeezing, stretching, and hammering, we got a new bit of tube in place.

By this time, the grass around us had taken on a peculiar brownish tint.'

'It doesn't seem to have appreciated being cleansed and disinfected,' I said.

'No gratitude,' snorted Alun. 'Probably foreign grass anyway.'

'For goodness's sake, get on with it, Alun,' groaned Mike.

Alun refilled the reservoir and then made a good show of tearing at the starter cord.

Nothing happened.

'It runs very quietly as mixers go,' I smiled.

Mike was wandering around the machine, gazing into its rusty depths. 'Isn't there supposed to be something in this hole?' he said, pointing.

We came around and followed the direction of his pointing finger. 'Something roughly the same shape as a spark plug, for example.'

'Ah!' said Alun. 'You may be right. I've got plenty.'

'In the same pile?' I asked.

'Exactly. Good job I kept them.'

'Hum!' I sighed.

A mere half an hour later, we found the spark plugs.

Then we then spent some more time hunting for the special spanner. Unused for decades, it was liberally

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encrusted with rust which had to be scraped off before it would fit the spark plug.

But in the end, we had the plug in place, and the high-voltage wire attached.

When all was ready, the plug in place and the high voltage wire attached, Alun nodded with satisfaction. 'Would you like to pull, Mike?'

'No thanks, I've had enough petrol for the moment.'

Alun grabbed the handle and tugged. The motor turned over, gave an encouraging cough, and stopped.

'Looking good.' smiled Alun.

'Looking good!?' cried Mike.

'Yep. Just give it a few more pulls and bob's-your-uncle.'

'You do it, Alun,' snorted Mike. 'Bob's your uncle, not mine.'

I stepped back a little, just in case. So did Mike.

Alun shook his head and braced himself. 'Here goes.'

And there, as mentioned, he went...

'He put all his strength into the pull. However, that strength was possibly a touch too much for the ageing rope. It snapped, and Alun went tumbling backwards across the garden.

Things might have ended badly had there not been a well-furnished holly bush to break his fall. The cushioning effect afforded by this was quite remarkable. He shot back out of it as if propelled by a spring. All the same, his choice of escape trajectory was unfortunate.

I, for one, would not have chosen that one. However, that's life, I suppose. If Alun wanted to end

up in one of Margaux's favourite rose bushes, well, what can I say?

In any case, we enjoyed the show.

Mike smiled down as Alun sat on the brown, petrol-drenched grass, picking thorns out of his fingers.

'And I suppose the coil of replacement rope is at the bottom of that pile again,' he said.

Alun nodded, 'You get it. It's easy to recognise.'

I suppose it looks a bit rope-like,' I suggested.

Mike paused, 'Surely it would be quicker if we just built a new mixer, from scratch....'

Once the rope was found and replaced, it was getting on for four-o'clock.

'Let's have a go, then go in and have some tea,' said Alun. 'I've had enough of cement mixers for one day.'

Mike and I stepped back a bit further this time, 'What are you two afraid of? It's not going to explode, you know,' sighed Alun.

'Who says?' said Mike.

Alun shrugged and gave a tentative tug. The machine turned over, emitting an encouraging splutter. He then put his strength behind the next pull, and the thing burst into life.

There was a roar, a cloud of black smoke, and the whole structure shuddered. Even the drum started to spin. The noise was, however, deafening. The rusted exhaust pipe had detached itself and fallen onto the rose bush.

'Oh hell!' cried Alun.

The back door shot open, 'What on earth is all that din?' shouted Margaux.

'Alun is just practising,' I shouted back.

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'Great gods! ' She shouted back. 'Turn that thing off, or we'll have the police around. They must have heard that all the way to Scotland Yard.'

Alun pulled a face, 'How do you turn these things off, Mike? There must be a switch or something, somewhere.'

'It has certainly fallen off too,' sighed Mike.

Saying this, he stepped over, leant forward, and jerked off the plastic petrol-feed pipe. The machine spluttered a bit and stopped.

A deafening silence fell.

So did some other bit of the machine. However, we never managed to work out to what this belonged.

The removed pipe was now spraying petrol onto Margaux's rosebush, so Mike quickly bent it double and jammed it beneath a rusty brace.

'You can't use that if it's going to make a noise like a nuclear explosion!' said Margaux.

We stood together, forming a barrier between her and the mangled rose bush.

'It's only the exhaust pipe came a bit undone,' said Alun. 'We'll sort that out after tea.'

'No, you won't. You can repair it before tea. But I don't want any more experimentation today.'

So, an hour later, we had bolted the exhaust pipe back in place, and all was ready for the next phase in the morning.

We were then ordered to undress in the garden and to leave the petrol-soaked clothes outside.

'That'll kill off the greenfly,' smiled Margaux. 'It'll save me having to spray the rose bushes tomorrow....'

We exchanged looks and were relieved that we had dragged to the mixer so that it hid the battered bush from sight.

The following day, at ten, we started phase three.

'We ought to have bought some reinforcing mesh,' said Mike. 'Otherwise, the base is going to crack.'

'I've plenty of hardcore. To start with, all the stuff in that pile can go in.'

'That'll save a few more trips to the Tip, too,' I added.

'And... It will free up extra room in the new workshop,' agreed Alun.

He started off by doing a few minutes of body-building exercises with the mixer starter rope. Unfortunately, it refused to start.

'Damn this thing!' cursed Alun.

'Why not try reconnecting the fuel pipe,' called Mike from the pile. 'I find that often helps.'

It did help, and we were soon sloshing barrow-loads of concrete into our foundation hole.

There is something virile and inexpressively satisfying about this sort of job.

'A man's job,' said Alun. 'Man has always built shelters for his family. So we are upholding the heritage handed down to us from the Stone-Ages.'

'Except that they used branches in those days,' I said.

'Or Dinosaur rib-cages,' added Mike.

'First, catch your Dinosaur...,' laughed Alun.

We sifted through the pile of "Questionably important" objects and chose those suitable as reinforcement material. There were two rusty bicycles that hadn't seen service in forty years and two-cycle frames kept for spares, "just in case".

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Next came ten metres of stout iron railings which had ornamented the front wall long ago.

This was followed by a roll of heavy wire fencing, five rusty-spoked car wheels and three large hanging baskets.

The girls were happily out for the morning.

'Let's get all this stuff nicely buried before they get back,' said Alun.

'Do you mean to say that this is illegal reinforcement, Alun?' asked Mike.

'One never knows with Margaux,' he replied. 'Best not to tempt her.'

'Let's get on with it then. We've only got two hours.' groaned Mike.

An hour and a half later, we stood back and surveyed the finished platform with aching backs.

Here and there, a few bits of our reinforcement stuck up through the pool of concrete.

In particular, a clearly visible bike handlebar decorated the middle section.

'I'll deal with that, Alun; I'll twist it around a bit more. You go and hunt out your disk grinder thing. We'll cut off the other bits.'

Saying this, he waded into the concrete pool in his boots. There remained a clearance of six or seven centimetres of boot, which Mike considered amply sufficient.

He put one foot on the bike frame and the other on the protruding handlebar.'

'Careful Mike,' I called. 'That thing must be rusted solid.'

He nodded, 'A good kick, should sort it out.'

I shot a look at Alun, and we paused in our search to watch.

Well, the handle went down as hoped. However, the rest of the bike came back up. Mike then stamped back down on the frame, which obediently disappeared under the surface. However, in this complex exchange, Mike's foot got entangled in some sub-surface obstacle. Losing his balance, he tumbled down onto his knees on top of the unpleasantly hard frame.

'Hells bells!' he cried, his boots filling with concrete.

'Well done, Mike,' laughed Alun, after having rolled about on the grass for some time.

'You'd better go and rinse your boots and feet before you and your boots become a single indissociable entity,' I laughed.

'Your hands too,' laughed Alun. 'Do it In the pond.'

'Instead of rolling about laughing, you two can find that disk grinder thing.'

Mike sat on the edge of the fishpond and took off his boots. He rinsed and wrung out his socks, then filled his boots with the weedy water.

Alun called over from under the tarpaulin, 'Don't empty the concrete into the pond, Mike. It'll kill the fish.'

'Oops...' came the answer.

We got up and went over, but it was too late.

'Oh hell,' cried Alun.

Clouds of grey were spreading out majestically across the surface.

'I seem to have lived through this before,' I said.

Alun and Mike nodded, 'Croatia again,' said Alun.

'Yes, but that was wasp insecticide.' added Mike.

'Oh well!' sighed Alun, 'No good crying over spilt concrete. Let's get on before the Girls get back.'

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Alun plugged in a long extension cable and powered up the disk cutter.

In next to no time, most of the compromising metalwork had disappeared from sight.

With relief, we stood back and surveyed the finished job with satisfaction.

'We've just time for a celebratory beer before the Girls get back,' said Alun turning to the house.

Then he emitted a low howl, 'Oh Hell!'

Mike and I spun around.

The sitting room sliding windows and the outside walls were covered with splatters of concrete. So was the decking and part of the kitchen windows.

The disk cutter had flicked dollops of concrete all over the garden, concentrating most of its efforts on the sitting room sliding windows.

'Oh Hell,' We rushed over and quickly managed to make things much worse by smearing the windows with more mess.

'Haven't you got a hose, Alun?'

'Of course I've got a hose.'

'Well, what about going and getting it then?' grumbled Mike. 'Where is it... Oh god! Don't tell me...'

With a show of animation only marginally short of absolute panic, we dragged the hose out from under the tarpaulin and set to work.

We had to wash down the hedge laurels and the garden chairs too, glad that the extra pressure provided by a now fully open shut-off valve allowed us to complete the job in record time.

This being done, we walked back to finish the job of hiding our reinforcing material.

'There's only that little bit over there,' said Mike. 'I'll finish that while you two tow the mixer down to the

end of the garden.' He was soon lost behind an impressive shower of sparks.

Alun and I grabbed the mixer and started to trundle the thing across the brown-tinted lawn.

'It doesn't look all that healthy now,' I volunteered.

'No. Petrol is clearly not the best grass fertiliser around.'

'At least, not for foreign grass,' I added.

At this moment, one of the wheels dug into the soft, petrol-soaked grass and jammed.

'Come on, Alun,' I called. 'Get your shoulder against it.'

He did as I asked, and the mixer responded - but it did not respond exactly as we would have wished. Slowly the rusty support brace buckled, and the entire machine crumpled under the weight of the half-full drum.

Down it went, and even the most imperceptive reader will have guessed that the trajectory carried it rose bush wards.

'Oh hell!' cried Alun for the hundredth time of the day.

However, this did not stop the machine from tipping its contents into the space allotted to the bushes fragile and temperamental root system.

As it completed its downward trajectory, the petrol tank hit a pointed segment of handlebar which had been discarded there.

The corroded tank punctured, and a gallon or so of petrol gushed out.

Mike gave a final triumphant flourish of the disk cutter, showering incandescent blue sparks mixer wards.

'Hell!' shouted Alun as he dived for cover

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The flash and a roar of a sheet of blue flame sent Mike tumbling backwards into the concrete. The rose bush burst into a flaming torch-like apparition.

We rolled as far as we could away from the inferno and got tentatively to our feet.

Mike stumbled, after us, dripping with concrete.

'Holy Moses!' cried Alun. 'That was a bit close.'

At this moment, the kitchen door opened.

'Everything all right?' called Margaux. She then seemed transformed into a pillar of salt by the blazing garden while my wife gazed over her shoulder.

'Oh. You've finished then?' she smiled.

We undressed in the garden for the second day running.

As I cast my petrol-soaked jeans onto the pile to join Mike's concrete socks, I turned to Alun.

'Just to clear up a point, Alun.'

'Nice pants...Yes?'

'Where exactly did you get that mixer from?'

'I told you. A friend, Dan, lent it to me.'

'Well, just for my information again, would the Dangerous Dan who lent you this death trap by any chance live in the vicinity of the Tip?'

Alun nodded; 'Down that way, yes.'

'I thought maybe he did,' I said. 'Mike?'

'Yes.'

'Pass me the disk cutter. I think we should amputate Alun's tongue before he can get us into any more trouble.'

Mike shook his head sadly, 'He can do that without a tongue.'

I sighed. He was undoubtedly right.

The following morning, we started the job of building the terrace itself.

The girls had bought a kit via an internet site, and by some miracle or other, it had arrived.

Not only had it arrived, but it was complete.

The best price they had found was from a company in Scotland. However, the fact that the wood had been imported from Finland had not struck them as unusual.

'Don't they have pine forests in Scotland?' asked Mike.

Margaux shot him a questioning look, 'Because they get wood from trees!?'

My wife laughed, 'You don't understand, Mike. If you want to keep the price down, you have to use second-hand trees.'

Margaux continued, 'and over here, they are all snapped up almost at once. So, manufacturers have to rely on overseas suppliers for decent quality second-hand trees.'

Mike shook his head and walked off. 'Just as bad as their husbands,' he mumbled.

Well, we spread the contents of the pack over the garden and consulted the instructions. But, no matter how many times we counted the parts, we could find nothing missing.

'These foreigners get on my nerves,' grumbled Alun.

'Yes,' I agreed. 'They do it deliberately, just to upset their customers.'

'There should always be something missing. Even if it is an unnecessary part,' said Alun.

'Agreed,' I said. 'It seems as if they absolutely insist on one being able to build the thing without mishap.'

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The least they could do would be to add a few parts that don't fit anywhere, then leave them out.'

'Or better still,' smiled Alun. 'Leave them in.'

I nodded, 'otherwise, where is the fun? Where is the pleasure of swearing and cursing the idiots who packed the stuff.'

'Exactly,' grumbled Alun.

During this debate, Mike had been at work. He had already placed and bolted in the six heavy support posts.

They had slotted smoothly onto the metal footings we had cast into the foundations. They now stood erect and apparently perfectly vertical.

We stood back and scowled.

'These foreigners get on my nerves,' grumbled Alun again.

'I agree,' I said, 'why go to such extents to annoy customers in such a blatant show of disrespect. They must know that complaining is half the pleasure of DIY work.'

'They clearly have other ways of seeing things over there, lost in endless snow-blocked forests,' said Alun.

'It's probably because they have to wait for the lakes to freeze over before they can get to the DIY shop for spares,' I suggested.

'Yep,' agreed Alun. 'That would explain it.'

By this time, Mike was lifting one of the roofing beams into place so we decided that we had had our grumble and could now afford to help.

These beams also slipped into place with annoying ease. Even the bolt holes aligned perfectly.

'These guys really get on my wick,' grumbled Alun. 'If we carry on like this, we'll have nothing to do all afternoon.'

Suddenly Mike seemed to wake up. 'Oh, don't worry, by midday, you're certain to have messed something up. The repairs will take us nicely up to teatime.'

'That's not very kind, Mike,' said Alun.

'No. That's right. I'm pleased you noticed,' smiled Mike.

Well, this aggravating simplicity continued, and before it was time to have a mid-morning break, both the roof and the back wall was in place. Not a crack or the tiniest glint of light was to be seen through the structure.

After tea, Mike got up and stuck down the shingles with the sticky muck supplied with the kit.

While he did this, Alun and I slotted the sidewalls into place, then attached the shelving and benches. These too, fitted with irritating ease.

Finally, we stood back and surveyed the finished job.

'Where's the fun in life if everything goes as planned?' groaned Alun.

Mike sat on the new bench, and it didn't even fall down. We sighed.

After tea, Alun stretched himself and jumped to his feet. 'Come and give me a hand, you two.'

We hesitated and quickly thought up reasons why this would not be possible.

'I only want to take the boat around into the front drive.'

'Is that all?' asked Mike.

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'That's all. Tomorrow I have to take it to the boatyard.'

'Isn't it a bit expensive?' I asked.

'The owner's giving me a place at the back, free,' Alun winked. 'I did him a bit of a favour.'

'Oh god!' cried Mike, 'What have you done this time?'

'Nothing. In fact, his son was looking for a windsurf board. So, I gave him mine.'

'Not the one you crashed in, Brittany?' I said.

'That's the one. But I only broke the mast, not the board,' he replied.

'But that thing is delaminated and fills up with water. The lifeguards showed us that,' added Mike.

'Like a sponge,' I added.

'It only leaks in French water,' smiled Alun. 'Over here, the water is too cold to get in.'

'That's nonsense,' cried Mike. 'And you know that perfectly well.'

'No, I don't. You told me yourself that water is at its densest at four degrees centigrade.'

Mike sighed, 'SO?'

'So, clever man, the water molecules will be too big to get through the tiny fissures as it's always about four degrees down this way.'

'What a load of rot,' sighed Mike.

'And in any case,' continued Alun, 'even if water does seep in a bit, it isn't dangerous.'

'No,' I smiled, 'It just weighs twice as much and won't turn.'

'Who's the experienced surfer here? You or me?' he sniffed. 'It'll be excellent training until he can afford a really good one.'

'One that doesn't leak, you mean,' said Mike.

Alun held open the door.

'Do you think he'll try that shop on the tip, like you, Alun?' Mike asked.

'If he's got any sense. Yes.'

We tramped down the garden, noting that the grass was even browner now. And the rose bush didn't seem to have appreciated having been concreted in then torched.

We exchanged glances and pulled faces.

'Do you think we ought to go and buy her a new one?' asked Mike.

Alun nodded, 'We'll do that on the way back from the boatyard tomorrow.'

'I didn't know they had a rosebush section at the Tip,' I laughed.

Well, we dragged the trailer out from under the weeping willow and carefully navigated it between the surviving garden plants.

When we reached the gap between the newly completed terrace and the house, we stopped.

'Are you sure it will go through?' I asked, sizing up the gap with a look.

'If Mikes measurements are correct,' said Alun.

'Of course, they're correct,' grumbled Mike.

I pulled a face, walked through the gap, and looked back. 'The width looks OK from here.'

'So, let's get on with it then, instead of making clever theoretical calculations,' sighed Alun.

'I said the width looks OK, Alun. I'm not sure about the length, though.'

'We measured the length too. Didn't we, Mike.'

'You did,' replied Mike screwing up his face a little.

'Maybe, but I'm not sure it will turn...' I started.

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'Oh, come on, let's get on with this. I want to change before eating,' grumbled Alun.

I lifted the hook, and the other two got behind and pushed.

We got the boat and trailer through the gap and up against the next-door wall. This was when things got more complicated.

'It won't turn the corner,' I called, 'see for yourself, Alun.'

Alun came and saw, 'Hum... Well, they will just have to go through separately. The trailer will have to go on its side.'

So, we backed up, unloaded the boat, set the trailer upright and dragged it through to the drive.

'Let's get the boat through now,' smiled Alun rubbing his hands together in anticipation of his nice hot shower.

I shot a look at Mike, and we exchanged a knowing eyebrow rise.

Alun took the lead this time.

The boat slid into the gap and came up against the wall. 'Oh hell!' he cried. 'Your measurements are all wrong, Mike.'

'Your measurements,' said Mike, 'you did the length.'

I smiled, 'Look. We just have to put the boat on its side, and Bobs-your-uncle.'

'Of course,' cried Alun, 'Back up, you two.'

Mike and I exchanged eyebrow movements again.

When we got back far enough, Alun came around and moved forward to get a hold of the boat.

'Oh hell!' he cried.

'Something wrong?' I smiled.

'The mast. That's what's wrong.'

We looked up, 'Oh!' I pretended to jump back with surprise. 'How on earth did that thing get there?'

'Shut up.' Grumbled Alun.

'Can't we just saw it off and glue it back on afterwards,' I asked.

'Shut up.'

Mike had wandered off down the garden and was gazing through the hedges.

'Hey! Alun, come down here.'

We stumped down and stood beside Mike.

'We could take it up across the field to the track over there,' he pointed.

'You mean,' frowned Alun, 'We dig out three of these bushes then drag the boat up that hill?'

'That's it,' smiled Mike. 'Or simply chop the bushes down. That'd save time.'

'That would bring the wrath of the gods down upon my shoulders,' groaned Alun. 'You simply cannot imagine how much tending went into growing those bushes.'

'So, we dig them out. We are three strong and gallant soldiers, ready to fight for our....' I hesitated.

'For the honour of our fair lady?' suggested Mike.

'That's close enough.'

'Great,' nodded Alun, 'but there is just one small problem.'

'And that is?'

'That, that is not a field but a carefully landscaped garden.'

'Is it?' we started. 'Landscaped to look like an overgrown field?' suggested Mike.

'The owner is a prominent environmental activist,' said Alun.

'Ah!' I said.

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'Oh!' added Mike.

'And there's another point.'

'Is there?'

Alun nodded, 'The guy hates my guts...'

'I wonder why?' I mused.

'Why, Alun?' asked Mike.

'I'll tell you some other day.'

'Something about the environment?' I asked.

'He's got this thing about sailing.'

'I wonder why?' coughed Mike.

'Never mind that. How can we get this boat out?'
sighed Alun.

'Easy,' laughed Mike, 'we just sneak it across in the middle of the night.'

'In the middle of the night?'

'That's what I said.'

'We dig the bushes up, then in the early hours we drag the boat and trailer over the garden, leaving a clear track showing where we came from?' Alun shook his head.

'We let the tires down so that they spread and don't mark the ground too much. Then I'll come behind you and rake over the grass as we go. No one will ever know we've been there.'

We looked at each other and leant forwards to survey the terrain.

'Hum.' Nodded Alun. 'Yes, it might work.'

'We'll dig up the bushes now,' said Mike. 'Then we put them back in place so we can drag them out easily when we're ready.'

'Ready for the big jump,' I suggested.

'Mind you,' said Mike. 'That tree will have to go. Or at least to have a few branches lopped off.'

'That tree!' cried Alun. 'That's the "hanging tree".'

'The Hanging Tree? That's interesting,' frowned Mike. 'How did it come to get that name. Dates back to medieval times, no doubt.'

'It doesn't look all that medieval to me,' I frowned.

'Do they hang villains there?' asked Mike.

'They don't yet... But they will do if you lop off even the smallest branch, without written authorisation from Margaux.'

'Oh!' Said Mike

'Got it,' I added.

'So, the tree remains, then,' said Mike.

'Un-lopped,' I suggested.

'Exactly. You've got it,' finished Alun.

'Pity though,' sighed Mike.

'Can't you feel the rope tightening around your neck already, Mike?' I said.

Mike coughed.

'If you do,' added Alun, 'the final jerk is only half a second away.'

'All right, all right. Neither branch nor leaf will be displaced.' He sighed.

'That's the spirit, Mike,' I laughed, slapping him on the shoulder.

It must have been about two in the morning when we musketeers forgathered in the garden.

We had pulled on jeans and jackets over our pyjamas.

Mike sneaked down to the end of the garden to pull up the bushes while Alun and I dragged the boat and trailer across the moonlit garden.

'The grass looks nice and green in moonlight,' I remarked.

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'Yep. Pity it can't stay like that in the sun,' replied Alun.

I nodded. We had loaded the boat back onto the trailer earlier. What's more, we had flooded the wheel bearings in a mixture of olive oil and butter to avoid any unnecessary squeaks.

We had also taken the precaution of giving every single movable part the same treatment.

'What's so special about the magic mixture you've slopped over half the garden,' asked Mike. 'Why not use proper grease?'

'What is so special, Mike,' said Alun. 'Is that I don't have any grease. Proper or otherwise.'

'Why not?'

'Because that's what was in that rusty old can you insisted on adding to the foundations, Mike,' I smiled.

'Ah! I wondered what that mess was.'

'Good grease doesn't need to be nice to look at,' said Alun. 'It just needs to grease things.'

Mike shrugged, 'I prefer mine clean and not full of all sorts of debris.'

'As you wish.'

We dragged the un-squealing trailer and boat silently across the dew-covered lawn and through the gap in the hedge before replanting the bushes behind us and stamping them in. We then surrounded the ground at their base with leaves we had piled up for the job.

'Ready?' whispered Mike.

We nodded and started up the slope.

As we advanced, Mike came behind erasing the tire marks with the rake.

In next to no time, we were at the top of the slope.

The car was parked a little lower down, ready for the getaway.

At the lip of the slope, Mike dropped the rake to help us haul the trailer over the last bump.

Alun whispered, 'One, two, three, go.' And we hauled the trailer onto the track.

All went as smoothly as planned. With respect to the trailer, that is. However, the trailer was only part of the story.

On the final jerk, the third-hand straps holding the boat in place snapped. Then, feeling the call of freedom under its hull, the little vessel began to slip surreptitiously backwards off the trailer.

'Oh god!' cried Alun, dashing to grab the stanchions at the edge of the hull.

We followed, and with flailing arms, got hold of anything we could catch. Then, leaning back, we put all our strength into the effort.

Even this little mutineer of a boat realised that it was dealing with something well above par. The combined strength of three mighty musketeers was obviously something to be reckoned with.

In accordance with this, the boat respectfully slowed its pace and swerved to the right.

However, bedroom slippers lack the grip that heavy Alpine trekking boots boast. We had no grip whatever on the dewy grass.

Noticing this, the little boat redoubled its efforts, and together we started careering down the slope with the boat.

'Let go,' whispered Alun. 'Quick, let's get out of here before disaster strikes.'

'Oh god!' I sighed, 'It's headed straight for that greenhouse.'

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'Exactly,' nodded Alun.

'And I suppose the guy who owns it hates your guts too, Alun.' Whispered Mike.

'You've got it,' whispered Alun, who was now dragging the trailer away towards the car as fast as he could go.

Having ploughed a deep, clean furrow across the landscape, the boat slowed a little at the bottom of the slope. With its well-pointed bows and smooth hull it slipped unimpeded through the garden hedge.

'Oh god!' I sighed. 'Please stop.'

However, the boat would not listen.

It gained momentum anew and hit the end of the greenhouse almost perfectly in its centre.

As it smashed through the glass panels, I heard the car start.

I just had time to see the boat come to rest inside the greenhouse amid crushed tomatoes and lacerated beans.

The noise was terrific.

This greenhouse was a perfect fit for the boat, or visa-versa, and the impact of the mast on the Victorian ridge decoration brought the wayward boat to an abrupt halt. It had tossed several of the panes splintering into the garden, then stopped, clearly satisfied with itself.

I made a dash for the car as Alun accelerated down the track.

Within thirty seconds, we had parked in the drive and had unhitched the trailer. We tipped it onto its side, and no one would have guessed it had moved since that afternoon.

We slipped into the house, quickly stripped off our clothes and pyjamaed once more, joined the Girls.

'What on earth was that?' cried Alun, as Margaux threw open the back door.

She snapped on the outdoor light, and we all stepped out onto the terrace.

Lights had come on all along the row, and the noise of conversations mingled with curses from further down.

'This is likely to get complicated,' whispered Alun.

We nodded.

'You'd better let me do the talking if required.'

'I think I'm going back to bed.' said Mike.

'A wise move,' I said.

Margaux started talking over the fence to the next-door neighbour, 'What's going on, Elsie?' she asked.

'There's a boat in Greg's greenhouse.'

'A what?'

'A boat. A sailing boat.'

'In his greenhouse?'

'What's left of it. Yes.'

Margaux opened her mouth to say something, then changed her mind, 'A sailing boat?'

'Yes.'

Margaux turned to us and compressed her eyes in an unpleasant scowl.

'Oh god!' groaned my wife, 'what have you three been up to this time?'

'Us!?' cried Alun.

The two women exchanged looks and blew out their cheeks.

'Where's your boat Alun?' asked Margaux.

'Boat?' frowned Alun. 'Well, it's just down there at the end of the garden, where we left it yesterday.'

'Is it?'

'Well, it was. Wasn't it Mike?'

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However, Mike had disappeared.

'Wasn't it?' he said, turning to me.

I nodded.

'And I suppose it's still there.' said Margaux.

'Naturally,' replied Alun.

Just at this moment Blue lights started flashing at the top of the slope, and two vans appeared and discharged several policemen.

Accompanied by the environmentalist family, they tramped down the slope, following the deep furrow.

John was with them...

We decided that it would be an excellent strategy to get close to the scene of the action so we squeezed our way through the hedge and joined the group.

Seen from close to, the catastrophe was worth observing.

Alun whispered in my ear, 'We're going to have to bluff our way out of this one.'

I nodded. It was not the first time we had been up against the wall together.

'Hey!' shouted Alun, clambering forward, 'That's my boat. What on earth are you doing with it in your greenhouse?'

There ensued a good deal of heated argument, in which Alun accused the neighbour of stealing his boat in the middle of the night.

The local police knew all about Alun's conflicts with his neighbours. They were also accustomed to odd things happening whenever Alun and his friends were together.

'You've both had it in for me since that trouble the year before last,' cried Alun. 'But I never dreamt you'd go as far as this.'

The debate went on, and tempers rose. Finally, the two families swore they were all fast asleep.

'Oh yeh!' snorted Alun, 'they all say that.'

After a good deal more clever footwork by Alun, the debate was closed. The police declared that the boat would be unlikely to sail off during the night. They would come around in the morning and try and sort things out.

At breakfast, Alun's daughter, June, turned up.

She wanted to show her parents her latest work.

Knowing that she mostly painted nudes these days, we gathered around with enthusiasm but for once, we were disappointed. It was a "Still Life", without the shadow of a nude anywhere. One of those things with an improbable mixture of out-of-season fruits and flowers.

As usual, however, it was exceptionally well executed.

Mike was in one of his less patient moods.

'There can't be many places on earth,' he said, 'where gardens produce quite such a profusion of strawberries at daffodil-time.'

Margaux put her arm around her daughter's shoulder, 'Mike didn't get his normal twelve hours sleep last night.' she smiled.

'The three of them were up late, apparently,' added my wife.

'Doing what, this time?' asked June.

'Who knows?' sighed my wife.

'Apparently,' smiled Margaux. 'In the middle of the night, and for no apparent reason, your father's sailing boat transported itself into Greg's greenhouse.'

Building the Patio

'What!?' cried June.

'Hmmm. Odd. Isn't it?'

June shot her father a frowning look, 'What on earth have you been up to this time, dad?'

Alun bridled but just as he stood up, presumably to present his line of defence from a more advantageous position, the doorbell rang.

'I suppose that'll be the police,' sighed Margaux.

June shot her father another of her looks. Looks which she had clearly learnt at her mother's knee.

The door opened, and in stamped John.

On seeing June, he stopped short, 'Oh!'

He hesitated, 'If I'm disturbing you, I'll come back later.'

June turned on him with a withering gaze, 'Oh! It's you, is it?'

John reddened around the exposed part of his neck.

'I'll come back after lunch, shall I?' he mumbled.

June, who had cast him off due to a tiff about not wanting to paint him in the nude, sighed. 'Your neck is terribly red, John. I suppose that's because of all the bear?'

'I'll come back, shall I?' repeated John.

'Oh don't mind little me,' sighed June, 'I'm off anyway.'

And off she went.

'Sit down John,' smiled Margaux. 'You know how June shoots of the handle for next to nothing. Come and sit by me.'

The two young people were a good match and would have remained so had not a certain coolness come between them.

One was a boxing champion and policeman, whilst the other was an artist specialising in female nudes.

On the surface, one would look hard to spot a reason why the hearts should be so sundered as Bertram Wooster would have put it. But such was the case.

June was one of those proud young and modern beauties who prefer to have it their own way.

When she had indicated to John that he was not the right shape for nude portraits, she'd simply stated her professional opinion.

One can readily appreciate that a respected boxing champion might not appreciate this from the one he loves.

This rift rapidly festered, triggering eloquent verbal exchanges and thence to a severe bout of heart-sundering.

Margaux patted him on the wide shoulder because she quite liked the boy. Furthermore, she realised that a man who would be putty in the hands of her daughter, whilst also being a boxing champion and policeman, would provide her offspring with ample protection.

Women spot such things...

'So,' she smiled. 'How can we help you, John?'

'Well, the sergeant asked me to come and clear up a few details,' he said, shooting a look at Alun.

'Shoot,' cried Alun.

'Well. To start with, it is your boat, isn't it?'

'Oh yes, no doubt there.'

'Good,' said John noting this down in his notebook.

'The sergeant thought it was very odd, there being no traces across the field. From your garden to the place where the boat slid down, I mean.'

Building the Patio

Alun and I exchanged looks.

'He asked if you had any thoughts about that?' asked John.

We shook our heads, and Mike piped up.

'I would have thought that if those neighbours wanted to incriminate us, they would have left tracks,' he pulled a face. 'Yes, that's very odd.'

'That's what the sergeant said.'

'I'm not surprised,' said Mike. 'An astute man, your Sargant.'

'But,' added John, with an embarrassed frown, 'We have almost certain proof that the others were sound asleep.'

Alun jumped at this, 'Almost!?' he cried. 'Almost is just not good enough. For example, if I were to say I was almost certain to have stopped my car when the traffic lights turned red. What would you say, had there ensued a horrifying accident causing the death of thirty children...'

Margaux sighed, 'Alun...'

'Well,' continued John. 'The Sergeant asked if, assuming that your neighbours were not behind this outrage...'

'Outrage!?' cried Alun, 'I'd say it's an outrage. A magnificent ocean-going yacht, smashed to bits by a bunch of jealous idiots ...'

'A half rotten dingy,' corrected Margaux.

'Who else could be responsible,' said John, 'In your opinion.'

We exchanged looks and pulled various faces.

'Any ideas?' asked my wife.

'Well,' frowned Alun.

John scratched his ear, 'the Sargent said it was odd that the guys went to the extent of digging up the hedge, then replanting it.'

'Yes,' I said. 'Now that is extremely odd. Any ideas, Mike.'

Mike shrugged, 'Clearly a professional job.'

'Not a bunch of imbecilic idiots then?' said Margaux, with a slight smile.

'Certainly not,' nodded Mike. 'A thing like that would take a lot of intelligent planning. Cunning too.'

Well, that lets you three off then,' chuckled my wife.

I felt that this was a little unfair, but I decided to hold my tongue.

'I have heard that big-time criminals will go to remarkable lengths to divert attention from themselves to innocent...' I said.

'Exactly,' interrupted Alun. 'This must be part of some dastardly plan to rob valuable paintings from the local art gallery.'

'There aren't any valuable paintings here,' said Margaux.

'That's what most people think,' I said. 'I bet these art thieves discovered that one of the paintings is, in fact, a Van Gogh, worth ten million pounds.'

Alun nodded, 'That's certainly the explanation' he nodded. 'International gangs of art thieves will go to incredible lengths to get their hands on priceless paintings.'

'Well,' I smiled. 'That seems to clear things up nicely.'

'I bet that even now, those criminals are slipping through the loopholes of the law. They're probably already taking refuge in some unreliable state under false identities,' Alun shook his head sadly. 'Too bad.'

Building the Patio

John seemed a little at sea, 'Hum.'

Margaux leant forward, 'You seem a tad perplexed, John.'

'Well!' he scratched his head. 'It does all seem a bit improbable.'

'That's true,' replied my wife, 'but can you imagine any other reasonable explanation for the night's events?'

John pulled a face and looked from Alun to me and then to Mike, 'Well...no. I agree that it's not easy.'

'Probably Estonian art bandits,' said Alun.

'Yes,' I added. 'The county is crawling with them.'

'Estonians,' frowned John brightening at the thought that this happened to be one of the sergeant's pet dislikes.

Alun spotted this and nodded at me.

'Only the other day,' he said. 'Three of them came around asking if we had any old stuff we wanted to get rid of.'

'Were those the ones pretending to be Romanians?' I asked.

'That's it,' nodded Alun.

'Didn't fool us for a second,' I added.

'Oh!' nodded John, jotting notes in his book.

'Oh God, Alun!' I cried. 'And we even brought those guys around into the back garden to show them the whatsit.'

'Hells bells!' said Alun. 'That's when they must have spotted the yacht.'

'Well, well, well.' said John. 'This is going to interest the sergeant. He's been harping on about foreigners for weeks and weeks.'

Alun and I nodded and pulled faces. Mike was edging towards the door, 'I'm going for a walk. Anyone coming?'

Alun stood, 'Anything else we can help you with, John?'

John shook his head, 'No. I think I've got enough to calm the Sarge down for the moment.'

'Well, we might as well pop down the pub then,' smiled Alun as we sneaked out. 'Quick one?'

'I'm on duty,' sighed John.

'Another time then, John.' said Alun. 'Oh, tell the Sarge that I'll be wanting my yacht back, though. And while you're about it, you might as well leave it at the boatyard.'

With this, we left as quickly as possible.

That evening, after a relaxing meal, we moved out to the completed terrace to do a bit of sipping chilled champagne.

Margaux smiled over at my wife, 'Do you know what I'd love to do tomorrow.'

'No.'

'It's going to be a lovely sunny day. We could go for a long outing, just the two of us, while these three musketeers clean up the garden.'

'Good idea.' said my wife.

'And do you know what would be even better?'

My wife shook her head.

'We can take the Bikes.' smiled Margaux.

'Perfect,' agreed my wife.