

Three Men in a Panic



Written by

Stephen William ROWE

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Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my friend Tegwyn Jones for his collaboration in preparing, proofreading, and editing this book.

Authors Note

Each of the stories was inspired by adventures or unusual events which happened either to me or to my friend Tegwyn at various periods in our lives.

After drawing up a shortlist of the most suitable ones, I went to work.

I have embroidered each tale with added events and characters, but I am convinced that these extra adventures might very well have happened, had things gone only slightly differently.

All the characters involved are products of my imagination and any resemblance of the characters to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

Stephen William Rowe

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Chapter 1 – Unexpected meeting

I heaved the bulging suitcases out of the car boot and dumped them on the uneven flagstones of the quayside.

As I stepped back to pull down the hatch, a discarded spider-crab pincer crunched under my heel, and I jumped with surprise.

‘Careful!’ my wife called back, and I sighed deeply.

‘A week in Normandy will do us both good,’ she had insisted a few weeks previously. ‘Saint-Vaast is lovely at this time of year.’

‘Out of season, you mean,’ I complained.

‘Pottering around small French fishing ports, during the cheap period, is not really my cup of Calvados.’

‘Our hotel is not cheap. In or out of season,’ she replied.

‘The dead season anyhow,’ I countered.

‘You’re just upset about the lack of half-naked bathing beauties to goggle at,’ said my wife.

‘That’s what seaside holidays were made for,’ I replied. ‘During the summer months, they do you very well in the half-naked bathing beauty line, in Normandy.’

‘You’re getting old and twisted,’ she retorted. ‘You need to get out a bit more.’

‘Out more in Normandy? God!’

I was having difficulty working up enthusiasm for this holiday.

‘Well, we’re going anyway,’ my wife had smiled.

‘It’s all booked and paid for.’

This last statement was a lie, but she experienced no qualms about it. She reasoned that, after all, a lie

was simply an alternative way of presenting the truth.

She meant well, of course.

The truth is that retirement had brought with it, perhaps just a touch more leisure time than I had bargained for.

We had moved to Grenoble, from the south coast of England, fifteen years earlier, when I was promoted. Head of Research for an international group was not the sort of position one could easily refuse, so we went. This move had naturally separated from our friends.

When our best friends were also promoted to top positions, sharing time together had become more and more difficult.

As a result, I had not seen my best friend, Alun and his wife Margaux for years.

I ought to mention here that, in our early years, Alun and I had often taken holidays together.

Invariably accompanied by our pal Mike, we had got up to all sorts of pranks and into numerous delicate situations all over the world.

Our wives still shudder when reminded of certain events that we three still consider amongst the highlights of our existences.

Only a month earlier, I had been chatting to Alun on the phone.

'Hey, Alun!' I had said with enthusiasm.

'No,' he replied, 'I can't lend you a penny.'

'No, come on Alun, I don't need your money.'

'What do you want, then?'

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I laughed. 'I've been playing with the idea of organising a trip somewhere with you and Mike. What do you think?'

'Aren't you forgetting something?' he replied.

'Sorry?'

'Your little grey cells seem to be depleting faster than I would have expected,' he sighed. 'Permit me to jog your memory.'

'Jog on,' I said.

'Well. If I happened to mention the words "wife" and "Margaux", would that convey anything to you?'

'Very funny!' I sighed. 'No, I haven't forgotten. Naturally, we'd have to work out a convincing way of putting the idea over.'

'What do you me "we".'

'Oh, all right, "I".'

'I prefer that,' said Alun. 'But do you honestly believe that time has blunted their memories of our more catastrophic escapades?' he paused.

'Somehow, I doubt it.'

I sighed again, 'No. That is a bit of a problem, I admit.'

'A stumbling block,' suggested Alun.

'Yes.'

'Or more possibly an impassable obstacle,' he added.

'Thanks, Alun. Always optimistic.'

'I call it being realistic.'

'Yes. But you must admit that time does tend to smooth off the sharp edges of memories a bit,' I said, not all that convinced, but not wanting to let Alun damp my enthusiasm.'

'Are you mad?' cried Alun, 'I assure you that on my side of the channel, Margaux's memory retains every smallest detail of our worst adventures.'

I had to admit that this was true. 'Not blunted then?'

'No. And unlike your ageing brain,' he continued, 'in Margaux's case, ageing plays out its game differently. Her little grey cells might have diminished slightly in number, but those that remain seem to be the healthy plump ones. They also appear to be primarily the ones containing memories of our more distressing escapades.'

'Odd that,' I said. 'Perhaps that's because those are the grey cells which have been the most efficiently stimulated.'

Alun laughed a sad, melancholy little laugh. 'She says that the word "stimulated" is not adapted to the situation. She prefers "stressed", or rather Over-stressed, in fact.'

'Not good news that,' I frowned down at the receiver.

'She also mentioned that those particular cells concerned with memories of our doings are no longer grey. They have all turned snowy white with worry.'

'Hum. Yes. Bad that,' I replied.

'Not comforting,' concluded Alun.

'It's strange that you should mention it really because I, too, have noticed this selective neuron survival pattern.'

'The survival of the fittest.' Said Alun.

'The most resilient.'

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'So, you've noticed the same evolutionary tendency in your better half too,' He paused. 'Nothing to do with British weather then.'

'In fact...' I took up this point, 'that observation has driven me to propose a new and revolutionary theory of how the brain functions and evolves.' I paused for breath. 'I was thinking of submitting an article on the subject to "Nature".'

'Never too late for the Nobel prize,' agreed Alun.

'I must admit that I was thinking more about the prize money,' I said, 'than about the fame, glory and celebrity.'

'Fame and celebrity are fine in reasonable quantities,' said Alun.

'Yes,' I admitted, 'One has to know when to stop.'

'Agreed,' admitted Alun. 'It's always a good idea to keep one's feet firmly on the ground, so concentrating on the money side of things would have a good stabilising effect.'

'I've tried a bit of fame and glory,' I replied, 'and I've often found that a little goes a long way.'

'Agreed, there's such a thing as too much of a good thing. You'd have to do quite a bit of travelling to talk at conferences, of course.'

'And you could perhaps accompany me, acting as my agent,' I mused.

'I'd only take ten per cent,' said Alun.

'Ten?' I cried.

'Oh, OK. Fifteen then. Mike could come to carry your briefcase.'

'Maybe, after all, it would be simpler to try and convince the girls though,' I sighed.

'Yeh,' agreed Alun.

'I'll see if I can find the right moment when we're on holiday.'

'OK. keep me posted.'

'Will do.'

So, it was with sobering thoughts about the low probability of success of this enterprise that I picked up the suitcases and turned to follow my wife.

Now, about fifty years ago and with typical French attention to detail, a lazy fisherman, had discarded a huge rusted chain on the quay. It was still there today, rusting happily in its well-earned retirement.

It goes without saying that I was destined to trip over that chain.

I did this with my usual talent and sprawled like only one with much practice can sprawl.

However, picking myself up again, my choice curses were inexplicably covered by an unexpected roar of laughter.

In the near distance, I saw my wife gazing at me, shaking her head sadly. Beside her, doing likewise was another woman I vaguely recognised.

However, behind them, doubled over with mirth was the long silhouette of someone I could not fail to recognise.

It was Alun.

By the time I realised this, however, he had fallen over backwards onto a pile of discarded and rotting fishing nets. Characteristically he was shaking with laughter, unable to speak.

My mouth dropped open. 'Margaux? Alun?' I cried. 'What on earth are you doing here?'

Chapter 2 – The Scheme

To cut a long story short, which admittedly is not my usual way of going about things, our wives had been scheming.

For several months, since we had both retired, they had been secretly exchanging observations about us. They had eventually concluded that something would have to be done.

'It seems that our men have been promoted beyond their capabilities,' said Margaux with her usual lucidity and insight.

'Yes. Holding down a top retirement position requires an exceptional skill-set,' replied my wife. 'For men, at least.'

'Change-Management ought to be taught at university. As it is, one has to learn as one goes,' continued Margaux.

'Yes. Men learn how to deal with changes to their employees, but less so with their own.'

'That's why consultants are paid so much.'

'The present situation seems to call for a bit of gentle interfering, don't you think?'

'A prudent precaution,' smiled my wife.

They agreed that, while both of us were reasonably easy to live with, we needed to be kept busy. This, the girls decided, could not last infinitely and would eventually become a little too challenging. Furthermore, the pencilled job lists on each of our fridge doors were already getting dangerously short.

Both women had already used the age-old tactics of pointing out how the wall paint had yellowed. They had then pointed at the kitchen, to draw our attention to how everything had aged and had then sighed at

how the gardens had become unacceptably overgrown.

However, this method has its limits.

While there might be an almost unlimited number of tasks one can invent, there is also an equally endless number of excuses for not doing them.

Furthermore, they were aware that while both Alun and I were good at most do-it-yourself jobs around the house, we rebelled against "having" to do them. This was firmly ingrained in our DNA.

'Do you know what I think?' said Margaux.

'I think so,' replied my wife.

'I know that it might seem a little extreme at first sight,' she hesitated and bit her lip, 'but I wonder if we should not permit the boys a little freedom.'

'A bold and innovative move,' gasped my wife with a wry smile. 'Freedom of a very carefully controlled, surveyed and calibrated amount, of course.'

'That goes without saying,' smiled Margaux.

'That would fit in very nicely with our plans too,' said my wife.

'Exactly.'

The Girls, (we always referred to our wives as "The Girls"), had there and then taken a decision.

They decided that we were going to take a series of holidays together. What is more, we would travel to a new destination every month or so.

What is more, we were to escort them to the scenes of some of our past adventures.

This startling news was imparted to us during that first evening meal.

We had taken a long, relaxed aperitif on the terrace of a port-side bistro and had then dined on

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lobster and champagne and were by then naturally prepared for almost anything.

Even so, it was only after the second bottle of champagne had arrived that the full extent of the plan was revealed.

'Why don't you ask Mike to come along. It would do him good, too,' smiled my wife.

We goggled at the Girls and shot worried looks at each other.

'Yes,' said Margaux, 'I know what you're thinking.' 'Sorry about that.' Said Alun, 'I didn't really mean it.'

'Shut up a moment, will you,' scowled Margaux. 'OK.'

'I know that, as the saying goes, two heads are better than one...'

'Three in our case.' Interrupted Alun.

Margaux sighed and looked at my wife. 'I wonder if we aren't making a big mistake.'

My wife shrugged, 'go on.'

'I also know,' she continued, 'that I have often, and perhaps a little unfairly said that, in your cases...'

'Yes, I know,' said Alun, 'that the capacity of the sum of our three brains in action, is less than any one of them taken singly.'

'Nothing unfair about that Margaux,' said my wife, 'It's a well-documented fact.'

'A case of the lowest common denominator, perhaps,' added Margaux.

'Hey!' I cried, 'I don't know about Alun's, but there's certainly nothing common about My denominators.'

'Except perhaps the lowest ones,' smiled Alun.

Margaux ignored this bit of attempted humour and continued, 'But even so, we feel that anything would be preferable to having bored husbands mooning about the place.'

'And getting under our feet,' added my wife.

We both brightened, 'Oh yes. Absolutely!' cried Alun.

'Certainly, the worst thing that could happen,' I added.

'A complete catastrophe,' completed Alun.

'Be quiet, you two.'

We became quiet and sipped some more champagne, shooting happy glances at each other.

'How about a third bottle,' smiled Alun.

'Be quiet,' ordered Margaux.

Mikes inclusion in these plans surprised us so much, for a simple reason. In most cases, Mike was the person who suggested the plans which landed us in our darkest enterprises.

When challenged, he invariably replied that he had not influenced our decisions in any way and that we had each had a free vote.

Furthermore, he invariably denied that he might have neglected to supply us with the crucial bits of information; the bits which would have swung our votes in the opposite direction.

This, added to Mikes very approximate map reading skills, had often been a source of grave concern to me.

However, it is worth pointing out that he had been a member of the regional rugby team in his early years. This gave him an outward aspect which had,

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on several occasions, served as a welcome deterrent.

On the other hand, it had also made him a little too sure of himself. This had proved to be a constant source of anguish during exchanges with the representatives of authority, especially far from home.

Alun was, unfortunately, always ready to try anything. He thus tended to look on any sketchiness in Mike's proposed plans as attributable solely to his poor presentation skills.

He could overlook the most blatant errors in reasoning. If any scheme looked like being good fun and there was a reasonable chance of cold beer at the end, then that was OK for Alun.

Having good fun was his key to the enjoyment of our little outings, but the fun was sometimes rather a long time coming.

All the same, he had the quickest mind of the three of us. Usually, he managed to find a solution to any problems, before we had finished fathoming out what had gone wrong.

All the same, his solutions inevitably carried with them a certain amount of risk. This risk was rarely communicated to us before it was far too late to bail out.

For instance, after a while, he might pipe-up and ask something like, "Oh, by the way, you two aren't claustrophobic, or anything like that, are you?" which of course we were.

He might then add, "In any case, the underground part is easy going. As long as we don't get jammed."

If we drew his attention to our shortcomings, he would be optimistic as usual, "Oh well! Don't worry. We'll cross that bridge when we get there."

This sort of thing had also occurred because one of us had been scared of Heights, insects or snakes, rough weather at sea, or other natural phenomena.

Somehow, however, we always survived.

On the other hand, I was the one who often did the worrying for the other two. I was also the one who grumbled and complained when things went wrong and looked like ending up rather a long way off, "according to plan".

I had excellent excuses for this unsympathetic behaviour because when something went really wrong, it was inevitably I who got the brunt of the thing.

Whatever happened, I always seemed to be the one holding the wrong end of the stick.

I know I shouldn't say this, but I have always suspected that this was all part of Alun's idea of fun.

My wife grabbed the bottle as I was about to serve myself. 'I'll take that,' she said, but before I could complain, she added, 'Why don't you two pop over and discuss the idea with Mike?'

'Yes,' added Margaux, 'But we will require you to write up a proposal.'

We pulled faces.

'A proposal for an extended series of voyages. Just note down the destinations,' said Margaux.

'No limits imposed.' Added my wife.

'No limits!!' I exclaimed.

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'Are you feeling all right?' asked Alun, 'It's not just the champagne speaking?'

'Oh! Perhaps, after all, they are getting a bit too old for it,' Frowned my wife.

'Pity, really,' agreed Margaux, 'Never mind.'

'We'll take the ferry and go and see Mike tomorrow,' cried Alun.

'Good,' said Margaux. 'Have some more Champagne.'

It did occur to me unusual that neither of the girls had mentioned costs.

I mentioned this to Alun, but he shrugged and told me not to worry. In most cases, unfailing optimism is a valuable asset. However, in Alun's case, it could become a very dangerous commodity.

Had we been aware of the terrible truth behind this plan, it would no doubt have astounded even Alun.

The Girls had negotiated a contract with a major publishing company, for a novel telling the story of our future travels.

They had swayed the editorial staff by presenting the outline of several chapters describing our earlier escapades, which wasn't really fair.

The publishing company had also been very enthusiastic about The Girl's idea of setting up an internet blog to precede and work-up pre-publishing interest in the book.

The company accountant had estimated that if well managed, the income from advertising on the blog would cover our travelling expenses. This is why they had decided to accompany us and why they were so uncharacteristically enthusiastic about our wildest propositions.

Had we known that we were about to be turned into the laughingstock of the planet, we might have rebelled.

That being said, we probably wouldn't have rebelled all that much and certainly not for very long.

The evening meal eventually finished in an atmosphere of eager expectation, which we had rarely felt since our childhood Christmas eves.

It would, we said, take more than two bottles of champagne, a few pre-dinner beers and aperitifs, to affect men of our experience.

At least that's what we were telling the girls, just before Alun had to haul me back out of the oily harbour water.

Chapter 3 – Visiting Mike

The next morning, we phoned Mike.

We agreed it unwise to let grass to grow under our feet. Chances like the present don't grow on trees.

Furthermore, Mike lived at Lyme Regis on one of the most agreeable stretches of the British south coast, so visiting him would be a considerable pleasure.

The girls said they would prefer to spend a few days in Paris before going on down to Grenoble for the week. They neglected to mention that they had a meeting with the French branch of their publishers. After this, they wanted some time to finish preparing their secret blog, without us looking over their shoulders.

That evening, we took the six-thirty ferry from Cherbourg to Poole and were picked up by Mike and taken to Lyme Regis.

Well, we didn't actually go "straight" to his cottage. With his characteristic foresight, Mike realised that Alun and I must have suffered a great shock, and then had had to brave the dangers of the high seas. Consequently, he suggested, nay, insisted, on a short pause at a hostelry.

Now this hostelry was of good repute, frequented by gentlemen of means and education. The victuals were known to be of the most excellent quality, and the beer was good too. So, we stopped off for a drink and a bite to eat.

Consequently, breakfast the following morning was a quiet affair.

It felt vaguely reminiscent of our younger days. It smacked of the times we had occasionally

celebrated something a little more than might have been deemed absolutely necessary.

After downing a Full English ("A sovereign remedy," said Mike), we stepped gingerly out into the cool sea breeze. We followed him slowly up the slope towards his father's home. The cottage, a short walk from the sea, was owned by his father but the old man himself, lived higher up the seaward facing hill. It was a big house with lovely rambling gardens and soaring, timeless trees and impressive rhododendron bushes.

I suppose he must have been well over eighty now and spent most of his time either in the garden or at the pub with his two old friends. This cheerful trio sometimes reminded me of Alun, Mike and Myself, but I kept this observation to myself.

'They'll be in the garden I suppose,' muttered Mike, screwing up his eyes a little at the effort of speaking, 'Dad's expecting us.'

A few steps further on he added, 'Apparently he has a little job he'd like us to do for him.'

Alun shot me a quick, frightened look.

'Oh God!' he said.

We had done a "small job" for him many years earlier and had ended up in court because of it.

'Nothing illegal,' said Mike reassuringly, then added, 'Something to do with his cat.'

I started. 'His cat? Didn't he always hate all living things except horses?'

Alun shook his head, 'Last time, it was a little job with that damn dog. Except that he neglected to mention that it was his neighbours' dog and not his own.'

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'Don't remind me,' I said. 'And we had to take all the blame, to save his so-called local reputation.'

Alun sighed, 'I can still hear that lawyer and his fruity voice. "Just young men's pranks, your honour. I'm sure that they regretted it as soon as they were sober enough for their brains to start functioning correctly again".'

He'd given a distinct impression to all present without actually saying it. That impression was that he strongly doubted that any of our three brains had ever really functioned correctly, from birth onwards. The fine had been a hefty one for us in those days, and we were even required to make a public apology.

Mike shook his head, 'Not an animal.'

'As far as I'm aware,' snorted Alun, 'Or at least as far as my education goes, a cat IS an animal.'

'Do you know!' I exclaimed, 'I really do believe you're right, Alun.'

I nodded, 'Yes. I have vague memories of our school classes, with the lovely Mrs Noel, where that particular point was covered in some detail.'

'Yes,' smiled Alun, 'But Mrs Noel was certainly more of a cat than a dog.'

'Ha, ha!' sneered Mike, 'I mean his catamaran. His two-keeled boat if you need extra help in getting the gist of the thing.'

'Oh! OK.' I said, and we relaxed a little, but not completely. No matter how trivial the task should be, we would make absolutely sure that we were doing it to something that actually belonged to him.

We turned off the main road into the close that led to the imposing house. Mike opened the gate. We then followed him along the stepping stone path

running across the lawn and skirted the hedge on the building's right-hand corner. He pushed open a tall wooden gate set in a high brick wall, and we entered the back gardens.

Three men were standing near a high stone wall which separated the flower gardens from the vegetable plot. They turned as we approached.

'Well, well,' smiled Mike's rugged and sun-tanned dad, looking us over while shaking our hands, 'Looks like the lads have been out on the tiles.' Saying this, he turned and winked to his two friends who laughed and nodded.

All three had walking sticks, hearing aids and glasses.

All three also had creases around their eyes, showing a decided tendency for laughing.

One of the two friends stepped forward, 'It's never a good idea to let the blood alcohol content drop too low though.' The two old men shook their head.

'Been proved a thousand times. A man can go completely to pieces, especially if the drop is too brutal.'

'Yep,' agreed Mike's father, 'A brutal drop can be lethal unless one is prepared and highly trained.'

'Training is essential,' added the third old man, 'Too often neglected by the modern young man.'

The three slapped their legs and laughed.

'How about a beer, lads?' he asked and burst out laughing as he watched us grimace. 'See that? Lack of training.'

I looked at the flower bed which they had been scrutinising.

'What's that stuff?' I asked.

'Tobacco plants. You are not smokers, eh?'

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We shook our heads.

'Almost ready for harvesting. Another week perhaps, if the weather holds.'

Mike leant forward and put out his hand to touch one of the leaves.

Before he could do so, his dad caught his forearm with his stick and yanked it back, 'Hands off.'

'Must be manipulated with caution.' he said, looking at his friends. 'We don't want cigars perfumed with the perspiration of drunks.'

His friend laughed and added, 'Or we'd have done that ourselves.' The three had a good chuckle over this.

'You intend to make your own cigars?' asked Alun, 'Isn't that illegal?'

'Not if you pay your taxes, then you can do more or less what you want.' Mike's dad smiled. 'If you pay them that is...'

'So, you're starting up a contraband cigar outfit.' Alun shook his head, 'Doesn't surprise me.'

'I didn't say we weren't going to pay, did I? No.'

His friend took up the subject, 'We were just reflecting that two hundred and forty pounds per kilo, is a lot.'

Mike frowned, shook his head and sighed, 'There are two point four kilos to the pound not two hundred and forty. What did you lot have for breakfast? Pure alcohol?'

'I was talking about taxes. They come to nearly a thousand quid for this harvest.'

'How many cigars can you make out of a kilo Dad?' asked Mike.

Sadly, the man shook his head and looked at his friends, 'Mike is always throwing cold water on our ideas.' he said.

I was quick with mental calculations, so I said, 'A cigar must weigh about ten grams, so you get one hundred per kilo of tobacco. So that's two pounds fifty taxes per cigar. How much does a good cigar cost?'

Mikes dad reluctantly replied, 'Fifteen to twenty. Up to thirty for top-class ones. Yes, I know, I know, nearly ten times less.'

'But you prefer to smoke with the pleasure of knowing that the smoke is one hundred per cent illegal.' smiled Mike.

'Tastes better,' said one of the old men, 'specially with a drop of illegally distilled pear alcohol...'

Mike started, 'Christ! You haven't started that again, have you?'

The men exchanged glances, 'Keep your voice down,' he whispered, 'or all the neighbours will be round for free bottles.'

'My God. You lot will end up in prison one of these days.' Mike laughed.

'If we declare that the tobacco is for making snuff, there's no tax,' said one of the men, 'but the Exciseman might come and check. So, we were considering declaring that it was being grown for scientific research, which also exempts it from taxation.'

Mikes dad completed this little discussion by saying, 'But we decided that we would go to the police next week. We'll complain that someone broke into the garden and stole it all.' He smiled, 'Clever, eh?'

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Mike shook his head slowly and sighed. Then suddenly, he stiffened. 'Hey! NO. Oh no. We are absolutely NOT going to be roped into your criminal plans,' he cried, then turned to us 'Come on lads. Let's get out of here before it's too late. That'll end us up in court again as sure as that.'

Mike's dad laughed and stretched out a restraining hand, 'Don't worry. We don't need the help of inexperienced novices. We can manage this one on our own.'

'Not our first adventure, eh?' smiled his friend, and the three laughed at some undisclosed memories.

Mike relaxed a little but remained on his guard as he asked. 'You said you had a little job you needed our help with. We have discussed this and absolutely refuse if there is anything peculiar about it.'

Mike's dad shook his head in mock sadness. 'No confidence? I'm hurt.'

'What is it, this little job?' insisted Mike.

'Well, I eventually decided to sell the catamaran, but it leaks a bit.' He admitted sadly.

'Oh! I get it. So, you want us to repair the hulls for free so that you can make a quick buck out of it.'

Mike's dad smiled, 'That's exactly it. I see I trained you well. What do you think, boys?'

His friends nodded, 'Brilliant.'

'The truth is that we would do it ourselves, but we find wriggling about inside the hulls a little more difficult than when we were your age,' he continued.

He nodded at us, 'Probably only take you a morning, then you could take her out for a sail.'

'Ah!' Alun smiled, 'Just like old times.' He had suddenly warmed to the idea, and a strange light had appeared in his eyes.

'Where is she?' he asked.

'Glad you agreed lads. She is down at Weymouth,' he smiled. 'You could sail over there in the Shrimper. I'm keeping her by the way. Anyway, the trip would get your old nautical juices flowing and the team into shape before the regatta.'

'They could use the motor if the wind's no good.'" proposed his friend.

'Yep.' Agreed his dad, 'I had it completely overhauled in the spring. Runs as smooth as velvet.'

'Regatta? What regatta?' Mike had become alert.

His father lifted one of the tobacco leaves with his stick, 'We thought you might like to have a go at the regatta afterwards, that's on Sunday morning.'

'Regatta!' Mike had always been keen on competitive sailing, so the deal was settled.

The next day we set off from the Cobb, at Lyme Regis at about mid-day. We took our suitcases along holding all our gear because there was plenty of space, the Cornish Shrimper 19 having four berths. Mike brought along a change of clothes because he declared that it would not be healthy spending the long evenings closeted up onboard in his "working clothes".

Luckily for us, the wind was just in the right quarter, and Mike proposed to leave the harbour under sail rather than the motor.

'We need to get back in shape before the race. You two are certainly a bit rusty, so I'll keep an eye on you as we go.'

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This meant that he intended to sit in the cockpit and shout at us and in this way, perfect his skippers' skills, which he no doubt felt were a little rusty too.

As soon as we cleared the pretty little harbour, the wind freshened, and soon the little Shrimper was sailing along at quite a respectable speed. Mike had already got his commanding-officers voice back. He'd also unexpectedly found a few cans of beer just at hand and was now practising the delicate art of drinking beer from a can, on a pitching boat. Although he seemed to have mastered this quickly, he was not yet satisfied with himself, so he opened a second can.

Aided by the relaxing qualities it produced, he shouted back to Alun. 'Pull those sheets in and go and see if you remember how to get the spinnaker up. We'll probably need one for the race.'

Unfortunately, Mike was not one of those people who take part in regattas just for the fun of it. Not only did alcohol occasionally flow in his blood, but also, the more potent variety of competitive spirit. We estimated it to be at least sixty per cent proof. Experience had taught us that, once we had eventually been beaten by most of the other boats, he would sulk for days.

With this in mind, Alun struggled along the heaving side of the boat to the tiny foc'astle. This was where the sail was stored.

Mike and I shouted suitably conflicting advice as to how to fix the sail, and it's three corners, green, red and white.

'Which of you two is the most colour-blind?' shouted Alun, doing his best to find the corners in the sail bag.

'Christ, Alun!' shouted Mike, 'Don't let it go overboard, or it'll get dragged under the hull, and that'll ruin it for good.' He took another sip of beer. 'Do you know how much a new one would cost?'

Alun made a noise like an angry bear. 'In a moment it'll be you who will go overboard. And even if you get ruined, I won't bother to buy a replacement.'

'Oh, thank you very much' Mike got on his high horse, 'for trying to train you to do a simple task properly for once.'

'For once?' Alun snorted, 'I never did this before.'

Mike seemed amazed. 'You never put a spinnaker up before? Never?'

'Never.'

'Oh. OK,' he took another sip, 'OK. Make sure the sheets are on the outside of the stays. Got the corners on? Good.'

He sat back against the transom.

'Now, watch how I do this. Ready to haul on the sheets?' he shouted to me.

'Ready.'

'Go!'

Mike and I hauled like fury, and the massive sail slid smoothly out of its containing bag. With a startling crack, the gathering wind filled the belly of the sail, and it shot forward, out of Alun's hands and over the water.

'Watch out.' called Mike as Alun toppled about, seeking his balance. 'You drunk or what?'

At this instant, a steel cheese-wire, which no doubt has a well-known name, appeared from nowhere and flashed outwards, propelled by the swelling sail. Alun leaned backwards to avoid being

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decapitated by it and it flashed out along the outside of his arm like a blade. At about wrist level, however, it encountered an obstruction. This was none other than Alun's beloved Rolex. The cable sheared off the wrist strap, and as we watched aghast, it flew up and was catapulted twenty yards or so, spinning and gleaming elegantly, into the waves, as only a Rolex can. Simultaneously, the boat surged forward under the impulse of the enormous extra sail, and Alun gaped open-mouthed, unable to speak.

Mike at once became very involved in doing something technical with the mess of loose rope under his feet, and I had to bite my lip. Alun worked his way back to the safety of the cockpit after looking absently after his lost watch.

'Christ. That was a close one.'

He seemed to be muttering to himself, then turned back to me. 'That was the best watch I ever had.'

'I'm really sorry, Alun.' I replied.

'Yeah. I'll never find another as good as that one.'

He seemed lost in thought. 'I picked it up directly from the manufacturer.' He paused and shook his head sadly. 'Cost me nearly ten quid in Bangkok, that did. Most genuine copy in the world apparently.'

Mike and I burst into laughter, and I had to do all in my power to keep the boat on track.

'Hey! Are you two sailing, or what?' shouted commander Mike angrily, more because his can of beer had rolled over the side than anything else.

'Damn it!' he shouted.

Chapter 4 The Regatta

The next morning, we went in search of the catamaran. We eventually discovered it hemmed in at the very back of the Weymouth boatyard, where it had been resting for some years. We found it in surprisingly good condition when we pulled off its two heavy tarpaulin covers. However, before we could extract it from the yard and drag it to a clear space where we could get to work on it, we had to shuffle ten other boats about. This took us a good part of the morning, and we naturally decided it unwise to start work without a proper meal inside us. Happily, and as usual, Mike knew just the place.

Unsurprisingly, he led us to a pub only a short stumbling distance from the boatyard. As is often the case, the sea air and exercise had given us a healthy appetite. It had also somewhat damped our initial desire to get on quickly with the job in hand. The food was excellent and the beer plentiful, so we tucked in with energy. Afterwards, Mike suggested that we ought to rest a little before starting, to enable digestion to run its proper course.

'The sun's still too high anyway,' he said, 'it'll be far too hot - at least forty centigrade - inside those hulls. You two would sweat to death.'

This was the first time we realised that we had been lumbered with the hard bit.

'Hey!' cried Alun, 'Who said I was going inside that thing?'

Mike sighed. 'You both know I'm claustrophobic, don't you?'

This was the first time we'd heard about this weakness, but he went on quickly before we could

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argue. 'And anyway, I need to be on the outside, to guide you to the places that need repairing.'

'I could do that, just as well as you Mike,' I protested.

'Oh, can you now?' Mike took on his naval commander stance with hands on hips. 'And where, pray, did this in-depth nautical knowledge come from all of a sudden?'

'No doubt from the same shop as your claustrophobia. So, shut up, Captain Cook.'

'Anyhow, it's too hot for the moment,' he said and quickly strode away to the Gents before we could take up the argument.

When finally, he deemed it cool enough to start, Mike walked back to the floating dock to the Shrimper to collect the supplies. Half an hour later, he returned with the information that one of us idiots had forgotten to take the resin on board. Then, inevitably, by the time we had been to the marina chandlery and had bought the stuff, it was too late to start.

The next day, we were up at six-thirty.

This was not because any of us wanted to. It was because some idiot was repairing or testing, the starting horn for the regatta.

'At least we can get the job done before the sun gets too hot,' said Mike over the sizzling bacon and eggs.

'That is, I suppose an impersonal WE,' I grumbled, 'in that it doesn't include you.'

'Oh, come on you guys, it'll only take an hour, then I'll buy a round.'

'Two.' said Alun, 'although I'd prefer a few more hours sleep.'

'OK. Two rounds then.'

A little later, while Alun and I were preparing the mats of prickly fibreglass and mixing the smelly resin, Mike went around the hulls with a back felt tip pen. He made a lot of fuss marking the places where repairs would be necessary.

After a while, Alun followed him, 'Christ, man! It's like a colander - there must be fifty holes to stop. You said an hour.'

'Did I?' He looked surprised to discover this, 'Oh well! perhaps a little more, but anyhow, we'll be finished in time for lunch.'

Alun and I exchanged glances and shook our heads sadly. We'd been hoodwinked once more.

Alun and I each had a mains-powered inspection lamp, so that Mike, from outside, could guide us to the places needing repairs. However, the hot incandescent bulbs had the effect of intensifying the heady smell of the resin in the confined space of the cat hulls.

'I often wondered what it was like inside a cat's gut,' grumbled Alun. 'Now, I know.'

'That's an odd thing to have wondered,' called Mike through the thin wall. 'Do you have that sort of thought frequently, Alun? If so, it might be worth seeing a psychiatrist.'

Alun made a reply which I felt perfectly adapted to the situation. However, it would not do to leave such things written down where small children might chance upon them.

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Luckily, the respirator face-masks Mike had borrowed cut out a good deal of the smell. However, the down-side was that they were unbearably hot to wear. Soon, our faces were streaming with perspiration, and we had to keep removing the damn things to wipe it off — no easy task in the confined space and the cause of much cursing.

Wriggling our ways down the narrow hulls with masks dangling from us, bumping on everything, while transporting both resin and fibreglass mats, was a long and painful job. We cursed freely at Mike through the hull's thin walls, but he pretended not to hear.

We had decided, or rather Mike had, to start the long job at the bows and gradually work backwards.

Now, even to the most inexperienced novice, it will be clear that this job is far from exciting. He will readily understand that Impregnating prickly fibreglass matting with a sticky, smelly resin is a messy and unpleasant job. This is especially so when one's movements are limited by the enclosed space and the painful cramps one inevitably gets.

Every twenty minutes or so, we surfaced for more resin and a welcome breath of fresh air, but it was hard going even so. The hulls were already stiflingly hot by half-past ten. When I came out for the third or fourth time, with even less skin left of my knees and elbows, I found Mike sitting on the hull of the neighbouring boat. He was dangling his legs happily, a half-empty pint glass of beer in his hand and another, full sitting beside him.

Following my look and never at a loss, he jumped down and handed me the glass, 'This is yours.'

I shot him a sharp glance. 'Not too hard, your end of the task?' I asked.

He pretended not to hear, 'I'll just pop over to collect Alun's. Should be ready now...'

'Ready now!' I shook my head in disbelief.

'Had to change the barrel. Back in a mo.'

Mike always astonished me with the speed with which he could invent excuses. He went over and leant into Alun's hull. 'Hi, Alun! What'll you have?'

There was no reply.

'Come on Alun don't sulk. I'm paying...'

There was still no reply.

He leant into the hull, grabbed Alun's foot and shook it. 'Christ! He's passed out, the idiot...' He turned. 'Come on quick. We got to get him out double fast. It must be the resin vapour.'

I rushed round to the other side of the hull, and we each grabbed an ankle and pulled. There was a bump, and the body jumped back.

'Christ, Mike. If his chin gets blocked behind one of the struts, we'll break his neck. Quick turn him over.'

We managed to cross his long legs but struggled to flip him onto his back. There are few things as difficult to handle than a limp body. God alone knows what this twisting could have done to his spine, but we had no time to think about details.

'Now pull quick.' By this time, the man in charge of the boatyard had noticed our agitation.

'Trouble?'

'Yep. Call an ambulance quick! He's passed out in there...'

At this moment, a stifled noise was heard from inside the hull. A low moaning sound followed this,

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but We couldn't make out a word. Mike and I exchanged worried glances; Alun was mumbling in an utterly incoherent way.

'God!' moaned Mike, 'The vapour must have got him. I bet the idiot took his mask off.'

Now, this seemed entirely possible knowing Alun, but when at last we had dragged him back far enough for his face to appear below the hatch, we saw he had it on.

His face was red and was working most strangely and animatedly, and the mumbling continued in an uninterrupted flow. I leant down and pushed the mask back up over his head to allow fresh air to reach him.

We then both jumped back.

'What the bloody hell are you two damn idiots doing?' He shouted, clearly not at all half-dead, not very unconscious either, but certainly very angry.

'You took half the skin off the back of my head. If that's your idea of an amusing prank, I'm going to show you what I think about it with my boot.'

We looked down at him as he painfully extracted himself from the hull and sat up, half in and half out of the hatch.

Mike cautiously stepped out of reach, 'We thought you'd passed out.'

'Yes,' I added 'when you didn't reply.'

'We had to get you out quick.' concluded Mike.

Alun rubbed the back of his head, and when he removed his hand, it had blood on it. 'Thanks a lot, you two. You might have killed me. I'm probably going to bleed to death now, anyway.'

'But...' murmured, Mike.

'Can't a man have a few minutes sleep without all the world falling on his head? Christ!'

'Sleep?' cried Mike, but at this moment, a siren announced the arrival of an ambulance in the boatyard. Two paramedics jumped out and came running towards us. They spotted Alun's bloody hands and pushed us aside. They at once went into automatic mode and checked for all the required things before attempting to remove Alun from the hull. He shot us rueful glances from time to time. Only after they checked his mask to make sure that it was the correct type did they ask what had happened. Mike and I had a strong inclination to slink away and get out of the immediate vicinity before the truth came out. However, we were by now hemmed in by a growing group of interested bystanders. It was then that Alun, obviously not too anxious about looking a fool in front of the gathered crowd, did some ad-lib work.

'It was the heat,' he wiped his forehead theatrically. 'It must be more than fifty centigrade in there. I thought I could stand it but obviously not. I just went out like a light.' He looked around the crowd.

'Good job these guys were keeping an eye on me though. Got me out almost at once.'

'How do you feel?' asked the ambulance man, 'Can you stand?'

Alun was on the point of saying that he felt refreshed after his sleep, but thought better of it, 'Oh yes, I feel perfect now. I just can't stand the heat you see. I should have been more careful, but you know how it is. The job's got to be done.' He smiled at the crowd and added. 'As I'm the only one who really

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knows anything about repairing boats, I just got down to it.' The crowd nodded their understanding, 'These two guys are keen enough.' he continued, 'But I wouldn't feel safe in a boat botched up by amateurs.'

The crowd murmured agreement.

'Well,' said the ambulance man, 'You'd better allow them to finish the job. You take it easy now.'

'Yes.' smiled Alun, 'Anyway I did the really technical and important bits. Mike, here will finish it off, won't you, Mike?'

Everyone turned and looked at Mike, who was on the point of calling Alun every name in his nautical vocabulary. However, under the crowd's scrutiny, he gulped and forced a smile. 'Of course, of course. Naturally, no trouble, no trouble at all.'

Alun nodded as he was led off to have his pulse and so-on checked. 'Good man. Don't worry. You'll get the hang of it quick enough. I'll explain.'

The crowd turned back to Mike again, who was once more preparing a few chosen insults. Instead, he smiled, 'Oh thanks awfully, Alun.'

'Don't forget you owe me two rounds, Mike.' He called over his shoulder.

This remark struck the crowd as an excellent reminder. An important task it had somehow neglected in the heat of the action. It thus moved off collectively in the direction of the pub, to talk over the events.

Perhaps driven by sympathy, the boatyard owner dragged down a big extraction fan with a pipe which he pushed inside the hull, right down to the bows. It drew air into the hull and cleared any accumulation of vapours. It also kept the temperature down.

'Should have thought of that before starting.' I scowled, 'Would have saved a lot of worries.'

Mike didn't reply but moved over and clambered down into one of the hulls.

'I suppose I'll have to finish the damn job now,' he scowled.

'Looks like it.' I smiled. 'We did two thirds, so you've only got your third to do.'

He shrugged.

'Don't complain.' I continued, 'Yours is the easiest third, and at least that third will be done properly, even if the rest has been botched by amateurs.'

'Balls!' said Mike disappearing inside the right-hand hull.

'I hope your claustrophobia, won't be too much of a handicap, Mike,' I said.

'Go to hell,' came the reply from within the bowels of the catamaran.

Mike was beavering away when Alun returned. 'I bought those two guys a round of drinks. Nice lads.' In one hand he was dragging two deck chairs and in the other two welcome pints of beer. He handed me one, his finger to his lips. We opened the deck chairs and turned them towards the sun.

'Keep cursing and swearing Mike.' called Alun, 'So that we know you're still alive.'

The reply was very nautical and carried with it confirmation of his long experience of the seas. The richness and variety of his vocabulary were also proof enough of Mikes true vocation in life.

The next day was Regatta Day, and as before, we were woken early by the same fool testing out the starting horn again.

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Our eggs and bacon tasted even better, now that the spectre of a blistering hot day of work was gone.

The previous evening we'd taken the catamaran out and had checked her for leaks. We tested the sails and had sailed around the outer bay in the dwindling daylight, memorising the course the race would be following. We even practised getting the spinnaker up, and more importantly down again, several times, and succeeded relatively well.

Once out on the water, Mike seemed to forget all about his recent land-side troubles. He went as far as congratulating us on our performance. 'As long as you follow my instructions, we'll do fine tomorrow.' I then reminded him that he owed us two rounds.

There were a surprising number of boats out the following day, but only about fifteen in our race. Mind you, fifteen catamarans take up a lot of room, and the experienced Mike was careful to keep well behind the starting line.

The sailors obviously knew each other, and competition was already apparent in the way that some boats were cautiously manoeuvring around each other. Mike seemed to know what was going on, but it went completely over our heads.

'See those young guys over there?' he nodded his head to starboard, 'We'll have to watch out for them. They know what they're doing. Pretty hot, I should say.'

Just at that moment, the boat slid behind us and to our leeward side, and the young captain shouted at us. 'Hey, there, grandad. How are you going to manage without your wheelchair?' He was yelling at Mike, of course.

A chorus of laughter went up from the neighbouring boats. Mike shouted back, 'We'll talk about age when hair starts growing around your little willie, laddie.' He then added something a little too nautical in nature to be included in this text. This caused a gust of laughter and a considerable scowling from across the water. The other crew, who must have been eighteen or nineteen years old, clearly hadn't expected such a juicy retort and were momentarily at a loss about how to react.

However, the captain eventually rallied, 'Turn your hearing aid up, or you won't hear the starting horn.'

Mike shook his head sadly, 'A bit lame that. Lack of vocabulary. Oh well, they'll learn.'

At this very moment, the horn sounded, and the other boat slid ahead, having cleverly manoeuvred upwind.

We followed as well as we could but were soon boxed in and were overtaken by several other boats. The young crew were obviously hot stuff as Mike had predicted and their captain reminded me of Mike himself, in his younger days.

Perhaps they were rigger players too, as he had been and well used to a bit of rough and tumble, when necessary.

Anyway, as the various stages of the race unfolded, Mike showed that he clearly knew what he was doing, and we were gaining on the leaders. Coming into the last but one leg, the wind suddenly changed direction. With lightning speed, Mike threw the tiller over into the opposite direction to the rest of the pack. He shouted, 'Spinnaker, Quick!'

Alun leapt down the boat and with surprising ease, the sail came out of its bag and went up smoothly.

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On the beam reach now, we got the best of the wind into the spinnaker, and the boat bounded forward. We gained on the others to windward and one by one they all fell astern. However, the young lads spotted our manoeuvre and quickly copied it. Mike shook his head and shouted as we overtook them, 'We'll lend you our walking sticks when you get in, boys.'

The lads showed their talent, and by the time we came up to the last buoy, they were almost level with us.

'Damn it,' shouted Mike 'they're going to try and steal our right of way, damn them.'

As they passed leeward within about a metre of our hull, the captain shouted, 'Bye-bye granddad. We'll send some oranges to the Geriatric ward, Monsieur Pampers.' and laughed an unpleasant and distinctly unfriendly laugh. Mike growled and replied with the polished invective of a veteran sailor, while keenly watching their boat.

'Prepare for combat.' he called.

We were just a few boat lengths from the last marker, and the lead was slipping from us. Then, just as they passed, Mike reached out with an unusually long boat hook, caught their rudder and wrenched it over. Their boat swerved towards the marker. Although the boys reacted immediately, they were forced to pass it on the wrong side, allowing us to round the marker and head for home. Behind us, they had to do a penalty turn, meaning that we'd finish well ahead of them.

A shout went up from the other boats as we slid away.

'Is that authorised, Mike?' I shouted.

'Old-time tactics man.' He laughed, 'Many a race was won with that in the old days. Just have to have a long enough boat hook.'

'The other guys don't seem to see it that way.' I said, seeing the arm-waving behaviour of the other teams.

'Well.' Mike rubbed his chin, 'Maybe the rules have changed just a shade since my days.'

We were by now flying down the home-straight, but the shouts from several other boats close by seemed to confirm that rules had undoubtedly changed. Then, as we were approaching the referee's boat, there was angry yelling from behind. We turned to see the young boys jumping about and waving their fists in a highly menacing way. Mike ran back and took the tiller from me. He threw the rudder around to bring the referee's boat between us and the other boat. In so doing, the long boat-hook which Mike had lashed back in place, caught the referee's anchor cable as we passed. It was so firmly held in place by its retaining ropes that it dragged their boat backwards. It did this with such a jolt that it sent all the judges stumbling about, arms flailing, in search of something to stop them going overboard.

As we dragged the referee's boat onwards under the force of our massive spinnaker, we heard a sudden roar from behind us. The referee's boat was now directly in the path of the boy's catamaran which had been flying at full speed after us. With a sickening crunch, their starboard hull smashed into the referee's boat and sent everyone sprawling on to the decks again. The sound told us that they must have breached the hull.

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Behind us, we saw the two boats separate, and as the referee's boat righted itself, the gash in the hull fell below the surface and water rushed in. To make matters worse, the rope holding our boat hook, stretched to its absolute limit, broke. Like an arrow, the heavy wooden pole was catapulted back and upwards. We watched with horror as it flashed towards the boy's boat. It speared their straining, stretched spinnaker near the foot, slicing a long slit. The tension due to the wind did the rest. With a great tearing sound, the canvas slit open and upwards and the vast sail split entirely in two. In a great flapping of canvas, it transformed itself into two flapping and useless sheets.

By now the referee's boat was leaning over at a rather unpleasant angle. The judges scrambled either onto the boy's catamaran or onto another which had come up. However, one man - obviously the boss - had kept his head through all this. Seizing the megaphone, he turned to us. 'Disqualified.' He screamed, then followed this with a choice series of nautical insults. Translated into layman's terms clearly this indicated that we were requested to remove ourselves from the vicinity at our earliest convenience.

Happily for all involved, our boat, now freed from the constraints of the hook, bounded forward and we were able to comply with their request with unexpected promptitude. As we shot away, Mike came back beside me and surveyed the scene of the disaster. The other boats had dropped their sails and were gathering around.

'Oh, hells bells!' moaned, Mike. Then with the foresight of the seasoned mariner, he came to a decision.

'Full steam ahead lads, let's get out of here double-quick, or we are in for one hell of a lot of trouble.'

I set to the task but added, 'And a bit of a punch up too. If I go by the look on those lads' faces, that is.'

'Yeah. That too,' agreed Mike.

Under the pull of the straining spinnaker, we shot through the gap in the outer breakwater and onto the smoother water of the outer harbour. We sailed into the marina and pulled the catamaran up onto the concrete apron.

Looking back, we saw the lifeboat heading out. Within a record five minutes, Alun had stowed the spinnaker away, and Mike and I had furled the sail. We cleared the decks and dragged the boat as fast as we could back behind all the other boats. Once we'd pulled over the dirty, time-worn tarpaulins, the boat looked as though it had not been moved for years.

Mike had been keeping an eye on the harbour to make sure that none of the other boats was following us.

'Here they come.' he called, 'Let's get moving.'

We sprinted out along the floating pontoon to the Shrimper. By the time the first follower was manoeuvring to enter the marina, Mike had powered up the motor. We were soon sliding smoothly past them, keeping well hidden inside the cabin. A minute or so later, we slipped out of the bay via the

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Castletown breakwater gap. We were out into the channel and safe.

'Christ,' sighed Mike, 'That was a bit close.'

Alun and I exchanged glances but said nothing.

'I could do with a beer. What about you two?'

He stepped up onto the deck and leaning over the rail, pulled up a rope to disclose a big, dripping fishing net.

It was bulging almost to overflowing with cans of our favourite beers.

'Cold beer all round.' He smiled. 'And don't forget, we have to celebrate.'

We frowned.

'We won the race, didn't we?'

Alun and I fell about with laughter and had difficulty in keeping from collapsing onto the cabin floor.

It was as if we had been transported back in time thirty years to the days when we did this sort of thing on a regular basis.

Mike, as usual, didn't see the funny side of things.

'Did we or did we not win?'

'Oh yes, I spluttered we won all right.'

'Tactics may have changed, but at least we showed those kids who the bosses were. Old guys rule, right?'

'Which is why we are making a tactical retreat. I suppose.' I suggested.

'Yes. Tactically it seemed wiser to defer any debate about comparing the merits of old school techniques versus modern ones.'

Alun nodded, 'Tactically, I too, prefer to avoid getting on the wrong side of a young rugby player's

fist.' He laughed, 'Age has brought with it a certain amount of wisdom in that respect.'

'That's what I thought too,' agreed Mike. 'Big shoulders too.'

I frowned, 'But surely they'll be onto us quick enough. After all, they have all our data on the Regatta entry sheet.'

'No, don't worry about that,' smiled Mike, steering the boat seaward. 'I think I might have made a few small mistakes when I filled out the form.'

Alun glanced over at me, 'Like what?'

'Well, the visitor's book was open beside me, so I just copied a name and address from that.'

'Christ!' I cried, 'Someone is going to get one hell of a surprise.'

'Professor Bright, from Bexhill-on-Sea, to be precise,' said Mike, adjusting our direction slightly.

I shook my head, 'I suppose you call that, Standard nautical tactics.'

'But what on earth made you do that?' laughed Alun.

Mike replied, quite seriously. 'Seemed a good idea at the time.'

I opened my can of beer and looked up. 'So? Now where?'

Mike smiled down at us. 'The weather is perfect, and the wind's forecasted to stay like this for forty-eight hours. If one believes the Met Office of course.'

'Yes...' I said cautiously.

'The fuel tank is full; the motor has been overhauled.'

He took a sip of beer. 'How about dinner in France?'

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This took us by surprise, but the last few days had shaken us out of our old routines and had seemed to have knocked ten years or more off our shoulders.

We exchanged glances; and nodded. 'Why not?'

Mike laughed, 'YES!' he shouted and spun the wheel.

'Get me the bearing from the chart, Alun,' he called over his shoulder.

Then to me, 'Get the mainsail tight, that'll stabilise her a bit and maybe save a little fuel. Best to be careful.'

It was half-past seven that evening when we reached the French coast, about six miles east of Cherbourg.

Mike had told us that he knew a fantastic restaurant on the seafront and that he would pay. Under the circumstances, we could see nothing much against the idea and agreed.

When we arrived near the coast, Mike pointed out a white building overlooking the small bay. The lights had just been turned on, and the comfortable-looking place beckoned to us welcomingly.

As the tide was out, we had to tie up to a buoy some way from the shore.

'We'll use the inflatable dinghy to get ashore,' said Mike.

'I'll get it out while you two bring up the pump.'

He disappeared above, and we checked the cupboard he'd indicated. The pump wasn't there.

'Where've you put the pump, Mike?' I called.

'In the cupboard.'

'It's not there.'

'Hell!'

He jumped back down and rummaged about, opening and shutting various cubby hole doors. 'Hell!' He repeated. 'I was sure it was on board.' 'So?' I asked 'We'll have to blow it up by hand.' 'By mouth, you mean,' I corrected. Alun and I exchanged glances again. 'That'll take us all night.' 'No. Come on. I'll start. Then we'll take turns.' He climbed back up onto the deck. 'We'll have it up in half an hour.'

I shook my head sadly. Although the restaurant beckoned from the nearby shore, it seemed unattainable.

I nearly fainted four times, blowing that damn thing up. Still, we eventually got the dinghy into more or less a recognisable shape.

The lights were now shining brightly from the restaurant, and we could see several groups in the window tables looking down at us. When we finally deemed that the thing would probably just about do, we lowered it over the side. It flopped about softly in an unconvincing sort of way, but I reassured myself that there could be no more than three feet of water under it. If the worse came to the worse, we could swim, I reflected. Alun seemed to be thinking more or less the same thing.

We climbed down carefully, one at each end and one in the middle and to my surprise, the thing didn't sink.

Mike took up the oars and headed for the concrete ramp that served as a jetty. We were only about

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halfway across when I had an uncomfortable feeling that the floats were getting softer.

'Mike.' I called, 'Are you sure the thing isn't deflating?'

He went on rowing. 'I got the same impression,' he agreed.

'Then you had better row faster, or we are going to get a bit wet,' shouted Alun.

I looked up and noticed that our progress was being followed by several other people. They were now standing by the big windows of the restaurant above.

Suddenly, the boat came to a halt.

'Damn it. We've hit the mud.' Mike made a face.

I looked overboard. There can't have been more than a few centimetres of water.

'Oh hell, Mike.' said Alun, "It's all mud."

'Come on, you guys.' said Mike, 'Nothing for it. We'll have to walk.' At this, he jumped out, and the mud came up to his knees.

'I'm not getting into that damn stuff. I have a wet backside as it is,' complained Alun. 'You got us into this, so now you can pull us up the ramp.'

Mike's reply has not been recorded, because even we two were shocked. Anyway, he did pull us until he was sweating and until the mud was only ankle height. We sighed and stepped gingerly out into the slime.

'Oh hell!' cursed Alun, 'How come your bright ideas always end up in some sort of disaster?'

Mike did not answer, but trudged up the ramp, dragging the almost deflated boat behind him in the slime like a dead sheep. We followed slowly, trying in vain to remain as dry and as clean as possible.

Annoyingly, our progress was now being followed by a large group of diners, who seemed to be greatly enjoying the unexpected entertainment. One man even raised his glass to us, but I must admit that I scowled and used some insults, which I thought I had forgotten.

I felt better after that.

When we eventually struck dry land at the top of the concrete ramp, we pulled off our shoes and socks and wrung as much of the slime as possible out of the bottom of our trousers.

'Surely we can't go in there now, Mike.' I said, 'Look at us!' Our backsides were wet, and we had slimy mud up to our knees.

'Oh hell,' groaned Alun, 'And how are we going to get back?'

Mike turned and looked over his shoulder at the restaurant. The kitchen door was open, and the staff had come out to have a look at the origin of all the hilarity filtering through from the dining room.

'I'll go and see if we can borrow a boat.' sighed Mike getting to his feet.

'We'll wait here if you don't mind.' I grumbled.

Thirty seconds or so later we heard Mike shout from the restaurant door, 'Come on you guys. Everything's OK.'

He was smiling as we reached the door. 'It's OK. They'll serve us, come on in.'

He ducked back in, and we followed into the long, warmly lit dining room. The patronne was waiting for us, hands firmly planted on her ample hips — nodding a generous welcome.

We entered to an unexpected thunder of laughter and applause. Many of the diners rose and clapped

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us on the shoulders. Some were still red in the faces from laughing.

In French, the patronne cried, 'We are used to sailors here, but what a show you put on, boys.' Turning to the room, she lifted her voice, adding, 'Brilliant entertainment n'est pas, everyone?'

There was another round of applause and shouting.

Several of the couples of diners, united by the pleasure of sharing unexpected events with total strangers, had drawn their tables together and were ordering extras.

Our little performance had clearly had a positive effect on customer spending that night.

'Come with me,' she said, treating us as if we were younger than her, rather than older, 'We'll dry your trousers while you're eating.'

She dug out some weather-beaten yellow waterproof trousers from a cupboard in the staff changing room and thus attired we were herded back to a table near the log fire. Our entry was once more accompanied by laughter, which was not surprising this time, because of our new nautical look. However, as we sat gazing into the fire, I notice that Alun was looking concerned.

'What's the trouble?' I asked, 'Cold?'

He hesitated and looked down, mumbling, 'I left our money belt on the boat.'

We stared at him, open-mouthed.

'You did what!?' cried Mike.

'What with all the business with the dinghy, I left it on the table...'

I closed my eyes, 'Oh God. I honestly don't believe this.'

At this moment the patronne appeared at our table. We looked down at the tablecloth, not quite knowing how to break the news. She frowned and looked from one of our faces to the other.

'Ah!' she nodded, 'The boys have a problem, yes?'

'I forgot the money on the boat.' said Alun in his broken French.

I spoke French fluently so took over. 'I can leave you my ID papers if you like and we'll come over in the morning and pay the bill.' I looked up into her face to see how this was going. It didn't seem to be going at all, and I cringed.

'And how do you intend to get back?' she said, plumping her hands back on her hips. "Your dinghy, it is in ruins."

I flung my arms up in a typical French way, indicating that I had no idea. Then unexpectedly, she turned to the room and raised her voice.

'Well ladies and gents, our group of travelling clowns have apparently left their money on their boat.' She pointed.

A roar of laughter went up.

'Shall we send them back unfed? Would that be fair, do you think? Would that be a true Normandy welcome?' she added.

A thunder of laughter went around the room, followed by a long, 'Noooo...'

She continued, 'And what about each person paying two euros for the cost of tonight's entertainment. What do you think?'

The answer was a round of applause and a thumping of tables, from the red-faced diners.

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'Perfect then, I'll add two euros to each bill for entertainment,' she cried, rubbing her hand together with pleasure. The waiters were now moving briskly about the room carrying, now bottles of champagne, now elaborate ice-creams. The patronne turned to us. 'A very successful and unexpected boost to trade, you have engineered. Thank you, boys.'

At this moment her husband appeared carrying a big pitcher of red wine which he plumped down on the table. He looked at his wife. 'I asked John to bring up their dinghy. He says he'll repair it before these showmen need to go back.'

She nodded; he then turned to us. 'A nice tasty bit of steak and some chips... Is that OK for you?'

We accepted gladly, and the patronne swished away to keep things boiling out in the main room.

By about half-past ten, we had finished our delightful meal and were feeling tired-out after our long day, full of adventures. The other diners were clearly still full of life. The number of bottles of wine and the louder and louder blasts of laughter indicated that the evening was going to be long. Above all, it looked like being highly profitable to the patronne.

Reluctantly, we left the fireside and crossed the room to change back into our dried trousers. We were surprised to be applauded and clapped on the back again, to the sound of a dozen different nautical jokes. The patronne kissed us on the cheeks, and we promised to come over for coffee in the morning.

True to his word, her son John had fixed the leak in the boat, and as we pushed off, we waved up at the diners now gathered by the windows to watch

us, just in case there might be an encore of our earlier performance.

When morning came, we washed and dressed as well as possible and rowed over to the restaurant. The patronne and her husband came and stood with us at the bar.

'Pity you can't do that performance more often,' said the man, 'We more than doubled our normal takings.'

Mike went over and thanked the son for his help. John was about twenty years old and a strong young man.

His mother grumbled, 'Just finished university and not a job on the horizon.'

'For the moment.' corrected John.

That morning we had decided to go down to Grenoble by train, and Mike asked the boy if he would look after the boat while he was away. He said he'd pay him the standard mooring fee and advanced the lad two hundred and fifty euros for the ten days he expected to need.

This brightened things up considerably, and John gave us a lift to the bus stop, from where we headed to Cherbourg to catch the Paris train.

From Paris, we took the high-speed train to Grenoble and were met at the station by the Girls.

Mike stayed with us until the end of the week before heading back to Normandy to find a crew and ferry the boat back to Lyme Regis. During this time, the Girls appeared strangely interested in our adventures and by careful questioning and cross-referencing, managed to piece together all the details of those epic few days.

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Later, these would appear in print to our utter surprise and dismay.

On his way back, Mike planned to fill the hull with bottles of wine for his father's cellar and offered Alun a berth.

But Alun said he preferred to go with Margaux by plane.

Mike said he could not understand why someone would prefer to pay for a trip when he could just as well have it for free.

But that was Mike, of course.

Chapter 5 - Traveling to Croatia

The girls accepted our proposition with unexpected enthusiasm.

This worried us.

'Spending a few weeks lazing about besides the Adriatic Sea in Croatia. Now that's an excellent idea,' Margaux said.

Now, reactions like this were highly uncharacteristic, and at first, we felt uneasy, as if something dark and ominous was gathering beyond the horizon. However, the girls eventually informed us that they had conferred and had decided to invite our various children. Their real interest in the plan then became painfully apparent.

We winced at this. A family holidays.

We winced because long experience had taught us that one's children tended to be considerably younger than oneself. This, in turn, meant they were usually unnecessarily energetic and always a bit too keen about being up and doing things. Far worse than this unhealthy desire for action, our offspring were nearly always more in favour of the wives' plans than in ours. We were therefore invariably outvoted. It should be noted that in the past this had often ended in our sulking a bit.

Even though it was universally known that we were averse to it, we had frequently been dragged out after a good lunch and shown all sorts of things we would much rather have heard about second hand. We were always ready to look with genuine and unrestrained enthusiasm, at any number of videos and photos, over the iced aperitif after a quiet

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afternoon. However, we were never permitted indulgence in such simple pleasures.

To Mike, Alun and I, lazing about beside the Adriatic had meant mostly eating, drinking and a little messing about in the sea.

‘That’s what lazing-about was invented for, after all.’ complained Alun.

In reply, the girls had merely scowled at us, and that was that.

What is more, Mike had been kind enough to offer to find a suitable house, but the girls had rejected his offer out of hand, which we considered a bit ungrateful. Their justification was that they preferred to avoid the sort of surprises they had come to expect when Mike or Alun dealt with reservations.

I had thought it a little unfair when they said they would if possible like to avoid being located next door to a petrol refinery, soap factory, open-air nightclub and above all a nudist beach.

Alun and Mike had naturally sulked a bit.

In the end, the girls found a fantastic seven-bedroom palace-like place, with lawns running right down to the sea’s edge. However, when they told us the astronomical price, it’s true that we almost fainted. They had pooh-pooed our alarmed reactions and had justified their decision by saying that the cost would be divided by seven. Alun and I knew perfectly well that at some convenient time during the final week, generally after a good meal, our better halves would suggest that we shoulder the part of the cost for our offspring.

‘After all,’ they would say, ‘that’s what money’s for.’

Such momentary flourishes of largesse, while encouraging, were, we knew, far too short-lived and focused for us to bother about bringing up the question of the new car or the replacement of the ageing laptop.

Such things were apparently, not what money was made for.

When the time came, we were informed that the Girls and the 'kids' were to fly over, while Alun Mike and I, were to drive down.

Our task was to transport the trailer-full of sea-side gear for the month.

This gear included windsurfers, paddleboards, surfboards and bicycles. It also included a surprising number of bags full of stuff that nobody would ever need or want and that would be transported back again unopened. This being said, we knew well enough that any resistance on our parts about this was useless.

'All this stuff certainly needs a jolly good airing,' joked Alun.

'And what better way of doing that,' I added, 'than a nice trip to the continent?'

'Yes, some good sea air,' he agreed, 'then we'll be able to put the stuff back to rust, happy in the knowledge that we've permitted it to see the world.'

'Agreed.' I nodded, 'One last long lung-full of the air of freedom, before undertaking that sedate final voyage towards the great dustbin in the sky.'

The girls had shaken their heads and sighed before going on with their packing.

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What one could want with underclothes, when we'd be spending all the time in swimming gear, we could not imagine.

'You're not a girl,' Said Alun, 'You can't understand these things.'

'Pleased you noticed.' I replied, and Margaux turned and plumped her hands on her hips.

'Will you two get out of here and do something useful.'

'We could always pop around to the pub,' suggested Alun, 'That'd be useful.'

Margaux sighed, 'Just get out, will you.'

We got out, having taken the last remark to mean OK.

At Poole, early the next day, we picked up Mike in the ferry carpark and found just enough room for his single suitcase.

'I thought we were going on holiday?' he remarked with risen eyebrows, 'not to a car-boot sale.'

Alun cast his look skyways and sighed.

'It's remarkable what marriage can do for a man,' continued Mike, 'It's like the multiplication of loaves. You start single with one suitcase, and then, with the wave of a wedding ring, it's transformed into a lorry load.'

'But there is one advantage,' Alun smiled, 'we now have three days, once more travelling the long, lonesome, dusty roads together.'

We nodded, 'We'll have to take it slow and easy though,' advised Mike, 'don't want to go overturning the trailer by speeding, knowing just how incredibly valuable the contents are.'

We all agreed that this was indeed a sensible precaution and asked him to remember it each time he took his turn behind the driving wheel.

Once onboard, we headed up to the deck and leant over the rail. Bands of noisy kids ran about the ship, making noise and preparing themselves to be sick all over the place.

'I don't know about you...!' Mike started, but Alun butted in, 'Yes, we're thirsty too.'

On arrival at Cherbourg, our laden vehicle and trailer was obvious fair game for a customs inspection.

We were duly pulled over.

Three men were on duty that morning, and they were obviously married men. They observed us and our trailer with undisguised sympathy, especially when we explained our plight.

The older of the three, who was apparently an old hand said, 'The key is to keep the ladies up to date, to avoid them worrying and thus spoiling the fun,' He smiled. 'That way you can slow down and maybe even get a bit behind schedule, without causing undue concern.'

'And have to stay over an extra night somewhere,' nodded Alun.

'Exactly,' smiled the official. 'The ladies wouldn't want you taking any unnecessary risks with their trailer full of essentials.'

Mike looked over at him, 'I see you have gone through this before,' he nodded.

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'Oh yes,' the man shook his head sadly, 'many times.'

The men then made a cursory check of the trailer and sighed at the sight of so many bags.

'Got plenty of ballast on board I see,' they laughed, 'Keeps the trailer from hopping about on the road too much.'

'I hadn't thought about that,' I admitted.

'That's what wives are for,' grinned the youngest of the three. Then, with a shake of his head, the chief called his assistants over,

'OK, lads, let's get on with the rest.' and turning back added. 'I suppose you'll be bringing all that ballast back again. Well, have a nice holiday.' He then hesitated. 'You wouldn't, by chance prefer us to seize that stuff and impound it till your return, would you?'

The idea seemed excellent, and we brightened, but the man shook his head and sighed. 'No. They'd be on your backs for weeks. It would be your faults, no matter how you tried to explain it.'

The insight of this man was unnerving.

'What's your wife's name?' I asked.

He laughed, and waved us on, 'Drive carefully,' he called.

The drive from Cherbourg down to Grenoble takes about ten hours including stops, but as we weren't on the road until about two in the afternoon, we planned a stop-over halfway down.

'Where can we stop where there'll be some good wine to sample?' asked Mike.

'Anywhere,' I laughed. However, having already considered this point I had already made a choice based on my knowledge of France. 'I suggest Auxerre. It's halfway and has a certain number of advantages...'

I let this sink in and waited.

'All right clever. So, what are these advantages?'

'Well...' I hesitated.

'Yes professor, tell us.' said Alun.

'Well, there happens to be a little restaurant I know, which is famed for its' omelettes with local truffles.'

Alun nodded, 'Yum, suits me.'

'And of course, some top class local red Bourgogne wine.' My two friends seemed to like the idea.

When we eventually reached Grenoble, we were given our marching orders by my wife, and we set off again the very next morning. We were heading for the north of Italy, and our route would bring us directly down onto the coast of Croatia, via the short coastal strip of Slovenia. We were naturally expecting delays getting through customs at both these frontiers but knew by experience that there was nothing we could do to avoid this.

When I said, we received our marching orders; this was an exclusive 'we'. What I mean is that Mike was detailed to listen to and to note instructions while Alun and I remained out of sight and thus obviously out of hearing.

We knew that no matter how we proceeded, we would always end up forgetting some vital point, and "get it all wrong". The "getting it all wrong" part, was not new to us and had admittedly never really

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caused us that much worry. It had in fact, often been a source of fun and these moments figured amongst our fondest memories. On the other hand, however, the aftermath had frequently proved hard going.

Mike, we reasoned, had no wife to remind him in the presence of friends, of such past failures.

He would get over it soon enough and would be allowed to forget. Such was not our case, and we were rarely permitted such luxuries.

Added to this incontestable advantage of Mike's, was the fact that he also had a little-known talent, which had been of use to us in the past. He could stand stock-still and gaze at the speaker with an intense look of attention and concentration on his face. Such was the effect produced that it was impossible to imagine that he was hardly listening at all and even less that he was thinking about something else.

So, if we were inevitably going to get something wrong, we felt it far preferable to place the whole of the blame in one well-defined place.

Mike was resilient.

We thus headed off, with a song on the collective lips, and if my memory is correct, this was "We are the Champions".

Our route from Grenoble took us first to Turin, then Milan and Verona, but before reaching Padova, we left the motorway.

'I know a place where we can stay the night.' Said Mike who was driving at the time, 'Right on the edge of the Brenta river with a lovely view. Good food too. No roads either.' He hesitated, 'The Penisola Agriturismo.'

As Mike was very fussy about his sleeping arrangements, we accepted without question, and we headed north.

As soon as he got off the motorway, and into what he called “real” Italy Mike seemed to become a little more Italian every minute.

'The hotel is near Piazzola Sul Brenta.' he said more loudly than usual and waving his arms about. His driving gradually became more and more erratic and Italian.

'Hey, Mike slow down a bit.' I shouted from the back, 'We've left the motorway you know.' At this, he slowed a little which allowed him to wave his arms more freely.

'Here's Piazzola,' shouted Mike as he navigated us along what seemed to us to be a cycle track, 'And this here's the Brenta. It winds and twists like that, all the way down to Venice. Well not far off anyway.'

At this point, the road met and followed the river around one of its many horse-shoe meanders.

'The hotel's all alone, at the end of this spit of land. We'll have the river on three sides and fields on the fourth.'

He suddenly pointed to out to our right,

'That's the village of Campo San Martino. It's on the other side of the river, but our place is straight down here.'

Well, he was right, and it was straight down there, at least as the crow flew.

On the other hand, not having been exclusively designed for crows, our track seemed to have hesitated slightly en-route. After some of this hesitation, it had apparently decided on doing a

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sharp right angle turn to join the main road, the Via Kennedy.

'Oh hell!' Cried Mike on discovering the unexpected deviation from straightness. He swung the wheel violently and somehow, we got around. Well, not everything got around equally well. There was a sharp crack and the car bounded forward.

'What the hell was that?' shouted Alun.

I had spun around and already knew the answer to the question.

'The trailer,' I groaned, 'it's just disappeared through those trees.'

'Christ!' shouted Mike jamming on the brakes. 'The river's down there.'

'Hell!' We all jumped out and ran to the edge of the road.

'Yep,' said Alun, 'there's the river. And there's the trailer.' It was lying on its side, having come to rest against a large tree at the bottom of the bank. Unfortunately, the strap holding the paddle boards had snapped and having spotted the water, they had understandably responded to its call and were now drifting sedately out into mid-stream.

'Hell!' shouted Alun again and dived down the bank closely followed by me. We waded out into the water and caught two of the boards before they could get out of reach and slid them back to Mike who hauled them up the bank. When we turned back, the other two were already floating away downstream.

'Oh, Hell.' repeated Alun looking across at me. I shrugged and dived fully dressed into the cold, brown water. We swam out and grabbed one each

then straddling them, paddled back to the shore further downstream.

'At least the banks are not slimy mud like last time in Normandy.' muttered Alun.

'Yeh. But this time Mike has managed to keep clean and dry.'

'We can deal with that later,' smiled Alun.

'Not now,' I nodded, 'He'll be expecting it.'

'Agreed.'

We were correct in our assumption because Mike had moved well away up the bank and was pretending to do something with a bit of rope.

'Well. Now that was an unexpected pleasure.' sneered Alun, 'Any other little Italian driving tricks like that up your sleeve, Mike?'

'I didn't see that damn corner coming. It wasn't there last time I came,' he complained. 'The idiots must have modified the road,' he snorted, 'Typical.'

'Well, the corner saw you coming if you didn't see it.' I quipped.

'Come on.' Shouted Alun from beside the trailer, 'Let's get this back up before we catch a cold.'

This task proved harder than expected and ended with us having to half unload the damn thing before it was light enough for us to drag up the slope.

However, we managed somehow and eventually got everything back on and strapped down. We then backed the car over and pulled the trailer up.

'Hey!' called Mike.

'What's up now?' this from Alun who was drying himself on a towel we had unpacked.

'There's a bit missing.'

'Well, this time you can go in after it. I've had enough river for the moment.'

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'No. I mean a bit is missing off the car.'

'Off the car?' I frowned.

'No. Off the hook thing.'

'The hook thing?'

'Yeh, the what's-its'-name.'

We shrugged and squelched over to look at the thing he was pointing at.

'Hell!' groaned Alun. The trailer hook had snapped clean in two, and the half with the ball was still firmly engaged in its' correct place on the trailer. We gazed down at this with gathering horror as we realised that this was Italy and also Friday evening.

Alun shook his head sadly,

'What did that customs guy say about getting behind in the planning?'

'An experienced man,' I nodded

'Been there, done that...'

'Exactly,' I agreed.

'What did you do with that bit of rope you were playing with?' he asked Mike.

'Rope?'

'Not to strangle you with. At least not yet,' shrugged Alun, 'to tie the thing up with. We'll see what we can do at the hotel.'

'Ah. OK. I put it here.'

Well, naturally enough, our idea didn't work because the thing sagged and kept digging into the road. Eventually, I had to sit in the boot holding the rope taught, to keep the trailer more or less level, which proved harder than I had expected due to its five hundred kilos jolting about.

Luckily though we only had to drive two or three hundred yards, but I don't think I could have managed much more.

'Here we are.' shouted Mike, waving his arms enthusiastically as we drove under some trees into a vast courtyard, 'welcome to the Penisola gentlemen.'

The place was a vast converted farm building, done up with excellent taste, but we were not all that attentive to such things at the time.

'You're the only one dry and clean,' growled Alun, 'Go and tell them what's happened and get the keys.'

'If you insist,' sulked Mike.

'I do. Ask them if they know a garage around here.'

Mike nodded and strode off happily, while we went around to have a closer look at the damage.

'Must have been some sort of defect in the metal,' I said, fingering the fracture, 'shouldn't have broken off like that.'

I looked over at Alun and frowned.

'Alun?'

'Yes.'

'Where did you get the trailer hook from?'

He kept his head lowered ominously,

'The Hook?'

'Yes. The hook. Where did you buy it?'

'Buy it? Well now let me think...'

'Alun. Where did it come from?' I kneeled down and looked up into his downturned face.

'Well,' he hesitated, 'I didn't actually buy it.'

'Not actually?'

'Well. In fact, I more or less found it.'

'Found it?'

'Well. More or less.'

'How on earth can you more or less, find something?' I looked at him, and the truth suddenly dawned on me. 'You got it off a tip, didn't you.'

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'Well...' I shook my head and added, 'I meant, more or less.'

'Well, yes. More or less.'

'So, in practice, one could say that it wasn't what one would normally term "new and unused".'

'Yes, I suppose one could say that.'

'I know,' I stood up, 'more or less.'

'Well, Margaux wouldn't let me buy one.'

'At least now we know why it had been dumped at the tip.'

Alun brightened at this.

'Yes, I often wondered about that.'

'I'm pleased that at least we got that point cleared up. I'm sure Margaux will be delighted.'

Alun winced, but seeing Mike come out of the doorway with a thickset agricultural-looking man, I went on hurriedly.

'Mike doesn't know about this I suppose?'

'No, I don't think so.'

'It would be a pity to let him off the hook.'

'Off the hook. Ha, ha, ha.' Alun broke into a laugh, and I followed his lead.

By the time the two reached us we were doubled up with mirth, clutching the sides of the trailer to avoid collapsing onto the gravel. The two men gazed at us with astonishment, but even so, it took all the moral strength we possessed, to regain a more or less stable outer aspect.

Mike introduced us to the owner, who had previously been the farmer of this entire part of the countryside.

He had handed over the farm to his son and had retired to the role of the hotel owner. He told us later

that he now worked shorter hours and earned more than when he was a farmer.

'I'll hand on the hotel to my son when I'm too old, and he'll hand the farm over to his son and so on.' He smiled at the idea of this legacy stretching off into the mists of time. It seemed a good idea to us too.

When he looked down at the damage, he shook his head and massaged Mike's shoulder with a heavy hand as he spoke.

Mike translated, 'He says We'll never get a replacement this weekend.'

He listened a little more and nodded to the farmer who had suddenly and unexpectedly become highly animated.

'He says that the local garage belongs to a complete idiot called Antonio who is the son of a scoundrel called Luigi.'

He nodded at us, 'There seems to have been a little friction between the families concerning a certain daughter.'

'I thought I caught a girl's name,' I nodded.

We looked across at the man with understanding and sympathy. Daughters, we knew by experience, could be the source of a good deal of unnecessary stress and trouble.

Mike continued, 'Nothing too serious though, I think because they are still on perfectly good insulting terms.'

He then said something in Italian to the hotel owner, who made some sort of huffing noise and threw his hands in the air, before going off into a rapid rattle of speech again.

Mike translated. 'If we want to keep our rooms, we'd better stay off the subject of garages.' And

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listened a little more, 'Anyway he says his son can repair the hook easily enough. He says repairing stuff like that is part of real farmers' daily life.'

We gave the man a thumbs-up sign, and at this, he jumped into the boot and took up the rope himself.

'The farm is the building we saw just before the gates. Only about a couple of hundred yards.' I looked back at the broad shoulders and thick arms of the man.

'He probably won't even notice the weight,' I commented.

'No.' said Alun following my look, 'probably used to lifting cows bodily over fences, to save having to make a gate. Cheaper.'

The man's son was more or less of the same build, just a bit younger. He went down on his knees and fingered the fracture, then fished a tiny folding magnifying glass out from his pocket.

After inspecting the thing, he handed it to his father who nodded agreement, before speaking to Mike.

'He says there was a fault in the metals' smiled Mike, clearly reassured that this would avoid him getting lumbered with the blame, 'Could have broken at any time apparently.'

We were not having any of this letting him off so quickly.

'But it didn't break at any time. It broke because you nearly crashed us all,' I reminded him.

Mike shrugged.

'Tell them exactly how it happened,' said Alun. Then, as Mike continued to hesitate and undoubtedly would have preferred to avoid it, Alun

went into a fantastic pantomime of gestures, which the two farmers followed, clearly understanding. He scratched a map on the dusty ground, then mimed first the sharp turn, the rolling over of the trailer, the floating off of the boards and us swimming after them. It was quite a fantastic performance, and I was impressed. They nodded understanding and when he finally pointed to our wet clothes they were clearly convinced.

The younger man looked from the trailer to the hook several times and nodded.

'Troppo Veloce' he nodded 'Troppo Veloce.' That at least we understood and nodded vigorously.

'Si. Troppo Veloce. Mucho troppo veloce.' said Alun improvising.

Mike scowled at us, but the older man laughed and clapped him on the shoulder before pouring out a new stream of speech.

'He'll weld it back on again but says now it's time for the aperitif now, so we'll have to wait.'

'When do we come back then, tomorrow morning?' I asked.

Mike translated, but the two men shot their arms up and cried out laughing.

'Apparently, we're to go along.' He hesitated, 'Even you two. He'll do it later.' He stomped off after the men, and we exchanged amused glances.

'I'll bet you those two guys have had more stuff off the local tip than I have.' smiled Alun.

'Part of a farmers daily life, I expect.' I replied.

'Probably.'

Now the idea of doing things later in Italy has to be taken in context to be understood clearly. The process was initiated when we gathered at a large

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deal table under a spreading plane tree where the farmers' wife had already brought the ingredients.

She greeted us, 'Ah English. I speak a little English. One moment.' and she disappeared to return seconds later with a tray stacked with extra glasses and various new ingredients for the aperitif.

Well, what with our being able to converse with the wife and with Mike taken up with his conversation with the farmers, time slipped by. A little later, with much gesticulation, we were invited to eat with them. By the time this was finished, night had come, and the last drops of the several bottles of red and white wine were drunk in the moonlight. I suggested, via the farmer's wife, that it would probably be better to come back in the morning to repair the trailer. She translated this, but the farmers threw up their arms as if they had never heard of such nonsense. The night was still young, from an Italian farmers point of view.

We thus drove the car a little unsteadily, over to a big barn, hoping that the farmers held their wine better than us. They first persuaded the ball-end to leave its resting place, employing a few sharp bashes with an ancient mallet. This done, the younger man fitted the two parts together and tutted.

He then said something to Mike, who translated.

'Apparently, it's a bit bent. But he thinks he'll be able to fix it.'

However, Alun wasn't going to miss this chance of getting at Mike, 'Ah troppo Veloce eh?' he cried loudly.

'Si si, troppo veloce.' Nodded the older man.

Well to cut a long story short, they carted out a rusty and dented oxy-acetylene welder and lit up half

the countryside with its brilliant light. The job was done in next to no time, but the young man's father insisted on inspecting the work with the magnifying glass before nodding approval at his son.

The latter then stood back and directed a powerful kick at the ball. The car jumped back, but the ball remained in place. He then repeated the test from the other side and nodded to his dad.

Now, I admit that I am not an experienced mechanic, and it may have been the effect of the wine, but to me, something looked a little odd. However not being a recognised expert in such things, I held my tongue.

We thus drew the trailer up and presented the two parts. The thing seemed to jam a bit, but the farmer was apparently used to such reticence from stubborn mechanical things. He thus jumped on the trailer end, and it snapped into place. Mike then levered himself into the car and manoeuvred it a little and immediately something odd occurred.

The left-hand wheel of the trailer left the ground.

I looked over at Alun, 'I think the thing is a little more bent than it looked.'

'Or the trailer chassis is bent.' contributed Mike.

The Farmer and his son went around to the back and lay down on the ground to look under the trailer.

I looked at Alun, 'Where did you get the trailer from Alun?' but he wandered off without replying.

'We can't drive it like that.' I said to Mike. 'The tyre would blow out as soon as we started on the motorway.'

'Don't worry so much,' said Mike, 'after a few miles, the thing will probably work itself back into place.'

Three men in a panic

'Work itself back into place? It not a pair of trousers.' I got down on my hands and knees and looked at the trailer chassis.

'You don't honestly think that those steel beams will twist back into place?'

'Maybe.'

'Never,' I said

Mike blew out his cheeks, 'I bet that guy has welded it back on all bent.'

'That wouldn't surprise me if he had drunk as much wine as you. But it looked ok to me.' I lied. I wasn't going to let him off yet.

By this time Alun and the two men were crouching behind the hook. Alun, who was more mechanically minded than I, was making a suggestion.

Mike scowled over at them, 'Can't they just un-weld the thing and weld it back straight?'

'Un-weld?' I shook my head, 'You can't un-weld something.'

He shook his head as if to say, anyone competent would be able to do it.

Anyway, the others seemed to have agreed on some corrective measure and went off together into the barn, to return almost immediately with a wedge-shaped bit of rusty iron and a spirit level. They first moved the car and checked it was level, then, after loosening the hook retaining bolts, hammered the wedge into the gap created, until the hook rotated, and the trailers two wheels came back onto the ground.

They checked the trailer with the spirit level and then welded the wedge into place. This done, the three men stood back and exchanged looks of mutual satisfaction.

The task was completed with a few glasses of Grappa.

On the way back to the hotel, while Mike was chatting to the Hotel owner in the back, I leant over.

'Where did the trailer come from Alun? Not from the same tip as the hook?'

He looked at me and shook his head sadly. 'Do you take me for a complete idiot, or what?' he laughed, 'I got it from a completely different one.'

Chapter 6 - Free Sand

The next day was a Saturday, and we headed off for our destination with holiday spirit oozing from every pore. This sense of well-being was further amplified when we unexpectedly got through all the customs posts without the slightest trouble.

The other members of our families had reached the destination the previous day. So, one of Alun's sons-in-law came on a bike to meet us at a strategic point and guide us to the house.

The house, when we reached it, was a remarkable edifice. But the thing which we found by far the most astonishing, was that it was exactly as described in the advertising blurb. It didn't even have a hidden main road running noisily two metres under the front windows or a smelly factory looming over the back wall.

Its long, white, multi-windowed facade opened onto a surprisingly well-kept lawn, running down to an uneven line of piled up rocks which separated the garden from a narrow dirt track. Beyond this, a short steep slope dropped onto a stony beach, not a hundred yards from the terrace. From nearly all the windows, one looked out over a small semi-circular bay, about half a mile across filled with glittering turquoise water. To our left, we could just make out the vast expanses of the Adriatic, beyond the headland.

One of the significant advantages of having plenty of sons-in-law is that, if chosen with care, they can take a good deal of work off one's shoulders. Once one has carefully navigated them into the certitude that they know better than you, which admittedly is

seldom tricky, one can sit back and relax. This is especially the case when young sons-in-law gather in tribes, such as was the present case. They had the trailer unloaded in next to no time and before we knew what was happening, had dragged the boards down to the sea and were paddling about with our daughters. Luckily the water was some way off because eight youngsters make a lot of noise when released into warm waters after a year in England.

Mike leant over and frowned, 'Do you two realise that the sum of the ages of any one of those couples is less than any one of ours.'

Alun and I exchanged glances.

'Got anything else stimulating, like that, to help the holiday spirit along, Mike?" he said.

'Just thought it was interesting.'

'Well, it isn't," sighed Alun.

'Surely, it can't be far off aperitif time?' I mused.

'Or at least, sneaking-a-quiet-beer time.'

suggested Alun, getting to his feet.

'I suspect its closer to that,' I agreed.

If such a mutinous thought as this got as far as my lips, it was because the girls had gone off in the car to get some local produce for the evening meal, leaving the coast clear. Better still, the eight kids would be messing about in the water for hours, so off we went.

The Girls had said that they must stock up with plenty of vegetables and had taken some big baskets with them.

'What we could want with vegetables, apart from potatoes, I really don't know," said Alun.

'I hope they are not planning to put us on one of their healthy diet plans again,' Said Mike.

Three men in a panic

Alun nodded, 'again,' he groaned.

'Let's pray to god that they haven't been reading those damn heathy-life-style articles in the Air-France magazine on the way over.'

'Oh, God! "Start now, and like us, live solely on tomatoes, olive oil, wild herbs and fish, and never a drop of alcohol. Do this and before you know it you too will have a pinup silhouette like us.",' I frowned. 'Those articles are dangerous. Their messages sink in fast and deep.'

'Shouldn't be allowed in public places,' snorted Alun.

'Dead right!' Exclaimed Mike, 'Or worse still, a scientific one proving that the inhabitants of a recently discovered tribe, live on average twenty years longer than the world average.'

'Yeh, and naturally these guys never eat hamburgers, and always eat four raw slugs before going to bed.'

'What more proof does the normally constituted wife of a retired gentleman need?'

'None,' agreed Alun. But shaking his head he went on, 'Anyhow, I think the risk is relatively low. The mere presence of so many young and absurdly active people will defend us against too much privation. Young people need good food to compensate for all the energy they burn up,' he smiled and nodded, and I laid my hand on his shoulder.

'Yes. Anyway, if ever we notice any tendency of sliding towards a disproportionate amount of healthy eating, we'll point it out.'

Alun nodded. 'That's agreed then. Our strategy shall be aimed uniquely at protecting the health and well-being of our offspring.'

'It is reassuring to realise that we do, after all, have an important mission to fulfil during our remaining years,' I sighed.

'Found the beer?' asked Mike.

'Yep.'

Thus supplied, we returned to the terrace table and relaxed in the deep shadow bordering the long swimming pool.

A wasp came zooming in from above, but I could have told it that it didn't stand a chance. Before it got within sniffing distance of his glass, Alun flicked it away, and it did a crash dive into the pool.

When the girls arrived, they greeted us with a friendly,

'Oh! You've got here, have you?'

We notified them that this was indeed the case.

'And you've already located the lost fountain of youth.' Said Margaux, with a slight curl of the upper lip.

'Yep. Found it,' admitted Alun, pretending not to have noticed the little jibe. 'Want some?'

'If any of you three can still stand, how about unloading the car for us?' They then turned on their heels and went off to do more important stuff.

Alun made a familiar grimace and waved his hand up and down from the wrist in a very French-like gesture. However, it seemed prudent to do as requested, so we moved off in the car's general direction.

Three men in a panic

From a distance, Margaux turned, 'If the lads had been here, we wouldn't have had to ask.' She shouted after us.

'Don't answer,' whispered Alun, 'and don't register having heard. They obviously had a spot of trouble somewhere.'

Well, the trouble was relatively easy to spot. The offside headlight was smashed.

'They're obviously not used to the local rules-of-the-road yet," Smiled Alun. 'The right of way always goes to the fastest car.'

We laughed or rather, sniggered so that from a distance our reactions would not be noticed.

'Don't go near the front, lads,' I said, 'we haven't noticed a thing.'

'No leave that to the kids. One of them is bound to think it funny and make a joke of it," smiled Alun, then we can join in safely.'

'Ones children can get away with things which would cause our immediate downfall,' Mike agreed.

'That's parenthood for you,' joked Alun,

'Keeping one's mouth shut, takes a hell of a lot of practice,' I added, 'I still have trouble on some occasions.'

'I wonder if one has wives in Heaven,' mused Alun.

This point struck us as an incredibly profound point, and well worth pondering.

'It might be worth questioning the local priest on that point," I suggested. The other two glanced at me with grins.

'Now that would be an interesting experiment,' said Mike. 'I bet that would tax his knowledge of the afterlife phase.'

'Would test his ability to produce a convincing lie without batting an eyelid. We could try that out tomorrow,' said Alun.

'I suppose there is a priest in these parts?' frowned Mike.

'Bound to be,' I said.

'So that's our task for tomorrow morning then.'

'I haven't been to church for years,' added Mike.

'Never too late, Mike. All these little efforts one makes are all set down in the great register of life. That might just about sway the balance in the right direction if we are lucky.'

'But I suppose that you two get extra points from being fathers," he said, 'which seems a little unfair really.'

'It's being husbands, that gets you the most points in the celestial log-book. Shows resilience and staying power and that's what the heavenly HR department is looking for, for key appointments.'

'Would you say that illegitimate children count?' asked Mike.

We looked over at him sharply.

'Illegitimate? You mean outside wedlock?'

'Yeh! That sort of thing.'

'Have you many, Mike?'

'Don't know. Might have a few, who knows.'

We looked at him, and he went on. 'Well, we might all have, mightn't we, without knowing it, I mean. In that case, we definitely do help in keeping up numbers. So that must count for something, surely.'

This modern viewpoint gave us fruit for thought.

'We could always take that point up with the priest too.' I proposed.

Three men in a panic

'Yes.' chuckled Alun, 'That ought to provide for some interesting debate.'

We smiled at each other and humped the overflowing horns-of-plenty, back to the kitchen.

The next day we had the opportunity of a little chat with the priest just after mass. Approaching him as soon as the twittering mass of old black-clothed ladies had dispersed, Alun open by saying that our friend Mike was concerned about some philosophical point relating to religion and above all, death. The priest had looked at him with concern when he went on to explain that Mike was brooding on this and that we wanted to avoid him spoiling his holidays because of his doubts. The priest agreed that would indeed be a pity, and that if he could be of any assistance, he would do all that he could to reassure Mike.

Unfortunately for him, he then went on to make a strategic error by admitting a little too freely that he spoke English well, having taken a BA at the Faculty of Theology and Religion at Oxford University. This was a grave tactical error because he could not now pretend not to understand us, once the discussion started to get a little more involved.

It must be admitted that he did his best and stretched his little grey cells to their limits, to render service. Under the circumstance, therefore, we were tempted to give him good marks. We debated, however, that the celestial HR department might have sucked in their breath, on hearing the evasive nature of a few of his replies.

I don't know why it was, but somehow, we didn't seem to hit it off well with him. Anyway, this was our

first encounter with a prominent member of the local community, and as such, we considered it valuable. It was a pity though that it appeared unlikely that we would be invited round for coffee and cakes. That's life, I suppose.

Respecting the age-old conventions, by the end of the second day, all eight youngsters had fulfilled their obligations. They now all had respectable sunburns.

We considered this development as timely and viewed it with a certain amount of gratification.

To understand our position, let me clarify.

Firstly, it meant that the Girls would now go into concerned-mother mode, and thus become far more nurse-like than husband-surveying wives. Secondly, it suggested that the household would go into "quiet" mode, for a short time, while the accumulated overdose of sun worked its way out of the respective systems. Thirdly, it meant that all the seaside equipment would be freely available to us.

Therefore, on Monday morning, the three of us took the bikes and did a three-hour ride around the nearby countryside. This was very pleasant, except for a distinct lack of local pubs to stop off at.

The same afternoon, we took the paddle boards out for the afternoon and came back with arms and backs aching.

The next day, the girls instructed us to stay in and keep an eye on the kids while they went to the village for vegetables.

'More vegetables!' cried the astonished Alun, then quickly added, 'are we all right for wine?'

Three men in a panic

Margaux sighed, 'there must be a least two bottles left.'

'Two! Have you seen how much those kids get through in a single meal?'

Margaux shook her head and glanced over at my wife, 'I didn't notice they drunk much wine. You three, on the other hand...'

'Don't drink much wine!' Cried Alun, then reason returned, 'oh it doesn't matter. We'll do without.'

We gazed at him wide-eyed, as the girls disappeared towards the car.

'Do without? Alun, are you feeling all right?'

'Don't worry. I'll pop around and have a chat with the boys,' He smiled, 'I'll ask them casually if we are OK for wine. One of them is bound to check. That should set the wheels turning.'

'Yeh. Sunburn is bad enough, but holidays meals without wine, are unbearable,' I agreed.

'And of course, we have nothing to do with the purchases and, they are just young blood,' finished Mike 'Good thinking Alun.'

'Well,' sighed Alun, 'It's no use letting grass grow under our feet eh?' And we wandered out onto the terrace to put the plan into action.

By the time the Girls returned, the cellar was fully restocked.

My daughter mentioned that she had packed the lads off to do this to give them something else to do than to moan about their burns.

The girls nodded understanding and said nice things to her, not even shooting us a single one of their questioning / doubting looks.

On our side, we nodded appreciation at my daughter's subtle tactics, which showed an unexpected mastery of the art of avoiding conflicts.

'Having kids along has, after all, certain advantages,' said Alun.

'A well-trained daughter, that.'

'Thanks,' I said.

At dinner, the Girls told us that they had met the Mayor of the district. A charming man apparently. He had told them that he knew our place very well because his son in law had built it. He explained that the land on which it now stood had unexpectedly been upgraded from non-constructible, agricultural land to constructible, which had enabled his sister to sell it.

The Girls had said that it was a pity that the beach was so rocky, and not sandy. Taking on a mayor-like stance, the man had said that, yes, he might be able to do something to improve that.

'It is important for us to make the visitors to our little community as comfortable as possible,' he smiled.

Well he wasn't very likely to say the opposite now, was he?

On that first Friday evening, we were surprised to see a huge truck edging along the tiny track at the bottom of the lawn. I suppose it must have had a forty or fifty-ton capacity and was so wide that its wheels were half over the edge of the track. It eventually disappeared around a turn in the track and silence fell once more. We didn't see it return and heard nothing more that night.

Three men in a panic

However, next morning we awoke to find an enormous mound of white sand at the end of our lawn. It was smack in the middle of the track, blocking it entirely and part of it had slipped down onto the rocky beach below.

The girls were amazed.

'Now that's what I call service with a smile,' cried Margaux.

'You asked the Mayor for a sandy beach, and here it is. Brilliant,' added Mike.

My wife, however, continued to frown. 'Surely the Mayor would have sent someone to tell us about it,' she murmured.

Mike obviously wasn't concerned with such petty details, but Alun and I prudently held our tongues.

'But it's the weekend,' he contributed, 'and you know perfectly that everything stops here. The guy probably just wanted to get the job done quickly, while he had a truck and a driver available. He'll probably be round to see us on Monday.'

At this point, the kids arrived on the scene of the discussion. My younger daughter at once clambered up to the top of the pile, which must have been twelve feet high. 'I can see New-York from up here,' she cried jokingly. Naturally enough, the other seven immediately went scrambling up to see New York, so we decided to go and have breakfast on the terrace while things sorted themselves out.

Now, over the last two days, the wasps had started to be a little troublesome, but before mid-day, they seemed to keep to their beds. It appeared thus that Croatian wasps knew more about life than their British cousins who were always flying about wasting

valuable energy, long before there was anything worth buzzing about for.

Anyway, Mike seemed to have infected the others with his enthusiasm. So, by the time they had all had a good look in the general direction of New York, they were converted to his theory. The consequence of this was that after breakfast, they all trooped down to look at the pile of sand and started working out ways of transporting it down onto the beach. It just happened that the day before, we had noticed a building site about two hundred yards down our track, nearer the main road and they eventually set off to see what they could find of use there.

From our place on the terrace, we surveyed their progress and saw them stop someone on a bike. There was a good deal of arm waving and pointing, and then the troupe moved off towards the half-built house.

The place gave the impression that it had been started, then suddenly forgotten. However, the well-known Croatian adage is that the best time to build a house was when one felt like it, and the present time just happened to be a not-feel-like-it period of the year.

Anyway, the kids swarmed over the place like ants and returned armed with a wheelbarrow full of shovels.

Now, Mike hadn't had children and naturally made the standard error when surrounded by numerous pretty young girls more than half his age. He forgot, he was no longer thirty years old, and the presence of four active, energetic boys led him on even further. We looked on from a distance, shaking our heads from time to time.

Three men in a panic

Luckily, my younger daughter had climbed back up onto the sand pile and with some careful arm waving, pointing and gesticulation, I sent her a message, to which she gave a thumbs up sign.

'Uncle Mike,' She called. 'Can you come and give me a hand with the drinks?'

Those carefully chosen words, "uncle", and "drinks", had the desired effect and Mike threw down his shovel and joined her.

On the return trip, we duly waylaid him and told him we needed his advice about the afternoon outing. This manoeuvre gave him an honourable way out of an otherwise potentially dangerous predicament.

I winked and smiled thanks to my daughter as she passed with the tray.

The younger segment spent the rest of the day at the job, and by four o'clock they had finished. The pebble beach had been converted into a lovely sandy cove, albeit, relatively small. In any case, it was wide enough to play beach volley on without having to limp back and forth after jumping on a sharp rock.

How long it would stay there, I can't say, but that was not our problem. It would do for the holiday.

We thus spent a pleasant Sunday on the only sandy beach in the region.

The next morning was our second Monday, and when we emerged for breakfast, Mike had already finished and was at the bottom of the garden inspecting his beach.

The kids wouldn't be up until eleven, and the Girls were chatting in the kitchen.

'They're probably planning the next vegetable expedition,' smiled Alun, slipping some more bread in the toaster.

At this moment, a dusty old local police car appeared, reversing along the little track. Mike wandered over to the two men who alighted, and the three of them seemed to be looking down at the beach.

There was quite a bit of arm waving and pointing, then Mike threw his arms in the air and got into the car, which drove off.

We exchanged glances.

'Hum!" mused Alun.

'Yes, Odd that,' I agreed.

At this moment, the Girls appeared, 'Where's Mike?'

'He just went for a drive with the local police,' said Alun.

'What?'

'The Police arrived, driving backwards, and he went off with them.'

'Why backwards?'

Alun shrugged, 'No doubt a local custom.'

'Oh, shut up. But why did Mike go off with them?'

'That's what we were wondering.'

The girls exchanged knowing looks, 'Well why not go and find out?' suggested Margaux, who was always rapid with good ideas.

'We were just debating that point.'

'Well go, then.'

So, we dragged out the bikes and went.

The inside of the small police station was almost as dusty but visibly older than the outside of their car. Of course, we hadn't seen the inside of it, so

Three men in a panic

were naturally in no place to make direct comparisons.

Mike was sitting on an old wooden chair looking up at a burly looking paint-bespattered individual, who was talking rapidly to the two policemen.

We stood taking all this in but couldn't understand a single word. When they eventually spotted us, we clarified with a bit of hand-waving, that we were with Mike.

They tried a bit of their language on us and seeing that this didn't work, called a little boy from outside and told him to go and get something. This was pretty obvious from the gestures. They then went around to the back of their counter and got on with whatever they had to get on with. The burly guy sat on another old chair and started scratching dried white paint from his overalls with a horny nail.

'What's going on Mike?' I asked.

'No idea. Something about the sea I think.'

'Strange that!' I said, 'perhaps it private.'

At this point, the door flew open, and our friend, the priest, strode in, clearly annoyed. He cast us a surprised look, nodded and shouted at the Policemen who jumped up from their chairs like rabbits from a box.

He then whirled around and directed a flow of rapid Croat at the burly man, who regardless of his impressive stature, kept his eyes mainly on his knees. The priest seemed to weigh up what he was told for a few seconds then turned to Mike.

'This gentleman says you stole his sand...' He paused, 'thirty-five tons, to be precise.'

We gazed at each other, round-eyed as the truth dawned on us. Alun, however, always quick with his

reactions laughed and slapped his thigh. 'Brilliant,' he cried, 'Brilliant.'

The Priest and two policemen gazed at him as he continued.

'This man dumps a mountain of sand right in the middle of the road and blocks it completely. Then when we have to shift a little to get our car past, he has the nerve to accuse us of theft. Incredible! simply unbelievable.'

The priest exchanged a word with the lowered paint covered cap.

'He says that the pile was on the far side of your gate and that you could get in and out with no trouble.'

The man said something more and the Priest turned back.

'He says his lorry broke down and he couldn't go further without off-loading the cargo.'

Alun frowned and then improvised again, or to put it another way, lied. 'That may be the case, I don't know, but what this gentleman failed to mention was that we had parked the cars further up the road, on the far side of his pile. What does he say to that?'

There was a brief exchange, during which we marvelled at the speed with which Alun could invent startling and convincing lies.

'He says that he didn't see any cars,' the priest hesitated, 'he doesn't say you are lying of course, but normally he couldn't miss seeing a car on the roadside.'

Mike rallied, 'Two cars,' He corrected, 'Perhaps he forgot to mention to you that he dumped the sand in the road in the middle of the night and certainly after two O'clock in the morning.'

Three men in a panic

'And,' improvised Alun, 'there wasn't a moon that night, was there.'

Naturally, none of those present remembered what the sky had been like two days previously. However, something in Alun's words provoked an almost imperceptible nod of understanding to animate the Priest's features as he turned back to the sitting form. There followed a lengthy exchange with lowered voices, during which it was clear that the Priest was getting somewhere.

During this, I leant over to the two others.

'This smells like contraband,' They nodded, and I continued, 'Ever heard of the Sand Mafia?' Their eyes opened wide, and I nodded.

'But why dump it there?' asked whispered Mike.

Alun nodded, 'Yes. Interesting that. I'll ask.' and calling the priest asked.

'Perhaps the gentleman would like to explain, why he chose the middle of the night to dump 30 tons of sand in front of our house, thus blocking the route and causing us a great deal of trouble and inconvenience?'

The priest coughed and looked slightly embarrassed. He had evidently been following up the same line of thought as we had.

As he turned back to the man, he leant forward and lowered his voice further, so that the police could not hear. His face was stern, and the answer seemed to satisfy him. During this time, I whispered. 'I bet he was stealing the sand from a beach further along the coast and took that coast track to avoid being spotted.'

'Yeh,' Agreed Alun, 'I wager he dumped it either to stop someone from following him or more likely

because he had spotted the police on the main road and didn't want to get caught red-handed.'

We nodded.

'Are these Sand Mafia guys dangerous?' muttered Mike.

'Not like the real mafia, but there's a lot of easy money involved in sand, so people get hurt sometimes.'

'Great,' said Alun, 'Well done Mike.'

The priest turned and seemed to hesitate.

'Apparently, he was waiting for the cool of the evening. That sort of thing is not uncommon in these parts you understand.'

Yes, we understood perfectly that this sort of thing and others of a similar nature might be common in these parts but decided not to say so. He went on, 'But the gentleman says that, if you only had to make a small passage, how is it that the sand is now spread evenly over the beach?'

Alun came to the rescue with more improvisation.

'Must have been the wind,' he said.

'Yes,' I added, 'I remember now that it was very blowy on Friday night.'

'Or more precisely, very early on Saturday morning.' added Alun.

Mike took up from here. 'Yes, I noticed that too. It might even have been a highly localised tornado.'

'Yes. Global warming causes that, I believe,' added Alun.

The priest translated this and smiled wryly at the reply.

'The gentleman asks if it was the wind the blew the shovels and the wheelbarrow down too.'

Three men in a panic

At this I burst out laughing, followed by Mike and Alun. Last of all the burly guy lifted his grinning face and burst out laughing with us.

He slapped his thighs, and we held on to each other, shaking with mirth, to the astonishment of both Police and Priest.

Alun wagged his finger at the burly man, and the Burly man shook his back at us, and we carried on laughing.

When we eventually managed to calm down, I turned to the priest.

'Tell this gentleman that we should try to find some sort of compromise.'

The man had now dropped the head-hanging pantomime and was grinning. When the Priest translated, he smiled and said something to which the religious man shook his head with exasperation.

'He says that he'll drop the charges if you load the sand back into his lorry.' This remark started us off laughing again accompanied by the other man.

After another quarter of an hour, we ended up giving the man two hundred and fifty euros in cash for his stolen sand, which was admittedly less than half what it would have earned him had he not had to dump it.

The priest had clearly no intention of mentioning the more incriminating details to the police and so, all in all, we were both not so badly off.

The driver hadn't got copped for theft, and we now had a lovely sandy beach instead of a rock-strewn one.

We parted after shaking hands warmly and watching him head for the bistro, a broad grin on his face.

'That's how business is done in these parts apparently,' said Alun.

Back home, the eight kids found this adventure highly entertaining, but the Girls seem to look on it as further proof of our unique capacity of attracting trouble.

'If I'm not mistaken, it was Mike who was behind this latest episode,' said Margaux, frowning one of her little, creased frowns. 'Maybe he should shoulder the entire cost.'

I smiled slyly, 'come on, divided by seven families, that's less than thirty euros each,' My wife gave me one of her disapproving looks, but I went on, 'That works out at about a euro per day for a private sandy beach. Can't complain at that really.'

The kids all agreed heartily, and the boys went indoors, en masse, to bring out the mid-day aperitif.

Chapter 7 - Wasps and Fish

Over the previous few days, we had been increasingly bothered by wasps. Nobody had been stung of course. Nevertheless, the Girls were always leaping about as soon as one of the little devils came sniffing around their plates.

'There's probably be a nest somewhere,' said Alun helpfully.

'Brilliant deduction, Watson,' sighed Margaux, looking from Alun to me, and finally at Mike. 'Well why don't you go and find it and dispose of it then?'

We didn't know the answer to this question but guessed that Margaux did.

'Well you three can make yourselves useful for once and do that while we're on the beach, this afternoon,' she said.

'OK,' I agreed. I got this in quickly before Alun had time to make the unfortunate comment, he was no doubt about to say, 'Will do.'

Alun made a face, then suddenly brightened. 'Let's go and see if we can find some insecticide in the lean-too.' He suggested, and we trooped off.

This clever manoeuvre neatly got us out of the task of clearing the table and washing up. Alun had once more startled us by the rapidity of his innovative thinking. Reflecting on this point I have often wondered why he had never considered going into politics.

Anyway, we took plenty of time over this job, and during the search discovered and studied all sorts of interesting objects. Many of these had been carefully hidden away behind other objects, to keep them out of view from the casual holidaymaker. All the same,

we did wonder why the owner had taken the trouble to hide several boxes of pipe-cleaners behind a cracked mirror.

Sadly, none of the exciting discoveries we made proved useful for wasp elimination. However, we eventually came on a wooden box full of suitably dangerous looking chemicals. Unfortunately, as the text on the bottles was either indecipherable or partially worn off, we had to go by the faded pictures on the labels. One of these had faded sketches of insects on it. On removing its rusted cap, the smell convinced us that, we were handling something which would certainly not do wasps any good. The dose was just legible, but Alun said that it would be a wise move to multiply this by ten, to be on the safe side. The bottle was big and almost full, so we saw no reason to disagree with the proposal.

I turned the container over in my hands, 'I bet this stuff was banned from the rest of the world several decades ago.'

'It's just what we need then,' smiled Alun, 'It'll do the job properly for once.'

Having got so far, we wandered around the house and outbuildings, carefully following the flight of each wasp we spotted. In this way, we discover the location of two big nests. The first was clearly visible, high up under the terrace roof and the second was under the tiles in the loft.

'The one on the terrace is easy to deal with, by hand. I've done that dozens of times,' said Alun. 'Don't tell the Girls though. If you do, they'll only get worried and worked up about a perfectly straightforward job.'

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We then walked back to the terrace, where he stood surveying the nest for some time. 'We'll wait for night, and when they've all returned to the nest, I'll show you how it's done.'

Accordingly, once the evening meal was finished, we suggested that everyone go off for a walk while we dealt with the wasps. Unsurprisingly, there was a marked lack of resistance to this idea, and we were left alone to our murderous pastime. Alun brought out some high steps and pulled on a pair of thick rubber gloves he had found under the kitchen sink.

'Now watch how I do this. No need for poison when you can get at the nest directly,' He nodded. 'The little devils are all asleep now, so I'll just grab it, crush the thing up and throw it down,' he paused as he surveyed the football-size nest.

'Once it's down you two, just stamp all over it. Just be quick about it.'

We gaped at him. 'Are you sure that's absolutely safe Alun?' I called up as he disappeared into the shadows.

'Done it often enough. Don't worry, flash me a bit of light from your phone so I can get into position.'

He was just poised ready to clap his hands onto the nest when Mike had one of his bright ideas. To help Alun see what he was doing, he stepped over to the wall and flicked the switch for the two 150-watt spotlights, one of which was only a foot or two from the nest.

Alun, momentarily blinded, swayed dangerously at the top of the steps and at the same instant the wasps decided that morning must have come early. The early risers, discovering an intruder, called up reinforcements. Thus, before we knew what was

happening, Alun was amongst us, and the three of us had made a strategic retreat to a safe location under the water the swimming pool. Mike had snapped off the lights again, and luckily for us, the pursuit was soon called off. Fortunately, also, the water was warm, and we also had plenty of time before the others returned from their walk to change back into dry clothes and pretend that nothing had happened.

When we told the Girls that, after studying the nest from close quarters, we had decided to put the job off until daylight, the Girls looked at us askance, but we pretended not to notice.

Next day Alun suggested that we deal with the two nests from a respectable distance once everyone was down on the beach. We had found a garden spray which sported the sort of long extension pipe used for treating trees. We filled this with a highly concentrated mixture from the bottle of Croatian insecticide. While we were doing this, Mike dragged a big empty water-butt around from the back of the house and positioned it directly under the nest.

'Now,' said Alun. 'I'm going to knock the nest down with this stick, right?'

We nodded.

'As soon as it falls into the water butt there, you flood it with the spray. OK?'

We nodded, but I made sure the spray was blasting at full power before Alun whacked the nest. As it plummeted down, I followed it with the long extension rod and kept playing the spray over the nest when inside the Water-butt.

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Then we dived into the pool and watched developments from a safe distance.

The results were eminently satisfying. Very few wasps seemed to have survived except those who were away at the time of our attack. So, reassured by the potency of our mixture, we decided to move on to the nest in the loft.

The trap door leading into the loft was in my bedroom. It was directly above the bed, so we had to shift this to be able to get at it. However, to move the bed, we had to move the wardrobe and to move this, the dressing table. Once we had finished, we found we couldn't open the door to bring the step ladder in, so Mike climbed out through the window and fell straight into the big outdoor dustbin. The thing rolled away down the slope towards the pool on its well-greased wheels, toppled over and emptied him and a week's rubbish, into the water.'

'Oh hell!' cried Alun as the detritus spread itself out leisurely across the blue surface.

'It all makes work for the working man to do.' I sang.

Alun blew out his cheeks, 'If Margaux discovers this...'

'When Margaux discovers it,' I corrected.

Mike had extracted himself from the mess and, removing some orange rind from his shoulder, heaved the steps over the windowsill, knocking the table lamp onto the floor where the bulb naturally burst.

'Balls!' cried Alun as a fragment of the glass got between his bare foot and his sandals. He hopped about, with his foot in the air, eventually coming to rest against the steps, which naturally enough

slipped away and folded up. The Alun-steps ensemble, crashed to the floor, bringing with it the suitcases we had stored on top of the cupboard.

I jumped back and stood looking down at Alun as he struggled to untie himself from the tangle of objects.

'All Ok in there?' called Mike from outside.

'Yes,' I called back, 'Just rearranging things a bit.'

'Oh, OK,' Came his voice. 'I'll pop down and start cleaning the pool, shall I? Before the Girls come back.'

'Hell!' cried Alun as a bit of glass pricked his big toe again. 'Hey Mike, keep an eye on the roof from down there and shout if you spot anything.'

'OK,' replied Mike. "What sort of things?"

'Wasps, for example.' sighed Alun, 'Or vultures.'

'Vultures?' called back Mike.

'A joke.'

'Ah! Will do.'

We eventually managed to get the steps up and pushing open the trap-door gingerly, I looked about me. I located the wasps' nest, about ten feet away. It was bigger than the first and humming with dangerous looking activity. I dropped the trapdoor. 'I'm not getting up there Alun, have you seen the size of that thing?'

'For heaven's sake!' cried Alun, 'surely you're not frightened of a few tiny wasps.'

'No. Not of a few, but a few million, yes.'

'There hardly any risk.'

'Do you know where the nearest hospital is Alun?' I asked.

'What would we need a hospital for?'

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'For saving my life after getting stung ten thousand times. That's what for.'

Alun screwed up his face. 'Look. If you're as frightened as that, I'll tell you what we'll do.'

'I think that is an exclusive "We". It means what I'll do, I think.'

'Let's not waste valuable time on details.'

'I have never considered my continued survival to be a detail,' I said looking down at him on the floor below.

'What we do then...'

'What you do,' I corrected.

Alun shrugged. 'The thing to do is for me to hold the trap just wide enough for you to get the spray boom through,' he said. 'Then you blast the nest, and you keep going until the devils discover where we are.'

'And then I get stung to death... Got it.'

Alun shrugged. 'Then you shout, and I drop the trap-door.'

'Or hatch,' I added.

'Hatch if you prefer.'

Saying this, he clambered up beside me on the rickety steps, pushed up the trapdoor and peered in. 'Oh, yes. Quite a big chap then.'

'That's what I thought. Except instead of the word "Quite", I would substitute "incredibly".'

'Come on, come on. You're surely not getting cold feet, I hope. Just because of a few wasps. Really.' Then he took the spray reservoir and weighed it in his hand.'

'Should be enough, but make sure you really flood the damn thing to blazes and keep going as long as possible.'

I glanced at him. 'Otherwise?'

'There's always the swimming pool. Come on let's get this done.' He swayed a bit on the steps, and I grabbed the edge of the trapdoor for support. 'Remember to flood it to hell,' repeated Alun, 'I'll drop the trap door as soon as they start to get snooty.'

I stepped down and pumped up the spray to maximum pressure and then tested it out of the window.

A small, brightly coloured bird chose precisely that exact moment to fly past and plummeted into the pool with a splash.

'Hey what are you two up to!' cried Mike from the poolside.

'Just testing,' I shouted back.

'Christ, for God's sake, don't inhale any of that stuff.' He shouted back.

Now, I hadn't thought about that aspect of things, so I pulled my tee shirt up over my face, before clambering back up beside Alun.

'What the hell...' he started, 'Oh Yeh. Good idea.' and copied me. He pushed open the trap, and I fed the long boom through it, took aim and pulled the trigger.

Within seconds the nest was dripping as the spray played over it. Then suddenly a cloud of wasps burst forth. Incredibly though, most of them got no more than a few centimetres before plummeting to the floor. I continued to play the spray over the rest and on the underside of the tiles until everything was dripping. I then inverted the spray nozzle and aimed it directly up into the nest opening. At this, another cloud of wasps burst forth and spread out in search of the invader.

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'Time to leave.' Shouted Alun, dropping the heavy trap door, slap onto my knuckles.

'Bloody hell Alun.' I cried; my hand held firmly in place by the massive structure.

'Oops! Sorry,' Alun clambered back up the wobbling steps and levered the trap up to free my fingers.

Unfortunately, the surviving wasps spotted the manoeuvre and made a rush at us. We jumped to the floor and leapt together out of the window, directly into the second bin. We then flashed past Mike, who had just finished clearing the pool. The container duly deposited us in the water, decorating the surface with plastic bags and seemingly hundreds of bit of watermelon rind.

Extracting ourselves from this new mess, we squelched up the pool steps and stood beside Mike who was surveying the roof. Wasps were still slipping out from the gaps between the tiles, only to drop dead seconds later.

'Well done,' he congratulated. 'You really swamped them.'

We followed his look and saw the tiles running with the liquid. It was running down the tiles into the gutter and from there down the drainpipe.

Suddenly Alun leapt into the air and pointed in an agitated manner. 'Oh Hell!'

Following his pointing finger, we saw that the pipe drained into the big ornamental pond full of lovely goldfish. The deadly liquid was already running into the water, forming a milky cloud which was billowing outwards across the surface.

'Oh, bloody hell,' was all I could think of saying.

Behind us, some of the plastic bags had started to empty themselves, and all sorts of rubbish had begun to spread out over the pool surface.

'Come on,' I shouted, 'Let's clear the pool before the girls get back,' I looked over at the pond, where some of the Goldfish had already started to react rather oddly. 'The fish have had it anyway.'

'Oh hell,' sighed Alun.

'Don't worry. We'll get some new ones,' smiled Mike, always ready with the reassuring comment.

We had just finished clearing the pool and putting my bedroom back together and were about to sit down and consider action with a beer or two. However, at this moment a rusty old van pulled up, and a man of about our age climbed out.

He was wearing a tee shirt with a big mauve fig printed on it. Under this, in bold letters was printed, "Figs are Big".

He strode up, a tall, thin man with a sharp, unpleasant face and far too much hair, for his age.

'Hello.' he held out his hand, 'You're English I believe.'

'British to be exact.' Said Mike, 'You too if I'm not mistaken.'

'Yes. Expat. Used to be head of the Environmental Agency at home. Moved here after retiring.'

He nodded, 'I grow figs for the UK market now and Orchids.'

'Interesting. How can we help you?' I asked.

'Well, I'm afraid I've had to come over to complain.'

'Oh, are we making too much noise?' I was going to add a sarcastic, note by adding "For the fig trees", but held my tongue.

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'Well, I couldn't help noticing that you were spraying insecticide.'

We wondered where he could have been stationed, to not have been able to avoid seeing, but we let this go.

'Yes, wasps. We had two huge nests in the roof.'

'As I thought,' he hesitated, 'I suppose you didn't know that Fig trees can only be pollinated by wasps.'

'Really!' we were amazed.

'Yes. If you haven't got Fig-Wasps, you don't get any figs.'

'Well, I never knew that,' I said.

'Figs are essential to the economic health of the Croatian nation.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Alun, 'that's stonishing. But those are a very special breed of wasp, aren't they?'

'Well yes,' The man hesitated, 'Fig-wasps, in fact.'

'I thought as much,' smiled Alun, but I frowned at him.

The newcomer went on, 'But that's not a reason to go killing off innocent, harmless wasps.'

'Harmless?' cried Alun.

'Innocent?' cried Mike.

There being nothing inspiring left to cry, I cried not.

'But anyway Fig-wasps don't build nests. They stay near the fruit,' said Alun who was forever gleaning useless information from newspapers.

The man frowned, 'That's true, but once one realises how useful some breeds are, one looks on them with a certain benevolence.'

Now here was my chance. 'Benevolence?' I cried.

'Useful?' cried Mike, not wanting to be outdone in this crying contest.

The man sighed. 'I don't suppose any of you knew that wasps are the only pollinisers for certain types of Orchid.'

Now here he had us. 'No. That, I admit,' nodded Alun. 'And I suppose that you grow precisely that sort of Orchid, and only a short distance from here.'

At this, he seemed a little embarrassed. 'Well no, not presently, but in the near future, perhaps.' He pulled himself up. 'But you must remember that wild orchids are one of the principal natural treasures of Croatia,' He nodded at us with satisfaction and went on. 'Did you know that there is an association for the prevention of cruelty to wasps, the SPCW. Its local headquarters are not far from here.'

We were amazed at this revelation. 'And what are their activities?' I asked.

'Well, prevention of cruelty to wasps, as the acronym suggests,' he said.

'I suppose that killing them comes under the heading of cruelty,' I said but was unable to finish my questioning.

'But these are no normal garden wasp.' cried Alun, apparently warming to the subject.

'Why do you say that?' frowned the SPCW agent.

'Because they attack goldfish.'

Mike and I turned away to hide our smiles.

'Wasps don't do that.' said the man.

'Not Fig-Wasps, of course not. But these fellows do.'

'That seems incredible.' The man was taken aback, but Alun continued.

'They seem to be some sort of mutated wasp... probably Russian.'

'Russian?'

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'Probably.'

'Why Russian?'

'Ask them. I don't know. No doubt because they were born there. Anyhow, they look Russian.'

'Would you like to see one?' asked Mike, 'Just to make sure they're not your Fig-wasps?' He pretended to have suddenly thought of something important hesitated, 'Yours are all branded I suppose?'

'Branded!'

'Yes, you know, marked. Like cattle.'

The man looked a bit troubled. 'Are you mad? How on earth could I brand ten thousand wasps?'

'Ten thousand!' cried Alun. 'Maybe you should make do with a dozen or so, and then you could brand them easily and deal with them on an individual basis.'

'Yes,' agreed Mike, 'Call them each by their Christian names.'

'Ten thousand sounds a bit like battery farming to me.' Frowned Alun. 'Not very ecological that.'

'Like to see one of the Russian mutant wasps then? There's one in Alun's Hair. Hey, pass it over.'

Alun shot into the air and danced about.

'It's dead Alun,' I said.

We extracted the dead wasp and handed it to the man.

'No, it's not a Fig-wasp.' said the man.

'Told you. But just look at that horrible, ghastly grin on its face.'

'It's not grinning. Wasps always look like that.' said the Fig grower.

'Not some sort of mutation then?'

'No.'

'If they always look like that, it can't help them much in reproduction.' Said Mike. 'I mean, who would want to mate with a grinning gargoyle, like that?'

'They don't reproduce with their faces, Mike,' said Alun, 'At least I don't think so. Perhaps you could clarify that point for us.' he said turning to our visitor. The man shrugged impatiently.

'Well, this one is unlikely to do much reproducing for the moment.' I said.

'No. Pity that,' said Mike.

At this instant, the man looked over at the pond and frowned. A couple of goldfish were floating, very much dead. 'What happened to them?'

Alun went back into innovation mode, 'I already told you,' he sighed heavily, 'The wasps attacked them. That's why we got rid of the wasps.'

The man looked at us with a look of astonishment. So, Alun went on. 'It was those damn wasps. They kill at least one every day. They swarm down, wait for a fish to come up for air and then attack it.'

'Yes,' I added, 'They sting them on the lips and their mouths swell up like balloons, and they die.'

The Fig grower gulped. 'Wasps don't attack fish!'

'Fig-wasps, no, but these Russian blighters, yes.'

'I don't believe it. And anyway, who says they're Russian?'

'We didn't believe it either until we saw it with our own eyes,' I said.

'That's why we thought they must be mutated Russian wasps.' said Mike.

'Those grins are sinister enough to kill the fish from heart attack alone,' added Alun, shaking his head sadly.

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'They are not grinning,' shouted the man. He then seemed to come to a decision. 'I'm going to report you lot to the police.'

'Do you speak Croat?' asked Alun.

'No, I don't.'

'Good luck then.'

'Get out of my way.' He frowned and shoved Mike to get past. Now Mike, having been a rugby player for twenty years, was all for a bit of friendly shoving now and then. So, he shoved back, with ex-rugby player vigour. The man went staggering backwards and with a nice splash, fell into the pool.

A few seconds later, it became apparent that he could not swim, so, in we went to drag him out again.

'You'll be hearing from me,' he shouted and stomped off.

Alun shook his head. 'No education. He didn't even thank us for saving his life.'

'I believe that's what too much expatriation does for you,' said Mike.

'I'll have to be careful then,' I frowned.

As we turned to go and get some well-earned beer, we noticed that some ten or so, big Goldfish were now floating on the surface of the pond. Several others were also swimming about in a decidedly unusual way. We fished these out and disposed of them as quickly as possible.

Next day the Girls were down on the beach when the police van came backing along the track again.

This time it was accompanied by another, larger one carrying four armed police officers. The vehicles parked and the group of six then tramped

menacingly up the path carrying their machine guns. Behind them came the Priest, walking at a more sedate and priest-like pace.

During their approach, the three of us remained sitting at the table on the terrace, preparing our defence. Then, while the Chief and the priest advanced on us, the main force remained at a distance.

There was a short exchange between the police officer and the priest during which the latter opened his eye as wide as saucers and made several sharp remarks. He then turned on us. 'I have once more been disturbed from my obligations to translate for you three gentlemen,' he followed with an impatient sigh. 'However, this time the reason appears to be of the utmost gravity,' He paused, but we remained silent, innocence and wonder written all over our countenances. 'The official SPCW representative has filed an official complaint about assault perpetrated in the pursuance of his duties.'

'And what might those duties be?' asked Alun.

The priest was taken aback. 'I could not say. but that is not the point.'

"Ah! But if his duties don't explicitly include provoking peace-loving holidaymakers, who are in the pursuance of their pursuits, then he wasn't pursuing his duties, was he?' This remark from Alun left the priest a little out of his depth. But anyway, he didn't have time to reply.

'He shoved me first.' retaliated Mike, 'I just returned the compliment.'

The priest conveyed this information to the police chief who nodded. However, the man's reply made the priest frown.

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'That may be the case,' He hesitated and turned to gaze at a further vehicle which was now making its way down the track. We exchanged surprised looks because this time it was an ambulance. 'Ah! here they are at last,' he said.

He then turned back to us and shook his head sadly, 'You seem surprisingly unconcerned by the gravity of the crime you have perpetrated,' He said, but at that moment the policeman made a sharp remark, and he nodded impatiently. 'Well, there's no use denying things. Perhaps you would like to tell us where we can find the bodies.'

We started and opened our eyes wide. 'The bodies?' I asked.

'Yes, The Bodies. That SPCW man said you killed them with poison.'

Alun laughed. All had suddenly become clear. 'Oh yes. The bodies. Yes, of course. I was forgetting.'

Mike and I caught on too and echoed his remark. 'Oh! The bodies. I forgot about those too.' I smiled. 'We used a highly concentrated insecticide, actually.'

'I told that man not to go to the police,' said Alun.

'Yes,' I added, 'That was a mistake.'

'I told him he might be misunderstood,' added Alun, exchanging glances with us.

The priest swallowed hard. 'Where are the bodies please? If you don't tell us, we will find them ourselves.'

'Do you like that man? The wasp man, I mean.'

'As a matter of fact, we have had a certain number of disagreements.'

We exchanged glances. 'Ah!' said Alun, 'A obstinate man then.'

'We are not here to talk about that expatriated trouble-maker. Where are the bodies?'

Alun looked across at us, 'Shall I tell them?' we nodded. 'I must admit that we were hoping to keep it all our little secret,' He said shaking his head sadly.

'Keeping five deaths by poisoning and secret?' cried the astonished priest.

'Ten in fact,' said Alun.

'Ten?' he cried, 'For heaven's sake, tell us where they are.'

Alun shook his head sadly again, 'Well if you must know,' he hesitated, 'They're in the pond.'

The priest started. 'In the pond! All of them?'

I smiled. 'Oh no. Not all of them. We've already disposed of five.'

'Disposed of them!?'

'Yes,' said Alun. 'We were worried about the smell.'

'And the vultures,' Mike contributed.

'Yes, the vultures,' agreed Alun.

'Vultures!'

'Yes. Horrible big birds which feed on corpses.'

The priest exchanged a few words with the policeman. 'There are no vultures in this part of Croatia.'

We laughed with relief, 'well that's a blessing,' said Alun. 'We worried for nothing after all then.'

'Good God! are you all raving mad?' burst out the priest and led the police off towards the pond. We pulled faces at each other, 'Not a very priest-like way of treating peace-loving tourists,' called Mike.

Ignoring this, and after a bit of disagreement and some shouting from the chief, two of the men waded out into the pond. They then spent a good half hour

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poking about in the mud and slime at the bottom. Eventually, however, they looked up at their boss and shook their heads. There was a short exchange, and the priest came back to us. 'They can't find anything. Where have you put the bodies?'

We stood up. 'I can assure you. They are there, in the pond. Those men can't be looking carefully enough.' Said Alun.

'They might have slipped under the leaves.' I suggested.

The priest snorted, 'A few leaves can't hide five bodies.'

'Yes, they can. I'll show you.' said Alun helpfully.

We were escorted to the pond by the armed policemen.

'I told you they weren't looking carefully.' smiled Alun. 'Look. There they are.' and he pointed to the far end of the pond.

The two soaked and muddy men waded across, and going down on their knees, splashed about in the slime. After a short pause, they turned and shook their heads again.

The police chief was getting very angry, so Alun stepped over. 'Look.' he pointed, 'There.'

The group assembled and gazed down at the dead fish bobbing against the grassy verge.

The priest was astonished, 'Goldfish!'

'Yes,' agreed Alun, 'I don't know the word in Croat.'

'Those are dead goldfish!' The priest repeated.

'Yes, that's right. Goldfish.'

The Croats exchanged a few words and looked over at us with astonishment.

'And these are the bodies that that damned CPCW man complained about?' cried the priest.

'Unfortunately, they were accidentally killed when the insecticide got into the water.'

There was a long pregnant silence.

I took a step forward and looked down sadly. 'We told that man that it would not be a good idea to go to the police. We warned him about possible misunderstandings.'

The priest was almost visibly smoking with anger, but Alun smiled. 'We'll leave you to explain to him how to say Goldfish, in Croat, shall we, or perhaps you would prefer us to do it...'

The priest snarled, once more in a rather un-priest-like way, 'No. I think it would be best for me to deal with that personally.'

When the truth was brought to the attention of the police, the younger officers burst into laughter and slapped their thighs with undisguised mirth. However, they were sharply reprimanded by their chief, who appeared almost as annoyed as the priest. The two men then exchanged a few words, and the priest smiled an unpleasant smile. 'The chief of police is very sorry for the mix-up.' We smiled and nodded. 'However, he would like to mention that the owner of this house was very fond of his fish.' He nodded, 'They were, as you say, the apple of his eye. He was breeding them.' We nodded, 'He also happens to be a rather important person around these parts and might become very angry.'

With this parting shot, he stomped off, followed by the police chief. The other four trailed some distance behind doing their best to hide their hilarity, but not succeeding very well.

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An angry and important Croat was not something which we were particularly fond of. Experience had shown such people sometimes to employ rather un-British ways of expressing their discontent. We, therefore, felt it a wise move to avoid unnecessary complications.

'We'll have to replace the fish,' Said Mike.

So, that afternoon, we visited the village and learned that the nearest pet shop was one hundred kilometres away in Split. All the same, as we wanted to avoid any further complications, we decided to take the following day off, and drive over. The expedition would probably cost more in petrol than the cost of the goldfish, but it couldn't be helped. However, late that evening, about an hour after dinner, Mike came over to us, a big smile on his face. 'Solved the problem,' He nodded.

'Sorry?'

'I found some goldfish. Plenty in fact.'

'You Found some.'

'Well, I found an abandoned house. The pond was full of them. So, I caught them all and put them in our pond.'

'An abandoned house!' I stammered, 'You're sure that it really was abandoned, Mike?'

'No doubt. No one has been near the place for ages. It's all closed up.' He smiled. 'I'll take you over and show you tomorrow.' We nodded and went over to the pond to have a look.

They were indeed very nice, plump and visibly robust goldfish. Classy goldfish to be precise. Not your common sort but ones with lovely gossamer

fins. We looked up at Mike with new respect. 'Well done, Mike.'

'I thought that would save us a four-hour drive.' he nodded, 'I think I deserve an extra beer.'

We agreed with this as being a good move.

'We can put them back as soon as they start reproducing.' He finished. I glanced at Alun, but we decide to let this one go. Timing was not one of Mikes' strong points.

The next morning, we were finishing breakfast when a new Range-Rover came purring up the track.

A well-dressed man jumped out and came briskly up the path.

'Oh hell!' sighed Alun, 'What now!'

Margaux cast a look at my wife, and they smiled and shook their heads.

'Hello, Hello. Pleased to meet you,' the man called as he approached. 'Just got back from six weeks in the States. They told me about the trouble you had yesterday. Thought I had better come around straight away.' He held out his hand and gave his name. 'I'm the local MP, you see. I felt I had to apologise for the misunderstanding. Stupid of course,' He went on, 'That CPCW man and his ideas, is always causing trouble.'

We explained that we had not taken it badly and had been more amused than anything else. Then suddenly, something caught his eye, and he stepped to the edge of the pond. 'Good heavens!' he cried. 'You have already replaced them. I suppose you went over yesterday afternoon. A long drive though.' Then kneeling he nodded, 'You must have been to

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the same place as I use.' He nodded, and we exchanged looks. 'Same breed as I have. Quite rare too. I didn't even know they had any left. You must have paid a small fortune.' He stood up and turned, 'How much does that old bandit ask for them nowadays?'

'Oh!' said Alun, 'It was Mike who paid for them. Mike?'

But Mike was no longer where he had been a few seconds earlier. 'Probably the oysters didn't agree with him,' I suggested.

'Oysters? For breakfast!'

'We told him that it was a bad idea,' said Alun.

'Well, that's the first time I heard of anyone eating oysters for breakfast,' the M.P. seemed stunned.

'Oysters on toast, actually,' I added, and he pulled a disgusted face.

'Well. The man's Welsh you see,' I said. 'And his mother was Polish.'

Oddly, this information seemed to reassure the mayor. However, at this point, I spotted Mike who was gesticulating wildly from behind the mans' back. 'Excuse me just a moment,' I said and quickly followed mike around to the back of the house.

'Hell,' he cried, 'That must be the owner of the abandoned house.'

'Not quite as abandoned as you thought then,' I smiled.

'He must have come over as soon as he got home from the States. If he goes back and finds his pond empty, we are in for trouble.'

'You're in for trouble.' I corrected.

'We'll have to put them back.' he said.

'You'll have to put them back.'

'Oh, OK, Ok. You'll have to get the guy out of the way and keep him occupied.' He jumped, 'I got it! Take him and show him the beech.'

Well, we did as request and spotted Mike as he dived over the fence at the end of the garden with a big plastic bag in his hand.

The mayor was duly impressed with our new sandy beach and thanked us profusely before he left.

The following day we drove the nearly two hundred miles and brought back a big glass bowl full of goldfish. The girls insisted on filming the release of the new Goldfish population into the pond and also took a series of photos.

Strangely enough, we were not torn to pieces by Margaux and my wife, who seemed to have something of pressing importance to deal with on their computer.

So, after exchanging looks of incomprehension, we shrugged, fished out a bottle of chilled rosé wine, and took this and our glasses down on to the sandy beach.

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Chapter 8 Mexico.

Mike leant back in his armchair and beamed at us triumphantly.

Glancing across the room, I was surprised to see how carefully Margaux and my wife were listening.

This was decidedly unusual.

I even spotted the flicker of a smile crease the corners of my wife's lips as the two women exchanged glances. Then to my surprise, they both nodded slowly.

'Sounds great. Well done Mike,' smiled Margaux. Alun and I gaped each other.

Our wives knew Mike almost as well as we did, but they had never yet been known to show any enthusiasm for his ideas. They knew perfectly that Mike's brilliant plans inevitably included a hidden flaw. Either that or his presentation had skimmed over some critical detail. They were also used to listening to his meek, 'Well. It seemed a good idea at the time...' once he had landed us in the trouble in which his plans so often culminated.

It was, in truth, quite evident to the Girls that this latest proposition was more than likely to land us in the soup. Although they couldn't yet see how this would come about, they intuitively sensed that it would. For once, however, they looked at this looming disaster from the more profitable, literary angle.

They were, in fact, already mentally sharpening their pencils.

My wife leant forwards, 'Just for the record though,' she frowned, 'how on earth did you manage to get such a fantastic deal, Mike?'

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Mike shrugged negligently, 'Oh. It was just a question of negotiation,' he paused, 'I'm pretty good at that sort of thing you know.'

'A question of subtle persuasion, I suppose?' suggested Margaux with an encouraging nod.

'Well. I suppose I do have a talent for finding the right words, at the right time,' he said modestly.

Now, this was big news for Alun and me. In our long experience of dealings with him; Mike had demonstrated conclusively to have an uncanny talent for finding just the wrong words at the wrong time.

'Full board in a four-star hotel, for a hundred dollars a night... I call that a masterstroke,' smiled my wife.

'Oh. It was pretty easy really. Mind you, wine's extra, of course,' said Mike flicking an imaginary speck of dust from his sleeve.

'Naturally,' said Margaux with a wry smile. 'Any other extras, you might have forgotten to mention? Like beds, or roofs.'

At this, my wife laughed and rose her eyebrows at her friend.

'Don't let jealousy cloud your judgement, Margaux,' frowned Mike.

'I'll do my best,' she answered, casting an amused look at my wife, 'I was thinking more of clouded horizons.'

I leant forward in my chair and looked Mike in the eye, 'Just how much lying was included in these so-called negotiations?' I asked.

He shook his head impatiently, 'if that's all the thanks I get, I can easily cancel the reservations, you know.'

Margaux stepped in before I could speak, 'Come on. Credit where credit's due. And in any case, we two girls have never been to Mexico.'

'I agree,' added my wife. 'And a luxury hotel, right in the city centre, almost next door to the Alameda central park...'

'Is not to be sniffed at,' concluded Margaux.

So, it came to pass that the five of us met up at Paris and took the long, direct flight to Mexico City.

Although I tried to squeeze the truth out of him on several occasions during the twelve hours of confinement, he would not tell. 'Don't worry man,' he said. 'Just let me do the talking when we get there, and everything will be fine.'

'But I am worrying,' I replied. 'As always when you organise things.'

'Keep your voice down,' He whispered. 'I'm trying to watch the film and everyone else is trying to sleep.'

Well Alun, for one, was not trying at all. He had been sleeping like a log for the past five hours. I don't know how he does it, but he can sleep almost anywhere. So, as Margaux and my wife were also asleep, I was left to worry in solitude.

On arrival, we took the hotel limousine from the airport. Having slept a good deal of the time, Alun and the girls were in fine form. I had not, and was thus tired and grumpy.

Moreover, as we alighted from the limousine, my anxiety increased markedly as I set eyes on the place which was to be our base camp for the next week. It was the sort of place one gazes at from a

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distance and is somewhat embarrassed to stop outside to look at the room rates.

However, Mike took charge and bustled around with worrying efficiency.

He herded us through the doors. 'Now you lot stay here, please. I'll pop over to the registration desk and sort things out. Come on, hand over your passports.'

'Can I help?' smiled Margaux helpfully.

'No, no. Stay here. It'll only take me a moment.'

He strode off with the air of an important businessman used to handling the staff of luxury hotels. I noticed how the man behind the desk became very alert when Mike leant forward to give our names. He shot a look across the lobby at us and darted into a back room, from which a well-dressed manager-like man emerged. He too shot a glance across at us then strode over to Mike, full of smiles and handshakes.

There followed a longish smile-filled exchange, during which Mike seemed to become more than usually animated. Eventually, he nodded agreement, filled in a form on the counter, and came back to us accompanied by two young attendants who bore away our bags.

'Well,' he smiled, 'good news. They've upgraded our rooms: some special offer or other. Come on. Let's go.'

Now, in the past, I have had the advantage of room upgrades, but rarely one like this. We three men had been allotted a luxury suite, with a separate bedroom containing two king-sized beds and a single one. We also had a sitting room with two sofas and a separate dining area including an

incredibly well-stocked bar. The girls had a similar suite, but with only a single king-sized bed. They didn't complain. 'We're used to roughing it,' nodded Margaux.

Both rooms had spacious balconies with armchairs on them.

'Come on everyone,' cried Mike, 'they're preparing us an early dinner so that we can have a quick walk around the square and get an early night,' so we trooped off to the lift.

The restaurant turned out to be just as impressive as the rest of the place, and we were guided to a round table set a little aside from the rest. It was next to the windows.

'Don't forget that the meals are all included so just choose what you want,' smiled Mike. 'Be careful about the wines though. They're a bit above our budget. I'll choose, shall I?' And he did.

We had an incredible meal and somehow managed to get through two bottles of the "cheap" wine.

Over the coffee, Mike leant back and beamed at us. 'Not bad eh?' then he sighed.

'Yes?' said Margaux, 'were you about to say something?'

'Well yes,' He coughed. 'I suppose I ought to explain how I engineered this special rate.' He looked around at us. 'I hope everyone's satisfied so far.'

We nodded, but I shot a worried look at Alun.

'Best to get things clear,' continued Mike, 'that'll avoid you guys making a blunder and spoiling things.'

'Oh God!' groaned Alun, 'I knew there was a trap.'

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'No. No trap. Just a little deception.'

'Not negotiation then?' I suggested.

'Well sort of, half and half really.'

'Oh, God!'

'Don't keep repeating yourself Alun,' he said.

'And soon everything will be made clear to us?'

suggested Margaux.

'Yes. So, where do I start?' he held up his hand.

'Yes. I know, I know.' He coughed. 'Well you see, I had this brilliant idea while watching a travel documentary.'

'Oh God!' cried Alun, 'not one of your brilliant ones?'

'Mike asked you not to keep repeating yourself,' scolded Margaux.

'I had this idea that all those travel journalists probably hardly ever pay their hotels if they promise to write a good review afterwards.'

We all opened our eyes wide, and he nodded,' so I phoned up pretending to be the head of the Times travel services.'

'Oh no... Oh hell!' cried Alun, 'give me some more wine.'

'But how the hell are you going to pull that off Mike?' I cried.

'Oh. Don't worry. I have nothing to do with that,' he chuckled. 'No. I asked them if they could pass me over our main travel writer. I said he was staying with them.'

'But he wasn't. Or was he?' I asked.

'No of course not. That was part of my clever plan.'

'Oh no! Not one of your clever plans too,' groaned Alun.

'This is starting to sound very interesting,' said Margaux, glancing at my wife who was enjoying this for some reason which was beyond me.

'Of course, the manager was interrogated, and he could not find any trace of the man.'

Alun snorted, 'and that's what you call being clever?'

Mike sighed and shook his head sadly, 'it is exceedingly distressing to have to put up with such lack of confidence in my capacity to organise things.'

Alun was about to shoot one of his ironical comments across the table, when Margaux interrupted, 'Yes. It's too bad. Don't worry Mike. We girls have confidence. Please go on.'

Mike scowled at us, 'well. I had naturally planned for that, so I said that he must have got held up during his prior documentary work in India or the Middle East.'

'I still don't see how we come into the picture,' I said.

'Of course, you can't, because you keep interrupting. I haven't been allowed to explain yet.'

'Go on Mike,' my wife smiled encouragingly, 'we are all ears.'

'I told the manager that I was surprised that the writer's agent had not phoned to book and asked him to tell the man to call me as soon as he did.'

'More and more interesting.' said Margaux.

'So,' he continued. 'I waited a few days, then phoned the hotel again, pretending to be the writer's agent this time.'

'Oh, I get it,' I cried, 'so he smells the possibility of a great article in the Times travel supplement and proposes you an unbeatable special offer.'

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'Exactly. Clever, eh!' He smiled looking around at our faces. 'Mind you. The upgrade was not part of my plan, but one can't grumble, eh?'

'And,' smiled my wife. 'I suppose you are now parading as the writer's agent.'

'Correct. And that's why I wanted to deal with the manager personally.'

I screwed my eyes up and frowned, 'but we are one travel writer short... Oh, God!'

'Oh hell!' cried Alun, 'who is it, Mike? Who's the writer?'

Mike smiled, 'well it seemed to me that the perfect person for the job would be someone tall and aristocratic, like Alun.'

'Give me wine. Quick!' cried the newly designated travel writer.

'I gave him your real name of course.'

'Now that was a good idea,' said Margaux, 'but I didn't know Alun could write more than his signature on cheques.'

'Oh Hell!'

'Don't get so worked up about it Alun. You don't have to do anything.'

'I only have to pretend to be a writer.'

'Well, just a bit.'

'A bit?'

'Well. I took the precaution of saying that you wanted to remain incognito.'

'Great!'

'I said that you hated people recognising you.'

'I do. Especially the police.'

'I told the man you might get upset and that that might influence your opinions negatively. I said that

had already happened in Italy, and the resulting review had been catastrophic when published.'

We all sat up and gazed at him with awe.

'Clever, eh?' he beamed.

For once we had to agree that this was indeed very cunning.

'Let's drink to that,' Alun blew out his cheeks.

Then suddenly sat bolt upright. 'But what if he checks out the Times articles? He'll see my name's not there on any of the articles.'

Mike shook his head sadly. 'Have confidence, Alun. I said you always use pen names. You might be surprised to learn that you have several different ones so that you can remain incognito almost everywhere. The manager promised to pretend that he did not know who you were.'

My wife leant over and patted Mike on the hand, 'lovely piece of work Mike. Well done.'

'Yes Brilliant. Well done Mike,' added Margaux, 'I'll have some wine too.'

'Me too,' added my wife.

'So, all you have to do is to behave like a travel writer.'

'And how does one do that?' frowned Alun.

'Well. I suppose you just sort of look at things.'

'Like a writer would,' I suggested.

'Exactly.'

'You sort of study things and make notes in a pocketbook,' I added.

'But I haven't got a pocketbook.'

Mike leant over and pushed a little leather-bound notebook across the table, 'now you do.'

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'Be careful not to frown though. As you make notes, I mean,' he said. 'That would get the entire staff stressed to death.'

'So, I look at things in a studying sort of way.' sighed Alun. 'I lean my head on one side, sort of screw up my eyes as if I'm thinking hard. Then I finally nod to myself and smile. Then I take out this little fellow and scribble a few things down.'

'Perfect,' smiled Mike. 'But make sure that you do actually write something.'

'Why?'

'In case the manager decides to try and get hold of it to have a look at your opinions.'

'We'll make a travel writer out of you yet,' laughed Margaux and clinked her glass with my wife's, who at the time was trying hard to smother a laugh, but with very little success.

The next day, we spent a good part of the time visiting the city. Following Mike's recommendation, Alun filled several pages of his notebook with text. Most of this he copied directly from the travel brochures we had been supplied with. Mike and I thought it a wise precaution not to depend too heavily on his imagination, which was apt, if left to itself, to turn up some highly unexpected results. We felt happy that the finished product would make for excellent and highly convincing reading, should the hotel manager or one of his spies sneak a look. Mike declared that half an hour of copying per day was well worth the effort, given the luxury in which it kept us. We could only agree with this.

Once back at the hotel, Mike and Alun made a leisurely tour of the various amenities. As requested,

Alun studied things that Mike pointed out. Sometimes he favoured leaning his head on one side, sometimes on the other. Sometimes he screwed up his eyes in concentration, and frequently he nodded. Occasionally he nodded and smiled at the same time, but in all cases he scribbled.

The two friends repeated this performance in a number of strategic places, making sure that they could be readily observed in the process of doing it. In any case, Alun had previously taken the precaution of copying some of the text from the hotel website into his notebook. He had changed words here and there and modified the order of the paragraphs to make sure the document was not recognisable. Finally, and to add a professional touch, he punctuated this text by inserting the words "nice" or "excellent" and even "remarkable" as he felt appropriate.

Mike eventually declared that that was enough for the present, and the three of us decide to try out the pool.

We thus spend a relaxing half hour floating lazily about in the water until Alun's biological clock chimed out the signal that aperitif time was approaching dangerously.

Over the years we had learnt to have absolute confidence in the uncanny capacity of Alun's body to reset itself to local time, no matter where we were. You could drug him to sleep for twenty-four hours, transport him anywhere on the planet and even blindfolded he would instinctively know when it was cocktail-time.

Accordingly, we showered in the changing rooms and rinsed our trunks out in clear water as bidden by

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the powers above. Then, swathed in our vast white towels, dripping trunks in hand, we headed back across the tropical fern filled, indoor courtyard.

However, halfway to the lift, Alun suddenly let out a howl. His lungs were obviously in fine form and the cry must have even been audible in the cabin of the Mexico-Paris plane, halfway home.

He hopped up and down, zigzagging around erratically, holding his foot as though he had stepped into a fire. His towel then dropped to the flagstone floor, revealing him to be a human being, rather than a cocoon with legs. Unexpectedly though, he abruptly appeared to decide that tumbling sideways into the lush, but prickly tropical undergrowth would be a good idea. His naked pinkness crashed through this thorny barrier, provoking a series of screeched words which we have been strongly advised to avoid printing.

Mike and I exchanged looks.

The spectacle was entertaining, so we were reluctant to bring the performance to a premature end. Nevertheless, compassion finally swayed us, and we stepped over to pull him out of the tangle from which curses were still resounding.

At first, all we could see of him was a bit of pink leg and his foot, the big toe of which was bleeding. The foot, we noticed with relief, was still firmly attached to the leg, which reassured us that all was not yet lost.

Accordingly, we gingerly waded in between the tropical fronds, avoiding their dangerous barbs, grabbed his hands and tugged him upright.

Bits of light-brown bark had got stuck all over him, but some parts of him were painfully devoid of any of this makeshift protective covering.

All the fuss had attracted a small group of interested guests. In particular, a middle-aged Japanese woman was carefully examining the now stark-naked Alun, with considerable interest.

She stepped forwards, 'Let me look?' she said. 'I'm a nurse. Let me see that.'

For a moment I had doubts about what the "That" could be. However, if I was correct in my assumption, the "That" was quite easy to see without having to get any closer. No bark had managed to adhere thereon.

At this point, the manager fussed over, whipped up the towel and wrapped it quickly around the offending region of Alun body. His intervention between Mike and I made the retrieval operation more complicated. However, we held on tight to reduce the probability of a second spate in the ferns.

'Oh hell! Oh God, my toe!'

'What is it? What is it,' cried the manager, 'has he been stung by a scorpion or something?'

'Scorpion?'

'Or a snake?'

'I didn't know there were scorpions or snakes in this hotel,' frowned Mike, making the most out of the situation.

'My Toe,' wailed Alun, hopping about unhelpfully.

'Are there scorpions and poisonous snakes in here?' frowned the Japanese woman.

'Of course, there aren't,' cried the manager.

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'Then why did you say there were?' she asked, keeping her eye on Alun's towel, which looked like falling off again.

'Oh, I don't know! What's happened here?'

'My toe!' wailed Alun again.

The manager and the Japanese women got down on their knees and inspected the damaged object.

'Stay still!' commanded the woman sternly, 'I'm a nurse.'

Alun stopped hopping.

'Nasty cut,' she glanced upwards through the gap in his towel. 'I can deal with that,' she said. 'I have everything we need in my room.'

Alun looked at me for support. His eyes seemed to be seeking rescue.

The manager jumped to his feet, 'Oh dear, oh dear. What happened? Look he is cut all over.'

'That was those deadly barbed ferns,' I contributed.

'Deadly? You mean poisonous?' commented a short teenage girl at the back of the crowd.

The manager sighed and recovered his professional poise, 'I can assure you that there are no poisonous plants in my hotel.'

'But what about the scorpions and snakes then?' said the girl.

'There are none of those either,' he lifted his arms in a gesture of despair. 'I don't know why I said that. It just came out.'

Well just at this moment, part of Alun also just came out, and the manager had to move quickly to cover it again.

'What happened to the poor man?' said the teenager, 'look - he's all white.'

Well, it is true that some parts of him were whiter than others, but we let this point go.

'Why is he so white?' asked a man at the front, with a strong Russian accent.

The teenager shook her head, 'everyone knows that people with scorpion stings go deadly white like that. Then they go into a sort of coma and die, all of a sudden.'

'He couldn't have been stung by a scorpion in here,' sighed the manager.

'The same thing happens with snake bites,' said the Russian at the front. 'Mind you,' he added, 'they usually break out into a cold sweat, and pass out, before dying. Seen it happen in Egypt.'

A murmur of interest went around the little group as they leant forward to see if Alun was sweating. Then suddenly the teenager jumped, 'hey! what was that?' everybody followed the direction in which she was pointing. 'I saw something move.'

'Me too,' said the Russian, who only thought he had, but certainly wasn't going to be left out of the fun. 'The damn place is alive with the things.'

The little group shuffled several steps back from the ferny undergrowth.

'I bet they're breeding the things in there,' said the Russian, amazed by his own imagination.

'Yeh. Venom Trafficking. I've heard of that.' sneered the teenager, keeping the little group between herself and the plants.

'Not surprising in a rotten, corrupt place like Mexico,' contributed the Russian.

The manager lifted his hands in the air to attract the attention of the group, 'I can assure you all, that

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there are no snakes and no scorpions in my hotel,' he said. 'I absolutely guarantee it.'

'They always say that,' sneered the teenager.

'Yeh!' nodded the Russian. 'I wonder how much the Mafia, pays.'

'The what?' cried the manager.

'The Venom Mafia?' suggested Mike.

'Yeh,' said the Russian, 'must be.'

Mike shook his head and tutted. 'Not the sort of guys who appreciate people putting their fingers in their little pies.'

'Or their toes, for that matter,' I said, deeply interested in the direction this discussion was heading. 'Never heard of them in Europe though.'

'Normal,' said the Russian. 'They keep themselves to themselves. Dangerous.'

'They stay in filthy corrupt places like this rotten country,' added the girl.

'But what on earth do they do with the venom?' I asked, full of interest.

'Sell it, of course,' contributed the teenager from the back.

'Use it on poison darts.' nodded the Russian at the front, 'this country is rotten to the core.'

'Corrupt too,' added a woman who hadn't been following all that carefully.

'You are inventing all this,' cried the manager in despair. 'You are making it all up.'

The Russian bridled at this, 'hell, I am. Ask anyone.'

'The ones who are still alive,' added the teenager.

'I'm going to the police about this,' said the Russian.

Mike smiled, and nodded at him, 'Good luck then.'

'Why?' he asked turning to us abruptly.

'You might end up in a damp rat-ridden prison cell.'

'Or dead.' I added. 'In a rotten, corrupt place like Mexico.'

'People tend to go missing,' Mike nodded.

'Or are found in a back street with a poison dart in their necks,' I added.

However, in an unexpected gap in the narrative, Alun seemed to come to his senses. 'I stubbed my foot on those damn tiles,' he pointed at the ground.

'They're flagstones,' I corrected.

'Oh!' exclaimed the nurse, 'yes. They stick up so, and the edges are razor sharp.'

The nurse took her eyes off the flagstone, to see if any part of Alun might now be sticking up. It wasn't, however, and she turned back and caressed the edge of the flagstone with a long, manicured finger, 'oh! very, very sharp. Badly laid too,' She cast a knowing look up at Alun.

The manager cried, 'badly laid! badly laid?' He went down on his knees again. 'Ah!' he hesitated. 'Hum. Yes, your perfectly right Mrs Yamamoto. Yes, definitely badly laid.' He stood and looked around for someone to blame. However, having spotting danger, the entire staff had evaporated, 'I'll get this repaired immediately. 'I'm so, so sorry. I don't know what to say.'

'Don't worry,' said Mrs Yamamoto. 'It's just a cut and a few scratches. I'll deal with it. As I say, I have all we need in my room. Come along.'

The manager sighed with relief, 'not serious then?' he gazed at the woman for support.

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'No, no. But the cut and the grazes from the thorns must be dealt with,' The woman looked at Alun with smouldering eyes. 'One never knows, with tropical plants, does one?'

'Poisonous as hell. If you ask me?' scowled the Russian.

'They are not poisonous,' sighed the manager.

'Says you,' sneered the teenager.

'I bet they are really are breeding snakes in there,' snorted the Russian. 'I'm going to keep an eye open. Might even call in the health inspector.'

I looked at the man with interest, 'Do you know what a health inspector is called, in Mexican?'

'I'll find out.'

'Why not ask at reception?' Mike suggested.

Mike and I were reflecting that, although the tiles might have been badly laid, that didn't look like being Alun's fate. Things strongly pointed to the nurse knowing a few things in that direction.

We thus released our hold on him, and he was led away by the efficient nurse.

However, just as they reached the lift, the door slid open, and "The Girls" stepped out.

A look of relief illuminated Alun's face.

'Ah!' he cried, 'I cut my toe.'

The girls took in the situation and smiled, 'Oh dear!' said Margaux, studying the woman.

'Yes. And this lady says she is a nurse. She wants to take me to her room to patch it up.' His pitying look was impossible to misunderstand.

'I AM a nurse,' said the woman.

'Well, that's very kind of you,' smiled Margaux, ignoring the significance of Alun's remark and his pleading looks.

'But surely,' stammered Alun, 'we have all the necessary first aid stuff ourselves.'

'Well,' frowned Margaux. 'I'm not all that sure. And as this kind lady is a professional, I'm sure she'll be able to deal with it far better than I can.'

Alun's eyes implored "Please", but Margaux simply smiled at the lady. 'That's too kind of you,' she smiled.

Mrs Yamamoto smiled back, 'Oh. I'm used to dealing with men. Such sensitive things.'

'Let us know all about it, Alun,' Margaux called over her shoulder, 'we'll be in the bar.'

And the doors slid closed, sealing the patient's fate.

Later on, Mike and I were sitting with Margaux and my wife in the bar. We ordered our aperitifs and explained Alun's accident. They particularly appreciated the invention of the "Venom Mafia".

'Brilliant Mike. Vintage stuff,' laughed my wife.

'Yes. I was quite pleased with that one. I wonder how Alun is getting on with the Japanese woman.'

'Oh! I do hope he's finished "getting on" by now. Otherwise, he'll be late for dinner.'

At this, we all burst into laughter.

'A dangerous looking specimen.' I commented.

'Yes. Far too dangerous for Alun I'm afraid. Didn't he look scared, poor dear?' smiled Margaux.

At this moment, the shape of Alun came limping across the bar towards us.

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'How's the toe?' smiled Margaux. 'Did Nursie make a good thorough job of it?' We all burst into laughter.

Alun made a snarling noise and dropped into the empty chair. 'Well thank you very much for your help ladies.'

'Help?' frowned Margaux, 'it looked as if you were going to get all the help you needed.'

Alun shook his head and snorted.

'I bet Nursie said you should take a shower before she could address the offending member.'

'I didn't notice her being offended by any of his members. Did you Mike?' I asked smiling.

'Oh, shut up you lot.' grumbled Alun.

'So?' smiled Margaux, 'Tell us all, not emitting a single detail.'

'She made me stand in the shower while she lathered my foot with some foul-smelling stuff.'

We nodded, 'And?'

Alun looked at us with scorn and shook his head.

'Come on Alun. Tell mother,' smiled my wife.

'surely she couldn't have done that properly if you still had your towel on.'

Alun snorted, 'I suppose you find all this very amusing.'

'Correctk,' said Margaux, 'So?'

'So, I took the towel off.'

'Oh!' Margaux was suddenly alarmed, 'Really?'

'Yes. Really. You see what you got me into.'

'Hum. I'm not sure I want to hear the rest,' she said.

'We do,' said Mike leaning forward, 'come on.'

'I'm not going to listen,' frowned Margaux.

'You got me into that mess now you can put up with hearing the story,' snorted Alun.

'I'll block my ears,' she said.

'So?' I asked.

'Well, the manager made me put it back on...'

'What?' our mouths fell open. We had left the manager out of our distorted reasoning. 'What was he doing there?'

'The man refused to leave me. The nurse ordered him out of the room several times, but he stuck to my side like glue. Thankfully.'

We all fell back in our chairs and laughed out loud.

Alun shook his head, 'at least there was one person I could count on in times of need...'

Margaux shook her head through her laughter, 'I bet that woman was wild.'

'I didn't wait to find out. I asked the manager to help me to my room.'

'But she did manage to deal with all your wounds I hope?' I smirked.

Alun shook his head at this irony, 'yes in fact she did. She had very soft, warm hands if you'd like to know.'

'And very long sharp fingernails,' suggested my wife.

'Yes. I noticed that.' winced Alun, 'She dug them into my thigh.'

We exchanged looks.

'Not an experience one forgets in a hurry,' I said.

Margaux turned over her hands and inspected the nails, 'I can always sharpen mine if that's something you appreciated,' she nodded, 'only if you want me to, of course.'

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'Very funny. Anyway, that manager saved me.' frowned Alun.

'At least part of you,' corrected my wife.

'Your honour is preserved.' nodded Margaux, sniggering.

At this point I sat forward on my chair, 'perhaps it would be polite if I were to pop up and thank her for all she's done,' I said.

However, my wife shot me one of her "husband-withering" looks, 'Margaux can do that.'

At this moment, the manager appeared from the bar and bore down on us with profuse excuses and above all with two bottles of excellent Champagne.

He promised that repairs would be made to the floor the very next day. He then practically begged us to accept a special free dinner, to compensate us for the inconvenience caused.

'Accompanying a famous travel writer has certain advantages,' smiled Mike, and we all agreed.

Stephen William ROWE

Chapter 9 - Bad Press.

The following morning, Mike complained of a sore throat. Accordingly, and as she had done dozens of times with our children, my wife took him over to the window and peered into his mouth.

'Stick out your tongue. Hum! A bit red back there,' she declared, 'you've got a bit of temperature too. No white spots though, so you'll probably survive.' Turning away, she added. 'I'd stay in today if I were you. A quiet day in the armchair with a book and plenty of hot tea and you'll be back on top tomorrow.'

'Back on top of what?' I asked.

'Shut up.'

'I do feel a bit feverish,' Mike admitted grudgingly. 'No damn blankets on these beds though, just these damn duvets. I hate duvets.'

'I'll get one sent up on the way out.' I said. 'Want anyone in it? A Japanese nurse for example.'

Mike ignored this quip.

'We'll pop back at midday to see how you are,' smiled Margaux. 'We'll can get lunch sent up and have it together,' she nodded. 'Come on,' she called to my wife. 'Let's get dressed.'

'I thought you already were,' groaned Alun. 'There goes another hour.'

To save hanging about again, Alun and I preceded the girls down to the lobby, but as the lift opened, we were distracted from our fundamental mission by a high whining noise. Following this, we discovered it's the source in the pool region.

A young man in paint-spattered overalls was hard at work with a hand-held grinding wheel. Down on

his hands and knees, he was painstakingly rounding off the edges of the flagstones, one after the other. Alun and I exchanged glances. There must have been several hundred, and each had four sides, as Alun usefully remarked.

'Hell!' he exclaimed. 'This is a bit embarrassing. Just because of a cut toe.'

'Don't worry,' I said. 'This job's certainly providing some poor jobbing builder with a bit of work that'll probably keep his family in food for weeks.'

Alun shrugged, 'I bet the guy is a member of the manager's family. A cousin or something.'

'Maybe. But he's probably penniless anyway.'

'Yes. I suppose you're right. Long job though.'

'Yeh. You wait in the Lobby for the girls, and I'll ask at the desk for Mike's blanket.'

I walked briskly over to the reception desk, where a young woman was fighting with the computer. At the time of arrival, it was clear that she was fifteen-forty down, and it was the computers' turn to serve. She looked up with the harassed look of one who is fighting a losing battle with a computer and sighed, 'can I help you, sir?'

'Yes. My friend is a little unwell. He would like you to send him up a warm blanket.'

The young woman stared at me, 'A blanket?' she gasped, 'Today?' she shook her head with surprise. 'It's already thirty degrees centigrade outside!'

Suddenly the manager appeared and moved rapidly over, 'That's all right miss. I'll deal with this gentleman.' He leant over, glanced at the PC screen, sighed, shook his head and rapidly hit a series of keys.

Three men in a panic

'Oh!' exclaimed the young woman, as the screen changed colour.

The director sighed and shook his head, 'would you be kind enough to step into my office a moment sir?'

I followed him and accepted the chair he held out for me.

'Your friend needs a blanket, Yes?'

'Yes. He's a little under the weather.'

'Ah yes. Of course. these things happen to the best of us.' He picked up his intercom and pushed a button. 'Please take a blanket up to room 657. A nice warm one. Yes, a blanket. Yes now. Thank you.'

'Thanks,' I said and made to rise.

'If you have a few moments, could I have a word with you please?' the manager looked suddenly embarrassed.

'Yes certainly,' I nodded.

'Well. I don't know how to put this sir,' he hesitated. 'It concerns the incident which occurred to your friend yesterday.'

'Oh! I assure you that that is done and finished with. He has already forgotten it.' I paused, 'he said that he was impressed that you have already started work on the floor. Very professional, he said.'

'I am pleased.' nodded the manager. 'We always take our responsibilities very seriously, especially where our guests' well-being is concerned.'

'Yes, I'm sure of that.'

'But a small problem has arisen.'

'Oh! Can I be of any help?'

'Well, you see,' and at this he pulled a sheet of paper on his desk towards him. 'Someone has talked to the press, and they are going to publish a

scandalous and totally false report of the event. They sent me this for my comments, and I have to get this killed off, as it's publication would be catastrophic for the reputation of the hotel.'

'Really! But who would want to do something like that? Surely not the teenager who was grumbling yesterday?'

'Not the girl. No,' he shook his head,' one of our competitors is certainly behind this,' he sighed. 'I can also guess which person supplied them with the information too.'

'The Russian?'

'Possibly. Not a very pleasant person.'

'But what did they say that could be so damaging?'

'Allow me to translate,' he coughed and read. 'Yesterday afternoon, this exclusive hotel was the scene of a dramatic incident when one of its guests was stung by a scorpion. A man, thought to be one of his friends, was bitten by a snake when he came to his aid. A third man trying to help was poisoned in the arm by the terrible barbs of a tropical plant. We understand that, after spending a life-threatening night, the three men are now out of danger.'

'It appears that, for many years, both scorpions and snakes have been breeding in the lush tropical plants in the hotel grounds.' The manager looked up and shook his head, before going on. 'The hotel management is asked to comment on this terrible accident.'

'Good God!' I murmured. 'But this is completely false information. Libellous. If they print, can't you take the paper to court?'

Three men in a panic

'Naturally, but that would take time, and the damage to our reputation would be done,' he sighed again. 'That sort of fake information could go around the internet in next to no time.'

'Yes,' I frowned 'that's undoubtedly what would happen.'

'They are certain to print something, no matter what I say... Initially, I thought of asking your friend to step forward and give an interview, declaring that everything was false.'

'Good idea,' I declared hesitantly.

'No,' he shook his head sadly. 'His real name and profession would come out, and I know that he does not wish for that.'

'Ah!' I said. Great care was necessary here if we were to avoid getting into very deep waters.

'In that case, the papers would at once conclude that his declaration was a set-up affair. They would assume that he was being paid by the hotel to clear its' name.'

Now, this was looking more and more complicated.

'And,' continued the manager, 'The board of directors would very certainly give me the sack, immediately.'

'Oh dear.'

'Yes. I have been working here for twenty-five years. I would be black-listed, and that would be the end of employment for me.'

'I had better go and have a word with M..., I mean my friend, Mister Jones' agent.'

At this, the manager jumped. 'Oh no!' he held up his hand, 'Not just now. No not a good idea at all I think.' The man seemed to be worried about

something. 'No. He needs to rest. At lunchtime would be perfect. That would be perfectly early enough to catch the evening editions if we find a solution.'

I looked at the man, who was undoubtedly uneasy about something.

'Yes, you're probably right.'

'Yes. I will personally take him up a nice cup of tea later this morning. When he has finished... I mean, when he has rested. And I'll explain the situation. It would be a pity for you all to spoil your sightseeing tour this morning. It's such a lovely day,' he smiled at me. 'Perhaps a nice rest this morning will give your friend inspiration...'

I was about to tell him that when Mike got inspiration, it inevitably led to complications, and usually caused a good deal more trouble than they were aimed at solving. However, at this point I heard the girls talking to Alun, so I took my leave.

Mike had got himself nicely comfortable in an armchair near the window and was buried in a novel. He had reached one of those breathless parts when the hero is confronted with an incredibly complex and apparently insolvable problem. One wants to know what he is going to do next. One does not want to be disturbed.

However, at this precise moment, there was a discrete knock on the door.

'Come in,' called Mike with an exasperated sigh.

The door opened and a well-appointed woman, wearing a tight white blouse stepped in. She was carrying a thick woollen blanket and smiled in a friendly way at Mike.

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He couldn't help but notice that as she walked towards him, her high heeled shoes sunk into the thick carpet and her blouse was stretched tight across her ample bosom.

He nodded, 'put it on the bed, please. I'll take it in a moment.'

The women started, and looked at him askance, but he had already turned back to his book.

'Can I be of any help, sir?'

Mike looked up. Big hips, big breasts, too much makeup, dyed hair. 'Thank you. No, I'm perfectly all right. I've everything I need.'

'Then you won't be needing my services?' she asked her hands firmly pressed on her ample hips.

Mike glanced up again and smiled, impressed at the casual assurance of the staff in this hotel. 'No, I assure you I'm perfectly comfortable. Thank you.'

The woman seemed unsure of what to do next. The manager had been quite clear and had given her the standard coded message. 'Are you quite sure that I can not help you in any way, sir? The manager specifically instructed me to do absolutely everything in my powers to make you comfortable.' She fluttered her eyelashes, but Mike did not look up.

'That's very kind. Thank you, but I'm perfectly OK for the moment.'

After a few moments more hesitation, the woman shrugged to herself. 'My pleasure sir. Please call if you need my services for anything else, later.'

'Thank you. That's very kind.'

At this, the women lifted her eyebrows and left the room.

When she reported back to the manager, he frowned and glanced up at her.

'That's odd,' he said.

'Yes. I thought so too. Not gay I suppose?'

The manager thought about this. 'No. I don't believe so.'

What he did believe though, after observing the well appointed and homely shaped woman, was that this guest was perhaps used to something a little more exclusive in the feminine line. 'Maybe he simply doesn't like dark haired women,' he smiled, being careful to avoid hurting the woman's feelings.

'Ah!' she said. 'Yes. That's quite possible. Some men are like that about hair.'

The manager pretended to frown and to be deep in thought. 'That cousin of yours?' He asked. 'The tall blond girl. Is she still in this line of business?'

The woman looked at him and drew in her breath. 'Oh yes, sir. But, dear me sir! She would be terribly expensive nowadays. Especially since she worked for the minister and as escort to those delegates, last year.'

The manager sighed. He knew that it was essential to ingratiate himself with this particular guest, no matter what the price. Above all, this time his job was in the balance.

'I don't think the cost will be a problem in this case. Could you see if she would be able to pop over for an hour?'

The woman nodded. In any case, she'd get twenty per cent commission from her cousin. It was, after all, the standard rate.

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Half an hour later, there was a second knock on Mike's door. 'Come in,' he called without raising his head.

However, when he did, he kept it raised.

Starting from ground-level, he discovered first a pair of long slim tanned legs, which seemed to soar endlessly upwards. Just above the knee level, they disappeared into a body moulding emerald-green dress. The latter swept over the hips and narrow waist before splitting in two and flowing gracefully around a pair of firm round breasts.

Mike gulped, 'Yes?'

His eyes left the lower expenses and travelled up along a tanned neck to a top-model face surrounded by masses of smooth dark-blond hair, which floated down over her shoulders. His mouth became oddly dry.

The hero in Mike's book, abruptly found himself abandoned, to struggle alone with his predicaments.

For Mike, a real-life pinup like this took precedence over literary hero's, however much they might require his moral support.

'Good morning sir,' murmured the apparition, 'I'm the hotel nurse.' Saying this she turned slightly to one side so that Mike could admire her nurse-like profile from a new and advantageous angle. He was not disappointed.

'Oh,' he gulped.

'Yes. The manager takes the wellbeing of his guests very seriously. he told me that you were feeling slightly under the weather and asked me to see if I could do anything to make you more comfortable.' She inclined towards him a little

Mike squeaked; his dry throat having made speech difficult. The part of his nervous system connecting his brain to his vocal cords seemed temporary to be out of order.

She smiled a top-model-like smile and undulated gracefully towards him. 'Apparently, you have a slight temperature.' Mike could not answer, and she smiled again. 'I think I ought to check that, don't you?'

Of course, Mike did think that, but the words did not seem to be able to find a passage through his overloaded nerve system, to his mouth.

'Oh dear! the girl stopped a few paces from him, running her long fingers slowly down her sides and over her hips. 'I seem to have come without my thermometer.' she laughed a pin-up-like laugh. 'Never mind. In Mexico, we learn to manage without. We use our lips.'

Mike gulped again as she drew near. 'Oh! do you, 'You don't mind, do you?'

'No,' admitted Mike,

'In any case,' she smiled, 'I supposed that international travellers like you, are used to roughing-it, as you say.'

Lost for words, Mike nodded.

The girl stepped up and bent gracefully down from the waist, placing her warm, soft lips gently on Mike's forehead.

Mike would generally have closed his eyes, to savour this delicious moment, but he could not.

Her emerald dress fell open just a foot and a half from his eyes, and her naked breasts appeared. They did not roll out of the dress or move at all. They just sat there, firm and round and perfect.

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The warm kiss lasted, far longer than he would have thought necessary, but he did not complain.

Removing her lips, she crouched down with model-like elegance, 'Yes a little fever, I fear. I'll feel your pulse, shall I?'

Mike nodded, and she placed a long-fingered hand, gently on his wrist. 'Hum! a little fast.'

'Oh?' said Mike.

'Yes, rather fast. Now that's odd.'

Mike did not find this odd at all, especially as from his vantage point, slightly above her, her dress continued to display part of its lovely contents.

'The manager mentioned that those nasty plants in the gardens might have scratched you. Did you notice if you had any red spots on your back this morning?'

Mike gulped at this, 'no, I didn't notice.'

'Perhaps I ought to have a look. What do you think sir?'

Mike definitely thought that this would be an excellent precaution. Just in case.

'Would you mind removing your shirt sir?'

Mike didn't mind a bit.

He stood, and the girl moved around behind him, unbuttoned the shirt, and slid it off. She placed her warm hands on his shoulder. She then ran them slowly down his back. 'No. That looks perfectly all right. No spots. But.' and here she paused pinching his neck muscles slightly. 'Oh dear. You are very stiff. There is much too much tension in your neck muscles. Too much stress no doubt.'

Mike was ready to agree with this. In fact, at that moment he was prepared to agree to more or less

anything the girl said. 'Yes, that's probably what it is.' He mumbled.

'Too much work and too much stress.'

Mike made a noise.

'sorry?' the girl laid her two hands on his shoulders and squeezed.

'I said, Yes,' he squeaked.

'Oh, then I can deal with that. I'm very qualified at massaging. Would you like me to ease up the tension for you? I'm sure the manager would encourage me to help you feel comfortable.'

Mike mumbled something a little vague. He was still having a little difficulty with his articulation at that precise moment.

'Lie down on the bed, please. Face down. I'll just slip into the bathroom to get into my working clothes.'

By the time she came back Mike had relaxed and closed his eyes.

'By the way,' said the girl, 'the manager asked me to give you a message,' she said as she started rhythmical kneading of Mike's shoulders. 'He thought you might be able to help him find a solution to a rather delicate problem.'

'I'll do my best.' mumbled Mike through the pillow.

She went on to describe the press releases and the dangers that were looming over the manager.

'He has known me since I was a child and has always been very kind to me. I do hope you can help him. I'd be so grateful.'

'Yes,' mumbled Mike, 'I think I might have just the right idea.'

'Oh! Lovely.' She purred. 'You can turn over now.'

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Mike, now three-quarters asleep, rolled over and stared. The girl's working clothes consisted of a skin-tight white tee shirt, something that looked like the bottom of a very minimalistic bathing costume and nothing else but smooth bare tanned skin.

She smiled down at him and nodded, 'It would have been a pity to spoil my lovely dress.'

Mike nodded back.

'You don't mind, do you?' she murmured.

Mike shook his head.

When the four of us entered the lobby, at lunchtime a tall, slim young woman in a body moulding emerald-green dress was standing at the reception desk talking to the manager.

The manager smiled across at us, and the girl turned and displayed the front view. Alun blew out his breath with a low whistle.

'Down Fido!' hissed Margaux, under her breath, 'Sit.'

The gorgeous apparition sent a dazzling smile in our direction. 'Take them away quickly,' said Margaux to my wife. 'Their blood pressure won't stand this, I'm afraid. Give them both a cold shower.'

We were led off to the lift and Margaux went to the desk to order our lunch to be sent up.

'My niece.' smiled the Manager, 'she sometimes helps me out.'

The two women exchanged smiles.

'Well. I'll have to be going. Bye, uncle.'

'Goodbye, dear.'

Margaux turned and watched the girl cross the lobby. 'What a magnificent young woman.' she

declared. 'Is she a fashion model or something like that?'

The manager coughed, 'Yes something like that, I believe. Last year she worked for the minister of culture for a time.'

'I'm not surprised.' Margaux nodded. 'Lovely hair.'

'Yes,' agreed the manager, 'Lovely hair,' he paused, 'She always had lovely hair even before she...' Here he stopped, searching for words, but Margaux suggested.

'Before the rest of her body caught up with it, in loveliness?'

'Yes. Exactly, that's a nice way of putting it. Yes. Before she developed into a young woman.' he nodded and smiled.

Margaux, smiled in turn, then reserved our places in the restaurant and walked to the lift.

Just as she was entering Mrs Yamamoto slipped in beside her. The woman seemed disturbed.

'I don't know where to start,' she said.

'Oh!'

'Well, you see, it's a bit embarrassing.'

'Is It?'

'Yes.'

'Oh dear!' said Margaux. 'Can I help?'

'Well,' she paused.

'Yes?' smiled Margaux.

'That girl at the reception. Did you see her?'

'It would have been difficult not to.'

'Exactly,' said Mrs Yamamoto.

'And?' asked Margaux.

'Well, I thought there was something you ought to know.'

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'Please go on,' said Margaux, becoming interested in the revelation she was about to hear.

'Well, you see, while you were all out,' she coughed. 'Well, I saw her coming out of your room just a short moment ago.'

'Oh!'

'Yes. I'm very sorry.'

'Yes of course.'

'She told me she was the hotel nurse.'

'Did she?'

'Yes. but I don't believe that.'

'No. It seems unlikely.' Margaux thought this was very entertaining. 'Her body just isn't the right shape, don't you think?'

Brigitte wondered just how Mrs Yamamoto came to be outside the bedroom door.

'Yes, yes, exactly. Oh dear! I hope you don't mind me telling you. We women must stick together I always say.'

'Do you?' Margaux frowned. 'I wonder if that young woman in green would agree with you?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Well, I would guess that a woman like that would much prefer to stick to a man than to a woman,' smiled Margaux.

Mrs Yamamoto nodded, missing the joke, 'I'm sure you're right. That's why I thought I'd better tell you.'

'Oh well!' sighed Margaux. 'I hope it's not going to be too expensive.'

'Expensive!' exclaimed the Japanese woman.

'Well, of course. He'll have it put down on the bill as extras. He usually does that.'

'Extras! This isn't the first time then?'

Margaux let out a peal of laughter, 'Oh dear no! Of course not.'

Mrs Yamamoto gazed at Margaux with amazement. 'goodness me!'

'Oh! But it's all rather sweet really.' Margaux sighed a long deep sigh.

'Sweet?'

'Well, the emerald-green dress and the blond hair, and that lovely body of course.'

Mrs Yamamoto had not missed the body. 'But!'

'You see,' smiled Margaux. 'I was wearing a dress just like that, the first time we...' her voice trailed off, and she laughed, 'Well. when we met.'

'Really?'

'Well, of course, that was twenty-five years ago now. I might be a trifle shorter than that young woman, but the difference ends there.' smiled Margaux, intensely enjoying herself.

During this, Mrs Yamamoto tried vainly to detect the resemblance between the two bodies.

No one would actually say that Margaux was short or stumpy, at least not to her face. However, on the other hand, one would certainly not naturally declare that her "slender body soared majestically skywards". There were also the curves to be considered. In this respect, Margaux boasted somewhat less of these, from nearly all vantage points.

'But!' protested Mrs Yamamoto, giving up the struggle, 'surely you're upset.'

'Oh of course. Especially,' she mused, 'because this one will clearly be in the hundred and fifty to two-hundred-dollar price bracket. 'Yes,' she shook her head and frowned, 'I'll definitely have to talk to

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him severely about this. We are not made of money, after all.'

The woman gulped, 'two hundred dollars!'

'Lovely hair, long tanned legs, nice hips and firm breasts. You don't get that for free. The dress to must have cost five or six hundred.'

'But!' spluttered the woman.

'Of course,' frowned Margaux, 'had it been something extravagant that he had purchased, I would have immediately sent him back to get a refund. But in this case, it would be a little difficult, don't you think.'

'Impossible.' snorted the woman, missing the joke again.

'Oh well,' sighed Margaux, 'we all have our little burdens to carry.' she smiled at the woman as the lift stopped to Mrs Yamamoto out. 'They are just little trials the Lord sends us to keep us on our toes. It keeps one's man happy too.'

Mrs Yamamoto rose her eyebrows. If her husband's god sent her any little trial like that emerald-green one, she for one would know how to deal with it. But something her companion said brought her back from dreaming about just what she would do in the circumstances.

'He used to call me his little Kiwi,' smiled Margaux.

'He called you what?'

'His little Kiwi. Thats sweet, isn't it?'

'Yes kiwi's are sweet?'

'No, the name. He gave it to me, and it sort of stuck.'

'The Kiwi suck to you?' Mrs Yamamoto was once more having difficulty with her English. 'I suppose it

was because of all those little hairs they're covered with. Like Velcro,' She suggested.

'No. Not the fruit. The name. The name stuck.'

This remark conjured up a very peculiar image in the woman's mind and she blinked and shook her head.

She was still struggling with her emotions as she stepped out of the lift.

Margaux smiled, 'goodbye and thank you, Mrs Yamamoto. I'm very grateful to you. But men will be men don't you think?' and the lift doors slid closed.

When Margaux and my wife entered our room, they found us goggling at Mike in disbelief. He looked in incredibly good shape. Quite a different person from the man we had left a few hours earlier.

'Oh.' he coughed, 'It's you. '

'Yes? It's us.'

'Well, that's great? we were just chatting about...'

'Nurses?" suggested my wife.

'Well, as a matter of fact...'

'I met the nurse in the lobby. Nice girl.' said Margaux, staring at Mike, who became very red.

'Yes. A charming young person.'

'And competent, I should think.' nodded Margaux.

Mike sat up, 'oh yes. Quite competent.'

'Very competent. I should say.' corrected Margaux.

Mike nodded and tried to look away.

'Did she check your throat?'

'Oh! Yes. She checked that all right. Perfect she said. Just like you did Margaux.'

'Did she check anything else?'

'Well as a matter of fact, yes. Just a few things.'

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'Here and there.' suggested Margaux.

'Yes. She checked the scratches from those plants downstairs in case they had got infected.'

'And had they?'

'Apparently not.'

'Good.' Margaux leant down beside the bed and picked something up. 'So,' she smiled, 'In Mexico, nurses check your throat and scratches with massage oil then. That's interesting.'

'Well, you see she felt that my neck muscles were a bit stiff...'

Margaux shook her head. 'We saw the girl Mike, spare us the innovative lies.'

My wife nodded, 'we agreed that you had excellent taste, Mike. Didn't we Margaux?'

'Yes. Good taste. Lucky to be a rich man though, how much did that set you back.'

Mike bridled, 'what do you take me for?'

'We take you for an unmarried man, all alone in a big hotel in a foreign country.'

'I didn't pay a thing, and I didn't ask her to come.'

'No? Not your taste then. Someone else has good taste then.'

'Well, for your information, the manager sent her to ask me to help him.'

'And this messenger-girl in the tight emerald-green dress needed massage oil to loosen things up a bit. To smooth over the negotiations and help them towards a favourable outcome,' said Margaux. 'He must need help very badly then.'

Mike snorted, at last spotting a way out of this predicament. 'Well yes. In fact, he does need help badly.'

He immediately dived into the story about the newspaper articles.

'Alun already explained us about that.' said my wife.

Mike smiled over at us. 'But,' he smiled, 'I've already found the solution?'

'Oh God!' cried Alun. 'I'm not doing it.'

Margaux smiled, 'I wonder if it was the massage oil that did the trick?' she nodded, 'Or perhaps the dress.'

'Or lack of it.' suggested my wife. 'Hold onto that oil all the same Margaux.' she added. 'It might come in useful someday.'

'Maybe Mike should start thinking about marriage.' Suggested Margaux. 'But I think that sort of specimen, would be a bit above budget.'

Alun smiled, 'Probably right. I bet a single change of underwear would cost him month's pension'.

Margaux shook her head, 'Just the sort of nonsense a man would think about first.'

She was wrong here because the first thing we were thinking about was how much the contents of the underwear would be likely to cost rather than the value of the clothes themselves.

'Do you want to hear my idea or not?' grumbled Mike.

'Oh!' cried Margaux, 'but grumbling is not good form after...'

'Negotiations,' suggested my wife.

'All right,' nodded Margaux. 'Let's have it.'

At this moment there was a knock on the door. 'Another messenger girl?' sighed Margaux. 'How

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many do you get through in a normal working day, Mike?'

'Must cost him a fortune,' added my wife.

'A rich man and his money are so easily parted.' sighed Margaux.

'All for a pretty face.' sighed my wife, 'terribly sad really.'

'I guess that it's simply boredom that's actually at the bottom of this.'

'Needs a wife,' my wife shook her head.

'I do not,' protested Mike

'Come in,' called Alun, and our lunch was wheeled in. It included a complimentary bottle of vintage wine.

'Nice,' nodded Alun scanning the label. 'I like being a famous travel writer.'

'Do you lot want to hear the idea or not?'

'No,' said Alun.

'Not if it is one of your brilliant ones,' I added.

'Agreed,' nodded Alun.

'Come on.' said my wife, dishing up, 'let's have it.'

'Well,' he started, 'Alun can't come forward because the press would naturally suspect the hotel of paying him. And in any case, our little subterfuge might get discovered if people started looking into his background.'

'That lets you off,' nodded Margaux. 'Feel better now?'

'Not yet,' said Alun who had had more experience of Mike's plans than his wife.

'So, I decided that we should get someone to come forward and say he intentionally leaked the fake information,' he nodded encouragingly.

'Go on,' said my wife handing him his plate.

'I'll have some of that wine please,' he said holding his glass out.

'So?' I said.

'Well, we will get the person to make a statement to the press, confessing that he was paid by someone, to make the false declaration. He can say he didn't know who the man was, but he suspected it to be one of the hotels' competitors.'

'Maybe,' suggested Alun, warming to the idea, 'the man could even admit that he was instructed to smuggle scorpions and snakes into the place. That would make it even more realistic.'

'Good idea,' nodded Mike, 'yes, that would clinch the thing.'

Margaux frowned, 'wouldn't that constitute a crime, over here though?'

'No,' frowned Mike, annoyed that someone should throw cold water on one of his brilliant ideas. 'There might be a caution or whatever they do over here. But nothing more.'

'Great.' I said, 'Any idea where you're going to find your man?'

When I got back out of prison, Mike was not there to welcome me.

The hotel manager had, however, come down and had negotiated my release, with the chief of police. Fortunately, the two men happened to be cousins and the chief was a considerate and understanding man. A goodwill case of vintage wine clinched the deal, and we were bundled out into a waiting Taxi.

'You seem to have bruised your forehead,' the manager said turning to me.

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'Oh, yes. I somehow stumbled when the officer was showing me around my cell.'

'Oh dear.'

'Apparently, these things happen.'

'Yes,' said the manager, 'people tend to stumble quite often in Mexican prisons.'

'I noticed.'

'Well. All is now well.' He smiled and patted me on the shoulder. 'I really don't know how to thank you for all your help.'

'Oh,' I coughed, a little embarrassed by his effusion, 'that's all right.'

'Surely there is something I can do for you, in return. Something which would give you pleasure.'

Suddenly the image of a body, clad in a tight-fitting emerald-green dress, floated up before my eyes, 'Well... There is just one small thing.'

My wife, who was sitting observing me from the other side, leant forwards, 'Don't even dream about it.' she hissed under her breath.

'Sorry?' said the manager.

'A nice meal and some of your lovely wine for dinner will be quite enough for him,' she frowned at me, 'quite enough?'

The manager then seemed to become a little disturbed.

'Yes, yes. That's an excellent idea. However, there is just a small complication which has arisen.'

'Ah!' exclaimed my wife.

'I believe that you were planning to leave tomorrow evening.'

'Yes. That's right,' I said.

'Well, might I suggest that I make arrangements for you to take the early flight tomorrow morning instead.'

My wife frowned and looked at him with interest. 'Why?'

'Well, you see my cousin didn't feel it wise to wait until he had received full written authorisation to release your husband.'

'Ah! I see,' said my wife.

'It would not look good in the press you see. And everyone has a boss...' his voice trailed off.

'And?'

'Well, we came to a most satisfactory arrangement.'

'I'm sure you did,' said my wife.

'Tomorrow morning, my cousin will discover that your husband has miraculously escaped from his cell.'

My wife chuckled, 'lovely!'

'Yes. A nice touch I thought. But they will only discover this just after the first flight to Paris takes off tomorrow morning.'

I was following this with attention, 'but they would just have to call customs, and we would be picked up when we arrived in Paris.'

The manager smiled and chuckled to himself, 'yes, but it seems that they might have made a small mistake in noting down your name and destination.'

'Lovely!' repeated my wife.

'I supplied my cousin with the name and destination of a gentleman who was staying with us — a very disagreeable and rude person. Quite lacking in education and refinement. He has called me some very offensive names.'

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'So, this gentleman can expect to have a few unexpected delays on arrival home.'

'Yes, I imagine so. Apparently, his home is in Moscow.'

My wife nodded slowly, taking this in. 'Ah! a Russian.'

I smiled at hearing this.

'Yes, and fortunately, my cousin has some good friends in the customs service there,' smiled the manager.

'Oh dear!' said my wife.

'Yes. Exactly,' smiled the manager.

Chapter 10 Bucharest Concerts

When the Girls suggested that we spend five days in Bucharest, Mike, Alun and I exchanged worried looks.

We had good reason for doing this, because memories of certain events we went through there, still troubled our sleep from time to time.

We had been there just after the Bucharest revolution, and the fall of the totalitarian president Nicolae Ceaușescu. It seemed to us that, as the regime had changed for the better, it would now be quite safe to do a bit of tourism.

However, old habits die hard.

We didn't realise that although the reign of the man and his secret police were now a thing of the past, the poverty and privations engendered by his regime were not. So, while corruption was no longer more or less state-controlled, it still proved to be a highly effective way of supplementing the meagre salaries public servants were paid. If they were paid at all, of course.

Why then, they seemed to have collectively concluded, dispense with such a useful and eminently flexible tool?

In our specific case and with hindsight, the result of this was entirely predictable. However, when for the third time, a policeman singled us out and elected to inflict an exorbitant cash fine on us, for a non-existent driving offence, we refused. This refusal enabled us to sample at first hand the amenities of one of Bucharest's dampest prisons, until we finally gave in after twenty-four hours, and paid up.

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Having decided that we had by then done our bit to bolster the local economy, we drove back to my home in France through Hungary and Austria. We only picked up one further fine just before the Hungarian frontier.

Having endured the description of this adventure many times, Margaux assured us that that sort of thing no longer occurred. We should not worry ourselves.

She furthermore assured us that we would not even have to trouble ourselves about the hotel arrangements for our visit to Bucharest. She and my wife would deal with everything.

An added advantage was that in Romania a lot of people spoke French and English, so we could usually manage to make ourselves understood quite easily.

However, the downside of this otherwise stress-free plan was that the aforesaid Girls had decided that a bit of culture would do us all good.

They had therefore organised things accordingly and had uncovered a package deal, which included four nights in a hotel and two evenings at the Bucharest Opera.

As the hotel happened to be the five-star Bucharest Intercontinental, and that the first opera was Madam Butterfly, we didn't complain. We could manage with that OK. We agreed that we could easily find an excuse to avoid the second opera, which was Wagner.

For the three of us, although Wagner came way behind Chinese opera, in terms of suffering, it didn't

stand the comparison with a few beers and a nice meal in a quiet restaurant.

In any case, we had plenty of time to work out a way out of avoiding this Wagnerian expedition and were quite confident about the outcome.

Mike, however, was uncharacteristically enthusiastic about this Romanian expedition. He perked up immediately when hearing the proposition, 'I always wanted to go back,' he said, 'there were some shops I wanted to visit at the time. I bet they're still there.'

'Shops?' said Alun.'

'Yes,' Mike smiled. 'surgical tools and appliances.'

'What!' I cried. 'What in the name of God do you want with a surgical appliance shop?'

'Surgical appliances perhaps?' suggested Alun.

'Naturally,' cried Mike. 'Some of the best scalpels and tweezers in the world come from there. Surely you know that Romanian surgical tools are manufactured using the finest steel in the world.'

'Well. Now that you mention it,' I said. ' No. I didn't.' Alun shook his head and frowned, 'they wouldn't also be very cheap too, by any chance?'

'Yep. That too,' nodded Mike with enthusiasm.

'Just one little question though,' I said. 'What on earth do you want surgical instruments for?'

'For my model building of course,' snorted Mike.

'Oh! of course!' I exclaimed.

It should be pointed out that Mike was a very enthusiastic model builder. Constructing complicated and time-consuming models of the most unexpected objects had been his passion for as long as we had known him. This activity also served to fill any time

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left over when it wasn't being employed in getting us into the most inextricable predicaments.

It's true that for a short time he had eased up a little when he had unexpectedly taken up gardening a few years ago. However, this pause had been a short-lived one. He had gone back to model making, once barely a single plant or shrub was left alive in his garden. I'll qualify this by saying that the fruit trees were all still alive. They just didn't seem all that inclined to produce fruit anymore.

In all justice, I have to say that Mike has won many prizes in model building competitions, the last being a remarkable scale-model of the Eiffel Tower. The construction of this occupied an entire winter season, and it was six feet high. All the same, after winning the competition, and as he didn't have enough space to keep it, he decided to burn it and to post the sacrificial rites video on YouTube.

He was determined to do this in style, so we were invited to a special farewell party to which Mike also asked his friends and acquaintances. However, the majority of these had had enough experience of our past endeavours and wisely stayed as far away as possible. So we ended up, just the three of us with Mike's grandmother, Ethel. We also ended up with enough champagne and food for twenty, so all in all the evening went off pretty well.

When it came to the Incineration ceremony, everything went almost as planned, and the video was posted as prearranged.

The number of views was genuinely incredible and hit the six-hundred thousand mark within the first week.

I suspect though that the part which produced the most significant buzz was when Mikes grandmother went up in flames. We put her out by spraying her with Champagne, and I must admit that we caught this part particularly well on the video.

'Thank god all this was close at hand,' cried Mike, throwing down his empty bottle.

'Yes, Providential, I'd call it,' added Alun.

Unfortunately, the fruit tree under which the sacrifice was made, has never since put out a single bud, let alone a leaf, but the video still gets thousands of views per month.

Mike is now planning to build a scale model of a Citroen 4CV, during the slack period this winter.

Returning to the question of surgical instruments I asked, 'won't you have trouble getting that sort of thing, through customs Mike?'

'Oh no. No trouble these days,' he smiled.

Alun and I exchanged frowns, 'we are not going to carry any of that stuff for you, Mike.' He said. 'Let's get that straight right away.'

'What!' Mike shook his head in despair, 'if I can't count on my two best friends to lend a helping hand for a riskless job, then what is the world coming to? That's what I ask myself.'

'Ask yourself what you wish Mike, but we're not doing it,' I contributed.

'Thanks a lot,' sniffed Mike.

'We do agree to send you some oranges in your prison cell from time to time though,' smiled Alun.

'We don't mind doing that, do we?'

'No,' I agreed. 'We might even be able to bend a file round in a circle to fit inside one. You'd have to find your own way of getting it straight again though.'

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'He could always buy a straight one at the prison tuck-shop shop,' smiled Alun.

'I hadn't thought of that. Yes, of course, he could,' I nodded. 'Mind you; they're in plastic which is not quite as hard as good Romanian steel.'

'Oh, shut up you two,' cried Mike.

At the hotel and as had become our custom, the three of us had one big room and the girls another. This arrangement saved the price of an extra room for Mike and gave our wives a break from our hypothetical snoring.

It should be remembered that the three of us had travelled all over the world together, sleeping in tents, caravans, camper vans, caves and sometimes even in hotel rooms. None of us had ever been troubled by the snoring of one of the other two, so we knew that the Girls' excuse was untrue.

In any case, we didn't complain, because this arrangement gave us the privacy to tell each other the newest rude jokes we had learnt. This activity was always one of the highlights of our first few days together. Furthermore, all the telling and all the laughing tended to give one a terrible thirst, but we were used to dealing with that sort of trouble.

Well, the first day and night went perfectly, and we eventually devised a very cunning plan to get out of the Wagner evening. The idea came to me in one of those incredible flashes of inspiration, which are the stamp of a genuinely innovative and agile mind.

I said to the girls that we all hated Wanger.

'Since when?' snorted Margaux

'Since he was born,' I countered artfully.

'But!' she exclaimed, 'for goodness sake. You do realise that we're talking about "The Ring"? His masterpiece...'

'Terrible,' I said.

'Boring,' added Alun.

'Doesn't Ring true,' improvised Mike, not wanting to be left out.

'Surely you're not putting beer and food before music again,' complained my wife.

'Before music, No. Before four hours of boredom, Yes.'

'Well!' exclaimed my wife, 'I'd never have expected that from you.'

'Now, that's obviously untrue,' I cried.

'I'd expect absolutely anything of these three,' grumbled Margaux. 'Just because they can't hum the tune while they're weeing drunkenly against a wall, it goes completely over their heads.'

'The wee!' Exclaimed Alun. 'Amazing!'

'Perhaps in our youth,' mused Mike.

'Perhaps not even then,' I said in a rare moment of honesty. 'I never got higher than shoulder level.'

'Shoulder level is an excellent performance for an amateur all the same.'

'Shut up,' scolded Margaux.

'Anyhow that Wagner guy was a bit of a pervert,' frowned Mike.

'What!' cried Margaux.

'Well, that Ring is full of perverts, incest and adultery.'

'Disgraceful,' agreed Alun.

'Shocking,' I added.

'Oh! Shut up you lot. Go and cater for your flabby, swollen bladders and we'll cultivate for our minds.'

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I was going to comment on the inconsistency of this remark and to mention that swollen objects were rarely also flabby but caught Alun's eye and let it pass.

The girls left us at about six-o'clock, so we decided to take a well-earned aperitif on the balcony before heading for the restaurant.

We had been sitting comfortably in the late sunshine, for some time when a sudden swirling gust of wind slammed the balcony door shut. I shot a look at Alun, and he frowned back. We then swivelled around in our chairs and looked over our shoulders. In banging too, the door had brought the curtain rail down. I frowned and got to my feet to tidy up.

However, the door would not open. The heavy iron rail had lodged itself firmly between the handle and the frame, jamming the door closed.

'Oh Hell!' I cried.

'Let me have a look,' said Mike, 'I'll sort this out.'

'Oh. Ok.' I said standing back and casting an amused look at Alun.

After a lot of fiddling about Mike turned back to us, 'It's stuck.'

'Oh really!' I said.

'Yep. The bar has jammed the handle. We'd better call reception.'

'OK,' I agreed, 'You do it, Mike.'

Mike swivelled around on his heel and stopped. 'Oh!'

'Exactly,' I said, sitting back down and picking up my glass. 'What time do the girls get back Alun?'

'About midnight I should expect,' he frowned, 'Unless they go on to a disco or one of those post-operative orgies we're always hearing about.'

'Midnight!' cried Mike. 'But it's only half past six.'

'Mind you,' I added, 'as they were in a bit of a huff, they might not even look in before hitting the hay.'

'Very probably,' agreed Alun, 'especially if they're drunk.'

'Drunk!' cried Mike.

'Well, you know what these opera-goers are like. Champagne, champagne and more champagne. A bit like the burning of the Eiffel tower,' I smiled.

It should be noted that Alun and I had always enjoyed taunting Mike. It could be counted on to bring out the best in him.

'So, what do we do then?' he sneered.

'We could jump,' I suggested.

Even though he knew as well as us that we were ten floors up, Mike couldn't help going and looking down. He shook his head and sneered at us, 'funny boy.'

'Just a suggestion,' I smiled.

'We could break the window with the chair,' he said walking over and rapping the glass with his knuckle. He shook his head and laughed a short, nasty laugh. 'Look at the rubbish they've used. As thin as paper. Christ and how much do we pay?'

'Mike,' said Alun.

'Yes.'

'You're not married, are you?'

'Of course not.'

'Not married to Margaux at all then.'

Mike frowned, 'Hmm. Yes. That's a thought.'

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'So, smashing the window as soon as our wives' backs are turned and then having to convince them that we were not dead drunk, might not be our best option.'

'Having to pay for the damage from our pocket money, is not all that sound either,' I added.

Mike took all this in and ruminated on it. In this respect, he was at a distinct disadvantage with respect to Alun and I. Years of experience had made any ruminating, and in fact, any thought at all, unnecessary to us when disaster struck.

'Wait a moment,' he cried and leant out over the balcony. 'The Girl's bedroom is next door.'

'I'm not doing it,' I said.

'Me neither,' said Alun.

'You don't expect me to do it do you?' scowled Mike.

'Your idea,' shrugged Alun.

We had of course already guessed that The Girls would have shut and locked their window. However, we were reticent to spoil the adventure for Mike so quickly after he had had the idea. That shows just what good friends we really are.

I leant over and looked down at the tiny figures walking along the road below us, 'Not as high as I thought really.' I lied.

'You'd probably get out of it with a few grazes,' agreed Alun.

Mike looked over again, 'no one's going to do any falling.'

'Well, I'm not,' I agreed.

'Me neither,' added Alun.

'Hell! You two are really Lilly-whites. Where's your manly courage and your spirit of enterprise?'

'I left mine in my jacket with the car keys,' I said.
'Me too,' nodded Alun, 'so we'll have to count on yours for once.'

'Well, I didn't jam the door.'

'Who left it open then?' asked Alun pointedly.

Neither Alun nor I knew the answer to this question, but the trick worked perfectly, as always with Mike.

'Oh, all right I'll do it. Anyhow it's only one small step.'

'But a giant leap for mankind.' I quoted.

Mike sneered at me, 'you two hold both onto my arm and don't let go until I tell you to.'

'Are you sure you want to do this Mike?' I asked.

He looked at us with pity, 'someone with guts has got to stand forward.'

I was about to say that if he fell, the people down below would have no doubts about him having guts, but I held my tongue.

'Hey! I've got an idea,' said Alun. 'We can fix our three belts together and fasten them around your arm. That'll give you more freedom. We can both wrap our end around our wrists so we can secure you if anything happens.'

'Great idea Alun,' smiled Mike. 'No guts, but a quick mind.'

'Thanks.'

'Nothing will go wrong anyhow. Christ, a child could do it.'

With this, Mike bent down and took his shoes off then amazed us by climbing over the balcony railing as if we were on the ground floor, 'OK. You two hold on tight. My life is in your hands.'

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As he moved off, it suddenly struck us that this was precisely the case.

'Hell,' whispered Alun.

'Sorry?' called Mike.

'Nothing.'

Mike leant over and grabbed the jutting rail of the next balcony and with surprising ease stepped out and hauled himself across.

'Keep hold of the belts, until I'm over the railing.'

We had no intention of letting go at all and were indeed far more concerned than he was. Frightened is more like it.

At this moment he started to lever himself up.

As he climbed, however, the button of his trousers caught the rail and unhooked the waistband. Down they fell, and having no shoes on, they shot off and fluttered downward towards the road below.

'Oh balls!' cried Mike, now displaying a pair of crimson coloured pants to the birds flying past, 'my trousers!'

Without thinking, he bent down with his free hand to catch them, forgetting that this was attached to the belts.

He started to topple over backwards into the space beyond.

'Pull him in quick,' shouted Alun and we immediately took up the slack of the belts and dragged him back. Regardless of this quick action he lost his footing and toppled in our direction, 'Grab his hand. I'll keep the belt.' Shouted Alun.

I let go and grabbed Mike's Wrist as he fell sideward towards us. Alun brought in the slack by leaning back with all his weight and Mike grabbed at the railings of our balcony with his free hand.

For a fraction of a second, he hung there, but while Alun held the belt, wrapped around his forearm, I leant over and grabbed Mike under the arm and held him against the railings. He swung his foot up and getting it on the ledge, I lifted him upright, and he swung himself over onto the balcony.

Then he turned to us. 'Bit close that!'

Then suddenly his brow clouded, 'damn it!' he cried. 'My best trousers!'

He leant over and scrutinised the road below where a good deal of activity was now going on, 'I'll bet one of those damn kids has stolen them.' He paused then started, 'Hell! My car keys and the front door keys were in my back pocket.'

We nodded, doing our best to look unconcerned while trying to get out breaths back.

'Hey!' he cried, 'That guy has got them. You can bet he's part of the Romanian Mafia. They'll have my car stolen and empty my house before you can even cough.'

'Mike,' I said. 'How on earth will they find out who you are or where you live. We are in Romania, you know...'

'Those guys have their methods,' he replied.

I was about to try and reason with him when we suddenly heard a voice. 'Hello!'

We lent over the rail and stared down at the head that was poking out from the balcony below ours.

It was a round, high cheeked Asian face.

Mike smiled, 'Oh hello Mrs Yamamoto. We didn't know you were here in Bucharest too. Do you mind if I drop in?'

At this, the trouser-less and scarlet-panted Mike levered himself over the railing, let himself down,

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and swung onto her balcony, our three belts still attached to his wrist.

The women took in this unusual ornament with an interested nod and smiled up at us with a knowing look.

We exchanged amazed looks at Mikes' incredible feat but at the same time, we heard his voice come floating back up to us, 'Thanks Mrs Yamamoto, I just have to pop down and get my trousers back. See you later.'

We heard a bang as her bedroom door slammed behind him.

A few instants later, Mrs Yamamoto's face reappeared, 'he's gone.'

Alun smiled down, 'yes. he was worried that the Mafia might get his trousers.'

'The mafia?'

'That's what he said.'

'What for?'

'To steal his car and burgle his house.'

'But, why? Has he got something of great value?'

'Well, he doesn't speak much about his financial affairs, even to his friends.'

'Perhaps he has had a troubled past,' suggested Mrs Yamamoto, warming to the subject.

We were sure that she was thinking, "I do so love a man with a troubled past."

Anyway, we exchanged glances, 'yes.' I agreed, 'I suppose one could say that.'

'Perhaps he has a big house and a very expensive car,' she said hopefully, 'A Lamborghini perhaps?'

Alun turned his head to look at me, 'has Mike got a Lamborghini?'

'No. Not a Lamborghini.'

'A Rolls then, perhaps?' came back up excited the voice.

'No something a little smaller, I believe,' said Alun.

'And more streamlined,' I added.

'Ah! Of course, a Ferrari.'

'No. Not a Ferrari. Something beginning with an 'A'. It's on the tip of my tongue. There's an 'M' in the name too.' frowned Alun, in his effort to concentrate.

'Ah...' sighed Mrs Yamamoto rapturously. 'Yes, of course. An Aston Martin. Yes. Naturally. What else?'

Mike would be pleased to know that he had an Aston Martin rather than an Austin Mini. He always wanted one.

'I suppose his house is crammed full of valuable antiques and paintings,' added Mrs Yamamoto.

'Well!' nodded Alun, 'now that you mention it, there are quite a few pictures and things standing about. But then again, I have absolutely no expertise in those things.'

'Some of those things might be valuable though,' I suggested.

'To a connoisseur, possibly,' agreed Alun, 'who can say.'

'He's a wealthy man then?' Said the voice from below.

'Possibly.' said Alun, 'but as I said, he never mentions financial issues to us.'

'Unless he has to buy a round,' I muttered under my breath.

'Sorry?'

'Oh, nothing. Mrs Yamamoto. I am just thinking out loud'.

'I wonder why he was so excited about those trousers and why would the Mafia be interested in

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them. He's not an international spy or something like that?'

We gazed down at the pink cheeks turned up towards us, and it seemed such a pity to destroy her illusions.

'Well,' nodded Alun, 'I never thought of that before. I wonder if you might have put your finger on something there.'

'Yes,' I agreed, 'that would explain many of his sudden and unexplained absences.'

We were about to develop this theme further, but at this instant, there was an enormous crash from inside our room and turning, we saw the door burst inwards.

Four armed and menacing policemen leapt in and dashed to the window, guns in hand. I should point out here, that there were four of them, they were not four-armed, but on reflection, they were certainly fore-armed.

One of these two-armed, armed police officers wrenched at the bar across the door, but his colleague found a much faster way of reaching us, by smashing the double-glazed windows, using his rifle butt as a battering ram.

Then things then became extremely confused.

'Where is the man you were trying to push over the balcony.'

Alun looked shocked, 'We weren't, he went over the balcony of his own free accord.'

'He's gone down, after his trousers,' I added. 'He must have reached the road by now.'

'Christ!' cried the one who seemed to understand English best.

They jumped to the rail and gazed down, just as Mike came sprinting out, bare-legged, the three belts flailing about behind him.

'How did he manage to survive the fall?' The three men crossed themselves feverishly and flung their hand up to the sky.

'It's a miracle,' cried the oldest of the three.

'The Lord be praised,' said another.

'What on earth is he up to now?' exclaimed the older policeman.

Gazing down, we saw Mike dash through the amazed crowd and then fling himself in an impressive flying tackle on the astonished man holding his trousers. The man went down, and Mike ripped the trousers from his grasp before dashing off again towards the hotel entrance, followed by two other two-armed, armed policemen.

As his scarlet rear disappeared from sight, we turned and exchanged looks with the policemen who were clearly having trouble taking all this in.

'He does things like that from time to time,' nodded Alun.

Explaining the apparent miracle was reasonably easy because Mrs Yamamoto participated eagerly from her post on her balcony below. However, it proved more challenging to explain to four persistent Rumanian police officers that we had not been trying to murder Mike.

Eventually, giving up the attempt to understand us, they herded us out of the room.

On the way out we passed the hotel manager who, the unused passkey in his hand, was angrily inspecting the smashed door frame.

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When the lift reached the ground floor, still guarded at gunpoint, we met up with Mike. He nodded, 'Got them,' he said.

'Great,' I smiled, 'why not put them on, now you've got them?'

He bent down and slipped his legs into them.

'By the way,' he smiled up at us, 'the keys weren't in my pocket after all. I must have left them in my suitcase.'

The next day, at about eleven, the three of us emerged from our short stay in a dark and damp cell, unshaved and looking a little worse for wear.

The girls were standing, chatting cheerfully to the head of the police brigade. The man, a little older than us, was beaming at them with evident good humour.

'Well thank you very much for your help inspector,' smiled Margaux as we appeared, 'and all the best for your retirement.'

'My pleasure ladies. Thank you.'

'Come on you three,' Margaux called to us, 'Unless you prefer to remain here.'

We pulled faces, and the Inspector grinned as we passed him and out through the main door.

Margaux led us silently down the road towards the hotel. However, after a few yards, my wife turned her head.

'Luckily for you three, that kind man is retiring next week,' she sneered.

We looked askance.

'Retirement pensions are very low over here,' added Margaux without turning her head. So, we made a contribution. The man was most grateful. He has five children apparently...'

After a few more steps she turned her head. 'Oh! By the way. Your bedroom door has been replaced, but you'll have to do without the window tonight. I told the manager you wouldn't want to cause more trouble by requiring him to change your room.'

Mike was about to object, but I quickly shook my head at him.

'When you have a moment or two,' said Margaux, 'perhaps you might like to explain what Mike was doing hanging over the balcony wearing only scarlet pants...'

'He was on his way down to visit his friend Mrs Yamamoto apparently,' said my wife.

'I would have thought that the stairs would have been more convenient, wouldn't you?' replied Margaux.

'Yes, but less direct, and he would have had to put his trousers back on, wouldn't he.'

'That's true. No doubt was in a bit of a hurry and wanted to save all the time he could,' Margaux nodded.

'When the sap rises and the juices of passion surge through the veins, there is no holding back a reproductive male,' nodded my wife.

'That's how you recognise the real caveman type,' agreed Margaux.

'Exactly. Too few of them around nowadays.'

Mike struggled with his emotions, 'No. Come on! It wasn't a bit like that. I'll explain it. It's all very straightforward.'

Mike did explain, but the outcome was that it didn't seem in the least straightforward. For example, to start with, his explanation wasn't straight and furthermore, it didn't go forward at all. One might be

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tempted to term it a 'bent-backwards' explanation rather than a straightforward one.

Needless to say, we got it in the ear.

Had there been a second performance of the never-ending Wagner piece that evening, we would gladly have attended. It would have been vastly preferable to having to go through the evening meal under the glowering eye of the hotel manager and animated by the lively and light-hearted banter of our wives.

Anyhow, we weren't given a choice.

Chapter 11 mountain Passes

The day before our adventure on the balcony, Mike had spent the morning scouting around the city and had managed to find us a car rental bargain. He had found a Skoda for twenty-five euros a day which we all agreed would take a lot of beating.

However, when we went around to pick it up, we discovered that the car had in fact already taken quite a bit of beating.

'Not absolutely brand new,' admitted the agent, 'but she runs like a dream, and you won't get a better deal this side of the Red Sea.'

'The Black Sea,' corrected Mike, who knew his geography, 'the Red Sea is further down, near the Gulf of Aden.'

'Yes, you may be right,' said the agent, clearly not listening to us, 'I've never been down that way.'

'Difficult, that one,' nodded Alun with a wry smile, 'especially that incredible bunker on the twelfth.'

'Yep. A real devil, that gulf course.' I agreed. 'Mike once took twelve stokes getting out of that bunker.'

'Who was stroking him, that time?' asked Alun.

'Do you know.' I shook my head, 'I can't for the sake of me remember.'

Mike sighed and shook his head, 'what are you two idiots gibbering about now?'

'A bit expensive though,' said Alun, ignoring Mike's question.

'Is it?' said the agent. 'I never have time to play. Maybe I'll pop down someday.'

'And did you know,' continued Alun, 'that down there the pro plays with red balls, instead of white?'

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'Everyone knows that,' I interrupted, 'it's a privilege which goes back to the days of William the Conqueror.'

'That's why his red balls have little gold crowns stamped on them, I suppose,' said Alun.

'I wonder what the Pro in those days did to merit that?' I mused.

'Service rendered, no doubt,' suggested Alun.

The agent looked up briefly with a non-committal nod.

'Odd that they nick-named them Aden Apples, and not Adam Apples though.' continued Alun.

The agent nodded again, not taking much notice of our chatter as he filled out the forms. 'That's interesting.'

Having completed our transaction, we loaded ourselves into the small and surprising uncomfortable Skoda.

The thing made an interesting rattling sound when Mike turned the ignition, but otherwise, it didn't sound any worse than an empty saucepan dragged along the road.

Mike shrugged and turned in his seat, 'twenty-five euros.'

We shrugged and nodded too.

'Do you know,' I said, 'I wonder if our brilliant repartee and creative lateral-thinking conversational masterpieces won't land us in trouble one of these days.'

'Just leave me out of it,' said Mike, 'That's all I ask.'

'You're such a spoil-sport, Mike,' said Alun.

'I wonder how much the girls had to fork out, to get us out of prison yesterday,' frowned Mike, changing the subject.

'Best not to ask,' replied Alun.

'If they didn't mention a sum,' I mused, 'it means that it wasn't an impressive enough amount to hold over us.'

'Talking about money,' said Mike, 'I suppose someone thought about bringing enough cash for the midday meal and petrol and stuff.'

'Stuff?' asked Alun.

'Yeh. Drink, souvenirs, visits.'

'Oh yes. Don't worry I've got a thousand dollars.'

'A thousand dollars...' cried Mike. 'Are you mad? What happens if we get hijacked?'

'Hijacked!' I laughed.

'Yeah. We're going into the middle of nowhere. If those guys see that we've got all that much, they'll scalp us to get it.'

'Which guys?' I asked, very interested in this hijacking idea.

'Criminals, bandits. The place is crawling with them. Everyone knows that.'

'I didn't,' said Alun.

'Obviously,' sighed Mike, shaking his head sadly. 'You two never think about anything but beer.'

'And women,' corrected Alun.

'And adventure,' I suggested.

'No,' exclaimed Mike, 'the adventures are what happens because you two always jump before thinking.'

'Good fun sometimes though.' smiled Alun.

'Yeh.' I agreed.

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'Oh, all right,' Mike shook his head and laughed, 'I suppose sometimes things turn out to be interesting.'

'Don't forget Mike,' I leant forward, 'That sometimes, the aforesaid adventures were triggered not due to Alun and me not thinking, but due to you actually thinking.'

Mike made a puffing noise, which we took as meaning "ridiculous" or perhaps "rubbish".

'Who found this rental car bargain, then? Did I engineer that by not thinking?'

Alun and I exchanged glances. The trip was not yet finished...

'Well, even if those mountain-pass pirates do scalp me It won't help them much,' said Alun, 'The cash isn't hidden in my hair.'

'Oh really...' sneered Mike

'I sewed a special secret pocket into the leg of my trousers.'

'Where?'

'Where only a man-eating woman would explore.'

'Oh god...' cried Mike. 'I'm not touching that stuff, it'll stink to high heaven.'

'It does already. It's been there all week.'

'God in heaven...'

'Might have come in handy yesterday, if the girls hadn't come to our rescue.'

Well, we had to agree that, the idea might have saved us considerable trouble if things had not turned out as they did.

'Do you often go about with a smelly treasure trove in your groin Alun,' I asked.

'Usually,' he smiled, 'but sometimes I take some money too.'

'Ha, ha,' sneered Mike. 'Get the map out, instead of trying to be funny.'

'I'm not trying,' said Alun, 'I'm being.'

By this time, we had wound our way out of Bucharest city, and its outskirts and had picked up the motorway, heading north-west.

We had planned what promised to be an enjoyable day's outing. We intended going northwards up over the Balea mountain pass, then eastwards along the back of the Southern Carpathian mountain range before coming back over the Urdel pass southwards. This would bring us back onto the plains again, across which we would head straight for Bucharest, in good time for a shower and a beer before dinner.

The girls had some important shopping to do, so everything was arranged without stress. They would, of course, spend considerably more than they had initially intended. They would do this, in a free and relaxed way, knowing perfectly well that, after our little "balconic" adventure, we would not dare challenge any seemingly unreasonable expenditure.

To reach the Balea Pass, at six-thousand seven-hundred feet above sea level, the route leaves the plains then climbs a seemingly never-ending snake-like road which twists and turns for nearly twenty miles. After the first mile or so we lost interest in the scenery and chatted on about all sorts of things until the road levelled out and dived into a tunnel, which marked the pass.

On the other side of this tunnel, we came into a sort of shanty town of constructions which had

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grown up around the entrance to the main attraction of the area, Lake Balea.

We were to eat here at the main hotel/restaurant. The place provided lovely views over the lake and the mountains, while completely spoiling the site if you happened to be anywhere else than on its terrace.

In any case, the dashboard thermometer indicated that the motor would appreciate a rest itself. So, all in all, it was an excellent place to stop and rest.

As we were fiddling with the car door locks which, for some reason didn't seem to correspond to the keys, three heavily built men came marching from the restaurant. They all wore black leather jackets of the sort that baddies wear in Hollywood thrillers. I could hear them talking together in what sounded like Russian, as they levered themselves into a Skoda, almost identical to ours and equally battered.

'I wouldn't like to meet those guys down a dark alley,' remarked Alun as they drove off in a cloud of blue smoke.

At our time of arrival, the mountain summits far above us were hidden by a blanket of grey cloud, fingers of which stretched downwards following the many avalanche corridors.

Not a day for hiking up there, we decided, as we searched for a free table.

We chose a spot on the terrace out of the cold wind, and after observing the lake for a short time, decided that the waitresses here were a better attraction than the cold and uninviting grey waters.

Our meal completed, Alun disappeared into the men's room and came back, having extracted the

necessary but limp funds, from their sweaty resting place.

From here, I took over the driving, because I had drunk half a glass less of wine than the other two.

Allowing about four hours for our return trip, we calculated that our blood alcohol levels should have just about reached the legal limit before we reached the outskirts of Bucharest. This would avoid another night in prison, should we be stopped, which in our experience seemed almost inevitable. In any case, Alun had more than enough in his little damp cashbox to cover the standard bribe rate.

It should be noted that before leaving, and as always when the three of us set out together, I checked up the present going rate in my well-thumbed copy of the "International-travellers bribe handbook".

The road wound its weary way back down the far side of the mountain to Carta on the valley floor. From here we headed roughly eastward to pick up the route up to the Urdel pass.

By this time, as often with such outings, the novelty of winding mountain roads had long since worn off. Furthermore, this pass was even higher and at 7,037ft, it's said to be the highest paved road in Romania.

In truth, this detail seems to be the only thing which it has to boast about because there is absolutely nothing on this road except mountains.

As we climbed, however, the engine temperature gauge seemed to rise in sympathy. Mike nodded and made the noise he usually made when about to show off his superior knowledge.

This invariably annoyed us.

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He leaned forward and tapped at the gauge, with the air of a man who knows what he is doing, which he didn't.

'That's due to the lack of oxygen.' he pulled a face. and leant back, satisfied with himself.

'What...!' I exclaimed.

'There's less oxygen as we get higher. You know that.'

'Yes, I know that, but the engine doesn't.'

'An internal combustion motor need oxygen to combust.'

'To combust?' spluttered Alun, who luckily wasn't driving. 'Combust, isn't grammatically correct. You can't combust.'

'Apparently, ours does,' I said, 'At least it's trying to, but is having a problem with oxygen deficiency.'

Alun sighed, 'Mike. If the engine can not combust properly, then it won't go. I other words, it will slow down.'

'Skoda's aren't built on the same lines as western European cars,' claimed Mike.

'Skoda's are not built,' said Alun, 'they're thrown.'

'In any case,' I said, 'we already noticed certain differences. To start with, the bodywork of ours seems to be built out of second-hand saucepans and the seats out of discarded deckchairs.'

'Anyway,' cried Alun, 'a non-combusting car will not overheat because it goes slower and slower, then stops.' He paused, 'It gasps for air like a frog with asthma.'

'A what,' cried Mike.

'An asthmatic Frog.'

'Those would be Romanian Frogs, I suppose?' I suggested.

Alun nodded, 'naturally.'

'Oh, come on Alun. Frogs don't get asthma.'

'And how the hell do you know that?'

'Well, it's just not reasonable.'

'Asthmatic cars aren't either.'

During this discussion the temperature gauge continued to rise so, regardless of the cause, I pulled off the road and parked by the parapet.

In front of us was a magnificent view.

'I like the image of the asthmatic frog. It conjures up just the right idea. The frog that wanted to be as big as a horse. And being asthmatic, couldn't blow himself up.'

'Probably saved his life,' said Alun.

'It wasn't a horse,' sighed Mike. 'It was an Ox. La Fontaine. You know.'

'That's an odd name for an Ox,' said Alun.

'The writer, you idiot.'

'I still have serious doubts about your oxygen deficiency theory Mike,' I said.

Mike snorted, 'Just because you're a scientist you think you know everything,' he sneered.

'Was a scientist,' corrected Alun.

'Hey, Alun,' I said. 'You remember the other day you told me about that pro footballer. You said he was a complete and utter moron.'

'Yes, but I can't see what that's got to do with it.'

'When he retires will he cease being a moron?'

'very funny,' sighed Alun.

'But true.'

'So?' sneered Mike

'Let me explain the phenomenon in simple, everyday terms.'

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'Oh god!' gasped Mike, 'here goes the professor again.'

I sighed, 'the fundamental reason that our car engine is overheating on this long stretch of uphill mountain road is basically the following. In most normal situations, an uphill mountain road tends to go upwards.'

Mike sniffed and looked out of the window shaking his head sadly. 'Into an oxygen-depleted atmosphere...' he said.

'Let me clarify further,' I leant forward and tapped the steering wheel.

'Oh god,' gasped Mike, 'can't you stop him Alun.'

'Don't worry Mike. The low oxygen content will hit him in a few seconds.'

I sighed, 'let us assume that someone comes around and shouts, "they're serving free beer around the corner". Off you'd go at your best speed and drink your fill.'

'Where on earth is this leading,' groaned Mike.

'Look at the colour of his cheeks, Mike,' said Alun. 'That's oxygen deficiency setting in already. He can't last much longer now.'

'But,' I continued, 'if just around the corner, the road goes up a very steep incline, you are likely to expend more energy getting to the pub.'

Furthermore, as you don't want to miss the treat, you'll want to keep going at the same speed, and you'll get pretty hot.' I looked at Mike and prodded him, 'Won't you?'

'Yes, yes, of course, I would.'

'Same thing with the car.'

'You really get on my wick sometimes, you know,' he sighed.

'However,' I continued, 'Setting aside the physics of the thing, which underpin this fundamental physical explanation which I have now clarified for you, is a second and even more important fact. This is linked to the fact that this car is a wreck and a pile of rusty iron, which should have gone to the tip ten years ago.'

'He's something there,' nodded Alun.

'So, I stopped to allow this rusty wreck to cool off a bit, before the engine bursts into flames.'

'We'd be late for dinner if it did that,' concluded Alun.

We opened the bonnet and sat on the side of the road gazing at the mountains for half an hour.

Inexplicably, the pleasures of mountain landscapes, palls quickly, especially in the presence of a cold searching wind. Oddly, this cold Romanian mountain wind seemed to get to places where ordinary winds do not reach. Consequently, I had to go off to respond to the call of nature behind a huge boulder.

As I moved behind it, I was surprised to find most of the space occupied by an unexpectedly large and new BMW with Swiss registration plates. Piled on the back seats were three big rucksacks.

Involuntarily, I glanced up and scanned the steep slope above me, following the path of the track which climbed up from near the car. There was no sign of movement, so I assumed that the passengers of the vehicle had already climbed over the ridge above us.

On returning to Alun and Mike, I mentioned this, and we all found it odd that someone should have chosen this spot as a starting point for any trek. We

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wandered back out of curiosity and gazed at the BMW's shining bodywork

'Mind you,' said Alun, 'If I had an expensive new car like that, I'd keep it out of sight too.'

'I bet that machine wouldn't overheat on a hill like this,' I said.

Alun laughed, 'Its a four-litre V8 motor. they could come up a slope like this at a hundred mile an hour and still have plenty of power for overtaking.'

'It would have cost, more than twenty-five euros, for the day though,' said Mike.

'More like two hundred and fifty.' nodded Alun as we headed back to see how our car was cooling.

Although the pause in our upward trajectory had allowed the engine to cool off, we agreed that all the same, it would be a prudent move to stop again at the pass before heading for home.

We were pleasantly surprised that our car actually did reach the top without incident. When we opened the car doors and stepped out, we were met by a gust of icy wind, coming up from the valley beyond. The rain was clearly not far off, up here and would be on us soon if we stayed too long.

Looking southwards over the plains, however, we saw that the valley beyond was still in the sun, as the line of mountains obviously held back the clouds.

We opened the bonnet to release the heat and then wandered over to look over the edge of the stone parapet.

One other car had just arrived, coming up the road from the opposite direction and it pulled over some way off.

Then to our surprise, the three burly Russians, we had spotted at the restaurant climbed out.

They too opened their car bonnet.

'Must be doing the same circuit as us, the other way around,' said Alun. We nodded agreement.

'Obviously got the same rental deal as us,' I commented. 'Looks like the same model Skoda too'.

Mike sulked.

As we wandered over toward the parapet, Alun took a running kick at a small stone with his sandaled foot, to send it flying over the edge into the prairie beyond.

Unfortunately, however, this small stone happened to be still attached to its mother, which was lurking under the rough grass.

Alun yelled and leapt into the air.

We wheeled around as did the three Russians, and we all gazed at him hopping and skipping about.

The poor stone was treated to such a deluge of insults that I'm sure that its mother would have covered its ears had she been able to.

Anyway, Alun's dancing antics went on uninterrupted for some time then suddenly something entirely unexpected happened.

On one of his higher leaps, something grey fell from his trouser leg. Then a gust of wind caught the thing, and we all shouted as a sheaf of banknotes whirled up into the air and fluttered towards the edge of the car park, where the land fell steeply away.

A wisp of wind separated the cloud of money in two and with a curse, we dashed after it across the mountainside. The Russians saw what happened and joined the pursuit with enthusiasm. We cursed our bad luck. Getting it back from men like that would be impossible.

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Although heavily built, the Russians were surprisingly agile and before we had gathered up a few of the fluttering notes, they had their hands full.

Alun did what he could but, chasing fluttering paper money in a brisk wind on one foot is not the best way to recover ones lost wealth.

Eventually, though, the game was over, and it had very clearly been won by the Russians, who came back from the paperchase waving fistfuls of our money at us, with broad smiles.

'Oh hell...' said Alun.

The three hard men were slapping their muscular thighs and almost falling about with laughter. As we watched, the three made a single pile of notes and then, shuffling them together came plodding towards us, smiling.

'Ha!' said the first, 'you have so much money, you throw it away. But we make a good chase eh? Good fun,' he laughed. With this, he held out the handful of money to Alun, 'we got plenty of money too. More than enough. Lots.'

At this, he burst out laughing and slapped Alun on the back, 'playing football with rocks... Not a good idea. Maybe a British game eh! In Russia, we use leather balls. Not so hard. ha, ha.'

The three men laughed out loud, and we had no alternative than to join in. We handed over the wad money we had collected to Alun who wiped his forehead with theatrical exaggeration, 'thanks very much. If you hadn't been here, it would have blown up the mountain.'

At this, the three Russian exchanged startled glances and burst out laughing, 'blown up a

mountain. You'd need a lot of explosives for that,' spluttered the first Russian.

'Easier to blow up a bank, than a mountain. ha, ha.'

'More money too.' laughed the other.

We laughed with them, then they shook our hands warmly then moved off to their car, slammed down the bonnet, and drove away down the road we had just come up. I think they were still laughing.

'That was a bit close,' sighed Alun.

'You're telling me,' agreed Mike

'Got a sense of humour too, those guys,' I added.

An hour later, and after seemingly a thousand hairpin bends, we eventually got back down onto the plain. However, by this time it was the car brakes which needed to cool off. In fact, the final mile had been touch-and-go because the footbrake no longer responded properly, and I had to use the hand brake as well. Consequently, I sighed deeply and relaxed as the road eventually levelled out.

Just as the petrol tank was also getting low, we spotted a rare petrol station.

'Let's stop here,' I said. 'We can fill up and let the brakes cool while we have a coffee.'

We filled up the tank then sat on a stone seat drinking our coffee and waiting for the brake lining smell to dissipate.

At this moment a battered police car turned off the main road.

Three men climbed leisurely out of their vehicle and looked over at our car.

'Oh hell,' murmured Mike, 'here comes trouble.'

Over the many years of our adventures together, we have developed a seventh sense about such

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things. We knew by instinct when some official or other was going to single us out for special treatment.

When we had been young, we were inevitably shabbily dressed, not all that clean, uncombed and above all, young. We had thus naturally assumed in those days that being singled out by officials as wandering drug addicts was because of these outward defects.

We had been wrong because we were now well dressed, almost sparkingly clean, perfectly combed or bald and above all, not young.

The three policemen stood looking from the car to us for some time then one of them said something to the others, and they came towards us.

'Shit,' said Alun, 'let's hope the smell of coffee covers the smell of alcohol in our breath.'

The men stopped and looked into our car, and the older one sniffed the air and turned to us.

'Overheated?'

Mike nodded, 'The Brakes.'

'Ah...' nodded the man and exchanged a look with his men, who smiled. 'As I thought. You have been driving too fast.'

'Much too fast, I would say,' added the officer to his left.

'Driving too fast is a serious offence,' said the chief.

'A very serious offence,' added the one who hadn't spoken yet.

I was about to try and explain the truth, but Alun shook his head at me, "don't bother", was what this meant.

'We are deeply sorry,' Alun nodded apologetically, getting to his feet.

He stepped forward, put his hand in his pocket and pulled out the wad of notes. However, he only got hold of half of them, and as his hand came out, the others fluttered to the ground. They were at once whipped up by a gust of wind and sent across the petrol station forecourt.

I have honestly, never seen anyone move as fast as those three policemen. Within five seconds they had caught the lot and were counting them carefully.

'Well,' said the chief frowning down at the notes in his hand, 'everything seems to be in order. Please drive carefully in the future.'

As they turned away from us, I shook my head. 'Three hundred dollars worth of fines in a single go.'

'A hundred each,' corrected Mike.

However, at this moment, we heard a crackling noise from the CB in the police car. The youngest officer ran ahead of his two companions. He listened for a moment, then turned and beckoned the other two over.

There was a rapid exchange, and the oldest man took the microphone and talked into it. Then the three heads turned slowly back towards us.

'Of hell...' I muttered, 'now what?'

The chief, stood upright and as he turned back to face us, he unfastened the retaining strap on his revolver

'This looks bad. You didn't do anything you should have told us about did you Mike?'

'No, I did not.'

'Well, it looks like someone told them something which has upset them.'

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The chief came slowly back towards us while the other two kept a little back.'

'You three men. You are foreigners. Is that right?'

'Yes,' I said

'That Skoda is yours?'

'Yes. It's a rental one from Bucharest.'

'And you have been over the Balea Pass and eat at the restaurant by the lake?'

'Yes,' Said Alun, 'but we paid.'

'We know that. And you have just been driving very fast and have overheated the brakes.'

'No,' I said.

'Come with us please to the police station. We must ask you some questions.'

'Why,' cried Mike.

'Because,' said the man removing his revolver, 'We have been informed that three foreign men in an old Skoda were coming this way very fast,' He looked at us as the other two men also removed their guns.

'These three foreigners have just attacked a bank and blown open the safe and have got away with nearly five hundred thousand dollars.'

'Oh hell...' cried Alun, 'those Russians.'

'That BMW must have been the getaway car,' I nodded.

'Balls...' cried Mike.

'It wasn't us,' said Alun, 'It was some Russians... we saw them. They gave us our money back...'

'You shouldn't have said that Alun,' I said, 'That is going to get them confused.'

'Gave you your money back? Russians?' frowned the chief.

'That's distraction tactics boss,' said the youngest policeman, who was obviously a fan of TV police films.

'No money in the car,' called the third policeman from our car.

'So, you've already hidden it.'

'We never had any money,' cried Mike.

'You just said that Russians gave it back to you. How many are there in this gang?'

'Oh Hell!' sighed Alun.

'Oh. I get it now,' said Mike, 'That's why they were so amused about the idea of blowing up the mountain.'

'What...?' cried the chief, 'They are going to blow up the mountain? Which mountain?'

'No. It was just a joke.' I interrupted before Mike could add some new catastrophic comment to make things worse.

The youngest officer was dispatched to the CB to relay the latest news to headquarters.

'You didn't joke about blowing up the safe in the bank,' said the chief.

'We didn't blow up any safe,' I sighed.

'And now your partners are going to blow up the mountain. Which mountain?' he waved his gun at me.'

'That one,' I pointed.

'Great gods...' cried the chief.

'I don't like this chief,' said the second officer, 'why does an international gang like this blow up a mountain?'

'To hide the bodies under the rocks,' called the young one.

'Which bodies?' gasped the chief.

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'The ones they murdered, to keep them quiet,' replied the young one.

'Great gods...!' exclaimed the chief. 'These men are the devil's incarnation.'

'I bet they are going to blow up the dam and flood the whole of Bucharest,' said the young one, warming to the story.

A look of absolute horror spread across the chief's face. Then he paused and frowned. 'There isn't a dam up there. hardly any water at all.'

'Oh. Are you sure?'

'Of course, I'm sure.'

'Course he's sure,' added the second officer.

The chief stood for a moment in silent thought, then shook his head. 'Come on, you three, get in the car. My officer will bring your car along. You've got a lot of explaining to do.'

We were escorted at gunpoint, handcuffed, and pushed into the back of their car. The second officer kept us covered with his gun as we started.

Mike leant over to us and whispered, 'Do you think we ought to tell them about the brakes, not working?'

We exchanged looks. Alun frowned over at me and a faint smile creased his lips 'No. I wouldn't bother. He'll be all right if he drives carefully.'

The road wound its way across the plain and after about five minutes made a hairpin bend to follow the course of a small river. The policeman covering us suddenly shouted, and the chief slammed on the brakes.

Looking over our shoulders we just spotted our little Skoda, leaving the road and sailing through the air into the small river. There followed a highly satisfying splash, and the car came to rest in about

two feet of water. Our driver went into reverse gear, and the battered police car dashed backwards, far too fast for my liking in a somewhat drunken manner.

What had to happen did happen, and the car went out of control, spun backwards off the road and slid sideways down into a muddy ditch.

The three of us, completely unharmed, exchanged glances but sat stock still, in the knowledge that a scared police officer with a gun, might react unpredictably.

Pretty soon, we were sitting handcuffed by the roadside, while a farmer was commandeered to haul the car out of the ditch with his tractor.

We then spent the rest of the journey back to Bucharest crammed in the back, with a soaked and unhappy Romanian Policeman.

I suppose things could have turned out worse.

However, I should have guessed that we would be taken to the same police station as the following day and that the man on service was naturally the same Police inspector as before. He looked at us with pity and shook his head sadly.

He was reading through the declaration we had made, shaking his head again when the phone by his hand rang. He picked it up, listened then leant forward on his desk. 'A big Swiss registered BMW V8, carrying three Russians, crossed the frontier into Hungary Two hours ago. With a car like that, they are probably already back in Ukraine.'

We nodded.

'I can't let you out until I get the authorisation from the chief.'

We nodded understanding.

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Then with something closely resembling pity the man added, 'I suppose I will have to phone your hotel and let your ladies know where you are.'

We sighed, and he picked up the phone again. Rather him than us...

Once at the airport and shuffling up towards customs, Mike leant over to us, a frown creasing his brow.

'Do you know,' he said, 'What with one thing and another, I completely forgot to tell you two about my surgical tools.'

'Ah,' I said without much enthusiasm.

'As there were quite a few, I put a bagful in each of your suitcases... I didn't think you'd mind.' he smiled, 'Should be all right.'

'Oh God...' cried Alun as his suitcase disappeared into the jaws of the x-ray scanner.

Chapter 12 Tregastel

Alun, Mike, and I scrambled up onto the flat top of a massive block of granite giving us an uninterrupted view across the little bay.

The girls declined to accompany us to our spartan throne, preferring the softness of a cushion of dry grass some ten feet below us.

The sun had just disappeared behind the distant horizon in a steaked glory of red, mauve, and orange, but the evening was still warm, and we were all feeling happy and relaxed.

Although we were not aware of it, Margaux and my wife had recently been warmly congratulated by their literary agent for the unexpected success of their blog. He had also informed them that the future publisher of their book was impressed but felt that an additional chapter, based in France would add to its appeal.

Consequently, the girls suggested a few weeks holiday not far from home.

What is more, they proposed a place which we knew and loved, and which also had a significant point in its favour. Nothing out of the ordinary had ever happened to either Mike, Alun or me, here. To put this in other words, this was one of the rare places on the planet in which we had never got into trouble.

The girls had chosen the dates to coincide with the famous annual twenty-four-hour boat race, and it was precisely for this reason that we were now perched high up, a hundred feet above the sea.

For the occasion, several of the tiny granite islets filling the bay had been equipped with powerful

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projectors. Once darkness fell, the bay would flicker and flash into full view again as the encroaching shadows were precipitated towards the horizon.

The place in question was the small seaside village of Tregastel, on the so-called "Pink Granite Coast" of Brittany. The entire coastline and the hundreds of little islets along it are made up exclusively of incredible chaoses of impressive granite blocks. To me, they don't look all that pink, but that's the name they have given the place, and I haven't been asked for my opinion.

The granite itself, in this part of Brittany, is remarkable stuff to go clambering about on. It is incredibly rough, somewhat like very coarse sandpaper. In consequence, one can leap from block to block without the slightest risk of slipping even when streaming with water from the breaking waves.

Mind you, shoe soles don't last long, if you do this a lot, which of course we did.

The twenty-four-hour boat race is reserved for 420s, sailing boats measuring four metres twenty long, with a crew of two. It starts at three in the afternoon ending at the same time the following day, for those who have not abandoned.

Two teams relay each other, and the winner is the boat completing the largest number of circuits around a triangular course between the small granite islets near the coast.

Everyone, including the organisers, ends up utterly exhausted.

As the church bell chimed ten-o'clock, the projectors came on, and at about the same time the wind dropped completely.

The forty or so boats, which had by now been sailing around the course for six and a half hours, suddenly came to a halt where they were, bobbing up and down gently.

The same thing happened almost every year, and the contestants knew there was nothing to do about it. The more experienced, settled down to catch up on a bit of sleep and made themselves as comfortable as was possible. The others cursed and ruminated and sat waiting for the wind to return.

This event did not upset us unduly, because it was not dissimilar to a welcome "entre-act" during some tedious opera or other. In any case, unlike the contestants, we were comfortable, dry, we could wander about if we liked and we could go home when we had had enough.

What's more, "The Girls" had prepared a big basket of food in provision of a midnight meal, and we had plenty of warm clothes for when the night became cool. They were presently using these as cushions and were leaning back against the granite block gazing across the water.

To complete our arrangements, two bottles of rosé and two of excellent white wine were cooling in a discarded lobster pot that we had firmly attached in the cold, crystal-clear waters far below us.

As we knew that this windless period could last for an hour or maybe two, we decided to go for a walk along the coastguard's path before turning back through the village to see what was happening. There was bound to be at least one Celtic dance group playing, and that would be fun to see, before coming back for the big firework display due at

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eleven-o'clock. We wanted to be back up on our perch in time for this.

Margaux and my wife decided to stay where they were and chat.

'We'll have a turn around the village when you three have finished.' smiled my wife.

Margaux shook her head, 'anyway, someone has to look after your wine, I suppose.'

We wandered off but soon decided that stumbling along a narrow, coastguard's track in the pitch black was not all that relaxing. We thus took a short cut across a field and dropped down into the village. Hundreds of people were milling around, looking at the stands, eating, or watching the musicians. Near the seafront, a group was playing traditional Celtic dance music, on a raised stage. In front of this, nigh on a hundred people were stepping out Breton folk dances.

When the fascination of these intricate steps began to pall, we headed back to our perch, to free the girls of their burdensome vigil.

In fact, we got back only just in time for the fireworks, which were let off from the biggest islets.

This display lasted nearly half an hour, and by the time things had settled back down, and the projectors had come back on, we were more than ready for some food.

We thus clambered back down from our rock and started to spread things out on the grass, which was beginning to dampen with dew.

'I'll go down and bring up some wine, shall I?' said Mike, with undisguised enthusiasm, 'one of each?'

We nodded, and he disappeared over the lip of our little plateau and scrambled down the steep chaos of granite rocks.

Thirty seconds or so later, we heard shouts, and lights flashed on below us. We all jumped to our feet and peered down to the waters edge fifty feet lower.

Mike was standing on an inclined block of granite, glaring out at three men in an inflatable lifeguard's rescue boat.

'Swimming's not allowed here,' cried the chief in French. 'Don't you think we have enough on our plates tonight, without having to save idiots like you, from drowning.'

'I'm not swimming,' Mike shouted back.

'No. You're drowning, or you're are about to.'

'I am not.'

The boat came in closer, carefully avoiding the jagged rocks.

'What are you doing with that lobster pot. That's illegal too, fishing with lights at night.'

'I am not fishing,' shouted Mike.

'So, what are you doing with your hand in that pot for then?'

The chiefs second in command nodded, 'I'll bet he is stealing one of our local fisherman's catch.'

'Yeh,' added the third man, 'René won't like that.'

The three men seemed to find this amusing.

'This pot does not belong to any René, and I don't give a damn about your René anyway.'

'René is a big man,' said the chief.

'Strong too.' said the other man.

'Quick tempered too,' added the third.

'This is not René's pot. It's ours.'

'So, you are fishing then. Got you!'

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'I am not fishing. I put something in it to cool.
Look!'

Mike leant forward and yanked angrily at the rope. Inevitably, however, the pot caught on a rock. Nature, not wanting to be left out of things, precipitated him, headfirst, into the dark waters towards the lifeboat.

There was a highly satisfying splash, closely followed by a choice selection of curses, some of which were strong enough to make a lobster blush.

'Hey, Mikel!' Alun called down, 'you heard the man. Bathing's prohibited.'

'So's diving from the rocks,' I added.

'Shut up.' gasped Mike

He was lashing about in the water, but before I had clambered halfway down to help him out, the lifeguards had manoeuvred in, and he caught hold of the ropes running along its side.

'Thanks,' grumbled Mike.

The three men were looking down at him without a lot of enthusiasm on their faces until I reached the bottom.

I leaned down and lifted two bottles out of the Lobster pot. 'This is what we were fishing for,' I called over.

Their faces lit up immediately.

'Why didn't you explain that?' the chief shook his head.

'We would have understood,' said the second.

'You didn't give me time,' sighed Mike, heaving himself over the rubber floater.

'There was no need to go diving into the sea like that,' added the third.

'I didn't. I fell.'

'Looked very much like diving from here,' said the chief.

'Agreed,' said the other.

'From up top too.' I added, 'Do you prefer Rosé or White?'

The men's faces lit up again, 'Sea-Cooled Rosé would go down a treat,' he smiled. 'We've even got a corkscrew.'

'naturally,' I smiled, 'you're French.'

They all laughed.

'We've cups too. For the coffee,' added the second.

'Catch!' I called and lobbed the bottle to them.

'Thanks.'

'Our pleasure. Could you put our friend down on the beach so that he can run home and change.'

'Will do.' said the chief. 'Come on. Let's get it done and have a quick glass of this before the wind picks up again.'

'Goodnight,' called the girls from above.

'Good night ladies, thanks for the wine,' came the reply, as they powered up the outboard and disappeared with Mike.

When he returned along the coastguard's track, half an hour later, he was not in the best of states of mind. However, after a heartening meal, three-quarters of a bottle of white wine and a big cup of hot coffee, he managed to see the funny side of the episode.

The girls seemed pleased too. Things were turning out as they had hoped, and everything was going in the right direction for them.

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13 - SWIMMING

The following morning, we got up late and took our time over breakfast in the warm morning sun.

Following this, Alun and Mike dragged the windsurf boards and sails onto the lawn and started messing about with them on hands and knees.

Because of the boat race, no one else was permitted to sail until after four-o'clock, so I set off alone to do a bit of swimming. This activity was allowed as long as one crossed the landing channel rapidly and did not obstruct the boats.

The remaining teams still had five hours sailing left and had handed over to the rested duo for the last stretch.

A lot of people were still milling about, listening to the Celtic bands or sitting drinking in the seafront bistros while idly watching the boats.

The wind had returned shortly after midnight, and the boats were still speeding around the course. As the bay at Tregastel is well protected from the sea by numerous small granite islets, even with this wind, the sea was only disturbed by small waves.

Because of this natural sea rampart, the weather has to be very bad before things get too rough.

As I waded into the cold water, the rescue crew of the night before were coming ashore, for their rest period. I waved, and they smiled as they dragged their boat up onto the sand. 'Lovely Rosé you gave us last night. Thanks.'

'That was Alsace Pinot-Noir,' I smiled, 'my favourite.'

'Well. Have a nice swim. Only two of you in this morning.' nodded the chief.

'Everyone else has got a hangover I guess,' laughed the second in command.

'So, you'll have a band of fifty feet wide each to swim in. That should limit the risk of collisions.'

We all laughed, and I struck off, doing my best to impress them, which of course I didn't.

As has already been mentioned, the bay was quite small, but this, of course, is only a relative appreciation. For a swimmer, the straight line from the granite outcrop at one end, to the enormous tortoise-shaped rocks at the other, measured almost two hundred and fifty metres. This is a very long way for all but the best swimmers, so I kept close into the shore, in case of an unexpected cramp.

The other solution was to swim fifty yards further out, through the zone reserved for boat moorings. Here one could easily catch a buoy if one needed a rest.

I pulled on my goggles and set off at a relaxed pace for my first crossing using the breaststroke.

By the time I got to the far side of the bay, my biceps and above all my upper leg muscles were burning. Regardless of the discomfort, I kept up the show right to the end, just in case the lifeguards were watching me through binoculars, which of course they weren't.

When I reached the granite outcrop, I grabbed a jutting rock and rested for five minutes, before setting off in the opposite direction, using the crawl, this time.

Even though the waves were small, each time I breathed on the seaward side, I had to be careful not

Three men in a panic

to get a mouthful of water, so I eventually changed to breathing only on the beach side. This choice meant breathing only once every four strokes but allowed me to glide through the water more smoothly.

About halfway across, I spotted the other swimmer, about ten metres further out, going powerfully and much faster than me. I also noticed that he was wearing a wet suit, which naturally gave him added buoyancy. I felt better having spotted this, but all the same, I had to admit that he was a much better swimmer than I.

The last fifty metres of this second crossing seemed never-ending, but eventually, I grabbed onto one of the rocks and floated over onto my back to relax for five minutes.

I had decided to end my swim by a third crossing using backstroke, which was my favourite. I pushed off and enjoyed the sensation of power as I drew myself through the water.

As I swam, I had regular views of the seafront, as the waves rolled me. I noticed that quite a few people had now gathered along the Esplanade and were gazing out to sea.

I rolled over to make sure that I was not getting in the way of an incoming boat, but as nothing was in view, I kept on.

The crowds seemed to be getting more and more animated as time went on, so obviously, something exciting was going on in the race out of sight from me. Then, on one of the rolls, I noticed that everyone was now standing stock still.

Then suddenly, my head experienced an incredible shock, and a shudder ran right through me. I had swum straight into some hard obstacle.

As I beat about with my arms, I could hear a faint roar of laughter from the beach.

I turned in the water and came face to face with the other swimmer. We had both been using backstroke, and the crowd had been following our progress as it became more and more evident that we were on a collision course.

The two of us exchanged astonished looks, treading water, then broke into laughter.

'You OK?' I asked.

'Yes, my head is pretty hard.'

It was a woman of about thirty-five or thereabouts, with athlete's shoulders. 'At least we gave those morons up there a good show,' she laughed.

'I think I'll call it a day,' I smiled.

'Not me. I've another seven to do today. Training for an iron-man competition.'

'Iron-woman,' I corrected.

'Ha! Yes. The probability of that collision must have been ten thousand to one. I hope those guys had bets on it.'

'More fun than boat racing,' I laughed.

At this, she set off again, 'Ha! Bye.'

I struck out for the shore, and as I climbed the sandy beach, a small group came down towards me. At the head of this were Alun and Mike. Alun, as usual, was rocking with uncontrollable laughter. Behind them came the three lifeguards, also grinning and laughing still.

'Brilliant bit of marksmanship,' laughed Alun.

'Yes, absolutely brilliant,' agreed Mike.

Three men in a panic

I plumped my hands on my hips and stared at them, shaking my head.

'Of course, nobody thought of shouting or sounding an alarm horn.'

The chief lifeguard snorted, 'We wanted to, but your friends told us you enjoyed that sort of unexpected encounter.'

At this, the five burst out laughing.

'Unexpected encounters. I love it,' spluttered Alun.

'Come here you,' I made a rush at him, intending to pitch him into the sea, but running on seashells, cramps one's style somewhat, so he sidestepped me.

'Come on,' cried Mike, 'you're famous now.'

'Yes,' laughed Alun, 'the man who rammed the national triathlon champion.'

'Champion?'

'Yes,' nodded the lifeguard, 'Anne Dubois. three-time French champion and runner-up in the world championships last year.'

'Ah. Yes, I was surprised by her shoulders.'

'Yes.' said the chief, 'A lot of men would like to be able to get as close as that to her shoulders, but apparently, she packs quite a punch.'

'I should have set up a bet. Could have made a fortune,' smiled Mike.

'Shut up Mike.' I said drying myself with my towel.

'How about a beer?' suggested Alun.

'Can't,' frowned the lifeguard, 'The regional boss is surveying us from up there,' he gestured behind himself, with his thumb, without turning. 'Another time.'

'And you,' he turned to me, and I nodded,

'Some hot coffee first,' I said passing my fingers over the bump on my head.

'Why is that guy surveying you? I thought you were all non-professional volunteers,' I asked.

'Yes, but there was a bit of trouble up the coast'.

'Trouble?'

'Yes,' he nodded, 'The head office at Paris discovered that some chancers were selling our fundraising tee-shirts.'

'I thought that was what they were for,' frowned Mike.

'Yes, but they had them printed dirt cheap in China and sold them at the full price.'

'So, even better.'

'Yes, but the head office couldn't find any mention of the funds in the local accounts.'

'Ah!' I said.

'The guys were using the National Lifeguards name and reputation to make money,' nodded the chief.

'What happened?' I asked.

'They were told off.'

'Is that all?'

'There are not so many people who want to spend their free time, saving people from drowning for free,' smiled the chief.

'And so, they now send an inspector around, to tell more people off,' I said.

'Exactly. But now, the telling off gets into the local newspapers...'

'Ah! I see. Not good publicity, in small communities like around here.'

'You got it,' he smiled, 'Anyway, we'd better be off.'

Three men in a panic

When we reached the terrace of the main bistro, at the head of the beach, my arrival was met with a round of applause and laughter. As we wound our way to a table, I was clapped on the shoulder by several laughing people.

The owner firmly refused payment and offered us beer and coffee on the house.

And so I became the Englishman who rammed the national triathlon champion and lived to tell the story.

'Hey You!' A big, strong and suntanned man was towering above us, glowering down at me. The people at the nearby tables stopped talking and turned to observe us.

'I don't take kindly to strange men messing with my wife.'

Alun had instantly spotted an opening for a bit of his "harmless" fun.

'Oh. He's such a shy man. He's forever inventing original ways of getting into a conversation with women.'

'Really!'

'Yes, he had a troubled youth, you see.'

'Did he?'

Mike turned, 'Yes. Looks like he might be going to have a troubled old age too,' he smiled.

The big man nodded and burst out laughing and sitting beside me clapped me on the knee, 'René Dubois,' he presented himself.

'Not the local fisherman, by any chance?' asked Alun.

'That's right. How did you know?'

'The lifeguard told us about you the other day. they thought we were stealing your lobsters.'

'And diving off the rocks at midnight,' I added.

'Hope you didn't break your head on my wife. She is made of pretty tough stuff. I once thought she might have been created out of carbon fibre.'

Suddenly there was a resounding whack, and René sprung up as if stung by a scorpion.

'Shut up you idiot,' we turned and found the famous triathlete towering above us, her wetsuit running with water.

She was taller than I had expected and as she pulled off her bathing cap, an unexpected quantity of dark sun-bleached blond hair cascaded down over her broad shoulders.

The owner of the bistro came over and handed her a big mug of some hot beverage, 'cold today Anne?' he smiled.

'Average.' she smiled back. She sipped some of the drink then bent forward and unzipped her wet suit.

As she did so, freed from the compression of the tight neoprene, her body sprung back into an unexpectedly woman-shape format.

René noticed my surprise and clapped me on the knee again, 'surprising eh? Always gives me a laugh. I sometimes wonder how she gets it all inside the wet-suit.'

'All what?' asked Alun, putting on an innocent schoolboy look for the occasion.

Anne shook her head sadly and sighed, 'you shut up René.' she cried, 'not everyone has got a dirty mind like you.'

We exchanged amused looks with René, who clearly felt no danger from the three retired men sitting with him.

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'Have you any idea what they are talking about?' frowned Alun.

"No,' I shook my head, 'not in the slightest

'French people are so odd sometimes,' nodded Alun.

Anne and René laughed, and René dropped his heavy hand onto my knee and squeezed and shook it hard, 'Ah! English humour. I love it.'

'Anyway, I'm really sorry to have run into you like that.' I said.

'Don't worry. It didn't hurt,' she smiled sitting and starting to brush out her thick hair with a large comb she extracted from a bag René had handed her.

'Call her Anne Kevlar,' joked René.

Anne shook her head sadly, 'call HIM, brainless René,' she countered taking a sip of her fuming drink.

'What are you drinking?' asked Mike, leaning forwards.

'Oxtail soup.'

'Oh!'

'I always have hot soup after training. At least up here in Brittany.' She drained her cup and stood, 'come on, brainless. Let's get home. Goodbye gentlemen,' she smiled and left us.

'René stood and shook our hands, 'sportswomen are the worst.' he laughed, but we could see the profound affection behind this tough outer crust.

Mike leaned forward and looked at us, 'It wouldn't be a good idea to steal that's guys lobster.'

We nodded agreement.

'Or his wife,' I added.

Ch 14 – Shipwrecked

Next morning, at breakfast, Alun announced that he wanted to go and try out his windsurfer.

Now, it's important to note here that for years, his favourite sport had been hang-gliding. He had developed, what Margaux considered to be an unhealthy appetite for throwing himself off vertiginous cliffs, abrupt mountains-sides, and steep hills. Like all enthusiasts with a real passion for their activity, he considered the danger to be negligible. When Margaux regularly challenged this point of view, saying that the hospitals were full of people who said the same thing, he would get in a huff and sulk.

'What can you expect if they do it all wrong?' he would retort.

She had unsurprisingly been overjoyed when Mike had crashed the glider beyond repair after he took up Alun's offer to teach him.

Her tactics were ready, and Alun was duly informed that the family accounts could not in any way be stretched far enough to replace it.

Mike had then suggested windsurfing and had proposed to find a cheap board, in compensation of having ruined the hang glider.

Margaux found windsurfing a far preferable sport, from her point of view. She reasoned that if you fell off a windsurfer, you could swim back to it or at least keep afloat until someone came and picked you up. However, she said, after falling off a hang glider, in mid-air, staying afloat was considerably less effective as escape measure and any picking up usually had to be done with a shovel.

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So it was that Alun became a windsurfing enthusiast.

He was particularly proud of this latest board, above all because he had apparently made an incredible bargain. He refused to supply the details of this bargain, but as I gazed down at it, lapped by the small waves, it looked to me decidedly the worse for ware. Like much of Alun's kit.

I cast my mind back to the accident we had in Italy when Alun's trailer had abruptly chosen a different trajectory to that of our car. Remembering that I eventually discovered that he had not bought it but had "found" it on a tip, caused a frown to cross my brow.

'It's OK, this board?' I asked.

'As solid as a rock,' he smiled, zipping up his torn wet suit.

Mike smiled, 'Not quite as much to compress into that as our friend Anne, the triathlon champion,' he said.

'Oh, I wouldn't say that.' I frowned.

'Yes,' nodded Alun, 'I'm sometimes quite proud of that myself.'

'I was thinking more of the bits above the waist-line myself,' I laughed.

'Waist-line?' frowned Mike.

'There in the middle,' I pointed.

'In the middle of what? Ah!' nodded Mike, 'Yes. You're right there's quite a bit there nowadays.'

'Shut up you two,' said Alun, zipping up the front.

'Careful! Hold the breath in. Don't go and nip yourself,' I said.

'He looks almost svelte. Now it's zipped up,' nodded Mike, 'I'll have to get one of those.'

'Me too. Not quite so tight fitting perhaps,' I agreed.

'No,' agreed Mike, 'Might hinder the flow of blood to the brain.'

'That wouldn't be too much of an inconvenience for Alun. His brain runs on beer.'

'Might stop the flow of beer too,' mused Mike.

'Beer molecules are much smaller than blood,' I said.

'Are you sure they are molecules and not simply atoms?' asked Mike.

'Do you know,' I frowned, 'I'm not at all certain of that now that you mention it. It must depend on the manufacturing process.'

'Wait a moment!' exclaimed Mike, 'I remember now, they don't use the same route. Beer atoms.'

'Molecules,' I corrected.

'OK. Beer molecules use the lymphatic network.'

'Yes of course,' I nodded. 'And that's probably why you swell up like Alun and need to use a body-compression suit to avoid exploding.'

'Go to hell!' scowled Alun.

'I thought that was where you were just about to go,' I said, nodding out towards the bay.

The wind had now risen, and a little further out the waves had grown and were now capped by foam. From time to time the gusts lifted the foam and sent it flying sideways.

'No. That's not hell. That's heaven.' smiled Alun. 'Just wait till you see what speed I get out of this little bijou.'

'Or jewel, to use the English term.' smiled Mike.

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'Or "death-trap", to use a slightly more adequate term,' I frowned.

Alun sighed heavily, 'you'll see.'

'See those granite islands Alun?' I asked, and he gazed to the wave-lashed rocks. 'Try to avoid them if you can. They tend to be quite hard on the outside.'

'Like rock cake,' said Mike, 'but you have to have strong teeth to get to the soft bit inside.'

Alun shook his head and pushed the board out into the water. He heaved himself up, lifted the sail with an athletic tug, fell off, and got back on again. This time the sail went up, and he shot out across the bay.

About a hundred yards out, just our side of the outermost set of islets, he seemed to find the wind he was searching for. He turned the board parallel to the shore and shot off along the coast. He was soon a long way away, and we were beginning to wonder if he hadn't changed his mind and decided, after all, to seek political asylum in the United States. However, he whirled the sail around and came flying back towards us, which was probably a better idea, all in all.

It must be said that, from our place on the sand, we were both impressed by this unexpected show of mastery, that he kept up for several laps.

He flashed by for the third time, swung the board around and leant back, as a gust of wind filled the sail and almost lifted him out of the water.

Suddenly, we heard a sharp crack, and the top half of the mast snapped off and folded over. As it fell, the board came to an abrupt halt and Alun fell off into the sea.

Before we had time to react, or even to get worried, he was already back on the board. But the board was now un-sailable.

The wind was now blowing with renewed energy and bearing him across the bay. It was clear that it would drive him directly onto an islet directly downwind from his present position.

We carefully observed the islet through our binoculars, guessing that he would be able to land and climb to safety easily enough.

The sea wasn't heavy enough, to put him in danger of being injured. He just had to allow the board to drift in, then to clamber off it over the rough granite.

However, the thing was an island, and it was about two hundred metres out across very choppy water.

We didn't have time to consider things further, because from behind us we heard a shout. Almost immediately, the lifeguards came dashing down the beach dragging the inflatable boat behind them.

In their wake, came Margaux.

By the time they had powered up the outboard, Alun was safely on the island.

'I knew I could always count on Alun getting into trouble,' said Margaux with a sigh. 'I came and had a chat with the Lifeguards while I was waiting to see how it would happen this time.'

We turned and looked at her. She was not in her usual, pre-destruction mood, but calm, a small smile pulling up the sides of her mouth.

'I told those men to get ready, but they wouldn't believe me. They said he seemed to be managing well for a beginner.'

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I nodded, 'We thought he was fantastic. I didn't realise he mastered the thing like that.'

'Sometimes he masters it a bit longer, and sometimes a little less,' she smiled, 'But he always ends up doing something completely wrong.'

'Like breaking a mast?' asked Mike.

'Sometimes the mast, sometimes the wishbone, sometimes the board itself and sometimes, but admittedly less frequently, he breaks himself.'

'But where did he learn?' I asked, 'I didn't know he had taken lessons.'

'Learn?' exclaimed Margaux, 'Alun hasn't ever learnt. He just experiments. Sometimes the experiments work, sometimes not.'

The Lifeguards reached the islet, and Alun jumped into the boat. They attached the board, dragged the broken sail onboard and turned back towards us.

Margaux turned to us, 'I'll leave you two to bring that rubbish back,' she smiled one of those ironical smiles that only wives know how to use, 'bring the board and sail too.' She then added, 'Oh! And tell those men they owe me twenty euros each.'

We looked at her askance.

'I bet them, he would break something, and they were stupid enough to take me up on it.'

With this, she turned and walked back up the beach.

'Oh!' she shouted back, 'buy them all a beer, from the sixty euros they owe me.'

A short time later, the lifeguard's boat scraped up the sandy beach, and they all jumped out.

They dragged the board up onto the sand, and we all gathered around.

The chief, walked around the board, giving it little test kicks, 'where'd you get this ruin from?' he asked. 'Second-hand of course.'

I frowned, 'Yes where did it come from Alun?'

'It's seen a bit of wear and tear.' commented the second in charge, 'I'll bet it was ex-surf school.'

'Well...' Alun hesitated, 'partially.'

'Oh god!' said Mike

'At our surfboard school, this sort of stuff goes straight to the tip,' said the chief, 'too dangerous for beginners.'

Alun bridled at this, 'Beginners?'

'Don't try to tell us you had lessons,' smiled the chief.

'Well.' said Alun, 'I have read all the best books.'

'Ha! I knew it.'

'Yeh. That last turn was proof if ever we needed it.'

I was frowning and looked hard at Alun. The word "tip" had struck me as premonitory, 'Where did you get the board from Alun?'

'Oh! The board. That came from a shop place.'

'A shop place?' I frowned again.

'Yes. You know.'

'No, I don't.'

'Well, a sort of place like that guy said.'

'A windsurf reject outlet?'

'Reject is a hard word.'

The third lifeguard was kneeling on the board pressing it with his thumb in an odd way, 'well, this board isn't hard.' he scoffed, 'Look.'

He pressed down hard in the centre, and his thumb depressed the surface almost an inch.

'It's always done that.' said Alun.

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'Yes, because it's delaminated and there must be a hole somewhere which has filled it up with water.'

The chief examined the board, 'well spotted,' he tapped the man on the shoulder, 'a dead board. I bet they ripped you off with their old junk,' he said.

'Cheaper for them than having to transport it to the tip,' said the other man.

'So, it didn't come from the tip this time, then Alun?'

'No, that board did not come from a tip.'

'If you'd have waited a few days, it would have done.' said the chief, laughing. 'let's have a look at this mast.'

They slid the two broken segments of the mast from the sail.

Together, the three men drew in their breaths, 'Christ!'

They got down on their knees and examined the two long elements.

'If you bought this from the same place,' said the chief, 'those guys ought to be in prison. Look!'

We gathered around and stooped to see what he was pointing at.

'See those little lines there?'

We nodded.

'Those are fissures. That's what happens when the sail gets dropped on the beach and stick in the sand. Along comes a big wave and jams the board against the mast.' He looked up at us. 'With the new high carbon fibre content ones, that just snaps the mast clean in two.' he nodded, 'But with these pre-historic ones it just weakens them.'

The man stood up and his second in command took up the discussion, 'as long as you don't put too

much pressure on the thing it can last a while. Ok for messing about on a windless lake. But not for a stiff wind at sea - like this.'

I looked over at Alun who was looking a little uneasy, 'how much did they rip you off for this Alun?'

'Nobody ripped me off,' he retorted.

'Oh yes they did,' said Mike

'No, they didn't, because I didn't pay for it.'

'You mean you stole it!' cried the chief.

'No. I did not steal it. You guys have a thing about accusing us of stealing.'

'Come on Alun,' I said, 'where did this mast come from?'

'I found it.'

'Oh god!' I said.

'On a tip?' Mike asked.

'Well, more or less.'

'More or less? What's "more or less" a tip?'

'Well, in fact, I found it in a ditch.'

'Christ!' I cried, 'I give up.'

The lifeguards burst out laughing, 'that mast would have been perfect for sailing in a ditch.' laughed the chief.

'The board too,' added his assistant.

'Very funny,' sneered Alun.

'You may well laugh,' I became serious, 'but that just happens to be one of the fastest growing sports in Wales.'

'What on earth are you waffling on about.' snorted Alun.

'Ditch surfing of course.'

'Ditch surfing!'

'Or Ditch Riding' added Mike.

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'Come on Alun,' smiled Mike, that's where all that acrobatic stuff came from.'

'What on earth are you on about.'

'We are talking about real men's sport.'

'Balls' said Alun.

'Well, how do you think they manage to turn a windsurfer in a ditch.'

'Oh, shut up.'

'They either have to stop or they use the wind to jump high out of the ditch and swivel round in mid-air,' I smiled, 'and that's how it all began...'

'What a lot of crap.'

'Mind you,' added Mike, 'For a good outing you need nice long ditches.'

'And that's why it began in Wales.' I said.

'Because Wales has some of the best ditches in the world.' added Mike.

'Yeh! Brilliant ditches. That's why the Olympic ditch-surf championships are to be held there.'

'What a lot of absolute rubbish.'

'I might have guessed it,' I shook my head. 'You don't even know the origins of your own favourite sport.'

'Go to hell.'

'Anyway, these gentlemen are apparently going to offer us all a drink.'

The three men started, 'OH!'

'Yes, Alun's wife bet you he would break something, and you accepted the bet. She said to tell you to buy us a drink instead of paying the twenty euros each.'

'She did what!' exclaimed Alun, horrified.

The lifeguards shook their heads, 'First time we have to pay, for the pleasure of saving someone's life'.

'There's a first time for everything,' smiled Mike accompanying them up across the beach towards the bistro.

'I didn't need saving,' grumbled Alun, 'I could have managed perfectly well on my own.'

'Come on Alun. Drag that ruin up the beach and get a beer.'

'Oh, all right,' he grumbled

The patron from the bistro was standing with his wife looking down at our little group as we climbed the granite steps to the tables on the esplanade.

'You weren't intending to cross the channel on that were you?' he smiled.

'Ha, ha,' grumbled Alun.

'Anyhow, he won't need to put a lock on it. No one would take that,' said his wife.

I looked across the table at the lifeguards, 'Alun would,' I said, and we all burst out laughing.

Three men in a panic

Ch 15 - SAVING CHILDREN.

The following day the weather was splendid.

The sun shone, the sky was blue, and the wind dropped off completely. We carried our gear down to the bay and spread ourselves out on the warm sand.

I remained sitting gazing out over the water for a few minutes then I decided to swim a couple of lengths across the bay. The water was full of people this time, so I decided against backstroke.

I had just finished the second and was floating lazily on my back by the tortoise shape outcrop when I heard my name called. Righting myself and treading water, I saw Margaux gesticulating.

She was pointing out across the bay and turning I spotted a small red inflatable children's boat. It was being carried away on the falling tide and would soon be beyond the islets.

I set off using my best crawl, and within a few minutes drew level with the craft and grabbed the rope.

Two small girls of about seven or eight peered anxiously over the side. Both had lovely suntanned faces, blue eyes and sun-bleached blond hair.

'We lost the oars.' said the older one.

'We didn't lose them,' said her sister, 'you forgot them on the island.'

'Same thing,' said the first.

'No. Losing is an accident. Leaving behind is forgetfulness.'

The older girl sneered and shook her head at this.

I smiled, 'don't worry. I'll pull you back in.'

The two girls gazed down at me wide-eyed, clearly surprised by this affirmation.

'Will you?' said the older of the two.

'Yes.'

'Oh!'

Ignoring this, I grabbed the rope she handed down and set off with a lop-sided crawl.

After a short period, I discovered that this was more difficult than I expected and stopped to catch my breath.

The youngest of the two girls leaned over and smiled down at me, 'it's difficult isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'That's because the tide is dragging us out.'

'I know.'

'Good,' she smiled, 'you can't swim properly with only one hand, can you?'

'No. I noticed that.'

'That's what mum always says.'

The other girl leant forward, 'you had better go on, or we'll be dragged even further out. You mustn't stop you know.'

I frowned, 'oh Really?'

'No.'

I cast the girls a look but set off again.

After a few more minutes the older girl called me.

'You're not going very fast.'

'Sorry,' I said.

'Why don't you tie the rope around your waist, then you'll be able to use both hands.'

This seemed to me to be a good bit of advice so I did what I could with the length available.

We set off again, and I must admit that this time, we made far better progress.

'See,' cried the girl.

'Yes.'

Three men in a panic

'I told you,' she chirped.

However, at this same instant, I reached out with my right arm and felt the rope slip from my waist. In doing so, it took with it my bathing trunks. Before I could do anything about it, they had disappeared under the boat and had been carried away.

'Damn it!' I cried, but there was nothing I could do.

'Have you lost your trunks,' came a peal of childish laughter.

'Yes.'

'Dad says it's not comfortable for boys to swim without trunks,' said the younger girl.

'It's not.' I agreed.

'He says that things get in the way?' said the older of the two.

This point proved itself to me as I started off again. There was almost immediately a gust of laughter from the two girls.

'We can see your pink bottom now,' laughed one.

'It's not pink. It's white,' gurgled the other.

'That's because it has got all cold in the water,' laughed the first.

I am not sure which stroke is the most uncomfortable without a pair of trunks on, but I carried on regardless of this. After all, I was on a mission of mercy. Furthermore, I reasoned whatever the outcome, my child producing years were behind me anyway.

After the laughter had calmed down, the older of the girls called out.

'Did you ever learn to swim?'

'What do you mean "learn"? I am swimming, aren't I?'

'I mean with a teacher.'

'why?'

'Because you're doing it wrong. That's why you're not going very fast.'

Up to then, I had felt as though I was doing quite an impressive job, so this comment jarred on my sensitive ego a bit.

I stopped and turned, looking up into the two sets of innocent blue eyes gazing happily down at me.

'Doing it wrong?'

'Yes. You should keep much flatter in the water.'

The younger girl took up the discussion, 'yes, keep your little tummy up and then the flatter you lie the better you'll slide through the water. Try it.'

I particularly appreciated the word "little" when describing my tummy, which I had not heard used as a description of it for some time.

'Don't stop now,' said the older girl, 'or we'll lose all the progress we've made.'

'We?' I gasped.

Anyway, recognizing the truth of this remark, I struck out again.

'That's better,' called the older girl. 'Can you feel the difference?'

'Yes.'

'Our mum is a swimming teacher.'

'Ah!' all became clear, 'that must be nice for you.'

'Yes. It is.'

I was going to ask where the hell she was but thought better of it.

'We can see your bottom almost all the time now,' said the younger girl. 'that shows you're doing it right now.'

'Great,' I called back.

'It's still really very white, though.'

Three men in a panic

'Really?'

'Yes. And it wobbles a bit.'

'Oh hell!' I whispered to my self.

'It does, doesn't it?' said the other, 'It's funny.'

'A bit like two jellyfish fighting,' said her sister, and the two little girls squealed with laughter.

'Oh god!' I whispered to myself, thanking heaven that at least Alun wasn't within earshot.

By this time, I had dragged them close to the shore and, letting my feet, down discovered I was almost in my depth. A few more strokes and I could stand and gasp. We had made it.

A little group of people had now gathered around Margaux, but I kept up the effort until the water was down to my knees.

The two little girls jumped overboard and splashed up the beach to where the people were standing.

I turned to the boat and grabbed the rope and began to untie it from around my waist.

Suddenly I froze.

I realised that I was standing knee deep in water, with no bathing trunks and with a group of people observing me from the beach.

There was not much I could do, so I gulped, put on a brave face and pretended to be completely unconcerned, by this fact.

I turned as if everything was quite reasonable, drew the boat up onto the sand and then strode away to our place. I exchanged a glance with an astonished wide-eyed Alun, whipped up my towel, wrapped it around my waist and marched back down the beach to Margaux.

The two little blond-haired girls were talking animatedly to a woman who was kneeling, facing away from me.

She stood and turned, holding out her hand. It was none other than my old sparring partner, Anne Dubois, the triathlon champion.

Well, well! Saved by the human battering ram,' she laughed and squeezed my hand. 'Thank you.'

I lifted my arms to the sky to indicate that it was nothing really, and naturally, my towel fell down and left me naked once more in front of the little crowd.

As I made a dive for my towel, Margaux stepped over. 'My husband Alun and his friend here are always trying to show off like that.'

From behind me I heard a burst of laughter and turned to see Mike and Alun collapsing onto the sand in fits of mirth.

'Very funny,' I sneered, 'but while you two have been sunning yourselves, I happen to have been saving the lives of these two children.'

'Mummy?'

'Yes.'

'He's got a funny wobbly bottom,' said the younger girl.

'Yes. It's all white,' said her sister.

'A tiny bit pink. Like a big jellyfish.'

'Like two jellyfishes,' corrected her sister.

Alun rolled about with laughed so much that I decided that the only action possible was to kick some sand at him.

'He doesn't swim very well either.'

Anne looked down severely, 'But he did rescue you all the same. Go and see your father.'

Three men in a panic

The two pulled faces and sprinted off up the beach, showering the seated sunbathers with sand.

'I don't know how to thank you,' she said. I have absolutely no excuse.'

'Don't thank him at all. He only did what I told him to do,' said Margaux.

'Anyway, thank you.'

'My pleasure.'

Margaux turned to me, 'Would you like to take your towel off again. I'm sure everyone would appreciate another view of the wobbly white jellyfish of yours.'

I shook my head, 'no. I think that will do for the moment, not too much of a good thing. Eh!'

Anne looked guiltily down at her hand, in which she clutched a sheaf of printed pages. 'I have no excuse. I was concentrating on these.'

'Don't worry.' I said, 'All ends well...'

Alun and Mike got to their feet, and we all followed Anne up to where her husband René was lying.

There were more thanks, and we were invited to sit down on the sand beside them.

'You seem to have been studying that magazine very carefully,' I said pointing. The pages were covered with notes, underlined passage, and circled sections.

'No. This is my magazine. I am the editor, in fact.'

'And the writer,' added René, 'and the photographer.'

Mike put out his hand and picked up a bound version. 'French Triathlete' he read and leafed through it.

'Yes,' said Anne. 'I'm pretty pleased, but there's a lot of work, and the circulation is a bit too small to make it worthwhile.'

Mike looked up. 'You know, this is very good, have a look Alun.'

While Alun leafed through the pages Mike smiled over at the woman, 'why don't you have it translated and try the English and American markets?'

Anne shook her head, 'I've just not the time available,' she said a little sadly, 'and it would be much too expensive.'

'Yes,' I agreed, 'the translation would probably absorb all the profit you made.'

'Unless it really took off,' said Mike. 'Surely it would be worth a try. What do the publishers say?'

'They say I'd need a top-class translator and that anyway, they'd never spend the money until the circulation figures in French were greater.'

'A bit stupid that,' grumbled Mike. 'Might work much better in Australia and New Zealand, than in France, for example.'

'I know. But that's how it is.'

Mike leaned back on his elbow in the sand then suddenly pushed himself back up.

'We'll do it,' he cried with enthusiasm, 'Alun and I can do the translation easily.'

Alun looked up sharply, 'hey! Wait a mo.'

'It's a quarterly magazine Alun. That's only four per year.'

'Ah! Might be possible then.'

Anne sat up, 'Really! Would you really do that for me?'

'Yeah,' cried Mike overwhelmed by his own enthusiasm.'

Three men in a panic

'How much...' Nodded René.

'We can make a trial run, and we'll do it for free won't we Alun?'

Alun had no other choice but to agree.

This unexpected good news enchanted Anne, so we all tramped up to the bistro on the esplanade to drink to the celebration of the new collaboration.

As it happened, the magazine was a great success first in the UK, then in Australia and New Zealand and a year later, in the USA. The extra income made life considerably more comfortable for Anne and her family and the regular translation job rounded off nicely Alun and Mike's retirement pensions.

It amused me to think that it is an ill wind that blows nobody any good.

The only negative point was that they never allowed me to forget about the pink jellyfish.

Ch 16 - Three men on an ISLAND

The following day, by the time we had finished eating the tide had almost reached its lowest, and it was now possible to wade out to the nearest Islet, "Ille Ronde".

The three of us put on our granite-resistant, beach shoes and were soon clambering over the massive blocks.

The isle itself is a little over two hundred yards long by a hundred wide and hid a secret, tiny protected sandy bay about halfway out.

We headed directly for the far end which opened out onto the English Channel. Clambering this far, took us a good half hour, but it was worth it for the lovely view, the sun and the light sea breeze blowing in our faces. It would be several hours before the tide turned and become high enough to necessitate swimming the hundred and fifty yards back to the beach, so we had plenty of time. To be on the safe side, we gave Mike instructions to keep a careful eye on his watch to avoid any unwanted surprises. We took the added precaution of asking Mike at regular intervals if we needed to make for home. And up to then he shook his head each time, 'plenty of time left,' he replied.

On reaching the far end, we climbed right down to the water's edge and sat dangling our legs off the side of a huge block, in the transparent water.

We chatted about this and that for some time, watching the shoals of fish in the clear water beneath us.

Three men in a panic

Then Mike turned to us, 'don't you think it's odd that we still think of this as the English Channel even though we are sitting on the shore of France?'

'That's because we're English perhaps,' suggested Alun.

'But the French call it "La Manche", smiled Mike, which means "The sleeve".

'Yes, but they're French, aren't they?' I said.

'What I mean,' continued Mike, 'is that they don't call it "The French Sleeve", just "The Sleeve".

'That's because the French people are modest and unassuming,' said Alun, dabbling his feet in the water.

'Alun!' I cried, 'you must have had much too much wine at lunchtime to say something like that.'

'A bit wet too. For a sleeve, I mean,' said Alun.

'Maybe the word "Sleeve" meant something else in medieval times,' I suggested.

'Yes,' nodded Alun, 'maybe it meant "Toilet".'

'Toilet!' cried Mike what are you on about?'

'No,' I corrected, 'The word Manche in French also means "clumsy", as well as "Sleeve". At least in medieval slang.'

'A clumsy sleeve, then.'

'Maybe that's what they called us Brits, "clumsy wets",' nodded Alun.

'A sort of insult, then,' mused Mike.

'No. One or the other,' I said.

'A bit like Mike then. Wet and clumsy.'

'I'm not wet.'

This was true. Alun and I exchanged knowing glances. It was sad to say that in the old days we would have immediately corrected this shortcoming by pitching him into the sea. Obviously, we were

ageing fast. We both sighed at the idea of the lost opportunity, but that's life.

But Mike's fertile mind had already turned to other things.

'When you think that all these tiny little waves are perpetually eroding the granite on which we are sitting and eating it away. It seems incredible, really,' said Mike. 'Waves, transforming this solid rock into sand.'

'Here comes the philosophical moment, we've been waiting for,' sighed Alun.

'If you could look at a time-lapse film of the last few million years,' continued Mike, 'we'd be able to see this rock gradually being eaten away by the sea, like a lump of sugar in a teacup.'

I glanced at Alun. However, glances, even sideward ones, aren't very effective in stopping someone else talk. Especially if that person is not included in the glancing exchange. So, he went on.

'That would be incredible to see,' Mike gazed down at the little waves lapping at his feet. 'And then we'd see a bit of unusual bit of activity for a fraction of a second, and that would be the birth of the human race and then it's extinction. Just a fraction of a second, if the entire history of the planet was condensed to a single day.'

Alun shot me a look, 'I hope the human race isn't going to extinguish today. I bought some really expensive wine for this evening.'

I turned and looked at Mike whose gaze was lost in the infinity of his profound thoughts.

'Maybe we'd just see the rock, being pushed up from under the ground, by tectonic forces.'

Three men in a panic

'Yes,' agreed Alun, 'in exactly the same shape as it is today.'

'Not eroded at all by the millions and millions of years of waves, then,' I added.

Mike frowned, 'Yes. Of course, that's another possibility. But how could we know?'

'We'll have to lay our hands on that reel of film, somehow then,' said Alun.

'Film?'

'Yes, your time-lapse one.'

'I was talking metaphorically.'

'It sounded melancholy to me.'

'Well. That too I suppose,' he smiled a little sadly, as one must do on such occasions, 'But...why?'

'Probably the drinks at mid-day,' said Alun.

'And the food. I noticed that Mike had rather a lot of food,' I added.

'I noticed that too,' nodded Alun, 'certainly more than normal.'

'Are you sure that "metaphorically" is the right word, Mike?' I asked.

'Well it does roll off the tongue nicely,' said Alun

'No.' Mike frowned. 'I meant, why did you buy some expensive wine?'

'Because the man behind the counter categorically refused to give it to me, free of charge.'

'A Frenchman, of course,' I said.

'Naturally,' agreed Alun, rolling his eyes.

'Mind you,' I said, 'It was mainly your fault. You would go and choose a shop with a salesman, rather than one with a gives-man.'

'I wondered about that. Yes of course. Voila, l'explication.'

'No.' Mike shook his head impatiently, 'but why did you lash out on something expensive for tonight?'

'Now that is what I call clear talking,' smiled Alun.

'Shows that he followed communication training courses in his youth....' I added.

'Why?' repeated Mike, 'is there some special occasion?'

Alun shook his head, 'the thing that was special about the occasion was that Margaux wasn't with me when I paid.'

'Why not?'

'Because she was baking a cake for tonight.'

'Anyway,' I said, 'we were not going to risk any of the stuff you buy.'

'By the way, Mike,' said Alun, 'what's the half-life of the stuff you normally drink. That red stuff, I mean. What's the half-life in litres?'

'What do you mean. A half-life is given in years, not in litres.'

'No,' smiled Alun, 'The half-life in litres per person. How much does it take before you reduce the population by half?'

'Ha, ha!' sneered Mike.

I turned to Mike, 'Are we OK for time Mike?'

He looked down at his watch, 'Yes, plenty of time still.'

'Let's go and have a look at the little bay. We might be able to find some oysters.'

We thus set off, following the very edge of the islet. Jumping from block to block, we eventually reached the tiny bay, hidden away at the end of a cleft between the granite blocks. We dropped onto the little sandy beach only twenty feet wide and looked around at the steep granite walls.

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We then waded out and spent a happy hour combing the rocks below the surface for oysters.

We didn't find any.

'It doesn't matter?' said Alun, 'Margaux said she'd ask René for some anyway.'

'Yes, but they might be battery-oysters,' I said.

'Battery-oysters!' spluttered Mike.

'Yes. As opposed to free-range oysters...'

'What are you blithering about?'

'You do know why you can't get free-range oysters at Christmas, don't you Mike?'

'Stop talking rot.'

'Well, I'll tell you.'

'Is that absolutely necessary.'

'Part of your education,' smiled Alun.

'The part I could do without, no doubt,' sneered Mike.

'That's for you to judge Mike. Well, Mike.' Alun paused and dabbled his hand in the crystal-clear water. 'It's all to do with oyster Hibernation.'

'What!' spluttered Mike.

'You see. You've already learnt something, and I haven't even started.'

Oh god!

'I'll explain, shall I?'

'Oysters do not Hibernate,' sighed Mike.

'Oh! Don't they! And how do you know that?'

Mike paused, 'well it's obvious.'

'So, Mr Clever. How do you explain then, that only battery-oysters are available at Christmas?'

This new bit of information had him non-plussed.

'Well,' I said, 'I'm against it myself.'

'About them hibernating?' asked Alun.

'No. About all the cruelty.'

'What on earth are you two dribbling about?'

'Dribbling!?'

'Well blithering, if you prefer.'

'They keep the lights on day and night for months and months on end, to keep them eating and eating,' nodded Alun. 'At the end, they eat themselves into a sort of trance until they don't know where they are.'

'Like if they were drugged?' I asked.

'Exactly,' nodded Alun.

'Horrible!' I said.

'At the end,' sneered Mike, 'I know exactly where they are. Inside my stomach.'

'Yuck!' I said, 'what a terrible end.'

'Mind you, dust to dust, ashes to ashes...' said Alun.

I thought about this a little and shot a look at Alun. 'That's disgusting Alun.'

'But true.'

'Not exactly ashes though.'

'No not exactly. Anyway, the poor little devils have no idea where they, what with overeating and the light on all the time, and they go blind.'

"Blind!" cried Mike, 'Oysters can't go blind. They don't have eyes.'

"And how do you know that Mr Clever?"

'Oh, shut up!'

'I consider it highly promiscuous, anyway.'

'Oh God, now what?' sighed Mike,

'Well being all squashed together in those iron mesh sacks and left without surveyance. God knows what they get up to, without their parents looking on.'

'That's why they keep the lights on all the time, I suppose.' I said.

Three men in a panic

'I thought you said that that was to keep them eating,' scoffed Mike.

'AND, to keep them from fornicating all night and wasting all that energy and getting all thin and feeble.'

'Christ.' said Mike, 'what a lot of crap you two speak.'

'How do you expect to improve your mind if you don't open it to new horizons, Mike.'

'I think I'll just leave it as it is for the time being,' He frowned.

'Oh well. At least I did my best,' Alun paused,

'Are We Ok for time, Mike?' I asked.

Mike looked at his watch, 'Yep. Plenty of...' his voice trailed off. 'Oh hell! It's stopped.'

'What!' cried Alun, 'When?'

'Half past three.'

'Oh God!' Alun swung around the little backpack he was carrying and dragged out his phone.'

'Oh hell! Seven missed calls from Margaux. Christ! It's nearly five.'

'Come on quick; we've just got enough time to get back across the bay before it gets too deep.'

'It's already too deep. We'll have to swim. That OK for you Mike?'

'Yeah if it's not too far.'

'You can swim, can't you?'

'Yeh. I can get all the way across.'

'Across what?'

'The swimming pool.'

'The length?'

'Hell No! The width. Sometimes I can even do it in a single go...'

I glanced at Alun. We would have at least ten times that, to swim.

'Come on let's get moving,' said Alun.

'If I were you, I'd send a message to Margaux first,' I said pulling a face, 'We'd better do everything in our power to reduce the sentence.'

Alun nodded and did as I suggested.

'I said, we are on our way back,' he said a little dubiously. 'Oh well! There's No use crying over spilt milk.'

Mike was already on the top of the first block of granite, 'I think it is more likely to be blood that's spilt, than milk,' he frowned.

Alun pulled another face and followed him up.

'I don't suppose it was a joke, about you not knowing how to swim, was it Mike?'

'I didn't say I couldn't swim.' He bridled a little.

'Well. Not a long way, then.' I said.

'No. That was true enough, although I am improving.'

'So, four lengths would be just a shade too much then.'

'Several shades too much, would be closer the truth.'

'Come on,' called Alun, 'we'll take turns in helping you.'

'Your phone is not going to appreciate the crossing much,' said Mike.

'Oh hell!' cried Alun. 'The cheque-book won't either.'

Just as I started to scramble up behind the other two, I heard a noise behind me. Pivoting around, I saw the nose of an inflatable lifeboat, turning into the little bay.

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I jumped back down onto the sand and waved. Alun and Mike appeared again at the top of the block and scrambled down it.

'We'll never hear the end of this now,' he groaned.

'Agreed,' I said.

'I'm glad I'm not married,' smiled Mike, patting Alun on the shoulder.

The boat carried only two of the lifeguards we knew, and they jumped out onto the sand and shook hands.

'In trouble again,' smiled the chief. 'I wonder if it wouldn't be a good idea for you to take out an annual subscription.'

'A life subscription would be a safer bet,' said his assistant.

'Your wife came around and thought you might appreciate a lift,' smiled the chief.

'Initially, she asked if it would be dangerous if she left you on the island until next low tide,' said the assistant. 'We told her there was no real danger unless you tried to swim back.'

I looked at the two men who were obviously enjoying our discomfort, 'but Margaux knew that Mike couldn't swim.' I said.

'I Can swim!' protested Mike, 'just not all that far.'

'Anyway,' went on the chief, 'then she remembered that the bottles of wine and the champagne was in the car boot and that you three had the keys.'

'Thank god for little mercies!' sighed Alun.

'Saved by the bell.' I added.

'And as she had invited us tonight,' smiled the chief, 'we thought it best to persuade her to allow us to come and rescue you.'

Well, we hopped into the boat and had the enviable pleasure of being gawked at by several hundred people on the beach and the bistro terrace.

We pretended to be unconcerned and walked briskly up the beach, pretending to be deeply absorbed in some interesting discussion.

Once out of sight we slowed down, 'Now comes the hard bit,' frowned Alun.

I nodded, 'let's go and pick up the wine first, that'll give the others time to arrive. They would never dare to murder us in public.'

'Good idea,' said Alun, 'I'll just send a text message so that we don't get another dose.'

'Then turn your phone off. Just in case...'

As we pushed open the high wooden gate, half an hour later, we were heavily laden with bottles. The next-door cat was sitting observing us lazily from the summit of the tall stone wall which surrounded the garden, with a knowing look. "Are you going to get it!" It seemed to be sneering.

It was a big fluffy ginger cat, and Mike stepped over and reached up with his free hand to stroke it.

'I wouldn't do that if I were you.' I said quickly.

'Cats like me, it's something about my smell,' he replied.

'I still wouldn't though,' I replied because from where I was standing, I could see the end of its fluffy tail beating time ominously. What's more, its ears were not in a very relaxed-cat position. There was a sharp movement, and Mike retracted his hand just in time. 'Hell!'

'I told you.'

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Alun smiled, 'never disturb a cat during its pre-mousing nap.'

'Smelly thing,' sneered Mike.

The triathlon champion, Anne and husband, had already arrived with the two little girls, and were helping Margaux set the table.

The older of the two little girls came over, 'that's the nastiest cat in Tregastel. No one ever touches it.'

'I can understand now,' said Mike.

'It doesn't like seagulls either,' added the younger girl.

'Oh!' said Mike, 'that's odd.'

'He's ginger you see,' she smiled.

'I noticed that,' he then suddenly seemed to remember something and turned to Alun. 'You didn't tell me why you wasted loads of money on such expensive wine for tonight.'

'And Champagne,' I added.

'And a nice cake,' concluded Alun.

'So,' asked Mike.

'Because, you brainless idiot, it's your birthday.'

Mike started, laughed and slapped his thigh, 'Oh! Yes, of course. I forgot.'

'We noticed that,' I smiled punching him heartily on the shoulder.

My wife came forward and handed him a bottle of champagne.

'Come on, Mike. Get to work,' she ordered, 'we're thirsty. We'll talk to you two later,' she added ominously, looking from Alun to me.

Mike naturally applied his undivided attention to the critical mission he had been charged with.

However, having decided to do this while aiming the bottle directly at us, Margaux slipped beside him and jerked the bottle up.

'Aim for the sky, Mike,' she smiled, 'there's so much more room up there for the cork, and It's always safer.'

Mike nodded and resumed his levering with all his strength.

Eventually, with a loud pop and a cheer from us, the cork flew skywards.

Now, as everyone knows, what goes up must come down, and this was, unsurprisingly, exactly what happened.

More unusually though, considerably more came down than had gone up. There was a strangled squawk, and something big and white came hurtling downwards.

A big seagull flashed past and landed straight on top of the dozing ginger cat.

The latter woke, screeched, spat, and leapt from the wall, flying in a graceful arc across the garden. It was a beautiful thing to see. Its fur standing on end and its numerous claws sticking out like so many sharpened steel daggers.

A second later, and using these with practised efficiency, it attached itself firmly to Mikes back.

This new host, emitting a similar screech, leapt forward, albeit a little less gracefully. Admittedly, his progression was impeded by the stout pole of the big parasol he had set up that morning, which did cramp his style a little. All the same, he made a courageous start. The rope with which he had repaired it came undone, and the thing shot downwards and closed. On its way, it naturally swept all the glasses off the

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table onto the grass before tightly enveloping Mike, the cat and the foaming bottle of champers.

Inevitably, the whole thing then went toppling over accompanied by screeching, cursing and wailing noises.

The fabric of the parasol then animated itself from within in a fantastic series of jerks and thrashed about in a highly interesting manner. Then, from the open end, a ginger ball flashed out. It was a soaked, bedraggled mass of fur, which for some unexplained reason seemed to be foaming.

This apparition flew up onto the wall, landed on top of the still groggy seagull, spat at it and shot along the wall to a safer spot.

Here it sat and started to lick it's fur, still foaming from it's drenching of champagne.

My wife gazed at Margaux, who nodded back, 'it was a good idea, after all, choose the plastic glasses.'

'And plates,' added Margaux.

Mike was still struggling inside the parasol, but we were of absolutely no help to him because we were all doubled up with laughter. Alun was, as usual, lying on his back unable to stand. The three lifeguards and René were similarly inflicted as were his two daughters. Only Anne remained passive.

She turned her head, and the three women exchanged glances as Anne shook her head sadly with a wry smile. The three women understood each other perfectly.

Margaux stepped forward as Mike, drenched in champagne dragged himself from the wreckage on the lawn.

Bending, she kissed him on his dripping forehead,
'happy birthday Mike,' She said, 'I love your
aftershave.'

'Great shot,' laughed Alun.

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Chapter 17 Christmas EVE

Margaux and Alun had invited us over from France for Christmas, and for once it hadn't rained or even clouded over.

Mike and all our children were also invited, making up quite a big party.

Happily though, both offspring and their partners were lodging with Alun's daughter, so at least breakfast time was tolerably quiet.

It was now was Christmas eve, and the girls had decided that we should attend the carol concert at Wells Cathedral. We all liked having a good sing and were looking forward to the evening with pleasure.

For the occasion, we had been ordered upstairs to put on our best clothes and were now milling about clumsily, with a good hour and a half left to wait. We had also been ordered out of the dining room while our wives and daughters prepared the table for the evening meal. This would be waiting for the hungry masses when we returned later after the concert.

'Haven't you three got anything better to do?' said Margaux, putting her head around the sitting room door.

'No,' said Alun emphatically, 'we could always help you.'

'Are you mad!' she cried. Then, after a few seconds, she added, 'go down to the shops and buy a bottle of Armagnac for tomorrow.'

We were in our coats, out of the door and on our way before you could say, Chateau Margaux. However, this delicate mission accomplished, we discovered that we still had more than an hour to fill. Imagine then our relief when we spotted the inviting

windows of a pub, beckoning to us from across the road.

So, Armagnac in hand, we plied our way across the busy byway and pushed wide the heavy door.

'Just what we need to lubricate the vocal cords,' smiled Alun.

'Exactly,' I added. 'Given all the Christmas carols coming up, It would be unreasonable to overstress them, without proper preparatory treatment.'

'Perhaps even dangerous,' agreed Alun.

'I could do with a beer too,' said Mike, thus spoiling the whole atmosphere of the excuse.

I ought to mention here that I was wearing my newest suit. It came from Grenoble's most expensive tailors, and I was exceedingly pleased with this purchase. For once I had been in precisely the right place at precisely the right time. More precisely, I was looking in the window when they put the "sale" ticket on it. I was at once attracted to the suit and even more so to the eighty per cent reduction.

Ever since, heads turn and follow me as I pass, wearing it. On these occasions, quality, I tell myself, swelling visibly with pride, shows.

The only difficulty I have found is matching a shirt and tie with a straw-yellow coloured suit.

The barman came over, 'Hello Alun, hello lads. What'll it be?'

We ordered, and Alun swivelled on his stool to shake hands with his neighbour, 'Hi, John. OK?'

'Hi,' the young man nodded to us with a smile which froze on his face as he noticed my suit.

Alun spotted his surprise, 'Nice suit, eh?' he said. 'Striking really.'

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'Yeh,' nodded the young man, whose clothes seemed several sizes too small, especially around the shoulders and biceps, 'I bet you didn't get that cheap,' he smiled. 'In fact, I bet it wasn't going "cheep-cheep".' He banged down his glass and laughed, accompanied by the barman. Clearly doubting our capacity to understand the finesse of this comment, he added, 'Like a little yellow chick, cheep-cheep...'

I bridled at this. 'Sorry?'

Alun leant over, 'this is John. He likes his little jokes, eh John?'

'Can't help myself,' he smiled. 'Sometimes I wonder where I get the ideas from.'

Mike took a sip of his beer, 'I suppose they just come to you in a flash?'

'Yeah. In a sort of a flash,' John agreed.

'That's inspiration then,' nodded Mike ironically. 'Not many people have inspiration like that nowadays.'

'Yes,' agreed Alun, 'it's a gift.'

I was about to say something unpleasant about John's clothes, which seemed two sizes too small. However, Alun leaned over, 'John has got attenuating circumstances, haven't you, John?'

'Have I?' he frowned, 'what for?'

'For having such a speedy repartee and not realising that you might hurt people's feelings.'

'Oh!' cried John, 'no harm meant,' He smiled.

'You didn't have all the advantages that we had, did you?' said Alun.

'Didn't I?' frowned John.

'No. You had to make do with being county lightweight boxing champion.'

'Being what?' I gasped.

'And a policeman too.'

'True enough,' nodded John 'twice running.'

'A policeman twice running.' I mused. 'That's interesting. How's that done?'

'No. Boxing champion' corrected John. 'Once you're a Policeman, well that's that isn't it.'

'I wanted to be a boxing champion too,' said Mike with a wry smile, 'but retirement got me just as I was poised for the start.'

There was a round of laughter.

'You haven't got the ears for it, anyway, Mike.' said Alun.

'Yeah,' I added, 'You didn't think that they get like that because of the boxing, did you, Mike?'

'You have to be able to dart like lightning, don't you, John? Big, stick-out ears like Mike's would catch the wind and slow your head down.'

John nodded wisely, 'You know,' he frowned, 'I never thought of that.'

'You didn't need to,' smiled Alun 'nature got you into the right shape at the outset.'

'Natural selection then?' I suggested.

'Exactly,' nodded Alun, 'born to the trade.'

'Well,' smiled John, 'you're maybe right, Alun.'

Alun shrugged modestly, 'like you, John. I sometimes get these flashes of inspiration.'

Then, for some unknown reason, John turned to Mike, 'and what do you do?'

'Nothing,' said Mike, 'I just retired.'

'But what did you do before then?'

'He sponged off society,' I said.

'Well, I restored stuff. Buildings and monuments mainly,' said Mike, ignoring me.

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'Oh!' Nodded John.

'Yes,' said Mike, 'It leaves most people wondering what to say next when I tell them,' he shook his head sadly. 'I don't know why it does that.'

'Because the subject is so damn boring,' said Alun. 'People want to avoid allowing you to bore the trousers off them.'

'Or skirts,' I added.

'It's not boring at all. Well, at least the job isn't,' grumbled Mike.

'No,' agreed Alun, 'It's just hearing people go on and on about it. Done any boring recently, John. Sorry, I meant boxing.'

We all laughed. 'No. Next fight is in February. But, about this restoring thing. It must be pretty difficult.'

'God, help us,' cried Alun. 'Are you mad, John? He'll never stop once you get him going.'

'I'm interested.'

Alun glanced at his watch, 'hells bells! Is It that the time? Come on we had better get going, or we'll be late.'

We drained our glasses and headed out into the cold.

'That John seems a nice guy,' said Mike as we strode off. 'Strong too.'

'Yes,' smiled Alun. 'He was in love with June. My daughter June that is.'

'Was?' I questioned.

'They had words, and he was cast off.'

'Like dirty underwear,' suggested Mike.

'What did they have words about?' I asked.

'You know that June does a lot of portrait painting,' said Alun.

'Nudes mainly, I thought,' said Mike.

'Well, John offered to sit for her, and she refused.'

'Why?'

'She told him he wasn't the right shape.'

I pulled a face, 'Oops! I can imagine that might cause a bit of tension.'

'What was wrong with his shape?' asked Mike, interested in this point.

'She didn't go into details. She just said that his body wasn't good portrait material,' Alun nodded. 'Then, I suppose he had to go and ask what it was that the other naked men had that he didn't,' I said.

'A bad idea that,' sighed Mike.

'She just said that what the others had, was the right shape,' frowned Alun.

'I bet that pleased John,' said Mike.

'They had words. Then June said that one thing they did have that he didn't was the intelligence to keep their mouths shut when required.'

'And I suppose he left in a huff?' I suggested.

'In several Huffs, in fact,' said Alun.

'Does June still do nudes then,' asked Mike.

'Yes. But she gave up men and concentrates on women now.'

'I prefer my nudes female' I said, nodding.

'Me too,' agreed Mike.

'In summer, she paints them in our back garden in the sun. Against the old stone wall. It's out of the wind, and she says the light is perfect.'

'So, you get to see?' asked Mike.

'Oh Yes. We sit and chat with them and have tea together, while June paints.'

'Wow!' I said, imagining the scene.

'Yes. Sometimes it's pretty wow-like, but not always.'

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'But don't they mind you gawking at them?' asked Mike.

'I don't gawk,' said Alun. 'Well I suppose for the first four or five times, I did rinse the old eye a bit, but after that, I seemed to get used to it.'

'It's only a bit of meat on legs, after all,' I hazarded.

'It's like being in that painting by Manet, "Luncheon on the lawn".'

'On the grass,' I corrected, 'the title is "Luncheon on the grass". Anyway, yes, I see what you mean.'

'Doesn't Margaux mind?' asked Mike.

'Oh, Margaux sits with us too. She is very good at making naked girls feel relaxed. That's why June asks us to stay and chat.'

'Oh!' said Mike, a dreamy look coming into his eyes.

'June says it avoids them getting bored and fidgeting. It also keeps them from posing too much.'

'I'm surprised Margaux allows you to stay and ogle,' I said.

'She says she prefers me to ogle completely naked girls I have no chance of getting at, then fully dressed ones that I might have,' he smiled. 'She says that that way I know exactly what I'm not going to get.'

'Maybe right. I think I ought to try that too. Just to check the theory.'

'Well,' smiled Alun, 'Nowadays, when I'm out, I find that I ogle more selectively and with far better taste than before.'

'Pity about John though,' I said.

'Maybe. Mind you, sitting drinking tea with naked men and Margaux, tended to be less of a pleasure for me.'

'I can understand that. Make you realise just how much time has flown since our youths.'

'Exactly, and Margaux said that it was sad that she had had to wait so long to realise that I too, was the wrong shape.'

We all burst out laughing.

'No...!' I cried, 'she didn't really say that?'

'Oh yes she did.'

'You know,' said Mike. 'One of the last projects I was involved in last year was to do with public fountains.'

'I told you it was boring,' put in Alun.

Mike ignored this, 'people kept complaining to the authorities that they were dangerous.'

'Dangerous?'

'They complained that their children might fall into the water and drown,' said Mike.

'That's what they were designed for in the first place,' frowned Alun.

'For stray dogs and cats too,' I added. 'Good deep fountains help regulate the population.'

'Yes,' agreed Alun, 'the trouble is that Squirrels...'

'Shut up Alun,' said Mike detecting the signs that some new source of verbal inspiration had presented itself to Alun's fertile brain.

'So, to start with we had to remove the water,' He said.

'Pity,' I said, 'the things being fountains.'

'They could have use powdered water, instead,' suggested Alun.

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'Or they could have pumped glass beads instead of water. To give the same overall impression,' I contributed.

'Good idea. One can't drown in glass beads,' agreed Alun.

'Shut up. Then after we'd emptied them all, parents started going on about the risk of kids falling in and bashing their heads on the stone bottom.'

'That would do most of them a lot of good,' I smiled.

'Forms the character,' agreed Alun.

'So, we had to cover the base with some cork-based stuff.' Mike sighed. 'Then they all went up in arms because they said the material used was an eyesore, which of course it was. It took me months to find something that everybody accepted.'

'And then?' asked Alun.

'And then an old age pensioner, bumped into a low parapet with his wheelchair to have a look. He tipped up and fell over it. He broke an arm.'

'Serves him right,' I sniffed. 'So?'

'So, we had to fill the fountains...'

'With water?' I said, hopefully.

'Mercury would be better,' suggested Alun. 'You can't sink in mercury.'

'Or break an arm,' I added.

'It doesn't evaporate either. Which saves on refilling costs,' smiled Alun, 'and even a squirrel can float in mercury.'

'No. Not with mercury you damn idiots, with concrete. And then I had to put the cork back on the top of that, almost level with the top.' He sighed, 'the cork stuff was a sort of dappled green stuff. Oh well.' He sighed.

'Yes,' nodded Alun, 'they had to do that here too. Same sort of green cork stuff too.'

'That was my last contribution to the great world of architectural restoration,' sighed Mike. 'Not my best effort.'

'Talking about the restoration of fountains,' said Alun, 'I'll show you one on the way home.'

'I've had enough of fountains for the time being,' frowned Mike.

'No. This one is a real work of art. It dates back to god knows when, or possibly even earlier than that. There was a hell of an outcry when people started complaining about risks to their children.'

Mike shrugged, 'there always is.'

'The national TV came down because the stonework is remarkable. Anyway, we'll be going past it, so we'll have a quick look. The local council are hoping to get it listed.'

We crossed the main road on the footbridge and thence across the triangular-shaped "Sydney gardens".

In the distance, I could see the fountain, standing in the middle of the gardens, surrounded by a broad sweep of lawns. As we approached, Alun pointed and attracted my attention to the fountain's details.

'When you get closer, you'll see just how incredibly detailed the stonework is.'

As we strode up, I noticed that the water reservoir had been modified as explained by Mike with green cork matting.

Mike, who was several paces ahead of us, put his foot up onto the rounded stone parapet and gazed across at the central statue.

Alun, a step ahead of me did the same.

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However, I wanted to get a closer look at the stonework, so I stepped over the parapet onto the green surface to reach it.

'Hey...! No!' cried Alun. 'Stop.'

I turned to look at him, and as I did, my foot reached the level of the green surface. However, it did not experience the expected resistance but went straight through the surface.

The green material was not cork-covered concrete, but a uniform coating of tiny, green-leafed weeds, floating on the deep icy water.

My leg went down and down into the icy water, followed by the rest of my straw-yellow suited body.

I just manage to grasp the stone fountain as I plunged forward and floundered about, sputtering in the ice-cold, green weed-covered water.

I heard a spluttering, and a roar of laughter from behind me as Mike and Alun collapsed onto the grass, unable to hold in their feelings.

After a bit more floundering, I managed to extract myself from the slimy weeds and heave my dripping body over the parapet. I knelt there dripping for several second scowling at the two men rolling about on the grass.

I then stood and dripped, looking down at Mike and Alun who were still both in different sorts of contortions as they rocked with laughter.

My lovely yellow trousers were now liberally coated with thousands of tiny slime-covered green leaves, like cress, but smaller. Where there were no leaves, were patches of brown slime and here and there, an unpleasant dark object which seemed to be alive.

I could not think of anything to say.

I stood there dripping, or perhaps I should say "slimeing", representing the actual state of affairs more clearly.

Eventually, I roused myself, 'come on you clots. I'm freezing. Let's get home before I die of cold.'

Somehow the two managed to get to their feet, even though they could not stop roaring with laughter.

I stumped off, still holding the intact but be-slimed bottle of Armagnac by the neck.

The other two came reeling along the road a few paces behind me. They spent most of the time holding each other up or falling over low garden walls into flowerbeds.

Understandably, the few people taking pre-lunch strolls marked us down as one more group of drunks on their inebriated way home. They hoped that a dose of the rolling pin on the head would be waiting when we got there.

As we eventually approached the house, the peals of laughter emitted by my two followers had obviously penetrated the double glazing.

Two faces, then four and finally ten, were pressed against the windowpanes. They gazed alternately from my apparition to Alun and Mike, who for some reason, did not seem able to negotiate the front gate.

The two men grasped at each other, roaring with laughter until Mike decided that sitting on the wall was the safest bet.

The door then opened, and Margaux and my wife stepped out. They took in my green slime-covered frame and exchanged looks. Then standing aside,

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my wife pointed up the stairs, 'go and slip into something clean.' She smiled slyly.

Alun and Mike exploded into laughter once more, 'slip into something...' cried Alun, falling off the wall, followed by Mike.

I dripped my way up the stairs to my room, but as the door closed on the mirth-stricken duo, Margaux called up.

'Go and strip off in the bath. And leave that ruin in it. We'll throw it in the bin.'

Standing there stark naked a few moments later, I stared down sadly at my green slime-covered straw-yellow suit. I had been really proud of it.'

I went over to the window and threw it open. The cold air revived me a little as I leant out and glared down at Alun and Mike, who were still crying with laughter. 'Shut up you two idiots.' I shouted.

At this moment, my wife appeared with Margaux. Regardless of my now being stark naked they pushed me out of the way, lifted the soggy remains of my suit from the bath and dropped them into a big black bin-liner.

This done, they turned on their heels and left me to shower and hunt out my jeans.

Stephen William ROWE

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Chapter 18 Christmas Day

We needed two big turkeys for the meal.

The cooking of one had thus been subcontracted to Mike's uncle. The man would be dining with friends and didn't need his oven. He was thus also cooking the home-made Christmas pudding, which was unusually large.

When the time was ripe, Mike, Alun and I were to take the car and pick them up.

Breakfast over, the three of us had been getting in everyone's way for some time, so were ordered upstairs to put on our best clothes.

We were now once more milling about clumsily and this time were ordered out of both the dining room and kitchen areas.

'Haven't you three got anything better to do?' sighed Margaux, pausing in the doorway.

'You said that yesterday and the answer is still, No,' said Alun. 'We could help.'

'As I said yesterday, "Are you mad!"' she cried. Then, after a few seconds added, 'its time to pick up the turkey anyway.'

I made a grumbling noise which she pretended not to hear. 'Do you think you three can manage that without getting into more trouble?'

'I doubt it,' I grumbled. 'You had best send the kids. We'll go round to the pub, that'll be safer.'

'Are you going, or not?'

'Yes, yes. All right. Come on, Alun. Where's Mike.'

'He's watching the girl across the road undress in her bedroom,' called Margaux from the dining room.

We were dressed and out of the front door in a fraction of a second, only to find Mike cleaning the car windscreen.

'That was a dirty trick,' sighed Alun.

The front door opened, 'and while you're on your way,' she called, 'stop off and buy another bottle of Armagnac. I can hardly use that filthy slime-covered one you brought home yesterday.'

Well, we picked up the Armagnac, then drove on to Mike's uncle's house.

The roasting dishes holding the turkey and pudding bowl were blisteringly hot, so we first covered the back seat with several old newspapers. We then settled the roasting dish and the pudding bowl on the seat next to Mike and told him to keep a careful eye on things.

'I doubt, the bird will try to escape,' he scoffed, 'but if it does, I'll do my best to reason with it and convince it to stay put.'

'Do you know, lads,' smiled Alun, 'I think we have just time for a quick beer.'

Off we went, then. A whistle on our lips and a song in our hearts, as the saying goes.

However, life is rarely a smoothly flowing river as is well known.

As we drove along, chatting happily, an unannounced and decidedly unwanted speed-bump hove suddenly into view. Alun slammed on the breaks just in time. However, neither the turkey nor the pudding had seatbelts. They also seemed anxious to respect the laws of physics, and therefore maintained their original courses and speeds.

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Mike reacted only slightly slower than the speed of light. He leapt into action, catching them just before they slid onto the leaf and gravel-strewn car mats.

However, they were still boiling. 'Yipes!' he cried, whipping his hand back and blowing vigorously on his fingers.

Then we hit the speed bump.

Up shot the turkey again, closely followed by the pudding.

Once more scrupulously respecting the laws of nature, both came back down again almost immediately. However, they did not come down precisely in their original places.

The pudding came down with a splash, into the turkey pan, half-filled with hot fat. As for the turkey, it chose Mike's lap as its landing site.

Mike leapt up as the boiling bird landed on him, striking his head on the car roof, 'oh balls,' he cried. He lunged at the turkey madly, which accordingly altered its initial trajectory and ended up on the grit and leaf-covered mat.

Alun swerved the car off the road into the park entrance we were just passing.

Like a wild animal, Mike leapt from the car and stripped off his hot-fat impregnated trousers. He then went hopping about rubbing his thighs which admittedly seemed a little red. His fingertips looked a bit worse for wear too.

I dived into the back of the car and managed to get the turkey back into the pudding bowl then brought the two out and laid them out on the grass.

'Oh, hell!' cried Alun.

'I couldn't put it better,' I agreed.

Mike took a step forward to get a look at the ruin. However, doing this with trousers around one's ankles makes the manoeuvre more tricky than usual. He stumbled and fell straight down, his head missing the turkey by a few inches. It did not, however, miss the ground.

'Bloody hell!' he cried scrambling to his knees, and we saw that he spoke truly because his nose was now bleeding nicely and dripping onto the Christmas pudding.

We helped him to his feet, found him a paper handkerchief then helped him off with his trousers.

'It's bloody cold,' he said. 'Oh, god! Look at that mess.'

The turkey was now liberally coated with gravel and dust, while the pudding was bobbing happily up and down in the boiling turkey fat.

'Oh, God!' cried Alun.

'Have you got a car brush or something?' I asked.

Alun nodded and ran around to open the boot.

'We'll need to rinse it and the pudding too. Quick open the Armagnac Alun.' I called.

I put on Alun's thick wheel-changing gloves and held the turkey up, dangling by a wing, while Alun brushed.

Mike, standing in his pants, with his fat-soaked trousers in one hand, poured Armagnac over it.

The results were impressive, and it was soon as good as new. At least to the untrained eye.

'Let's do the same with the pudding,' cried Alun, 'Quick.'

I lifted it into its original bowl, with my free hand, holding the turkey clear of the ground. Then

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replaced the turkey in its pan where it fizzed and bubbled.

Mike poured Armagnac over the pudding then Alun gave it a good brushing. He then suddenly looked up at us. 'I've got an idea.'

He jumped up and dashed to the car, coming back with a cigarette lighter.

'We'll flambé it,' he smiled.

'Are you sure that's wise?' I said hesitantly, stepping back a little.

However, Alun did not listen. He leant forward and clicked the lighter. There was a whoosh, and a sheet of blue flame shot up. Alun toppled over backwards, his eyebrows and hair smoking.

Jumping back out of harm's way, Mike overturned the bottle on his trousers, then tripping over fell backwards. His trousers dropped onto the flaming bowl and ignited a second sheet of blue flame.

'Oh hell!' cried Mike, righting himself, 'My best trousers!'

He jumped up again and made to jump forward to recover them, but his foot landed on the handle of the turkey dish and up went the bird once more.

I just managed to catch it by a wing, as Mike dragged his flaming trousers away and jumped up and down on them, in his pants, to put out the smouldering mass. At this juncture, it became apparent to a casual observer that the elastic on his pants needed replacing so, you can imagine what happened. Not a pretty sight, or rather not quite portrait-material as my daughter June would have put it.

We then turned and looked at Alun, frantically rubbing his forehead to extinguish the flames.

At this epic moment, a heavy crunching noise came from the gravel path.

'Hullo, Hullo. What's going on here?'

The three of us whirled around to find a massive Policeman bearing down on us.

Mike stood in his pants, riveted to the ground, his smouldering trousers at his feet.

Alun was still smoking in the upper regions, and I stood with the turkey dangling from my hand.

The Policeman glanced around our little group.

'What have we here. The three wise men, bringing gifts from afar. Gaspar, Melchior and Balthazar, following a star on high?'

Then suddenly, his face cleared. 'Oh, It's you, Alun!' he said without surprise, 'I ought to have guessed.' He paused, 'and your pals too,' he nodded.

'Oh, hi, John.' Said Alun. 'On duty now then?'

Mike opened his mouth to explain, but John held up his hand, 'no time for explanations for the moment Lads. Margaux will no doubt explain to my mum.'

'Happy Christmas all,' he smiled, turned quickly on his heel, and trudged off.

'I thought they were Kings, who came from afar,' said Mike kicking his smouldering trousers out of the way and over to the side of the path, near the park entrance.

'Or Magi,' said Alun. 'In French, they are the "Mage Kings", the "Rois Mages".' You get the best of both words in France.

'Alun smiled his clever, "I will explain all" look. 'The word "Megi" comes from "Magos", which itself comes from the old Persian word "Magupati". This was the

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title given to priests in a sect of the ancient Persian religions. Today we'd called them astrologers, I suppose.'

'Great. Thanks, Alun,' I said.

'Hey, let's get moving you two,' said Mike, 'I'm getting a bit cold, without my trousers.'

We carefully loaded the turkey and the pudding back into the car, ensuring that everything was perfectly stable this time.

We then jumped in, and Alun turned the ignition key. Suddenly, he froze as he caught sight of something in the rear-view mirror.

'Oh hell!' he leapt out, and we followed, mystified.

However, we did not stay mystified very long.

Where Mike had kicked his smouldering trousers, a plume of blue smoke was rising, and behind this, the tall, dry grass had caught fire and was now crackling and blazing merrily.

We dashed over, but as we reached the spot, the flames reached something extremely dry and highly flammable. A sheet of flame shot skywards in a crackling inferno, and we leapt back.

Smoke billowed upwards, and I rushed back to the car to get the extinguisher.

This was far too small to make any difference, but I did it all the same.

Soon the smoke alerted the nearby houses, and someone came dashing out.

He stopped short, gazing at trouser-less Mike.

After a few seconds he gulped and seemed to cast off the paralysis of his vocal cords, 'I called the fire brigade. What happened?'

'It was my trousers, said Mike, they caught fire, and I took them off.'

'What!?' he stammered.

However, we were saved by the bell, as the Fire engine came clanging merrily into view.

The trouser-less Mike made a dash for the car and hid on the back seat.

At the same moment, John, came running back and stood, gazing at us, with wonder.

In a few seconds, the fire was out.

The chief stood back and turned to the Policeman, 'I wonder how that started, any ideas, John?' he asked.

John shot a look in our direction and shook his head, 'kids probably.'

The chief followed his look, 'Oh! You're here too are you, Alun? Ah!' 'he muttered, 'and you're obviously Alun's friends.'

Mike nodded from the back seat, and the fire brigade chief shot a look at John, who smiled and nodded back.

'Well, all's well that ends well,' smiled Alun.

The chief exchanged another look with John and frowned, 'kids then, you think?' He nodded doubtfully.

'I shouldn't wonder,' said John, 'it's just the sort of thing they get up to when their parents are too occupied with cooking the Christmas turkey to survey them.'

The chief looked over at us again, 'you three didn't see any kids, did you?'

Alun, shook his head, 'nope. We didn't see any kids at all.'

'I didn't think you would have,' the chief frowned.

'Well, we had better be getting back. Nearly time for Christmas dinner. Like a lift, John?'

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'Just as far as the roundabout. Thanks.'

Just as they were boarding, one of the young trainee firemen called out, 'I Found something odd chief.'

'What.'

'Looks like a pair of burnt trousers.'

We froze halfway into the car.

The chief cast a look over his shoulder at us and shook his head sadly, 'kids!' he exclaimed, 'What'll they be up to next? Come on, jump up, leave that alone. Happy Christmas Alun. Happy Christmas lads.'

With this, the Fire Engine roared off.

We followed, after sighing and exchanging relieved looks.

'I suppose it's inevitable that Margaux will get to hear about this, Alun?' I sighed.

'Inevitable, I'm afraid.'

'Oh well, we'd better get this stuff home.'

Once we had parked the car, we decided to sneak the trouser-less Mike in without him being seen.

'We'll take the turkey and pudding in and keep everyone occupied while you sneak upstairs,' said Alun.

However, as we approached, the front door opened.

My daughter looked out, 'we were starting to wonder where you had got to.'

'The turkey needed a few more minutes cooking,' lied Alun.

'Oh! Did it Really!'

'You don't need to stand there gawking,' I called, 'we're coming.'

The two of us picked up the pan and the bowl and shielded Mike behind us. However, as we opened the front door, ten heads appeared from various rooms.

'We heard the fire engine,' said Margaux, taking the turkey from Alun, 'what did you do this time?'

Alun made a show of bridling, but before he could bridle properly, Mike piped up from behind us Mike.

'My trousers caught fire.'

'Come here, Mike,' sighed Margaux.

He stepped between us, and a burst of laughter went up from our offspring.

'Well, for once it wasn't Alun's fault,' smiled my wife.

'Well,' said Mike, 'not entirely...'

'Go up and get changed, Mike. Dinner will be ready in five minutes. And you,' she said, turning to Alun, 'go and wash your hair. You smell like a bonfire.'

'He Was a bonfire,' I said.

My wife looked at my hands, 'And you. Go and wash your fat covered hands.' As I opened my mouth, she held up her hand. 'No, don't explain. I don't want to know... yet.'

Well, in the end, the meal went brilliantly.

However, when the turkey came, my wife looked over at Mike. 'Not much juice with this one!'

Mike frowned; 'I didn't notice. Mind you, my uncle always buys low-fat turkeys nowadays.'

'Low-fat turkeys!' cried Margaux bursting into laughter.

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'Well, that's what he said, didn't he, Alun?'

Alun was not going to get drawn into this, 'I don't think I was listening.'

'Me neither.' I said quickly, 'I was dealing with the Christmas Pud.'

'So, Mike?' smiled Margaux, 'perhaps you'd like to expand on the benefits of low-fat poultry.'

'Well...'. He hesitated, but luckily for him, the children changed the subject.

When finally the colossal pudding was served, everyone agreed that it smelt absolutely delicious.

The girls served it and declared once more that it smelled lovely.

We looked away and pretended to be absorbed in some in-depth discussion.

We waited before tasting our own portions, but everybody declared that this was by far the best they had ever tasted.

I burst out laughing, accompanied by Mike and Alun.

Margaux smiled, 'pleased that you can see the funny side of things at last.'

She then looked around the table, 'who'd like a drop of Armagnac with their coffee?'

The three of us froze, we had forgotten about the Armagnac...

EPILOGUE:

That evening, after the long Christmas meal, the five of us were seated in the armchairs in front of the log fire.

The eight kids had gone back to Margaux's daughter's house for the evening and calm had returned to the little house.

We opened a bottle of iced champagne and sat sipping it contentedly.

Alun leant back in his chair and nodded, 'we had some pretty interesting adventures this year,' he nodded.

'Yes, like the good old days,' I agreed.

'Yes, unfortunately,' said Mike.

Margaux shot a look at my wife and sipped her champagne, with a slight curling of the corners of her lips.

Suddenly, Alun sat forward, 'do you know,' he said. 'I wonder if it would be worth trying to write up our adventures into a sort of book format. What do you think?'

My wife started, 'it'll be time enough to think about doing that when you lot are too old to have adventures anymore.'

'And anyway,' added Margaux, 'nobody would be interested in reading it.'

Mike smiled, 'I agree to that.'

Little did we know, that the girls had already started scheming again. They had already sketched out the holidays which they knew would supply the material for volume two of their book.

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Stephen William ROWE

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