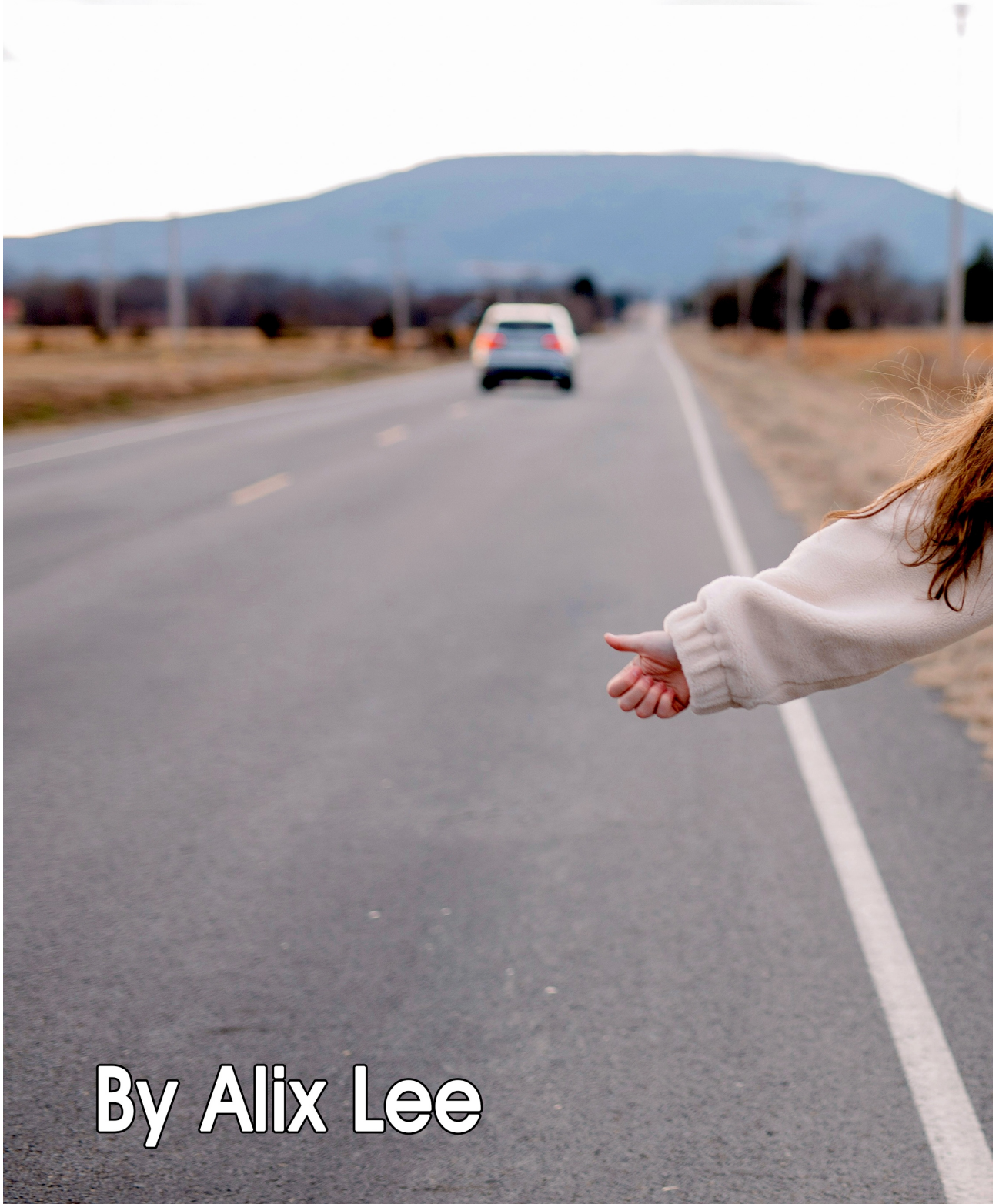


True Tales of a Traveller
The Long Way Home



By Alix Lee

The Long Way Home

**A True Tale of a Traveller, Set in Various European Countries in the
Early 1980s**

1st Edition

by
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"Travel brings people together, and tears them apart."

Preface

The True Tales of a Traveller series of short stories and novellas consists of several dozen real-life travellers' tales covering over three decades. Although presented in a short story format (in five volumes) for reading convenience, these stories are not fiction. Apart from some of the characters' names which have been changed to protect their identities, everything in these stories is true.

These stories do not all fit neatly into the 'travel story' genre, although some will indeed meet most readers' expectations in this regard. Others are simply adventures - or misadventures - that happen to have taken place in various different countries.

The third of this series of stories, *The Long Way Home*, is set in not one but half-a-dozen European countries, in 1982 and 1983. At over 17,000 words, this story borders on novella length. Like the other stories in the series, it provides not only an entertaining read, but also information on all the places visited, some relevant only to the era in which the story is set, but some still relevant today. In addition to being a travel story, *The Long Way Home* is also a love story, and a story about the unexpected twists and turns that can occur in personal relationships.

Hope you like it!

Tale Three: The Long Way Home

Finally, the fateful day arrived. Our apartment in the Nea Smyrni district of Athens, which little over a month previously had been host to over a dozen travellers - friends, friends of friends, and friends of theirs, too - was now empty but for me and Diane. Rupert, our fellow kibbutz volunteer friend who had shared the apartment with us from the beginning, had left for Nottingham University six weeks earlier. We cleaned up, and made sure our bags were packed with all we would need for the long journey home.

On the morning we left Athens, I had my first encounter with a psychic, or someone who claimed to be a psychic.

After leaving our apartment late that morning, loaded down with her backpack, my shoulder bag and various smaller bags, Di and I walked across the street, to say goodbye to Saad, an Egyptian national who lived on the other side of Agias Fotunis street from us, and worked as a waiter in nearby Nea Smyrni Square. Saad, scrawny, bearded, and almost always wearing a broad smile, was an amiable character in his early 30s. We had chatted to him on many occasions when eating in the square, and even as guests at his apartment. We figured that as a waiter working nights, he would probably be home in the morning.

He was. Opening the street-level wooden window boards of his basement apartment, Saad greeted us effusively as if he hadn't seen us for months, rather than just days, even though I could see from his table that he was in the middle of his breakfast. Did he actually expect us to clamber in from the street?

But there was somebody else there too. "I see you have a friend with you, Saad?"

"Yes, a friend from my hometown," Saad replied as the man walked over to the ground-level window. Dressed in nondescript shorts and T-shirt, he was very strongly built, in contrast to Saad's wiry build, but smiled just as easily as his host as he shook hands with us through the windows. Unlike Saad, who was fluent, he spoke no English.

"Is your friend here looking for work?" I asked Saad.

"No, he's just travelling." Then, Saad seemed to intuit that I was about to ask what his friend did for a living. Saad's smile widened: "He's a psychic", he added.

"Really?" I asked. I could hardly resist. "Can he tell us anything about us," I challenged. Some exchange in Arabic took place, and Saad's muscular friend took a step towards the window. He gazed at Di, and for a moment, I thought he wanted to ask her something, but a sleepy look came over his eyes. This lasted for about a minute, and I was about to bring it to an end by telling Saad that we had to be on our way, when the man suddenly spoke several short sentences. Saad translated: "He says that Diane is very loyal to her friends. She is patient and tolerant, and also very hardworking. She is willing to suffer much hardship to get the things she wants."

I smiled at Di. "Well, there you go, Di. Psychic Reading Number 14-b, just for you!" I felt it was something nobody would disagree with; broad, bland, and probably repeated by the man very regularly.

The fake flavour of the psychic's reading almost made me forget that I had asked him to tell us about both of us. I was about to say goodbye when Saad, told me: "OK, Alix, now it's your turn!"

I acquiesced, and waited for Saad's hometown friend to say something. After a moment, a puzzled look came over his face, and he exchanged a sentence or two with Saad.

"Come closer, and crouch down," Saad then instructed me. "Let him see you better."

I did so. Saad's muscular friend stood a step forward, and gazed at me for some moments, as he had at Di. After a few moments, I felt quite uncomfortable, and was about to make some wisecrack when the man finally spoke several sentences, which were translated almost simultaneously by Saad: "...he says you often talk about many things you claim you are going to do, but rarely even try to do any of them...he says you

value the advice and opinions of strangers but not the advice and opinions of your friends...you trust people you shouldn't, and not the people you should. He also says you never thank people when you should, and you hate to apologise for your mistakes or even admit you ever made them..."

I felt, despite myself, the smile fading from my face, but I laughed it back. The somewhat negative reading by the 'psychic' was not enough to put a damper on my forced high spirits. Inwardly, I was extremely distressed to be leaving Athens. But I was determined to start the new journey on an upbeat note. Starting a journey any other way seemed very unwise to me; almost as if inviting misfortune. I wasn't going to let this fellow throw a spanner in the works. I laughed off the so-called psychic's interpretation of my personality, which I thought he had made up on the spot, and asked Saad to tell his friend that his intuition was off, but he shouldn't give up; he would no doubt get more accurate with time. We finally said our farewells, and took a taxi to the railway station.

The train trip from Athens west to Patras, on the north-western side of the Peloponnese peninsula, took a little over three hours. From there, we would take a 16-hour-plus ferry trip to Brindisi, on the south-east coast of Italy, the longest ferry trip I had ever taken at the time.

Once we had taken our seats in the train and stacked our luggage, Di suggested that the psychic's opinions of our personalities was interesting, though she couldn't agree that she was hardworking.

"I believe there are people who are psychic", I told her, "but that guy certainly isn't one of them." I then began half-heartedly to explain why I thought so; Di laughed lightly and I knew she found my reaction amusing because my reading had been much less positive than hers, but I couldn't really concentrate on the topic, my mind was entirely preoccupied with the fact that I was actually leaving Greece. I felt a part of me was being slowly torn away, to remain in Athens, while I left, or at least most of me left. I had known that I loved Greece, and that I didn't want to leave, but it wasn't until I actually had to that I realised how much I loved the place.

We passed over the famous Corinth Canal. Cut through solid rock, it was completed in 1893, its vertical sides rising nearly 100 metres above the water. I scrambled to extract my camera from my shoulder bag, but by the time it was in my hands, the canal was gone. This reinforced my sadness at leaving Greece; I felt there was still so much in this relatively small country that I hadn't seen.

"Missed it," I said with dismay as I sat back down. "Never seen it before, and now it's gone, I've missed..."

"We passed over it six weeks ago on our hitch-hiking trip," Di corrected, "and you barely noticed it. It's just a canal, Ali," she added, "I didn't know you had a canal fetish!"

In a little over six months Athens had come to feel like a second home to me, and I was sure the same was true for Di, even though she didn't let it show. There were things I didn't much like about the Greek national character, but for the most part I found the Greeks to be a likable people. I liked the food, and as for the climate, I loved it. Physically, it was easy to leave, but emotionally I didn't like to think that I may not be coming back. That feeling was very unwelcome indeed. Rather, I preferred to look on the last seven months or so as having laid the foundations for a long-term relationship with the country. There was no other way I could leave the country.

My thoughts were so preoccupied with the time I had spent in Greece, and the time I hoped against hope to spend there in the future, that I was almost unable to converse with Di throughout the train trip, or even concentrate on conversation, and she became annoyed at my lack of response to her comments. All this just made me wonder which one I loved more: Di, or Greece? Despite the frequent quarrels and disagreements that had marred our relationship in recent weeks, I had to admit that if forced to choose only one or the other, then I would choose Di. But it wasn't an easy choice.

After some perusal of the Lonely Planet guide for the country, I told Diane about Patras: like so many places in Greece it's a city whose roots go back to antiquity, with the first evidence of settlement at this location dating back to the third millennium BC. In recent history, it had become known as the place where the Greek Revolution (the War of Independence) began in 1821. After independence, it quickly developed into a major urban centre, and was the first city in Greece to introduce public streetlights and electrified tramways. Its importance as a centre of commerce and industry, and its proximity to Italy made it a prime target for Italian air raids during WWII, softening up the city for joint Axis occupation. After the end of WWII, Athens boomed, but while Patras recovered, it didn't grow nearly so fast economically.

Di looked bored at my narration and ready to sleep. "We're going to Patras to take a ferry to Italy" she

reminded me. "We won't have time to see the city."

I desperately wanted to look at our trip in the same way as travel we had taken elsewhere in Greece, such as our trip to Crete.

"Yes," I continued, still reading the travel guide, "there's some info about the ferries here! It says the port of Patras has always been an important part of the city's economy. It manages more than half of the foreign sea-passenger transportation in Greece, and has car-ferry links with the Ionian islands and the major Adriatic ports of Italy. That's where we're going!"

Indeed, we didn't - and couldn't - stay more than a few hours in the city. Along with Thessalonika, in the north of the country, Patras was a major Greek population centre I felt regret that I had had no time at all to explore. But I was coming back, I told myself. I was definitely coming back.

We boarded the ferry for Brindisi. Without reserved seats, we spent much of the sailing time sitting or lying on the floor at first, chatting with a group of young Italians until they, and we, discovered that there were actually many seats free if we looked around for them. After that, there was nothing but half-sleep and half-dreams until we arrived in Italy. Greece was gone.

We found a relatively cheap pension and loitered around the city and its harbour for a few hours before taking a meal. With a host of unfamiliar items to choose from, I opted for a pizza, while Di seemed more familiar with the menu. In my adolescence, pizza had not yet become truly internationalised as it is today, and I had only developed a pizza habit in Athens. I found the thin crust pizza different from my usual, but nevertheless delicious enough to order a second. I wondered if I could ever come to enjoy Italian food as much as Greek?

All Roads Lead to Rome, Eventually

The next morning, we made an early start to hitch north. Di, who was proficient in French and Spanish, soon discovered that she was able to communicate in Spanish for most simple things, such as asking directions. I was very conscious of the fact that I had nothing to contribute to communications and had suddenly become linguistically dependent on my girlfriend. We found our way to the north-bound highway and stood there waiting for a lift.

Long-distance travel with people we are close to quickly brings out the best - and the worst - in us. This is particularly true when there are unexpected challenges. I had known there was something special about Di as early as our trip to Masada in the Israeli-occupied West Bank about nine months previously. Despite the hard time hitching in the desert heat, without water (as it had been quickly consumed by me), she never complained. After the episode at the Hotel Paris in Glyfada described in *Working Holiday*, Di got a job at a local bakery, which involved getting up at 4 am, and working in an entirely Greek-speaking environment, and this was held at a time when she could speak no Greek at all. Before she quit the job in favour of a job as a barmaid at the Galaxy bar in central Athens, there was a period of overlap, when she was working in both jobs, with just a few hours sleep in between. Because of all this, my respect for her grew into something bordering on awe. But even the resilient cheerfulness and optimistic nature of this diminutive south London girl would be dealt a serious blow by our trip home.

As a still-novice traveller, I badly underestimated the challenge of travelling overland from Athens to the UK. In fact, we only had to get to Rotterdam, as Willeke, our kibbutz volunteer friend, had invited us to stay there. Even so, we didn't have nearly enough money to even be sure of being able to complete the trip. I had neglected to make proper plans for the trip, deciding instead to simply take it as it comes, in the same way most of my travel in Israel and Greece had taken place. My rough estimates of how much time and money the trip would take were based on the trips I had already made in Greece, Israel, and the Israeli-occupied territories. Even on the longest of those trips, such as my trip down the Sinai with Rupert, or the trip Di, Rupert and I had made to Istanbul, I was never more than a day's travel from base, usually far less. The present distances were much greater; they involved several border crossings, different time zones, and worst of all, several currency exchanges, in all of which we would lose money. And all the countries we were going to were more expensive than Israel and Greece to begin with. And, in autumn, much cooler too.

Nevertheless, a successful hitch-hike from Brindisi to Rotterdam was certainly still possible, if we had exceptionally good luck with getting lifts, which is what I was hoping for. Unfortunately, we had exceptionally

bad luck. On the first day, we waited over eight hours, until late afternoon, before finally getting a lift, which took us just a couple of dozen kilometres north along the coast. And I had hoped to be in Rome the same day!

We stayed at a nondescript pension in a nondescript town. Di seemed unfazed by the setback. But I was concerned. I had rarely had such a bad time hitching. True, I had waited even longer for a lift in the Sinai desert, but that was mainly because there was very little traffic to begin with, and I was travelling with a rough-looking hippy. Now, I was travelling with an attractive girl - ostensibly an advantage in getting lifts - and none of the many vehicles that had come our way had stopped. What was wrong?

The next day, we again set out very early to make as much as we could of our time. And again, we had the same experience. By early afternoon, we were still at exactly the same spot. Then, it happened: finally, a driver stopped.

"It's Cold Outside!"

The vehicle which stopped for me and Di on the coast road north of Brindisi was a truck. The driver was heading all the way to Rome. This good news came to me from Di, who spoke Spanish with the driver, and seemed for the most part able to communicate successfully. I felt a great sense of relief. Finally, we were moving. I began to take more interest in our location, even looking at where we were on my map of Italy. We headed up the east coast to Pescara, a city of about 100,000 residents at the time of our trip, the most populous city in Italy's Abruzzo region, and one of the top economic, commercial, and tourist centers on the Adriatic coast. We then turned west to cross the mountainous terrain of the central Appennines. Just before we did, there was a violent thunderstorm some way out in the Adriatic, with dramatic lightning flashes in the distance every few seconds. Seeing it all from the warmth and safety of the truck cabin - and this was a 'state-of-the-art' vehicle for the time, and very comfortable - made me appreciate getting this lift all the more.

The driver, a stocky and muscular, jovial, crew-cut character in his 30s seemed to enjoy conversation, with Di speaking Spanish, and him Italian, frequent misunderstandings, much gesticulation, puzzled expressions and all. Unable to add anything to the conversation, I just watched the scenery go by, glad we were finally on our way. I also felt very glad to have Di with me. Hitching had been terrible so far, but how much worse it would have been without her didn't bear thinking about.

By evening, and a couple of short stops later, the landscape had changed. Not only was it more mountainous, but as I discovered when stepping out at one of these stops, it was also a lot cooler, and wetter. We eventually stopped at a restaurant with a large parking area around 7 or 8 pm, the driver explaining that we couldn't get to Rome the same day; we would be there early the next day, however. We could sleep in the cabin of his truck, he explained, adding that this was one of his regular stops, and he often slept here. Was that alright by us?

It seemed fine to me; more than fine. I marveled at the swiftness of our change of luck. I felt it was almost incredible, but I was in no mood to ponder on it. I just accepted it. This was the way to hitch, I said to Di, as we jumped down from the cabin. "It looks like our luck's changed. Pity he isn't going all the way north to Milan." I felt some regret at not being able to communicate with this amiable, and rather funny character. As we walked into the restaurant, there was much back-slapping, and then the man suddenly grasped one of my hands in his, giving me an intent look.

"He says he's your brother!" Di told me. "I don't feel good about this," she added as we took our seats.

"You better tell him we don't really want to eat," I said to Di, "we have to conserve our funds."

The driver made a gesture that needed no explanation: he would have none of it! The meal was on him, drinks and all. A bottle of red wine arrived before our meal even started, and he made sure the three of us joined in a toast, or several. By the end of our meal, we were on to the second bottle, this time strong port. As the driver repeatedly clinked his glass with mine, Di repeatedly warned me, ominously, "He isn't drinking! You're the only one drinking. He's only on his second glass. Don't get drunk! I don't trust this character."

"Of course he's drinking," I finally responded. "C'mon Di! He's just a really friendly fellow, and he doesn't want to finish the whole bottle himself. You can't refuse the man's hospitality. Have another glass yourself!" I was in a very merry mood by the time we clambered into the cabin of the lorry, and this much I do remember

clearly.

A couple of hours later, according to Di's description, she managed, after several kicks, to wake me up. I was sleeping towards the front of the cabin, while she was between me and the driver. I remembered nothing of it, due to alcohol intake, but have no reason to doubt her word.

She told me: "Wake up! He's got his hands all over me. Do something!"

(According to Di) my response was: "No he hasn't, Di. Go back to sleep..."

A few moments later, she managed to break free from his grasp by herself, and clambered over me, deliberately digging her heel hard into my thigh in the process. I did indeed feel that, and awoke, wondering what was going on. "Get up!" she commanded "Get our things. We're sleeping outside!" I had never seen her so angry.

"But Di," I protested, "it's cold outside."

I looked to the driver for something in the way of explanation. He shrugged his muscular shoulders with such a comical 'I'm innocent!' look that I had to laugh. At that precise moment, Di looked back at me from the door of the vehicle. From her viewpoint, it must have seemed that I was laughing with the driver, rather than at him.

Cold it certainly was. "But Di, what's going on? Why can't we sleep in the truck?" I asked, hauling our luggage with me as I walked behind her from the parking lot to the road. "We can't sleep out here," I added, "it's freezing."

"He just tried to rape me is what's going on! While you told me to go back to sleep! And then you laugh with him like an old friend! What kind of boyfriend are you? I'd rather be cold than raped!"

She was too angry for me to argue with. I told myself I would have to ask her more about all this the next day. But right now, I had the conviction that my head had turned into a heavy block of lead. What I needed now was someplace where I could just rest this heavy block.

I resigned myself to sleeping in the cold. My main concern as I sat down at the roadside resting my back against a small tree, quickly became whether or not Di would still be too angry to let me rest my 'lead block' close to the warmth of her body. Then I noticed that she was not by my side. I looked up to see her walking back towards the restaurant, where the waiter stood silhouetted in the doorway.

After being called back by the gestures of the waiter, I too walked into the restaurant, which was now closed, and in the process of being cleaned up. By that time, Di was already seated and the waiter was telling her, in English, that the driver was a regular, and it wasn't the first time he had tried to force one of his passengers to have sex with him.

I was relieved to finally find someone who could speak English and I was ready to take command of the situation, but Di was obviously still too unhappy with me to let me do so, and uncharacteristically cut in on my explanation of our encounter with the driver. She described me and my reaction to the driver's alleged attempted rape in disparaging terms. I found this description in front of complete strangers very embarrassing and inaccurate, and wanted to 'set her straight' on the facts, but having never seen her in such a bad mood before, I decided not to make a scene in front of the restaurant staff. I resolved that I would reprimand her later for the huge, unflattering exaggerations, made without reference to my description of events.

After serving up snacks for our supper and glasses of water, probably intended to sober me up, the waiter, who was perhaps in his late 20s, offered to let us sleep at his apartment. We accepted gladly.

After closing up, the waiter drove us to his parent's home, where he lived in a basement apartment below theirs. He gave us the use of his whole apartment, explaining that he would sleep upstairs at his parent's place. Having such cleanliness, comfort and warmth instead of the roadside put us both in a better mood, although I noticed Di was not in the mood for conversation of any kind. I also noticed she no longer used the pet name she habitually addressed me by, but rather my full first name, and this remained the case until after we arrived in Rotterdam.

The next day, we awoke up around 8 or 9 o'clock. After a breakfast served up by our waiter host, we were

driven by him to the nearest town, Narni. From there we could take a train to Rome, he told us, which was just over two hours away.

Narni is an ancient hill town in Italy's Umbria at an elevation of about 250 metres. It's main claim to fame is that it lies close to the geographic centre of the country of Italy. We would have no time to see the town itself, beyond the railway station.

At the railway station, we sat in a crowded waiting room. I commented upon our luck running into this waiter, and Di asked me why I didn't think the waiter's favour worth thanking him for? "We did thank him!" I objected.

"No, I thanked him. You said nothing all morning until you finally said 'goodbye'."

"So? We don't both need to thank him, do we? I don't speak Italian."

"He was speaking English, in case you didn't notice. Or are you still drunk?"

At this last insinuation, I felt anger welling up in me. I was in two minds about whether or not to set Diane straight on the events of the previous night right there and then, not to mention her insulting descriptions of my response to the alleged rapist. But I had overheard one of our Italian fellow travellers in the waiting room use an English word in his conversation with his neighbour, and was concerned that if we entered into a heated conversation, we may be understood by other people present. So I let it pass, resolving to sort her out later, but gave her fair warning: "Diana", I began slowly, "I want to talk to you when we get to Rome..."

"We can talk now."

"No, we can't. But when we get to Rome, I want to make sure you understand a few things before we go any further on this trip."

In the eight or nine months I had known Di, I had never witnessed such anger and obstinacy as I had the previous night, not to mention unflattering and untrue descriptions of me in front of complete strangers, and I wanted her to understand there could be no more of the same on the rest of our trip to the UK. But I also wanted to avoid 'making a scene' in public.

"Oh, good," Di responded bluntly, "because there are a few things I want to talk to you about, too..."

What was this, I asked myself? Some kind of challenge? In recent weeks there had been increasing dissonance between myself and my girlfriend. Well, if it was an argument she wanted, I would make her sorry she picked me to have one with! And for the sake of the rest of our journey, I wanted her to understand that I, as the one with more travel experience, and the better judge of character, not to mention the person in charge of funds, was still the one running this show.

After arriving in Rome, we checked into a cheap pension, the first we looked at, and grabbed some quick snacks before heading to the first must-see location: The Colosseum. The Colosseum is one of Europe's most remarkable monuments, not just because of its completeness, but because of the gory purpose it was intended for. It was constructed in the heyday of the Roman Empire, about 70 years after the birth of Christ, and inaugurated in 80 AD. In this arena, gladiators fought for their lives, entertaining huge crowds in the process, and thousands of animals were also killed in the process, some 5,000 in its first 100 days alone. The arena was abandoned after the empire fell in the 6th century. We lingered in the area, enjoying the late afternoon sunshine before taking a meal nearby.

Perhaps it was due to the fact that we felt we had finally arrived somewhere significant, or perhaps it was due to the warm, sunny weather, but I felt much more relaxed than I had over the previous several days, and disinclined to insist on having the "talk" with Di that I had put off in Narni. She probably felt the same.

However, I had a nagging feeling that once back on the road, we would suffer the same fate as we had hitching in Italy so far. I concluded that the country was simply not a good place for hitch-hiking, and I didn't want that fact to drive us deeper into conflict with each other, even if there were glaringly obvious discrepancies of Di's in her understanding of things which begged to be corrected. We had to move fast. We were already in Rome later than planned and it was evident that our funds had been insufficient to begin with. I decided to take a chance, and just cut the rest of Italy out of the equation completely.

That night, back at the pension, I suggested we revamp our plans, and take the train to Lyon instead of trying to hitch. "Why Lyon?" asked Di. "Why not just give up trying to hitch and take the train all the way to

Rotterdam?"

"We don't have the money. I don't think we even have enough to get to Paris. I think Lyon is the best we can hope for, and if we've got enough to get there, I'd say it'll just about wipe us out."

Di looked as despondent as I had ever seen her. I continued. "We can still try to hitch, of course, but look how that's worked out so far. We might spend four days getting to Lyon instead of one, and we'll still be wiped out money-wise by then anyway. And there's a lot of mountainous terrain between here and Lyon; it's going to be a lot colder than here. It's already been colder than I expected."

"And what do we do after getting to Lyon?"

"Just hope that hitching in France is easier than here. If we take the night train tomorrow night and arrive in Lyon the next morning, we may be in Rotterdam by evening of the day after. And we can sleep on the train, so we don't have to pay for a place to stay tomorrow night, either."

"And we get from Lyon to Rotterdam in just one day?"

"Why not? People hitch from Glasgow to London in one day, even much less. It's not much further." She didn't look convinced. "I've heard a lot of good stories about hitch-hiking in France," I lied. "Believe me, Diana, it's going to be a breeze after this place." Without a further word, she went to sleep.

There was one other attraction we could not leave Rome without seeing, not merely a feature of the capital of Italy, but an entirely different country: The Vatican. We agreed to visit this tiny state, without there being any actual consent from Di that we should follow the subsequent travel plan I had suggested.

But, assuming we were now going to be following the new plan, after breakfast the next day, we left for the Roma Termini railway station to see if we could get tickets to Lyon. There was a sleeper that night, we were told, and it would take us about nine hours to get there. I was right about funds: after buying the tickets, we had very little left. It would be an embarrassment even changing what was left into French francs, but one I was willing to suffer.

After returning to the pension, and leaving our bags in the manager's charge until evening, we headed to another country: landlocked within Italy, Vatican City is the world's smallest state. Thankfully, we didn't have to change money to use in this country, although incredibly (or so it seemed to me), we discovered that it did have its own currency, different from regular Italian lire.

The Vatican occupies an area of less than a square kilometre. Nevertheless, being home to the Pope, it has a tremendous influence over other countries and peoples around the world, much more than most countries hundreds of times its size. At times, it has been a part of Italy, but at the time we visited it, it had been independent for over 50 years. It even has its own army!

Saint Peter's Square is unavoidable, and the Sistine Chapel was first on our unspoken list of places to see within the miniature city state. We didn't have the time to even begin to see the many museums, and in the late afternoon, we headed back to the guesthouse for our luggage, now feeling much more like tourists and much less like tramps. Our relationship also seemed to be back on a tenuous good footing; there were smiles and small talk, and observations of local life. I left Rome with some regret at not being able to spend at least several days wandering around, absorbing the city to the full. And, of course, some regret at not being able to spend more freely. We had just a few bread rolls and a couple of vending machine mini pizzas to sustain us on our coming journey.

Another Accidental Friend

Nevertheless, I couldn't help feeling upbeat. As the train thundered through the cold night, I spent a lot of time looking through a train door window as Di slept in the sleeper compartment, even though there was almost nothing to see except blackness and occasional glimpses of the lights of small towns. I was immensely glad, however, to be on the move, putting distance behind ourselves and Italy. I felt empowered at being able to take the train and not depend on the willingness of Italian drivers to give us lifts, and I also felt sure France was going to be much, much better for hitching. We would arrive in Lyon with enough funds to get some bread and soft drinks perhaps. Then, we would have to find the north-bound autoroute, and fast.

Suddenly I remembered that I had a 'friend' in Lyon: Guido was his name, wasn't it? I had met him in the dorm at the Festos Hostel in Athens when I first arrived there in April. We had chatted each evening, sharing my experiences of working and travelling in Israel, and his of travelling in Yugoslavia and Greece. When he left, he had invited me to visit him in Lyon if I was ever there!

I checked in my wallet to see if his address was still in it: it was! His address was still clear on the yellowed paper. I had to think this one over, however. Was it right to drop in on someone I barely knew? Might it be an imposition? Might he have even completely forgotten me by now?

Finally, I made up my mind that we should drop in just to say hello, provided that his address was easy to find and not too far from the station. We didn't have to impose ourselves, but just hint we had experienced a bad time hitching in Italy and ask the fastest way to the Paris-bound autoroute. And this we did.

Luckily, Guido didn't live far from the Gare de le Part-Dieu railway station, where the train from Rome arrived, and he was at home when we called, and not working that day. Even more luckily, he insisted that we stay in Lyon at least one day, as his guests. We couldn't have refused if we had wanted to. When this slim, curly-haired young Frenchman opened the door and saw me, his eyes had genuinely lit up, and that was what decided me that we would not be imposing by taking him up on his offer. He took us on two trips of the city, one to the main sights in the afternoon, and another along with a friend of his in the evening, which took in some of the oldest parts of town. However, the thing that left the deepest impression on me was that some parts of town seemed to be almost entirely populated by north Africans immigrants. I reflected that they seemed to occupy a place in French society overall somewhat akin to south Asians in the UK. Guido insisted on treating us to a meal in a very cosmopolitan part of town and we enjoyed some 'travel talk', with us relating the events of our past half year in Greece, and Guido telling us of his recent travels in Mexico. It seemed we had more to talk about than we had time to, and Guido still had more overseas travels planned.

After breakfast the next morning, the friend of Guido's whom we had met the previous day drove us to a location within a very short walk of the north-bound autoroute.

On the Road(side) Again

After Guido's hospitality, I had expected Diane to be in a good mood, as I was. I thought she would have been grateful that I had come up with this ace that I had kept up my sleeve. But she wasn't. She had a few criticisms of the way I had seemed to take advantage of Guido's hospitality, eating and drinking to my heart's content, and not thanking him for anything. I pointed out that she had thanked him for both of us, and we didn't need to make ourselves seem grovelling.

"You could at least have said 'thanks' when he bought beers for you. He didn't have to, you know!"

"I did say thanks!" I insisted.

"No, you didn't. You just said 'cheers', and downed them like water. You didn't thank him."

"Cheers means thanks," I contended, "in case you didn't know?"

"No, it doesn't. Cheers means cheers, when you're drinking. Do you think Guido understands English slang?"

"Cheers isn't slang, and I'm sure he did understand. Anyway, it doesn't bloody matter whether he understood or not, Di. What's that got to do with anything? All that matters is that we're here, well on our way to Rotterdam, thanks to my French friend."

Our conversation quickly descended into argument. Di made some comments about my behaviour mattering to her whether it mattered to anyone else or not, and delivered some blistering criticisms of my conduct on the trip so far. "It's funny," she concluded, "we've been together for so many months, and yet I feel I'm only just getting to know the real you now. I suppose I should be glad of that, at least."

I snorted in derision, but decided not to be drawn further into the argument and simply ignored her further comments which petered off after a few minutes. We stood at the side of the autoroute, separated by a deliberate space of about 10 paces. This was perhaps the only thing that enabled me to ignore her criticisms:

it struck me that oncoming vehicles would perhaps not realise we were together, and even if they did, and they stopped for her, by the time they had actually come to a complete halt, they would probably be closer to me. It would seem as if they had stopped for me, not her, whether they had or not. I would take advantage of that to put her back in her place!

However, that didn't happen. Around noon, after over three hours of fruitless hitching, Di made the action of finally taking a few steps in my direction, which was the first recognition of my existence in several hours. She smiled as she approached, and I took that as a good sign of reconciliation. However, she then repeated something I had said to her in Rome, but in a farcical approximation of my voice: "I've heard a lot of good stories about hitching in France, Di"

I was knocked aback. I had assumed she was ready to sue for peace. "Don't blame me if they weren't all true!" I finally retorted.

I was beginning to wonder how such bad luck could even be possible. I was hitching with the same girl I had hitched with on the nearly empty roads of the Peloponnese peninsula less than two months previously, when almost every vehicle we encountered had stopped. Now, it was even worse than in Italy. Literally hundreds of vehicles had passed us by over a period of just more than three hours, and not one of them had stopped.

It would be nearly another four more hours before a sleek and sporty Italian sedan pulled over. I had been sitting on my shoulder bag, dozing, when Di called me. I clambered in eagerly, pleased to learn that the young, English-speaking driver was travelling all the way to Paris. I shared the cramped rear seats with his enormous dog while Di sat in the front. About halfway to Paris, he stopped at a service station. We waited patiently for him to have a meal there, and walk his dog, explaining that we had eaten a late lunch just prior to coming out to the autoroute. In fact, I felt so hungry I almost wanted to suggest that if his meal had any leftovers, I would love to have them! At one point on the way to Paris, he asked how we found hitching in France? I felt he would think there had to be something wrong with us which he hadn't noticed if I revealed that we had waited eight hours for a lift, so I replied: "Good, but not as good as I thought," then added, "I had heard some very good stories about hitching on the autoroutes of France, although some people don't believe them!"

Last Train from Paris

Finally, we reached the southern outskirts of the capital. After explaining to the driver that we hoped to continue travelling north by rail the same day, he helpfully dropped us off on the most convenient road he could think of for catching a bus to the Gare du Nord railway station. From that spot, without the spare cash for the bus fares, we walked all the way to the other side of Paris, Di carrying her backpack, me with my shoulder bag slung over one aching shoulder after another.

"That's the Gare du Nord, Di," I said as the railway station finally came into view, trying to adopt an upbeat tone and elicit her travel interest. "It's the busiest railway station in Europe and one of the busiest in the world. Long distance trains all over north-west Europe from here".

"Yeh, well we're not going to be going very far from it, are we? Is this where we're going to sleep?"

"No, it isn't. We'll go as far as we can, Di, in the direction of Belgium."

The station was indeed the place we needed to get to. I wanted to spend the last of our French franc coins to get as far north as possible, which was also why we couldn't use the money on local city transport, and thus had to walk several miles across Paris.

We took the last local train as far north of Paris as it went, and travelled far beyond our paid-for destination. I figured, what the hell? We could claim we had dozed off and missed our stop; they couldn't very well send us back - this was the last train. We looked for a way off the platform without going through a ticket check. However, as it happened, nobody was taking tickets at this small station anyway, so we walked straight out of it. We didn't have a single franc left by this time, and of course, had nothing left to eat and nothing to drink. We couldn't sleep in the locked-up waiting room of the station, but the open entrance area had benches on both sides. Fortunately, the toilets were also accessible from outside the station.

A man we assumed to be the station master left about half an hour later, making some comment I didn't

understand as he passed us. 'Non capisco' I replied with a shrug.

The next morning, we walked about five kilometres from the railway station to a north-bound autoroute slip-road and stood there waiting for a lift.

"Lucky we have your French language skills, Di," I said, trying to sound upbeat. "I'd be lost by myself."

"You're not kidding," she replied. "And why do you keep saying 'Non capisco' every time anybody speaks to you?"

"Well, sorry, but I don't understand."

"'Non capisco' is Italian. Are you Italian? Surely even you must know the French for 'I don't understand' is 'Je ne comprends pas'?"

"Oh, yes, now you mention it. I guess I haven't adapted to being in France yet; still thinking I'm in Italy."

"We're nearly in fucking Belgium, and you're still in Italy with your rapist friend!" came Di's response. She rarely swore, and I had to take that as a measure of the toll our overland trip had taken on her by this time.

"My what?! Sorry, I'm just a bit slow to respond, Di, that's all."

"You're slow to respond, alright. I can't think of any male friend I know who would just lie there while someone rapes his girlfriend."

"He didn't rape you!"

"He would have if I hadn't broken free and kicked you awake."

"Sorry, Di. I understand; I can see that you're upset. It's been a hard trip, I know." I didn't want another confrontation, and I didn't have any energy left for one anyway.

"Oh, really? I would never have guessed. And don't keep saying 'sorry', like you've just discovered some new word, and you can't leave it alone. You never said sorry before for anything, and now you sound like a broken tape recorder. Just do something positive and useful for a change."

As the only thing I could think of saying was 'Sorry, Di', I remained silent. The barrage continued: Why did I keep calling her Diana when her name was Diane? What kind of idiot couldn't even remember his own girlfriend's name? Why did I believe anything anybody else told me and ignore everything she told me?

"It's been a hard trip, Di," I repeated, "I don't blame you for feeling a bit pissed-off."

"Well, I'm glad we took this trip, even if it has been hard. Now, I feel I finally know you. I don't think we have a future together, that's something I'm pretty sure of now, anyway. When we finally get back to England, I think you should go back to Leeds."

I felt that statement like an invisible dagger, even though on one level I had long been expecting it. Before I even left the UK the previous year, I had thought that if I were lucky enough to find a girlfriend, she would be sure to ditch me as soon as we got back to England; I had never had any luck with girls before I left the UK. At the time we left Athens, I had still thought it likely that Di would leave me sooner or later - and probably sooner rather than later - but I believed I was in with a chance of working to persuade her not to dump me until long after we got back to London.

I had thought our relationship could still be saved if she grew attached to me over the months, as seemed to be the case. However, our journey across Europe seemed to have put paid to that; it looked like the parting announcement had been brought forward many months, to before we even arrived back in the UK.

And the UK was certainly now almost within reach. No matter how bad things were, we were obviously going to get there, one way or another. I felt that over the extent of this journey I had gone from being the man who was running the trip to being no more than some unwanted piece of very heavy baggage.

"I don't want to go back to Leeds anymore," I told Di, trying hard to contain myself. "I want to live in London, with you." I was a master of not showing my emotions, but Di's statement that we didn't have a future

together tested even my abilities. The problem was, I could barely even stand the thought of being without her. I didn't want to go back to my former life, under any conditions.

But Di was adamant. "I want to live by myself. If you don't want to go back to Leeds, that's your choice; you can go wherever you like. I'm sure you can find a nice little motorway slip-road somewhere to sleep at the side of."

My mind replayed the events of the past seven or eight days as we walked out the little station forecourt and into the town. Athens seemed like a lifetime ago. Had this parting announcement come anytime before taking the train to Lyon, I would have been - just about - able to get back to Athens alone. But now, I didn't have a penny left. And even if I had the money, I asked myself, would I go back now? We had come too far. The scenery was beginning to look very similar to that of southern England; I felt I had to go all the way now; I was almost there.

"See how you feel after we get back to England, Di." I suggested, trying to put the subject to rest. But inwardly I cursed myself for leaving the warmth and comfort of Athens, knowing inside something like this was bound to happen. If I had to be alone, how much better to be alone in Greece than in cold, wet, expensive north-west Europe.

Di asked a local for directions to the autoroute north, and we walked for about an hour before reaching the slip-road. I felt thoroughly exhausted by this time and knew that Di felt the same; we were almost too weak to hitch.

Again, the entire morning passed without a lift. At one point, Di sat down wearily on her blue backpack, and I took over putting my thumb out. "If we were in Paris, we could go to the British consulate for help," I pointed out. It was just an idea, and I put it out to see what Di thought of it.

"We- are- not- in- Paris", Di replied, stretching out the words. "What do you think we should do, walk all the way back? It must be at least 20 miles away." I noticed tears in her eyes. Finally, they began to flow, and she just sat there on her backpack, crying profusely.

I stood looking at her for some moments, wondering what to do. And then I noticed that a car had pulled up, only a few metres away, and was waiting for us. I knew it couldn't stay on the slip-road for long, so I just ran to it, and Di followed. The driver was a French businessman, heading for Brussels, where he dropped us off in the north of the city, at the northbound A12, heading in the direction of Antwerp.

I could see the distinctive stainless steel Atomium building a couple of kilometres away, with its bizarre shape of nine spheres connected so that the whole forms the shape of a unit cell of an iron crystal. Determined to make the most of a bad trip, I was about to point it out to Di to elicit her interest when another car stopped, the driver asking, in Dutch, if we spoke Dutch? I nodded, smiled, got in, then told him, no, only English! He seemed just as glad to speak English, as it happened. I had picked up a few words of the Dutch language from Dutch volunteers at my first kibbutz, though not enough to hold a conversation.

The driver, a slim, chain-smoking Belgian man in his early 30s seemed keen for conversation to alleviate the boredom of his business travel to the capital. He asked where we were coming from? From Athens, I told him.

"Woow! That's a long way. And now you're almost at the end of the your journey, soon be back in England, I guess."

"Oh, we're already at the end of our journey", Di put in.

"Well, there are a few things worth seeing in Belgium and Holland," he countered. "Maybe not so interesting as Greece, but still worth a few days, I think..."

"Oh, we're running a little short of time," I explained.

"Among other things," Di added. She seemed to be perking up, even if her comments were not entirely positive.

We were now in the Dutch-speaking north of the country. Dirty, tired, and very hungry, but confident that we would be in Rotterdam very shortly. And within minutes of getting off in Antwerp, the Dutch driver of a ramshackle van painted head to tail with a psychedelic scene stopped to offer a lift. Yes, he confirmed, he

was also going Rotterdam, and even dropped us off just one street from the one in which our kibbutz friend Willeke lived, in Kralingen district, in the city's north. "The street's somewhere round here," the driver shrugged, "can't remember exactly where."

"That's fine," I told the driver, "anywhere round here will be OK; thanks a lot for all your help." We were on the corner of an adjacent street.

Re-entry

Willeke was - thankfully - at her home, and she broke into a joyous smile at seeing us at her doorway, hugging us both before virtually dragging us into the house. The large, 3-storey house she lived in was shared with her elder sister Hennie, and Willem, a student lodger. Hans-Peter, Willeke's Swiss boyfriend, who was another ex-Kibbutz Magen volunteer, was also there. And there was someone else there from Kibbutz Magen, an ethnic Indian girl from north London named Meena. As Willeke introduced her to me, I felt almost weak at the knees. She looked ravishing, dressed in warm winter woollens that couldn't hide her fine figure. She smiled demurely as we were introduced, but at one point our eyes met, and on some etheric level, some kind of connection instantly occurred between us, something inexplicable, and yet profoundly understood by both of us.

"Well!" Willeke declared, apparently deliberately to break the spell, "you and Di must be exhausted after your long overland trip. Are you up to going out for a drink and something to eat, or would you like to just get some rest?"

"Oh, I'll be fine without a rest!" I replied. "If I can get a shower first, I'd love to go out for a drink and something to eat. I think we both need food more than sleep", I laughed. "It's been a pretty hard trip, and as Di will tell you, we haven't had a whole lot to eat as we've sort of run out of funds!" I thought it best to point out from the outset that we didn't have a penny left between us.

Willeke's house had been host to a whole bunch of ex-Kibbutz Magen visitors, especially at the time of her birthday in late September, and they had all been made to feel just as welcome as ourselves. Having spent a long time on the kibbutz, she had the dubious good fortune of being acquainted with a very large number of volunteers, some of whom were mutually unacquainted and only met for the first time at Willeke's place. Meena and I were good examples of this. She had left the kibbutz by the time I arrived, but after travelling around Israel for a week or two, she returned to stay as a guest for a couple of days before going back to England. So I had seen this attractive ethnic south Asian at that time, but never spoken to her and knew nothing about her beyond her name, which Willeke had mentioned to me once or twice.

After the supreme comfort of hot showers and hot meals at Willeke's home, Di and I joined her, Hans-Peter, and Meena for drinks at a couple of local bars. The effect of the sudden re-entry into clean and civilised life was just as obvious on Diane as it was on myself. She was very quickly, once again, her familiar, positive and cheerful self. Hans-Peter was an offbeat, beatnik type of character, with a shoulder-length mass of hair that brought the 1970s pop star Marc Bolan to mind, and a marijuana habit; in short, a long way from the stereotype of a Swiss national. That evening, and over the following couple of days, I kept most of my conversation between me and him. I didn't want to damage the delicate unspoken truce between Di and myself and I hardly dared to speak to Meena, for fear of not being able to wrench my attention away. The next day, both Di and I contacted our parents for the financial help we needed to complete the final part of our trip; the boat trip to England, and in my case, the train journey and boat journey to the Isle of Man as well. After all, we were now living at Willeke's expense, and any money from the UK would necessarily take at least a day or two to get to us.

Di left as soon as her money, an international money order, arrived by post. She was keen to get back home. My financial bail-out didn't arrive so quickly, and even when it did, I lacked the motivation to rush back to the UK. There were a couple of Dutch friends from the kibbutz I wanted to visit, and I was enjoying the comfort of Willeke's home too much to rush back to the uncertainty of life in the UK again. I was, perhaps, indulging in that comfort. But there was also something else, or someone else, that kept me from departing too quickly.

As far as Meena, Willem, and anyone else was concerned, we had arrived as 'Di and Alix'. And now the Di half had left, and there was only Alix. There was no mention, as far as I could tell, of how close our relationship had been. And Di had said nothing either to indicate that we had now 'broken up'; I knew she didn't want everyone to know about it.

I realised also that there was a beautiful possibility opening up that may help me avoid returning to a lonely life in some bed-sit room in the UK. Meena was younger than me at only 19, and there was no mention of a boyfriend in the UK or anywhere else. And she was sleeping in the same house, in a spare room just upstairs from the living room where I slept on the sofa.

As soon as my money did arrive, also by international money order, I asked Willeke if there was shoe shop nearby? My trainers were beginning to come apart, and I realised they probably wouldn't last the journey back to the UK. She suggested that I go into the city with Meena, who was on her day off from the Indian restaurant in The Hague, where she was getting work experience. She had been living in Rotterdam several weeks by now and seemed more than willing to show me around.

We walked around the city centre looking for suitable sports shoes, chatting about Kibbutz Magen, living and travelling in Israel and elsewhere in the region, and about her life in London, which was the topic I found the most interesting. "At first, I thought this was the last thing I wanted to do", Meena told me in reference to learning the ins and outs of running a restaurant. "I mean, y'know, my parents are like real Indians; they grew up there. But I'm English, I'm not Indian." She smiled at me, and added: "You probably know more about India than I do!"

"Oh, I wouldn't bet on it." I told her, realising that perhaps she was crediting me with more travel experience than I actually had. Our terrible overland trip from Greece had apparently given Di and me the status of tough, intrepid travellers, even though our fellow kibbutz volunteers had all been around quite a bit themselves.

"But then, I thought, 'why not'?" Meena continued. "My dad's going to be opening his fourth restaurant soon, whether I'm in on it or not, and I can learn the basics from the Patel's place in The Hague - they're friends of my parents from the same city in India as my parents grew up - and by the time I go back at Christmas, I'll have a better idea of whether I want to run a restaurant or not. And what's more, I can stay at Willeke's for the couple of months I spend here. She wouldn't let me pay for my stay even if I insisted, so it's great; I get pay which I don't deserve for my help at the restaurant and have nothing to spend it on!"

After buying my shoes, I noted that it was nearly lunch-time: did she want to get a bite to eat? We opted for just a snack and a drink in the nearest cafe, a very cosy-looking, elaborately decorated establishment which was already busy with local office workers, and had only a small corner table available, with stools rather than chairs. We both ordered pancakes - a Dutch speciality - and to my mild surprise, Meena ordered a beer, like myself.

"You definitely aren't Indian", I commented. "I bet the average good Indian girl doesn't drink beer!"

She laughed easily. I was reflecting on how strangely comfortable I felt when I was with Meena, when I realised that my right foot had somehow become trapped between her foot and a leg of her stool, and tried to extract it. "Oh, sorry Alix!", she commented as she removed her foot to allow me to get my foot out, "I didn't mean to trap you!"

"Oh, I can think of worse places to be trapped..." I told her, and for only the second time, our eyes locked. We both laughed, and I'm sure we both knew there and then that we weren't in town just to buy a pair of shoes. I was attracted to her like a magnet. That was nothing remarkable; I had been attracted to plenty of girls before who wouldn't give me the time of day. But, this time, it seemed the attraction was mutual.

I asked her if she had thought about travelling a little bit around the Netherlands while she was there? She had. But Willeke, who worked as a nurse at a local hospital, didn't have enough free time to accompany her. "I'm too lazy to travel by myself".

"Well, I have time!" I suggested.

"Oh, that's great! I was hoping you would be able to go with me!"

I could hardly believe my luck. It was almost as if Meena and I were having the same thoughts, and we both had the same unspoken hopes. I certainly was not going to have to struggle to get to know her.

"Well, actually, I was hoping that you would let me go with you", I laughed. "You must have read my mind!"

Meena made some comment about mind-reading, and I told her about the alleged psychic I had met just

before I left Athens. "He was the real thing, that's for sure! He could just, y'know, look at you, and he would know all sorts of things about you, just by intuition. He told me, for example, that I had great plans - brilliant plans even - but that if I wanted them to happen, I had to work just that little bit harder on carrying them out, and then everything would, y'know, just sort of fall into place..."

"That's exactly how I feel", Meena told me, beaming, "everything's just falling to place!"

By the time we walked out of that cafe, I was having trouble keeping my feet on the ground. I can't remember what we talked about on our way to the metro station to take a subway train to the nearest station to Willeke's house. But I do remember that by the time we arrived on the platform, a train had just left, and there was nobody left on the platform.

"There's no-one here..." I commented. She turned to me, and without another word, we kissed. And we were still kissing when the next train arrived, on our fourth or fifth session. And that's how everything was with Meena; we understood each other so well by intuition that we barely needed to talk. I realised that meeting her was something of monumental significance in my life; it changed everything for both of us.

Over the following several days, we visited three of our fellow Kibbutz Magen volunteers, one in Utrecht to the east, one in Amsterdam, and one in Groningen, in the north of the country. We slept at their places, and were careful throughout not to give these mutually acquainted people any impression that we were anything more than the friends we all were. But every moment we were out of sight of people we knew, we were back in each other's arms. And that's how my last several days in Rotterdam were spend thereafter.

We made tentative plans for the next year. As soon as the New Year holidays were over, I would leave my parent's house for London, and find work and accommodation somewhere close to where Meena lived with her parents in Camden Town. Her parents would never let her openly live with her boyfriend, but in practice we would spend as much time as we could together short of living together. That was enough for me. By the time I came to leave for England, I was only sorry I wouldn't see Meena for several weeks; I was no longer reluctant to return to the UK. I was happier than I could have imagined possible towards the end of my overland trip with Diane, less than two weeks previously.

But, significantly, Di had phoned Willeke to find out the time of my boat and connecting train to London, and claimed she was going to meet me.

"Welcome Home!"

I dozed for the first hour or two on the ferry to Felixstowe, then took a walk around the boat for the refreshingly cold, salty sea breezes. before returning to the same seat in the warm lounge. I reflected on how reading had been such a major part of my life before I met Di. Then, I would never have had taken a train or a ferry without a paperback to keep me company. And now I hadn't read a novel for nearly a year! That's how much Di, and travel, had changed my life. Seeing a Dutch man, apparently in his 40s, reading an adult comic book a couple of seats from me, I also reflected on cultural differences. For most people I knew in the UK, reading comics was a pass-time reserved for children, and when I thought of my what my 'old school' disciplinarian father would have thought of the idea of a middle-aged man reading comics, I laughed involuntarily, which elicited a curious glance from the Dutch man.

If such cultural differences existed between places as close as England and the Netherlands - and I now knew much of the even larger cultural differences between the UK and the places I had spent the last 15 months or so - then how much greater the cultural differences between India and the UK had to be! Little wonder then, that Meena's parents would never accept their daughter living with her English boyfriend, even though they had to be relatively Anglicised or Westernised Indians to even have emigrated to Britain in the first place. I felt that I had barely begun to learn about the many and varied different cultures of the world, and hoped I could continue learning.

These were the thoughts that occupied my mind on the ferry. But there was another one: why had Di told Willeke she would meet me at Liverpool Street railway station? Did she really plan to do so? What for? Had she decided that despite breaking up, we should still stay friends? Or was it something Di just said to Willeke because she didn't want all our mutual friends to know, through Willeke, about our break-up?

I wondered about the chances or her really being at Liverpool Street when I arrived? If she was, surely she

would let me stay the night at her parent's home, where I assumed she was staying, before I headed north. If not, there was always that cheap hotel near Victoria Station I had stayed at on my first foray to London looking for work several years previously. What was the name of the place, I asked myself? Ah, yes, The Star. And if The Star didn't have any rooms, the large hostel I had stayed at in Holland Park on my second trip to London was certain to have a bunk bed.

Two hours later, I was disembarking from the train from Felixstowe to London's Liverpool Street.

As I approached the end of the platform, I noticed two young women waiting to meet someone. Closing in, I suddenly realised that one of them was Di! Dressed in a dark mid-length dress, stockings and high heels, and a spotlessly white jacket, she smiled at me as she walked the last few paces between us before I could, pulled me towards her and kissed me on the cheek. "Welcome home, Ali!" she told me in a tone that left no room for doubt that she meant it. She was even wearing perfume! I was dumbfounded. I had never seen her like this.

"Well, don't look so surprised that your girlfriend comes to meet you at the station," the other, older woman said. "It's quite normal here, you know!"

"This is Alison, my sister," Di told me as her sister stepped forward and pecked me on the cheek. "We can live at her house in Wimbledon for the time being."

Alison was perhaps eight or nine years older than Di, and blond rather than dark-haired, although I didn't know if that was natural. But she had the same familiar smile, which might have put me at ease in different circumstances. She drove us to her home in Wimbledon in her Mini, asking questions all the way about some of the adventures Di had obviously told her of. She also made it clear we could both stay with her as long as we liked, and asked me if I had thought about what kind of work I would be looking for in London?

"Oh. Oh, I haven't thought much about it, yet. There's only a few weeks before Christmas, so I had in fact been thinking of just going straight to my parents home in the Isle of Man."

"Oh, but you must stay at least a week or so before you go to your parent's place," Alison told me. "Di's not going to let you get away as easily as that after all this waiting!" she added. I could see the smile on Alison's face in the driver's mirror as Di pulled me towards her by the elbow and gave me another kiss on the cheek. Next to Di, dressed in her best, I felt very rough in my old green bomber jacket and faded blue jeans. But that wasn't the only reason I felt dirty. I had to tell Di as soon as possible that things had changed now. But how?

Di had already told me about Alison. She was married to Greg, who worked as a 'road tour manager' for a couple of British rock stars who had once belonged to the same band but were now big names in their own right, and thus toured separately, which kept Greg pretty busy. Alison's semi-detached home down at the end of a quiet Wimbledon avenue was attractive and comfortable, and would obviously seem too large for one person while her husband was on tour, so she was happy to give one room to Di and me.

After I had unpacked and taken a shower, Alison and I sat in the living room chatting about her husband's work while Di made coffees for the three of us in the kitchen at the back of the house.

Suddenly, Alison changed the subject: "Di was telling me about some of the difficulties you two had in Greece, like that hotel manager who didn't pay you, as well as the terrible trip you had back. We both agreed that things like that bring a couple closer together. I can tell you", she smiled reassuringly, "Di really appreciates you now!" She then told me the story of a couple she knew who had nearly broken up due to difficulties they encountered travelling in central America, but who were now absolutely inseparable.

Obviously, Di had made some re-assessments of my character since her return to the UK, and I couldn't help but feel a bit flattered by that, especially after all our disagreements. Nevertheless, I felt I had to clarify to Diane as soon as possible how things had changed, to avoid misunderstandings and possible recriminations that I had been anything less than 100% honest with her. This urgent business would not wait a single day.

Once Alison had gone upstairs to bed, I was left alone with Di. I told her: "Di, there's something I want to talk to you about..."

Di had suddenly remembered that she had a present for me; a pair of jeans and a cassette of the Human League's 1981 album, Dare. I was momentarily lost for words. She had obviously remembered that I had commented once in Israel that I liked that particular style and brand of jeans, and also that I had commented once while in Greece, that I "would have to buy their album" when I got a chance, in reference to the Human

League, a British band with a very popular song, even in Greece, in 1982.

"Di", I repeated, putting the presents aside, "there's something, er, important, that I kind of want to, sort of, talk to you about..."

She came over to me, clasped her hands together behind my neck, and asked what it was, addressing me for the first time since we had left Greece by the pet name she had given me.

"It's about Meena..."

There was no sign of recognition of the nature of the matter in Di's smiling eyes. "It's about Meena, Di..." I repeated. I heaved a sigh, resolving to continue. "Meena and I...Meena and I are now close, very close..."

Suddenly the smile dropped from Di's face. Then her arms dropped, and she took a couple of steps backwards, her eyes locked onto mine.

"No!" she exclaimed. "No, no, no! No, you couldn't! No, you couldn't!"

"C'mon Di, you told me we were finished. Of course I was attracted to Meena; she's a very attractive woman!"

But Di's legs had given way and she was now sobbing, on the floor, repeating the question, "How *could* you?" over and over again.

I was mortally afraid Alison would hear us. I moved to pick Di up and sit her on the sofa, and I told her we were still friends and always would be. But there didn't seem to be any energy in her at all, even when she tried to push me away, telling me not to touch her, and no recognition that she was even still hearing me.

A Chat in the Park

Whether Alison had overheard us or not I couldn't be sure, but the next morning it would have been obvious to anyone present that things were not all as they should have been. Di's eyes were still red from crying, and over the following several days, she would cry again and again, without warning, which made keeping the whole affair under wraps very difficult

Late on the morning of my first full day in London, Di suggested we "go for a walk", though I realised she really meant go for a talk, to discuss the things we couldn't talk about in front of her sister. We walked to the common, which was less than 10 minutes walk away.

Taking a park bench, with Di sitting to my left, I commented with a sweep of my right arm: "So! This is the famous Wimbledon Common. Who knows, Di, maybe we'll see a womble..." I was referring to an imaginary animal from a childrens' TV show of the 1970s, ostensibly set on the common. But Di, who had turned towards me and was regarding me coolly without touching, was in no mood for such banter. "How many times did you fuck her, Alix?"

"What?! God, Di, what..." I was taken aback by her bluntness.

"You heard. How many times did you fuck her on your shagging trip around Holland? Once a day? Ten times a day?" Then, her voice softened. In a tone of exaggerated gentleness and concern, Di continued: "Oh, I *am* sorry. How many times did the two of you make love? That's what you would have called it, isn't it?"

"It isn't like that, Di. Meena comes from a very conservative Indian family background. Her parents would never agree to sex before marriage."

"You weren't shagging her parents, were you? Do you really expect me to believe you didn't have your way with her?"

"I'm just telling you the way things are. I've never lied to you before; it's up to you whether you believe me or not."

After a pause, Di continued, apparently understanding that I was indeed telling the truth: "You cannot be serious...if that's true, it's even worse...my boyfriend left me for a chicken curry! Is that all I'm worth to you,

after all we've been through together? A chicken curry?"

"Oh, come on Di, what are talking about, a chicken curry? Be serious."

But she was being serious, all too serious: the tears were flowing again. I felt intensely embarrassed, and hoped nobody had noticed. My fear was that they may mistakenly presume that I was somehow responsible for the upset. Thankfully, there were few people on the common on that cool and blustery morning.

"Di, I'm sorry, but I thought you had ditched me. You did tell me in France that we had no future together..."

"That was the travel! That was our awful overland trip talking, not me! How could you think I meant that, after everything we've been through together?"

I pulled Di towards me; this time she didn't resist. "When do you next plan to see her?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know; you know me, I live from day to day..."

She repeated the same question in exactly the same tone of voice. She wasn't going to let me get away with that.

"I suppose we may meet up sometime early in the new year..."

"Is that what you said to her at the Hook of Holland ferry terminal when you kissed goodbye - 'I suppose we may meet up sometime early next year'? I don't believe that."

I decided to stand my ground. "Yeh, I did say something like that. Willeke and Hans-Peter were there too. Meena didn't want anyone to know about us."

"I'm not surprised. So, it was just a dirty little secret between the two of you? Well, not for much longer..."

I hoped she didn't intend to let her sister know about Meena; I thought that would damage her impression of me beyond repair, and I certainly didn't want to look for another place to stay that very same day. "Di, I'm sorry but all this has taken me by surprise. I need some time alone to think things over. I haven't had any time alone for 15 months now..." This was certainly the truth.

We agreed to maintain the appearance of no change in our relationship, whether towards her family, travel industry friends she had known from her previous job, or those we had met during our time in Israel and Greece. Di did not want people to know that, as she put it, her boyfriend had left her for the first available female as soon as we had spent more than a couple of days apart. And so, later that day, I went to meet her parents at their home in Clapham in my role as their daughter's boyfriend and suitor. And a few days later, we travelled to Nottingham, to meet up with Rupert, the former kibbutz volunteer friend we had shared our apartment in Athens with, and who I had worked with on the yachts outside Athens throughout the summer.

We took the National Express bus there from London. Perhaps because of our masquerade, or perhaps because I had said that I needed time to think things over - which meant that *maybe* I would put the Meena episode behind me - Di cheered up considerably during these last couple of days.

We were only in Nottingham for the one night; I crashed out in Rupert's room on the campus, while some friends of his put Di up in shared digs outside the university grounds.

On that evening, we met Ru and some of his classmates for drinks in one of the on-campus bars. He claimed there were 22 bars on the university grounds. Rather than having a drink at each of the 22 bars, we had about 22 drinks in the one we were in. I was relieved to hear that Rupert had experienced almost as difficult a time re-adapting to life in the UK as I was having.

He related his return to the UK. Prior to getting back to England, he had decided that a person's twenties were a time to be spent travelling, not studying or carving out a career. On the way back from Greece, he decided he would just pay his parents a quick visit for a couple of days, before heading back out to our place in Athens. His studies, and his career, could wait till his thirties.

"My old man nearly burst a blood vessel," Rupert told me. "I was given the choice to come to Nottingham Uni immediately, and get on with my studies, or never darken the family doorway again! Most people wouldn't believe he would disown his son, but I know he's a stubborn old bastard, so I gave way in the end!"

I had by now made up my mind definitely to postpone looking for work until the new year. The next morning, we left the university for the bus station so I could take the bus to Leeds, and Di the bus back to London. Waiting for Di's bus, which was first to leave, with no forethought and almost as if beyond my volition, I said to her: "Di...thanks for being my girlfriend."

She looked at me in mild surprise at my unexpected and uncharacteristic statement. "What a strange thing to say!" She gave me a mock punch. "I'm still your girlfriend, you know? I'll always be your girlfriend." She was smiling, but I think she knew inside it was finally over. The tears were just behind her eyes once again. Station staff were calling for her bus. One last hug and she was gone. And that was the last I ever saw of her, though it would take me years to get over her.

On the bus back to Leeds, I thought this strange, tangled and tumultuous relationship over. I could not help but love Di, after, as she put it, all we had been through together. But I knew it was best for both of us that I put her behind me. At the end of the day, I told myself, everybody wanted to live in happiness and harmony with their 'other half'. That's what life was all about, I reasoned, and that's what I had with Meena. In contrast to all the conflicts and disagreements I had endured with Di in the last weeks of our relationship, I could not even conceive of anything approaching a disagreement with Meena. Our personalities were 100% compatible. I had never put any stock in astrology, but these circumstances made me wonder: our birthdays were just two days apart, while there was over four months between my birthday and Di's.

Finally, I was back where all my travels had started: the Headingley district of Leeds, a lively university campus overspill area in the city's north-west. But this time I was only staying a couple of days, with my sister and brother-in-law. My lonely life in that city was definitely a thing of the past. After Leeds, I took a train to the Irish Sea coastal town of Heysham, and from there, the ferry to the Isle of Man, where I spent Christmas and New Year at my parent's home.

I didn't bother telling my parents, or anyone else I knew there, about Di or about Meena. As far as Di was concerned, in my assessment, that was all in the past, so there was no point in mentioning her. As for Meena, she was my future, and I wanted to have something more concrete than a plan to live together – or as close together as possible - before telling my family about her. Di phoned regularly, but after the first call, I asked my mother to tell her I was out. In reality, there was nothing for me to think over about my relationship with Meena: my mind was made up. I even imagined that in the not-too-distant future we may run a restaurant together.

A New Year and a New Start

I returned to London on the third day of the New Year, 1983; I couldn't wait to get started on my new life in the capital, and my parents understood this. And, of course, I couldn't wait to see my girlfriend, which was something only I understood. I knew from phone calls I had made to her family home in Camden Town that Meena was already back in England, but I hadn't managed to catch her at home, and so there was no way to relay my move to London to her. I figured that I would just have to keep calling until such a time as I caught her in.

I stayed once again at the large Holland Park hostel I had previously stayed at, but this time for just two nights. Finding work and a place to live went even more swiftly and smoothly than I could have hoped for. My new, tiny studio flat was located in the west London district of Ealing, and my work as a warehouse assistant was at a large furniture store in Richmond-upon-Thames, an upmarket district in the south-west of London. Ealing was not an ideal location, but it would do in the short term. From my amiable, talkative landlady, who lived a street away, I learnt the fastest bus and tube routes to Camden, and was relieved to discover the journey wouldn't take me more than 40 minutes. The job was in precisely the opposite direction; I knew that once I found a place closer to Meena's home I would have to give it up, but - like the flat - it would suffice in the short-term.

However, as the days went by, I began to feel troubled by the fact that I could only ever speak to Meena's younger sister on the phone. Meena herself was never home.

I knew that Meena didn't want to alert her conservatively-minded family to the reality of our relationship, so as someone who was supposedly merely a friend from the kibbutz she had stayed on, it would seem unusual for me to call her every day, and I refrained from doing so. But after over two full weeks in London, and at

least half a dozen fruitless phone calls since arriving there, I decided I had to seek her out directly. The day I made that decision was an unusually balmy Saturday morning in a very cold winter. I worked only five days a week. I had nothing else to do anyway, I told myself, so I had every excuse to drop in at her parent's restaurant to say hello, if she was there, and no excuse not to. And if she wasn't there, at least I could then be 100% sure that she would know I was looking for her.

Meena had not even told me the address of the restaurant, just its name and the street it was located in, yet I found it very quickly. It was not yet 11 am when I found it, but the restaurant appeared to be open. After seeing the establishment from the other side of the street, I stood leaning against the wall of a bookstore, reading - or appearing to read, with a feigned nonchalance - a national daily newspaper I had just picked up in the same store. I felt as if I were playing the stereotyped role of a typical spy, trying not to attract attention, while taking in everything that happens around himself. But in truth, I was simply too nervous to storm straight in to Meena's restaurant and ask if she was there. My heart was pounding. I had to calm myself first. And on some level, I probably hoped I would see her walking out of the place, and then I could simply call her over, and I wouldn't have to deal with her parents at all. I feared they would just want to warn me off if they intuited that I fancied myself as more than just a friend of their daughter. And, for some reason, I felt that they would indeed 'see through me' and know that in reality I was a boyfriend.

Of course, Meena didn't appear at the doorway. Finally, I put the paper in a public rubbish bin, walked across the street and into the restaurant. The door was unlocked, but there was no-one inside. Then, the portly figure of a middle-aged south Asian man with grey-flecked hair and a handlebar moustache appeared at the other end of the room: "Sorry sir, we're not yet open."

He paused, and I wondered how to introduce myself. "Oh! I must have forgotten to flip the sign on the door," the man then said, indicating the door as he walked towards it to flip an 'Open' notice on it to 'Closed'.

"Er, actually, er, I'm not here for a meal", I said. "I'm a friend of Meena's, and I was wondering if I would find her here?"

"Oh...a friend of Meena's..." Then a look of realisation came over his face and a broad smile revealed more gold than teeth: "Oh! You must be Alec!"

"Alix."

"I've heard so much about you! Well, hello, Alix, and welcome to my humble little restaurant!" He shook my right hand vigorously, enclosing it in both of his. "Will you be taking lunch here?". I shrugged, momentarily lost for words. "Meena's in the kitchen right now, learning to cook murg makhani. Do you know it? She told me you are very interested in Indian cuisine and Indian culture, and you regularly ate at my friend's restaurant in The Hague..." I realised immediately that Meena must have relayed exaggerated and glowing reports of me from the Netherlands; in fact I had never even seen the restaurant she worked at there and I knew virtually nothing of Indian cuisine. I was at a loss for a response. Thankfully, without further ado, he called her. A minute or two later Meena appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, wearing an apron and holding a spatula. She smiled and greeted me, but I couldn't help wondering how she could take so long to get from the kitchen to the main room of the restaurant? After all, there was no-one else there and she had to have heard my exchange with her father.

Nevertheless, I was immensely relieved to find her father to be an friendly, easy-going character, and very far from the dogmatic conservative I was fearing. He repeated his question as to whether we would take lunch there or outside, and told Meena she could take the afternoon off if she liked.

"No, Dad, we'll just take a coffee outside; I'll be back in half-an-hour."

"Half-an-hour? Alix has come a long way, specially to see you..."

I explained that I now lived "just down the road, in Ealing" and could visit again anytime it was convenient. He shrugged, but as we left the restaurant he added the suggestion that Meena could take her time. As it happened, we didn't even take a coffee together, just a 20 minute walk and talk along nearby streets.

We strolled down a busy, sun-speckled canal-side street, bustling with shoppers, as well as people who seemed, like myself, to be simply making the most of the unseasonably warm and sunny weather and getting out in the open. In other circumstances, the weather alone would have been enough to put me in an exuberant mood. But there was something I wanted to get to the bottom of. As we made casual conversation

about the past several weeks, I tried several times to pull Meena towards me, but she gently pushed me away, with the claim that she didn't want anyone to see us like lovers. I objected: "There's no-one here we know, or who knows us".

"Lots of people living around here know me", she insisted. "I don't want word to get to my parents that some guy was hugging me in the street!"

"Oh, come on! Look, Meena, I'm here to see you after calling you I don't know how many times, and never catching you in. What's going on? Are you trying to avoid me or something? Don't you remember our plans to be together? Well, I'm here in London now! I'm living just down the road, and now I can start looking for somewhere nearer to you..."

We were leaning against the railings of pedestrian bridge over the canal, close to one side of the canal. A few feet away, a couple were playing with their two toddlers; I knew they could hear every word we said, just as we could hear every word they said. "We should just let things cool down for a while first..." Meena told me.

"Cool down? Things could hardly be colder! I'm freezing in that place I live. I was hoping you'd put some warmth back in my life!"

Meena then, at last, looked directly at me. I had felt she had been avoiding looking directly at my eyes. But when she finally did, there was none of the warmth and intimacy that had always been there in her eyes while we were in the Netherlands, let alone the powerful sense of attraction. She paused as if she had carefully considered whether or not to tell me something. Then, she proceeded: "I think the letter your girlfriend wrote to me while I was still in Holland was really nasty and vicious. Did you really say those things? I don't really want to know, but I think I *have* to know" she told me.

I could not make any sense out of the question. Finally, I told her: "My girlfriend? You're my girlfriend, Meena!" I then made another failed attempt to pull her towards me.

"You know who I mean. I didn't know you and Di were so close."

"So we were. But so what? Di and I had already broken up by the time we met."

"So what about the things you two said in the letter? They really upset me. I was in tears; and it was impossible to keep it all from Willeke. And once everybody at Willeke's place knew about our affair, it became really uncomfortable living there. Nobody said it, but I think they all blamed me for coming between you and Di."

I heaved a sigh. "No, look, Meena, I've already told you before - Di and I broke up before I met you. Alright? But what is this letter you're talking about?"

"You really don't know?" Her voice seemed to convey a cautious optimism. Then, I could almost feel her relief, as she told me that she had known all along it couldn't all be true. But she still didn't know what was true and what wasn't, she said, as if asking for me to clarify things for her.

"Meena, I don't know anything about any letter. I haven't ever written to you before. What did this letter say, anyway?"

"Di told me you were by her side as she wrote it..."

"Well, I wasn't. So what did it say?"

After some hesitation, Meena related the letter: "She said you had told her it was good fun 'playing around with the little Indian virgin in Holland', but that it got truly boring after a while, when you realised I wasn't going to 'come up with the goods' after all your effort. She said you had laughed that you'd always imagined Indian curries to be hot, so you were disappointed to find them virtually frigid!"

"Jesus Christ! I never said anything like that about you, Meena. How could you imagine I could even say something like that?"

"I thought you couldn't have said that. Anyway, she said that you now had better things to do, so you thanked me for the entertainment, but you wouldn't be wanting to see me again. She also asked me if the 'virgin act'

was genuine, or just something I used to practice seducing other peoples' boyfriends in preparation for when I finally had something worth giving them? She said it as if she genuinely wanted to know, and asked me not to get her wrong; she said she really hoped I would write back. She signed off claiming you were feeling horny and she couldn't keep you waiting any longer! You really wanted to make love. Well, she didn't actually say, 'make love'....

"Yes, I can imagine." I felt like I had been hit with a sledgehammer by the deceit which had obviously taken place while I was there with Di in Wimbledon. I vowed inwardly that I would never speak to that woman again, but at the same time I felt glad I had now put her behind me forever.

"Meena, listen to me," I said, as I made a final attempt to pull her towards me, which was just marginally more successful than the others, "Di is a very jealous and spiteful girl. You don't know this, but it was her who ditched me, not the other way around. So, I really don't understand this behaviour of hers, at this point. But let's not let this come between us." I was going to add, 'it's you who I love', and I had a deep-rooted certainty that these words would clinch things between us and set out relationship back on track. But I was well aware that apart from all the other people coming and going around us, the couple with their two tiny children had been by our side throughout our conversation and had certainly overheard everything we had said, so that prevented me from saying anything so mawkish. I was certain that they were aware of what our conversation was about, but not at all sure how they may relate our conversation to other people later. I was concerned that I may be painted in a bad light; I was not about to let them tell other people, "...and then the young man finally said 'I love you', and the girl fell into his arms!" I suggested instead that we go and take the coffee we had come out for.

But once we left the pedestrian bridge, Meena told me she had to get back to the restaurant. I pointed out that her father had said she could take her time, but she insisted. "OK," I agreed, "at least I feel better now this has been cleared up, and at least now I've seen you again. Let's put all this stuff about Di behind us - like I already have - and start seeing each other again. It doesn't take long for me to get here..." Meena seemed to be in agreement, but when we reached to glass doors of the restaurant, she turned and told me, "I have to go now..."

"So when can I see you again? How about next weekend?"

"Not for the next few months; let's just let things cool off, like I said, and you can decide what you want." The implication was clear; that I was somehow wavering between her and Di.

"I want you! I can't wait months to see you, Meena, for Christ's sake. I want to see you every day. I want to at least talk to you every day if I can't see you. You have to answer my phone calls!" I grasped both her wrists to bring her attention back to me. I was not about to let Meena slip away without something more concrete than a promise to see me again in a few months. At last my concern at being noticed by other people, and what their opinions may be had left me. I was ready to get down on my knees if necessary. I couldn't have cared less what anybody who saw us thought. But she could.

"Don't hold me!" she told me in a forceful whisper. "I'm sure my dad's looking! I'll write to you."

"Write to me? I live just down the road!" I knew I had to get something more definite than a commitment to write but the sound of giggling young women at my side distracted me.

I turned to my right to see four young south Asian women smiling at us. One of them apologised, saying they didn't mean to interrupt anything, but was the restaurant open? Meena, in turn, apologised to them, and ushered them into restaurant, giving me a wave as she did so. Before I knew it, I was standing at the doorway by myself staring in like a simple-minded fool incapable of deciding what to do next. And I probably would have remained incapable of deciding what to do next if it were not for the fact that one of the four young women noticed that I was still standing there, and pointed this out to her high-spirited, laughing friends. I feigned a glance at a non-existent watch and walked away.

I returned to my tiny studio flat in Ealing in a mildly optimistic frame of mind. I had at least got to the bottom of the matter and now knew why Meena had been avoiding me. I had also made my position clear to her. But an empty feeling came over me on the bus trip back, which seemed to get progressively emptier the closer I got to my abode. How could I possibly stay in this ice-box several more months with nothing more than letters and an occasional phone call, I asked myself as I opened the front door? if I wasn't going to see Meena anyway for several months, what the hell was I doing in London?

And how was it possible, I asked myself, that I had even ended up living alone again in a cold little room not

much different from the one I had left a year and half ago, despite all my attempts to avoid precisely this? Was I fated to live such a life? If I was pre-destined to living like this if I chose to stay in the UK, then I would simply change that fate by not staying, I told myself.

Now I was earning a living at the furniture shop; but it was a living, and nothing more. I couldn't imagine saving the money from this job for an airline ticket back to Athens in addition to the money I would need to survive while I looked for work there again. At least not within three or four months, and I just couldn't wait that long.

Finally, one bitterly cold evening when the 10p coins for the meter had run out, I reached the conclusion that I had only made one, fatally flawed decision. All the subsequent hardships, disagreements, and heartbreak had stemmed from that: I should never have left Greece.

After this realisation, it seemed to me that in reality there had never been any other way for me to solve all these subsequent problems; it was just that I had been putting off the decision: The next day, I put aside the money for several day's food supply. And with the next pay packet I would have the money for the Dover to Calais ferry or hovercraft fare, with some to spare for two or three days shoestring accommodation either in Athens or on my way there. If there was no other way for me to get to back to Greece, I would simply take the long way back.

End of Story