

True Tales of a Traveller
A Career in Travel



By Alix Lee

A Career in Travel

*A True Tale of a Traveller, Set in the UK and Various Other
Countries in the 1980s*

1st Edition

by
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"Travel transforms the traveller, completely and irreversibly".

Preface

The True Tales of a Traveller series of short stories and novellas consists of several dozen real-life traveller's tales covering over 35 years. Although presented in a short story format 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 fifth story in the series, *A Career in Travel*, is at nearly 40,000 words a substantial novella-length account set mostly in Britain in 1984. The story is about a young traveller's attempt to integrate his love for travel into a regular, settled lifestyle in London. Although humorous in places, this is also a thought-provoking story that goes right to the heart of what it means to be a traveller, the differences and similarities between a traveller and a tourist, the differences and similarities between a traveller and an immigrant, and a traveller's place in society. Travel in the British Isles and a number of nearby countries is related as the traveller tries hard to come to terms with self-imposed travel limitations and the challenges of settling down into a more sedentary, and hopefully matrimonial life. 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 most still relevant at the time of publication.

Tale Five: A Career in Travel

Chapter One: Incurable

It happens to every traveller sooner or later, and to most it happens sooner rather than later. It isn't so much that one loses interest in travel per se. You just lose interest in the uncertainty of travel. And at the same time, you may even begin wanting to...well, er, settle down.

This is something that goes to the very heart of travel, and what it means to be a traveller. What is the definition of a traveller? How is a traveller different from a tourist? Can a traveller be a tourist as well? How is a traveller different from an immigrant? Again, can a person be both? How long could someone just travel without working? How long could someone work and travel?

For most people; for most *travellers*, travel is not a lifelong career. In fact, it isn't a career at all. In late summer 1983, when the urge to settle down hit me, I still wanted to travel. What young man would not be interested in seeing different parts of the world, and experiencing life in them first-hand? Especially after two years of just such a lifestyle. I wanted more of the same. But I also wanted to somehow integrate travel into a regular lifestyle; the kind of regular lifestyle that other people had. Yet I didn't know how.

How could I travel all my life? In principle, I liked the idea of spending extended periods of time in various different countries, learning about the differences and similarities between them, their histories, the cultures and lifestyles of their people or peoples, and so on and so forth. I knew that there were indeed some travellers who spent decades living and working abroad, going from one country to another for a matter of months or even years in each place at a time. But most of these people were highly qualified; people like doctors who dedicated their services to charity organisations operating in war zones or third-world countries. How could someone without a single 'O-level' (the high school examination taken by 16-year-olds in the UK at the time; short for 'Ordinary level') to his name travel like that? I had no skills whatsoever to offer. I had been fortunate enough to enjoy some lucky breaks during both my stays in Athens, particularly the second stay, and I still had several thousand pounds sterling in spare cash when I left the Greek capital for the second time.

But I didn't know what to do with it. And worse still, I didn't know what to do with myself. I had arrived once again at the shared home of my Dutch ex-kibbutz volunteer friend, Willeke, and her sister Hennie in north Rotterdam's Kralingen district, the first visit having been the previous year after an overland trip from Athens. But this time, I was beginning to wear out my welcome.

This time, I had stayed nearly six weeks, doing nothing at all apart from hanging out with Willeke's friends, enjoying the easy-going Dutch lifestyle, sunbathing on the roof of the shared house and generally lazing around. Willeke herself, and others, had suggested at various times that I register with an *uitzendbureau*, or temporary work agency, and make myself available for work if I wanted to settle down locally. They seemed happy to encourage me to do so, and add me to their circle of local friends. I had considered this, liked the idea, and yet repeatedly failed to take action. Despite myself, I did little else apart from sunbathing, drinking wine and feasting on Dutch cheese!

As I lay awake late one night on the sofa in the living room that had become my home, I recounted the events that had led me to this lethargic new existence in Rotterdam.

East and West

My flight from Athens to Amsterdam had been via Sofia on the Bulgarian state carrier, Balkan Bulgarian Airlines - which judging from appearances was the only airline using the airport. It had involved a five-hour transit stop at Sofia airport. This had been made far longer than expected by an etiquette problem at the airport of the kind that had probably ceased to exist by the end of the decade.

Something many people today may find difficult to appreciate was that in the 1980s, east and west Europe were like two different worlds. As mentioned in the previous story, I had made just one holiday trip to Yugoslavia as a child and one trip transiting the country on the Magic Bus earlier in 1983. But even that was two more trips to eastern Europe than the vast majority of Brits could ever expect to make in their lives in this era. The Balkan flight gave me just my third impression of an eastern European country.

This situation at Sofia airport made a deep impression on me because of a similar, yet different experience when travelling through Yugoslavia some five or six months earlier. Due to the nature of the political system in Bulgaria, Balkan staff were responsible for all flight transfers. After a 40-minute wait to reach the desk of the sole Balkan staff member checking our tickets and giving us boarding passes, there was finally just one person, a middle-aged Frenchman, in front me. I had been wondering at the Balkan woman's consistently expressionless, automaton-like face as she took the tickets of travellers, and as she took the Frenchman's ticket, it remained that way. But just as the Frenchman was giving this woman his ticket, a stocky, bull-like character who had marched briskly from somewhere beyond the back of the queue shoved in front of the him. Literally pushing him aside with his forearm, without so much as a glance at him, the big fellow then slapped several dozen passports and tickets on the desk, and barked "Moscow!" Still expressionless, and without a word, the Balkan woman pushed the Frenchman's ticket to one side and checked in all the several dozen travellers of this Russian tour group first. Rendered speechless, the Frenchman just threw up his arms as he turned to look towards the long line of people waiting behind him!

This reminded me of a similar - and yet different - situation when the Magic Bus had made a stop at a roadside restaurant and bar next to a petrol station in Yugoslavia. This was not a motorway, but a major dual-carriageway, and the refuelling stop was the nearest thing to a motorway service station, with quite a few vehicles, including a couple of tour buses, already parked there. The Magic Bus guide (or organiser), a young Greek fluent in English, told us we would be there for half an hour, so several of us, him included, decided to have a drink and a bite to eat. As the guide ordered drinks on behalf of the half dozen or so of us who wanted them, a Russian tour guide pushed in at the bar by his side and ordered drinks for a large group of Russian tourists rowdily milling around behind us. On this occasion, however, as equally expressionless as the Balkan airlines staff, the Yugoslav barman completely ignored the Russian, turning to serve the Russians only after giving us our drinks.

Were such actions and responses, their similarities and differences, typical of Bulgaria and (non-Eastern Bloc) Yugoslavia? In the limited time I had spent in those countries it was impossible to know. Still, I felt glad to have had some glimpses of communist eastern Europe, and like all other western - and eastern - Europeans of the time, I had no idea that in much less than a decade there would be no such thing as communist eastern Europe.

It crossed my mind that there was still much to be seen in Europe; so very, very much that I could barely consider myself to have even scratched the surface of what there was to be seen in the region. I didn't need to go so far away as southern Egypt to enjoy an interesting travel life. There were many places within two or three hours flight time of Amsterdam or London, or a couple of days by bus or train, and even many places worth seeing just a few hours of overland travel time away. I was feeling restless again.

I couldn't have forced myself to sleep if I had wanted to, so I packed my bags there and then, at about three in the morning. I decided right then that I couldn't stay one more day at Willeke's place. I didn't really want to return to the UK either; I preferred life in the Netherlands. But I had to admit that I had brought this situation upon myself by my weeks of inaction, and had only myself to blame. Britain was now the only obvious place I could think of where I could make a base for my future travels.

On the ferry from Hook of Holland to Felixstowe the next day, I reflected on my decision. Six months previously, I had left London for Greece, regretting having ever returned to the UK in the first place and vowing never to make the same mistake again.

But now I felt I had to be more realistic. I couldn't travel forever, and London seemed as good a place as any to settle down. And in fact, I wasn't intending so much to immediately and fully settle down, but rather to use the city as a base for further travels, especially travel in north-west Europe, which had plenty to offer in the way of interesting destinations. And even if I really wanted to make trips further afield in the future, London had some of the best 'bucket shops' (travel agencies selling discounted tickets) in the world. The important thing now, I told myself, was getting a steady job.

By this time, I was beginning to feel like an old hand at arriving in London and finding myself work and a place to live. This was my third time, and, as before, I stayed at the same large hostel in west London's Holland Park, and within two days had found myself a 'bedsit' in Streatham, south London. A bedsit (or bed-sit) is basically a room that does not have an en suite bathroom, or a kitchen, thus it falls short of being a 'studio flat'. Some will have very simple cooking facilities, but most are just rooms in shared houses with a bed and a place to sit, hence the name.

I was fortunate enough to find one with agreeable, sociable residents in the other three rooms, which is what can make bedsit life tolerable, or even enjoyable. At this point, I had committed myself to staying put, and finding some way of combining my love for travel with settling down in a steady job that would provide enough in the way of a regular income for me to satisfy my travel addiction.

During my second stay in Greece and my work in the region, I hadn't thought much about my relationships with my two ex-girlfriends, Diane and Meena. But during my sojourn in the Netherlands, I had mulled over everything that happened between myself and Di, and come to the conclusion that she had a character of rare quality. As for Meena, although I could just as easily have settled down with her if she wanted me to, the final parting was what had convinced me that she didn't care as much for our relationship as I had at first supposed. This had brought me to the decision that I had win Diane back, and I was confident that I could do that, especially now I was going to be living in south London, not far away from her home in Clapham. Once I had work, I decided I would get back in contact with her.

However, I hadn't even started looking for work. I had been expecting a landlord curious to know exactly what I did for a living, as all my previous landlords in the UK had. But instead, I had met Anton, an amiable middle-aged Polish immigrant with a slight accent who lived with his elderly mother on the ground floor. He didn't even bother asking what my job was. He had seemed happy enough to receive two months' rent in advance and a deposit, and I had the feeling he hadn't really expected that.

This made me wonder if I really needed to seek employment so desperately? I still had plenty of money and didn't really need to find work immediately. Perhaps a slight change of plan was in order; a delay of sorts while I slipped into this new lifestyle of a London-based, part-time traveller, in the process of beginning to settle down. I had noticed an advertisement at Brixton underground station on my way to Streatham (which lies further south) for something called a 'Eurorail Pass' (later known as a Eurail Pass). I decided to return immediately to check it out, and took along my passport and a couple of passport photos, just in case.

It turned out to be an offer I couldn't refuse. For although I wanted to cure my travel bug by first bringing it under control, I was a little like an alcoholic in therapy, given the choice of talking about his drinking problem over a cup of tea or over a bottle of whisky. When faced with an offer like this, I simply didn't have the mental solidity to refuse; my resolve crumbled into dust. The Eurorail advertisement had just such a power of persuasion. Apart from some restrictions, such as sleepers and some first-class services, the Eurorail pass would qualify me for heavily discounted tickets all across western Europe. The only restriction on eligibility was that I had to be under 26 years of age. How could I let an opportunity like this slip by, I asked myself? Maybe it wouldn't be available next year, and if I delayed too long, I would no longer be eligible for such a pass anyway.

That evening I called Willeke from the pay phone Anton had installed for his tenants in the ground-floor hallway of his house: "Wiki", I told her excitedly, using the familiar name all her friends called her by, "I'm coming back! I've just bought the train and ferry ticket his afternoon, I'll be back in Rotterdam tomorrow afternoon!"

"Oh," she responded noticeably less thrilled. "I thought you were looking for work in London...?"

"I've got work lined up," I lied, sensing her need for assurance that I wasn't going to stay another six or seven weeks, "but it doesn't start for two weeks, so I've decided to do a little travel in the meantime. Don't worry, I'll only be in Rotterdam for one night, then I'm off to Scandinavia!"

Far North-east

I decided to visit, in turn, Jeanette, the Swedish girl I had travelled to Egypt with earlier in the year, at her parent's home in Karlskrona, southern Sweden; then her Kibbutz Magen volunteer friend and roommate Maddie, further north in Uppsala; and finally Mikael, a Finnish volunteer worker from my first kibbutz, Kibbutz Bar'am, who lived in Helsinki. I didn't have the phone numbers for the first two people and Mikael's phone remained unanswered, but I hurriedly wrote out letters to all three of them late that night in my Streatham bedsit. I didn't have the time the following morning to seek out post offices, but fortunately my messages had been written out on pre-paid aerogrammes, and I did find a post box at Liverpool Street railway station. I only hoped the messages of my impending visits arrived before I did! I was on the road again, in high spirits, and pleased as punch with my new semi-settled lifestyle as a London-based, part-time traveller.

I only decided a few minutes before arriving at Willeke's house that the job I had ostensibly found in London which was due to start in two weeks time was at a travel agency. The fiction just seemed to fit so well; working in the travel industry was perfect for me, Willeke pointed out, as did her sister Hennie, tenant Willem, and Willeke's friends Bob and Linda, who all congratulated me for securing the position. We all celebrated my imaginary new job at a local bar that evening.

Without any planning, or even considering travel time, I arrived in Copenhagen very late at night the following day. There were no trains or ferries to Sweden I could take for over six hours. The shortcoming of the Eurorail pass was that it didn't include sleepers. I could have taken a sleeper if I had paid extra, or planned my itinerary a little more carefully, so I would arrive in Copenhagen earlier, but I hadn't even thought of it. By the time I got in at the station, even the station's various restaurants and snack bars had closed, and there was nothing else to do but sit and wait for the next morning's first train.

I wasn't the only one waiting; several other travellers were spreading themselves out on seats and benches, some even getting into sleeping bags. I spread myself out likewise, but ditched the idea of pulling out my sleeping bag, opting instead to merely cover myself with my heavy jacket, hugging my shoulder bag like she was a lover. An expressionless young man drove a cleaning vehicle back and forth incessantly around the station's seating area; I couldn't be sure if he just had no other work to do or if he was deliberately attempting to dislodge us over-nighters by annoying us out of the place.

The night air felt cooler than in Rotterdam, and this in fact had been one of the reasons I had chosen to travel to Scandinavia, now, in late September. Helsinki would not make a good choice of travel destination in the depths of winter, I reasoned; I could then make a short trip or two to the western Mediterranean instead. That was - just - within the self-imposed limits of my new UK-based, semi-settled lifestyle of a part-time traveller.

At the time of my trip, there was still no bridge over the Oresund Straights, which separate Sweden and Denmark, and the ferry from Denmark on the way out was very full of loud, young (and some not so young) Swedes, who apparently travelled to Denmark specifically to get drunk and bring back as much alcohol as they could to Sweden. I wondered where these Swedes could have all been drinking to be in such inebriated states so early in the day, and did in fact put this question to one of them who took up conversation with me of his own accord. However, his answer was incoherent, so I was none the wiser. Of course, these circumstances did not exist on the journey back.

Karlskrona was Jeanette's home town, and I paid her a visit at her parent's spic-and-span yet very homely abode a couple of kilometres from the city centre. She drove me around town in her Volvo, and told me that after arriving back in Sweden she had experienced several 'recurrent' bouts of a sickness we had both contracted earlier in the year, or at least she felt it to be the same illness we had both suffered in Aswan, Egypt. The doctor who treated her suspected it may have been malaria. But the instances of recurrence seemed to subside of their own accord and she was now hoping she had seen the last of whatever it was.

We ate out and had drinks with her younger brother. I stayed one night, sleeping on the living room sofa, and left the next day for Stockholm, and Uppsala, where Jeanette's friend, Maddie, was studying at Uppsala University. The uneventful but comfortable trip to Stockholm took around five hours. Seeing the city of Stockholm from the train just before it pulled into the station made me feel some regret that I would not be able to look around this sizeable capital, but I had decided that Sweden was simply too expensive for staying at hotels.

Staying with friends, my expenses were much lower than they would have been otherwise. I really didn't have to pay much for food either, but while waiting for the train at Stockholm, I had felt a bit peckish, and

bought a platform kiosk hamburger. After working out the price in pounds I came to the conclusion that this trip would have been very expensive indeed had I needed to pay for my meals.

Uppsala is the fourth-largest city in Sweden after Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, and was home to about 120,000 people at the time of my visit. The city is famous for being the main centre of pagan worship in the Sweden of the Middle Ages when it was home to the Uppsala Temple, a centre of worship for the Norse religion. The university was founded in 1477, making it not only one of the oldest in Scandinavia but one of the oldest in the world.

Walking out of Uppsala Station, I remembered that Jeanette had told me that Maddie was staying on campus "about two miles from the station."

I saw just one taxi outside the station. I didn't want to take a taxi if I could avoid it. I had paid a horrendous price for three mouthfuls of food at Stockholm railway station and was sure a taxi fare would be prohibitively expensive. But there was no-one else in sight to ask, so I asked the taxi driver the direction. He pointed the way for me and confirmed that it was indeed about two miles away. I went on my way.

The driver had not insisted on taking me there. Well, that's because this is Sweden, I told myself - not Egypt - and I happily started my little walk. After such a long time sitting in trains, I felt I could easily cope with a two-mile walk.

But after nearly an hour's walk, I began to have my doubts. I was still on the same long, straight road that I had started on, but there was now hardly a building in sight, and nothing that looked remotely like part of a university for as far as I could see. Yet, the taxi driver's English had seemed almost perfect; I was sure he had understood me, and I was sure I had understood him. As these thoughts went through my mind, a car passed me, and I noticed it was the same taxi. 20 minutes later, I saw the taxi again, coming towards me on its way back to the city centre. I quickly flagged it down; it looked like I was going to be forced to take it back to the city centre, so I could start out again on the right road. I was sure by this time that I had taken the wrong one.

"Sorry, but didn't you tell me outside the railway station that the university campus buildings I want to go to are two miles from the station? Didn't you tell me to take this road...?"

A look of realisation came over the driver's face. "Yes, two miles from the station: Two *Swedish* miles, that is. That's, er, about 18 kilometres!"

I hadn't even known or suspected there was even such a thing as a 'Swedish mile'. Walking such a distance was out of the question. I asked the driver if he could take me there, and got in the car knowing the fare would unavoidably punch a serious hole in my entire Scandinavia travel budget. But at the same time I also knew I had no choice and was glad to get off my feet.

Maddie and I managed to cover all the things that had happened to us in the 18 months or so since we had last met, but I did think at first that I wouldn't even get the chance to talk to her alone, as a number of her friends found much to ask this former intrepid traveller. This made me realise that there comes a point in a person's travels by which time he or she has simply accumulated enough experience of travel and life in other countries to interest all sorts of random people. As I didn't have much else going for me apart from my travels, I was glad of this on the one hand, but on the other I was also glad my travels were now going to be scaled down to fit into a normal life.

As for Mikael, the third person on my visit 'hit list', Maddie told me that the best way to get to Helsinki was to first return to Stockholm by train which took less than 40 minutes, and then to take a ferry from the Swedish capital directly to Helsinki, and this is what I did the following day, after sleeping on the floor of the room of one of Maddie's male classmate's.

But I had been expecting a ferry trip of several hours, like the ones I had taken so many times between England and Holland or between England and the Isle of Man, and was a little shocked to find I would have to spend 15 hours on the boat; almost as long as the Patras to Brindisi ferry trip I had taken the previous year. However, 15 hours on a ferry was, to my mind, still something definitely preferable to 15 hours on a train, and infinitely preferable to 15 hours on a plane or a bus. If you didn't suffer sea-sickness - and I never had - you could even come to enjoy it, which I did very much on this occasion. For a few moments, I considered cancelling the trip, but after committing myself to making it, I phoned Mikael from Uppsala Station, using a pile of Swedish coins, to confirm my imminent arrival. Luckily, I found him at home this time.

The ferry was possibly the largest I had ever travelled on, and as soon as I had boarded it and walked around the entire floating city, I felt some regret at not being able to pay for a cabin and go the whole hog in terms of luxury. In such circumstances, I would easily have been able to spend 15 days on the boat, let alone 15 hours.

The only other thing about the trip that made a big impression on me was that knowing the travel time to be 15 hours, I had expected 15 hours on the high seas I imagined to separate the two countries. As it was, I wasn't even sure when we left Swedish territory. The coasts of both countries are a mass of islands and peninsulas, especially on the Finnish side. On the long approach to the Finnish capital, there must have been hundreds of islands, ranging from rocks barely big enough to host a bird's nest to islets with a building or two, and right up to islands with obviously significant human settlements.

Spending almost an entire day travelling made a paid-for overnight in Helsinki unavoidable. Fortunately, Maddie had been able to recommend a Helsinki hostel she herself had stayed at the previous year, a sparsely decorated yet comfortable establishment within about 15 minutes walking distance of the ferry terminal (as was most of the city centre). I had expected Helsinki to be cooler than Stockholm or Uppsala but the temperature and the weather - damp and cool but with light drizzle - were about the same. The city seemed livelier than Stockholm at the time of my arrival, at least in the area around the waterfront, and was certainly in a completely different league from the one-taxi town of Uppsala. The atmosphere was very much one of an important international capital.

The following morning I checked out of the hostel, leaving my shoulder bag there for later collection, and spent most of the morning at the city's natural history museum. I had noted the ferry times back to Stockholm on arrival and decided that if I didn't have free accommodation that night I would take the overnight ferry back to Stockholm to save on accommodation costs. Even low-budget accommodation in Helsinki was not low budget enough to stay more than a night if I could at all avoid it, I had decided, after calculating the costs in pounds sterling. Apart from that, I had been through four currency exchanges since leaving the UK - British pounds to Dutch guilders; Dutch guilders to Danish krone; Danish krone to Swedish krona; and finally Swedish krona to Finnish markka, losing money, of course, on every exchange. The funds I had allocated myself for this trip just seemed to be quickly diminishing, despite almost free accommodation and my Eurorail pass!

Travel Transforms the Traveller

When I had phoned Mikael from Uppsala I had arranged to meet him at Helsinki Central Station at noon on my first day in the city. I would know shortly thereafter whether or not I had free accommodation for that night.

I arrived about 10 minutes early for my appointment with Mikael, and scanned the station forecourt area for the studious-looking, bespectacled Finnish academic I had spent so many hours playing chess against deep into the night at Kibbutz Bar'am in late 1981. Although we also worked together in the fields, it was those long, long chess games that I remembered him best by. We talked about all sorts of things during those games, but there were also times when we didn't speak a word for 20 or 30 minutes. Mikael was by far the most formidable chess player I had ever come up against at that time.

Twenty-five minutes after our scheduled meeting time, I was ready to walk away and book my return ferry trip, when I heard a voice call my name. I looked to my right and saw a thickly bearded man with long, straggly dark hair walking in my direction. For a moment, I wondered if it was someone from the hostel, but I couldn't remember meeting any such person. Only when the man was just a few paces from me did I realise it was Mikael!

"Hey, man, good to see you again!" Mikael said as he hugged me. Then, he took a step back, looked me over, and told me: "You've changed! I almost didn't recognise you."

"I've changed?! What about you!" I almost added that I could have been standing right next to him without realising who it was, but I was in fact, virtually rendered speechless by his transformation. He laughed, obviously aware that he had indeed changed a lot.

After exchanging some pleasantries about my trip, Mikhael suggested that we take lunch at the city centre campus of Helsinki University, where we would be able to meet two other members of his 'band'; sociology students who habitually took their lunch there. The other member worked as a male nurse at a local hospital; I would meet him later, Mikael assured me.

"Your band?" I asked, unsure what exactly he meant by that.

"Yeh, I've got a band together now. We play local gigs mostly, but we also play other towns and cities. It's my main form of income these days; the other guys are students."

"Wow", I said, unable to add any further comment. I had not had the slightest idea that Mikael was even interested in pop or rock music, or any kind of music for that matter. The only music-related thing I could remember about him was when, late one night, he had pleaded for one of our fellow kibbutz volunteers (we slept in 4-bed rooms) to please turn down the volume on his portable cassette recorder. It was affecting Mikael's concentration on the chess game.

The two students, Matias and Leo, both as long-haired as Mikael, were already taking their lunch when we walked into the cafeteria. "There they are", Mikael said, pointing them out. "Same food, same place, every day. No imagination!"

Matias had messy blondish hair and was clean-shaven, while Leo was thickly bearded. Leo looked a little more dated for the era in his patched denims, while Matias, dressed in combat pants and a printed 'Strangers' t-shirt, looked a little more 'new wave', but the two were obviously both very much 'sub-cultural'.

Mikael invited me to choose whatever I wanted to eat. Assuming university canteen fare to be cheap, but with every intention for paying for it myself, I took a large dish of beef and mashed potatoes. Then I added a mushroom soup and a delicious-looking pasty. But when I came to pay, Mikael insisted the meal was on him.

Mikael introduced us to each other and I took a seat and began to eat even before he had finished what turned out to be a long-winded account of my movements since leaving our kibbutz on the Lebanon border. That stopped the other two from finishing their meals and elicited a few "oh, wow"-type comments; they definitely had not been expecting to meet such a well-travelled visitor, and they had quite a few questions about life in Greece, Turkey, Israel and Egypt. However, I felt a little uncomfortable with all this attention, particularly as I was now in the process of curing my travel addiction, and I swiftly directed the conversation towards Mikhael's transformation into his present 'form'.

"So, what about the Mikael who told me he wanted to do a master's degree in pure maths?" I asked with a smile. Mikhael laughed out loud. "Yes, what happened to him? Well, he won't be missed, that's for sure! God, I must have been so naive", he said, shaking his head.

After a moment's thought, Mikhael continued: "Yeh, I suppose you can live in a tree house if you really want to, just working things out in abstract maths. Doesn't harm anyone. Doesn't help anyone, either. Contribution to society? Zero."

"Exactly!" Leo affirmed. Matias nodded seriously. But what I was wondering about was at which point this transformation from the scholarly maths student to the social activist had taken place? Was his time at the kibbutz - essentially a commune - the catalyst? And if so, was it a catalyst in a positive sense, which is to say that Mikhael was impressed with the communal kibbutz way of life, or in a negative sense, which is to say that he had given much thought to the ethnic inequality in Israel and the occupied territories?

After we left the canteen, Mikael and I parted company with the two students. Mikael assured me I could "crash out" at his place as long as I wanted, and I returned with him to the hostel to collect my bags. After dropping off my bags at his shared house, we walked for about 20 minutes to what seemed to have once been a warehouse for storage of goods unloaded from the nearby port. Mikael had the key and he opened the place up. About 20 minutes later, the other three band members arrived.

The remaining band member, Georgie, was a burly, bearded, leather-jacketed character a few years older than the others, and very far from the stereotyped image of a male nurse. After introducing us, Mikael explained that the band tried to practice every afternoon if they could. Thereafter, there was quite a lot of banter and joking in Finnish, which of course I didn't get. Mikael then explained to me that usually practice was practice and concerts were concerts; they were not really the same because you could horse around in practice and even stop playing altogether, which you couldn't really do at a live gig, even at a pub. But this time, it was practice that was much more serious, because now there was an English-speaking judge of their English songs present!

"Oh! You sing in English?" I asked.

"Just a few songs. Most Finns don't really get all the lyrics, so we don't usually worry if we make mistakes, but now is different..."

"Oh, don't worry about me. I'm not going to pass judgement on your English!" I just wanted them to feel at ease.

Mikhael turned to look at the others and after a few moments stated "Divided Land", set the pace with three taps of his right foot and the band launched into a song with a new wave tempo reminiscent of The Jam. Mikael sang forcefully:

*"They came from the east and they came from the west,
And divided our land how they felt best,
Brother fought brother, daughter fought mother,
They filled us with hate for one another..."*

Another song with English lyrics, but a definite reggae feel, *Ronny's Farm*, was similar in sentiment to *Divided Land* but rather more humorous. It related the story of a farmer, who gave up breeding animals and growing crops in favour of the more profitable 'cultivation' of bombs and rockets. Animal Farm-style, the few remaining animals finally revolted, kicked Ronny out, dismantled the bombs and rockets, and took control of the farm for themselves. As for the eight or nine songs with Finnish lyrics, I naturally had no idea what they were about, but concluded that they were unlikely to be love songs.

In the 1980s, it was difficult to escape the east-west, communist-capitalist political polarity, and this was even more the case on continental Europe, where the actual divide lay, than in the UK, where it was already evident enough. Universities in parts of western Europe were hotbeds of communist sentiment, and many in Finland, which had a less confrontational relationship with the Soviet Union, were heavily infiltrated by communists. Finns had to come to terms with having a very powerful neighbour immediately to their east with a dramatically different political system.

I asked Mikael in casual conversation at a city centre cafe where we had breakfast the following morning whether most Finns were afraid of a Soviet invasion? "We're not afraid. Finland is not a big country but we value our independence. We had to fight for it before and if we have to fight for it again, we will. But, like you told me, the ferry from Stockholm took over 15 hours, right? Well, it's only about three hours by car to the Soviet border. So, how can we look at the Soviet Union in the same way as people may in the UK, or even in the other Nordic countries?"

I had to admit he had a very valid point. Finland, even the country's capital, was virtually right on the front line.

When I mentioned that I had stayed in Karlskrona before arriving in Finland, Mikael laughed and told me that ever since a Soviet submarine ran aground there just outside the city two years earlier, the Swedes had been "seeing" Soviet submarines off the coast of Karlskrona all the time. His assertion was that the Swedes were convinced there was a covert invasion plan underway, when in reality all that had happened was that some drunken Russian sailors had lost their way. The rest of Scandinavia, he claimed, lived in constant fear of the Soviet Union, but not Finland.

The Soviets knew by now that there was nothing they could do with Finland, Mikael claimed. They had tried twice to invade and failed; they had tried to subvert the government and failed. Finland wasn't afraid of the Soviets, and it was for just that reason that it didn't need the help of NATO or the United States. In Mikael's view, America was happy with the rest of Europe living in fear of the Soviets; it only increased Europe's dependency on the United States.

I stayed at Mikael's place only one night. I saw his band in concert that evening at a local rock club, a very lively venue that Mikael told me was the first rock club in the country and a place he was grateful the band had a chance to play as it had a reputation for bringing up-and-coming rock bands to public attention. He mentioned several other bands that had played there, but none of these Scandinavian groups were popular enough outside the region for me to have heard of them.

But the next evening the band was to play Turku, the country's third or fourth-largest city, about an hour and a half's drive away from Helsinki. After that, they would play two other locations before returning to the capital. Mikael invited me to travel with the band, but I felt I would just be like extra luggage, with nothing to contribute. So, he left me with the key to his place and we parted company after breakfast the next morning, when I went to visit a place a few kilometres south of Helsinki.

I spent several hours wandering around the sea fortress of Suomenlinna. The defences had been built over 200 years earlier on five interconnected islands to protect the capital from attack. I visited a couple of related museums and shot off an entire reel of film on my cheap East German-made Praktica EE2 SLR. Fortunately, the weather was much better than it had been the previous day.

However, nearly all of those photos were dismal failures. The views back to the city were a treat for the eyes, but a standard factory-issue 50 mm lens couldn't bring out these visual highlights. Most of the photos were somewhat dull and flat. I knew at the time that I needed a better lens, but I didn't know how uninspiring the shots were until over a week later, when I finally had time to have the film developed. Travel photography, or any photography for that matter, was a completely different experience in the late 20th century from today, and if you were actually travelling and didn't have time to wait around for developers, you often didn't know what you had actually shot until weeks later!

Apart from the constant Soviet threat, there were also many reminders in Finland at the time that the country was relatively new, and relatively small. The Suomenlinna fortress was one. Originally known as Sveaborg (Castle of the Swedes), it was renamed in Finnish to Suomenlinna (Castle of Finland) in 1918 for nationalistic reasons, though it is still known by its original name in Sweden and by Swedish-speaking Finns, of whom there were still many in the 1980s.

In the late afternoon, having returned to Mikael's place to pick up my bags, I boarded the floating city to Stockholm for my return trip.

Another reminder of Finland's former relation with Scandinavia's biggest state was provided when the boat stopped at the Åland Islands around dawn before reaching Sweden. This group of islands, less than 40 kilometres from Sweden, had a population of fewer than 30,000, and was entirely Swedish-speaking, although a part of Finland. The islands were autonomous, and its residents didn't need to do national service in the Finnish military, a fellow passenger informed me. I realised that the ferry had also stopped there on the way out to Finland, but at the time I hadn't even known whether the stop was in Sweden or Finland.

Like Another Country

The train back to Copenhagen from Stockholm took about seven hours. It was one with compartments, but with my Eurorail pass, I had no reserved seating. I walked down the corridor, and found most compartments full, but finally walked into one with only two other passengers, a scrawny blond-haired man of around 30, with a dark-haired girl who seemed to be his girlfriend.

Although gaunt and a little rough-looking, the man seemed to be in good health, and was certainly in very high spirits. He had apparently just opened a can of beer from a six pack, and almost as soon as I sat down, offered me one. The hordes of drunken young Swedes on the ferry from Denmark came to mind, along with Jeanette's remark that it wasn't even legal to drink alcoholic drinks on the streets in Sweden, and for a moment I wondered if drinking on the train was allowed? But, seeing that both the man and his girlfriend were not afraid of any such regulations - if they existed - I accepted, and immediately fell into conversation with the man, Johan, who it transpired was a Dane. His girlfriend, Stella, a Swede, was less talkative and less fluent in English, merely adding a comment, a smile or a laugh here and there in the storyline.

According to his own explanation, Johan had just returned to his native Denmark, after what he called a "long holiday, paid for by the Spanish government". Five years previously, he had been assigned by a Scandinavian company to work in Madrid. At that time, he told me, Spain was making a transition from the dictatorship of Franco to a modern democracy. "It's not really a proper democracy, even now," he said. "I'd say it's nearly there, but it's going to be a good many years before Spain is like here, or any other western European country. Too many die-hard Franco sympathisers, you see. You know about Franco?"

I nodded.

"When I went there, in '78, it was still pretty much the old system, just without the old dictator. But it was OK; I enjoyed living there. I like the people, and the Spanish lifestyle. One night, however, I made a terrible mistake..."

His pause seemed a little rehearsed, and I could see he was enjoying his storytelling. He took a swig from his can of Carlsberg, smiling at me and waiting for my response. Eventually, I could not resist making a gesture for him to continue.

"I crashed my car, right into another, at a 'T' junction. No-one was hurt; neither of us were going fast. Just a bit of superficial damage to both cars. No big deal, you may think? But the guy in the other car was the local chief of police. He was on his way to some important meeting, and he was furious. I got a 10-year prison sentence!"

"10 years?"

"That was my original sentence; it was reviewed earlier this year, and the second half reduced to a few weeks. The chief of police and the judge who sentenced me were both no longer serving, so cases like mine got a second look at."

Shortly after getting back to Denmark, Johan had decided to look up Stella, his former girlfriend from his student days in Stockholm. "She hadn't forgotten me!" They both smiled.

I would have left the newly re-united couple at Copenhagen station, but they insisted that I stay with them for a day or two. "You'll like it," Johan added with a smile, "It's like another country."

Denmark and Sweden are, of course, both Scandinavian countries, but my feeling was that Denmark had at least as much in common with the Netherlands as it did with Sweden. The capitals of both Denmark and Holland had similarly-sized populations and both had reputations for being somewhat laid-back and off-beat. Denmark was still the more expensive of the two, no matter what measures were taken to avoid it, but the side of the city I saw was certainly at least as bohemian, unconventional, alternative, off-beat, sub-cultural, non-conformist, free spirited, individualist, dissenting, and anti-establishment as Amsterdam squat life, or anything else in the Dutch capital. If not more so. In fact, at first I could hardly believe what was I seeing.

After we arrived at Copenhagen Central Station, the three of us walked two or three kilometres to Johan and Stella's home. During this time, we were naturally engaged in conversation on a variety of topics, just as we had been throughout our train and ferry journey: my work life in Greece, Johan's prison time in Spain, the Israelis and the Palestinians, differences between life in Sweden and life in Denmark and so on and so forth. So I didn't pay too much attention to the change in surroundings. I saw an Indian-style full-size mantra wall mural and the English graffiti 'Welcome to Freetown', and then realised that we had walked into a district popular with bohemians. I also noticed a distinct difference (that is, a downgrading) in the quality of housing, but I didn't want to make my hosts feel uncomfortable by letting them know that.

"So...this is where you live?" I asked, when Johan opened the unlocked door of a three-storey townhouse.

"Yeh. We live on the second floor; there are other people living on the ground floor and the first floor. They're all good people, you'll meet them soon. This entire area used to be a military barracks. After they moved out, we moved in. That was before I went to Madrid. I didn't think anyone here would remember me when I came back, but they did, and I got a place to live here again straight away. These people are like nowhere else on Earth; it's a great place to live. I could have lived with Stella in Sweden, but I don't know how long I would have been able to stand it," he said, laughing with her, before putting his hands on my shoulder with a friendly smile. "People here are more easy-going. The Danish government leaves us alone, and we make our own rules."

At first, I took this "we make our own rules" bit with a pinch of salt. I had already met plenty of subcultural types in the Netherlands (via Willeke and her friends) who had ambitious - or deliberately myopic - claims like, "We just live how we like, the government and the police leave us alone", and so on. And though I felt in a great mood to find I had been given my own quiet room at the top (the attic) of Johan's house, I could not stop myself from pursuing this. "Well, obviously," I said, "I mean...you can't break the law, can you?"

"We have our own laws. But we don't want criminals here. They're not welcome, and they know it. So they don't come here..."

I looked at Johan without knowing what to say. I had a strong urge to react with a laugh and "C'mon, leave it out!" as I would if talking to an Englishman (or "give me a break" as an American may have put it), but I was afraid that these friendly people may become less so if I did. On my left side was Johan, with Stella just behind, both looking directly at me with beaming smiles. On my right side was the attic room with something approximating a bed in it. It was not a bed per se, but actually a kind of wooden crate with a mattress pulled over it, but I could see at a glance that it was more than adequate for my needs. Right below me, and with direct connection to my mind and my feelings were two tired legs, just dying to lie down. In fact, I had done a lot of sitting the past day or two, but sometimes there's nothing to beat a place to sleep that doesn't move!

"Well," I responded, "let's talk more about this later. I'm genuinely interested to know more, but I really need a couple of hours rest if that's OK with you..."

I crashed out for the rest of the day and evening, waking up in the middle of the night. With nothing else to do, I gazed out of the tiny attic window, smoking cigarettes. The sky was absolutely clear and a crescent moon shone as brightly as the thousand stars spread across the sky. Everywhere was quiet, but for distant voices and the occasional sounds of a stray cat in heat. Yet I felt sure I could smell the sweet scent of marijuana coming from somewhere or other.

The next morning I awoke late, and Johan and Stella were nowhere to be found. I left my attic room, and the apartment below at nearly noon with some reluctance; I couldn't find locks on any of the doors and wondered how my hosts would feel about me leaving their home completely unlocked? On the other hand, they had obviously done the same, and I remembered that the place had not been locked when we arrived. At least I knew I would be able to get back in when I returned. I put all my valuables in my airline shoulder bag, deciding to have a walk back into the city centre and take a look around. I had made notes of some of the places worth a visit from conversations with Jeanette, who had visited the city a number of times.

A short walk from the flat, I noticed an area of parkland and a small lake. I wandered down towards it, took a seat on a conveniently located bench and pulled out my map of the Danish capital to peruse for the places of interest I wanted to visit. A young blond man with angular features and a serene smile was already sitting at the other end of the bench and he greeted me in Danish as I sat. I became engrossed in the map and actually located the very lake I was sitting by, which made finding the route into the nearby city centre very easy.

Only when I put the map back into my bag and made to leave did I notice that the blond guy had just rolled a marijuana joint. He leaned over towards me and asked me if I'd like a smoke?

Not wanting to seem impolite, I took the joint and was about to take a 'toke' when I noticed its size. I held it away from myself for a moment to take a better look at it. It seemed to have been constructed from a dozen or more cigarette papers.

"Yeah, it's a biggie, I just got carried away making it", the Dane told me in perfect English. "I can't possibly finish it myself; you'll have to help me on this one!"

So I did, and in the process introduced myself, mentioning briefly how I came to be in the area of Copenhagen known as Christiania Freetown. The blond guy introduced himself as Axsel, described himself as an artist and told me he had been living there for three years.

I tried to get a more accurate description of the actual circumstances of the place than Johan's idealist "we have our own laws", but discovered Axsel to more or less share the same notions. Although he hadn't been living there as long as Johan, he did fill me in on the origins of the community.

He told me the community, mostly originally a military barracks, was set up in about 1971 by an alternative magazine publisher in reaction to the lack of affordable housing in the city, but that once populated, the people decided they wanted something better than just a huge squat. They formulated their own set of laws, independent of the Danish government, with their own rules forbidding stealing, violence, guns, bulletproof vests, and hard drugs.

"So, you can't get hard drugs like crack cocaine here, then?"

"You probably can, but we have rules against it, just like outside. They were allowed for a while about five years ago, but it didn't work out, so they're illegal again now."

I nodded.

"The difference is that here we, er, *like* marijuana..." he continued, handing me the massive joint again, "so we don't rule against this herb and we don't like to see it treated like a drug as it is outside. So, in fact, we approve of it!"

"So what about stealing?" I asked. "Is this place really free of theft?"

"I guess that happens too, but not like outside. See for yourself; if you tried to walk into someone's place when they're not home, you'll probably find it unlocked. I never lock my door, neither do my neighbours."

I felt a twinge of guilt at not being trusting enough to leave any of my valuables at Johan and Stella's unlocked flat, but this unwary approach was something I could hardly come to terms with after so many years of assuming that leaving your possessions unguarded was just asking for trouble.

I asked what kind of artwork Aksel did, and he claimed to have done "everything. But I've had a hand in a lot of what you see on the walls here. You know, before I came here, every piece of artwork I did was done alone; I would never work with other people, not even on a mural.

"That's the Freetown difference. Here, I've worked with all sorts of people. It's more real".

"What do you mean? Why's it more real?"

"I mean, it's like real life in any other job, you know? I mean, can you imagine a policeman, for example, insisting that he works alone, with nobody else? You have to get along with other people in most jobs, so why should artists be different?"

I had to admit he had a very interesting point, and one I had never considered before. I could have continued chatting to Aksel the artist for a very long time. I certainly felt very comfortable and relaxed. But I was also conscious of the fact that although we had shared just one joint, and I had done my best to see that he smoked more of it than I did, I had never smoked so much marijuana in one session in my life and was beginning to feel quite disoriented. When I saw him begin making another joint, I quickly made an excuse that I had to meet someone in the city centre, a local friend who was going to show me around the city.

I asked Aksel whether he happened to know of anywhere that I could rent a bicycle, and he insisted on lending me his own bike, which was parked by his home a short walk away. We walked over there, Aksel still smoking the second joint and me trying not to, and after a cursory look over the very basic, functional 3-speed, I got on it. As I did, I noticed it had no lock.

"Don't need them here", he claimed. By "here" I wasn't sure whether he meant just the Christiania community, or Copenhagen in general until I was about to ride the bike away. "But there are a lot of bike thieves in the city. So don't lose it; it's the only transport I've got!"

On my way to the National Museum, which was my intended first stop, I rode passed a huge palace. Stopping to ask a local resident, I was informed that it previously belonged to the Danish monarchy and that parts of it were now open to the public. I made a mental note to visit it upon my return from the museum but never did.

The National Museum contained a truly remarkable number of exhibits which not only covered recent centuries but went right back to prehistoric times, long before there even was a Denmark, though naturally the Viking and subsequent ages were covered best. The museum also included a large collection of exhibits from the ancient cultures of Greece and Rome, the Near East and Egypt.

Whether it was due to having ingested so much marijuana, or to the rich variety of exhibits on display at the museum that had kept my mind fully occupied, I found with some surprise that by the time I came to leave the place, it was about to close anyway! I had taken only a quick snack at the museum, in order to save time to visit other places.

I was relieved to find Aksel's bike still waiting for me where I had parked it outside the museum, but then, despite having reflected on the outwards journey that I didn't really need a bike and could have walked the distances involved, I got completely lost on the way back! My growing conviction that I was heading in the wrong direction was confirmed when I stopped to ask a pedestrian. I set off back on what I presumed to be the right track, and the same thing happened again! I eventually did successfully make the now long trip back to Christiania Freetown, and when I got there found that I couldn't remember where Johan and Stella lived!

I rode around until I found the small lake on the edge of the community and then found my way back from there.

The next problem was that I couldn't remember where Aksel the artist lived. Fortunately, that was easily solved as Johan thought he knew who I meant from my description, and his hunch turned out to be correct. Aksel wasn't home, so I left his bike where I had found it.

Johan and Stella had already eaten but Stella offered me some "hash cakes" she had cooked earlier. I

politely declined, explaining that I had discovered that cannabis and myself really didn't mix that well, and provided a narration of the day's events as proof, which they both found very amusing. But Stella insisted all that confusion had to be only because I wasn't used to it, and I had to let myself adjust to it gradually. I reluctantly ate one of her cakes. Thankfully, it didn't have anything like the powerful and lasting effect of the marijuana joint I had smoked with Axsel.

Johan and I drank into the night, talking about all sorts of things. I asked about places to see in the city centre, as I had decided to make my move back to Rotterdam the next day, and may have time to kill between buying my train ticket and actually getting the train. He told me he had never considered what was worth seeing in the city from a foreign visitor's point of view, but suggested that the Botanical Gardens and the National Gallery were both pretty central.

Without time to visit both, I visited only the Copenhagen Botanical Gardens. Run by the University of Copenhagen, the gardens covered a much larger area than I would have expected for their central location, and they dated back over a hundred years. Around noon, I took the train to Amsterdam.

Although Copenhagen is less than 700 kilometres from Rotterdam as the crow flies, the train journey was closer to 1,000 km, and it took over 11 hours to reach Amsterdam. After the short train ride from Amsterdam to Rotterdam, and the metro to Willeke's shared house, it was way past midnight by the time I arrived back. But at least, unlike on the outward journey, I didn't have to sleep on a bench!

Back Home from Home

On my second day back in the Netherlands, which by now felt like a home from home, I paid a visit to my ex-Kibbutz Magen 'house mother' (a volunteer with responsibility to represent the volunteers as a whole) at her flat in Utrecht, the country's 4th-largest city at the time of my visit, with a population of about 240,000. After coffees and pancakes at a nearby pancake house, and long conversations on the intervening time since we had last met, Eva went on to take care of some business of her own which involved her parents, and I had a look around the city alone.

I visited, among other places, the Rijn en Zon (Rhine and Sun) windmill, actually the first Dutch windmill (or any windmill) I had viewed up close despite having now spent a collective several months in the country. Although this invention was originally Japanese, it had already become internationally associated with Holland by this time, so I suppose I felt I ought to make an effort to see something that had become a part of this country's image. Yet, as I learnt, the Dutch windmill heyday had long passed. 80 years previously, the Netherlands had boasted over 10,000 windmills, but by the 1980s, barely more than a tenth of that number remained. The history of this particular windmill was one of having repeatedly faced demolition, but after the Utrecht municipality bought it in 1974, it was finally restored in 1977.

I met Eva again at her flat in the late afternoon before returning to Rotterdam, and related my wanderings around the city, but she seemed preoccupied with something. I asked her if there was anything wrong? She then told me about a conundrum she faced in her relationship with her parents and asked me how I thought she should handle it? I really couldn't understand why anybody would want to ask advice on such a matter from someone like myself, of all people, but found myself listening with growing fascination as she related the details of her dilemma.

Apparently, her parents had not been on good terms with her since she had taken up with an 'older man', and they were still insisting, even up to their meeting with her that very afternoon, that she break off the relationship. Still knowing but few of the details, I instantly took sides with 'young love', and in my own mind I was preparing to tell Eva to 'follow her heart' and not listen to her parents. But she then went on to tell me that the man she was involved with was a writer she had been working for as what is now known as a 'carer'. She also mentioned his name. I had actually seen this writer's books, although only available in Dutch, on sale at railway stations and various other locations in the Netherlands, and reacted with surprise and incredulity. But, still, I sided with love against convention, and told Eva that if she really wanted to be with the writer, she shouldn't listen to her parents.

"Why are you working as his carer?" I asked. "Is there something wrong with him?"

"He's wheelchair-bound", Eva replied, "so he needs help on a daily basis. He's been in a wheelchair since his late sixties..."

"Since the late sixties?" I asked. The late 1960s were only a decade and a half ago.

"No, since *his* late sixties. He's 74 now!"

I must have been staring at Eva blankly while I wondered how to reply. Inwardly, I was flabbergasted. Eva was an intelligent, attractive 22-year-old girl. I had assumed the 'older man' to be in his thirties or forties. What was she doing falling in love with a wheelchair-bound man in his seventies? Was it money? At first blush, that seemed the most obvious 'attraction'. Well, I certainly found it hard to believe that it could be a purely physical attraction, at least from Eva's point of view. And yet, I found it almost as hard to believe that Eva could be so mercenary as to ingratiate herself with this well-off old fellow in the hope of benefiting when he left this world. She was one of the most altruistic people I knew; in fact I had previously pondered on the fact that Eva was the only volunteer at Kibbutz Magen who would have willingly taken on the work she did, looking after the rest of us volunteer workers. None of the rest of us would have taken on her work load, that was for sure.

I was unable to offer Eva any useful advice. I made some bland comments to the effect that it wasn't easy for me to give her any advice without knowing a lot of personal details, and even then I would have to give the matter a lot of thought.

But I couldn't stop thinking about Eva's relationship with this writer. Late that night, I thought I had the answer to the question as to how Eva could have fallen for this old fellow. And for that reason I couldn't sleep, as I turned this idea over and over in my mind.

It seemed to me that some women were inexorably attracted to men of artistic talent. The rest just didn't matter. Probably the same circumstances existed among men, but certainly not to the same extent. Even though these women were in a minority, they certainly existed. Picasso was an excellent example of this 'artistic magnetism' some men had. Even in his last years he had always had his choice of beautiful young female companions. The Dutch writer may not have been in the same league, in the world of literature, as Picasso was in the world of visual arts, yet he obviously exuded a sufficient allure through his art to attract at least one attractive female over half a century younger than himself.

But the deeper reason I couldn't sleep was that I felt this was the ace I had up my sleeve. I didn't even want to attract hordes of female admirers; I only wanted one.

Diane knew nothing of my artistic work. I hadn't even mentioned to her in the year we spent together that I had been enrolled at an art college shortly before going to Israel; that I had been accepted purely on the strength of my work, without even an 'O-level' in art, or in any subject for that matter.

My cousin Paul had recently graduated from the Chelsea College of Arts, and had already won several awards for his work. What if I were to try to pull off the same feat of getting enrolled on the strength of my work as I had with the mediocre Warrington College of Art, with the much more prestigious Chelsea College of Arts, regarded at the time as one of the leading art schools in the UK? Then, surely Di would gravitate back to me. *Surely!* If a wheelchair-bound man in his 70s could attract someone like Eva through his art, then certainly I could attract a woman of almost my own age through my art! I began to plan in my mind making an application to the Chelsea College of Arts.

But before I took the ferry back to Felixstowe, I dropped in at the apartment of Willeke's friends Bob and Linda, who lived close to Rotterdam Centraal Station, from where I would make the short train journey to the ferry terminal at Hook of Holland. As I had ample time, Bob suggested that we first take a meal at a newly-opened pizza restaurant nearby. He was a teetotaler, so, he laughed, he didn't want to buy me a drink in a bar, but he still wanted to treat me, to congratulate me for having landed the job at the travel agency.

Bob was five or six years older than me, and a local, so I was used to him being much more knowledgeable and better informed about many things relating to life in the Netherlands, but this time he proved himself to be at least as knowledgeable about my fictitious job in the UK as I was. No sooner had we ordered our meals than Bob looked directly at me and asked: "What's the name of the travel agency you're going to work at?"

His question caught me completely off-guard. I had not expected any questions about my ostensible place of work. "Name?" I asked.

"Yes, name. You know", he went on slowly, gesturing with both hands which added a ridiculous air to his question, "like your name is Alix. And my name is Bob! And the name of this city is Rotterdam. What's the name of the travel agency you're going to work at?"

"Well", I responded all too late, "it's just called Streatham Travel, after the district in London where it's based..."

But by this time Bob was smiling broadly and chuckling: "I suppose that's better than it just being called 'Travel Agency'! In the Netherlands, you need to take training to do airline ticketing work. I have a friend who works in a travel agency; he had to take a 3-month, full-time course for that."

I decided to stick to my pretence, despite my cover having apparently been blown wide open. I didn't want the others to think I had been misleading them. "Yeh", I responded, "it's something like that in the UK too, but the agency said they'd pay for that training. I can, sort of, do it in stages; on-the-job training we call it in England."

Bob smiled knowingly, and added the ultimate affront: "They must have been very desperate to find someone! Well, congratulations anyway, on whatever job it is you've found..."

Later, I thought more about this conversation.

I liked to turn things over in my mind while watching the churning waters below from the deck of the ferry, whether that was the ferry between Holland and England or the ferry between England and the Isle of Man, and then think some more about things, while sitting in the warmth inside. It was only when I was alone on the ferry that I gave thought to Bob's assertion that training was needed to work in a travel agency. If only three months were needed, as he had indicated, why not consider taking such a course, I asked myself?

That way, I would have a fall-back should I fail to be accepted at the Chelsea College of Arts. And even if I were accepted at the art college, it would be unlikely that I would begin my studies there right away. I may well need to wait anything up to a year.

Throughout all these considerations, and the images they conjured up in mind of my future life as a London-based part-time traveller, there was one part that remained blank, like a part of a collage that was only lightly pencilled in. I knew without a doubt that an indispensable part of settling down was one's 'other half'. For me, that meant the wife or girlfriend I was to live with. Without that person, I knew it would be difficult to convince myself of the value of settling down; I may even end up hitting the road again despite myself, with no proper plans and no intention to return. Even with a good job in travel, or with a career in the visual arts.

Perhaps this feeling could have been attributed to nothing more than social conditioning. Since childhood, I had heard word usages like 'get married and settle down', that seemed to imply that marriage came first, and then, once married, one would naturally settle down. But to me the idea of settling down without even being married - or similarly 'attached' - just didn't seem to make much sense. I wanted to 'settle down', but I didn't want to settle down with myself. I knew then that winning back Di's heart was key to my plans to settle down, without that component and with just myself for company, the rest of any 'settling down' construction I could build would surely just fall apart.

Chapter Two: The Big Smoke

Back in London, I quickly found a part-time, evening job at a petrol station less than 10 minutes' walk from where I lived, on the corner of Streatham High Street and Strathbrook Road, where Streatham High Street becomes London Road, the road connecting London to Brighton, which dates back to Roman times.

I discovered that training was indeed needed to ensure employment at a travel agency, and I enrolled in a series of three courses to achieve that end, known as the British Airways Fares & Ticketing courses at a 'travel training college' in Oxford Street. The third course dealt with computer operation, a new field in those days.

I had a love-hate relationship with London which on this, my third stay in the city was, finally, more love than hate.

But what I didn't like about London was essentially what I didn't like about Britain. London was a city that seemed to me to epitomise the British class system and the country's long history of socially-ingrained inequality. Huge differences existed in the affluence of the various districts comprising the city, and this was one of the things I was least looking forward to getting used to again after the relative equity of life in the Netherlands. There were north-south differences, east-west differences, and sometimes remarkable differences between one district and its immediate neighbour or neighbours, all within one city. That said, London offered more opportunities to break out of class boundaries than any other place in Britain, especially for young people, and this was something I did like about Britain's capital.

In 1984, class differences were no longer as pronounced as they had been a couple of decades earlier, when life in affluent Chelsea, in London's south-west was contrasted with life just south of the river from Chelsea, in Battersea, in the 1968 film *Up the Junction*, but they were still an inescapable part of life in the UK.

As far as the overall north-south dichotomy was concerned, one of the ways this manifested was transport. At the time, the London Underground metro system, one of the most extensive in the world, with a total of eleven very long lines, had just one line, the Victoria Line coming anywhere near where I lived. For the districts directly south of central London, this line stopped at Brixton. After that, you took the bus to get any further. What this meant for the many thousands of people like myself, travelling to central London for work every day, was considerably more commuting time than would have been the case living the same distance from central London (Charing Cross Station is usually taken as being the centre) to the west, north, or even east.

Nevertheless, I still managed to slip into a relatively enjoyable lifestyle in the south London district of Streatham, sharing Anton's home with fellow bedsit dwellers Nicky, a lanky, blond and bearded Lambeth Council employee originally from Yorkshire and several years older than myself, and an Irish lad named Jim, in his late teens, usually employed in construction. A fourth bedsit room was occupied by a man in his early 40s who travelled a lot and used it only occasionally. In the evenings I worked at the petrol station, and during the day I studied at the 'travel training college' in Oxford Street.

However, there remained this constantly nagging problem of a potential glitch in my newly settled lifestyle.

As soon as I had returned from Scandinavia, I phoned Di to let her know that I was now living in south London, "like you, Di". We talked on the phone for about half an hour about my travels, her family, and our mutual friends and acquaintances, but to my surprise, when I revealed my intention to apply to study on a degree course in fine art at the Chelsea College of Arts, Di's response was muted; just a perfunctory encouragement and no sign of surprise that I may be able to get myself enrolled there. I suggested we meet up the next day, a Saturday, thinking that after I explained to her that the school was one of the country's top art colleges, she would see me in a different light and her attitude towards me would change for the better. Apart from that, after nearly a year apart, I was keen to see her again, and begin working to mend our broken relationship.

But although she would have loved to meet up again, or she told me, she would be busy all day that Saturday. I didn't insist. I felt it was enough for the time being that we had re-established contact.

Two months later, and after several failed attempts at meeting up with Di, I had successfully completed the first two of the three British Airways ticketing courses, and was now faced with the question of whether or not to return to my parent's home in the Isle of Man for Christmas? It was a given that if my four siblings and myself were all in the UK, then we would make our way home to stay for at least a few days over the Christmas and New Year holidays.

But I had read in *Time Out* magazine that The Police were to play Wembley Stadium the last few days of the year. Seeing any one of those concerts would make the trip to the Isle of Man difficult to arrange. But I knew Di to be a big Police fan, and after some thought, decided that the concert should take precedence and bought two tickets for the 28th. I called Di and after exchanging pleasantries asked her excitedly if she knew who was playing Wembley at the end of the month?

"I've no idea..."

"The Police! And guess who's got two tickets for the 28th?"

There was a pause. "You're going to see The Police? I didn't know you liked them."

I didn't particularly like them, but I didn't say as much. "Well, you like them, Di, don't you? You used to love them!"

"Me? No, I'm not really into The Police at all..."

"But you used to listen to them all the time, Di!"

Their songs, playing on her portable cassette recorder in her room at Kibbutz Magen in Israel were inextricably tied up with our first intimate evenings alone, and I only realised much later that this was probably the precise reason for her loss of interest in the band.

"Oh, that was a long, long time ago."

"It was less than two years ago!"

"Well, don't live in the past, Alix."

I tried a change of tack: "C'mon, Di, let's just go to see them anyway. You told me you're not going anywhere over the holidays. I've already got the tickets, because I thought she loved The Police. I don't want to go alone. Won't you come with me anyway? They're a great band, you have to admit!"

"Sorry. I'd love to go just to make you happy, but I really don't like The Police; I think I'd hate it!"

"Well, what kind of music are you into now then, Di? Maybe we can go to see someone else instead...?"

"I'm just not really into music nowadays."

That didn't really leave me a lot of room for manoeuvre. I decided that if she wouldn't go to a concert with me, I would give it my best shot: "How about coming with me to the Isle of Man for Christmas? If you don't have plans to go anywhere else, why not come with me to my parents' place? I've already been to yours; now it's your turn!"

Again, there was a pause; short but perceptible: I knew she was thinking of an excuse. "Oh, I'd love to go with you, but not at Christmas, of all times. My mum and dad would never forgive me! I've never missed a Christmas at home."

I was about to suggest New Year as an alternative when the front door opened. It was my housemate, Nicky, who then wheeled his bicycle into the hall, removed his bicycle clips and clipped them to the frame of his bike. All this took place barely an arm's length from me, and the bike's owner maintained a strange, suppressed smile throughout. I wondered if he had overheard the conversation from outside the front door.

"Well, OK", I told Di, "I guess we'll just have to work with that as it is for the time being. Let's talk about it again in a few days' time; sorry, but I really have to go now!" I thanked her for calling before she had a chance to respond, and hung up the phone.

20 minutes later, as was my new habit, I dropped in at Nicky's room. Only he had a licensed TV and in those days you couldn't legally watch television at home in the UK without a license; my little portable set was only used for short periods late at night when I knew that Anton would not open the door to the people from the prowling TV detector vans, or anyone else for that matter. Incredible as it seemed to all my foreign friends and acquaintances, these vans, which were equipped with TV signal detectors crept around at a snail's pace in residential areas and when they located a signal coming from a location with no matching television license registered, they pounced! They could even enlist the help of local police.

Nicky had already changed out of his wet clothes and was settled in his armchair in front of the TV. But he leaned over to the small fridge on his right, extracted a can of Heineken, and handed it to me:

"Here", he told me in his usual self-deprecating manner, "it's not much to drown your sorrows, but you don't normally even get that much from this stingy old git!" I took the can and sat on the only other chair in the room, a hard-backed wooden chair, but looked at him for an explanation. He laughed and added that I should just forget her.

"What?"

"You're better off without her. Look, OK, this is no palace we live in, but what do you lack? At least you've got your freedom! Do you want to give that up for the sake of a regular legover?"

"Sorry, Nicky, but you've lost me completely: what on Earth are you talking about?"

Nicky just smiled and chuckled. I insisted again that I hadn't the slightest idea what he was talking about. "But, thanks for the beer anyway!"

Nicky then told me how he, a Yorkshireman, had come to be living in south London. "You've probably already guessed; it was a woman. And she ditched me the moment someone more upwardly mobile appeared on the scene."

He then went on to relate a disturbing story of how he had plotted to burn her house down with her inside it and even went as far as hiding in waiting for her to return home, armed with a large canister of petrol, but never actually saw her come back home. Not wanting to possibly sacrifice other lives without taking the one he wanted, he eventually gave up.

I was quiet for some moments. "Well, that's some story, Nicky. You can be pretty sure I'd never let my actions be dictated by a woman like that, and I'd never go off the rails like that for anyone!"

Nick chuckled again, and smiled knowingly. "I'd recognise myself anywhere!" he laughed.

I shook my head, and told him he'd got the wrong end of the stick. I explained that the girl he'd probably overheard me talking to on the phone was just an old friend who probably secretly fancied me and was always looking for some excuse to meet up with me, but I never had the time.

However, I felt very uncomfortable with the feeling - or even the implication - that other people knew more about my personal life than I myself knew. From that point on, I became very wary of talking on the phone in Anton's hallway when any of the other bedsit residents were home.

And I remained committed to re-starting my relationship with Di, though I ended up spending both Christmas and New Year with my parents. I failed to even meet up with the girl. And into the bargain, I also failed to sell or even give away the two tickets to The Police concert. But something happened in late January that made me feel, if only for a few seconds, that my relationship with Di was about to change for the better...

A Short Weekend

It must have been the last week of January, 1984, when Anton called me to the pay phone in the hall downstairs. As I approached, I had a powerfully positive feeling: I felt I *had* to be Di, finally calling me of her own accord. I took the handset from Anton with a smile, and waited for him to retreat several paces towards

his own door before speaking.

"Hello?" I said as I pressed the receiver to my ear and cupped the mouthpiece with my hand to keep my conversation between myself and Di as much as possible.

"Yaaa-hooooo!" Came the shrill response. "Gotcha at last, mate! Gotcha at last!"

I recoiled from the receiver, and must have been looking at it in a mixture of shock and revulsion as I mentally debated whether or not to simply hang up. I held the receiver at arm's length, and heard another, shrill, but unclear sentence.

"Who is it?" I asked in a no-nonsense, waste-one-more-moment-of-my-time-and-I'll hang-up tone.

It was Josh, a likeable Kiwi I had briefly worked with on the boats in the marinas outside Athens in 1982. He explained that he had called several mutual friends from our time in Athens, one of whom had the phone number of my parents in the Isle of Man, and they in turn had given him my present number.

Josh was now working in a hostel in the Earls Court area of west London. But he told me that he'd go off his head if he didn't get out of the place soon, at least for a few days, and asked me if I had any travel plans. I answered that, no, I didn't; I was in fact in the process of settling down and had finished with travel for the foreseeable future.

"Yeh, right!" he laughed, then asked if I had any plans to return to the Isle of Man soon? I felt he was trying invite himself to travel there with me! I explained that I had only returned from the island a few weeks ago and wouldn't be going back anytime soon.

"Well, what about that girl who used to sleep on the floor of your place in Athens, what was her name?"

"You mean Christine?"

"Yeh, that's her! Isn't she from Jersey Island?"

"I think she's from Guernsey", I told him.

"What's the story with that place, the Channel Islands? Are they part of Britain or not?"

"From what I know, they're like the Isle of Man, where my parents live. They're not part of the UK, the British Commonwealth or the EEC, but they are part of Britain; they're not really independent."

"But I bet it would *fee!* like going abroad, going there, wouldn't it? Certainly, it's not England, right?"

"They're not in England, no"

"That's all I need. C'mon, mate, let's give Christine a visit; I've got to get out of this place or I'll go out of my mind!"

"You mean, just invite ourselves to stay with her?"

"Yeh, why not?"

I pointed out that it usually worked the other way around; you only visited other people if they invited you first.

Josh pleaded with me further, and I at first objected to the idea that it had to be me who invited us for the weekend. But I had to admit that I knew her better than Josh, and I also knew I still had her phone number, so eventually I called Christine and invited Josh and myself to stay with her in Guernsey for a long weekend. She sounded thrilled, and said it was no problem for both of us to stay either at her parent's home or her boyfriend's flat.

I called Josh to tell him to be ready Friday morning; Christine had informed me that the morning boat left Portsmouth at 9 am. It was already Wednesday. I was subjected to another round of whooping calls as if the man at the other end of the phone were at a rodeo show, and tried to think of a reasonable excuse for not being able to work Friday and Saturday evenings at the petrol station.

In order to reach Portsmouth Harbour by 9 am, I had to leave my Streatham bedsit before dawn on a very cold winter's morning. Yet, somehow, just having to make such an early start brought back an old familiar feeling of excitement at being about to embark on a journey. It was something I had first felt as a boy of 10 years old when my parents, sister and brother had all needed to rise at about three-thirty in the morning to set off on our overland drive to Yugoslavia. On that occasion, we had needed to make it to Dover by 8.00 am for the ferry to the continent.

I reminded myself that I really didn't want to make this trip, and was basically just going as a favour for Josh, who felt he didn't know Christine well enough to invite himself to visit her alone.

Josh was already at Waterloo when I arrived. He was four or five years older than me, and his prematurely thinning dark hair gave him the appearance of someone at least a few years older still. For some reason, he apparently wore shorts in any climate; in Athens in the summer of '82, he had worn shorts and t-shirts every day, and now, when I spotted him waiting in the forecourt of Waterloo Station, he was wearing shorts with a thick hooded anorak, and carrying a well-packed daypack on his back. This gave me the impression of an alpine hiker who had somehow taken the wrong turn on a hiking trail and ended up at a central London railway station.

The two-hour train ride to Portsmouth Harbour and the sailing to Guernsey was uneventful, but for a conversation I had with Josh.

For the first half of the seven-hour sailing I played chess with Josh on the fold-up 'travellers' chess' set I carried with me everywhere I travelled, as we sipped beers. I learnt the reason Josh hated his job so much. He claimed that, "at least half, and sometimes all" of the people who stayed at the hostel he worked at were either Aussies or Kiwis. He had hit the road to see the world and ended up seeing more Kiwis in London than he'd even met in New Zealand!

But at some point, our conversation took a strange turn. Facing me at the window-side table in the lounge where we sat, Josh looked straight at me and told me: "Actually AI" - he always called me AI - "there's a problem I've been meaning to talk to you about..."

"Oh?" I asked. Then, after a pause, I urged him to continue, though inwardly I was dreading being burdened with someone else's personal, or perhaps even medical problems. I could sense that it was something serious, something that he had given a lot of thought to. An image of Dave came to mind. Dave was one of my fellow kibbutz volunteers in Israel. He was telling me how Andi, an Austrian volunteer, had revealed to him that he was gay and fancied Dave. I hoped it wasn't something like this.

"It's you!" Josh laughed with a flourish of his right hand in my direction. He then took another gulp of beer. My heart sank. The last thing I wanted was to be burdened with a male fancier.

Then Josh continued: "I mean, how do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"This!" he exclaimed in a gesture which took in both the boat and the expanse of sea outside the window. "I mean, do you remember when I met you on that boat we worked on in Glyfada, outside Athens? You took off the very next day on a hitch-hiking trip with your girlfriend! And here you are, still travelling, having just come back from the North Pole!"

"You mean Helsinki?" I laughed "That was nearly six months ago, and it's a long way from the North Pole, Josh!"

"It's close enough! Closer than this old scumbag is ever likely to get." he replied pointing a finger at his own chest.

"I mean," he went on, "just how do you manage it? I want this lifestyle, AI! I don't want to settle down now that I've only just started travelling. I know I started off a bit late, but I figure if I go back to Enzed when I'm about 35, then I'll be about ready for settling down."

I sighed. I would have felt great relief that it was only my lifestyle Josh was impressed with rather than my person, but I had heard something very similar a couple of times before. As I listened to Josh relate his dilemma, a similar conversation from the previous year came to mind, and those events flashed through my mind.

The previous year, while in Athens, I had come to know a man named Mohsen, a friend of my flatmate and host, Saad. Unlike Saad, who had qualified as an Arabic teacher in Egypt and only worked as a waiter because he couldn't find anything more rewarding in Athens, Mohsen had only a basic education. But he had trained as a welder and had been working in Athens for several years by the time I met him. Unlike most Egyptians, he was dark-skinned enough to be regarded as a negro, something he claimed had caused him endless unhappiness in Egypt. He had gone to Greece expecting to find the locals less racially prejudiced, but found them even more so.

I knew he wasn't exaggerating in this respect. Once, I had met up with him for a coffee in central Athens on his day off (I worked only evenings dishwashing, so I had free time in the day). We had a coffee and a chat - despite his background, Mohsen was the only friend of Saad with a fairly good command of English - at a Syntagma Square cafe in central Athens. He then excused himself, explaining that he had only one day off a month, and he was looking for better-paid work, so he wanted to use his free time to apply for work at some of the companies near the lorry factory where he worked in an industrial district a few kilometres from the city centre. I suggested that I go with him. I joked that I didn't mind getting my hands dirty if the pay was good enough, and I certainly didn't have to be constantly cleaning them eight hours a night, every night (through dishwashing).

At the first and only place we walked into, a small steel works near to Mohsen's lorry works, we went directly into the manager's office, the door of which was wide open. The boss, a lean, slightly haggard-looking man in his 40s, surveyed us with a look of slight puzzlement as he saw us approach. "Yes?" he asked, looking up at us from his desk. Mohsen explained that he was a welder looking for work, and wondered if there was any available? For several moments there was no reaction. The man's face turned first ashen, as he regarded Mohsen with an air of disbelief. Then, the blood quickly returned to his face again, as he stood up and shouted at us: "Out! Out! Get out of my company! How *dare* you come here looking for work! Go back to your own country, you dirty nigger! Get out of my company! Out of my country!" (of course, the actual discourse was liberally laden with obscenities; this was Greece, after all). The boss reached for a baseball bat leaning in the corner of his office and literally chased us out of the office and back onto the street.

We returned to central Athens, and took another drink at a different cafe. Mohsen told me this time that although he now took one day off every month, he had worked every single day for his first year and a half in Greece. It transpired that in over three years in Greece, he had seen nothing of the country but Athens, not even the beaches outside the capital where I had worked on yachts the previous year. I had thought of myself as a rough and ready shoestrapping traveller, willing to work hard in unrewarding jobs to pay for his travels, but in comparison to Mohsen, my lot seemed rather comfortable to say the least. I told Mohsen that I was planning on taking a few days off to see some Greek islands - although in fact I was only making those plans right there and then in my head - and asked if he wanted to come along? Mohsen needed some convincing that it was reasonable and normal for any able-bodied man to get 'sick' once in a while, but in the end we decided that we would both come down with flu for a few days.

The first island we visited was Naxos. Naxos isn't far from Paros, our second stop, and part of the same Cyclades island group. Naxos is the largest island in the group at 430 square km, and at the time of our visit had a population of a little over 14,000.

The boat journey of about 150 km from Piraeus, just outside Athens, to Naxos took nearly five hours, most of which time Mohsen and I had spent playing chess with a trio of young Italian backpackers. Conversation was difficult, but we didn't need much talk apart from the word 'check' in each other's languages. Mohsen wiped them off the board, and me too, so I quickly decided to opt for 'observer status' only.

In Naxos on the first evening, I took an evening meal with Mohsen, and we soon fell into conversation with Philip, a young crew-cut Mancunian with a sharp off-the-cuff sense of humour, and Katerina, his Greek girlfriend from Thessalonica, where Philip had been working as an English teacher when he met her.

At this restaurant in Naxos, I witnessed another example of the same problem Mohsen had encountered at his 'job application' in Athens. At some point in the proceedings, Mohsen, in animated conversation on some subject or other swept his arm across the table, where it struck his glass and sent it flying into the air. It landed a couple of metres away, with a smashing sound that was followed fractions of a second later by a scream of alarm from a foreign woman at the nearest table to it.

The waiter, a swarthy man in his late 20s, tall for a Greek but very skinny, came rushing out onto this veranda-type area in front of the restaurant where we were eating, cursing Mohsen in the process in racist terms without the slightest hesitation, and telling him that this was a respectable restaurant and no place for

people like him. In the meantime, I had knelt to pick up the pieces of glass, as Mohsen apologised profusely to the woman who had screamed. She laughed lightheartedly and said that she had just been taken by surprise. But the damage had already been done. At first, Mohsen completely ignored the waiter and his diatribe, but then the waiter actually pushed Mohsen, telling him to get out of the place and leave the guests alone to enjoy their meals in peace. It was not a forceful push, but more of a shooing away motion. But it was definitely the wrong thing to do. Mohsen, who was much more muscular, turned around to stare the waiter down, with an order to shut his mouth, get another glass, and another bottle of wine to go with it.

I knew from first-hand experience how common it was for guests to shout in anger at waiters in Greek restaurants, but this certainly wasn't often seen the other way around; it was obviously more than Mohsen's pride could take to have a waiter barking racist insults at him in front of a dozen fellow diners, even if it wasn't certain they understood Greek. The waiter looked at Mohsen with an air of astonishment; he had apparently never thought a black man would have the audacity to give him orders. He turned on his heels, and stormed back into the restaurant.

A few moments later, he returned, several paces behind the manager of the restaurant, a red-faced, overweight man in his late 40s or early 50s. This character came literally charging out onto the veranda like a bull, shouting obscenities and racist insults, and threatening to "have the police put you all in hospital"! He picked up a chair and made to push it, legs first, at Mohsen, who was standing up and taking a step backwards to avoid it. The manager then swung the chair at me. I ducked, and the momentum of the manager's own swinging motion made him lose his balance and fall. I then noticed that Mohsen, as well as Philip and Katerina were already descending the steps leading from the veranda area to the street as swiftly as they could. I decided to follow them, and as I looked over my shoulder, I saw the restaurant proprietor, now back on his feet, making obscene gestures in our direction. "I know where you are staying," he shouted, "my brother is the chief of police, and he will put you all in hospital!"

The four of us made our way to the harbour, at a swift pace. There, we stopped to sit on the quayside and discussed what had just happened. We decided unanimously that there was no possible way the restaurant manager could have known the two different guesthouses where we were staying; this was just typical Greek bluster. However, we couldn't know for sure that the man's brother was not the local chief of police, and his threat that his brother would put us "in hospital", rather than "in jail", was intriguing, and a little worrying. We discussed this for a while, with Katerina providing a couple of appalling examples of police brutality she had heard of from friends in her home city. We concluded, there and then, that it would be safer for us all to just leave the island. I noted that there was a ferry which had just come into the harbour and may be leaving soon, and walked over to ask one of the nearby dock workers if that was the case. It turned out to be leaving at about midnight, for Paros. We decided to take it, and with just an hour and a half to spare, the four of us swiftly returned to our respective accommodation to get our things and rendezvous back at the quayside.

We took the midnight ferry to Parikia, the capital of Paros. I bemoaned the fact that we had all paid for our rooms at our guesthouses and had lost that money, but Phil joked that we had come out on top regardless, by virtue of having had four meals at the expense of the "man with the chair"! The restaurant owner and waiter had not even paused to consider that we hadn't yet paid for our meals! We spent the journey on deck, enjoying cool sea breezes under a crystal clear sky full of stars and a full moon, drinking coffees, talking about the evening's events, Philip's life in Thessalonica, Katerina's impressions of life in the UK (from her one short visit), where she would soon be living with her boyfriend, and so on and so forth. The sailing took a little over an hour.

Disembarking in Paros at past 1 am in the morning, there was no obvious place for us to go. After looking around for establishments of any kind still open, we ended up in a bar, which happened to belong to a guesthouse. We took drinks there and lingered until the bar closed at 4 am. As the guesthouse had only one room available, Mohsen and I let Phil and his girlfriend take it, and we said our farewells. After the bar closed, Mohsen and I strolled back down to the harbour, still discussing the evening's events, and reflecting on Greek national characteristics. It seemed fascinating to me that someone could feel chagrined by the very presence of a dark-skinned man, and especially his refusal to be bullied, yet feel no embarrassment at all at trying to clobber customers with a chair, in full view of half a dozen tables of diners, shouting obscenities and racist insults into the bargain.

Then we noticed a ferry preparing to sail to Mykonos, the first of the day, and decided to take it. Why not?

Our time in Mykonos was probably just as much of an adventure for Mohsen as our first stop, but in a different, and more agreeable way.

Mykonos is another large island in the Cyclades group, and it also had a population of around 14,000 at the

time of our visit. At that time, the island already had its own airport, but very few flights, and the vast majority of visitors to Mykonos arrived there the same way we did. Later, as tourism developed there, the airport would not only host domestic flights, but flights to various international locations as well. But at the time of our visit, Mykonos was still relatively quiet, neither the 'gay mecca' it later became famous for being, nor the expensive 'Ibiza of the Eastern Med'.

On the deck of the ferry to Mykonos, we met Mary-Ann, an American from some small town in Ohio I can't remember the name of, with a happy-go-lucky attitude and a pleasant smile. As a 'gap-year' student with a Greek mother, she had come to live and work in Athens, and was doing some independent travel around the country of her maternal roots before looking for work in the capital. We ended up sharing a room about a kilometre from the town centre. Or, a "killer-metre", as Mary-Ann put it.

Mohsen had learnt British English, and had never been exposed to American English. Mary-Ann, on the other hand, coming from small-town America, had never been exposed to British English. This resulted in a series of misunderstandings, almost one in every other sentence. As the one who had to do the 'translating', I came to realise how just a couple of years of travelling had made me intimately familiar with a variety of different English accents and pronunciations, without even so much as noticing it. Mary-Ann had never been outside her hometown until a month or two previously, so hearing words like 'route', 'schedule' and so on with non-American pronunciations invariably left her wondering what we were talking about.

We had taken out a room for three, which is what the old woman running the guesthouse assumed we wanted, and - without planning - we toured the town and its surroundings as a trio that day. This included taking a hike into the island's interior, which rises up to an elevation of over 300 metres. We hiked inland to a picturesque village in the centre of the island where we took lunch before continuing to a stunningly beautiful beach on the north-west side of the island, without a fraction of the number of tourists of the main town. We spent most of the remaining afternoon there before heading back to town. The trails we took were not signposted hiking trails, but just simple footpaths which local people had probably been using since before there were roads and vehicles.

The next day, Mary-Ann left for another island, while Mohsen and myself, at a sudden loss for what else to do, decided to head home. After our return to Athens, I didn't see Mohsen for over a week, which was unusual as he lived within walking distance of Saad's flat. When he finally dropped by at Saad's place, he told me he had spent a lot of time reflecting on our short island-hopping trip.

It was more usual that people regarded travellers with a little distrust, particularly older people. But with some people, especially those in their teens and 20s like myself, the opposite was often the case.

Mohsen told me with a serious air: "I've thought a lot about our trip to the islands. I know now that you are living life the correct way. I've decided I want to live like you. I think a man's 20s are not a time to be working hard, or trying to make a home and a family. Better to travel in your 20s; to see the world. A man can settle down with a home and family in his 30s or even later; this is what I think now. I don't want to spend the rest of my 20s working twice as hard as Greeks for half the money. I've decided that from now on, I will work only for the money needed to travel and see places..."

At first I had to laugh. I was taken aback and flattered that someone actually envied my way of life, which was not even my own first choice. My first choice of lifestyle had been to settle down in London with an English girl; I was only travelling because I didn't know what else to do. Nevertheless, the fact that after just a short, 3-day island trip Mohsen felt this way, made me realise that the lifestyle was very attractive to some people and just a few days travel could make an indelible impression on someone who hadn't previously travelled very much.

But I also realised that Mohsen had a hard time getting any work at all in Athens and I didn't think it was in his own best interests to pursue the kind of uncertain lifestyle I lived. However, I didn't say anything to deter him, as I didn't really know how serious he was.

Mohsen lost his job only a couple of weeks later, apparently just for the sake of taking a trip to northern Greece with a West German girl he had met in a bar, and thereafter he could not hold down any job for more than a few weeks. I felt guilty for not having done more to persuade him not to give up working hard for his future in Greece just for the sake of travel.

So by the time Josh asked me for my "advice", I almost knew what to tell him even before he elaborated on his "dilemma".

But Josh then veritably poured out his heart: "The other thing is my dad, Al. He's 70 this year and pretty frail even for that. He's asking me to go back home now. I mean, I think he doesn't believe my mum's up to looking after him. What do you think I should do? I mean, y'know, Christ, I've been away less than two years! I haven't really seen anything yet! I'm thinking of going back in about another six or seven years. What would you do? You wouldn't go back, would you?"

"Well, Josh...actually, you might be surprised, but I *would* go back if I were you..."

He gave me a wry smile and pointed at me: "Like hell you would! That's the last thing *you* would do."

Suddenly I realised that Josh was not really asking for my advice at all, as he claimed. He had already made up his mind not to go back to New Zealand; he was merely asking for the endorsement of someone he felt certain would give it; an incurable travel-addict: me. My endorsement was intended to put his heart at ease, to relieve him of the sense of guilt he felt for refusing to return to his family home to look after his elderly father. I didn't want to do that. And it didn't fit in with my new lifestyle as a responsible, part-time traveller either.

After a couple of moments, Josh began again, as if he hadn't got his message across the first time: "I don't *want* to go back at this time. I'm already 28. I want to see more of the world while I still can..."

"Well, you can't always just do what you want, Josh. Sometimes you have to do what you don't want", I told him. Even as I heard myself speak, I reminded myself of my old school, authoritarian, disciplinarian father. That wasn't a comfortable feeling. But I was determined not to let my Kiwi friend get the impression that I approved of him abandoning his elderly father just to indulge in travel.

"You've got to see the big picture, Josh," I continued. "Put yourself in your old man's shoes. How would you feel if your son wouldn't come home just so he could go having some kind of endless holiday on the other side of the planet?"

Until that point, we had both been slowly sipping beers from bottles, and Josh's bottle was still half full. He stared at me for a few moments, then picked up his bottle, gulped down the remaining half, slammed the empty bottle of the table, and said: "Right! And you're the only exception, eh? You just do what you like, go where you like, shag every woman you like, and just generally have a non-stop travel party! Everyone else has to be 'responsible!'"

I was taken aback by Josh's outburst, and didn't know how to respond. I didn't know how Josh could possibly conceive of my relationships with Meena and Di as "shagging every woman I liked", but he was evidently furious at my response to his quandary.

"No, I don't" I finally responded in measured terms. "Look, Josh, travel's great. Who would deny that? But just don't build your life around it. Build your life around a career and a home. That's what I'm doing now. I've finished with all that aimless travel crap now. In fact, my mind's set on settling down in London. I've nearly finished a travel agents' ticketing course for British Airways certificates, so I can get a regular job in a travel agency. I'm travelling now, but this is just a short holiday, like other people take."

I went on to explain that I had decided that in future I would travel no more than five or six hundred miles from London and suggested that he could take a similar approach to quenching his thirst for travel, while still being able to take care of his father.

"Well, thanks a lot, mate!" There was more than a tinge of venom in his voice.

I shrugged. I didn't know what else to suggest.

"There's nowhere within 600 miles of Timaru that isn't New Zealand, except perhaps the Chatham Islands, and I've already been there, and there isn't anything bloody there anyway!"

"Oh, right, I see. New Zealand is a bit isolated, I suppose".

"Yeh, you could say that", Josh responded sarcastically. "It's a bit isolated, alright!"

He then fell silent as he regarded me with a strangely cool air that I hadn't seen in him before. After a few moments, he continued: "I just don't know if you're only pulling my leg, or if you really have become a boring old fart before your time!"

Before I could respond, he stood up. "This game's yours", he told me waving his hand dismissively in the direction of our unfinished chess game. "I going to see if there's anyone on this boat to talk to who still has some life left in them!"

I had to laugh to myself as Josh stormed off. But I was determined I wasn't going to say just what he wanted me to for the sake of harmonious relations.

I feel asleep with my thoughts and woke up as the boat was pulling into the ferry terminal

"Coming, old man?" Josh asked as he shook my shoulder. "Should I get a wheelchair for you?"

Despite the sarcasm, Josh was now smiling and seemed a lot more relaxed. It struck me that perhaps he had indeed met someone to talk to who still had a bit of life left in them.

The Storm Riders

As we disembarked from the ferry at Saint Peter Port, the island's capital, Josh asked me excitedly if I realised that Guernsey was actually a lot closer to France than to England. I told him that of course I did. "I bet most of the people here are as fluent in French as they are in English, with France just around the corner!" he commented.

"There's this place called St. Malo", he continued excitedly, hardly paying attention to where he was walking and almost bumping into people as we passed through the ferry terminal. "It's less than a three-hour boat ride away; we've *definitely* got to go there, Al. *Definitely*, now we're so nearby.

"There's this spooky castle half in the sea there, and you wouldn't believe it, but I actually saw a photo of this place about five years ago and I knew then that I had to see it firsthand. Maybe it was a premonition! We can go there just for one or two days..."

I shook my head emphatically. "Not a chance, Josh. This is three nights max in Guernsey for me, then I have to be back in London town, working and training for my future. If you want to go there, you're on your own." In fact, I knew exactly where he was talking about, having seen the same magazine on board the ferry. It was a Norman-era abbey described in the magazine as one of medieval Europe's greatest marvels, and I would have been as keen to visit as Josh was, but I didn't want to encourage him.

"Anyway, there's a castle right over there if you just want to see a castle", I said pointing in the direction of Castle Cornet, which lies at the entrance to Saint Peter Port. Formerly a tidal island, the castle is also known as Cornet Rock or Castle Rock.

"Oh, right. How did I miss that? Well, we'll definitely see that too, we can have to look over there tomorrow. But why not make the most of being here? You're not going to be back here again anytime soon."

I shook my head again, and reaffirmed my commitment to be back in London on Monday.

Josh was now in an ebullient mood, our disagreement of a few hours earlier apparently completely forgotten. But he was nevertheless insistent. "Look, Al, where's your travellers' spirit? What's happened to that -"

He was cut short by an unusual sight, and his sentence remained unfinished. I had also noticed the same sight.

As we were walking out of the ferry terminal, we saw a girl walking swiftly towards us. She waved at us, and inwardly we must both have become aware that it was Christine, but it was only as she approached to within about 10 paces, that Josh and I realised with certainty at the same time that this waving and smiling girl was indeed Christine. There was something very different about her.

"Christine!" I exclaimed as she stepped towards us. I was at least sure by then that it was her. For a second or two I hesitated, but then I pulled her towards me and gave her a hug and a peck on the cheek. As I did, I noticed her nose ring.

"Sorry I'm late!" she said, adding a question as to our lightness of luggage: was that all we had?

Josh, on the other hand, had been left speechless, even as Christine greeted him with a kiss on the cheek and remarked that he had put on weight.

It wasn't that Christine as a person looked any different. She still had the same pleasant smile when she smiled and the same look of melancholy when she didn't. She still had the same long, dark, straight hair that fell nearly all the way down her back, only now it was flecked with green and red. But her style of dress had certainly changed dramatically: torn jeans with a zip inexplicably halfway down her left thigh, a kind of star or explosion design of darker fabric on her crotch, and a white T-shirt with something obscene printed on it that I couldn't quite read in full as it was mostly covered by a sleeveless leather jacket with the words 'Def Leppard' written out on the back in silver studs, and a skull and crossbones beneath those words.

Finally, as the three of us walked away from the ferry terminal, the power of speech returned to Josh: "Not your mum's embroidery work, is it, Chrissy?" he remarked, indicating the skull and crossbones.

Christine just smiled, but added after a few moments that her boyfriend Keefie, and the other boys in the club all dressed like that.

"The club?" I asked.

"Keefie's in the Storm Riders, a bikers' club; me too actually. You'll met him soon. You'll love him, I'm sure!" Then, looking at Josh, she remarked that she couldn't remember whether he drank or not - although she could remember that I did, she added with a laugh. Josh answered in the positive, and Christine exclaimed: "Great! You guys are all going to get along like a house on fire!"

We walked for about 20 minutes before coming to a quiet, rather picturesque alley, then we took a staircase from the street to an almost empty second floor flat which Christine explained was rented by Keefie, and here I left my airline shoulder bag and Josh left his daypack in the corner of a sparsely furnished living room. We talked about our ferry trip, about Josh's frustrating Aussie-centric hostel in London, and even about Athens and my overland trip from there with Di back to the UK. But we didn't get around to asking Christine anything about her life with Keefie, and the bikers' club, the Storm Riders.

Within a matter of minutes, however, we would have an introduction. As we walked across a street no more than ten minutes from the flat to meet Christine boyfriend, I noticed a number of motorcycles parked outside a pub, some rather carelessly, or so it seemed. The sound of pounding music reached us even before we crossed the road, and at the same time the door opened, the music became much more audible, and a scrawny man with long hair, dressed in blue patched and torn denims and a sleeveless leather jacket - not unlike Christine's - walked out and caught sight of us.

He looked at us with a very strange expression. I almost stopped in my tracks. I didn't know what was wrong, but I knew that something definitely was. I wondered if perhaps the scrawny man, from his point of view, was seeing something terrible, perhaps the 'grim reaper', rather than two young men and a young woman crossing the street. Then a peculiar expression crossed his visage that reminded me of a scene in a Hollywood science fiction movie I had seen a few years earlier in which one member of a spaceship crew had, unknown to himself, become host to an alien creature. Something was inside the man, bursting to get out.

Suddenly, before we reached him, the scrawny man twisted 90 degrees to his left, and vomit spewed from his mouth. "Keefie!" cried Christine, running the last few paces to his side. The man turned back towards me and Josh, and set eyes on me momentarily before once again turning towards the pub behind him and throwing up, this time with his whole body doubled over.

"Keefie, baby! Are you alright?" Christine asked as she crouched down next to him. After a few moments, Keefie straightened, turned and grinned at us, stating that he felt much better for "that puking" and that now he was ready for some serious drinking. Christine introduced us to him, but he disregarded the names Josh and Alix.

"I'm gonna call you Puke Face," he said to Josh, "'cos I puked as soon as I saw your face. And you," he told me, then hesitated, "Er...I'll call you Puke Face Two, 'cos I puked a second time when I saw you!"

Christine giggled, and smiled at us as if Keefie's words were true gems of wit. "Nice fella", I said to Josh under my breath as we entered the bar.

"Jesus!" Josh said in response, also under his breath, but much more forcefully. "Look at that!"

I followed his eyes and saw a heavily built, leather-jacketed man in his late 20s, wearing a WWII German army-style crash helmet, which he was forcefully banging against a pillar in the centre of the pub.

"That's Mad Max", Christine told us, having noticed Josh's reaction. "People say he begins each day with a whisky and a headbanging session. Without the helmet!"

Josh looked at the spectacle, then looked back at Christine, as if to check that all this was really something she was actually involved with. "I thought headbanging was just an expression. I didn't know there were people who actually banged their heads, like this guy!"

"Yeh, he's great fun, isn't he?", Christine laughed. "He's a friend of my dad's, too. You'll love Max..."

"A friend of your -"

Before leaving us to mingle with some of the other similarly-dressed guests who filled the pub - there didn't seem to be anyone there who wasn't in the club - Christine introduced us to a gaunt, humourless-looking man in his 30s named Mack, who had a four-inch scar on his left cheek, explaining that they also called him 'Mack the Knife' on account of the scar, which he got in a knife fight.

"So, you Aussie poofers come 'ere to learn 'ow to drink, right?" Mack asked.

"No, we already know how to drink", I replied, though I wasn't really sure about Josh. "And he's a Kiwi", I added pointing my thumb towards Josh.

"Well, that's 'is problem!"

Keefie explained, with a four-letter insult, that Kiwi meant New Zealander.

"Oh, yeh, I knew that", Mack responded unconvincingly. "Point is, do you Aussie poofers want to learn to drink? How about the 'nods? Are you up to joining a nodding session?"

"The nods?" Josh asked.

Mack shook his head in mock disgust, and took a bottle of Pernod that stood on the bar by his side into his hands, pointing out the name 'Pernod': "Pernod - the nods!" he explained.

"Oh, right! I said with a laugh, then added under my breath to Josh that I wasn't sure about his idea of fluency in French among the locals, judging from Mack's pronunciation of the drink. Mack then took four small spirit glasses and filled them with Pernod, a drink almost 50% stronger than the average Scotch whisky, at 68% alcohol.

"Nod One!" he stated before downing his drink in one. Keefie followed, and confirmed, "Nod One!". I got the idea and did likewise. Then Josh.

The empty glasses were swiftly refilled, and the ritual was repeated. This time Josh passed a glance at me before downing his drink, as if seeking permission. "Nod Two!" I told him with a smile, holding up my glass as if for a toast, then tapping my glass on his. "Nod Two!" Josh exclaimed, then told me under his breath, "We've got to get out of this place, Al..." Fortunately, the music was so loud, we didn't need to whisper.

I thought I knew how to leave, though it wasn't going to be easy. Christine had told us we could crash out at Keefie's flat whenever we were "ready"; the door was never locked as there wasn't anything there worth stealing. All I had to do was make a dignified retreat, but that would be difficult with Mack, Keefie and another biker, by the name of Dead Jed all doing the 'nods'. And then, just as the five of us put our glasses back on the bar having achieved Nod Four, Mad Max was suddenly by my side. He grabbed my glass, filled it, emptied it, and put it back on the bar, stating emphatically: "Nod Four!"

Mack wasn't having it: "You can't be at Nod Four, you daft twat! You didn't drink the other three!"

"That's easy solved!" Max then took my glass once again, then poured and downed three successive glasses, rounding off the display with an idiotic guffaw that made me laugh too.

"Jesus Christ! I hope you're gonna buy the next bottle!" Mack was not impressed.

Another, even louder guffaw seemed to confirm that he wasn't planning to. With an air of resignation that seemed to reveal that this was nothing new, Mack complained, almost to himself, about freeloaders as he ordered the third bottle. Josh looked very unstable, and left for the toilets. "Keep an eye on 'im when 'e comes out the piss", Mack said to Dead Jed. "I think 'e's planning an escape!"

I was too. I turned the topic of conversation away from how Dead Jed got his name (after a motorcycling accident, he had initially been unresponsive to the attempts of an ambulance crew to resuscitate him and only came around on the way to the hospital), to the kind of bike Mack rode.

There were far fewer bikes outside the pub than there were bikers inside; most evidently didn't trust their riding skills after a few drinks, or wanted to stay not too far from the legal limits. Fortunately, Mack, who was only going to drink perhaps the alcohol equivalent of a bottle of Scotch, did trust his riding skills, and his bike was outside. "It's the Commando, outside", he confirmed.

"Oh, really?", I commented, "good to see some people still go for British classics".

There was some verbal sparring between Mack and the others, who chided him for riding a relic. Mack disregarded those who rode "Japanese crap", and I sided with him, relating how I used to secretly ride my father's Triumph Trident as a 15- year-old. "Can I have a look at it?" I asked.

Mack shrugged. "You've got eyes." He gestured with a turn of his head: "There it is!"

I walked outside, and sat astride the Norton Commando, pretending to be looking at the maximum speed on the 'clock'. As I glanced back into the pub, however, I saw Josh was now back with the others on another 'nod', and I knew that was my chance to make a getaway. Swiftly dismounting, I left the scene for Keefie's flat, which I found empty. I was asleep on the floor within about 10 minutes.

When I awoke in the early morning and scanned my eyes over the room, there were seven other inert bodies sharing the empty living room, with various pieces of bedding or thick clothing covering them. I assumed Keefie and Christine to be in the bedroom as the door to that room was now closed. Of those asleep on the floor, I recognised only Mad Max, by his size, and Mack, as he was the only one without any makeshift blanket, just his leather jacket covering his face. Josh was awake, sitting with his back against the wall, and he seemed to have been waiting for me to wake up. He made silent gestures for me to get ready to leave. I did as instructed and ten minutes later, after creeping out the flat, we were out on the street.

It was Josh's idea that we should leave Keefie's place and go directly to Christine's parent's house. I objected that: "First, we should wait for Christine to wake up, and second, we don't even know where her parents live."

"Guernsey's not a big place; we can find her house ourselves. I'm not spending another night with those angels, that's for sure. Let's just go directly to Christine's place, she won't mind, and that was the original plan anyway."

I agreed, but commented, "Angels, did you say? They're no angels, that's for sure!"

"I mean Hell's Angels."

"They're not Hill's Angels, Josh, I replied, mocking his accent."

"I know Hell Angels when I see them".

"I promise you; they're not Hell's Angels; Hell's Angels are a particular gang; these are the Storm Riders, just a regular bikers' club. It's just that in Britain, some bikers like to wash less than others! And by the way, you have a very strange smell about yourself too; I'd take a good long shower at the first opportunity if I were you."

"Yeh, very funny!"

I insisted that Josh did indeed smell strange, and once convinced that I hadn't been awake to notice, Josh revealed that Mack had urinated on his sleeping body upon his arrival at Keefie's flat in the early hours. Dead Jed, the only other one on the living room floor not in fact dead to the world by that time had laughed and told Josh not to take it the wrong way; Mack just wasn't "fussy where he took a piss after a drink or two!" he said.

Josh was not convinced that I had missed the incident entirely, but I didn't care to press the point. We walked back towards the seafront, and stopped the first adult person we saw, a middle-aged woman, to ask how to get to Christine's address. I showed her a piece of paper with Christine's address on it, and true to Josh's expectations, she was able to guide us to a bus stop where a bus would take us close to the very house we wanted to visit.

Once the bus arrived, Josh's mood became more upbeat. "Look at this dinky little machine!" he exclaimed with a beaming smile as the bus pulled over. It was evidently a 1940s or early 1950s design, though in immaculate condition. "I thought they only had buses like this in the movies! We don't even have buses like this in Timaru anymore!"

His high spirits continued throughout our arrival at Christine's parents' large, semi-detached home, and our meeting with her mum and dad. Christine's father was a freelance commercial illustrator who worked in his own studio within the house and the couple were both youngish and somewhat bohemian, which made Christine's claim that Mad Max was a friend of her father's seem almost believable.

Josh was back in his element as a traveller when Christine's father pointed out that the small island of Herm was visible from the house, and showed him the view towards the island from his studio upstairs. He suggested that he take Josh to a spot from which Alderney, the third-largest Channel Island could be seen, and Josh responded enthusiastically. Upon hearing that we hadn't yet eaten breakfast, Christine's mother insisted on making us both sandwiches, which she delivered to us on a tray as Josh and Christine's father chatted and I looked on. Then the phone rang downstairs.

A few minutes later, Christine's mother returned to the studio where the three of us were still in conversation about Guernsey, the various Channel Islands, their sizes, populations and distances from France, and so on. When she revealed with a cheerful smile that the caller had been her daughter and that she had been informed that Keefie and Max were going to be visiting around 11 o'clock, the smile on Josh's face seemed almost to drop instantly to the floor.

"Christine said that Keefie and Max are going to take you two on a pub crawl of the island! Have you met Keefie and Max?"

Josh gave a one-word reply to confirm that they had indeed met. His voice was flat and toneless, and his face expressionless, but aware our hosts had a more positive impression of those fine young men, he quickly put on a smile and asked if it would be OK for him to take a shower? Of course it would, Christine's mum assured him, adding that we should make ourselves at home, and I was then left in discussion with the illustrator. As a fellow artist, I had plenty to talk to him about.

He specialised in book cover illustrations, and I he showed me some of them. We are just getting into discussion of the materials he used and the procedures he followed, when Josh reappeared from the shower, claiming that he had just realised his passport, ticket and wallet were still in a locker at the ferry terminal where he left them upon arrival while we sorted ourselves out with accommodation, Christine having been so late that we had assumed she would not meet us.

Josh suggested that he go back into Saint Peter Port immediately to retrieve his valuables before meeting up for the pub crawl, as the locker was only paid for 24 hours, and he didn't want to risk it automatically opening if he didn't get there before the 24 hours were up. I listened curiously, knowing the whole story to be fiction. It seemed entirely reasonable, however, and when he asked if I wanted to go into town with him, I shrugged, left my airline shoulder bag in the living room, which is where I was going to be sleeping, and walked with him back to the road we had arrived on to take the bus back into the city centre.

From the bus stop where we disembarked, we walked to the marina and strolled along the seafront.

"Let's work out a plan of action for today", Josh suggested, sitting himself on a stone wall and facing out to sea. I leaned against the wall and looked at him for further elucidation.

"That was a very clever trick you played last night", Josh told me, "pretending to be interested in Mack's bike. But we've got to think of some better excuse to get out of meeting that biker's gang again. We can't really hang around at Christine's house either; they seem to actually like these hooligans. So, I think we should just stay out all day and not go back to Christine's until late tonight."

"It wasn't a trick, Josh." After a moment's thought, I added: "and they're a bikers' club, not a gang. I thought

you got along with them like a house on fire; the last I saw they were even buying drinks for you."

"Yeh, right, very funny. Well, whatever they are, we've got to avoid them. We could just stay out all day, and not go back to Chrissy's until, say, about nine o'clock tonight. Should be safe by then. It doesn't really matter what excuse we make, as long as we don't meet up with them again."

"But I thought Christine said they're coming for you at noon?"

"They're coming for *us*, you mean!"

"Not sure about that, Josh. You see, I may have thought of just the perfect excuse we need to avoid them..."

Perhaps it was the memory of Mohsen, that had come back to me the previous day, and the way we had just taken the island ferries on the spur of the moment at that time that made me realise that the same kind of thing could perhaps happen again. I noticed that the ferry presently docked at the terminal belonged to the same company as the one we had taken from Portsmouth, and wondered if that was where it was sailing next? I also realised that there wasn't anything I really needed in my airline shoulder bag at Christine's house. I had brought my passport on the trip just in case I needed it, and it was in my combat jacket pocket, along with my wallet and ticket.

"Just hang about here for a few minutes, Josh," I told my companion, "I'm going to ask the ferry company a couple of questions inside the terminal."

Ten minutes later, I returned from the terminal to where Josh was still sitting on the stone wall, gazing out to sea.

"Turns out that ferry over there is leaving for Portsmouth in 15 minutes. I've decided to take it back, to cut the trip short a couple of days -"

"What!" Josh almost fell off the wall.

"You coming?" I asked. "You won't have to meet your Hill's Angel friends again if you do!"

"How can I do that? My passport's back at Chrissy's house!"

"Ohhh, no! Pity! Well, I've got to go now, Josh. Take care, and just tell Christine that something just came up and I had to go back to London...."

I began walking towards the ferry terminal, Josh alongside me, pleading for me to "wait, wait, wait!"

"C'mon, Al, you can't just leave me here with that bikers' gang! Let's keep to the original plan! Your bag's still at Christine's; how can you just leave?"

"My bag? Nothing in it, mate. You can keep it as a souvenir if you like!"

As we approached the ferry, I noticed that a dozen or so other remaining passengers not yet on board were being urged to hurry up by the man checking tickets at the gangway entrance.

"These boats have been known to go down, you know?" Josh suddenly stated loudly, attracting the attention of a couple and their two young boys who were just having their tickets checked. I wondered whether or not they knew that Josh was in fact correct: there had been a serious accident on one of the Channel Island ferries to England the previous year.

"Well, you better take the plane back", I told him. "Give me a call when you get back to London. Er, I mean, *if* you get back to London!" I laughed, as I showed the man my ticket. "I'd stay for a week or two if I were you; Josh. Give yourself time to appreciate the culture and lifestyle!"

"Bastard!"

I walked up the gangway and onto the boat. Naturally, there were other people at the quayside who had come to see off their friends or family members, and now as the boat prepared to pull away, there were people waving, and a few last shouts too. I gave Josh a wave as well, and he responded with a 'two-fingered wave' and the apparent claim that I was an illegitimate child, which he mouthed several times further as the

boat pulled away. This attracted the attention of a few of those near to him, but I chose to respond only with a polite wave and a smile.

I reflected on my sudden departure during the journey back, once we were out at sea. Maybe it had been a bit over the top, I asked myself? It was obvious that Josh was already not having a great time, even without me suddenly leaving. As a fellow traveller, I didn't wish a bad trip on anyone else. Yet, I couldn't encourage him not to go back to New Zealand to take care of his ailing father. The worst thing I could have done would have been to go with him to St. Malo. This way, I was satisfied that I got my opinion on aimless travel across to him. Hopefully, he would begin to see the big picture and realise that travel wasn't everything, as I already had.

Nevertheless, though I thought I was setting a good example to Josh and everyone else I knew, as someone who had put irresponsible, aimless travel behind him and was looking to settle down, there remained one missing component of the equation, without which it didn't make a lot of sense: where was the girl?

Chapter Three: Everything But the Girl

When Josh had asked me about Diane, I had lied that we were now seeing each other again on a regular basis, and that the tiff we had been through during our overland trip from Athens had almost been forgotten. I couldn't pretend we had never split up, because I couldn't be entirely sure that Josh hadn't already heard the truth from some other mutual friend or acquaintance.

In fact, in one way or another, I had lied to everybody about Diane, whether that meant pretending to Josh that we were back together, or pretending to Nicky that she was "an old friend who probably secretly fancied me and was always looking for some excuse to meet up with me", or even completely failing to even mention the true nature of our relationship to my parents.

How could such pretence and mendacity ever be a part of the reason I was now settling down in London, I asked myself? On the other hand, how could I give other people the full picture if I didn't have it myself? I had to know exactly where I stood with Diane.

She had given me one excuse after another for not meeting up with me, all perfectly reasonable and valid if taken alone, but I had now been back in the UK for nearly six months and failed to meet up with her even once. I decided that I had to, at the very least, meet up with her again and make that meeting a starting point for regularly seeing each other again. And it had to happen soon.

However, I was reluctant to just turn up on Di's doorstep, after the experience with Meena, the ethnic Indian girl who had come between us over a year ago. On that occasion, I had been snubbed in no uncertain terms, and very embarrassingly, right at the door of Meena's family restaurant. I vowed that I would not allow myself to be jilted in public ever again.

So, I would have to first communicate with Di by phone. That was something I did not want to do on Anton's pay phone.

I walked to a phone box near the petrol station where I worked, armed with enough coins to ensure that I would have time to say what I had to say.

As soon as I stepped into the phone box, I noticed that the door would not pull closed completely. And by the time Di answered the phone, there was an overweight, curly-haired young man a few years younger than me waiting for me to finish my conversation. Instead of standing in wait, he paced sweatily around, looking at his watch, and even leaning against the phone box at one point.

Di sounded as distracted from the conversation as I was, but I couldn't know why. "It's been well over a year since I last saw you, Di. I've been back in the UK for nearly six months now, and I still haven't been able to see you."

"Well, don't worry, you're not missing anything!"

As I spoke, out of the corner of my eye I saw a couple in their thirties approaching the phone box on foot, obviously also wanting to use it. However, I was very much aware that some things *had* to be said between Di and myself, and I was not about to let any outside circumstances affect that.

"I think I *am* missing something", I told her. "I'm missing *you!* I've been wanting to see you again for months, and you just keep giving me excuses. I really need to see you again, and soon..."

"Have you been waiting long", I heard the woman outside ask the fat lad.

"Yeah; he's been on for ages. I've been waiting here about 15 or 20 minutes already." I could make out

disapproving tongue clicking and sighs of frustration. "We've got to make our call before seven o'clock", I heard the older man say, "It's nearly 10 to now!"

I felt like opening the door and telling fatso: "Liar! I've been talking no more than five minutes!"

But I had more important business to attend to. I heard Di's voice, now sounding very distant, telling me once again that certainly we would be able to meet up soon.

"Well, how about tomorrow?" I asked.

I heard her make yet another excuse, but the voice of the fat lad outside the phone box was clearer. "Just whispering sweet nothings to his girlfriend!" he complained, and I turned around to see him shrug, palms held heavenward.

I then turned my attention back to the phone. "Well, next week then, Di. Let's fix a date right now!"

Suddenly Di's voice came back loud and clear. "I can't talk now - my boyfriend's coming!"

"Boyfriend! What? You mean there's someone else?"

"Of course there is, after all this time!"

"Well, why -"

"Sorry, Janice, I've really got to go now!"

"Janice?"

"Let's talk about this again at work, tomorrow...bye for now, Jan!"

Di hung up, leaving me with an astonished expression, and the three people outside, who had now been joined by a fourth, looking towards me inquisitively. I had realised by then of course that the name Janice had only been said for the sake of Di's boyfriend. An uncertain smile played on the fat lad's face; I knew that he was wondering if he had heard what it sounded like he had heard. But I also knew that even with the broken door, he could not have heard Di's voice, only mine.

"Janice?" I repeated, into the phone with even greater surprise. "So, it was Janice all along, then, was it? Well, I don't think Jane could have been very pleased to find that out.

"Oh, sorry Di", I continued, "but I've really got to go now. There's this guy pacing around outside like his hairs' on fire, waiting to make a call...yes, I know we've only been speaking for five minutes, but it might be a medical emergency or something, so...OK, speak to you then. Bye!"

As I opened the door to leave the phone box, the fat lad grabbed it impatiently. I felt like punching him in the face, but instead just asked him: "If I were just whispering sweet nothings, then how come you heard them?"

He just broke into a smile. Before I walked away, I was sorely tempted to get my revenge on him by pacing around outside the phone box and listening into his conversation, but I thought better of it. There was something else occupying my mind now.

All this time that I had been trying to see Di again, she "of course" actually had another boyfriend. And I had been kidding myself and everyone else I knew that we were going to get back together, or in fact already were back together! And just now, she had almost succeeded in letting four complete strangers know the truth just as early as myself! I swore I would *never, ever* let anything like this happen to me again.

The certain knowledge that my relationship with Di was over, and probably had been for well over a year, no matter how much I had lied to myself and others about it, was a major blow to my settling down plans. But it came almost on the eve of my final travel training test, which was to be held a couple of days later at the British Airways west London offices near the Gloucester Road tube station. That was another integral component of the settling down equation, and I was one I was adamant I wouldn't let anything interfere with.

This test was made especially difficult by the fact that my brother had just moved down from Leeds to west London, and dropped in several times at my Streatham bedsit, where he met Nicky and the two found they

had much to talk about. We shared six-packs or bottles of wine between the three of us in my bedsit, but I joined in the conversations only intermittently, and spent most of the time glued to the small wooden desk and hard-backed chair in the corner of my room, calculating flight distances and costs.

As it happened, I passed the British Airways exams with full marks. I then registered with a temporary employment agency specialising in the travel industry. I expected to be waiting around for assignments as was often the case with general employment agencies, but was offered a two-week assignment in Islington, north London, beginning the very day after I registered. I only took it because, as the first job with the agency, I didn't want to create the impression of being too difficult to accommodate. But it was a long way from where I lived, and after the job finished, I vowed I wouldn't travel so far for any future assignments.

That didn't leave me short of work. One of the early assignments in my new career in travel, and the first time I actually operated a computer terminal in my work, was a brand-new start-up airline called Virgin Atlantic, founded by the boss of Virgin Records, Richard Branson. The airline's inaugural flight to New York in June 1984 was only a few weeks away, and flights were being booked at a tremendous rate. To keep up with the ticketing, the company's Oxford Street offices stayed open 24 hours a day, and pay for the night shift was very reasonable. The airline seemed aimed to emulate Laker Airways, Freddie Laker's low-cost, no-frills airline of the late 1970s, which was the first of its kind, and had gone bust a couple of years previously. But eventually Virgin outdid Laker Airways in every respect, went from strength to strength, and set an example dozens of other low-budget airlines would later try to follow.

The three-week assignment lasted less than two. One night, we ran out of work in the early hours and I suggested to the others in the office that we take a break by having a stroll outside. Most of the other office workers agreed with the proposal and we walked to Piccadilly Circus, where to my surprise, we found there were retailers selling alcoholic drinks even at 3 am. We all had a can or two of beer and arrived back at the office slightly tipsy, only to find that there was still no work. Consequently, we put our feet up and dozed off.

And that's how the day shift staff found us. I didn't think anything more of the non-incident until mid-afternoon of the same day, when, sleepily, I picked up the phone in the hall at home. A girl introduced herself as Maria and told me I "didn't need to come back" to the Oxford Street offices any more.

When I asked why, she told me that they knew I was the "ringleader" who had taken everyone out to get drunk!

"Ringleader of what?" I asked. "We just went outside for a break because there was no work and we couldn't stay awake otherwise!"

But my protests were to no avail. She told me "Richard was furious" when he heard about the incident and demanded that all those on the night shift the previous night be "fired immediately".

When I asked whether the temp agency had been notified, and mentioned that I had been told it was a three-week assignment, she quoted terms of the agreement her company had with the temp agency. After I hung up, I decided to call the temp agency, just to clarify exactly what had really happened, and this I did.

I then went back upstairs to my bedsit with a bitter taste in my mouth. For all the fake first-name terms and sham easy-going attitude, this pseudo non-conformist hippy-cum-entrepreneur was just as cut-throat business-is-business as all the rest. His image, I told myself, was carefully tailored to dupe genuine non-conformists like myself to work for him or part with what little money they had on his music or airline offerings. I decided to drown my sorrows. It wasn't even five o'clock, so that meant I would have to go out and buy a six-pack to keep me going until the pubs opened.

But just as I descended the stairs to do so, the phone rang. It was Amy, the girl from the temp agency, and she had already fixed me up with a new assignment, if I wanted it. Did I? Absolutely, I confirmed, and she gave me the details: an agency specialising in Spanish holidays, located near Victoria Station, starting the next day.

I decided to buy the six-pack anyway but cancel the evening's drinking. A couple of cans were enough to celebrate this swift U-turn in my luck, and I needn't that much to calm myself down. I was definitely not used to having such an easy time of job hunting and was more than happy with such circumstances. But now I had to stay sober! And now I also knew without a doubt that I had made the right decision by following a career in travel.

In contrast to Virgin Atlantic, I worked at the Victoria travel agency for much longer than was originally

intended, while also continuing to work evenings at the petrol station. There were only three people at the Victoria agency, the boss, myself, and a young Spanish guy named Hugo, or Hugh when he was in his particularly English mode. The three of us hit it off quite well and enjoyed a close working relationship.

Finally, I was making money, but sometimes it was hard to hold onto. My itchy feet ailment had not by any means been cured yet, even though I was undoubtedly moving in the right direction.

But there was still this one part missing from the idyllic jigsaw puzzle picture. That was those several pieces which, when added together, would reveal the image of a female.

During the year-plus I lived in Streatham, apart from the trip to Guernsey, and several trips to the Isle of Man, I made several weekend trips to Rotterdam, staying again at Willeke's shared house in Kralingen, and she also made a trip to London, which resulted in a few of us ex-Kibbutz Magen volunteers meeting up in central London for a meal and a drink.

Di didn't want to take part in these meet-ups, and the realisation slowly dawned on me that she wasn't going to be present anywhere I was under any circumstances, even as a friend.

On all three of the occasions that I went to Rotterdam for the weekend, I was in high spirits and in serious 'girl-hunting' mood. Appropriately fired up with Dutch courage, I met girls on all three occasions, on the overnight ferry from Felixstowe.

One such girl was Jackie, who was en route to Germany for a half-year 'homestay' with a German family, during which time she planned to improve her German. As she told me she had just taken her 'A Levels', I assumed her to be at least 18, but it transpired that she was in fact only 16, and had been allowed to take A Levels early, as she was an exceptionally bright student. She stayed in touch with me later by mail and wanted to meet up with me in London when she returned for a few days several weeks later. I told myself she was too young for me and made some unconvincing excuse not to meet.

Another girl was Sharon, a university student living in Southampton. We met on the ferry and she also stayed with me at Willeke's shared house for a couple of nights, after which we promised to meet up again in England. We got along extremely well, and I loved her self-effacing sense of humour. But Sharon was almost as tall as myself and that was my rationale for not developing our budding friendship into a 'relationship'. The truth was, I couldn't imagine anybody taking Di's place, and no matter how earnestly I set out to 'find a new girlfriend', I couldn't. I did meet up with Sharon at her shared digs in Southampton, but only as a friend.

I arrived at the house Sharon shared with several others early one Friday evening, and all of us soon ended up in a local pub. The next morning, Sharon's housemate, Mike, a fine art student with a dark mop of uncombed hair and a sparse Guy Fawkes-style moustache and beard, and the only one among us with a car and a driver's license, drove Sharon, myself and his girlfriend to Stonehenge, about an hour's drive away. For all of them, this was a repeat visit, but for me it was the first, so I couldn't help feeling this trip was mainly for my benefit.

Stonehenge is without doubt Britain's best-known prehistoric monument. It consists of a ring of standing stones, each one around four metres high, just over two metres wide and weighing around 25 tons. The stones are set in the middle of the most dense complex of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments in England, including several hundred burial mounds. It was thought to have been a place of huge religious significance for ancient Druids not only in the immediate area but for people of the same belief from around the British Isles.

The Druids were a shamanistic spiritual or religious order promoting harmony, connection, and reverence for the natural world. In the 19th century, there was the beginning of a revival in Druidism, and that grew slowly in scale until the 1970s, when the nascent New Age movement gave it added impetus.

There were only a few other people at the site when we visited. We wandered around the stones talking about whether or not the Druids had really existed and what they were said to believe in. Mike remarked that I should have come a few weeks earlier, when it had been a lot livelier as the site of a free music and arts festival with a New Age flavour known as the Stonehenge Free Festival, while as it was it seemed set to become only the site of a downpour.

The sky had become dark and ominous, and that provided a perfect backdrop to the stones for the half-a-dozen photos I shot on my cheap East German SLR. Unfortunately, that was all the film I had. We didn't trust the weather, so returned to the village where the car was parked and had coffee and sandwiches in an

exquisitely decorated cafe there before returning to Southampton.

Apart from the shared interest in art, Mike and I also had another shared interest, which for him at least was the major interest: politics. After it began raining, we talked almost constantly about political circumstances in Britain, the Cold War confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, and so on and so forth. He was fascinated to learn the political opinions and standpoints of the people I had met on my Scandinavian trip, and that obliged me to some degree to continue talking. Though Sharon was mostly left out of these conversations by her lack of interest, and consequently almost ignored by the guest she had invited to visit her, still I could hardly stop talking on these subjects once we started.

Sharon and Mike's girlfriend, on the other hand, talked about the things that interested them, and I didn't even notice what they were. I didn't see or hear from Sharon again after that trip. The trip could have been an opportunity for me to get closer to her, but it turned out to be one long political and social studies discussion with her male housemate.

I also took a day trip to Paris with Hugo, which in those pre-Channel Tunnel days didn't leave that much time to actually see the city. We visited the must-see Eiffel Tower, still the city's highest construction nearly 100 years after it was built, the iconic Gothic cathedral of Notre-Dame, and the Pompidou Centre, then still a recent construction (and regarded as the epitome of futuristic design), as well as a well-known department store, mostly for the sake of two English girls from north London we met on the trip who were also on a day trip. But that was about all we had time for.

The girls were a lot of fun to sightsee with, but I didn't feel either to be qualified in the 'looks department'. I didn't know whether or not Hugo was also seriously girl-hunting, but the fact that he referred to the girls behind their backs as "Laurel and Hardy" revealed that he probably felt the same about their looks.

After all these unsuccessful attempts to initiate an intimate relationship, I began to feel that perhaps the root problem lay with me. The fact was, or so it seemed to me at the time, I was simply incapable of any such relationship.

It wasn't that I couldn't 'break the ice' and chat a girl up. I could easily do that. But I would inevitably end up comparing my potential new conquest with Diane, and the new girl would come away looking second-rate, despite the final blow that Di had dealt me.

And yet I knew with certainty that the relationship with Di was over. Paradoxically, if I wanted to stay put, I had to move on. And I certainly wanted to stay put in London, so I had to move on and find someone new. Otherwise, there was a real danger of the lure of aimless travel getting the better of me once again.

I needed help, but I didn't know exactly what kind of help. In the macho male world, most men - especially hot-blooded young men as I was supposed to be - just didn't get so hung up on any one female that no others could take her place. I knew that I would have to keep this help I was seeking secret; I couldn't risk letting people like Nicky or Hugo know about it for fear of ridicule.

I knew I needed something more than a lonely hearts club. In a lonely hearts club, I would simply continue to sit on the fence, judging every female by comparison with Di, and ultimately failing to make any change. Yet I needed something less than a psychoanalyst, which I didn't have the money for anyway. I began to scour the London newspapers, as well as *Time Out* magazine for advertisements for any such service that could help me come to terms with this emotional block and overcome it. And I was doing precisely that one Saturday morning when the phone rang.

"Hi, Alix! Guess who it is?"

I didn't need to. It was Melanie, known to her friends as Laine, one of my fellow ex-Kibbutz Magen volunteers, and one I had lost touch with. She lived in Oxford and had been quite close to Di while on the kibbutz. I had learnt from others that she had later gone on to do voluntary work in India.

"I heard you and some others from Magen met up with Willeke in London a couple of months ago, didn't you?" She sounded like she was blaming me for the event.

"Yeh, that's right, Laine. Who did you hear it from?"

"Oh, a friend of yours!" I knew she meant Di. "But why didn't you call me?"

"Call you?"

"Yes, I would have loved to see Willeke again. You should have told me she was coming to England!"

I explained that I didn't have her number. If she had ever given it me, I had lost it. I also told her I would have loved to have seen her too, and when I did, a thought crossed my mind: I really liked Laine. Somehow, I always felt strangely at ease with her, as I did talking to her now. Even though she had obtained my number through Di, I wasn't even interested in knowing what had been said about me. I had an idea, right there on the spur of the moment: "OK, Laine, how about this to make up for not having invited you to London when Willeke visited: why don't you come to London whenever you have time, and I'll show you around the place. I'm inviting you now!!"

"You mean, just you?"

"Yeh, just me. Hopefully."

"OK. When?"

"Whenever you like. You tell me when you're coming, and I'll make sure I'm there to meet you!"

"Wow! I never knew you were so gallant, Alix!"

"Well, that's 'cause I used to have a girlfriend, in those days."

"How about next Friday, then?" she asked, and when she did I knew it was an opportunity I wouldn't miss for anything. We fixed the date in principle, though not the exact time, and after we hung up and I returned to my bedsit upstairs, I could hardly calm myself!

Apparently, in the space of half an hour, I had gone from the gloom of thinking I would never break away from my fixation with my ex-girlfriend to realising that I had been overlooking the right girl for me all the time.

I carried out a mental review of the phone conversation. I had told Melanie I hoped I would be meeting her alone. She *had* to understand from that statement that I wanted to be alone with her, and also that Di was no longer a part of my life, if she hadn't already gleaned that much from Di herself. I had also even implied that I was gallant by nature, and that she had never known this only because previously I "had a girlfriend", but now I didn't! Finally, I hadn't even mentioned that previous girlfriend by name, and that was just fine; we wouldn't need to mention her again by name anytime in the future, ever.

I could have jumped for joy. How had I ever overlooked Melanie before, I asked myself? She was obviously 'made for me'. Finally, I had found her. Even all the tortuous disagreements I had been through with Di now seemed worth it, as ultimately all that had led me to Melanie.

In having a relationship with Melanie, there would even be some kind of a linear continuity that I found reassuring. It would be quite unlike beginning a new relationship with a girl like Sharon or Jackie. I already knew Melanie well, I would merely be allowing myself to become a little more intimate with her. It was perfect! I knew I could successfully deepen my relationship with her, and now I had the chance to do so.

I wouldn't even have to say goodbye to travel! With Melanie as my girlfriend, and perhaps even my wife, I would easily be able to cater to my travel lust, and thereby conquer it, rather than risk it conquering me, as I was sure it would if I remained unattached. Having Melanie as my girlfriend was in fact even preferable to Di. Because Melanie, judging by her comments on India, still wanted to travel, while Diane was apparently not interested in travel at all anymore.

Chapter Four: A Tiny Seed

I met Melanie at Paddington Station around 10 in the morning. From there, we took the tube to kick off the day's sightseeing with the Tower of London.

We had a light lunch and drinks on a nearby houseboat pub and restaurant on the Thames that Hugo had introduced me to some weeks earlier. We sat on the boat's open, upper deck, with a direct view towards Big Ben, the only table available as it happened; the place did a roaring business. Fortunately, the late summer weather was excellent. I mentioned that I had only visited the boat before to drink in the evenings and Melanie commented that I certainly had a good taste in pubs and asked if the place was my 'local'? "You could say that", I confirmed, claiming to work nearby, although in reality that was only the second visit of my life to the houseboat.

From there, we took the tube north to Camden market. I knew the place only from an unhappy meeting with my ex-girlfriend Meena there over a year earlier, but guessed correctly that it was the kind of place Melanie would like. We spent a long time in the area looking at this and that, yet buying nothing, a peculiar female pastime I've never really been able to understand. The rest of the sightseeing trip, like Camden Market itself, was carried out on foot. In the mid-afternoon, we crossed Regent's Park, central London's second-biggest open space, to visit Madame Tussaud's wax museum, and the adjacent London Planetarium, where we saw a light show. By today's standards the show would seem pretty feeble, something like a Windows XP computer screensaver with accompanying music delivered via headphones, but at the time it was certainly pretty cutting-edge.

After a bite to eat nearby, we returned to Paddington Station, where I saw Melanie off on the train, confident that I had lived up to my word by "showing her around the city". She invited me to Oxford, which was the ultimate aim of the day out for me. I couldn't really invite her back to my bedsit in Streatham; the place was just too far out of the way.

That Damned Book

I took Melanie up on her word a couple of weeks later, while the memory of the London trip was still fresh, with the hope of establishing our meetings as a regular thing.

Oxford lies about 80 kilometres to the north-west of London, and had a population of around 140,000 in 1984. The train trip took little more than half an hour from Paddington; far less than it took to get to Paddington from Streatham.

She met me at the railway station and apologised almost immediately that although she lived in Oxford, she had no idea where the most interesting things to see were from the point of view of an outsider. She hardly ever went anywhere, she explained, except for a few shops and restaurants close to her place.

I then made a monumental Freudian slip: "That's alright, Laine", I told her. "Let's just go straight to your place then!"

I tried to cover up my slip of the tongue. "I mean, we could go to your place first, if you like, and then just go wherever it is you like to spend your time. I mean, a cafe, a book shop, whatever, I don't mind. We don't have to go anywhere special..."

But Melanie was looking at me with laughing eyes. She had obviously noticed my slip of the tongue. What the hell, I thought, at least now she knows how I feel about her.

She drove us to a busy shopping street, only five minutes' drive from the station, where we took lunch in a restaurant packed with students and office workers. It struck me later that we could have walked to all the

places we visited, including her house. But she apparently wanted to practice her driving skills, having just got her driver's license. I made a comment to the effect that the funky pink and white Volkswagen Beetleback suited her, and asked how long she had been driving.

"Two weeks!"

I decided to 'belt up', even though our distances were short, and I rarely wore a seat belt as a passenger in those days.

We took a leisurely walk from the shopping street through part of the grounds of Oxford University.

Oxford University lays claim to being the oldest university in the English-speaking world, and it is arguably the most prestigious in the world. It grew rapidly from 1167 when the English king, Henry II banned English students from attending the University of Paris. After disputes between students and local residents in 1209, some academics fled north-east to Cambridge where they established what became the University of Cambridge, still the university's main rival.

The September weather was unusually warm, more like mid-August. We sat on a bench, and Melanie began describing her time doing volunteer work at Mother Teresa's in India. Mother Teresa, honoured by the Catholic Church as Saint Teresa of Calcutta, was an Albanian-Indian Roman Catholic nun and missionary. She lived in India most of her life, and it was there, in Calcutta (now Kolkata), that the charity organisation Melanie worked at was located. It sounded truly awful and I even wondered why she was telling me about this experience.

I admired Melanie's spirit of selflessness and her concern for others, but when she got into descriptions of the sanitary conditions in Calcutta, the extreme poverty and the physical health of the people she was helping, my only comment was, "Rather you than me, Laine!"

We were later walking back in the direction of the railway station, and her parked car, when Melanie suggested that we take a look in the city's modern art museum. It seemed like a perfect opportunity to reveal my own artistic 'credentials'.

The modern art museum was housed in an unimpressive-looking building, but some of the works on show were quite the opposite. However, my main focus of attention was not the artwork, and I found it hard to pay attention to the exhibits. At one point, I commented that although I enjoy spending time appreciating other peoples' art, I enjoyed the process of creating art much more.

"I didn't know you liked painting! What do you like to paint? Or is it some other kind of art, like sculpture that you like to do?"

"Mostly drawing and painting. I thought about going professional, and just making a living as an artist. I was accepted on a fine art degree course at the Chelsea College of Arts, one of the top schools in the country, but I decided to travel instead. Big mistake, I guess."

I had been expecting a very different response than the one I got, and was even ready to change my plans if Melanie was sufficiently encouraging. But instead, she replied: "No, I think you probably did the right thing. You're more of a traveller than an artist."

I felt deflated. "Anybody can travel, Laine. All you need to do is buy a ticket and go. Could anyone do this?" I gestured at the nightmarish surrealist painting before us.

"Well, I think there's a bit more to it than just buying a ticket and going", she smiled. "Anyway, it's what you do in the places you travel to that matters. You could be helping people, instead of scaring people with something like this! But you can do artwork when you're older, you can't really be a traveller when you're 50 or 60."

"So, you'd rather be travelling than doing creative work?" I asked.

"No, I mean you."

"Well, what about you, Laine. It's *you* I'm interested in!" I felt invigorated and assertive; the message *had* to be getting through that it was *her* I wanted, not talk about travel or art. But she made some comment I didn't understand about just being a country girl and told me she'd like to work with animals when she'd finished

her studies.

By late afternoon, the unseasonably warm weather had begun to turn cool and dark, and straggly rain clouds were moving slowly across the sky. After driving back to her shared house, Melanie and I sat on the living room sofa alone, listening to music. Her housemates, of whom there were three, all students, apparently had matters of their own to attend to. We both had alcoholic drinks on the coffee table before us. She showed me some of her India photos; I didn't see anything to indicate the extreme poverty she had claimed.

"Well, you can't really see that in these photos", she commented after a pause, "but believe me, it'll come as a shock to you, when you see it first-hand. Travelling in India is a bit of a culture shock for most people from rich countries. You really need to spend some time preparing yourself for it."

"Prepare myself for what?"

"For the culture shock."

"Oh", she added, "you might find this useful, too", and taking a battered old Lonely Planet India guidebook from the small table at her side of the sofa, delivered it into my hands.

"Looks like it's seen better days, Laine!" I laughed. I put it down again, on the coffee table before me.

"Yeh, that's what it's like out there. But you can get an idea of things from the book, and you can always buy a new copy before you go, if you like. You can't see the poverty from the photos in the book, either, but you'll see that when you get there, I promise you! Just make sure you're ready for it."

I didn't want to remind her, yet again, that I had already seen plenty of poverty in Egypt. "Well, maybe I *would* see that *if* I went there", I corrected her, "but there's zero possibility of that!"

I wondered where she had ever got the notion that I would want to go to India of all places? I was in Oxford to see her, and hopefully get intimately familiar with her, not to learn about India.

I would have added that there was also zero possibility of me going anywhere at all as far away and as poor as India; that such travel didn't fit into my new, settled lifestyle. But I didn't want to express disinterest in anything she was interested in. I knew that could ruin my chances with her. Instead, I tried to interest her in my idea of taking a short, out-of-season trip to the south of France.

"Going after October wouldn't be so expensive. It's already September. We could stay in Antibes for a week for about -"

"We?" Melanie was looking at me with an air of surprise.

I laughed, turning slightly towards her, setting my right knee upon the sofa, and looking more directly at her. "Well, how would you like to come along?" I smiled. "Just five or six days, one week max."

Now I had made the suggestion, Melanie had to have become aware of the implication: that it was her I was primarily interested in, not travel to France.

Her smiling eyes seemed to give that away. "You mean, just for a holiday?" she asked.

"Yeh, why not? That's the only travel I'm really into these days. I'm settling down in London now, but I'm not averse to a holiday now and again."

"Just hobnobbing with the rich and famous on the Riviera?"

I shrugged and smiled: "Sounds like fun to me!"

"But it's a bit self-indulgent, isn't it? I mean, you could be doing so much more, helping other people."

"You mean like doing charity work in the black hole of Calcutta?" I laughed. I wanted to ridicule the notion with a sharp, derisive comment that came to mind, but I just held it in mind. I was very much aware of the fact that Melanie's character had developed a very altruistic streak since working at Mother Teresa's. Wary that she may take my humour the wrong way, and not wanting anything to come between us, I decided not to mock her suggestion. "We've both done that kind of stuff now. Not all travel has to be hardship, Laine!"

But she seemed to be progressing along her own line of reasoning which had very little in common with mine. I was trying to persuade her what good fun it would be for the two of us to travel together in the south of France (sharing rooms, and hopefully beds); she was trying to interest me in the far less attractive idea of me spending an extended period of time doing some kind of unpaid and no doubt very hard work by myself in some poverty-stricken corner of the Indian subcontinent. I could suffer that kind of work if it meant being with her, but what would be the point of subjecting myself to a fate like that if I wasn't even going to be with her? We were talking at cross-purposes.

"You could work on an ashram, away from the cities, if you don't like the idea of being in a place like Calcutta", she continued. "There's a lot of things you could do, and so much you could learn."

I had no idea what an ashram was, but I correctly deduced that it was something peculiar to Hinduism and other Indian religions. I argued that it was an over-simplification to assume that you could only learn by travelling and working in poor and faraway countries. There was still plenty to learn by travelling closer to home, in places where you didn't have to live like a special forces commando on an endurance course.

She laughed at my analogy. "Well, maybe you're right, but you can do travel like that at any age, y'know what I mean? You can really only handle rough travel when you're young. If you don't go now, you may regret it in a few years, when you're married, and it's maybe not so easy..."

I looked her into the eyes. Now we were talking about marriage! She was still smiling broadly and easily. The alcohol had relaxed us both. Melanie was a lot more idealistic than me, that was for sure. Though I wanted to drive home my point that spending time doing unpaid work in poor countries didn't necessarily mean you were helping anyone or learning anything, I realised that I had to play my cards very carefully. I vowed not to say anything that may end up distancing me from her; I wanted only to get closer to her that night. Much closer. After we had established more intimate bonds, we could always revisit these topics.

I decided that wherever I disagreed, rather than openly disagreeing, I could instead respond with answers like "maybe you're right, Laine", or "that's a good idea; I'll have to think more about that" without actually committing myself to anything. The important thing at this point, I realised, was to get her from her living room, which any one of the people she shared the house with could walk into at any time, and into her bedroom, where we could talk with more ease and a lot more intimacy.

"Well", I responded, stretching my arms above me, palms upwards, and then bringing them down again, with my right arm now resting on the sofa behind Melanie's shoulders. "You're probably right. But here we are talking so much about me and where I should travel next. What about you; it's *you* I'm interested in!"

She commented offhandedly that she would have to finish her studies before taking up any more travel. But then she hit me with an unexpectedly forthright suggestion: "Were you thinking of staying the night?"

There was more. "Because you can stay in my room if you like." This was music to my ears.

I smiled a knowing smile while looking directly into her eyes but I had barely begun to reply when she continued: "But now's the time to decide, if you don't want to go back to London tonight..."

My half-spoken reply remained stillborn. No matter. The situation called for action, not words. I prepared to pull Melanie towards me, but before I could, she added: "I mean, if you do stay the night, just remember to pull my door closed behind you when you leave, and of course, make sure you pull the front door closed behind you too."

I could not quite comprehend why she was giving me these instructions. Where would she be when I left the house? Why wouldn't she be with me? My smile must have faded a little as I considered these questions.

She must have noticed my befuddlement. "Like I told you at lunch", Melanie continued, "I'm going home to my parent's place tonight, so my room's here if you want it..?"

I could not remember her mentioning anything at lunch about her going to her parent's home, but didn't say as much.

"...the room?" I finally responded. What good was the room, I was asking myself, without her? Did she think it was her room I was after? Slowly, it dawned on me that there was a gulf between her understanding of my motivations and intentions, and my own.

"The room would be great...er, yes, it would be great, thanks for suggesting that, Laine...but, er, I think I'll skip that this time round, and, yes, head back to London tonight. Otherwise, you know...I'd still have to make the trip in the morning. Might as well get it over with..."

"Good!" she exclaimed in an upbeat, 'let's go' tone. "Well, we'll have to leave soon; like I told you, my parents live in a small village, it takes a while to get there. Maybe as long as it takes you to get back to London!"

She then went running up the stairs to her room, leaving me in precisely the same position, as I had been two minutes earlier, right arm on the back of the sofa, right knee up on the sofa, looking towards the empty space where she had been, as if seducing a ghost. Ten minutes later, we were ready to leave the house.

"Don't forget your book!" Melanie reminded me cheerfully, holding up the battered old India guidebook.

"My book? Oh, yeh, my book. Well, I don't have anything to carry it in; maybe I'll just leave it with you for now..." I had travelled without even a daypack, and I didn't want to carry anything that wouldn't fit into the pockets of my combat jacket.

But she insisted on finding a small plastic bag to put the book in, and presented it to me once again.

I did my best not to let my disappointment at the turn of events show. This was imperative for me. She had to understand that it was her who was missing out, I told myself, not me. But anyway, I continued with my internal dialogue, if she were genuinely too dim to sense my intentions and my interest in her, then she wouldn't be able to sense my disappointment either. And if she were that dim, that maybe I was wasting my time with her anyway.

During the short car ride to the station, I looked over at the girl in the driver's seat and asked myself if perhaps I had made a mistake in not making it clear that I would pay for the holiday in the south of France? I reasoned that if Melanie had understood that I would pay and yet still turned her nose up at a paid-for winter break in the south of France, then all that voluntary work in India must truly have addled her brain. Perhaps I hadn't made myself clear enough?

She explained just before she pulled over in front of the station that she didn't have time to see me off and could only drop me off. I managed to paste on a smile before leaning over, pecking her on the cheek, and thanking her "for everything".

"Have a nice trip", she smiled, as I stepped out of the car.

"Thanks. Hope to see you again soon, Laine."

I had walked no more than half-a-dozen paces when Melanie called my name. My heart skipped a beat. Had she suddenly seen sense and changed her mind? I turned and looked towards the parked car. She was bringing something from inside the car to give me. A few seconds later, she reached out of the car with something in her hand: "You forgot your book!"

This time I even found it hard to paste on a smile. I had an almost irresistible urge to take the book, slam it onto the ground, stamp down hard on it, and then throw it as far away as I could manage.

Instead, I nodded, and quickly retrieved the book, thanked her again, told her to look after herself, and then turned to walk towards the station as she drove away.

But as soon as I entered the station, book still in hand, my eyes locked onto a litter bin. I smiled. It was a tubular bin with a large ashtray as a lid, a kind still popular in those days. I knew I would derive considerable pleasure from removing the lid and plunging the book as far into the bin as it would go.

But by the time I had reached the bin, another thought had occurred to me which stopped me in my tracks. Without the book, I had nothing to read on the return journey. There was a newsagents still open in the station, where I could still buy a copy of a national morning paper. But it seemed almost insulting that I would have to pay the full price to read news that had hit the news-stands 12 hours earlier, and I was not in a mood to take insults. I refused to pay to read on my return journey. On the other hand, I was already in a foul mood, and I knew enough about myself to realise that left to only my own thoughts, I would be in a much worse mood by the time I arrived back in London. I decided to keep the battered guidebook for the return journey, and dump it on arrival in Paddington, when I had finished with it.

Germination

As the train left the city of Oxford behind and hurtled through the Oxfordshire countryside, the fields became bathed in a golden glow of oncoming twilight; the uncertain weather of an hour earlier had turned into a glorious sunset. I took the thick, dogeared book from the plastic bag it was in and skimmed through it briefly, offhandedly noting the names of the main cities and their locations.

I looked through the several groupings of colour photographs. They seemed to reflect a wide variety of vastly different landscapes, lifestyles, and people. But I became engrossed with one particular half-page photo. It was a shot of tiny steam train, a number of its passengers looking out, or even hanging out of its doors and windows, set against a background of tea plantations, with snow-capped Himalayan peaks visible in the distance.

Hadn't Melanie mentioned taking this very train during our lunch together? I had been so preoccupied with thoughts of seducing her that much of what she had said about India had gone in one ear and out of the other. It made sense that she had taken the train, however. I could clearly remember her mentioning the name 'Darjeeling', and judging by the maps in the book, that didn't seem to be too far from Calcutta, where she had worked.

I closed the book for a moment to watch the growing twilight outside the train, little suspecting that a tiny seed had been carried on the wind from the foothills of the Himalayas, and had lodged itself firmly in the mind of an unhappy and frustrated young man on a train speeding towards London Paddington railway station.

But a few moments later, I had to open the book again, to have another look at that photo. The seed was germinating.

The train seemed to be no more than half the width of the modern locomotive I was sitting in, if that. I looked up the corresponding text information on the train and learnt that was known as the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, and also literally as the Toy Train. It dated back to 1881 and ran between a city on the north-eastern edge of lowland India at an elevation of a little over 100 metres, up to the city of Darjeeling at an elevation of over 2,000 metres above sea level.

Darjeeling, I learnt, was known for its tea industry, and its stunning views of the Himalayas, particularly Kangchenjunga, the world's third-highest peak.

Thereafter, I could hardly dispel the image of the steam train and its spectacular setting from my mind. By the time I arrived back at my Streatham bedsit, I had already decided there was no reason on Earth why a London-based, part-time traveller should not travel to far distant locations once in a while. And I had even begun to forgive Melanie for not appreciating my interest in her and responding accordingly.

Hugo, who now worked at a central London bucket shop, had just returned from a 5-day trip to Los Angeles. London to LA and London to Calcutta had to be similar distances. I began to mentally make plans for a short trip to Calcutta. Having heard Melanie's descriptions of that city, I had no interest whatsoever in staying in the city itself. I would travel immediately from Calcutta to Darjeeling. I decided to give myself one week for this trip, sometime in October or November.

This was an exciting new development and I now felt no regrets at having failed to seduce Melanie. Not all was lost in my relationship with her! I reasoned that by the time I returned from Darjeeling, I would not only have the advantage of shared memories of Israel, I would also have experience of some of the same places she had visited in India. Then, I would repeat my suggestion of a trip to the south of France together, and this time she would take me up on it.

I phoned Hugo up the next day to ask him to check the cheapest London-Calcutta return fares his agency had on offer.

"Don't have any", he replied without even checking. "I don't know why, but they don't get many cheapies to Calcutta at this agency. I can get you a London to Delhi six-month return for a little over 300 quid, though. It'll cost you a lot more than that if you want a return to Calcutta. Why not try Delhi instead? I've heard that Calcutta's the pits; the poverty's unbelievable!"

"Yeh, that's what I've heard, too. Let me get back to you when I've thought it over a bit".

I put the ticket on hold, and consulted the maps in the India guidebook and relevant text information. Several hours later, I had worked out that apparently, the entire journey from Delhi to Darjeeling would cover a distance of nearly 1,500 kilometres, involve numerous train services, and take me the best part of two days of non-stop travel, assuming everything went smoothly. Obviously, I would have to allot myself much more time if I took this option. I decided to look around at other travel agencies for a cheap London to Calcutta return.

But all were more expensive than London to Delhi, some by quite a margin. Finally, I decided to take Hugo's advice. I set aside 16 days for my trip to India. This had to be enough to see the capital and to travel to Darjeeling too. 16 days in a faraway land was, I told myself, a suitable holiday period for someone working in the travel industry, and by no means an indulgence. I was a travel industry employee; no-one could expect me to be satisfied with an annual 10 days on the Costa Bravo.

By this time, I had been given a one-month assignment in a newly-established travel agency near Liverpool Street Station. In principle, I would leave for India two days after that assignment concluded, on November 10th. In this way, I could simply pick up with a new temporary assignment upon my return to the UK on the 27th.

But then a series of related and unrelated events intervened that would put paid to this clean and straightforward arrangement.

I booked my flight with Hugo's agency to meet my intended schedule, but did not actually buy a ticket. Yet, for some inexplicable reason, I decided to change all the travel money I had available, 2,000 pounds sterling in total, into Thomas Cook travellers' cheques.

"India's dirt-cheap", Hugo told me. "You won't need anything *like* that much for 16 days there, even with your travel costs. Why don't you just buy five or six hundred quid of travellers' cheques, and take a bit of extra in cash, just in case?"

In those early days of the credit card, travellers' cheques were still easily the most popular way to avoid carrying too much cash on your travels. The advantage of traveller's cheques was that they could be cancelled or replaced if they were stolen — provided that you still had the cheques' serial numbers, which I had learnt to keep separately. My line of thought was that I might as well buy all the cheques I would need for the coming travel-packed months. But I also wanted to indirectly impress Hugo with my new conquest, even though he wouldn't actually see her, and if truth be told, the conquest hadn't yet even occurred.

"Might as well change the lot", I told him, "I've got other travel plans apart from India, probably not long after I get back. Better having cheques than just cash..."

"Oh, really? Where're you off to when you get back from India, then?"

"South of France. That'll be a lot pricier, but my girlfriend's insisting on at least a few days on the Riviera."

The very next day, October 18th, I read in a national newspaper during my lunch break at a fast-food restaurant near Liverpool Street Station that the pound had plunged in value on foreign exchange markets the day before. At first, I disregarded this headline news; I had little interest in financial news. It was only as I was on my way back to the travel agency that the thought struck me: could this affect my trip to India?

I held on to the paper, and spent every free moment of that afternoon going back to the news report. Apparently, the US dollar had slumped against other currencies too, but the pound had outdone it, and every other major currency, losing six cents even against the dollar over the week. I knew, of course, that this would affect the value of the travellers' cheques I had just bought, yet I had to ask my colleagues' opinions for confirmation that the damage would be minimal.

"Course it'll affect the value of the money you take abroad", laughed the middle-aged south Londoner who was not only the oldest of the four agency staff and the most experienced in the travel industry, but also the one who I thought should have had the best grasp on such things. "Put it this way", he continued, bringing gestures into play to illustrate his point, "say you were abroad last week, and every pound you had then was worth 1.86 US dollars, or one dollar eight-six cents, which is about right as it happens. Well, now maybe you're still abroad, but every pound you have is worth one dollar eighty; six cents down. That's not a lot of difference to a single pound, but if you've got a lot of pounds..."

"Well, let's hope this is the end of the slide in value of the pound, then", I responded.

"If you ask me, it's just the beginning! And apart from that, you have to consider that the dollar itself is also doing badly. If I were you, I'd just put my travel plans on hold."

I knew this fellow to have some very definite political views. He was a wholehearted supporter of the leader of the Greater London Council, 'Red Ken' Livingstone, who at that time had locked horns with Margaret Thatcher's Conservative national government. I hoped his negative opinions on Thatcher's leadership had coloured his opinions on the value of the pound, and I hoped he was wrong in his prediction.

But he turned out to be right. From that day on I followed the value of the pound with increasing despondency and frustration. There was hardly a single day that's its value didn't fall.

Rebound and Reschedule

Then, there was another unexpected development. On October 31st, the prime minister of India, Indira Gandhi, was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, in revenge for a military assault on what was the most holy site for Sikhs, the Golden Temple, in Amritsar. After her murder, there were reports of widespread, and often deadly, pitched battles breaking out between Sikhs and Hindus, especially in Punjab State, the Sikh homeland.

With this violent unrest, my first thought had been whether I should delay my trip to India. Foreign travellers were not being targeted, but it was also possible to get caught in the 'crossfire', I conjectured. But then I consulted the maps in my guidebook. Amritsar, the epicentre of the violence, was a long way from Delhi, over 450 kilometres to the north-west. Not as far away as Darjeeling was, to be sure, but it seemed reasonable to assume that it was far enough away from the capital to be safe in Delhi. And the new leadership of Rajiv Gandhi, Indira's son, would probably prioritise public security in the capital.

So, my next tentative plan was to continue as planned and simply stay away from the trouble spots, which wouldn't be difficult as they were all well to the west of Delhi; in the opposite direction from my planned Darjeeling itinerary.

Within a couple of days, however, this plan had turned full circle. After reading news media reports detailing the military operation that had been carried out several months earlier to remove a militant Sikh leader, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his followers from the Golden Temple complex, I decided that I had to understand more of this situation. According to the articles I read, the leader of a Sikh political party had suggested Bhindranwale take up residence in the Golden Temple complex to evade arrest by the Indian authorities. This extremist religious leader then made the sacred temple complex his headquarters and fort, from where he launched attacks on Hindus and on those Sikhs who collaborated with the Hindu-led authorities. The more I learnt about the situation, the more I wanted to understand it. How much support was there for an independent Sikh homeland in Punjab state? How much support had there been for Bhindranwale? Did the desire to establish an independent Punjab extend across the border into Pakistani Punjab? I felt I had to understand the reality behind the news reports.

I knew I had to go there myself to get a real grasp of actual circumstances. But Amritsar was to the west of Delhi and Darjeeling was to the east. If, in addition to Darjeeling, I visited Amritsar, which was certainly the centre of Sikh nationalism, I would definitely need to give myself more time. I called Hugo to reschedule my flight, adding six more days to the total time. I also put the date of departure back four days to give some more time to the pound, which I felt *had* to rebound by the time I took my trip. Now I would leave on November 14th, and be back in London on December 7th.

This had now evolved into a major piece of travel, however I looked at it. I would need to get fixed up with new assignments not too long after my return, or I could even end up using the remainder of my travellers' cheques just staying alive.

But then, there was a further development that would affect my India travel plans even more categorically. My brother Mark had moved to London from Leeds some months earlier, and now called to let me know his new telephone number, the fifth or sixth change since his arrival. In fact, he had now already been living in London for months, staying in various short-term accommodation, and he had dropped in at my Streatham bedsit at least a dozen times, but it wasn't until early November that I actually paid him a return visit. He told me he had moved into a new bedsit in Kensington.

When I saw the quiet little street of upmarket townhouses that Mark's flat was on, only a short walk from a lively area of shops, bars and restaurants, my initial reaction was close to awe. "Wow", I said to myself under my breath, "he's certainly gone up in the world", and I wondered what the accompanying new job could have been that supported the classy accommodation. Surely, he couldn't still be delivering Calor gas canisters. Even a bedsit in such a location couldn't be cheap.

As I checked and re-checked the address, I saw a casually dressed man in his thirties walk out the place, and drive away in a silver blue Porsche that had been parked at the gate and assumed him to be one of Mark's fellow tenants. Even bedsit-dwellers drove Porsches in this part of London, I marvelled as I found the front door had been left unlocked and slightly ajar. If only the whole of London were this way, what a place the city would be! I walked in, and at first didn't notice the poor state of decoration of the hall. Mark had told me his room was on the first floor, so I took a few steps towards the wide staircase, put my hand on the banister...and pulled it off!

Alarmed at the damage I had caused, I hurriedly tried to fix the handrail back onto the supporting posts, and only then noticed the flaking paint on the ceiling and the old, worn and dirty wallpaper and carpet.

When I rang on Mark's bell there was no sound, but he opened the door, explaining that he had heard me coming. "Take a seat", he invited, gesturing at the stool at the far end of the room. I expected to see a door somewhere leading to the rest of the bedsit, but there was none, and the 'far end' of the room was barely two metres away. The entire room was hardly any longer than the bed, and hardly any wider, either. I squeezed passed him and sat down, only then realising that only one of us could sit down at a time.

"Is this it?" I asked. "Christ, what kind of place have you got yourself into? Do you actually pay for this?"

It turned out he paid more for his shoebox than I was paying for my Streatham bedsit. I mentioned the incident with the banister, and he told me not to worry, he had done the same thing before. I noticed then that there was a bowl on his pillow, and asked him what it was for?

"The ceiling leaks", he explained, "so I put this there when I'm not sleeping!"

"And when you *are* sleeping...?"

"I get an hourly reminder of the time. It only drips about once an hour, at the moment at least. Suppose it may get faster with time."

I noticed that sleeping in the other direction was not really much of an improvement. A wall cupboard would be only an inch or two above his head. "Well, have you told your landlord about the leak?"

"He said he knows. Can't do anything about it right now, as he's too busy. You might have seen him leaving just now; silver blue Porsche?"

I confirmed that I had. "Your landlord should be in jail, not driving around in a Porsche! How does he find anyone to live in such a dive?"

Mark claimed that when he "viewed the flat", he had been the third in line. Luckily, he smiled, the other two passed it up.

"What were the other two people like?" I asked curiously.

"An Egyptian and a Moroccan. Both illegals, if you ask me."

"And even they turned their nose up at this!"

"Well, the other rooms are all full. Mostly Chinese and Africans. Haven't met them all, but I've seen some of them. I'd say they're all illegals too."

I told him about my impending trip to India and joked that I'd let him know if there was anywhere worse in the slums of Calcutta that he may be interested in.

But with my place empty for several weeks, I couldn't with a clear conscience *not* offer it to Mark as a temporary alternative to the miserable box he was living in.

Yet he contested that it would hardly be worth it to move to somewhere as far from central London as Streatham Common for anything less than at least a month. It wouldn't be as easy to find new accommodation close to his place of work in central London from Streatham as it would be from where he was.

"Forget living anywhere near central London", I advised him. "Just find another place somewhere near where I live in Streatham. Look at the difference: my place is at least seven or eight times the size of this, for five quid a week less. Just travel into central London for work, like I do."

But Mark wasn't impressed with the idea of living anywhere so remote as Streatham Common. I decided to agree with his suggested minimum of one month to look around for another place, and added two weeks to it to guarantee enough time for him to find somewhere else to live. "OK, how about this: you can stay at my place free for six weeks while I'm in India. That'll give you plenty of time to find some decent alternative, whether in Kensington or somewhere near to where I live."

He agreed. I was sure six weeks in Streatham would change his mind about living in any of the rip-off accommodation on offer closer to his place of work. And I was also sure that six weeks would put paid to my concerns of possibly not having enough time to see all the places in India I wanted to. I called Hugo to tell him I wanted to re-schedule my flight.

"*Again?* Look, Alix, are you sure you even really want to go to India?"

"I'm absolutely set on it, Hugo. There are places there I have to see, even if going there is the last thing I ever do. Besides, my girlfriend's nuts about the country, we'll probably be making many more trips there together in the future."

"Well, why isn't she going with you this time?"

"She's doing her O-Level high school examinations", I told him. This part was true. "Otherwise, she'd love to come with me!"

"Her high school exams! How old is this girl? Don't get yourself arrested, Alix, or you won't be going anywhere!"

I explained that Melanie had dropped out of school in order to travel several years previously, and was now catching up on her studies. Again, all this was true. It was only the subsequent claim I made that once Melanie had learnt about my plans to travel to India, she had been ready to drop out of her studies a second time to go there with me that was a fiction. I added that, "I told her. 'Melanie, just finish your studies, and get your O-levels; I'll be back soon enough, and we'll be taking the next trip together'. And I think I managed to persuade her."

"Sounds like true love to me!" Hugo suggested. I didn't contend the assertion. We joked about impending wedding bells, being each other's best man, and whether Hugo would also eventually fall for an English rose.

And my return journey was re-booked for December 21st, giving me a total of six weeks in India.

However, the other prerequisite for a happy journey, a rebound in the exchange rate of the pound, just didn't happen. As the value continued to slide, I found my despondency with the situation turning to anger. Each time I read a daily paper - a new habit for me - I ended up feeling like punching a hole in it.

Last Goodbyes

On the morning of my last Saturday in London, with less than a week before my flight, while looking through the dogeared guidebook that had become mine, I realised that despite having discussed the poverty and sanitation in places like Calcutta with Melanie, I had overlooked getting vaccinations against infectious diseases. The Lonely Planet guidebook strongly advised getting jabs against diphtheria; hepatitis A and B; tetanus; and typhoid, and there were several other infectious diseases mentioned for particular regions and/or circumstances.

But all of them were intended to be taken weeks before travel began, some as long as six weeks in advance. I wondered if any of these inoculations were really necessary? I had not had any inoculations at all before

travelling to Egypt.

I decided to talk to Melanie about them, and wondered if I could use the issue as a pretext for meeting her again, one last time before my trip. I now had four days free before my flight on Wednesday, my last day in the UK. Tuesday would be the perfect day to meet, provided I had all my travel preparations taken care of by then, and hence nothing else to distract me from leaving her with an impression she would not forget. In any case, I had to be sure she understood that I would be looking forward to coming back from India and seeing her again as much as I hoped she would be looking forward to my return. I had by now forgiven her for her unresponsiveness in Oxford. At a gut level, I felt sure she had been considering my obvious expressions of affection for her, and had simply been playing hard to get when I last met her, reluctant to dive into a new relationship without consideration. Now, she was as sure that I was made for her as I was that she was made for me. I was 99% certain of this.

Fortunately, it was a Saturday morning. I knew from experience that nothing short of the outbreak of World War Three (a common topic of speculation in those days) would rouse Nicky from his slumbers any time before at least 11 o'clock. I could shout "I love you!" on the phone if I wanted to, secure in the knowledge that even if Nicky heard it, it would be lost somewhere deep within the realm of his dreams. As for Anton, I had never seen him emerge from his ground floor residence any time before 10 am, weekend or otherwise.

"Laine, I'm so glad I caught you home", I told Melanie when she picked up the phone. "You know I'm flying to Delhi on Wednesday. Well, there's something I overlooked about India that I need to talk to you about. Can we meet on, say, Tuesday, so I can go through it with you?"

"Well, what is it?" We had had several phone conversations since our meeting in Oxford, but I wasn't about to let her get away with just another phone conversation this time.

"I think we really need to meet up on this one, for you to understand my meaning. Don't worry, it won't take long. I'll come directly to your place now I know where you live."

"I don't think I can manage that, at least not next week. If we meet up again, I think it'll have to be in London. Can't you tell me now exactly what it is? I hate suspense!"

I was caught between two contradictory feelings. I didn't want to deal with the question of vaccinations on the phone; I wanted to see her. That was really my whole purpose in calling. In truth, I was prepared to take the risk with respect to vaccinations if necessary; I would only get them if it was convenient. But when she told me she was willing to come to London to see me, I heard it as a confirmation of my intuition that she had been considering my expressions of affection for her and now felt ready to reveal that she had similar yearnings for me.

"Well, it's about the poverty thing there that we were talking about in Oxford. We can talk more about it if you can make it to London on Wednesday. I'll meet you at Paddington, if that's OK with you?"

"No, really, I can't make it to London next week; that's impossible. I mean, maybe we can meet in London after you come back."

"It'll be too late then! I'm leaving on Thursday, and I have to know before then!"

"Well, can't you tell me exactly what it is now? Maybe I can help you find the answer if you tell me now. You've got me worried for you now, and you won't tell me what's wrong!"

So, she was worried for me. It looked like I had to compromise. Maybe I would just have to be content with knowing she was concerned for now. She seemed adamant that she didn't have the time to meet me. I decided to tell her my conundrum, but at the same time I also considered the possibility of just turning up on her doorstep uninvited on Tuesday, just to say goodbye. Certainly, she wouldn't turn me away if I just turned up without warning. Then I would know her excuses to just be hesitancy. The unsolicited advice of the other employee at the petrol station, who worked the evenings that I didn't, and was something of a playboy, came to mind: "When a woman says, 'yes', she means yes. When she says 'maybe', she also means yes, and when she says 'no', she means maybe!"

I told her the problem.

"Is that all?" Melanie asked with a laugh after I explained. "OK, well, as far as I remember I got only diphtheria and hepatitis jabs before I went. I was late too, but I was mostly in Delhi for my first week or so,

which is a bit safer than the countryside. But wait a minute, I'll ask for you. Hold on, I'll be back in just two minutes..."

And with that, the phone fell silent. I was mystified. Who could she be asking for information about vaccinations for India. Just as I was considering this, I heard footsteps outside leading to the front door. A few seconds later, the bell rang.

I was thrown into a dilemma. I didn't want to leave the phone for a moment just in case that happened to be the precise moment Melanie returned from wherever she had gone. Yet, the door had to be answered, and repeated ringing may even bring my landlord to answer it. I didn't want him overhearing my conversation. The bell rang again. I swiftly and gently placed the receiver on the little table under the payphone, and went to open the front door. I had my hands on the latch when I heard Jim, the other tenant, call from behind me: "I'll get it, Al! That'll be my mum's package; she keeps on sending me the things she thinks I miss in England!"

I went back to the phone, picked up the receiver again, and Melanie was already there. "...and he told me that when he went, he only got hepatitis jabs. So, I would make them your priority if you don't have much time, and just catch up with the others if you can-"

"OK, Laine, I'm with you now. But, sorry, I had to leave the phone, who is it who told you that?"

"My boyfriend, Richard!"

"Your boyfriend?! I didn't know you had a boyfriend!" I felt a mixture of shock, anger and indignation overwhelming me. "Who's this boyfriend?"

Jim was spending a long time taking delivery of his package, joking with the postman about something or other. Finally, the front door closed, he turned and began walking towards the stairs behind me. As he passed me, I glanced towards him with a smile that revealed that I didn't take any of the conversation I was engaged in seriously. I knew that must have heard my previous exclamation.

But in reality, I took the matter deadly seriously, especially when Melanie reacted by just laughing and asking, "didn't I tell you?"

My fingers grasped the receiver tightly and my whole body became taut as a piano wire. I glanced behind me towards the stairs, to be sure Jim had returned to his room. He hadn't. He was standing outside his door, the large package in his two hands, looking down the stairs toward me curiously.

I looked back up towards him, but he just smiled back. I made an open-palm 'what is it?' gesture. He smiled broadly, then opened his door, apparently with some difficulty, and disappeared from sight. It seemed that he had simply been unable to open the door easily with the large package in his hands, but I couldn't be sure he hadn't been hoping to eavesdrop. After his door closed, I turned my attention back to the phone.

"Laine, are you still there? No, you didn't tell me you have a boyfriend. Why not? There's me, wasting my time chasing you and listening to all that crap about India, when I could have been expending the same effort on finding someone else to settle down with. If it hadn't been for you, I wouldn't have lost a thousand pounds buying travellers' cheques at precisely the wrong time! You've even made me develop an interest in some country thousands of miles away, against my better judgement. You've punched a bloody big gaping hole in my settling down plans. Well, if you're too dim to recognise my interest in you, or too dim to realise that I would be a much better choice than the idiot you've now got yourself hooked up with, then maybe it's just as well that you're *not* my girlfriend! Good-bye!"

The above paragraph was what I wanted to tell her. But what I actually said was:

"Laine, are you still there? No, you didn't tell me you had a boyfriend. Who's the lucky guy?"

"I didn't have a boyfriend the last time we met. We've only been together a week, though it feels like I've always known him." She then went on to relate their meeting at night school, how they found they had a common interest in India, where he had been three times, and so on and so forth. He loved travel just like I did, she claimed, adding that she was sure I would love him.

"I doubt that very much, Laine!" I wanted to say, but somehow the words just didn't make it to my mouth.

At first, I just felt a slight nausea as I listened, but that quickly passed and I found myself no longer able to even muster the energy to listen. I wanted to bring back the feeling of nausea, or the anger and indignation that preceded it, but I just didn't seem to have the energy. I felt drained. I had missed my chance, I told myself, simple as that. Now, I just wanted to bring our conversation to close before I ended up slumping to the ground. I put all my remaining energy into waiting for an appropriate time to bring the call to an end, thanked her for all her advice on India, and told her I would write a postcard.

I knew there was nothing I could now do about either my decision to travel to India or the mistake of buying pound sterling travellers' cheques when I did. The pound continued to drop in value, eventually reaching parity with the US dollar. But that was a relatively minor issue in the big picture of settling down into the life of a part time, London-based traveller. With the practicalities of my impending travel to attend to, I had no time or inclination to consider how I was going solve the much bigger problem of that indispensable component part of the settling down equation - the 'other half' - having been suddenly wiped off the board a second time.

And at a deeper level, I knew that the foundations upon which my resolve to settle down was built on were now very unstable.

Several days later, having had only two of the advised jabs, and having left the keys to the bedsit with my brother, I took off on an Air India flight to New Delhi. I wasn't convinced my brother would find another place to live within six weeks, and I wasn't looking forward to having to share my bedsit with him when I got back.

As the plane took off, I realised that I was in many ways embarking on completely new territory. Apart from the fact that I was travelling to a huge, and for me, completely new country, this flight was the first truly 'long haul' flight I had ever taken. Although the London-Tel Aviv flight I had taken early in my travels several years ago could perhaps, just about be classified as 'inter-continental', this flight was over twice the distance, which made me realise just how much of the world I had yet to discover. Having spent such a long time travelling and working in countries closer to the UK had done nothing to dispel my sense of nervous anticipation.

I brought out the battered old guidebook again soon after take-off; just looking at the photos did something to calm that nervousness. But now I noticed something new: it was no longer only the image of the Darjeeling train that I found engrossing. Some of the others were almost equally fascinating. There was truly so much to see in this country called India that I didn't know how I would ever find the time.

I was 'on the road' again, albeit in the air. In principle, I was still set to return in six weeks' time to my Streatham bedsit and my career in travel. But my gut instinct told me that my short career in travel was over, and my long career as a traveller was back, and in no uncertain terms.

End of Story