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SEVEN DAYS

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INSET

4 short silly stories

KEN DUNN

QUARTET!

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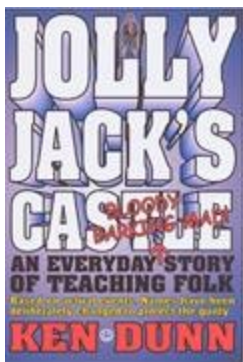
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About the Author

For 5 years, between 1959 and 1964 Ken Dunn trained as an Industrial Designer and then took a PGCE, Post Graduate Certificate in Education – a one year teacher training course. Not wanting to enter education then he worked in Local Government and Museums as a Graphic and Exhibition Designer and after that for several years as a freelance designer. In 1983 he entered secondary education and eventually retired in 2005. He and his wife Wendy now live in Somerset.



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Seven Days

This is tale of woe from the past which happened when I was still teaching. I do wonder how many other teachers have had experiences like this. Any comments will be gratefully accepted but will not necessarily be accorded any sympathy! Read on....

Education is a wonderful thing. It can be stimulating, rewarding and often extremely funny..... Except for School trips, well, some of them. I was sitting in the staff room, happily ignoring the mountain of marking which I should have finished last week, when in slid dear old George. Complete with fixed grin and slightly furtive, George is Head of the Music Department. I knew in my water that he was after something. It was the decisive way he made straight for me and sat down, beaming. Before I could say 'NO!' he began with a sickly sweet, 'Hi!' Trouble always followed that single word and I wondered what it would be this time. Minutes later I knew and heard myself saying 'Yes'.

He was good was old George. He could con anyone when he turned on the charm. A smooth and seamless liturgy flowed over me as he extolled my professionalism, personal presence and responsibility for all things educational. The question was barely noticeable at the end of it. The question was, 'So you see, you're the only one I could ask. Can you help with the Paris visit?'

Over forty kids had been organised to go on that and he was a member of staff short. Not any more. Three weeks later, at an un-Godly 5.30am, the School choir, a modest orchestral ensemble, six staff, including me, and two parents, climbed aboard the double-decked coach. We adults immediately established our territorial rights on the lower deck, much to the annoyance of several of the kids who were turfed out of all the prime seats. Apart from George, who ensconced himself in the forward position next to the driver, the rest of us bundled various instrument cases and music stands to the back, the baggage compartment being quite full, and made sure all the kids were on board. Not unlike a railway carriage, tables between four seats, the arrangement, for us, was quite comfortable. Flora Westbury, Head of Drama, fiercely Welsh and self appointed 'Queen Bee', as far as the kids were concerned, took over two forward facing seats.

'I cannot bear facing backwards!' she said as she plonked herself down. No one said anything but there were a few smirks at the innuendo which that suggested. Lyndsey Appleyard, teacher of piano and keyboard, reluctantly sat opposite her. Flora failed to make her arrival a happy one. Then one of the two parents who had joined us plomped herself down next to her with a relieved sigh. A standard, 'There's better', issued forth but the accent she had was picked up instantly by Flora, and a seamless flow of Welsh gibberish continued from both of them, on and off for hours. This was Mrs. Jones, another Celt who, at a later stage in the trip, was to join ranks with Flora in complete nationalistic mode. Lyndsey retreated into cold immobility for some time.

On the other side, opposite each other and against the window, Harriet and Kevin Winton took up their seats. Harriet, a small and demure woman, was responsible for the choir. She sat quietly constantly pushing her long mousey hair behind her ears and adjusting the Alice band on her head. Kevin, as diminutive as his wife and with hair just as long, but without an Alice band to control it, had been dragged in to conduct all the performances. He was not a happy man. Next to them was Harry Ransome, Head of Chemistry, lolling not to gracefully as a direct result of having a few too many the night before, and opposite Harry me. Sitting behind us was Mrs. Mandon-Hackman. Aloof and remote, concerned only for her daughter, Finola, a viola player. A more irregular bunch of so-called adults could not have been organised.

The coach was fine. One of those low-slung, swish, double-decker, discreet loo, coffee machine jobs and bristling with switches, lamps, fans and video screens as well as adjustable everything, everywhere. The kids were excited, discovering all the wonderfully 'fiddle-worthy' bits of equipment, buzzing with silly conversations and only just remembering to wave at the surrounding sea of parents as we rolled away. Only the adults were less than happy, except George.

George, bless him, had omitted to tell us until a day before departure that we would be leaving just after the crack of dawn. He mumbled something about available ferry crossings and it would only take five hours to get there! A few pert suggestions were made at this revelation but he ignored the insults and there we were, freezing, half asleep and with the prospect of five long hours ahead of us with a coach load of hyper-active children, too wound up to sleep at all. Thanks, George!

The motor way stop didn't help. Still half asleep we herded the kids in, and eventually out, of a 'greasy spoon' and back on to the coach. Mrs Mandon-Hackman remained, as ever, aloof and apart, slowly promenading around but with a steely eye fastened on her daughter at all times. It took us over half an hour to round all the kids up, collect escapees, check the head count twice and then, thankfully, we were on our way again. Two hours later with little delay we rolled onto the ferry and scrambled up through the decks to find a place to sit and be sick. So far, day one was going reasonably well.

The urgency to park ourselves somewhere comfortable was a total failure. As we reached one of the more civilised lounges, one with a bar, most of the seats had been commandeered by the sub-human, larger swilling, low life so there was nothing to do but check the kids. By this time, and despite all our advice, they were charging round like wild animals all over the boat. They raced through the decks and around the upper gangways outside, hanging off the rails alarmingly, but as we cleared the harbour most of them were turning green, firmly in the grip of a rising swell which reduced everyone to sober, look-a-like drunkards.

Various anti-sea-sick potions were issued, to no great effect, and a few of the staff were found 'studying' the wave pattern of the channel. The exception was George, beaming away up on the top deck, strenuously breathing in the sea air, and Flora, the Welsh Queen Bee herself, in complete control of the kids, some of the staff and probably the elements as well. Hatred is a difficult state to cope with, but from this point forward Flora was to make it very easy for a few of us. She had established herself, as usual, as the centre of the Universe, gushingly sympathetic to all 'unseaworthies' who hung to her coat and her every word, or rather words, which were a continuous stream of Welsh 'understanding'. Mrs. Jones, or Angharad, later to be known as 'Angryhead', sat next to her as back-up.

Flora performed her assumed natural function as beacon and life-boat to all, but in a few days time without her realising it, her lamp would begin to fail and her boat would spring a very big leak. The remainder of the crossing proved to be uneventful and as the public address system warned of landfall I bumped into fellow 'staff leader', Harry Ransome, by this time he was quite pissed and then totally pissed off at not being able to get another drink before we arrived. He'd been in the bar since our departure and was not amused about his

hobby being interrupted just because we had to get the kids organised and back onto the coach.

He slouched off into the mass of the walking dead making their way to the exits, oblivious of his part on the trip. The rest of us were then fully occupied rounding up our dear little charges. As lemmings we all shuffled our way down through the decks to the coach but after three head-counts we realised we'd lost six of the kids! Now this must be a record. One bus-load departs, stuffed full of kids, and before we even hit France we lose six! Three of us fought our way up through the human stream to the passenger decks. Flora, Lyndsey, 'the piano', and me. We shot off in different directions, scouring the decks for little Charlotte Davis, Arnold Dibny, Penelope Ardvell, Sharon Twissle, Bernard Upshot and Evadne Shortworthy, all 11 years old and lost. They were all found by guess who? Yes, Flora Westbury.

Back on the coach the kids were even more hyped up by the crossing than before and the prospect of the journey to Paris did not look good, at least to those of us who were awake. The top deck of the coach proved to be the main problem with various tentative and gauche attempts at flirtation from several 12 to 15 year old kids. Policing the 'foothills of sex' can be very wearing. Harry, quite oblivious to this, slept through the whole journey, bless him.

Three and a half hours later we reached Paris. The South East of the city is not to be recommended and the reaction to the 'Hotel' was a stunned silence of disbelief from kids and staff alike.

Dear old George hadn't told any of us that we would be staying in a youth hostel and this one was right in the middle of a heavy, Algerian ghetto, complete with barbed wire fence, border style entry, sentry box and red and white traffic boom as well as high powered lamps above. Various mutterings of 'Stalag' and 'Colditz' were passed round as we took in our new surroundings. An uncompromising brick, two storied block sat glaring at us. What must have been gardens were now weedy scrubland and full of beer cans, bottles both plastic and glass, crisp packets, old newspapers and God knows what else. All of this had been, no doubt, lobbed from various windows over the years. The interior of the building did not improve our depression.

We were confronted by a badly stained wooden parquet floor and a grimy, echo-chambered concrete interior with a circular reception area plainly unused for some time. A wide open staircase ran off from this and underneath this lurked the actual reception desk. Nobody there. George was now flapping around and rapidly going to pieces. He was

fretting about the fact that we should have been met by a courier, booked for the trip, to solve just this kind of problem. Half an hour dragged by before we managed to find the manager. She, at least I think it was, proved to be a stereotyped, stoic, ugly who gave away very few clues as to where we were to be billeted and stood with arms folded listening to our bad French and quite deliberately not understanding a word.

Mercifully the courier arrived, an attractive 23 year old female, Laurence, a brunette and oozing apologies for being late, but within minutes she had us all registered and we began the process of parking our charges. The two floors of the building were strictly organised, for very sensible reasons. The ground floor housed females only and that's probably why Harry and myself were allocated opposite rooms at the end of that corridor! The morning was going to be an interesting experience for all. Upstairs was for males only and, yes, Flora, Lyndsey and Mrs Angharad Jones were smack in the middle of that lot. Wonderful planning. We couldn't make any impact on the management and even after the courier tried to explain the situation, no changes to arrangements made in advance were going to be possible. And that was that.

Eventually we organised the kids into their 'cells' and began the calming down process. By 9.30pm we managed a relative level of stability and thoughts of the bar began to emerge. We had missed the evening meal but at that stage none of us really cared. A quick skirmish with the management established that the bar would not open until 10.00pm! Was this really France? My room was somehow nominated as the 'common room' and we all piled in complete with whatever duty free liquid had been won on the ferry. It was then that I realised that Harry must still be on the coach! He was still there. Fortunately, for Harry, the coach was booked to stay with us the whole time, otherwise.....

A little ruffled but reasonably happy he joined us half an hour later and after partaking of a couple of bottles of muscle relaxant we all felt a little more human. Feeling decidedly more durable, a false impression after too much duty free, I needed to 'test the plumbing', and as my room didn't have the 'equipment' I made my way to what I thought was the loo. Wrong! It was the fire escape and as I opened the door an ear-splitting bell erupted throughout the building! I managed to close it after a few mind numbing seconds but by that time the corridors were full of kids running in all directions. The management were not best pleased about it.

When we eventually settled things down, and the others had gone off to their rooms Harry and I crept back to my place and re-engaged with the duty free. Slowly relaxing, we exchanged various points political, social, cinematic, theatrical and literary including the possibilities of how to escape from this concentration camp. The last topic reduced us to helpless laughter but this sank into a resigned depression for our collective plight. It was unexpectedly lightened when I happened to look out of the window to find two strange characters shuffling up and down outside in the dark and staring at the ground. I then realised they had two sticks in their hands and appeared to be 'dowsing' for water! Not only did we have the most bizarre place to stay but had two French nut cases walking round the building dowsing when not twenty yards from where they were, zigzagging around, was a bloody great lake! We decided that the French are even more crackers than the Brits. Well after 1.00pm, and a little worse for more hysterical laughter and duty free 'testings', Harry shuffled off to bed.

Breakfast held its own joys for us. Every meal had to be negotiated with a 'Barclay Card look-a-like' piece of plastic by pushing it into a long vending machine. Laurence stood at the door to the dining room dutifully doling these things out as we all tramped in, slightly red around the eyes. This self service arrangement only allowed four items to be provided, covered by the card, a piece of fruit, a piece of bread, a pot of something resembling jam and three pre-packed biscuits. Once the card had been slid into the slot at the top of this device only one of a double line of small, transparent, plastic doors could be opened to retrieve the four items. If these did not suffice then other breakfast choices such as croissants and the like, were available and served by two miserable females but these had to be paid for. Several of us did, rather grumpily, with Harry mumbling about, 'bloody French hospitality'.

The general conversation over breakfast was a slightly disgruntled one. Flora complained of the shower in her room which tended to spray everything outside the shower area. Lyndsey had discovered an ant colony had come to say hello and 'Angryhead', Angharad Jones, gave us a rather graphic account of how her next door neighbour, a rather undetermined 'continental', was given to clearing her nasal passages first thing in the morning. George just sat there with a smug expression. We realised later that he and Laurence had been allocated adjoining bedrooms in the sub-basement and this may well have ac-

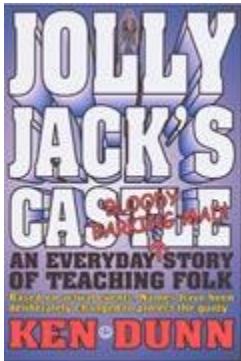
counted for his general 'bon homie'. In any case general agreement saw the place not just as another Stalag or Colditz but more a mixture of 'Quatermass and the Pit', 'Gremlins' and someone even suggested 'The Invasion of the Body Snatchers'. I couldn't work that last one out at all.

After breakfast we clambered on to the coach and chugged off to the first venue for rehearsal. This turned out to be a rather fine old church just off the Rue Jaques and not far from the Notre Dame. Sadly, somebody had forgotten to tell the builders to clear their stuff. Major refurbishment was in progress so the place was alive with a concrete mixer, scaffolding and pendulous plastic sheeting which covered most of one end of the nave. We managed to pick our way through it, set the kids up in front of the altar then, as they began their rehearsal, Harry and I left them in George's, Kevin's and Harriet Winton's tender care.

Lyndsey was looking decidedly fed up but as pianist for the kids she couldn't escape. The Queen Bee and Angryhead were locked into another of their bouts of Celtic gibberish at the back, George was chatting Laurence up again so Harry and I tip-toed out to take in Paris at first hand. By now it was late morning and we only had about an hour and a half to ourselves but this was more than enough to reduce Harry to being partially pissed again. He does enjoy a pre-lunch bevy. The only high point was on our way back which was a bizarre confrontation with a complete 'Spock-like' individual wearing something which resembled a flying helmet, a yellow wrap-around rug, games bag and green welly boots. Obviously a Liberal Democrat on the loose.

I managed to drag Harry back to the church just before the lunch break for all of us and sat him down behind one of the pillars near the concrete mixer hoping he'd sober up. Kevin was in full, red faced flood, his long shoulder length hair whipping around as he made several strident statements about what they'd been doing. It hadn't been a good rehearsal. Lyndsey sat at the piano, her head cradled in her arms across the keys. Enthusiastic girl. Harriet sat to one side looking like a little waif, listening to Kevin ranting at all of the kids. She gave me a woeful smile and then looked down at her feet, her brown mousey hair falling like a curtain in front of her. She was not enjoying this at all. The others were out in the vestry folding programmes for the evenings performance and trying to be 'jolly' in the face of the verbal abuse going on in the nave.

Then the echoes from there died down and it seemed things were returning to normal. I looked out and all the kids were still sitting in their places but quite silent. Kevin and Harriet were having a private



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conversation which didn't seem to be going to well as far as Harriet was concerned. It was just like observing two gerbils having a chat. Kevin then turned and ordered the kids to pack up. It was lunchtime. They tramped mournfully down and passed us on their way to a small room at the back of the church which they were using as a green room come changing room. I joined the rest of the staff to supervise the lunch-break.

This was down on the itinerary as 'own arrangements'. Terrific! That was code language for traipsing the kids around until we found the nearest fast-food joint. Here we were in Paris, with all those restaurants, and all the little buggers wanted was a 'Big Mac'! So much for Parisian cuisine. After lunch we crocoddled down to the Notre Dame. It was shut. Great. The coach arrived and off we went to the Eiffel Tower. Look but don't climb! Not enough time for that. What next? The Pompadou Centre, that was what. A very grubby, scruffy building then, twenty years after completion and alive with weirdo's selling 'suspicious substances', variegated spivs selling other kinds of tat and very little else, except, it seemed, the whole tourist world who were there at the same time.

Mrs Mandon-Hackman surveyed the whole building within disdain, muttering to herself at one point, 'I must have a word with Richard about this.' She obviously operated at higher levels than the rest of us. We bundled the kids back onto the coach after spending quite some time rounding them up. Not until the final head count did I realise that Harry was still at the Church! The coach driver wasn't too bothered about the slight detour to pick Harry up. It was the Queen Bee who made all the snide comments as Harry stumbled back onto the coach. We both ignored her.

Back at what we now had nick-named 'The Reform Centre', I managed to get Harry into his room while the rest of us picked up our 'cards' for the early evening meal. That over, we took off again back to the church for the evenings performance. Despite the building site feel it went off rather well and with a full house. George had at least done his pre-advertising of the event in the city, via the agents for the trip, and the Parisians enjoyed themselves, as much as you can ever tell. The kids took some settling down that evening. The success of the day had sent them off into hyper drive again. Midnight rolled up by the time we had them all pinned down, at least to their rooms. Harry, George and I made for the bar, miraculously open, but after an hour or so George was out for the count. He had had a long day, bless him. Ten

minutes later I somehow found myself stuck with the bill. This did not please me too well as this was supposed to have been organised by George, now totally 'zonked out' from his celebration of the kid's performance. I grumpily sloped off to bed.

I must have been in bed for about three hours when all hell broke loose outside. Clicking the light on I found it to be 2.45am and someone was shrieking in the corridor. It was Flora. The Queen Bee herself and in full voice. What a sight! Curlers, the baggiest nightie known to man and a purple face as she harangued the noisy, foreign intake which must have arrived an hour or so before

No sooner had I stuck my head out of the door than Harry appeared, looking slightly bemused by the row. Before he or I could utter a sound a door at the other end crashed open and an equally terrifying sight stepped into the corridor. I think it was female but it was a tricky decision. She, it, stood there with hands on huge hips, built like an outside toilet and bellowed to all and sundry, in what must have been the foulest of French.

Everyone in sight disappeared instantly and silence fell like a damp blanket. She, it, grinned slowly, winked at Flora and turned back into her room. Flora just stood there with her mouth open, speechless. A rare thing to experience. Unfortunately that proved to be the last time during the whole trip. Enjoying the silence I eventually dozed off. After only two days I was knackered. There were five more to go.

Breakfast. First down, first croissant. You had to be quick in this place or everything disappeared! The next venue was one of the English Churches for an afternoon performance which would be alive with numerous devout 'ex-pats'. The kids slid into pre-performance mode while we adults formed another folding programmes conveyor belt. With that done and the rehearsal well under way Harry and I sneaked out to sample another Paris morning. Just wandering around with the feeling of relative freedom was enough in itself. The conversation ended up with the pair of us analysing our fellow warders and that sent us off into mindless laughter at some of the attitudes, particularly the Welsh contingent, the Queen Bee and Angryhead.

By the time we arrived back at the Church we were a dual bundle of mirth, laughing none too quietly at the general situation. We sat up at the back like two naughty boys, stuffing handkerchiefs into our mouths to stop ourselves giggling. This just made things worse and we had to leave. We were met just outside the door by the agent who had organised the trip from the Paris end. He was a particularly oily char-

acter, oozing false charm and always wringing his hands. A true second hand car salesman if ever I saw one. Totally bemused by two helpless idiots he then asked if we could find him some cigarettes as he had to stay to see someone about the next venue.

After spending half an hour looking for some unspeakable French fags we realised that it had been a simple ploy to get rid of us. The wasn't a fag shop anywhere to be found so we gave up and came back to the church. The agent, now known as 'Slick' to Harry and I, was still grazing around the entrance and didn't seem too happy to see us. Up at the back again we managed to contain ourselves this time and caught the last thirty seconds of the concert.

Late afternoon and back at the Reform Centre we all had the evening off, or so we thought. Without telling us, George had organised a trip down the Seine on one of the Bateau Mouche, the large motorised sight-seeing craft which ply up and down the river. Thanks George. Into the coach again and off we all went. We arrived around 7.30pm by which time it was dark. The Buildings on the river were floodlit and, under other circumstances, it would have been rather pleasant, but with a large contingent of loony kids charging around the open top deck it was not a relaxing experience. Harry was probably the most offended. There was no bar.

Back on the coach, on the way to the reform centre, Flora insisted on stopping outside Christian Dior's main shop to be photographed. That was one of the most irritating events of the whole trip. She had most of the kids fawning around her while she posed in front of the bloody place. The coach was blocking the street and the Parisian traffic behind us vented their collective spleens with an ear-splitting cacophony of horns while she had several photographs taken of 'her favourite designer's shop'. Arriving at the reform centre we now had the evening off, what was left of it. It was now almost 10.00pm but the rest of the time was spent in diffusing the 'foothills of sex' all over again. Two hours of that and we were all exhausted. At least tomorrow would be different. It was.

I hadn't been looking forward to this particular day at all. It had been decided that the kids would need a break from a fairly intense programme of concert performances and that seemed at first to be quite reasonable. I think the actual truth was that George had cocked up the bookings and had to fill the day in somehow. That somehow was Euro-Disney! I've never seen such a tidal wave of humanity as on that day. Bundling off the coach we joined the throng trudging relent-

lessly toward the entrance. It was going to be a nightmare keeping our lot under any kind of control. We adults sorted the kids out into groups and with strict instructions to keep together we made for the gates. Laurence, the courier, shot off to organise group tickets and we hung around telling the kids it would only be a few minutes. How wrong can you be. It actually took one hour and thirteen minutes! Apparently the group ticket window, round the side from the main entrance, was completely unmanned and by the time one of the staff appeared to deal with ticketing for everyone the crowd was absolutely enormous with Laurence somewhere in the middle of it.

We tried to keep the kids calm but as the time ticked by tempers began to fray. At this point Queen Flora came to the rescue. A thirty foot circle of our kids were organised and expanded, controlled by Flora who completely ignored the relentless flow of humanity still flowing doggedly to the entrance gates. She began two mindless games, suitable for four year olds, of 'Bunnies' and 'Murder'. I couldn't understand it at all. The passing grey multitude wondered why a circle of Brit children were alternately acting like loonies or falling down for no particular reason. The depressing thing about it was that the kids were enjoying it.

Most of us adults tried to look as if we had nothing to do with any of it but after a few minutes I couldn't stand it any longer. I went off to see how Laurence was getting on. Harry followed me. Lyndsey followed him. She was feeling just as fed up with this as we were but up until now hadn't shown it. Now she did.

'If that stupid bitch says one more bloody Welsh proverb I'll kill her!' Lyndsey said as she walked between us. Things were looking up. We eventually found Laurence almost at the front of the queue. The damned place was heaving! There must have been two or three thousand people all shoved up together trying to get a ticket to get in. Bloody tourists! A couple of minutes later Harry and I pulled Laurence from the throng complete with all the tickets. Without us she would have been there another half hour just trying to get out from the crowd.

Gathering up the whole group we made our way to the entrance which ran under the main hotel on the site, of which there were five others in various locations. I wondered about that afterwards. Who the hell would want to spend a holiday in such a bloody awful place as this? It was really only an upmarket Holiday Camp after all. As soon as we had managed to get the kids through the gates they vanished, dis-

appearing at great speed in every possible direction. So much for the heavy advice about staying together. The rest of us shambled off into this international, but overtly Americanised, centre of 'fun' with Harry and I dreading the whole experience. On the way through the turnstiles we had found out that the place was dry! Not a drop of alcohol was available anywhere in this desert of wholesomeness. That was extremely depressing, especially to Harry.

The layout was impressive for all that. A complete mid-western, late nineteenth century American town lay before us complete with shops, cafes and restaurants. Sprinkled beyond and around this were dozens of 'experiences' from a haunted house to an enormous labyrinth of pirate caves, science fiction fantasy lands to eastern bazaars. It was all extremely well done but the cost was horrific. We had already been relieved of almost £30 each, thankfully paid for by the school, just to get into the place and although all the events were free the shops and cafes were not. Harry, Lyndsey and I settled in a 'regular' hamburger joint and were relieved of £7 each for one medium sized hamburger. This did not help our overall appreciation of the place.

Over the next three hours we saw quite a few of our lot rushing around the place and as they were obviously going to be fully occupied for some time in the mindless pursuit of trivia we decided to do something about the alcohol problem. The main hotel at the entrance seemed to be the likely place to tackle first. If there was no booze in that place then there would be no hope of finding any anywhere else. We found to our dismay there were no entrances to the place from inside the complex, only exits and there were one-way only. It was impossible to open the doors from our side. We hovered a while at one of them and, as luck would have it, a woman came out while we were there. Before the self closing door could click back into place we were through it and nonchalantly ambling through the interior.

Sumptuous is the only word to describe what we found inside. It was a bit like entering the world of Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Great Gatsby'. A large, circular central space held the reception area, a discreet cafe and bar with a huge staircase running off to the rooms above. The furniture, although economical in number was far from that in style. Palms and verdure was scattered everywhere giving the feeling of a country residence rather than a hotel. This was further heightened by a wide stone fireplace with a blazing log fire.

We made a bee-line for the bar but after first ordering a couple of beers we quickly changed our minds and decided on a large glass of

Muscadet instead which Lyndsey had already ordered. After all this was France and it wouldn't do to perpetuate the 'Brit Beer Bonehead' syndrome.

Settling into the capacious sofa's in front of the fire we were graciously delivered of our wine by a young and very tasty waitress. She then charmingly asked for our room numbers, in an accent which didn't quite grasp the English language. It was rather like a female version of Inspector Clouseau. We all smiled at this odd pronunciation but Harry solved the answer to the question without a flicker.

'Visiting friends,' he said smiling. 'Just let us have the bill.'

'Certainly, Sir,' the waitress said, bowing slightly but then before she walked off she turned back and asked, 'Excuse me, but are you English?'

We nodded and she became slightly more animated and began the 'Clouseau speak' again. It was tricky to follow it but it was a straightforward question followed by a straightforward statement. It went something like this.

'Do you know Kent?'

A multiple nod from us.

'Ah. I know Kent. I have a friend who is a Kent person.'

Now that might seem fairly harmless piece of conversation but her pronunciation of 'Kent' didn't quite work. Instead of the 'E' she used the letter 'U'. You can imagine our reaction. She left us doubled up with laughter, a puzzled look on her face. The mirth quickly evaporated when she later brought us the bill for the wine. We had to pay £6 each. So much for having a quick drink.

By this time it was getting late and it was almost time for the pre-arranged meeting back at the main entrance. We ambled over to the main hotel exit but once outside we found the same masses of humanity streaming out relentlessly. The park was closing and the gates were now shut to anyone wanting to come in with several security guards manning them. There was no way we could get back inside. Rendez-vous time came and went and we were still trying to find a way in but stymied every time by the guards. Twenty minutes later our lot came out, a knackered looking and ill assorted bunch, most of them wearing Mickey Mouse ears and carrying all manner of souvenir crap. Flora spotted us immediately and her face clouded over with venom. They had all been organised like a military exercise by Flora, of course, and she had been looking for us for well over half an hour. From that point the others joined ranks with the Welsh contingent. We were obviously

'naughty' and in disgrace. Oh dear. We all trudged back to the coach, the three of us being totally ignored by the others.

After dinner at the Reform Centre, George announced that he'd organised a disco for the kids. Harry and I groaned inwardly at this. We had hoped for a relatively quiet night. No chance. Half an hour later, down in the basement, not a window in sight, the place was pulsating with heavy metal 'music' and the kids were going wild, gyrating all over the place to the wall of noise which buffeted the rest of us. The only compensation was small bar which had been set up in one of the corners. Rough French wine and horrendously expensive bottled beer was the only fare available so we had to make the best of it. Harry and I stuck it out for an hour then managed to escape without the rest noticing we'd gone.

Once through the outer entrance we spun a coin and turned left down the road. The clatter of heels behind us heralded a breathless Lyndsey.

'Hang on, you two!' she yelled. 'Wait for me!'

After a few minutes walking along we found a seedy little dive which was part cafe and part bar. Walking in we were studied darkly by the locals, who broke their eyes away from the TV set on the wall and a football match. A half dozen or so swarthy, dark skinned, suspicious, low brows watched us settle to a table on the far side of the room. This was still covered with the fly blown remnants of someone's dinner and it took a few minutes for the patron to clear it and grunt something which must have been 'Wajawant?' in French.

'Cognak!' Harry grinned and stuck two fingers up, luckily the right way round, then realised we were three and adjusted his hand accordingly.

The patron raised an eyebrow but shambled off and after a deep discussion with two or three of the locals shambled back with a bottle of local brandy complete with an optic. He plopped three reasonably clean glasses on the table, up-ended the bottle and delivered half a glass each, pumping the optic into life each time. A different kind of delivery but non the less effective. We called him over for another top up a few minutes later and then noticed the locals were looking round in our direction more often. The football had gone from the screen and they seemed to be talking about us. Harry hadn't noticed this and ordered more brandy. The patron obliged and then I became just a trifle worried. Two of the locals stood up, their chairs grating backwards

behind them. The patron stood leaning over the bar watching them walk towards us. They were huge, ugly sods, stubble chinned and generally unkempt. This was not a healthy situation.

Harry was getting quite pissed, again, throwing the brandy back like lemonade and hadn't given this any thought until they sat down at our table and slowly grinned at each of us, particularly Lyndsey.

'Anglais?' one of them grunted.

'Yes,' I said, 'Ah, Oui!'

'Ahh!' the other said and nudged his mountainous friend. The other winked back at him, grinned and then leaned closer to both of us. Harry was just staring, a slightly wild expression in his eyes. Lyndsey had wrapped her coat tightly round her and looked as if she was ready to make a dash for the door. I was scared shitless by now.

'Meeltun Keens!' he said, grinning.

Now my French isn't good at the best of times but this was gibberish to me. I shrugged and looked puzzled. Harry sat frozen.

'Meeltun Keens,' he said again, 'You know zat playce in Ingland? You leeve zere?'

'Ahh! Oh, you mean 'Milton Keynes!' I said, relieved. 'Yes I know it but I don't live zere, uh, there.'

'Zo, Meeltun Keenes,' he said again. 'Verry nize playce. I spend holday zere two yearz ago.'

I looked at my watch and attempted a despairing look.

'We have to go now,' I said, 'Have to get back to the hotel. People waiting for us.'

Pulling Harry up and shoving Lyndsey behind me, I made for the bar, clattered enough francs down to cover the 'cognak' and backed to the door, pushing the other two along and grinning maniacally. The two gorilla's at our table got up and like little children waved their hands saying, 'By, by. By, by!'

We 'By, by'd' back and then shot out, legging it back to the hostel as fast as we could. We found the place closed. The arc lamps were full on at the gate, the boom was down and the side gate locked. Harry and I looked at each other, shrugged, walked up to the boom and raised our hands above our heads.

'Don't shoot!' shouted Harry, 'We surrender!'

Lyndsey collapsed in a fit of giggles. It took all of us about five minutes to make our way, shaking with laughter, under the boom and back up the drive to the front door, holding on to each other, helpless and with tears running down our faces. Fortunately they hadn't locked

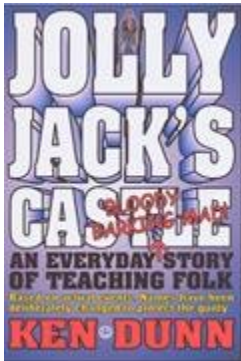
the front door and I don't know what we would have done if they had. But it was bad enough. The Queen Bee, Angryhead and George were standing inside the door, waiting. We stopped laughing.

Breakfast the following morning was tricky. No one was speaking to us. I could see that the kids were wondering what was going on but we ignored it and then left them to it to pack. We were now about to leave for Orlean and the last part of the tour. We piled onto the coach again but this time the seating arrangements for the adults had been already reorganised by Flora to oust us from their company. Not a word was spoken. It was quite weird and, much to Flora's annoyance, quite funny to the three of us.

A few hours later we arrived at Orlean dreading what the 'accommodation' would be like. We were pleasantly surprised. It was clean, tidy and very well organised, except for two small points. Our accommodation was on the third floor without a lift and they didn't have enough rooms to go round. The kids had been taken care of, it was just the adults who had the problem. There was a third problem which Harry quickly discovered. There was no bar. George flapped about again and with Laurence to help him we managed to sort it out to everyone's satisfaction except Mrs Mandon-Hackman and the coach driver.

They were allocated a couple of rooms round the back and away from the main building in a single storey structure which looked as if it had been a rehabilitation centre for down and outs. The interior was no better. Peeling wallpaper, raw wooden parquet floors on the point of coming adrift, steel shuttered windows and nails driven into the walls which would have to double as wardrobes. Very tasty. Mandon-Hackman and the driver were not amused. He was a veteran of thousands of trips and he reckoned this was the worst accommodation he'd ever seen, and he'd seen quite a few.

After taking one look at the place Mandon-Hackman refused point-blank to even consider it. I had to agree with her. Then, to cap it all we found out that there were no other people staying in the place. Just us. The problem seemed an easy one to solve. We could simply use rooms on the second floor. That wasn't possible. They were only available at a higher rate and arrangements could not now be altered. Besides there was another party arriving in the morning. I tried to point out that the other group would arrive tomorrow and we could easily vacate before they came. The patron wouldn't budge. The front door lock



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combination number was issued to us, 1943, a good year we thought, and that was that

Harry and I did the decent thing. We gave up our rooms. Not to ingratiate ourselves with either the Queen Bee, Angryhead or the rest or even to placate Mrs Mandon-Hackman, who was obviously used to much better things than this. No. Ours was a very practical decision. It would mean that we didn't have to suffer the nightmare of settling the kids down quite so often and we could escape more easily without having to run the gauntlet of the Welsh faction. There was one other very practical point of view. We had to keep the driver happy for the return to the U.K. It had been known for disgruntled coach drivers to deliberately bypass the hyper markets on the way back for just this kind of reason. That we could not allow.

The re-arrangement was effected and things settled down again. Harry and I nicknamed our resting place the 'cowshed' and it wasn't much better than that. The ablutions area was distinctly tacky and the view from the windows, when we eventually prised back the steel shutters, revealed bars on the outside and an alley of the red light variety, sprinkled with dead cars, dustbins, dying species of vegetation and the rising spectre of a pure gothic horror church spire. Harry pulled out another bottle of scotch and we drank each others health watching the moving protein crawling across the floor. At least the ants were happy.

Lunchtime arrived and we made our way to the restaurant which sat opposite the main front of the building. This was a great improvement over the last place. No 'Barclay card' and excellent food together with free and very drinkable red and white wine. Harry was very happy about that. George kept forgetting the combination number for the front door and eventually Laurence wrote it in ink on the back of his hand. Trouble was he kept forgetting about it every time and washed it off at least ten times.

A distinct chill was still hovering over the rest of them as far as we were concerned but Kevin, now known as the 'Chief Gerbil' was absent. Mrs Gerbil explained he was having a few digestion problems. That was code language for the runs. He had stuffed himself full of hot and very spicy Mexican enchilada's at Euro-Disney and was now suffering the consequences. During the rest of that day whenever he turned up he would then have to quickly disappear almost at once to 'off-load'. He was in a hell of a state and probably had a very sore rear end. Couldn't have happened to a nicer man! He was in fact not only a

pain in the nethers to most people at the best of times but now he was to himself. There was something like poetic justice to that.

Piling into the coach again we turned up at the next, and joy of joys, last venue, a crumbling old church which had once seen much better days. The interior was alive with ornate paintings which were now rather grubby and dark. A highly suspect verger ambled around the place wearing a long shabby old mac. Harry and I wondered if he when he would start flashing. Anything was possible on this trip.

With more programmes being folded by the two Celts plus a haughty Mrs Mandon-Hackman, Harry and I slid out to taste the streets of Orlean. We found a pleasant roadside cafe at a main, wide cross-roads and sat there watching the French trying to kill each other either by walking directly in front of cars tearing across the junction or by mad drivers attempting mass suicide ramming exercises. A few near misses but no blood. Most entertaining.

Back at the Church and the rehearsal was over. Mrs Gerbil had held this one, Chief Gerbil had been in the sitting position somewhere else for the whole time. We all piled on to the coach and arrived back at the hostel with a couple of hours or so to spare. Time enough for dinner and then into our party frocks again for the last performance. This one went down particularly well with the locals. A standing ovation! The kids deserved it as they had sang and played exceptionally well.

Later that evening they were more than just active. With the success of their performance they were almost uncontrollable. It didn't help with the Queen Bee and Angryhead playing chasing games with them until well after midnight. The Chief Gerbil was still held in the grip of his own private misery and didn't show at all. Lyndsey came down to share a bottle of wine with Harry and I and to get rid of a few more moans about Flora and Angryhead. Even George was showing a few signs of irritation with their non stop whittering.

We were quite a happy little group by now. Flora had successfully split us up into four separate camps. The Gerbils, George and Laurence, herself and Angryhead and then Harry, Lyndsey and me. Mrs Mandon-Hackman did not hob-knob with anyone and we hardly saw the driver at all. Wise man. As far as the kids were concerned they were having a whale of a time charging around like mad things. A few of the older ones were enjoying the obvious disintegration of mutual respect between the adults. You could feel their eyes watching us. I fell into bed just after 1.00am, exhausted. One more day and then home.

No more performances just a gentle visit to the Loire Valley and the land of chateaux after chateaux. What else could happen now?

By 10.30am we had arrived at Chateaux Chambord, a huge rambling edifice built over two hundred years before at the height of the fashion for such frippery. Although a bit on the austere side it was certainly impressive. This would surely keep the kids happy for quite a while. It did. It must have been a whole twenty minutes before they were wandering around moaning about being bored. What I couldn't understand is that you could never even have seen half of it if you'd been running round the damn place for at least an hour. But kids are kids and we were stuck with them.

An hour later we gave up trying to enthuse them about the history of France, this kind of architecture and pushed them back on the coach. We arrived back in Orlean a bit early for a reception at the Town Hall which the Major had kindly invited us to, so, with instructions to all to arrive back at 1.00pm the adults wandered off into the town. Lyndsey, Harry and I found a roadside cafe and basked in the warm sunshine. We didn't talk much except for taking the piss out of the Queen Bee and just sat there enjoying the weather. A few of the kids bounced past us now and again, all good humoured and enjoying the freedom of being let loose in the town.

At 1.00pm everyone turned up on time. This was truly miraculous but probably more to do with the fact that the kids were told they would be given something to eat. Always a guarantee of punctuality. We trouped in and were seated around a splendid fifteenth century interior on the first floor. The Mayor and a few other worthies were gathered there to thank us for the performance and how much they'd enjoyed it. All this was haltingly translated by Slick who had obviously turned up to take advantage of the free nosh and the odd glass of wine. With the formal reply from George, equally haltingly translated again by Slick all pleasantries were set gently aside for the food.

The kids were not as animal-like as we had feared and although the grub disappeared at a fast rate of knots none of the kids disgraced themselves, except Harry and me that is. Harry had spotted something on the other side of the room and during the formal thanks and reply from George he became a helpless shaking blob just as we had done at the concert on the second day in Paris. He managed to contain himself until the informal lunch began but then retired shaking just as badly to an anteroom. I followed him wondering what the hell he was laughing at. With a hankie stuffed into his mouth, again, it took him a good

three minutes to explain. There was a large painting on the other side of the room where we'd been sitting which showed a scene of a large bed, a figure, male, lying half under and half out of the bedclothes and half undressed. By the side of the bed and in the foreground of the picture was a female, again half dressed and leaning towards the male figure, her head blocking out his middle.

At this point the translation from the Mayor, via Slick, had been a comment upon the clarinet solo of the performance. It went something like, 'And what a good blow job that was!'

Harry was looking at the picture at the time and that, coupled with such an unfortunate translation sent him off completely and as he explained it I went with him.

We had reduced ourselves to a state of total collapse yet again and were not appreciated by either the Mayor or George. Queen Bee and Angryhead were standing there sending bolts of disapproval through the air but the Gerbils had to ask what was going on. The kids thought it was hilarious and it took Lyndsey to get us out before we were thrown out. We'd arranged for the coach to pick us up at 3.30 so there was still over an hour to go. Everyone made a dash for the supermarket and grazed through the place looking for anything to take back. We three took up sentry position at yet another roadside cafe and watched the mayhem on the roads until the coach arrived.

Dinner saw the continuation of the rift between us but this time the Gerbils had given up wondering why Queen Bee and Angryhead were so 'Celt-like' and conversed happily with the three of us. Even George softened when we'd explained the nonsense at the town hall. This left the two virgins of the Apocalypse sitting by themselves. They didn't like that.

The evening was a warm and balmy one and by about 8.30pm Lyndsey, Harry and I were sitting on the steps of the cow shed enjoying a large scotch each. We were running over some of the more daft moments of the trip when round the corner stormed the Queen Bee followed hotly by Angryhead, George and Laurence. My heart sank at this invasion and I wondered what the hell we'd done to deserve it.. Instead of a telling off, which is what I'd expected, she and they wanted our help and judging by their expressions it was serious.

'What's up?' I asked getting up.

'There's a man!' the Queen spat out.

'A man?' asked Harry.

'A man!' repeated George, 'In there!' and he pointed back to the hostel.

'What man?' Lyndsey asked, 'In where?'

'On our floor!' the Queen Bee hissed at her, 'Where do you think?'

'What's he doing?' I asked.

'How do I know!' the Queen Bee snapped back. 'He's in the male toilets!'

'Probably having a pee,' Harry grinned.

She gave Harry a look which would have withered forests.

'Where's the patron?' I asked. 'He should sort this out.'

'He's not here,' George said mournfully. 'The staff don't stay over. There's nobody at all.'

'So?' I asked. 'What do you want us to do about it?'

The Queen Bee pulled herself up to her full height and launched in to one of her bulletins of action.

'I want you and Harry to 'escort' this French 'gentleman' off the premises. Then bring your mattresses over to the hostel and take them up to our floor. You can bed down at the top of the stairs and stop anyone coming in during the night.'

Harry and I looked at each other and at the same time turned to the Queen Bee and said in complete unison, 'Sod off!'

She stepped back as if she'd been punched in the mouth which she'd come pretty close to anyway.

'How dare you!' she gasped.

Lyndsey stifled a laugh, George looked stunned and Angryhead stood there speechless. I couldn't believe the gall of the woman and Harry just burst out laughing.

'We'll see to the frog,' I said, before she could start ranting again, 'but if you think we're going to spend the night, on the floor, at the top of the stairs, you must be bloody mad!'

She turned on her heel and stomped off, closely followed by George, Angryhead and Laurence.

'Come on, Harry,' I said wearily. 'We'd better get rid of the frog and try and calm things down somehow.'

'I'll hang on here,' Lyndsey smiled and sat down on the steps again under the lamp over the door, picking up her scotch.

Harry and I found the bloke washing his hands in the gents and after a few gestures and garbled French he was outside and walking away. We later found out that he knew the patron very well and used

the place to freshen up on his way home from work. Nothing more sinister than that although why he did that here instead of his own home was a mystery. At the same time the Queen Bee was winding everyone up, including the kids, about a major breach in the security of the building and she would personally be on guard against any other 'penetration' of our territory and safety. This had a startling effect on the kids who became extremely worried at this sudden change to their small, and now, thanks to that silly cow, highly vulnerable world.

I tried talking to her and gave her an undertaking that Harry and I would patrol through the night, if necessary, to make sure of no other intruders. She didn't seem that impressed but she did nod a cursory approval. I left her to it and walked back downstairs with Harry to Lyndsey who was still sitting there with the scotch.

'She's crackers, that woman,' Harry said.

'Ah,' Lyndsey said. 'You've noticed that then?'

We poured ourselves another scotch and sat down again. Two hours later we'd emptied the bottle and were beginning to feel no pain.

'I'd better go and see how the seige is getting on,' I said and weaved my way to the front door. I pressed the numbers of the combination but the door remained shut. I tried again and it still wouldn't open. What I didn't know then was that the Queen Bee had double bolted the door from the inside so there was no chance of anyone, who didn't have an axe, getting in at all. That left the problem of how Lyndsey was going to get back to her room. That was a problem. I could just see the verbal mileage that poisonous Welsh Celt would generate if Lyndsey had to stay down here with us. I walked back to the other two and reported.

'The bitch has done that deliberately!' Lyndsey said.

'Without a doubt,' I agreed.

'Oh, to hell with her!' Harry beamed. 'Let's have another drink.'

He beetled back into the cow shed and came back with another bottle of scotch. Now I realised why he had brought such a large suitcase. It must have been full of the stuff, although by now there couldn't be much of it left. It became just a little cool for sitting out so we stumbled inside the cow shed. There were two beds in my room and we all flopped down onto them and discussed the week all over again. Just after midnight we still had the problem of how to get Lyndsey back upstairs.

'If we can't get in through the front door,' Lyndsey said, 'can we get in through a back door somewhere or a window?'

I hadn't thought of that at all and went off to find out. By the time I got back Harry was spark out on one of the beds and Lyndsey was just sitting, humming one of the themes she and the kids had been performing through the week.

'Nothing,' I said, as she looked up.

'Oh, great,' she replied, 'that's just great'.

I poured myself another scotch and thought about the odd fact that there were no resident staff. I wondered what would happen in a real emergency, like a fire!

'Hey!' I said. 'There's a fire escape at the side of the place. We might be able to get in that way!'

At almost 1.00am the last thing I would recommend to anyone is negotiating a spiral fire escape, in the dark, in a foreign country. It's no fun even especially when you might have had a bit too much scotch. Lyndsey followed me up the winding staircase right to the top of the building, the odd giggle popping out now and then. I put my hand on the fire door and twisted. It opened and no screaming warning bell!

Seconds later we had padded silently down the hall and reached her room. She gave me a peck on the cheek and slid inside. That left me in the low, yellow pallor of the night light and now facing the distasteful prospect of a steep descent down that fire escape. To hell with that. I was going down and out through the front door. I strode down the hall to the double doors which opened outwards to the main staircase and pushed. The doors clonked into something on the other side quickly followed by a high pitched, 'OWW!'

I stuck my head round one of the doors and could see a rumpled mass of bedding stretching across the landing at the top of the stairs. Squeezing through the gap I could feel a large object moving under my right kneecap. I stretched over and switched on the light. Three bleary faces looked up at me from the floor, blinking in the sudden burst of light. They belonged to Laurence, Angryhead and the Queen Bee. They had dragged their mattresses out onto the top landing of the stairs and had probably been there for hours. The Queen Bee was rubbing the top of her head. That was the noise I had heard when I opened the door. It had smacked right into her! What a shame.

'What the hell are you silly buggers doing out here!' I said, very loudly.

'Keeping vigil!' the Queen Bee snapped back.

'Keeping vigil?' I asked 'Against what?'

'Intruders,' she said sulkily.

‘Intruders my bum!’ I shouted at her. ‘I could be an intruder! And what about the fire hazard your causing by lying here, blocking up the doors like beached bloody whales? Get back to bed now! Come on, push off before we wake up the whole bloody floor!’

They got the point and sloped off to their rooms, dragging their bedding with them. George stumbled out to find out what all the row was about. He saw me and simply turned and went back into his room. It may have been the look on my face which persuaded him. I was not feeling very calm. A few kids poked their noses out but on seeing me they quickly shut their doors.

I waited for a couple of minutes, just to make sure everything was quiet, then made my way downstairs and back to the cow shed. Harry was fast asleep so I covered him with a blanket then crashed out myself.

I had one hell of a headache in the morning and it took me about half an hour to wake Harry up. We eventually trudged over to the restaurant and joined an unbelievably noisy mob of our kids who were full of the previous evenings 'entertainment'. Lyndsey saw us arrive and organised two large cups of coffee for us as we sat down. She winked but said nothing. At the other end of the table the Queen Bee and Angryhead sat stiffly, picking at their plates. George was as bemused as ever and Laurence really wanted to be somewhere else. She was lucky. Slick arrived and took her off but not without effusive kisses and waves to everyone from both of them.

An hour later we were all packed and the front of the hostel was stacked with baggage and instruments waiting for the coach to arrive. The kids were hopping about all over the place, looking forward to going home. George was pacing up and down anxiously, occasionally looking up and down the street hoping to catch a glimpse of the coach. Mrs Mandon-Hackman stood silently with her daughter looking slightly haggard from the weeks events and obviously thinking to herself, ‘Never again, darling!’.

The Queen Bee and Angryhead were slowly walking to and fro in a state of self isolation and I suspect they were both pondering the possibility of how silly they had been, particularly about last night. Lyndsey sat on the steps of the hostel grinning from ear to ear watching all of this and then winking across to Harry and myself.

The coach arrived at last and Harry and I took complete control, bundling all the kids on board first and organising our own seating arrangements for the adults. The journey back was a long one but very

satisfying. The Queen Bee and Angryhead had been relegated to the back of the lower deck while the rest of us moved around now and again, checking on the kids from time to time. The hyper market stop proved to be a smooth half hour of concentrated, selective purchases by all and within another hour we were half way out of the port of Dunkirk and on our way home. Mrs Mandon-Hackman left us at Ramsgate, swept away in a Rolls, one of the company cars of course.

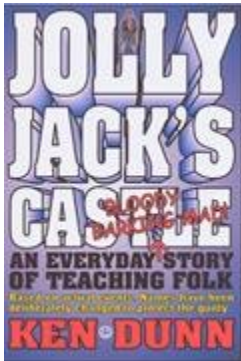
We arrived back at the school just before midnight. It had been a long journey. Mums and dads surrounded the coach as it came to a stop and the kids bounced out finding welcoming arms to hold them close. The Queen Bee and Angryhead stomped off the coach, pushing their way through the throng of folk, and disappeared into the night without saying a word to anyone. I watched them go thinking to myself that it would be an interesting meeting when we all returned to school. Within another ten minutes all the kids had been picked up with their instruments and baggage and were well on their way to their own beds yet still full and overflowing with all the stories of the week, rabbiting away non-stop into the night.

Harry and I made a point of thanking the driver, so did George, but only because I frog-marched him round to do so. He'd done a bloody good job in the circumstances. School trips are never that easy.

Lyndsey gave Harry and I a kiss on the cheek and just said, 'Thanks for everything.' Then she was off to find her car and drive home. Harry followed her quickly waving back to me. He always was an optimistic sod. I walked off home opened the front door, shed my coat and flopped down into the chair. My wife appeared from upstairs.

'Oh, your back!' she exclaimed with a smile on her face. 'Have a good holiday then?'

'Holiday....?' I thought.



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Beer

Looking back on it all now it's quite funny, I suppose. At the time it was far from it. In fact, when I think about it, which I try not to, it was positively diabolical. I've never been involved with anything quite like it since and I hope I never will, but at the time you don't think of things like that, do you?

I'm talking about the 'Great British Beer Festival' in Newcastle upon Tyne in the North East of England, 'Geordieland'. Never heard of it? I'm surprised. I thought everyone had. Ah, well. It certainly felt at the time that the whole world knew about it and were intent on wreaking vengeance on anyone who had anything to do with it. It was 1973, almost forty years ago now. Doesn't time fly? As a struggling designer I was barely keeping the whole pack of wolves from every single door, crack and crevice when the prospect of some substantial graphic work simply popped up in front of me.

I say 'popped' as it came from a diminutive little fella who had a habit of trying to surprise people by literally sticking his head under your nose when you were least expecting it. This character was Fred Thompson, known to all as 'Tommo', a freelance photographer. I'd come across him some months before. He'd split from the company he'd originally worked for and set upon on his own. A standard arrangement at first with portraits, weddings, cuddly babies, you know the kind of thing.

Gradually he expanded his territory even managing to sell a few 'newsy' shots to the local paper. There were other more shady areas which he 'developed' and I suppose he made most of his money from these. 'Artistic' and highly private, erotic poses of young ladies had become one of his more unsavoury specialities. Now and again he actually sold a few to the bottom end, if you'll forgive the expression, of the 'girly mag' industry.

In any event I had passed what bits of photography I could his way and, I suppose because he wanted to help me, he told me about this new event which had just hit town. Two rather well heeled business men, Robert and Tony Long, had set up residence in one of the best hotels in town and were contacting all and sundry developing a

concession base for their new enterprise. This was to be a major Beer Festival along the lines of the Munich Beerfest. It was going to celebrate British Beer, not the watery lager which the Germans and particularly the Australians were trying to peddle at the time. No, this was to be a festival of the finest British Ales around. It just happened to coincide with the National urge in the early seventies to go back to basics, 'proper' beer in wooden barrels, not the fizzy keg stuff which had just begun to appear in the new fangled aluminium barrel variety.

The word had spread like wildfire about this and somehow Tommo had wheedled his way into the organisation and came back out with the photographic concession for the whole thing. I should have known then that if Tommo was involved then I shouldn't be. How anyone could have recognised him as a professional I'll never know. This in itself should have been a warning about the two Long brothers but I suppose I was too close to it and at that time I was a little thin in the bank balance stakes which always tended to affect my normal reasoning.

I met the Long's the following day in their hotel, was introduced by Tommo and we sat in their spacious suite, both of us slightly cowed by the opulent atmosphere. Both of them were sleek, business suited examples of capitalism, immaculately dressed and oozing confidence. There was nothing cheap here, at least on the face of it. Robert Long was from somewhere in the Midlands, Nottingham as I remember. Fairly tall and thick set, he was a larger version of his older brother, Tony, who talked with a distinct Canadian accent. It became apparent later, that he had emigrated some years before but had arrived back to help organise and run this prestigious, liquid operation.

The Festival would run for five days, Monday to Friday, and they wanted the best 'image' for it they could get. It would mean not only tickets, brochures and posters but TV and Radio ads as well as the design for the staging and a hell of a lot more besides. I couldn't believe my luck. I was now facing a lot of work and the prospect of a lot of money as well. This might run into thousands if I played my cards right.

We arranged to meet the following Friday when they would be better placed to give me a full briefing. There was still a lot to organise and by then they would be able to outline the full extent of their needs. Champagne arrived and we all drank a toast to the festival. I arrived back home to tell my wife my news. She was apprehensive

about the possible work load but saw the opportunity. It was too good to miss and being in on the ground floor, as it were, was even better.

Friday came around and we met again at the hotel. By this time they had a venue organised and a pile of applications from several breweries. These guys didn't mess around. As well as that various people had been arriving all day long asking for appointments to see the two brothers. The place was beginning to buzz. We sat and talked the whole thing through in detail. The site of the festival was going to be the open space on the edge of town inside one of the largest tents ever seen in Europe. That turned out to be vast not just large. Planning permission had been applied for and granted. A specialist company had already been signed up to provide the tent and they were due to arrive to set it up the following day. Once that had been completed it would need a rapid 'dressing' of the whole thing, outside and inside.

This ranged from a main and spectacular entrance surround through a signing system for the operations inside then to cash desks, turnstiles and various point of sale units for the gifts and bric-a-brac which the brothers wanted. After all that other parts of the huge interior would need platforms for the entertainment events, several bars where the beers would be sold, a main stage, lighting and sound systems and several booths for the sale of Beer Festival Souvenirs such as glasses, hats, beer mats and clothes and all manner of goods associated with Beer. One of these, 'hats', had to be explained to me.

What the brothers were looking for was the 'North Country Image', they who knew their beers, and the hats were in fact caps, the 'Andy Capp' variety, which would ensure the arrival of the 'common man'. I had my reservations about this but, if that's what they wanted, then that's what they would have, it was their money after all, but I managed to get that simple thought quite wrong.

By the time I left them I had pages of notes and a full brief. We had agreed terms, which included a rather substantial fee, and everything seemed very healthy. They were pleased with some of the suggestions I had made and all I had to do now was 'deliver the goods'. The only problem was that there wasn't a lot of time available. They wanted the whole thing up and running in two weeks! Quite apart from my own problems, things were hotting up elsewhere. They had to bring in three office staff and install a few more phones just to cope with the enquiries and calls which continued to bombard the

hotel from all quarters. Everyone wanted a piece of this 'beer based' action.

The tent was now up and complete. It was the biggest thing of it's kind I've ever seen. Describing it to give the right scale is tricky, but if you can imagine about four of the circus type structures all fastened together that should give some idea of the area. But this was much higher and wider with hardly any internal supports. They were on the outside with the canvas being suspended from an intricate arrangement of cables which were tensioned back over the top of the whole thing. It stayed up somehow and the feeling of space on the inside was quite extraordinary. Fortunately for me the company responsible for it were able to provide a scaled layout on paper which made the chore of organising the enormous interior that much easier.

I was still quite blinkered by all of it and the speed in which every thing was developing didn't help. I was caught up with 'beer fever', just like everyone else who were involved, and mesmerised by how much I thought I might make out of the whole affair. I should have stood back mentally and looked harder but as the days fled by, with hardly any time to spare for thought, I became more and more enmeshed in the whole business and reassured by the easy confidence of the two brothers.

Unknown to anyone working on the Festival a few rumours were beginning to surface in the town about the Long's financial credentials and it took another few days before some of the organisations involved began to wonder if they might just be being taken for a ride by these two smooth characters who had arrived from nowhere. But then money had been paid 'up front' by them and it seemed inconceivable that anything could go wrong.

I ploughed on with the preparation of drawings and specifications. I didn't get a lot of sleep over the following few days but I managed to knock out a simple component system which would be easily constructed and provide all that they needed for the interior of the tent. The graphics for tickets, posters and all the other things they wanted was an easier task. Once I'd established a theme, an 'image', it was a relatively simple process of applying that to everything, right down to the beer mats.

Four days later we were going over the drawings and presentations and they were very pleased with the end products of my labours. I then had the extraordinary situation of having that paid for then and there. This was unprecedented! What more could I do? What

more did they want? I was now firmly, and totally theirs to command. I then found myself as overall co-ordinator of the whole thing, just like that! The fee for this role was agreed and would be paid at the end of the Festival. That then left me, not only 'gob smacked', but with a huge list of organisations to deal with, and all in the space of ten days to 'get the show on the road'!

A battalion of different companies were established as Festival plumbers, electricians, sound and lighting consultants as well as furniture, glassware, crockery, bunting, floor covering, security, cutlery, table cloth suppliers and a host of other hopeful, would be purveyors of goods of all kinds, shapes and inclinations. I could only hope to estimate the overall numbers of customers for the five days of the Festival and hand these figures over for them to deal with.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly, albeit at a rather hectic pace, when the first 'problem' emerged. The company who had erected the tent had arrived on the site complete with the trucks it had first arrived in. They were not happy. Although an initial payment had been made no more had been forthcoming so they were now going to take it away! The Long brothers were less than enthusiastic about this and met them on site, being careful to block the entrance to the site with their own car.

After a heated argument things eventually calmed and heads began to nod. The tension eased but I noticed that Tommo was creeping around in the background with a plastic bag full of unidentified lumps. These turned out to be huge potatoes which he had rammed up the exhaust pipe of the four trucks in the hope of immobilising them. Little did he know that if they had started up the spuds would have been blown out like cannonballs and anyone caught in the firing line would have ended up with a very large hole through them! The drivers dug them out before they drove off, grinning at the naive attempt to stop them.

In any case that turned out to be the turning point of all our fortunes. A few more nervous exhibitors from the breweries down to the smallest supplier were asking similar questions about the slow payment which seemed to be taking over. That began to show itself a day or so later. Meanwhile Tommo was working on something else which was making him grin from ear to ear. He was arranging the 'supply' of 'Beerettes'. These were half a dozen of the local girls, well endowed, frothy, mindless near harlots which he had 'interviewed' at great

length before offering them to the brothers to help the sale of all the souvenir 'tat'.

They were exactly what the brothers were looking for. Young, bouncy - in more ways than one - attractive, in a tarty kind of way, but they still needed their 'uniforms'. These turned out to be a bright red with a very, very short flared skirt, tight fitting top, very low neckline, a full cap and knee length silver boots. They arrived at the hotel to 'demonstrate' how they looked and pranced around the place in this bizarre gear to the delight of the Long brothers and especially Tommo, who was almost dribbling at the sight.

Tommo took them all off to his studio, suggesting he should taking publicity shots of all of them for the local papers. I saw him the following morning and he could hardly stand. It must have been quite a session! His grin now almost met at the back of his head and it took him another day to regain his strength.

The day of the Grand Opening of the Great British Beer Festival was only two days away but the rot had begun to set in. Three of the major Breweries pulled out, unhappy about the lack of payment and the rumours of a possible, major, 'con' were now flying about all over the place. They all centred on the lack of payment and more and more people were becoming distinctly suspicious of being 'taken' by the Long's. After deposits had been paid not a penny had passed to anyone and even the hotel was beginning to become apprehensive about the Long brother's bill. This was now in the thousands for all the additional services and rooms which had been taken over.

The brothers managed to stem the tide by oozing confidence and reassuring statements but there was still a general feeling of unease. The local TV News invited the brothers for interview on the eve of the Festival and it was plain that they were out for blood, accusing them openly during the broadcast of being con-men. The Long's parried every probe and snide remark and that probably kept the 'show on the road', at least for the opening the following day. After that things changed.

As dawn broke on the big day of the 'Great British Beer Festival' all was in place but not as complete or as 'Great' as it should have been. There was less than a third of the original list of breweries present which had originally agreed to take part but we'd managed to spread things out so that it wouldn't really be noticed. Everyone was wondering just how many punters would actually turn up. The morning ground on to the official opening of midday and there wasn't a

soul in sight apart from the few constables who had been organised to 'keep the peace'. After all, northerners knew how to drink and this was probably the biggest single alehouse ever erected in this part of the world and in the history of beer itself.

Then, as the seconds ticked away towards noon, a few strolling figures began to make their way across the grass to the entrance. Robert Long turned and signalled to the sound system people and the air was filled with the sounds of brass bands as the first few customers paid their fiver and strolled through the narrow sales gauntlet, accepting their free, printed, 'Great British Beer Festival' pint glass, the dimpled and handled variety, and their free 'Beer hat', the cloth caps which had been so important to the 'image' of the whole event.

After another nerve wracking five minutes there was, at last, a healthy crowd at the entrance with more and more people streaming across to the tent. Within another twenty minutes the tent was stuffed full of people, with hundreds more trying to get in, all anxious to taste the various beers available, all at knockdown prices, and enjoy the entertainment. We'd managed to get just enough together to keep things going, ranging from a creche to beauty contests, giant size bar games, a Bingo session, a trad jazz band belting out drinking ditties on the stage and characters in nineteenth century costume acting out the brewing process.

In amongst all of this the 'Red Specials', as they were now known, flitted through the throng fluttering their eyelids and flashing everything else, selling 'Beer Souvenirs'. These included the humble beer mat and counter cloths to more of the cloth caps and engraved glasses. The biggest selling line were the saucy photographs, courtesy of Tommo, of most of them in 'beer wench' poses. The punters were loving it and in less than an hour community singing had broken out all over the place, aided by the trad jazz group who were blasting away on stage with a large crowd, jigging and drinking in front of them. It looked as if everything would be all right. How wrong can you be.

By the end of the day, near midnight, we were relieved at how well it had actually gone. The Long brothers were beaming with satisfaction and, with handshakes all round, they left and walked back to the hotel being careful to collect the takings of the day with them. As the last unsteady, yet grinning punter, was poured out into the cool night air a bustle of activity began as the bar staff set to, cleaning up all the bars while a squad of cleaners spread out through the tent to tackle the dross of the first night.

Tommo and myself wandered around making sure everything was set for the second day and then, still on a high, poured ourselves a couple of pints from one of the bars. The half dozen coppers who had been patrolling outside wandered in a few minutes later on their final check of the tent and happily accepted a pint each. We all sat round for another hour, laughing and joking about the day until a rather stern Superintendant arrived and spoiled the fun. The cops sloped off winking back at us but looking forward, just as much as we were, to the second of the five days of the Festival.

The second day, Tuesday, was just as successful but I noticed we were beginning to run out of the special beer glasses and the cloth caps were getting a bit thin on the ground as well. I wasn't particularly concerned about this as I'd arranged another delivery of both items for the following morning. When neither of these had turned up by eleven o'clock on Wednesday morning I began to wonder what was going on. We were due to open in an hour and that didn't leave us a lot of time. A phone call to each supplier gave me the answer. They hadn't been paid a penny, contrary to a prior agreement to stagger the cost day by day, and wouldn't supply a single thing until the Long brother's coughed up for the first two days goods.

I phoned the hotel but was told the brothers were in 'conference'. I didn't like the smell of this at all. What I didn't know was that the 'conference' they were involved with was an emergency financial meeting with one of the local money lenders. The banks wouldn't touch them so they'd been forced to find this other source and were faced with having to pay way above the standard rates of interest to fund the rest of the festival.

Minutes before we were due to open a line of near thugs arrived, all carrying cash registers. Behind them a tall lean figure followed, dressed in a dark overcoat and wearing a wide brimmed, velvet fedora. An up market Fagin. This was the money lender the brothers had brought in to pull them out of trouble. He set his team up carefully across the entrance in readiness of the place opening up. Then a couple of trucks arrived. One was full of glasses but these were just ordinary ones, not the specially printed variety which the punters had been promised. The other carried a load of really 'naff' caps, cheap rubbish really and nothing like the originals.

The Long brothers turned up just before we opened, threading their way past the eager queue of folk outside, both of them looking

downcast and, had we known it, resigned to a virtual takeover. They nodded at Tommo and I and, after looking around, walked back to their hotel, leaving us to it. The crowd outside were beginning to get restless as midday came and went but we were still trying to get ourselves organised inside with the deliveries of glasses and the, so called, replacement hats. By twelve fifteen we opened but the paying public, as they dribbled past the cash registers, were not happy and said so loudly. It was the glasses and the hats they were complaining about. Things didn't improve. If it hadn't been for some of the heavies from the cash registers coming over there could have been a nasty situation. That was just the begining.

There were a number of glum faces around the place that day, all of them grumbling about not being paid but recognising that another financial source had been found. The general mood from all concerned began to rise but it didn't last. That was due to the simple fact that the money lender wouldn't accept any claim for payment other than keeping the place going from his actual arrival that morning. As the day came to an end and the last of the public left the atmosphere in the tent was tense to say the least.

He left with his cash registers just before one in the morning and after he'd gone an impromptu meeting took place in one of the bars. All who had been involved with the Festival were there. There was talk of pulling out there and then but a few of us argued to keep going. After all if we did pull out there and then the chances of covering costs would disappear completely. An agreement to meet at nine in the morning was accepted. Then we would all attempt to talk again to the money lender to find out what the true situation was.

I doubt any of us had an easy night. Many of the businesses involved with the Festival had spent a great deal of money supplying various services. None of them had been paid more than a small, initial percentage of their whole committment. It was not a good situation. At nine o'clock the following morning we were all there, waiting for the money lender to arrive. He didn't show at all.

At ten forty five the people who'd supplied the cutlery and crockery stormed out of the tent and brought their van up to the entrance. Without saying anything to anybody they began to collect all their stuff, loading all of it as quickly as they could into the back of the van. That was the signal for the rest of them to do the same. All hell broke loose as a multitude of vehicles were brought up to various parts of the tent. Where there wasn't an entrance they made one with the expen-

sive sound of tearing canvas coming from all sides. They were all quite adamant about clearing the place and disappearing before the public began to arrive.

Tommo and I slouched over to one of the bars and sat dejectedly in front of the pumps.

'Want one?' Tommo asked, nodding his head at the nearest one.

'Why not,' I answered.

He walked round and pulled two pints. With the security we'd had for the tent there'd been no need to lock any of the bars so we took advantage of the short lull before anyone else realised the same thing. We were on our third pint and feeling a little better for it when the Police arrived. Tommo held his wrists together, offering them up as they strode towards us. Both of us expected to be dragged off for drinking illegally but they ignored us completely. All they were interested in doing was helping themselves to the barrels! The Police van was backed up to the tent just like all the others. Tommo and I looked at each other as the same thought dropped into our heads. We had thirty minutes to do something about it.

That afternoon we were sprawled in our living room, both of us quite pissed, my wife looking on from an armchair, a glass of scotch in her hand, smiling vacantly. Around us were stacked cases and cases and cases of beer, lager and all manner of things liquid. We had taken our outstanding payment from the Long brothers 'in kind' just as everyone else involved with the Festival had done, Police included.

The last few minutes before Festival 'opening time' had been total mayhem. The tent had been alive with people running backwards and forwards, struggling with anything that wasn't staked down tight. Within seconds of midday the whole tent had been stripped. The place was a wreck and looked as if it had been hit by a hurricane. The bars were empty. Tables and chairs lay scattered. Banners from the fronts of the bars lay amongst them and the remnants of publicity material lay trampled where it had fallen under the manic stampede to get everything out.

Lounging back home in my living room we wondered what had happened to the brothers. We found out a few days later. They'd disappeared from the hotel that same day, their bill unpaid, with all of the takings from the first two days. That must have been thousands of pounds. At a fiver a head we must have easily had ten thousand peo-

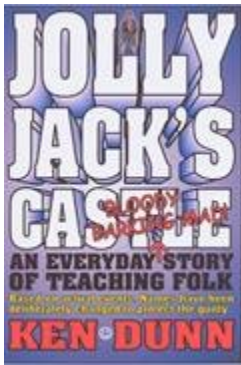
ple through the tent in the first two days. £50,000 is a lot of money today, never mind forty years ago!

The money lender was not too pleased about that and the aftermath which the Festival had brought. He'd had the problem of paying the people who'd erected the tent and then for the damage to it which had happened on that last day. As well as that there'd been the expense of clearing the site but he refused to pay all the other outstanding bills from all the other contributors since he'd taken over. They, and he, were not very happy.

A few weeks later I had a phone call from Tommo. He had a new scam going and wanted me to handle the design work. I asked him what it was. He told me and I looked round at the cases of booze which we still had stacked up in the living room. Tommo had taken his 'cut' but there was still a hell of a lot sitting there. The project he was working on was for an Australian company. They were new to the U.K. and anxious to make the right impact on the market place. They had chosen this part of the world as it had a lot going for it. They'd be needing a major exhibition space and a lot of publicity.

What were they selling? Lager.

Slowly and quite deliberately I put the phone down.



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Cream

Altogether there were six full time, hard nosed, territorially manic, purveyors of 'The Cream'. They were known only as 'Limbo', 'Squidge', 'Drib' (which was a shortened version of 'Dribble'), 'Hole', and that took a while to figure out, 'Ding-Dong' and George.

George was the true professional. Over forty years of hard experience had given him an easy going style. He had defended, expanded and consolidated his territory made easier by the 'cream' he was selling. These were the days of 'real ice cream' from great metal tubs, not the encroaching, foaming, aerated 'fizz' which had just become popular or the 'bricks' which had arrived before. No. He delivered 'real ice cream' and he did it with style, great style.

Oh, yes. George had great style. But George didn't care about any of this. All he wanted was an easy life, a few pints at the end of the day and a good game of 'doms', dominoes to you and I, in the local pub after a day of dispensing 'cool delights' to all and sundry. He would have been even happier if he'd had his own parlour. Not that the others had any less going for them. Far from it. They were all highly individual 'individuals', but George always seemed to have the edge, every time.

All of these oddballs were a bunch of absolute nut-cases who sold ice cream around the streets of the North East of England, Geordieland. And not just in the Summer. They sold the stuff all the year round and made a fortune doing so. Things may have changed since then. I'm talking about the sixties when I was a student and the days when selling ice cream on the streets was more akin to warfare than anything else.

The nicknames of the full time drivers had been earned after years of faithful service. They were, when you got to know them, as accurate a set of descriptions as anyone could have. 'Limbo' was Lenny Robson, a great, gangling, bean pole of a character who could get round, under, behind or through any barrier, enforced or not, to get to his 'public'. Many a time Albert Antonio, who ran the business, had to withstand the Local Education Officer's haranguing, usually backed up by a very bored Policeman. This was always about the numerous occasions when Limbo had turned up right in the middle of a few school playgrounds. He would happily sell, to any small sprog who

had the pennies, a mixture of assorted lollies, ice cream and anything else he had on board that day.

'Squidge' was a lesser mortal but only in height. Better known as Sam Hoskins, he took great delight in poaching any other ice cream van's territory, as long as it wasn't an Antonio van and, as far as anyone knew, had never been caught doing so. Even so, that was a dangerous occupation. Territory is 'all' in the ice cream game. I found that out for myself. He could squeeze himself onto anybody's patch and then disappear before they turned up. He had a sixth sense for knowing the routes of the competition and would use that to the full when things were not going too well with his own.

Derek Armstrong was 'Drib'. This came from his terrible habit of leaving the lid off his tub. You have to remember that this was during a time when large, metal, circular, insulated tubs of ice cream were loaded onto the vans direct from big freezers. There were very few of the 'turn a tap and out it comes' variety around in those days. During the summer season this didn't help his sales at all. The stuff became very sloppy and you could find kids walking around with the stuff dripping off their elbows as they tried to lick it up.

Then there was Arthur Holden, or 'Hole'. He could whip up a cornet which looked huge but it was in fact partially hollow. This was his contribution to the ice cream trade and as a result of his dextrous hands he would only use about half of the amount he should have done. The consequence of this was that he made twice as much profit than anyone else but it didn't always get back to the boss.

'Ding-Dong' or Harry Patterson, was probably the most 'hearing impaired' ice cream salesman known to man. He would switch on his chimes and just sit back and let them run and run. He didn't give a stuff about the understanding that you shouldn't let them ring after 7.00pm. Not for him. He'd even been known to climb into his van, straight from the pub, and well after closing time, chiming his way home.

That left George. George was just George, a true professional. From the top of his balding head, down over his enormous paunch to his solid flat feet, he was a true magician with ice cream. The customers loved him. What they didn't know was how much they weren't getting. George was a genius at creating a mouthwatering ice cream mountain which looked incredible but was completely hollow, much more so than the Hole ever did.

His takings were always the highest at the end of the day. The management loved him. He was the star of the business. What they didn't know was that he could tease a barrel of ice cream twice as far as anyone else, even after pocketing well over a third of the overall profit. He became my guide, teacher and mentor for a whole week before I was allowed loose in, and around, the streets of Newcastle upon Tyne.

I met them all in 1962 in the middle of a five year stint at college. Broke and desperate I'd been trying all the usual venues around Newcastle for holiday work and drawn a complete and total blank. Every other student in the Universe had beaten me to it. Nothing left. But then, by sheer chance, 'Good Old Yellow Pages' came to my rescue.

Well, the directory didn't have that particular 'handle' in those days. I think it was just the 'Business Directory', but the result was the same. I'd picked up a disheveled copy in the common room of the college, promptly dropped the bloody thing and it happened to fall open at 'Ice Cream Manufactureres and Suppliers'.

'What the Hell!' I thought and made a list of the handfull of names and numbers listed. Curiously, they were mostly Italian but I wasn't in the mood to be 'picky' so I dialled my way through the list with the little change I had left. Number four on the list was the first one who didn't say 'NO!' Albert Antonio turned out to be a Fagin-like Italian with Geordie overtones, one hell of a mixture, and totally suspicious of anything and anyone he came into contact with. He was dark haired, yet almost bald, and the most miserable sod I had ever come across up till then.

He eyed me carefully as we talked, checking my driving licence and spitting questions the whole time. Had I done this kind of work before? Any accidents? Had I worked for any of the competition? How long could I be available to him? Another dozen or so questions were shot in my direction which I answered as best I could.

At the end of a fast ten minute grilling I had a job! Basic minimum, of course, cash in hand, starting tomorrow and I'd be working with George, whoever he was, until I knew the ropes. This was more than I had hoped for. The 'cash in hand' reference was the bonus. No tax. Either way, as a student I wasn't bothered about all that. Who was in those days? All I was concerned about was surviving over the holidays and earning enough to keep myself going.

With everything apparently settled Albert abruptly left with a final, 'Be here at 10.30 in the morning!'. I just stood there, feeling a little confused, wondering if there was anything else to do next or should I simply leave? But then George happened next. He rolled in, almost immediately, all twenty rolling stones of him, filling and overflowing the chair next to me. A great bunch of fingers reached towards me.

'Wheey, helloh, Kidda! Amm George! Welcome aboard!' A broad 'Geordie' accent. That was the beginning of seven weeks of total lunacy which I will never forget. I was now part of the Summer conscription, three in total, who were always students or some of the great unemployed who were taken on to swell the ranks of 'Antonio's Great Ice Cream Experience!' The other two, a chap in his mid thirties and another student of about my age had been taken on as serfs in the ice cream parlour. Unlucky them. I'd been given the chance of driving around the streets selling the 'cream' whereas they were stuck inside with that unbelievable collection of headcases known as the Antonio Family all day long!

George was my guide through this brave new world. He had been around ice cream since he was fourteen years old. He'd known Albert's father, Luigi, founder of the business and he'd been just as barmy as his son, Albert, who now had the best ice cream on Tyne-side. He had medals to prove it. The proof of this was emblazoned over all the vans he ran. 'Winner of the Rose of Ice Cream 19...' At least sixteen emblems were studded on each one of the idiosyncratic vehicles which made up the 'Antonio Fleet'. Albert was a very proud Geordie/Italian. The Rose awards were merely a new version of the wars of previous times which I was unfortunate enough to become involved with all too soon.

But that was Albert and this was George. George took me 'on board' completely. Looking back I wonder now if he felt sorry for me, though God knows why. He was only just over five feet tall and I towered a good foot over him. Nevertheless he felt a good deal larger than I did at that time. Approaching his mid sixties, ruddy faced, rotund to a wonderful extent and with a spectacular vocabulary which veered from unadulterated anglo-saxon to unashamed pure filth, he was a force to be reckoned with. As a specialist of the first order George showed me 'the ropes', the basic rules of the trade.

The first day was a classic. I arrived at around 10.15 in the morning, knowing I was early but wanting to be seen to be keen. George was already there, leaning against the window of the Ice Cream Par-

lour looking over to the large double doors of the Creamery next door. This was the 'Holy of Holy's'. Nobody but NOBODY was ever allowed inside when 'The Cream' was being prepared. It was a recipe which had been handed down through the generations, probably Mafia based, and jealously guarded from all but the immediate family. I would find out who they were quite soon. George grinned and winked as I shambled over.

'He's in there,' he said

'Who is?' I asked.

'Albert.' George whispered, putting up a pudgy hand to lower the level. 'He's mixing the daily supply!'

I stood next to George, fascinated by what might lie behind the large doors, listening to the faint swishing noise which oozed from the crack between them. Albert, within and engaged in a mysterious and ancient rite, was 'Mixing the Cream'.

We stood there for a while with me wondering when I'd be given the keys to a van. I didn't see a complicated scenario ahead of me. The ice cream would be loaded into the van with a few bits and pieces, I would then drive off with the whole town to choose from. Easy. It didn't happen quite that way. After a couple of minutes the Creamery doors opened just enough to allow Albert Antonio to slide out. He pointed directly at me and spoke.

'You go with George until you know the ropes.'

That was one of the longest sentences I ever heard him say during the whole time I was with the business. All other communications were usually much shorter and much more 'colourful'.

All novices to the trade always started with George. There was no one else who had as much experience as George. He winked again and thumbed me in the direction of his van, pointing at a bucket on the ground next to him at the same time. This just happened to be full of soapy water with a large, damp rag hanging over the side. It didn't take a college degree to work out what he meant.

Half an hour later and I'd finished. The van gleamed from end to end and we were ready for the next task, loading up. A few minutes dragged by while we waited but then the other drivers of the vans appeared one by one. The secret mixing ceremony continued. George gave them all a quick introduction to 'the new boy', me, and they nodded and grinned in my direction. Then the 'click-clack' of high heels was heard and from round the corner appeared a vision to test the sanity of any man.

The shoes were bright red. The stockings, a pale blue, disappearing up inside a very, very tight and very, very short black leather skirt above which a shrunken, gold finished, tank top revealed a strip of pink flesh. Above this, straining against the gold fabric were an amazingly large and upright pair of breasts. All this was topped with a brown suede jacket and the head which stuck out from the top was heavily made up. Mauve lipstick, heavy mascara and white eye liner surrounded piggy little eyes and an enormous dyed blonde 'bee-hive' wobbled about on the top. This was Maria, daughter of Albert, and an absolute bitch.

All eyes followed her to the door behind which the magic potion for the day was being prepared. She opened it and walked in slamming it behind her. The roar of an engine broke the spell. We all scattered as a bright yellow sports car screamed up to us, skidding to a halt by the door. Karl had arrived. Karl with a 'K', as he would often remind us, Albert's son, although we all viewed him as 'a person of questionable birth'. He never let us down on that. Just like his sister he always lived up to our opinions.

A minute or so later the double doors to the 'shrine of cream' opened slowly. Albert Antonio, proprietor of the whole business walked out, hunched and sweating, rubbing his face with a large handkerchief. He glowered at all of us and then turned back into the shrine. That was the signal to move. We all climbed into the vans and, without a word being spoken, engines running, we arranged ourselves into an orderly line, George and I first, to take on board the days supply. George backed the van up to the doors and then went round to check off the load. I followed him.

Albert had appeared again and with Karl helping, the two of them were manhandling the tubs of ice cream along a primitive, metal-rollered, conveyor belt. Behind this was an assortment of boxes. Another rumpled figure stood at the door to the shrine, leaning against the door frame. This was Albert's brother Mario. I don't think I ever saw him sober. He just stood there, hand in pockets, watery eyed, an expression of mild euphoria across his face, watching Albert and Karl working up a sweat as they heaved the daily supply down the conveyor belt. Then Karl stepped forward, a clipboard in his hand and a sneer on his face. He began reading off the first batch of daily 'supplies'.

'Tub, cream, one. Wafers, box, one. Cornets, box, one. Cornets caramel, box, one. Lolls, boxes, two. Chocs, box, one. Sugar cones, box, one. Float, fiver.'

He looked up immediately and then snapped, 'Come on, then. We haven't got all friggin day!'

Albert glowered again at both of us. George smiled a huge smile, signed for all of it and kept the smile fixed on his face while we lumped the whole lot into the back of the van. Not until we climbed into the front seats, George starting the engine and driving off, did the smile disappear. He then said only two succinct words. They were, 'Fckin' Bastxrds!'

'That bad?' I dared to ask.

'Worse than that, kidda!' George replied. 'If any one of 'em was on fire aah wouldn't piss on them to put them oot! Albert's just a bad tempered owld sod, just like his father. Karl's somethin' else. Pure evil. Watch y'sell with him.'

'What about the other one?' I asked.

'Mario?' George asked.

'I suppose so,' I replied. 'The one who just stood watching all the time.'

'Aye, that's Mario,' explained George. 'He's Albert's owlder brother. Bone idle and completely pissed most of the time. He was the apple of 'is father's eye. Couldn't do any wrong. Albert hates his guts but the business is half his so there's nothin' Albert can do about it.'

'And who's the female? The one who swanned in earlier' I asked.

'D'ye mean Maria, the daughter?' George asked. 'Aal tits and hair?'

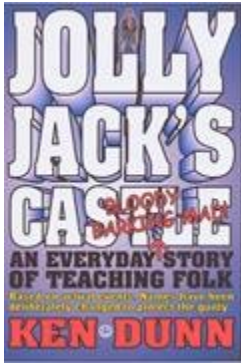
'That's the one,' I said.

'She's nee betta than the rest,' George sighed. 'She's ownly intristed in one thing, if y'see what ahh mean.'

I didn't. George took a deep breath and explained.

'Anythin in troosars,' he said. 'An' she's not picky aboot anythin' she can find inside anyones troosars either. She's crackers. A total nympho. Watch y'sell there an all.'

A few minutes later we were driving into George's territory, just off the Scotswood Road and well before all the old terraces had been demolished. Rank after rank, they used to run off at right angles above that famous stretch of Geordie folk law. The streets which ran up the hill from the road were back to back with a rear lane running between them just wide enough to allow a single vehicle to drive down providing, of course, that it wasn't a Monday, the traditional



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washing day. Then all the back lanes would be criss-crossed with lines of wet clothes and it was a brave man who dared to drive through that lot.

It was Friday and in the first week of the school holidays the place was alive with scruffy urchins charging around all over the place. We took a lot of cash within a few minutes from greedy, snotty nosed brats all fighting to be first in line. I say we but it was George who was doing all the work, chatting to me as he delivered the cream and showing a few basic techniques of how to cope with the equipment. There were two basic tools. One was a scoop and the other was a kind of flat spatula. The scoop handled the cornets and the flat thing dealt with the flat wafers or 'sandwiches' as they called them.

George was not only adept at handing the stuff out quickly and dealing with the change but he knew he was dealing with an ice cream which oozed of Italy, sunshine, cool glades, warm evenings and a softly sung serenade. It really was good stuff. As well as this George had a wonderful, fine line in 'patter' which he would turn on when the mothers appeared, as they did frequently with their little ones.

Most of them were curled, headscarfed harridans and all as miserable as hell. After he'd chatted them up they were smiling, coy lumps, quite horrific when I think back to that, willingly handing over their money and buying twice as much when George turned on the charm.

'Whey, hello, pet,' he'd begin. 'What's ya fettle the day, hinnie?'

This was 'Geordie speak' for, 'Good morning, madam. I hope you are well today.'

With another couple of lines like, 'but you're looking good today,' or 'it's so good to see you again,' a few of them began fluttering their eyes like school girls. I had to turn away. It was enough to turn anyone's stomach.

After an hour or so we were cruising around one of the modern housing estates, mostly tower blocks and wreckage, built in the optimistic days of the late fifties when slum clearance had been a near religion for the local authority. We pulled up in the car park of one of them and waited. Although they'd only been built less than ten years earlier, the contempt in which the occupants held these places was evident to see. The great planning hope of the mid and late fifties had thrown up these brick and concrete towers up all over the place. All the previous housing in that area had been flattened under an army of

bull-dozers and with it had gone the community spirit of the mean streets which they now replaced.

Without exception everyone who lived in these places hated them and treated them with complete disdain, to put it politely. They were not communities any longer. They were at best tall shelters. At worst they were only hovels, stacked one on top of another. Looking around the base of this one was a depressing sight. A couple of broken down cars without wheels, engines or anything else were lying dumped in one of the scruffy car parks. There were very few folk living in these places who could actually afford the comparative luxury of a car.

Litter bins were smashed and scattered around all over the foot-paths and the scrub which had once been grass held a liberal layer of assorted rubbish. Graffiti covered anything accessible and the whole area had the run down depressed atmosphere which matched the older streets we had just come from.

George sat perched on the fixed stool by the open side window of the van, a fag sticking out of his mouth waiting for the rush from the block we'd just stopped under. He'd played his chimes for a few seconds longer than usual and then looked up. I followed his eyes as young faces appeared everywhere on all floors, pressed to the glass of the windows, and shouts began to be heard from every direction. Seconds later a stampede of kids, mothers and a few men rushed out of the entrance and virtually surrounded the van. Pushing and shoving they all tried to get to the front and a few mini fights broke out amongst the kids. A few slaps here and there from the mums soon stopped that.

We managed to serve all of them without any further problems, with me feeding George with cones, lollies or wafers and he dispatching each order and taking the money. It struck me at the time that it was such a 'fluid' process, a non-stop stream of confection going out through the window and the money coming back in. How I would cope by myself I didn't know.

By early afternoon we'd sold well over half the load. That was the point where the local pub beckoned. This was still in the Scotswood area of the town where 'real' pubs were to be found. They've all gone now but at the time there was a pub on every street corner along that famous street, Scotswood Road, which was almost three miles long. Not the posing, designer joints you can find today but 'proper' pubs which were there for one reason, oblivion. Many a case of brain damage had happened over the years as game souls tried to have a half of

beer in every one. Nobody ever succeeded. Geordie ale was powerful stuff.

The pubs were named after the processes which the Scotswood Road overlooked. This had been an area of heavy industry so the names reflected all of that. 'The Hammer', 'The Iron Billet', 'The Forge', 'The Furnace,' and many more were emblazoned over their facades, and all of them were classic examples of early and late Victorian building. Every one of them were very well used by the local population who could drink and drink and drink. Geordies didn't mess about. They had worked out their priorities for what they wanted. These pubs were full of as many chairs and tables as could be crammed in and with as big a bar as possible. The one which George took me into was no exception.

There were only a few bods in the place which somehow made it seem even bigger. There's always something 'comfortable' about a near empty pub, well, there is to me anyway. This one had that unique 'hoppy' smell from the beer and with the light on behind the bar, it seemed to exude a kind of slow party atmosphere. I had the feeling of expectation just walking into the place that it was almost waiting for the whole community to arrive, crowds of drinkers wanting to slosh gallons of ale down their throats, and it was just lying sleepy and content until that happened. But that's me. I always was a bit odd. But this was almost 2.30pm and the bulk of the drinkers had been and gone. So much for reverie.

Anyway, there we were walking in and one of a small group of three across at the bar hailed George as he waddled towards them.

'George, y'old bugger! How's ya fettle?'

'A'reet man!' George answered. 'So far so good!'

One of the bar staff was working her way through the aftermath of the lunchtime drinking session, collecting empties and wiping the tables down as she cleared them but she slowly ambled round behind the bar to take our order. Built like a tank and listing to one side as she walked, she wore a flowered apron tied round her vast bulk with her hair covered in a headscarf. She leaned over the bar and grinned directly at George, a wide, tooth gapped grin.

'Right pet,' she said. 'What can ah get yih then?'

'Mee usual!' George said cheerily. 'An' one fer me mate here!'

Always generous was old George. She pulled the pints and slid them across the bar.

'There y'are, hinny,' she said, still grinning.

'Thanks love,' George said, 'That's grand!'

He handed over the first pint to me and then took the other for himself.

'Eeh, look at that!' he said, holding his pint up to the light. 'Did y'eva see such a sight?'

Before I had the chance to make any kind of response he brought it up to his lips, sniffed it in full admiration, said, 'Forst today!' and then dispatched half of it in one easy gulp.

I sipped mine, in a comparatively genteel fashion but then saw George stiffen as he put his glass down on the table. I followed his eyes to the door and saw a figure in a long, white coat walk into the bar. It was one of the opposition. One of the 'brickies'. The grin on the face was fixed, the manner offensive and all of it in Georges' direction.

While we were offering real ice cream there were one or two national companies selling solid stuff, wrapped in paper and tasteless, hence the 'brick' reference. They all had the notion they had the right to sell anything, anywhere and all of them were very 'pushy' about it. This one was no exception. His name was Billy Harris and it was the first time I had come across him. It wasn't the last.

'Well, well well,' Billy said, walking up to the bar. 'Look who it isn't! It's that famous fella himself! George the 'Parlour' man!'

George just stood there without saying a word but his hands clenched into fists at that last remark. I slid my pint to the back of the bar wondering if things might just become a bit 'active'. But George relaxed, turned his back on Billy and leaned against the bar, sipping his pint, staring straight ahead. It was common knowledge that George had always wanted to set up his own ice cream parlour but so far hadn't got round to it. A distinct lack of money had a lot to do with it. Billy kept taunting him. He ambled over and leaned on the other end of the bar.

'Nothin' t'say,eh?' said Billy. 'Must be aal that plannin' f'the business aal bet.'

'That's it,' George said. 'Then ye'll be out o'business, not that y've got much of a one selling bricks in stead o'cream, like.'

Billy bridled at that. He didn't like the 'brick' reference at all.

'Now, now,' the barmaid said. 'That's enough you two. I divn't want any fightin' in here.'

'It's a'reet, pet,' George smiled, 'Just give Billy somethin' to take away the brick dust, like a bucket o'watta to stick he's heed in.'

It was Billy's turn to clench fists but a large warning finger from the barmaid was enough to stop him saying anything else.

Later that afternoon we were driving round the edge of one of the new estates to the next point on George's patch. We pulled onto another half derelict car park area and there was one of the opposition. It was the same company Billy worked for, another one of the 'brickies'.

George didn't bat an eyelid but drove straight up to the other van and rolled in as close as he could to the serving side, coming within a couple of inches of it. These vans only served their stuff from one side and George had successfully blocked it with our vehicle. We could serve from both sides and the other fella knew it. He jumped out of his van and ran round to the front of ours, red in the face with fury and shouting. George just sat there, ignored him completely, reached over and flicked the chimes on, drowning him out with their noise.

Seconds later we had a mini crowd round us from the flats, all clammering for service and all round our serving hatch on the other side. The 'brickie' was furious but there was nothing he could do. As we dished out the cream and the rest and he sloped off, climbed into his van and drove away, vanquished by George yet again.

'Happens aal the time!' George grinned. 'They nivva lorn!'

For the rest of that week George took me through all the scams and tricks he and the other lads used and by the end of it I felt ready to get started on my own. There had been a lot to remember but some of the points George made were fascinating.

'Nivva poach on a mates patch,' George warned. 'That's the worst thing ye can dee.'

I nodded obediently as this Sage of the Cream continued with the lesson.

'Y've got t'know ya territory,' he continued. 'In some places ye can only sell tanner cornets but in others ninepenny ones. It's the same cornet ivvery time but some folk have more money so y'make 'em pay, it's as simple as that!'

This was well before decimalisation so a 'tanner', a sixpenny silver piece, would be two and a half pence in today's currency and a 'ninepenny one' would be just under four pence. I doubt whether you would get much change, if any, out of two pounds these days for the same two ice creams!

There was a great deal more wisdom from George, much more, and I absorbed it as best I could. On the following Monday morning I was about to be released to the surrounding area of Newcastle as a

purveyor of the 'cream'. I turned up, as usual and wondered what would happen. The instructions I received were short and sharp. Albert Antonio emerged from the creamery, threw a set of keys to me and pointed at a van parked next to the parlour.

'Don't bend it!' he snapped, turning on his heel and stomping back inside the creamery.

'He has such a way with words,' I said as George ambled over, grinning at me.

'Ye get used to it, kidda,' he said. 'Divn't take any notice. He's had a bad night by the look of it.'

'Bad night?' I asked.

'Aye, bad night,' George said again. 'Seems that he lost a packet at the casino again.'

'Again?' I asked.

'What ye don't realise,' George explained, 'is that Albert isn't like you and me. When we've finished for the day he begins. He gets his heed doon for a couple of hours then he's off to the clubs, gamblin'. Every night he's out and about, spendin' the takin's of the day, gamblin'. And if that's not enough his owlder brother, Mario is goin' round the place in the opposite direction, grazin' through aal the pubs and clubs gettin' completely paralytic, rat-arsed pissed. Ivery neet's the same. That's why this is such a piss-pot of a business. If they didn't do it they could have built a chain of parlours aal ower the region. Instead o'fritterin' the whole bloody lot away, stupid owld sods, the pair o'them!'

'That's probably why Albert's such a bad tempered old bugger,' I offered.

'Got it in one, kidda!' George smiled. 'Howway then. Time to hit the trail!'

I climbed into the driving seat, started up and pulled into line behind the rest of them. One by one Karl doled out the daily supply to all the others with me pulling into place in front of the double doors, last.

'Ah,' he grunted. 'The new boy, eh?'

I had the good sense to say nothing at all. I took the simple attitude which George had demonstrated so well before. I just smiled and nodded. Karl stared at me as he reeled off the daily supply, pushing it over to me across the squeaking rollers of the conveyor belt. I loaded the consignment, shut the back door of the van and walked round to the driver's door. I could almost feel Karl's eyes on me as I climbed up

into the van but then I was off, on my own, looking for my own 'patch'. As I drove away Maria stepped out from the parlour, licking her lips, smoothing her thigh with one hand and pouting slightly, giving me a big wink as I passed her. I didn't like the look of that at all.

The old, converted Bedford vans which we drove around in those days were proven work horses which just kept going and going. That's why they'd been used by a number of similar businesses for years. Based on a thing called a 'Doormobile', they had aluminium bodies designed and built for street trading, whether ice cream or not. They were reliable, economical and easy to maintain. When you consider that they were forever stopping and starting all day long it's a miracle they didn't need more care.

But there were occasions when 'maintainance' became necessary. It was rare for any one of us to drive more than a mile or so between stops for selling the cream, and the starter motors sometimes gave trouble when we moved on to the next pitch. Without going into too much mechanical detail the starters would jam, particularly in summer weather, when they overheated. Two basic tools were always carried on board just in case this kind of breakdown happened.

One was a large screwdriver and the other a hammer. If the motor jammed you had to pull the cover off the engine, this was accessible from inside the van, place the screwdriver tip on the end of the starter motor and smack the top of the screwdriver with the hammer. That would always free the starter and you were mobile again, simple as that. Not very subtle but effective.

There were times when that didn't work and that would leave only one alternative. The motors jammed because they were hot so, obviously, they had to be cooled down. Rather than use some of the precious cream to do it you had to apply a 'personal' touch. You might well have seen the driver of one of these vans in those days kneeling down between the front seats and pointing something down into the engine. No? Well, it's enough to say that a trickle of 'water' would usually dribble out from under the van whenever this happened!

That first day by myself wasn't the huge success I would have liked. Without having a defined 'patch' of my own it was difficult to find somewhere without poaching any other vans territory. Not that I knew where any of their routes might be. I toured around for a while, stopped here and there, letting the chimes go every time but didn't get a hell of a lot of paying punters.

It's not just stopping anywhere, as I began to find out, it's knowing where to stop and not having the problem of being moved on by the law for creating a hazard, parking illegally or creating a crowd, an 'obstruction', on a busy street. Not that I had that problem. I was lucky to have a couple of snotty nosed kids without any money more often than not.

Cruising round one of the estates I stopped a couple of times but without any great activity happening. Moving on to another point I pulled round a corner and found one of the opposition sitting there facing me. It was a 'Fantini Brothers' van, another 'real ice cream' vendor like Albert but still a heavy competitor. I would have driven passed but the driver waved me down, grinning. Perhaps this wouldn't be a confrontation after all. He climbed out of his van and walked over to me, still grinning.

'How do!' he said. 'Your new round here, aren't you?'

I nodded.

'Thought so,' he said. 'I know aal the Antonio drivers. Thought I hadn't seen you before. How's it goin?'

I relaxed immediately. This wasn't going to be a stand up row. He seemed to be genuinely interested. How wrong can you be?

'Not so good,' I confessed. 'I've just started and haven't found a decent patch yet.'

'Ahh, that happens to aal of us in the first week or so,' he said, still grinning. 'Tell you what. Why don't you try down by the main road. There's loads of punters down there. I don't think anyone's coverin' that at the moment.'

This was manner from heaven. The opposition giving me tips about where to work! I gave him my thanks and drove off to find it. He waved me off, still grinning. I found the road he'd described and stopped along it, behind it, either side of it and then at, both ends of it without one single person coming out to see me. I couldn't understand why it was so quiet. Lunchtime came around and I found the pub which George had first taken me to. By the time I arrived he'd been there for a while and some of the others lads were in there as well.

'How's business, kidda?' George grinned as I sat down.

'Bloody awful,' I moaned. 'Haven't managed to collect more than a couple of quid all morning.'

'Ahh, nivva mind, hinny!' George sympathized. 'Forst days ar-allways the same. Give it a couple o'days. Ye'll see!'

The others sat around smiling in the same way. They'd all had that kind of start themselves.

'Where've y'been then?' Drib asked.

I gave him a quick description of where and they all fell about laughing. I didn't see the joke.

'All right, all right,' I said. 'What's so bloody funny?'

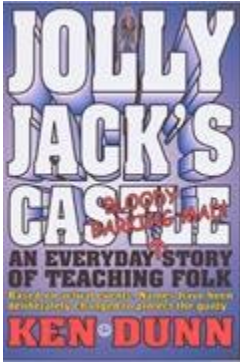
'Three of those places, and the main road you were working,' George said, chuckling, 'were cleared by the council four weeks ago for rehousin'! No wonder you didn't get anyone! There's neebody there anymore!'

Feeling like a total pratt is not a pleasant experience but I had to see the funny side, eventually. The rest of the day didn't improve but tomorrow was another day. I wondered if I'd come across the driver from the Fantini business again. I hoped not for his sake.

The only real bonus of driving Albert Antonio's vans was that we could use them after the working day to get ourselves home and back again each morning. He didn't have the garage space to keep them near the Parlour and the area had a few 'characters' who would have been happy to nick anything off them, mirrors, hub caps, wheels, anything. Albert was happier to have the vans well away from the area rather than have a fleet which would have been half derelict within hours if they'd been parked outside his place.

The only trouble about that was that the van I was driving became a magnet for the kids in the area where I was living. I spent most of my time every early evening chasing kids away from the damned thing, all of them thinking that it was heaving with goodies which might be 'available' if only they could get inside it. There wasn't a day that went by over the whole time I was working for Albert when I didn't have to spend at least three hours a night 'defending' the van from marauding kids.

On the second day of my solo 'sales drive' I rolled up for the 'loading' ceremony, parked the van and walked over to see the lads. George took me off to one side and gave me a few ideas for pitches. With that valuable information on board, as well as all the goods from Albert via Karl, I rolled off into the town to find them. Now, even though I'd lived around Newcastle for years I rarely got to see as much as I did during those few weeks on the 'cream'. Some of the places George had told me about were just vague names on the map but I did my best to find them.



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By the end of the morning I'd sold almost half the load and feeling the difference from the day before I didn't bother stopping for lunch. On through the afternoon was just as good and well before five I'd sold out. I arrived back at the parlour early, much to Albert's surprise. I off loaded the tub, handed over the cash and drove home, much happier altogether.

The rest of the week went just as well and every day saw me knocking off earlier than the rest of them. Albert still looked puzzled every time I turned up before the others but he was happy enough to take the money. By Thursday I thought I couldn't lose. Wherever I stopped there'd be dozens of folk crowding round the van. Out went the cream and in came the money. That's when Maria became more interested.

I'd just off loaded the tub, handed the cash over to Albert, who went off muttering to himself, and was on my way back to the van when she made her move. With Albert safely back inside the creamery she had sidled over to my van, just before I climbed back into it. She slid an arm across the door, holding on to the handle, preventing me opening it. Standing there she flexed the two fully loaded projectiles of her breasts straight at me and ran the tip of her tongue around her lips. It was a tricky moment.

Albert was in the creamery, behind the van. She was right in front of me, the van behind her and then she began to slowly writhe against it, licking her lips again with hooded eyes. I was on my own. What the hell was she doing? A stupid question I know but I reckoned I had seconds before she'd pounce. George saved the day. As she pushed herself from the van towards me a peal of chimes rang out and there was George driving towards us. Saved! She scuttled off as George pulled up and Albert appeared, wondering who was making the noise. A few minutes later George took me to one side for some fatherly advice.

'Nivva get near that horny bitch,' he said quite amicably. 'If she gets the chance she'll have ya troosars roond ya ankles and be at ya manhood. She's the fastest fxck in the Universe an' nasty with it.'

That is probably the most potent warning I've ever had from anyone about anything, ever. In the next few weeks I was very careful about having the van strategically between myself and Maria every time. I trundled off home, thankful for still having my 'manhood' intact.

I turned up as usual on Friday morning to see a line of glum faces. I thought Albert had been having a go at them all about something, he did that from time to time, but no, that hadn't happened. I wondered what was up. George asked me how things were going. Apart from him rescuing me from the jaws, or worse, of Maria he'd only seen me briefly in the mornings and this was the first chance he'd had to see how I was getting on.

I told him things were going well, dropping the odd street name to him and generally talking about where I'd been. With every street I mentioned a head looked up from the group lounging next to the creamery. One by one, each one gave me a poisonous look and then they all stood up as one and walked purposefully over, surrounding me.

'There's one thing y'aalways do in this game!' Limbo said.

'An' that's keep t'ya own patch!' said Squidge.

'Aave been wondrin' why me takin's are doon!' Drib stated, his face very close to mine.

'An he's not the ownly one!' snarled Hole.

'So,' advised Ding-Dong menacingly, 'y'd better get y'sell sorted oot, an' quick!'

George pushed his great bulk forward before things got out of hand.

'Calm doon, ye lot!' he said. 'How many times have ye done the same thing, 'speshly ye, Squidge?'

They backed off but the expressions of fury remained the same. I did my best to apologise but it didn't seem to make a lot of difference. All of them, except George, ignored me until we had finished loading up and then they simply drove off without another word.

'Nivva mind, kidda,' George said. 'They'll come roond, ye'll see.'

He pulled an old, worn map of Newcastle from his van and showed me where their patches were.

'That'll keep yer oot o'trouble,' he said. 'Now, look a'this. Why divvn't y'try ower here.'

He pointed to a section on the west side of the city.

'There's another new howsin' estate gannin' up here,' he said with a wink. 'They've been building it for months. Lot's of young families, lot's o'kids. Ye'll be aallreet ower there!'

'But what about the rest of the lads?' I asked. 'I really don't want to roll on to anyone's patch again.'

'Nee problem,' George grinned at me. 'They've aal got their own patches sown up. Regular customers. They won't be wantin' to lose them for new territory now. This one's a new'en! Get in quick afore the 'brickies' move in!'

That's exactly what I did. Good old George, he really knew the business. After another week I began to be recognised and some folk would wait for my arrival. Things were going well but it didn't last. Just as George had suggested the 'brickies' did move in. It was half-way through the third week, on a bright and sunny afternoon, when I pulled in to one of the new streets and another van appeared at the other end of it. It was Billy Harris, the 'brickie' we'd met in the pub weeks earlier.

He must have spotted me at the same moment for his chimes started up immediately. I countered with mine and the air was full of garish 'tinny' music. We both rolled on towards each other, closer and closer, coming to a stop, bumper to bumper, the chimes still ringing out. It was almost like a gunfight of the old wild west. Two contenders slowly coming towards each other, neither prepared to lose ground or flinch from the confrontation.

Two groups of people stood on either side of us, all of them wondering what was going on but really only concerned about buying an ice cream. They looked on as Billy Harris and I glowered at each other through our windscreens. I 'sat' my ground as we both reached up and switched off our chimes. A few long, silent seconds ticked away and then Billy slowly climbed down from his van and walked arrogantly over to mine, pulling my door open.

'Time's up!' he growled. 'This is my patch! Get your heap, and that sloppy crap you're sellin' out of here, now!'

I looked down at him blankly and then swung my legs over to the door. He stepped back, planting his feet apart, arms coming up, hands forming into fists, looking as if he was ready to smack me one at any moment. I slid down to the ground thinking about what would be the best thing to say to take the heat out of the situation.

It was only then that I realised how short he actually was. He slowly looked up at me, jaw sagging, obviously rejecting what he'd meant to do. His hands went down to his sides, he brought his feet together and moved quickly back to his own van. As he reversed away up the street life returned to normal and I had a crowd of punters round the van, all wanting to be served first.

By five thirty I was almost sold out and made one last stop before driving back to the parlour. A short burst of the chimes was enough to bring a few folk out and as I served them an odd looking character sidled along the street in front of the van. A couple of minutes later he was still there but then turned as I happened to glance in his direction and crossed the street walking quickly away.

As the last of the customers waddled happily off with their purchases I slid the serving hatch shut and climbed back into the driving seat. Starting up and into gear, I pulled away but the steering didn't respond at all. I stopped and climbed down to see if I could see what the problem might be. Both front tyres were as flat as pancakes!

One flat could have been unfortunate but two? That's when I saw the matchsticks pushed into the valves of the tyres. These were no ordinary punctures. This was sabotage! Billy Harris drove past at that point, his chimes on full blast and a stupid grin on his face. It must have been him I'd seen earlier but I hadn't recognised him without his white uniform on.

I trundled back to the Parlour hours after the others had arrived, off loaded and gone. Albert was not pleased. Neither was I and said so, loudly. It must have been one of the few occasions when anyone had answered back. He stood there, speechless and then stomped off to his flat above the Parlour.

I'd been able to borrow a foot pump from one of the families on the estate and after forty minutes of hard foot stamping had blown the tyres back up. The following morning, on my way in, I bought a foot pump, just in case. By the time I arrived at the Parlour the word had somehow flashed round everyone about what had happened

'Who d'ye think it was?' George asked.

'There was no doubt in my mind.

'Billy the Brick Harris,' I said, and then told him of the confrontation I'd had before the tires mysteriously flattened themselves.

'Interestin', very interestin',' was all he said.

The other lads were just as concerned. Their annoyance from that previous business was now long forgotten and before we all drove away to our respective patches we swapped stories. Quite a bit of poaching was going on by all the brickies in the area. It wasn't just happening to us either. Other vans, straight competitors of Albert's like the Fantini Brothers, were having the same sort of trouble.

The rumour was going around that the brickies were trying to move into everyone's territory. This had to be coming from the top as

quite a lot of advertising of the brick variety of ice cream had been going on in the press and on TV just before it began. Then Albert came out in a rage finding us all still standing there

'Get on with it!' he yelled. 'The bloody stuffs meltin' while you're all just standin' there yackin'!

Karl and Maria were standing on either side of him, smirking as we broke up and walked off to our own vans. As I drove off I wondered if things might get out of hand if there was going to be a major invasion from the 'brickies'. Only time would tell.

During the following week I became more and more adept at the business. My patch was now firmly established and as the cream rolled out across the serving hatch the money rolled in the other way. Everything was going very well, very well indeed. But, as these things usually go, it didn't last. There were three incidents which put me in my place. The last two of them freaked Albert out completely.

The first happened back at home. The van was parked on the street and as I stepped out to start my working day, pulling my front door shut, I spotted someone peering in through the back window. I thought it might be an opportunist burglar so I crept round to the front of the van and waited. This character was now moving slowly along the side, examining everything inside and as he came to the drivers door I jumped on him, pinning him against it.

'What's your game, mate! I demanded.

'Get yours hands off me!' he blurted out, going red in the face.

'Not until you tell me what you're after, sunshine,' I said, now quite fired up with the thought of catching someone red-handed, trying to break into the van.

'After?' he said. 'What do you mean, after?'

'Don't play the innocent with me you little sod,' I growled, taking hold of his lapels in both hands. 'I saw you trying to find a way in.'

'I was doing nothing of the kind,' he said. 'I was merely checking the interior of the vehicle. And would you mind letting go of my jacket?'

'A likely story,' I snarled.

'Will you let me go this instant!' he demanded, struggling against my grip.

'Not until I find a copper!' I sneered back at him.

I spun him round and, grabbing him by the scruff of the neck, frog-marched him up the street. He was complaining all the way but

as I turned the corner, lo and behold, there was a PC ambling towards us on his beat.

'What's all this then?' he said as I came up to him, hanging on as tight as I could to my wriggling, protesting captive. 'You all right Mr Fuller?'

'You know this one?' I asked, surprised.

'Indeed I do sir,' the PC grinned. 'This is Mr Henry Fuller, District Health Inspector for these parts.'

Needless to say I had to apologise to him, much to the stifled amusement of the Policeman. Henry Fuller straightened his jacket and tried to regain his dignity, stepping away from me to the corner of the street.

'Would you be wanting to report an assault, Mr Fuller?' asked the Policeman, wryly.

'No I do not' he retorted, much to my relief. 'But I would like, with your help officer, to examine in minute detail the condition of that vehicle.'

He pointed an ominous finger at the van.

'Certainly sir,' the Policeman replied, and turning to me he said, 'Shall we go then?'

I unlocked the van and left him to it, standing with the Policeman on the pavement. He was in there for a good five minutes, poking about everywhere. When he finally emerged he was looking even more irritated than he had before.

'Everything all right sir?' the Policeman asked amiably.

'It would appear so,' Fuller snapped. 'But make sure that spare tyre is covered up at all times in the future, young man!'

With a curt nod to the PC he walked briskly away, leaving the pair of us standing there.

When I told George about it later on he burst out laughing. So did the others.

'Ye'd better watch y'sel in future,' George smirked. 'Owld Henry 'Fullacrap' Fuller can be a right bastard. He's had quite a few on health charges in the past. Jus' keep y'heed doon an' y'll be a'reet!'

The second disaster happened a few days later. Half way round my patch, just before lunchtime and it seemed to be going as well as ever. I had turned down yet another cul de sac but had forgotten, again, that this one was too tight to swing the van round at the end. I'd have to reverse out, again. Sighing, I switched on the chimes and

waited for custom. After ten minutes I'd taken all that was going so I started up and slid the gear stick into reverse.

Now, the old Bedford conversions were great vehicles but they had two very bad blind spots at the back. The bodywork wrapped itself round each corner and must have been about eighteen inches or so wide. I chugged back up the cul de sac, almost to the top, keeping a beady eye out on both corners, turning my head and using the large wing mirrors but then.... bang! What the hell was that? It wasn't another parked car, of that much I was sure. I climbed out and went round to the back. What I saw then is something I should have seen before but didn't. I'd completely demolished a cast iron lamppost!

The damned thing was lying on the ground shattered into several bits, its lamp smashed in a circle of tiny pieces and the column lying in four jagged sections. Only a short stump stuck out of the ground where it had stood. There wasn't a mark on the van but the lamp was no more. What was worse, and frightened the life out of me, were the sparks which were fizzing off the wiring coming up out of the stump and into the remains of the rest and.... the van was still in contact with the stump!

I leapt back into the van to pull it away as someone from the end house came running out, shouting. I ignored the yelling, rammed it into first gear and shot forward, concerned only to get the van away from any raw pulse of unwanted electricity. The shouting continued and I stopped suddenly, jammed on the brakes and swung the door open to inspect the damage from a safe distance. That was a bad move on my part as it slapped the origin of the shouting smack in the face. Now I had a demolished lamppost and a flattened householder. What else could go wrong?

Albert was not very happy when I told him what had happened. Two very frosty days went by while he wrestled with insurance claims from both the local authority and the bloke I'd flattened with the van door. But that's what insurance is for, isn't it? I was just happy that Albert had set himself up with the good sense to cover himself, his business and all his drivers, full time or temporary, for any eventuality. All the same, things were tricky for a while after that.

As if that wasn't enough, a third event then capped everything and kept George and the rest of them in fits when they recalled it, as they did regularly for the rest of the time I was with them. Albert wasn't too happy about it either.

At that time, in the mid sixties, I'd only been driving for about eighteen months and the bulk of my driving experience had been a mixture of borrowed vehicles until I joined the esteemed ranks of 'cream' salesmen. Not that I was a lousy driver. Far from it. If I say it myself, probably because nobody else would at the time, I was coping fairly well. I hadn't had a speeding fine or any other misdemeanour on my licence. The one thing I hadn't gained was a full and sensible 'concentration' on the art of driving. It's just that as a fairly normal male I could be distracted by 'certain things'. The day that a singular and particular distraction happened to me was the first and last but it was, I have to admit now, a spectacular event.

Going round the old patch again I was driving on to my next stop when it happened. It was a quiet afternoon, the weather was bright and warm and things had been going well all day. I was moving fairly slowly along on my circuit and then ahead of me a vision of pure delight stepped out from one of the houses. She was about my age and very, very 'tasty'. As I drove along behind her I was transfixed by the simple purity of the physiological movement in front of me. It was near perfect. I slowed to walking speed followed along behind her, revelling in the sight and the undulating form in front of me until the point where my route required a right hand turn. Still gazing at this beauty I turned the wheel automatically. That was the worst thing I could have done.

As I turned, still gazing at that receding form, the hips moving deliciously from side to side but sadly away from me, an horrific, grinding, tearing, ripping noise dragged me back to reality. Ramming my foot to the brake I looked down and out of my window. The sight I saw filled me with total despair. I had ripped off the complete side of a car! The bumpers on the old Bedford had acted like a giant tin opener and it wasn't just any old car I'd ruined. It was the pride and joy of the householder who had parked his treasure outside his house.

For whatever reason he hadn't got round to putting it away in his garage. If he had it would never have happened, but that wasn't his fault, it was mine. The car was an early fifties model of a large Vauxhall limousine, all fins and 'sticky out bits', but now it had a long, irregular, gouge running the complete length of one side. Beneath the pampered and polished metal skin it must have been corroding for away for years. Now there was a red, rusting scar all the way along it. I had torn the whole thing apart in less than three seconds!

There were only two alternatives in this situation. I could either ram the van into gear and get the hell out of it there and then, and as fast as possible, or... own up. There was really only one thing I could do. I pulled the van over to the kerb, switched off the engine, got out and walked up to his front door. I couldn't walk away from this. Besides, and I have to admit it, I had the sneaking suspicion I might have been seen by a neighbour. I rang the bell and he came to the door, smiling! The smile didn't last long.

Albert could hardly speak when I told him what had happened. I was impressed by the wonderful, near purple colour of his face! I kept my head well and truly down for a few days after that. Thank goodness for insurance companies!

Over the next couple of weeks I 'honed my art', remembering everything George had told me. I could now present a delicious looking cornet to the punters which was hollow. Not as well as George or Hole, of course, but not bad even if I say it myself. But this gave a great temptation by itself. I was saving almost a third of the cream which should have gone into the cornets and, human greed overtaking me, I 'adjusted' the takings accordingly.

One third of the cash sales went into my pocket and the remaining two thirds went to Albert. There was a hell of a lot of this going on at the time, and maybe there is still is, but I hadn't perfected my criminality well enough. It was Karl who began the inquisition. I arrived back one early evening to find him in charge instead of Albert. He looked at the takings I handed over and made a point of slowly checking the remains of the cream in the tub.

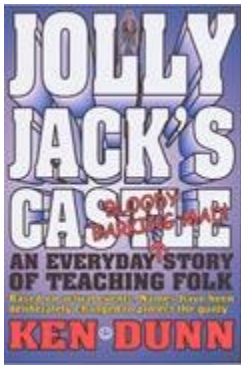
'Been workin' hard, eh?' he said in a very snide fashion.

'As hard as ever,' I replied, keeping a blank expression on my face.

'You'd better watch y'self,' he said. 'I've got me eye on you.'

Apart from Karl I hadn't reckoned with the beady eye and calculating brain of Albert Antonio. He was no fool and had known, without saying a word, what had been going on for days. Karl merely started the process off for him. In my fourth week, and without me knowing, he'd been carefully inspecting the tub whenever I returned and meticulously assessing the takings. They were slightly down on the previous weeks but the level of the remaining cream in the tub was about the same as before.

On the last day of that fourth week he acted. With one quick look into the tub and a rapid check of the change I handed over, he looked up and fixed me with his gimlet eyes.



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'Not so good this week!' he snapped. 'Can't give the regular. Have to cut it until business picks up.'

With that said he handed over a few notes and turned on his heel without waiting for a reply. I checked my weeks 'wages'. They were down by a third. There was nothing I could do and the last thing I wanted was a stand up argument, not that he was available for that. He was already back inside the creamery with the door slammed shut behind him. This was the disadvantage of the 'cash in hand' deal which had been offered in the first place.

Karl and Maria were sitting in the window of the parlour, having witnessed the whole thing and were now grinning innately at me. I drove off home, furious at having made a complete pratt of myself, again! Honesty is, after all, the best policy. I'd have to be more sensible in future.

The following morning saw more unrest in the camp with more stories of the 'brickies' moving in on patches all over the place. There'd been a couple of stand up fights in the street with the brickies and the Fantini vans locked in actual 'fisticuffs' and throwing ice cream at each other in front of bemused customers!

Albert was just as irritated at the delay caused by all this chattering and duly shouted loudly at everyone again. Mario sauntered out, looking as disheveled as ever and twice as pissed as usual.

'Have y'got to make such a bloody row!' he complained. 'Aave had a late night an' an early mornin'. You lot arn't helpin' me peace o'mind one little bit.'

'Aah wonda which piece of he's mind he' taakin' about,' George muttered as we walked off to the vans.

Driving along to my patch I kept my eyes open for any of the brickies. I didn't see one of them. As the morning rolled on I began to slowly relax but I still kept a wary eye out. If they were going to appear it would be a sudden arrival. But nothing happened to me during that whole morning. I kept my eyes well and truly open for any sign of Billy Harris or any other brickie van which might appear but there wasn't a sign of one of them at all. The afternoon was different.

There were a number of cul de sacs on the estate and these were good stops to make. I pulled into one I'd been working on for a few weeks by this time and at the end of it I turned the van round and stopped ready to come out. I'd just flicked the chimes on when Billy

Harris pulled in to the top and sat there, engine running, blocking the exit.

Two others rolled up behind him and then the three of them slowly moved forward towards me. This was not a healthy situation. I knocked the chimes off in mid melody and waited, making sure I'd locked the doors and closed the serving hatch. I sat there wondering what Billy had in mind. I soon found out.

People from the houses had begun to emerge but then seeing four ice cream vans in the street they were all a bit confused. I wasn't. I was watching Billy driving slowly down the street followed by the other two vans. He stopped a few feet away from me, switched his engine off and opened his door to get out. As he closed the door he held one hand behind his back and just stood there, a wide grin spreading across his face. Then he began to walk over to my van, the hand behind his back came forward and he held up a car jack in front of him. The other two drivers had climbed down from their vans and each of them were carrying a pile of building bricks. It only took a few seconds to work out what they were intending to do and I was helpless to stop them. I might have easily taken Billy on but not the two gorilla's he had with him.

If I couldn't think of something quickly they'd have the van jacked up, the wheels would be off and I'd be left sitting on the bricks. Billy walked right up to the front of my van and leered through the wind-screen at me. People stepped back into their front doors apprehensively, watching in silence. The two thugs Billy had brought with him stood behind him, grinning inanely. Billy brought up the car jack and stroked it, stretching out the agony for me and then began to move down to one of the front wheels.

At that moment the air was torn by the noise of six ice cream van chimes, belting out their melodies full blast! I looked up and couldn't believe my luck. The cavalry had arrived! Limbo, Drib, Squidge, Hole, Ding-Dong and good old George were lined up across the entrance to the cul de sac blocking it completely!

This must have been a first for anyone in living in that street if not for the whole of the North East. It must have been quite a sight to the householders. The six of Antonio's were lined up and pointing down the street, Billy and his mates in an arrow arrangement facing me and my van pointing back up to the rest. What the folks in the street were thinking I'll never know but Billy and his 'helpers' didn't look quite so cocky as they'd done a few moments ago.

They suddenly dropped the bricks and the car jack, scampered back to their vans and did what I had done, locked the doors and made sure of their serving area as well. A minute or so later and they were being 'escorted' away by George and the rest, each of the brickies vans hemmed in front and back by the lads in theirs. They moved off slowly, giving the effect of a bizarre funeral procession.

'Is it some sort of carnival, hinny?' asked one of the young mums as I served the bewildered folk from the street.

'Sort of,' I said. 'A special occasion. A celebration of Ice Cream makers.'

'Eeh, that's great,' giggled another mum. 'And t'think it happened right here!'

With all the folks served, I trundled off to find the others. There they were in the middle of scrubby patch of wasteland about half a mile away. All three of the brickies vans were sitting nose to tail in a triangle and the lads were driving slowly round them, laughing hysterically. All three brickie vans were without wheels and jacked up on bricks. Billy and the other two were trapped in the middle, cornered by their own vehicles and covered with ice cream! We didn't have any more trouble with the brickies for quite a while after that!

My last week arrived and the prospect of another term at college drew near. I'd enjoyed the last few weeks with all these characters and wondered if there might be a chance to join their ranks the following year or at any other holiday period for that matter. As a total coward I left it right to the last day before I said anything at all and then it was George I took advice from first.

'So what do you think, George?' I asked. 'Should I ask him?'

'Why not, kidda,' George answered. 'Yiv got nowt to lose. Ye naa the business as well as any. Gan on man, go for it!'

The reaction I had from Albert when I did ask him wasn't the one I'd expected.

'Are you taking the piss out of me?' Albert rasped. 'Since yiv been with the business there's been nothin' but trouble! There hasn't been a single week when y'haven't cocked things up, fiddled the takin's or been a pain in the arse. In fact a smart arse, college boy and a bloody know it all!'

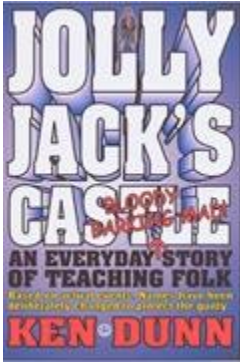
'Now just hang on....' I tried to reply but he kept going, totally ignoring anything I was saying.

'Not only that but yiv caused problems on other drivers patches, almost fightin' in the streets, smashed friggin lampposts, wrecked friggin cars and cost me a friggin fortune in friggin insurance claims!'

'Are you trying to tell me something then!' I almost shouted at him.

'Yes!' he shouted back, red in the face. 'When can you friggin come back to friggin work?'

'Looks like yiv made the grade!' George chuckled. 'Albert's choosy about who he employs. See y'in the hols, kidda!'



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INSET

My daughter began teaching last year and loves it. I wonder how long that will last? Yes, I know that that sounds very cynical but after several years of teaching I know exactly how infuriating, frustrating, mindless and occasionally quite evil some kids can be! But then, she's working in a small independent school with sensible kids so it might not be that bad. We've talked a great deal about all aspects of education and I told her the tale of the in-service training side many staff had to cope with quite some time ago now. What follows is only a 'slightly' exaggerated' tale of one of my training events many years ago.

I didn't want to do it and said so, but the Subject Adviser pulled rank over my Head of Department and myself and insisted that I should go. What a nice man. Secondary Education occasionally sends unsuspecting teaching staff away on 'In Service Training' jaunts. For short, INSET. Five letters, actually meaning 'In Service Educational Training', will lodge themselves in educational history as complete and total confusion for all concerned. This particular 'In Service Training extravaganza' was designed for the subject I taught, Design and Technology, or what some wags have called, 'A Subject looking for an Object', and usually categorised as 'The 'Good with their Hands Lads'. Everybody comes out with that one, time after time. This was July, 1986, and in the middle of the imposed Governmental and educational maelstrom/holocaust which was then to become known as GCSE.

As these changes to the educational process began all kinds of brown material were scattered far and wide over the secondary educational fraternity by several circulatory and local authoritarian devices up and down the country. Most of us were trying to keep our heads down in case it made contact and stuck. It had landed, mostly in the mouths of 'advisers' who felt obliged to spit it out all over the rest of us. One way of doing that was via INSET courses. So there I was, Day One, mid July, early afternoon, all expenses paid and outside Loughborough University, parked in a side street, fumbling over the steering wheel with indecipherable photocopies of the campus plans. The 'clarity' of these proved a great success in eliminating at least 30% of the full compliment of my fellow 'insetees' for the seven day course to which I had been sentenced.

Throughout the week we were there those of us who had successfully penetrated the maze to our own course would catch occasional glimpses of other harassed teachers, desperately trying to identify their own course venues, driving aimlessly around, crawling past the rusting vehicles containing the skeletal remains of previous lost souls.

I had arrived, only an hour and a half late, and had miraculously found the registration point for the course in one of the main buildings. A fixed 'jolly' grin snapped across the face of the character sitting at the foyer desk of this, a university, sixteen storeyed, residential tower block. After a quick frisk from two heavies, chequebooks were extracted, cheques filled in and receipts slid across the desk. Ten seconds flat.

A key was issued and then a lift, which was highly unsavoury to the nose, and extremely claustrophobic, brought me, via a slightly alarming, creaking ascent to the sixteenth floor. Entrance was gained to a standard but well worn 'closet' studio bedroom. Home for the next few days. The slight swaying of the fifteen storeys below my feet caused by the wind outside didn't help.

A few minutes were all I could spend decanting my gear into a couple of drawers and a tiny wardrobe before descending again to brave the next set of photocopied instructions, trying to find my way to the introductory session. By sheer chance I found it together with over two hundred other poor souls, nervously checking each other as we all shuffled into the main lecture theatre. In a surfeit of over-politeness we all found a seat and were heavily subdued by the 'thunk' of the doors closing behind us and the lights dimming slowly.

Two more jolly fixed grins arrived on the platform at the front and launched into an effusive greeting. Then began a routine of explanation, videos, slides and overhead projected confusion which lasted for 45 minutes for seven different subjects. By now it was perfectly obvious, to any who could understand the visual and audio chaos of the presentation, that the next seven days would bear no relation to our collective expectation.

We all shuffled off to find our designated groups in a shambling and quaint single file. Another 10% of the company disappeared forever, lost in the never ending concrete around us. Studio 3, my group venue, and now to be known as 'D.E.S. Course N718 - D&T', was a large room with a circle of chairs on which had been placed a file containing a veritable 'door-stop' of 'information'. All the stuff we'd been

throwing away for years had caught up with us again in one massive chunk.

Twenty five of us sat facing each other nervously fiddling with this pile of rubbish. 'Jolly Jack', our tutor for the week, then swanned in, introduced himself and a slow moving, geriatric, pile of clothes next to him. This was the Chief HMI, Her Majesties Inspector in the subject but then, before you could say 'D&T!' we were launched into role play. I groaned inwardly as I watched perfectly normal adults, at least I thought they were, sliding too easily into the bizarre roles they were asked to perform. Keeping a straight face with this kind of nonsense is difficult for me. Their attempts at pretending to be embittered old bats of school mistresses, decrepit, rheumatoid and arthritic, 58 year probationer teachers, assorted 9 year old brats and strident mothers appeared before us. A few others developed their own attitudes watching this nonsense. I heard one low muttering of, "What the fxxk am I doing here?" Fortunately Jolly Jack didn't hear that.

One enthusiastic nutcase ran out, much to Jolly Jack's surprise, but then reappeared about half an hour later wearing a viciously flowered red frock, white beads, thick flesh coloured stockings, red high heels, a red handbag and a black curly wig! He held us all spellbound, parading round as a hatchet faced school marm. He was eventually restrained and is still presumably a reasonably comfortable inmate, and potential subject adviser, in the high security wing of the local mental institution he was taken to. Jolly Jack quickly regained his composure. The fixed grin snapped back into place and round two began. This was a business simulation for a fictitious company called 'Teddytronics Ltd', manufacturers, would you believe, of teddy bears. The basic notion was to make a profit for the company through projected proposals fed through a computer. We used Smarties as money. I ate mine.

Thirty minutes later 50% of the group had gone bankrupt, 25% were guilty of financial fraud and the remainder were a mixture of total confusion and virulent arguments quickly followed by several cases of GBH. The computer will presumably be available again after they discover why it insisted on printing out the most obscene version of 'Little Nell' ever committed to paper, then coughed and finally died, smoking gently. By this time a small hard core of cynics had naturally found themselves. We escaped for dinner, suppressing hysterical laughter and joined the rabid mass, fighting for position in the refectory. We crammed down as much food as possible in the availa-

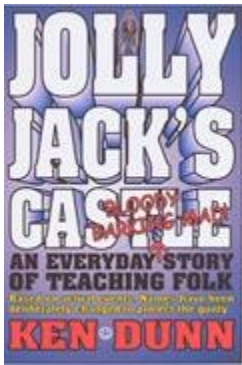
ble time before drowning it in the bar with as much anaesthetic as could be taken. This seemed the only means of making the evening session more bearable.

7.15pm and the evening lecture began. Relentlessly, and oblivious of the several muttered, 'Piss off you stupid wanker!' and worse than that, Jolly Jack rambled on. Group members nudged each other into wakefulness to ensure collective suffering and JJ continued droning on, using all manner of crap clichés. 'A new ball game', was one of his favourites. The first time he said it a few folk checked their fly. 'Address ourselves to this new situation', was another and 'Let me float this one out to you', only resulted in several of the audience immediately holding their noses against what they thought was coming their way.

There were others but none so awful as, 'Let me hang this one on the great blackboard of education and see how it swings!' That one was a cracker!

I switched off completely to all this silly sod was saying and surveyed my fellow prisoners. Various personalities and attitudes had begun to emerge. There were a couple of drones there. They were easy to spot. They were the individuals who would continue in an endless monotone without punctuation and hardly needing to breath, pursuing a circuitous route to make blindingly obvious points. Then there were one or two 'A spades a spade' characters. They were the ones who had been in education for decades and were convinced that they had the secret of teaching and it can't be improved upon. All else is new-fangled crap. The few buffoons amongst us grinned all the time. They made statements which were totally ridiculous or naive or both and only succeeded, like the drone, in extending our torture beyond the allotted time.

JJ was a complete pratt. Just looking at him confirmed that. We all sat in our private misery, resigned to the remaining six day sentence ahead, with not a single female to lighten the experience. Someone began to snore. Miraculously 9.00pm eventually ground towards us and we escaped again to the sanctuary of the bar. Other groups arrived and sat staring disconsolately into their warm flaccid beer. A heavy atmosphere pervaded the whole place. There was only one resident pocket of sunshine. That was Beryl, the gargantuan barmaid. Alive with mascara and a line of patter to match its colour, pure filth, her self induced role was as instantaneous mother earth to all.



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She dispensed beer and a heavy line in piss taking with equal panache. But then disaster struck. She called time.

The atmosphere darkened as the mass departure took place with only a few of the company lying comatose around the floor, dribbling and breaking wind gently. We followed the route back to the tower block where the 'home closets' resided, a distance of only 50 yards or so, but that became quite tricky as weaving bands of drunks stumbled around into each other. After a few well placed kicks a pathway was forced through this lot and we managed to get to the lift and up to our closets. I quickly closed the curtains to shut out the 16 storey view and allowed total collapse and sleep to take over despite the noise of extra-mural activity from several surrounding bedrooms.

At breakfast the following morning the numbers were down again as a result of the previous evenings brain damage in the bar. The survivors struggled in, ashen faced and quite unable to cope with the sight of sizzling bacon and eggs. Several rushed out holding their mouths and turning attractive shades of green. Some didn't make it to the gents. The refectory staff glowered at this but had the detritus cleared away by lunch time. We left them to it and straggled off for another fun-packed day.

It began with a lecture. 'Industrial Design - The Professional View'. We had crowded in to a much smaller room than the previous day and some of those poor sods were within inches of the front where the speaker would be standing. Another tricky situation. Any speaker would be faced with a line of folk, interspersed with near cadavers and several digestive systems on the point of breakdown. A diminutive, squeaky clean prick squeezed into the front with a face that was worth punching and began a huge ego trip about his own commercial value to the universe as a whole and what people like him need us to produce.

What he really meant was we needed to churn kids out to be cannon fodder. A few purist remarks floated through the assembly such as 'what about education?' but these were squashed flat against the bulwark of 'Cost Effectiveness', whatever that means. All discussion evaporated. After morning coffee another slow, single file arranged itself in the direction of the main lecture theatre. Another educational delivery, 'A Primary Approach to D&T', was about to begin. Obviously 'Blue Peter Time'. A few scuffles eventually resolved themselves as a few hardened individuals vied for the seating closest to any exit. Minor cuts and bruises were dismissed in the face of the vision which

appeared before us. The last remaining stragglers, still filing glumly in, were completely cowed by the withering look with which 'she' scanned the audience before her.

A razor faced, iridescent blonde, dressed in black simulated leather stood there, hands on hips, waiting. All mumbling from the rest of us faded. The geriatric HMI pile of clothes then slid forward to introduce Ms Bondage, Primary Adviser for Soho. A conscious need to sit back as far as possible in the seat swept through all of us as she stepped quickly forward, her eyes flicking around and glinting viciously as she made sure we were all awake. She made great use of a great pile of coloured paper, taking us through the delights of an 'origamic fold up' but most of us missed the relevance of that as we then tried to cope with animated examples of grossly enlarged fluffy ducks, remote controlled 'Daleks' and disturbing combinations of rubber, tooth-brushes and undetermined 'gel'. The general message seemed to be that we were not 'exciting' pupils enough! Paranoia then began to creep in to the proceedings and, as no one dared to say or could think of anything to ask this 'Valerie' of education, the pile of clothes ended the lecture with thanks but this was lost to most of us as the place had rapidly emptied in a stampede for lunch.

St. John Ambulance personnel were now on standby as everyone fought for position again in the dining room but the casualties were, surprisingly, much lower this time. An optional lecture was available for all of us during lunch time but as nobody could remember what it was about or what time it was scheduled for it seemed wiser to eat than sleep through another tedious hour of crap. It was during this lunchtime that 'Mr Bloat' showed himself. I haven't a clue which group he was with but he was obviously testing out a basic theory of volume against the amount the human stomach can consume. He was not a little man. No. He was the fattest, most greedy bastard I've ever witnessed. The plate he was carrying couldn't cope with the quantity which was piled onto it like a steaming pyramid. Bits fell off as he walked to one of the tables. Bits that would have fed any one of us for the whole day!

Back in Studio 3 after lunch, Jolly Jack beamed to all of us and announced the next project. This was to be, 'Problem Solving'. He seemed to be unaware that we had all been involved in that same process since our arrival. First trying to work out what the hell we were doing there and second trying to find a way of escaping it.

We were now faced with setting up a 'Problem Solving Brief' and then solving it. Various suggestions were bounced around but the general consensus gradually arrived at a very practical possibility. This was how to detect a subject adviser's arrival in the school car park and effect complete disembowelling before more than five steps had been taken. Solving that threw up a few snags. Experiment and implementation destroyed two small buildings on the periphery of the campus before refinement narrowed the field down to a 3 meter target area at a range of 150 meters. Unfortunately the next guest lecturer wandered into the test area and was vaporised before any warning could be given. The general consensus was that he had looked too much like a subject advisor.

Hasty phone calls from the management dredged up another unlikely candidate and the dust settled for the next event. During the break for coffee that afternoon, a few bods from other groups were found tinkering with our device and then pressed us with offers and counter offers, mumbling about using it for morning assembly's and open days. We turned them all down but left them to it having switched the thing off. The police arrived a few minutes after that followed by a butch batch of bomb disposal thugs and a motley collection of M.O.D. white coats. The cops rounded up the lot who'd been fiddling with our contraption. We didn't see them again.

The next lecture was, 'What IS Technology?' Could this be up-market 'Blue Peter Time'?

This was much the same as the last but with marginal differences. The speaker, a male, just, gave forth a mass of unreadable, overhead projected rubbish, countered with mystifying suggestions which included the Thames Barrier, a sewage farm and a catalogue of heavy engineering white elephants including the first fully cantilevered bra.

His, and our, attention was disturbed half way through this fascinating tripe by the low moaning and heavy panting coming from the back of the hall. It was emanating from an enthusiastic probationer blonde in her early twenties, a female we had all missed, and a 'caring' head of department who were presumably in the process of 'realisation' to be followed by further research and additional 'evaluation'.

The speaker knew he was on a loser after this and slowly ran out of steam. He resigned himself to ending his ordeal and our confusion by ending the lecture fifteen minutes early! We scampered off to the refectory and after the usual skirmish we placed ourselves strategical-

ly round the place in order to view the rest and eat without being attacked from behind. The timing of this also gave us a foothold to an early entry to the bar but then Mr Bloat appeared again and amazed everyone again by the amount of food he was balancing on his plate.

At breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner he always performed in the same way. One of our number estimated only a month of life may be left to him before the heart attack arrived. A few crossed themselves in sympathy.

Yet another lecture had to be attended. This one was going to be a 'wow!' It was 'Structuring D&T Courses in Secondary Education'. Oh joy! All that could be seen at the front, where the lecturer was supposed to be, was a pair of hunched shoulders and a shining bald pate. A monosyllabic stream of gibberish began the whole thing, with him bobbing up and down as he became more excited about what he was talking about.

This suddenly changed as he lunged for the control box in front of him, plunging all of us into total darkness with the occasional flash of a slide to break the gloom. This continued with overhead projection arriving to further confuse everything, each image barely allowing time for any of us to focus on it before it disappeared to be replaced with another. The incoherent mumbling continued and as it did so the temperature began to rise rapidly.

Jackets slid off, buttons were undone and various stages of undress quickly developed until most of us were almost stark naked and comparing various anatomical 'features' as the projected lights flashed gaily on and off. All too soon the lecture was over but then a posse of security guards pushed through to arrest several individuals in the process of a tightly packed 'gang bang' at the back in the tropical intensity of the interior.

During tea a number of folk were actually swapping notes on length, width and overall size of the variously noted individual appendages and a general feeling began to creep in that things might be beginning to look up. The remaining session completely destroyed this simple notion and that was probably a good thing.

Jolly Jack, fixed grin radiating, took us on another verbal educational circuit which left all of us feeling that he was exploring his and our collective anal canal. The level of concentration, to whatever he was saying, faded rapidly and then died totally as JJ bravely tried to rescue our interest. He failed spectacularly. Most of us were asleep

but a battery of alarm clocks were already precisely set for 9.00pm and the end of the days session.

The sun came up over day three of the INSET programme and with breakfast over we gathered for an outing to Sun City, Milton Keynes. We were asked to use our own cars little knowing that no private coach company would enter the site to transport anyone anywhere since the disaster of the last D&T course. This was due to the fact that the partial remains of the coach from the previous year had been found lying abandoned in the campus indoor swimming pool. No sign of the driver was ever found.

So, with only vague directions we piled into five cars and then attempted to leave in five different directions. One of our number, having used the wonderland of the resource centre available to all, had re-sprayed his old Cortina a blinding white. Then he'd added red and blue stripes, constructed a blue lamp, methane powered of course, and switching on a siren which he'd knocked up from string, cardboard and 'Blu-Tack', took off through the car park like a bulldozer, through the security fence and made straight for the M1, cross country, never to be seen again.

The rest of us gave chase, terrorising the whole population of Loughborough and scything through the traffic, continuing to create absolute mayhem all the way only to lose each other eventually in the Orwellian nightmare grid system of Milton Keynes. It's the closest thing to Legoland ever seen with the feeling that you might be part of some planners nightmare model, a long, grubby, planner finger ready to plummet from above to pin you and the car to the road while a booming discussion goes on above about environment, living space and, perhaps, the rising suicide figures for those living in new towns like this.

We drove on, catching glimpses of the others between gaps in the never-ending shrubbery or flashing across the thousands of roundabouts, added to the road system, to further confuse and lose anyone stupid enough to drive through this hell-hole of urbanity.

By sheer chance we found our goal. A double fronted garage. This was not the most exciting of venues. Once finding some signs of life, by beating on the front of the damned thing for about five minutes a reluctant technician opened up. Behind him lurked two high-tech smart-arses producing robotic back scratcher's. Wondrous. A rotund figure hovered in the background. This was a real, live T.V.E.I. Curriculum Leader. The letters stand for 'Technical Vocational

Educational Initiative' but they are better known as, 'This Very Easy In'it?' Either way suspicion gradually seeped into our thoughts in that he may well have actually been a fruiterer in disguise due to the two pineapples and cucumber which he appeared to be carrying inside his trousers. We entered this 'establishment' and found the standard plastic seating.

The 'Curriculum Leader' slid in front of us and with him stood a smug little bastard complete with felt tips and a white board behind both of them. This was the Co-ordinator of Bucks. We all felt that the first letter of that last word may have been incorrect. These characters then went on to outline a magic wonderland of microchips and the immanent redundancy for the bulk of the population. We sagged collectively as this brave new world of the future rolled out in front of us, then realised we were sweating noisily from the 40c plus temperature which the central heating was pumping out.

Somebody had forgotten to tell the computer it was high summer. It was then that one of the smart-arses admitted that the computer controlled system had refused to switch off the boiler. We had to stagger outside to breathe the cool air which was a mere 27C.

Clutching our packed lunches and more than a little disillusioned by this 'demonstration' of the 21st century ahead of us we weaved apprehensively through the MK maze to lunch at a gay, lakeside converted cow-byre and were thoroughly entertained by the numbers of jolly wind-surfing MK population busily trying to drown themselves.

After lunch, and another nervous, motorised crocodile through the MK maze, we arrived at the next venue for the day. A school! We ran the gauntlet of tense, white knuckled staff still having to deal with the last few days of their term and found refuge in the stifling heat of the recently completed lecture theatre. Until three weeks ago this had been the extensive, but dilapidated, kids toilet and shower block. There's innovation for you. A fascinating show of work was set out for us to peruse, all A Level standard, including purpose made, cast iron restraining devices for the under 5's, small nuclear packages for 'cleansing' certain areas of the school, the staff room in particular, and a range of anti-personnel, biologically oriented, mutation inducing, non-sexist underpants.

Light-hearted and infused with ideas we floated back to the cars and drifted off on a wave of expectant and euphoric creativity, finding our way through the MK maze again and on to where the M1 and Loughborough lay waiting for our return. We rushed in to JJ's next

lecture, bursting with a new and fervent enthusiasm and anxious not to be late for the end of day seminar. Reality has a bad habit of slapping you in the face like a wet fish and within seconds of another JJ non-event coming to a grinding end we rushed to the expansive arms of Beryl the bar maid and oblivion.

Day 4 and Oh! Joy of joys! We launched into meeting a 'SILO'! This was the 'Schools Industry Liaison Officer' and one of the most officious little pricks we'd come across during the whole of this extended 'educational' farce. This time the simulation of a production company was to be organised. Another bloody role play wank. More groans floated up from all of us. Confusion reigned everywhere as none of us really knew what the hell was going on. Afterwards, a pile of 483 paper hats, or sick bags, or maybe even inter-uterine devices, was stacked in front of this 'SILO' prick.

He stood there beaming at the success of the whole project. Stupid sod! They were then grudgingly carted off, for immediate incineration we all hoped, by a University refuse disposal operative, mumbling something barely audible about questionable parentage.

Then came 'the project' on how to summarise what we'd been doing. That left most of us with a big problem. That was simply figuring out what the hell we actually had been doing. In any case it was later re-directed by us to humiliate as many course staff as possible as well as giving us the opportunity to create a series of, 'end of course souvenirs'. Suggestions of using the prime product of a local sewage farm did not go down to well.

We formed into two groups, successfully ignored JJ altogether, and generated, in the language of the day, 'brainstorming ideas in parallel'. We rejected inflatable HMI party dolls, recycled overhead projector slides as surprise sandwich fillings and decided instead on duplicating candid photographs of the course leaders, taken over the last couple of days, in a variety of highly compromising situations, not to say positions, usually at 2.00am in the morning, as inexpensive memento's for everyone.

With the bonus of tracking down the photographic laboratories of the University, we had, after an hour or so, a neatly cropped pile of finished prints, complete with forged HMI signatures, ready for sale to all. The damaged lab door, produced by using the defunct computer as a battering ram, would be easy to replace.

Time for dinner arrived but 'lo! Mr Bloat was missing. Then we heard that the ambulance was in attendance together with the fire bri-

gade in the gents. They had a major problem there. During a particular spectacular evacuation, Mr Bloat had become stuck between the narrow walls of the cubicle. All manner of machinery from the fire brigade, designed specifically for 'prising out fat bastards from gents loo's', was being used but up till then all to no avail.

Mars bars were being frantically fed to him to keep his strength up until someone hit on the wheeze of starving him out. Cruel to be kind. It took four days of constant vigil before he lost just enough weight to be slipped out. This was greatly helped by a liberal coating of Swarfega.

Back in Studio 3. and before JJ appeared, we hit on a great new stunt. Paper aeroplanes! And, even better, a competition! We all stampeded out, trampling the HMI pile of clothes and JJ on their way in. Clutching handfuls of 'designer paper' we invaded the top of one tower block and launched our mini aerospace venture. For the next two days the wind pattern around the building maintained a squall of paper missiles which killed four pigeons, smashed dozens of windows and disabled a police helicopter which was, curiously, on station above us. All the other groups rose to this challenge and the whole campus took on a 'sociologist' experiment.

By now the Army had surrounded the whole site, on full alert. Foxholes with light machine guns had been dug everywhere as if a plague of gigantic moles had surfaced. This proved to be counter productive for them as hundreds of escape tunnels, from the University building which had been excavated over the years, were breached. Numerous squaddies disappeared never to be seen again. The Army, nervous and rattled by this, retreated under cover of darkness to the M1.

Day 5 dawned to a quiet campus. A lecture had now been organised on, 'Management of Change' or more correctly, 'How to take the piss of the system.' This was by far the most stimulating event of the whole painful week. A flared trousered, paisley tied, parapsychologist 'whizz kid' spent an hilarious one and a half hours pin-pointing exactly how to induce paranoia, tension, fear, stress and deliberate schizophrenia into the whole system.

Hoots of praise, whistles, football rattles and toilet rolls filled the air at the conclusion followed by a mad scramble for his autograph. This developed further and he was carried shoulder high to the bar. It hadn't actually opened but that seemed to be a mere detail as a eu-

phoric tide of humanity smashed through the locked, double glass doors without feeling a thing.

Whoops of drunken delight quickly echoed through the concrete canyons as the speaker continued his theme of personality assassination. He followed this up with practical advice of how to drop a Head of Department, Deputy or Headmaster into the brown sticky stuff with the minimum of effort and without them realising how it had been done or who had done it. Wonderful stuff.

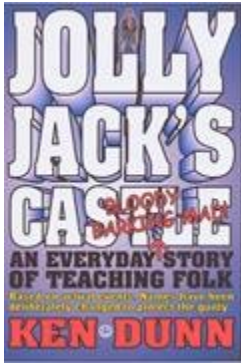
After lunch several of our number were conspicuously absent which, considering the next subject on offer, was not surprising. It was 'C.P.V.E.', 'Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education', or an 'Object without a Subject', but known to most as 'Can Pass Very Easily'.

A broad based broad, built like an outside toilet and wearing what looked like a gym-slip, harangued us all about the less able ones in schools. We thought she was talking about the senior management until she dropped the clue we needed by talking eventually about pupils. Theirs would be an easy academic life if we were to chop things up a bit. This was the overall theme to what she was saying but it took a while to figure it out. She was banging on about modules, clusters and then took off at a high rate of knots about, wait for it, the problems of 'Gender Polarisation'!

I could see a few of the group polishing their mental modules, scratching their academic clusters but they were lost about that last one. Gender Polarisation apparently meant the separation of the sexes by subject. H.E. (Home Economics) for girls, D&T (Design & Technology) for boys. This shouldn't happen. Well, if she'd said that in the first place we would probably have understood. This was obviously building up to be great fun and, if we were good boys, she was going to give us some project work on C.P.V.E. this afternoon. Gosh! We couldn't wait!

Another doorstep of paper was delivered to each of us by Pickford's, the tables and floor structure now straining under the weight of the acres of converted timber we all now collectively possessed. A break for coffee allowed more of the group to escape. Our remaining number, now visibly shrinking, again fell prey to paper aeroplanes before 'she who must be obeyed' returned. As she, or maybe 'it', walked through the door all evidence of paper flight disappeared like a frog up a drainpipe in case she kept us in after the lesson.

She rattled out an incomprehensible set of instructions about our next task and then left with JJ expecting us to get on with it.



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As the door closed behind them the air was immediately thick with paper aeroplanes again. The HMI pile of clothes and JJ came back in but were duly ignored in the blizzard of paper as the competition spirit took over and then began to hot up between two distinct factions in the group. Lunch time arrived and with our pre-set alarm clocks ringing we ran out to hog the queue.

Trouping back later on JJ insisted we should continue with the 'Can Pass Very Easily' project. Just trying to understand the paper-work we had to wade through it became manifestly clear that we would 'Not Pass Very Easily' on this one. Gloom set in like super glue around any remaining shreds of enthusiasm.

Brief relief arrived in the form of afternoon coffee before we were plunged into another lecture. This one was, 'Language and D&T'. Puzzled looks from everyone at this. Were they really going to talk about how to swear at kids without them realising you were doing so? Yes! For the second time pure entertainment had arrived as a 'Max Wall' look-a-like transfixed all of us with unbelievable jargon.

Copious notes were taken as a list of expletives, recognised and obscure, poured out as a recommended means of communicating directly, on a more or less one-to-one basis, with kids. 'You have a tendency to block your fundamental thought passages', was a way of saying, 'Stop walking around with your head up your arse!'

We were now hanging on his every word. Another gem was, 'You seem to have a problem with your parental lineage,' which on translation was, yes, that's right, 'You little bastard!'

'I've never heard that one before!' and 'Oh! That's what it means!' were the kinds of rapturous comments which rippled through the company as we scuttled off for tea. Great stuff!

Back in Jolly Jack's Grotto we slumped over the waste paper (educational information) again. A gradual breakdown of interest took only seconds and an occasional paper aeroplane flitted across the room every time JJ turned his back. One bold soul managed to sneak out in the middle of some unintelligible speech by JJ, quite undetected through the furniture, on his hands and knees to a much more important event. Lead trombone in his brass band in Pontefract.

The final lecture of the day was, 'Image and Presentation', or 'How to confuse and defeat the enemy, other departments, when the budgets are being negotiated for the school year'. There's no business like show business. Spellbound, no none even noticed as 9.00pm slipped by. We all sat there, open mouthed at the techniques of stealth, fraud,

deceit and criminal manipulation to gain all the school resources available. Magic! The speaker was obviously a natural politician, ready made HMI material.

We rushed again for the autograph and many in the multitude relieved themselves of copious pound notes to purchase signed copies of, 'How to get THEM to do it for YOU!' At last we entered the bar and the surprise discovery of a few previously missing colleagues, still smarting from their unsuccessful attempts at scaling the electrified fence which now surrounded the campus. The Army had been busy in the last 24 hours. They sat, crying in their beer and then crawled to the bar to off-load their souls to big Beryl. She, as a true professional, sympathetic and running over with understanding told them to, "Drink up or piss off!"

The 'end of term' seemed no nearer but a heavy responsibility, if not downright guilt complex, had settled over all of us, much to JJ's further confusion. The HMI pile of clothes was distinctly ill at ease that morning at this unexpected zeal as we all buckled down to the production of unreadable and meaningless C.P.V.E. rubbish, specifically for display to the whole and wider contingent of fellow course 'prisoners'.

As a means of heightening the expectations of the display, all notices which had been produced by the 'management' were then systematically replaced by us.

"C.P.V.E. FREE ZONE!", "T.V.E.I. RULES!", "JOLLY JACK'S BOYS!", "GONE ON A COURSE! - BACK SOON!" and so on.

The day progressed and so did the work. Every square inch of display space was filled with 'exotica graphica'. Even lectures were ignored in the competition which soon showed itself between the several small groups. They were all producing dynamic, riveting, truly wondrous.... crap! JJ had to dab his eyes with his red, spotty handkerchief and the HMI pile of clothes quivered in the corner with pride at this array of 'meaningful and sensitive, in-depth exploration of C.P.V.E.' We all stood back and wondered what the hell he was looking at. But it did give us 'brownie points' all round.

Flushed with success we rushed off to don our party frocks for the highlight of the week. The Last Night Course Dinner! Will there be party hats? Jelly? Games? Strippers? Gosh, it's so exciting! Then we found that Group 3, from, yes that's right, Studio 3, had been allocated seats behind the gents. We all wondered why? Undeterred by this we bolted down the food (?), and washed our mouths out with the brake

fluid, masquerading as red wine, one glass each only, and then sloped off to the bar, ignoring the end of course speeches.

The feint sound of the sycophantic licking of HMI boots floated through to us as we threw back as much booze as possible. Big Beryl enquired as to the quality of the dinner. We collectively told her what they could do with it and a small, fat, sweaty, balding little man at the end of the bar dropped his beer, burst into tears and rushed out. The Catering Manager.

With only tomorrow left we decided to throw all caution to the wind and invade the flesh pots of Loughborough. The University's minibus lay unguarded and we used it as both a diversion and a means of cutting the power on the site. Pointing it at the internal electricity sub-station and then taking off the hand brake, it rolled slowly forward. We all ran to our cars, started up and waited, engines throbbing for the moment of escape. It was perfect.

A huge flash erupted as the bus made contact with the sub-station, smashing through the gates to the campus as a bonus, and we were off through the gap and down into 'sin city'. A large orange mushroom cloud billowed up behind us and the whole campus was plunged into darkness. Five minutes later we drove slowly back through the shattered entrance, disappointed by the night life. Too repetitive. Green, amber, red, red and amber and back to green.

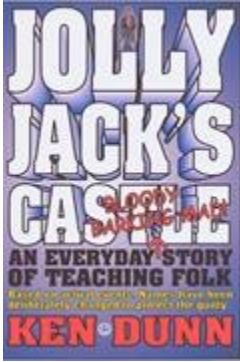
Sunshine flooded the early morning 16th storey window. Was it really here? The last day? Already? So soon? Ahhhh! And I had so enjoyed the whole thing. A truly rich educational experience. Jolly Jack and the HMI pile of clothes picked their way through the debris as we all began to leave the grotto for the last time to trade in our 'closet' keys for the removal of the electronic detection collars we'd had to wear for the last two days and then gird our collective loins for the final breakout.

Feverish activity across the campus then took place and the loading up of luggage into the cars was a signal for the Police and Army alike to form a tight, four vehicle deep, channel, directly leading to the M1.

Underground nuclear bunkers were put on full alert by white knuckled staff who just manage to scramble in and clang the doors shut, now hermetically sealed against anything, as the release siren in the campus, automatically set, went off.

All hell broke loose as the noise erupted from the car park, cum starting grid. Spinning wheels, dust and the smoke from exhausts, all

well under the MOT standards, filled the air as we all roared away, en-mass, a tear in everyone's eye, all looking forward and anxious already for next year and, 'Course N718, Design & Technology' - The Subject looking for the Object.



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