

The Provence Dilemma

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my dear wife Janis, for tolerating me while I wrote it, yet supporting me throughout.

PREFACE

An intriguing story of a naïve young man who, for the first time in his life takes a short well-earned holiday in the south of France. Leaving girlfriend Hannah at home, he embarks alone on his journey that takes him through tunnels of happiness and sadness and back again. The holiday becomes more permanent and deviates into a turmoil of love, sex, disaster, desire and decisions and finally.....a dilemma. The Provence Dilemma is Lewis's first published novel but the story is such that you will simply have to read his next novel to discover what really happens next!

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1 THE PIGEONS

It was December the 11th and an emotional time for Steve. He had lost his mother in the previous December to a terrible disease and now it wasn't long until Christmas again. Steve was usually a happy young man and at nineteen years old, he had his whole life ahead of him, it was just that time of the year. He was in the allotment today, exercising his father's pigeons. His father had twenty-four racing pigeons, there were more once but the flock had reduced over the years. No longer were they entered into racing, Steve's father was a little frail, he had retired from the local steelworks and the tragic loss of his wife caused him to lose interest in racing them, they were like pets now. Nonetheless, these birds like any other creature, needed exercise and Steve knew how to do this and although he wasn't interested in the birds, he did it to help his father.

The birds were released from their loft each day for about an hour, Steve saw it as a necessary chore. When they were released, they would fly out and up, circle then disappear for a while. Then without warning, almost as if on purpose, they would suddenly fly at great speed and pass just over the allotment, whizzing past and you could hear them as they went by, it was a whooshing sound. The sky was a beautiful dominating blue, with no clouds in sight and there was no wind either today, great flying weather. Steve opened the front flap and called the birds out, they gathered themselves coming out two or three at a time, then flying out and circling until they were together. This routine was daily and today was no different. Once the birds disappeared, Steve would sit on an old chair outside the loft and wait for them to start circling above, usually after thirty or forty minutes. Then he would put some feed in a metal bowl and shake it so it rattled. He would call them at the same time and slowly they would return to the loft, one or two at a time landing on the flap, then going back inside.

Today was cold though and whilst the birds were away, Steve sat on

a box inside the loft. There were some newspapers that his father had left there from the week before, they were old, but Steve picked them up. He never looked at them though, he just gazed out through the bars of the loft, not really looking at anything. He was thinking. He was thinking about his father, they were never close but the loss of a mother and a wife had forced them both to become closer, they had to.

Earlier that morning, Steve's father had gone to the corner shop to buy his regular newspaper. Steve was in the kitchen when his father returned and came in taking off his flat cap and coat and hanging them on the back of the door. He was very tall and slim with it and his eyes were quite sunken in his face.

Steve turned to him "Alright dad" as if a question.

His father replied with a "Yep" and then it was quiet.

"I'm making some tea, would you like one?" Steve asked.

"Please" said his father.

It was all a matter of fact. Steve made the tea and passed the cup to his father. He put it on the table and sat down opening his newspaper and Steve knew there would be little if any, conversation.

Steve was like his father, tall, fair, slim and with a sort of baby face that if left unshaven, it still wouldn't show. He always wore jeans and was frequently unshaven and his father often quipped him about that. He worked part time at one of those large chain stores that sells cycles, camping equipment and anything related to cars and just about all the staff were part time. Wages were not particularly high and the staff tended not to be the most loyal. Steve did enjoy working there though and he was actually interested. He would often prove himself most helpful towards customers that were unsure about a purchase, he really was quite knowledgeable and popular with the other staff too. He paid his way at home and he could save a little each month from his wages. He wasn't sure how much he had accrued, but he had been saving regularly now for a couple of years. Steve did not know how important these savings would be to him over the coming few days.

He had a girlfriend, Hannah, a local girl who was very pretty with light brown hair. She was not the slimmest of girls but far from being overweight and had the most beautiful large dark brown eyes. She was in love with Steve and would do anything for him. Steve liked Hannah very much, but he did not truly love her, not deep down, even though at times their relationship was intimate and very close. Hannah lived with her parents too and worked as a nurse at the local hospital, she was part qualified and was keen to finish her training. As she did shift work, they met most days either in the evenings or daytime as her work permitted. They had been together for four years and Hannah had helped him through the loss of his mother.

So the pigeons were out. They were flying around, somewhere in that beautiful crisp blue sky. Steve was sitting on an old wooden box inside the loft, with his collar up clutching those newspapers, gazing out. Time was passing and his daydreaming continued holding the newspapers. He blinked suddenly and lifted the papers up on to his lap. They were just regular newspapers that were a week or so old. Something to read, he thought and started to look at them, just browsing, not really reading any particular story. He just flipped through the pages and threw it down on the floor. He looked at more closely at the second and he read a couple of the articles, they meant nothing though. The odd advert was in fact quite interesting sometimes and the pictures almost entertaining, causing Steve the occasional wry smile. Towards the back pages of the newspaper were the usual seasonal adverts at Christmas time for holidays and cruises and Steve looked at them as there was nothing else to look at. Little did he know, that one of those little adverts would eventually change his life forever. His eyes rolled enviously over the different adverts, wondering how on earth people could possibly afford them. He had never travelled; Hannah had suggested a few times that they tried a cheap package holiday but it never happened. Towards the bottom of the page were the smaller adverts, just text, no colour, with just phone numbers or a website address. Corfu, Tenerife, Ibiza were all there and Steve wondered, for the first time

in his life, what it would be like in these apparent sun-drenched countries. He read one in detail, it was about a hotel in Nice in the south of France. It sounded so beautiful to read, but is it really like that, he thought? There was something about the south of France that got Steve thinking, wondering. Can it really be like that, all that sunshine, blue skies, cars, girls and lovely flora? He was gazing out through those bars of the loft again, when two of the birds suddenly landed on the flap. They almost startled him as he realised the time had passed quickly and they were returning from their exercise. He jumped up and threw the newspapers down, going outside to call the rest of the birds back in. He counted them all back, closed the flap and started the walk home. He had forgotten about the birds, he was on autopilot and didn't even remember shutting them in safely. He walked down the hill, thinking about this paradise he had read about in the newspaper. He wondered if he had enough savings to ever go to such a place. The pretty girl behind the desk at the bank smiled at Steve as she confirmed his savings account balance as £2,156.00.

"Wow" he exclaimed, he was excited that he had saved so much.

She laughed as he said it. Perhaps there is enough money to go to this paradise, he thought.

"Thank you so much" he said to her excitedly, as if she had given him the money herself.

Something had ignited a fire inside him, he was deeply excited by what he had read and how much money he had in his bank. His shift was due to start in an hour and now he had to concentrate on getting home and ready for work. When he arrived at the store, he asked his supervisor if he was entitled to any holiday time. "Yes, sixteen days" she said. Steve thanked her and went out on to the shop floor smiling, but for the first time at work, he was not thinking of work. He was thinking about that paradise, how much money he had and now, how much holiday time he had accrued.

He wanted to go there and now he could, but what about Hannah, how would she take it? There was not enough money for the two of

them and besides, he knew she didn't have very much holiday time accrued at the hospital. If he was going to go there, it would have to be alone. What about his father, the birds? His mother wasn't there, but what would she say? He thought about his mother and how they had all been together on holidays when he was young, but they had never travelled far and certainly not in another country. He wanted to go, he had to try it.

2 DECISION TIME

After work, Steve went home as fast as he could. He quickly got changed and went straight to the allotment. As he opened the gate to go into the field, his mobile phone rang. It was Hannah.

“Where are you, have you forgotten to meet me?” she said.

They had agreed to meet up that evening and Steve was so preoccupied, he had completely forgotten poor little Hannah.

“I’m sorry, I..I forgot, sorry Hannah”.

She could tell immediately from his voice that something was different.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing, really” he said “Can I call you back?”

She reluctantly replied “Of course” but she knew at that moment that things were not quite right.

Steve went into the pigeon loft, the birds started making noises because they did not expect him there at that time and figured they must be up for their daily exercise. Steve ignored them, he went straight for that newspaper he had left on the floor. He picked it up and frantically went through the last few pages until he found the one that had affected him so much in this way. There it was - at the bottom of the page and he read it again, over and over.

This is to be, he thought. He said to himself “One way or another, I am going to go to this city and see it for myself”. He went home and up to his bedroom. He switched on his computer, he really couldn’t wait for it to start up, taking his coat off at the same time. He opened the internet and searched for NICE. There it was, pictures, information, details, maps, everything. Steve’s eyes were lit up, he could see it, now he wanted to feel it. Then he remembered...Hannah, his father, his mother. He carefully but quickly considered each one, he was methodical like that. Hannah only wanted him to be happy, but was he being selfish, he thought, if he went there. She would be upset, of course but he was sure she could understand. His father, although a little frail, can manage the birds, he does it sometimes, so why can’t he do it if Steve is away for

a week or so? And his mother, she was not there of course but would she condone his sudden desire to travel like this? These things were going around in his mind when his phone rang again. He could see the caller was Hannah, he had forgotten to call her back.

“Hannah, I am sorry I never called, are you okay?” he said, apologetically.

“Yes, of course I am” she said in a concerned manner “But is there anything wrong?”

Steve realised that Hannah knew him too well and that she could tell something was going on, he could not hide it from her.

“Well, nothing is wrong, but we need to talk” said Steve seriously.

His decision was no longer dependent on what Hannah or his father thought, his decision was made - he was going. After hearing this request from Steve, Hannah began to cry, she thought their relationship was going to end, something was wrong and to her, it was the end of the world.

“Please Hannah, it’s not bad news, but I need to talk to you about it” he said.

She calmed down and said she would come straight over. He was about to ask her to meet him the next day, but she had put the phone down, she was on her way. He began to think of ways of breaking the news to her that he was going away for a couple of weeks, alone and was sure that this would not be an easy task. Hannah only lived about two miles away and she was at the door of Steve’s house within half an hour.

His house was small, a terraced house in a long row of Victorian houses that all looked the same except for the front doors. Steve’s father answered the door and was a little surprised to see Hannah quite late in the evening and with a red face. He was elderly, but he wasn’t daft and he could see too, that something was not right.

“Hannah, come in, what’s wrong?” he said.

She came in, wiped her feet and gently answered “I don’t know”.

Steve heard them talking and started to come downstairs.

“What’s up, son?” said his father looking up the stairs at him.

He looked at Hannah, she was all red faced and it wasn't from walking round to his house. She was clearly upset and had been crying. This was it, he had to tell them of his plans.

"Well, I have to tell you", he said anxiously, "that I am going on holiday for two weeks!"

He looked at the floor. There was silence. His father closed the door and they both looked at him.

Hannah said "is that it, is that what this is all about, just a holiday?"

Steve almost sighed with relief but the anticipation of his father's reaction still to come was holding him back. Then his father exclaimed

"good, it's about time you both had a holiday!"

He was smiling. Steve's face dropped.

"err..well, I am going on my own dad, Hannah has no holiday and we cannot afford the two of us".

Looking at Hannah's face, Steve could see that she was okay with it. She understood. His father realised then what he meant. He said surprisingly

"I think that will be nice, where are you going?"

Hannah and Steve went into the lounge and his father went to the kitchen to make them all a drink. They sat down, and Steve explained that he had never travelled abroad and his circumstances now enabled him to try it. Hannah pretended she was happy for him, but deep down she was upset, after all, she loved him. Drinks came in and they all talked about Nice.

"It has a population of about a million people" Steve said.

"I don't think it's very far from the Italian border, is it?" said Hannah.

"How will you get there?" asked his father.

Everyone, to Steve's surprise seemed interested, even keen on the idea. Hannah was pleased that their relationship was okay, she was convinced for some reason there was something going on that would end it, but now she knew what it was she was relieved – well somewhat. Steve went on

"It's in an area called the Cote d'Azur".

For another hour, the discussion was all about Nice.

Steve had not got the detail together for his plan of how to get there,

when, where to stay and what to do, but there was time to do this, he was hoping to go in the spring,

“It has a lovely climate year-round, but much warmer in the springtime onwards” he said.

Hannah could see that he was so excited, so she went along with it, “I don’t blame you one bit, I would do the same” she said quietly.

They both knew that wasn’t true but there it was. The following day, Steve had to go to work early but was still thinking about his forthcoming holiday, what he did not know was that the holiday would turn into an adventure, changing the course of his life forever.

Hannah slept on the Nice announcement and the next day, she felt better about it. In fact, in her lunch hour she scanned the internet for information about Nice and the surrounding area. She printed off about nine pages of information altogether, she was preparing all of this when she realised that she was helping her boyfriend to go away without her - for two weeks. She dwelled on it for a few moments and continued and found that she too was becoming very interested in the area, it really was exciting to read about all the things to do there and wished she was going too. She could not, she accepted it and that was it. That evening, she called Steve and told him about the print offs from the internet she had for him and they agreed to meet. The local park was the most visited place by them when they were out together, they both enjoyed the privacy and the surroundings. There were lovely flowerbeds, shrubs, trees and a small lake. There was plenty of wildlife there and Steve often took pictures of squirrels on his phone, he loved those little things and they seemed to be everywhere and very daring, they came so close. They met just around the corner from the park, outside the supermarket.

As Hannah stepped down from the bus, Steve leant towards her and kissed her briefly on her lips. She smiled and held his hand, walking toward the park entrance. There was no gate anymore, it had been removed by a car crash some months before and had not been replaced. They walked slowly up the pathway as Hannah told Steve

what she had discovered. They sat down on the usual seat that looked like it had been there since the beginning of mankind. They continued to talk about the Cote d' Azur and Steve could see that Hannah was almost as excited about it as he was. He promised her that he would keep in touch every day, his phone was his life and it was much the same for Hannah, they both knew this would be such an easy thing to do.

Hannah said "you can take some pictures of the beach there and send them to me, yes and the hotel".

She really was quite thrilled by it all. She had even told her closest friend at work about it, her parents, her aunt and the neighbours too. Hannah asked Steve if he had any details of his plan, where exactly was he going to go?

Steve snapped quietly "No, that's too far away yet".

Hannah pulled her head down into her coat and looked down, for once she wasn't admiring the scenery she was, well, niggled. He was short with her, she couldn't go and he didn't like her asking him about it she thought. Steve could see this and immediately came back "Perhaps you could help me decide Hannah?"

She smiled and they kissed passionately, cuddling for a few minutes after.

3 THE PLAN

It was the most exciting time for Steve, more so now that he could remember for some time, perhaps so far in his short life. But Christmas was just next week, he had some shopping to do and being a typical man he had bought nothing for anyone yet. He had thought about it but that's as far as it had got, now he needed to act. Today was the first Saturday Steve had off in his work rota for two months and he knew he had to use the day for Christmas shopping, he hated it but it had to be done. He got the bus into town and got off right outside the shopping centre, his small home town was blessed with a small shopping mall and this was just right for Steve, he could get it all in one place. First, he had to get something for Hannah, she was his girlfriend and she was so loyal, she deserved something nice. Hannah was to be presented with a new mobile phone on Christmas day, her old phone was out of date so he knew it was the thing she would most want and she also got some very nice white lacy underwear. Dad, well he got another flat cap, some aftershave and some underwear too. Steve's closest friend was really a work mate, Richard. He liked Richard so he bought him a day at a racing circuit that happened to be just twenty miles away, where he could drive a Ferrari, he had always said he wanted to do that.

"Right, with that out of the way" he thought, "I'll go into the travel agents".

He went in, almost tripping on the door step and looked eagerly at the brochures, but there was nothing with Cote d'Azur on written it. The young man who was wearing a nice crisp shirt with a tie that didn't match, approached Steve.

"Can I help you sir, do you know what you are looking for?" He asked.

Steve had never been into a travel agents before and was amazed how busy it was.

"Oh, yes please" he said nervously, he had no idea what he was looking for.

“I want to go to the south of France, the Cote d’Azur please” he added.

“Ah, I know what” said the chubby young man.

He said no more and walked over to some shelves where there were thirty or forty different brochures on display. He browsed quickly and picked up one, then walked along and picked up two more.

“Take a seat sir” he said as he walked back across towards Steve, waving his hand at the chair in front of the desk.

“Is it a hotel sir, or a campsite you have in mind? He asked.

Steve thought for a moment “A hotel I guess” he replied.

The man realised Steve really had no idea and looked at the brochure, flipping through the pages and opened the brochure up.

“This is a nice hotel on the outskirts of Nice, if you choose one in the centre, the price would be double” said the man, with the knowledge you would expect from a travel agent.

“How long do you have in mind sir?” he asked.

Steve told him that he wanted to go for two weeks, but it was dependent on his budget,

“I have about fifteen hundred pounds” he said openly.

Steve looked anxiously at the man and then at the brochure in front of him.

“The cost of this hotel would exceed that sir, when we consider the cost of flights too”.

The man bit his lip and could see that the costs were of a concern for this inexperienced potential customer.

“Why not consider going for just a week sir?” he said, suggesting a compromise.

“Well, I was hoping to see the whole area, so perhaps a campsite would be better?” Steve replied optimistically.

“Yes” said the travel agent, “Campsites are a good way of seeing the sights on a budget”.

He went off and returned after a few minutes with some more brochures. He suggested that Steve take them home and have a look through them to get some ideas for himself. Steve thanked him and took the brochures. He walked as quickly as he could to the bus stop, it was cold, getting dark, about to rain and he felt deflated now.

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