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Autumn is never late in Falmouth and on that October night Ben could feel its withering chill settling over the harbour once again. Perhaps it's something to do with the lordly Atlantic sharing its cold or maybe it's the way the old seaport sits foaming at the mouth of the English Channel. Either way, the dampness hung in the nostrils and made him sniff. He wondered why he'd resisted the sweater. Now he couldn't wait to fire up the ovens. Just a small cellar restaurant so it wouldn't take long to warm it up and anyway, it would be quiet. The first night since the bulk of the trippers had gone and as far as he knew they had no bookings.

When he got in Jane was busy laying the tables with her right hand, occasionally sipping her usual vodka and orange, a fag waving from her left as she hummed along to the music in her head. Jane had great panache. She always seemed to be on her way to some gala pageant in glittering slinky black dress and tottering around on impractical spiky heels littered as usual in cheap sparkles. He remembered how once, when asked why she never wore gold, she pulled a face and said, 'What? Gold makes me look cheap!' But Jane could wear anything and always look gorgeous. She had shiny flaxen hair styled in a pony-tail and the kind of smile that defied every other female who came within ordering range to keep their distance.

Ben liked Jane. She didn't take nonsense from anyone. On the last night of the season one lady diner had remarked in tortured home county's drawl, 'My deah gal, it must be awfully demeaning for a girl like you, with such obvious pizzazz, to find yourself reduced to waitressing.'

Handing the lady a menu, Jane had leaned across the table, one hand on her hip, a cutting sardonic smile, a whisper intended for all to hear and replied, 'Only when I have to wait on people like you, Madam,' and with a sharp flick of her ponytail, she sashayed into the kitchen for a top-up.

Jane turned on a tap, held the cigarette under the trickle and dropped the sodden stump into a waste bin, 'God, I hope we get a few diners tonight. There's nothing but sagebrush rolling round outside and I've got bills to pay.'

'If we have to throw more food away Derek might as well close till Christmas and cut his losses,' said Ben, absentmindedly chopping parsley.

They said the same things at the same time every year.

Derek arrived all fizz and bubble rubbing his hands together, 'Evening all. Don't think we'll be busy tonight - might close at nine.'

'Oh, yeah? Meeting a secret admirer?' Jane emptied her glass as he hung up his coat and shot her a glance. They were paid by the hour.

'If Kevin calls round when he's finished at the pub, I'll probably go for a drink with him over the road,' said Ben.

'Going for a lock-in and a moan, are you? Well, if you do, and you see Keith in there, tell him not to be long. It was two o'clock before he got to my flat last night and when he did he just fell on the bed all giggling and slobbering. He went straight to sleep leaving me staring at the ceiling.'

'He only dreams of you, Jane.'

‘Barstard!’ She lit another fag and went to stand in the alleyway at the back. If it wasn't for nutty, radiant Jane and her spiky cynicisms, there were times when Ben would have taken the harbour option and joined the fishies.

There was one evening, when they were idling around waiting for Derek to close through lack of customers when she wanted Ben to pass her the local newspaper, *The Falmouth Packet*. Jane had a flair for abbreviations so without thinking she fell into, “Ere Benny, bung us the pack-a-min.” This, roughly translated, meant, “Ben, sorry to trouble you but could you please pass me The Falmouth Packet?”

Derek, the owner and our boss, was a strange bloke. Known as the type of man who regarded infidelity as a virtue and yet, as the owner of the most popular seafood restaurant in the county, nobody ever criticised him. He had the knack of making most people feel special and that made him very popular. He made Ben feel uncomfortable. Whenever he held court amongst his small circle of hangers-on, bragging and making innuendos, checking his hair in any reflective surface and referring to women as ‘they’, Ben would make himself busy in the kitchen until he could cross the road into Maz's Bar. Yet women would fall at Derek's feet with the click of the restaurant latch and his wife never suspected a thing. Well, not until eventually she guessed the truth when she realised the girl always sitting at the end of the bar was always sitting at the end of the bar, day and night. His marriage broke and Barbara, his wife, moved with their daughters to France.

Jane blew smoke at the sky just as something dark with a long tail ran behind her into the shadows and disappeared amongst the bins. Luckily, she didn't notice.

‘Still raining, Jane?’

‘What, out here? Nah, it’s like a summer’s day. Bluddy cold though, but really, really clear. You can see millions and millions of stars.’

Ben had to look. Amongst them, over in the south, hung Orion's Belt and whenever it appeared it always made him smile. When he was little his Auntie Mary would take him to evening mass and one winter’s night, while walking him home she had pointed to Orion and asked him, ‘Do you see that T shape amongst all the stars? Your mother put that there especially for you when she went up to heaven. It's a T for Tony.’

‘But my name’s Benedict.’

‘Yes, your first name’s Ben but your second name’s Tony. Perhaps she couldn’t find enough stars to make the letter ‘B’.

There are things you never forget.

The phone rang. Derek snatched it up, ‘Hello? This is the Fish Restaurant. Derek speaking. How may I help you?’ After a couple of ‘yesses’, ‘*absolutelies*’ and ‘*pleasures*’, he replaced the receiver and checked his reflection again.

‘All is not lost. Five Americans staying at the Falmouth Hotel want lobster. They're coming in at nine.’

‘But we haven't got any lobster,’ groaned Jane.

‘Well, try one of the other restaurants and see if you can borrow a few. Say we'll pay them back at the weekend.’

‘You're joking. It's freezing out there and anyway, no one goes fishing in this weather.’

‘I suppose crab'll do at a push, unless they want it in the shell. Ben, just make a rich Thermidore sauce, use the Stilton and serve it in the large ramekins. They probably won't even notice. I'll give them a drink on the house.’

‘Why all the fuss?’

‘Well, they're off touring the county tomorrow tracing their ancestry, but back this way for Christmas and New Year's Eve and they want to celebrate in here.’

‘Largess brings its own rewards,’ said Jane, wincing at her cigarette smoke as we wondered at her wisdom.

‘Er, which means New Years' Eve is fully booked now all except for one,’ grinned Derek.

‘Oh yeah? Who's that?’ Now Jane was concentrating on cleaning her nails with a boning knife.

Just as she opened the door to go hunting crustaceans, a pretty lady appeared in the doorway and gave the room a smile like fresh apples, ‘Hello, do you have a table for three, please?’

Derek crossed the room in two steps and pretended the meeting of their hands was an accident as he opened wide to let her in, ‘Yes, yes, do come in and make yourselves cosy.’ He indicated the fireplace with a bow and a sweep of an arm appraising her curves as she passed. His eyes removed her coat and all her other clothes.

‘Dirty night, isn't it?’ He cleared his throat and winked at Ben.

Following her down the steps into the room came a man of rather large bulk and the shrimp of a boy. Looking at all three, it didn't seem possible for the man to be the father or for her to bear the weight of responsibility but they seemed happy enough once

they were settled over the menu, anticipating their dinners, sipping their drinks and laughing a little.

Jane returned, stamping into the kitchen and throwing off her coat, 'No lobbies but I did get a chunk of frozen crabby meat.'

When the big man's order appeared on the hook, they had to look twice. Dainty poached scallops and rocket for his wife, three little cheese and pastry parcels for his son and a whole crab for himself with garlic bread. Ben had to read it twice. A crab so large is usually served as a main course and although not exactly over-filling, it can be fiddly and take time to remove from its shell. Her main course was fillet of salmon, the boy's was poached chicken breast and his father's was fillet steak. Once they'd been served, Ben waited five minutes before going over to see if everything was satisfactory. Without a trace of irony the big man asked if there was any diet cola in the bar.

Dead on nine, the door opened again, and in trooped the American contingent with, 'Hey guys! How're y'all a-doin'? We're from Maine and boy, do we love our lobster! Hee-haw!' They flopped around a corner table all grins, coats, approval and loud enthusiasm. They wanted five Cornish Lobster Thermidore, in the shell, with plenty of expensive wine and Derek could see the night might be saved yet again until he was told we had no lobster after all.

By the time he broke the bitter news to the Maine diners, our commonwealth cousins were groaning like old doors and moaning like schoolboys but just when they were mulling over whether or not to change their order, a loud banging on the street door sounded like it was about to be kicked in. Suspecting mischievous kids, Derek tip-toed over and whisked it open only to reveal Reckless Ronnie at the top of the threshold steps.

Ronnie was the local maverick fisherman, all wild staring eyes - one off a little staring into the night - all dripping, glistening beard and shoulder-length hair hanging like rats tails. His bib-n-brace oilskins and waders were making sea-water puddles round his feet while the naked rain flew across the room whipped in by the wind. At the end of his outstretched arms, he was struggling with a heavy plastic creel.

‘Evening Ron,’ said Derek. ‘Step in for a minute. Don’t let the heat out.’

‘Evenin’, Derek. Evenin’ all. Want any lobster, do ‘e?’

‘Lobster? Wow! How many Ron?’

‘Only five, sorry.’

‘Bring ‘em in, bring ‘em in.’ Derek closed the door behind Ron.

The Americans couldn’t believe their eyes or their ears, ‘Don’t believe it!’

‘Where’d he come from?’

‘Well, well, well! How the hell do you do that?’

Jane grinned, ‘Magic! Simple Cornish magic!’

The salty sea rumbled and rolled in the largest pan on the heat. One by one Ben dropped in the lobsters and replaced the cauldron lid. Just as he turned to make the sauce the lid flew through the air and rattled onto the kitchen tiles jangling and deafening and shattering his calm. He almost jumped out of his whites.

Jane screeched, ‘Kerr-ist! That last flippin’ lobby’s not very happy!’

And armed with a bread knife and baguette she froze like an Amazon ready to attack. But once they realised just what had happened they looked at each other and fell about laughing until they were gasping for air. And how they needed those laughs and hung on to them as you would a life raft in the ocean of autumnal gloom. Oh, the tedium!

Ben realised he had to leave restaurant life or become a hamster. Life on the wheel was a repetitive round of work, sleep, work and sleep and work. He needed some wandering without responsibility.

So when a thoroughly drenched Kevin swept into the restaurant Ben could see he was in no mood to hang about. He checked with Derek that he was clear to go, cleared up and made a swift exit across the narrow street into Maz's Bar for a few drinks and a grumble with his chum.

Maz lived above her bar with her daughter and three young sons. Her husband, Barry, was away at sea most of the time. Maz was extremely adept at multi-tasking with walking, talking, telling stories, joking, smiling, laughing, listening and all the while serving her customers. If she needed a break she would lean on the bar and tell of her latest domestic incident. There had been a constant stream of demands from her kids for fizzy drinks right throughout the summer. It got so bad she decided to make a rule: 'No more fizzy drinks for any of the kids without a signed chitty from Mum or Dad.' This worked perfectly well until her youngest, Sammy, handed a barman a blank piece of paper, wailing, 'It's not fair because I'm the only one who can't write yet!'

Hunched over their wine, stumbling through sterile conversation, harrumphs and sighs, Kevin's talk took a serious turn. Drying his hair with a bar towel, he began chattering on about their respective situations until his old radical rants came bubbling to the surface as usual when he was feeling used.

'It's the old exploitation story. We workers prostitute our skills for a pittance and a pat on the back while our bosses and their bank accounts get the real profits and their businesses bloom!' The more they drank the more he argued and the more Ben began to see his point. 'We dropped city life because we wanted to be free and now our freedom is

being eroded just because we are tied to the plough. We might as well go back up to Liverpool because we're never going to make any real money down here.'

Ben met Kevin the day he started work in a Merseyside shipping office. In fact it was Kevin who helped him feel welcomed behind that particular plough. Kevin was tall and thin with strong self-belief and a prickly sense of humour. Ben liked him from the start. His family had come to Liverpool from the Isle of Man. Yes, Kevin had an edge he kept well honed but also he had a soft side kept well hidden. Between them they discovered the space and the freedom to be themselves, to express their true feelings and even to be intolerant of each other when necessary. Over the years their friendship deepened.

Eventually, about a year after Ben moved to Cornwall, Kevin arrived after a disappointing trip to Spain and inevitably they shared flats and houses as well as the same circle of trusted friends; and at times, even the occasional girlfriend. Kevin had a strong character and would stand up to anyone he considered excessively self-assertive. He excelled in confrontations, not known for backing down, and this, coupled with his cutting repartee, led him to working with the public and eventually into starring in bar management, top of the bill in a county of very few opportunities.

In Ben's case, his career in catering accidentally fell at his feet and all he had to do was pick it up. One evening the landlord of his local pub took him on as Cook in his popular rustic diner and the moment they walked into his kitchen, Ben felt at home.

He stayed on for several adventurous years until curiosity dragged him backpacking through California and over to Hawaii and on a one way ticket until he ran

out of money and a bell rang in his head which brought him back to Falmouth where he continued cooking in several of its most prestigious restaurants.

Untrained cooks were always in demand and although known to the higher-waged professionals in the catering trade as *cowboy* chefs, Ben took the label as a compliment. In his opinion, restaurants were all about entertainment, another form of theatre, and they fulfilled the same desire for approval and applause in him as he'd sought as a lad back in Liverpool. Gradually cooking became part of Ben's reputation and subsequently he and Kevin were never out of work unless they wanted to be, which is how they became a well-known double act in Falmouth.

Summers came and went and in the evenings after work Kevin would often come and collect Ben from the kitchen and they'd go to a club or one of the waterfront bars to wind down over a drink. They'd while away the time talking nonsense and in the winters they did the same except they started earlier due to lack of business. Most restaurants closed around nine once summer was unplugged and the darker days were introduced.

Kevin liked to talk. Better still he loved to argue, didn't like to lose and was cunning in the art of intense disagreement. Arguing was in his DNA. When he began to clash, those within earshot would hush and settle back to listen knowing he could not lose. His friends began to realise he would argue just to show how good he was at arguing. He even had a book on how to argue that he kept within easy reach. Kevin was a master in the art. His nickname was Kevinski.

There they sat, yawning and yapping and sipping cheap forgettable wine and grumbling away the time because yes, they were unhappy with their world. Kevin took

one look at Ben's face, sat up straight, gave him a nudge and said, 'Come on, Ben. Let's declare the Christmas season open. Hey Maz, another bottle of the tongue-numbing Beaujolais Nouveau, if you please.' He kept things light just to keep Ben cheered, 'Better than being at home in Liverpool. At least here we drink champagne, eat caviar and stagger over rose petals.'

But Ben wouldn't be swayed, 'They abolished slavery and invented the mortgage.' He winced at the vinegary drink.

'You haven't got a mortgage,' smiled Kevin.

'Not since I sold my flat to you,' Ben returned the smile.

'All you have to do now is enjoy the dosh.'

Ben took another sip and scowled, 'Mother of Zeus, I wouldn't put this stuff on chips.'

'Oh, stop moaning. I don't know, you go on and on about how much you like all things Greek but you've forgotten Zorba's philosophy on being free and taking chances. You remember the scene in the film where he says, "A person needs a little madness, or else they never dare cut the rope and be free"? - well it used to be our mantra, or words to that effect.'

Ben crossed the cobbled yard from the Gents. There was a new moon and the sky was full of stars. He paused. There was a different smell in the air. Good smuggling weather; known to locals as "*wreckin' weather*" - windy, moony and dank. The friendly old fog horn droned on and off through the ancient mist and brought with it imaginings of watery, older Falmouth. For centuries it was the sea-farers' haven of forty-nine fathoms and in its time had supported freighters, gun ships, galleons, brigantines, packet ships,

fishing boats, work boats, ferries, cruise liners, canoeists, lone Atlantic yachtsmen, the yellow welly brigade - you name it, Falmouth had seen it. Ben felt marooned and not sure what to do with his life. He could never return to Liverpool now, not after the theatre of mayhem they loved in *Phalmouth*. As his dad used to say, 'It's good to collect things, but it's better to go for a walk.' It was time he took a walk because in no time he'd be an old man sitting in the corner of a bar telling tales and boring people with his life story. He had to find a way out, even if it meant closing his eyes, holding his nose and taking a flying leap into the dark abyss.

The door to Maz's opened a little and in straggled another few weary waiters, barmen, chefs and washer-ups desperately making the rounds searching for a reason to make it all seem worth while. They exchanged the usual hellos and nods before ignoring each other again and returning to their poison. All were a little frazzled after another long summer nannying customers and late night drinkers - and for what? Once autumn arrived for those still in employment the future lay along a darkening narrow road of dim, damp nights stretching towards a dismal horizon of few customers. Ben don't know why, but since he first left school, once March nudged April he felt a nagging need for change from the niggles of curiosity.

Kevin had fallen absolutely still. Then he tapped Ben's arm, dropped his voice and his whispering rang like a bell in a desert, 'Hey, do you fancy taking a year off to go travelling in Europe?'

Kevin was famous for his hair-brained schemes but one look told Ben this time he was serious and in one instant he knew. No further discussion was needed, no pros or cons to be weighed.

‘If all else fails at least we'll have a few laughs.’

‘Or a few fights.’

‘Well, we're both pretty volatile so what do you expect?’

‘How can you be volatile? You're always half asleep.’

‘Might even get a tan.’

‘Yeah. OK. Good idea.’

‘How about next May 1st?’

Ben sipped the ambrosian brew, ‘Mmm, six months to get organised. OK by me.’

‘Right then.’

They clinked glasses and grinned.

‘Right then. Let's cut the rope.’

2

Saturday, the first of May and students joining Falmouth College of Art, or Falmouth Marine School or joining other courses in the area, flocked into the town from all over Europe for the start of first term. Students never have enough funds so there were the usual vehicles for sale in the lanes and roads around campuses. Motor bikes, cars, all kinds of converted sleepers-on-wheels and, as usual, several clapped-out VW Camper Vans. But one stood out from all the rest – a superb 1975 Volkswagen Bay Camper.

Only weeks before Ben's good friend and downstairs flat mate, Magic Alex, had introduced him to an old school chum, Ivan James and his fair and gentle wife, Debbie. Ivan was a local motor engineer and justly well-respected by almost every motorist in the county. Without exception, he was known as *Doctor* Ivan and it was he who went with Ben to inspect his latest obsession and the moment he slid out from beneath her chassis he said, 'OK! Now get behind the wheel, close your eyes and wait for the feeling. If it comes, buy the van but if it doesn't, don't. With a camper, you buy the feeling, not the van.' Ben did as he said and sure enough, the feeling came. He smiled at Ivan and nodded.

Next day, round at Ivan's garage, the van was given an official MOT test and was pronounced fit enough to fettle through Europe.

'Should be OK now, but there's a couple of things you should bear in mind. Because the engine sits in a confined space it tends to generate quite a lot of heat. In order to avoid the build up of possible toxic waste it is fitted within a cowling. The cowling surrounds the engine and re-directs the hot toxic air through an exhaust pipe and out into

the fresh air. Of course, your cowling seems to be missing but no need to worry, your van will be quite safe as long as you don't put too much strain on the engine. Just take care and remember, fifty on the level should be your top speed. This is my prescription and ought to be your main consideration.'

'That and the realisation that absolutely every other motorist is insane,' Debbie laughed. Ben winced.

Over the next few days, he repainted the van very carefully giving an elegant white finish. Right around the entire body he inscribed the narrow, ancient Meandros or Hellenic Key Pattern which represents the eternal flow of life. It ran beneath the bay window across the front, right along each side over the side doors and across the back door below the window. Finally, and even more carefully, above the sliding entrance door he painted the holy words, *Villa Zorbus*, in further homage to his illogical obsession with the Zorba movie and all things Greek.

Then, to his further delight, he discovered the Villa cooker was set on a swivel right beside the sliding door behind the passenger seat. This meant they could cook standing outside when temperatures rose. Cooking in open air heat. It was then that it became real, that they were actually about to set off into a dream. The Villa was equipped with a fridge, a sink, a ventilating skylight that dripped rain in wet weather, louvered side windows for maximum swish of air, plenty of storage space, plus shelving. Even every window was curtained. As on a boat, there was no wasted space which meant ample room for two inflammatory nutters.

Then just after Christmas Kevin resigned his job, sub-let his flat to an animal-loving local chef who promised to look after his cats, Pasha and Scallywag, while he was away.

‘Believe me, there are no words to describe the look of distress in Scally’s eyes when I said goodbye. I was amazed how much it got to me.’ Kevin was quiet for days afterwards. He moved into Ben’s flat and by the end of April it was too late to change their minds.

Ben had bought a fairly decent camper van from a dreamy art student, resigned from the famous Fish Restaurant kitchen and was about to abandon his home.

But first he needed to familiarise himself with the Zorbus so they agreed on a trip up to Liverpool to say hello and farewell to families then hopefully cross the channel down in Portsmouth.

Ben felt ready.

And Kevin could hardly wait.

For the previous year and a half, right up until the day they set off, Ben had not driven a vehicle of any type and yet there he was, behind the wheel of blind optimism and eagerly flying away into the unknown.

And yet, he felt quietly confident. It was all to do with the driving seat. VW drivers tend to look down onto most passing vehicles and this gives a feeling of invulnerability. Along with this came a joie de vivre and the tendency to whistle and hum a lot more. It was one of those mornings, standing on tip-toe, tender, fragile and trembling; somewhere between winter and spring. Not only did he feel more positive

because of the large VW insignia displayed at the front of the camper ostentatiously declaring membership of a unique community of wayfarers and wanderers from around the globe and thus attracting toots and waves of friendly enthusiasm from every other camper driver he met, but for the first time in an eternity Ben felt free.

But the euphoria didn't last long. After a hundred miles or so, while queuing for petrol, they noticed copious greasy stains splattered all around the engine flap and oily smelly steam billowing from the exhaust. Ben's mouth fell onto his chest. What did it all mean? Was this the end of their dream? Technology left him at the toothbrush and Kevin was just as lonely when it came to industrial science but he did have an excellent memory, 'Remember Ivan's warning? Gaskets in the rocker compartments are the usual main faults with VWs.'

They didn't sell them at the services but directed the Zorbus to a garage a few miles off the motorway where they might find what was needed, that is, if it was open. The drive to the garage didn't take long even if it was stuffed with apprehension but as soon as it hove into view they saw the garage was open.

'We don't deal with VWs because a few more miles further up there is an authorised VW dealer man who will certainly be glad to help, although by now he might be closed. Just look out for the sign.'

Off they went again and this time they were in luck. The dealer man lifted the engine flap and sniffed. He looked into Ben's eyes and shook his head, 'Where's the cowling?'

'We haven't got one at the moment.'

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