

Partout le Magasin

A Gentleman and his Butler in France

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To our friends and families,
And to Ludwig van Beethoven, without whose inspiration
this book would never have been possible.

Chapter 1

Day 1 : We are the Drunk Scotsman

Take care of those who work for you
and you'll float to greatness on their achievements.
- H.S.M.Burns

1.1 The Butler's Tale

Ignorance, they say, is bliss. Judging by the quantity of useful weather information I managed to find on the Internet on the afternoon of Thursday 20th September, 2001, I should have been a very happy man. The internet contains billions of pages, some of which are not pornographic, yet I couldn't find one single pair of weathermaps for western Europe which agreed even on the most fundamental of details, like whether or not there was likely to be any rain, or tropical monsoons or even fiery storms of molten lava. The statistics against are mind-boggling.

So, incurably blissful, I left Cambridge at 4pm to travel towards London on the first stage of what was to become something of an adventure. Rather like "Thelma and Louise", but with mercifully fewer fatalities and a distinct lack of sex.

The train journey between Cambridge and London is far from inspiring. The graceful industrial estates quickly melt into vast tracts of pointless farmland, where generations of the agricultural cognoscenti have gradually perfected the art not only of ploughing and turning mud, but actually cultivating it.

This bucolic frivolity is then brought swiftly back into focus by the frightening anonymity and uniformity of the North London suburbs. It is from this sea of homogeneity that millions of middle-aged middle-classed and middle-income homeowners leave their 2.4 children in the middle of the morning, drive their middle-of-the-range estate cars an intermediate distance through average-sized roads past unremarkable office buildings into middle-term car parks, working until the middle of the evening, stopping only for breaks at midday and mid-afternoon. Nietzsche would bomb the lot and build a concert hall, as I was to discover several days later.

Before long, these suburbs reluctantly cede their grasp on the scenery, losing out to a multitude of large, grey buildings which, far from being universally avoided, seem to have attracted the artistic approval of a healthy number of promising young political commentators. The aesthetic grandeur of Kings Cross lies only minutes away, and already the fervour was reaching distinctly tepid levels of inactivity.

Travelling across London in the rush hour is an experience that everyone should hope to avoid at least once in their lives. Kings Cross heaves with the sheer volume of office workers all fighting to be the first to get as far away from the place as realistically possible. In fact, the only people who actually try to get into Kings Cross at this time of day are tourists, drunkards and prostitutes. I wasn't sure to which category I most closely belonged.

I had arranged to meet my good friend Ian at some time a bit before 6pm either at his flat or nearby, on the way there, on the underground, on the train to his parents' place, or at the station in Newbury. Our immaculate level of precision planning was comparable to that of the increasingly ludicrous military campaign in Afghanistan at the time. I knew approximately what I had to do, and when I had to be there to do it, but I had absolutely no idea whatsoever where it was I was actually supposed to be.

I navigated the underground, and I use that word lightly, in flagrant disregard to all the laws of physics which should have taught me that, in the absence of intellectual anarchists like Einstein, the

quickest route between two points was a straight line. Or at least, the closest approximation that one could obtain without walking through solid objects. My chosen route through the underground stations was rivaled only by my complete inability to traverse simple tunnel systems at Green Park. If I had been a rat, I would have been singled out, placed in a tub marked 'stupid gene' and given reduced sunflower seed rations.

Arriving finally at St John's Wood, I began to make my way towards Ian's multi-million pound wardrobe accommodation, located tantalisingly close to a bewildering display of unfeasibly expensive cars. Owning a Porsche in London is rather like owning a wonderbra in Kabul, on so many levels. Quite why people bother, I will probably never understand. But then again, perhaps they have a greater need of one than I do.

I can only thank my imagination for delivering me to Ian's house at anything vaguely approaching the agreed time. The route from St John's Wood station takes one past a beautiful orchard, lined with succulent red apples, towards a confusingly adventitious Scotsman playing furiously on his bagpipes without creating a sound. Thankfully I have at least that much control over my mental processes. Passing the Scotsman takes me near a selection of aging television stars partying the night away, and leads rather conveniently to an enormous yellow submarine parked somewhat inconsiderately against a priory wall. After negotiating the traffic, the remainder of the journey is remarkably easy, and I found myself standing romantically under Ian's balcony shortly after ten to six.

After much protest, Ian finally agreed to admit me to his palatial penthouse. He was in the process of cramming what looked like a dishwasher into his bulging backpack, and insisted that he would be ready to leave in just a few minutes. He asked me to start having a root around in the kitchen to see if he'd forgotten anything. I asked if I should take a wrench. I'm not sure that he understood.

A few brief minutes later, we found ourselves striding butchly down the road, checking out cute women and laughing boisterously about how great it was enjoying Beethoven and being so undeniably burly and masculine. Positive psychology was to play a very important part in the following few days, for all the good it did us.

1.2 A Gentleman's Tale by Ian 'N' Bentham

It could not be called a carefree day, nor yet untroubled. Recent events in the USA meant working in the City had a certain unwelcome frisson, and the world in general was perhaps not at its safest. Still, this was the day appointed for me to meet my old friend and acting Butler (hereafter to be known simply as Xol) for a relaxing trip to France. I was looking forward to it greatly. Much, however, remained to be done before our Continental jaunt could commence.

A last day at work is always trying. Whether leaving for twenty four hours or six months, there's always the same frenzy. Handing over some tasks, completing others, and destroying documents regarding more sensitive matters are all part of the rich tapestry of going out-of-office. It is the career equivalent of writing a will and leaving a legacy. The aim is to set up an estate which it is hoped won't overly tax one's successors. On this occasion, I removed the audit trail to some of my less auspicious decisions, successfully wrapped up a bout of testing work, wrote a couple of notes to those left behind, and slipped out early - This last using the age-old but ever-effective tactic of casually offering my boss a consolation bottle of vin rouge. To be delivered upon my return, naturally. Much as my boss's memory borders on the lousy, this was one promise I saw fit to honour in the days ahead.

Xol had done his best to render us unprepared for the trip, failing to receive the ferry tickets and not even considering a destination for our sojourn. I weighed in by ordering our green card for the car insurance late enough so that we could only confirm its arrival on the day by phone. This was a pattern much followed: Any semblance of coherence in this tale owes more to good storytelling and a sound historical training than it does to any suggestion of forward-planning.

This curious lack of structure was matched only by Xol's complete lacuna in the sense-of-direction department. He ably demonstrated his total bewilderment in the face of a map, over-confidence in the face of French sign-posting, and abject panic in the face of the almost middle-eastern turmoil of Gallic traffic. Still, Xol has a certain charm, whether or not he knows where he is. That's quite aside from his post-Freudian obsessiveness, but we're getting ahead of ourselves here...

Wending my way home, I couldn't help but recall someone telling me, just over a year ago, that in the good old days, the City was run by chaps. Each one a decent, honourable chap whose word was his bond - so to speak. My then interlocutor bemoaned the fall of chaps and the concomitant

rise of regulators. I can't help drawing a comparison with modern attitudes to a personal gentleman's gentleman. There is, frankly, far too little understanding of what a gentleman is. And come to that, a grotesque over-emphasis on the personal. I resolved to be undaunted by the incomprehending and bigoted attitudes we were likely to meet in this connection along our way.

At the flat, I packed a few choice possessions including all the spare items which Xol would inevitably have omitted. I sometimes wonder who is looking after whom in this arrangement. After all I do all the thinking, planning, and driving. Admittedly he is no mean cook when in the right mood. In any case, Xol arrived as I finished the packing process, having clearly failed (judging by his knapsack) to bring anything to wear. Too tired to argue, I headed out into the street with him and made for the underground, trying to avoid the glances of those disturbed by Xol's apparel - or lack thereof.

1.3 Onwards and Across-wards, the Butler Resumes his Tale

Much as I love the London Underground, in a strictly utilitarian sense, its propensity for exaggerating human peculiarities profoundly troubles me. I often lie awake at night wondering if I'm one of those freaks whom everyone's secretly watching out of the corner of their eye. What a wonderful thing it must be, or perhaps is, to be unaware of one's own abnormality. One day you're minding your own business, talking to coconuts and pretending to marry traffic cones, when the next you're catapulted to the front page of a special full-colour supplement in the Guardian entitled "Britain's 100 Strangest Lunatics".

Paddington Station looks rather like a Guardian supplement. I'm not sure entirely what I mean by that, except that a great number of people there wandered around as if engaged in a thrilling internal discussion about the future of the monarchy, or the emergence of embryonic democracies in the Third World.

I wonder if people actually living in the "Third World" resent that term? It's not exactly as if they haven't got enough troubles of their own without having to deal with derogatory classifications from those of us lucky enough to possess running water and satellite TV. I suppose there's too much political correctness in journalism already without every TV presenter referring to underprivileged regions as "countries which, through no fault of their own, find themselves in an economically disadvantaged situation." It's not exactly as if they're going to find out after all, is it?

But what is the classification of "Third World"? Is there a committee in Brussels somewhere agonising over a map of the entire planet, and writing down names in three neatly arranged columns? Perhaps there is. I wonder if they have a strict, logical definition of "Worldness". Maybe there's a scale named after someone famous like Gandhi or Mandela. Maybe a good indication of the "Worldness" of a country would be whether they have ever considered a definition of "Worldness" before.

Ian had two important jobs to do at Paddington. We found ourselves with a comfortable amount of time left, so I sat around with the bags while my over-enthusiastic friend ran off on errands. I pondered the journey on which we were preparing to embark. In just a few short hours we would be floating gently through the channel in a large, rusting vessel named after someone French we would never even have heard of. My contemplation of this farcical situation was temporarily interrupted by a cute brunette wandering into the ticket office. This was fortunate as I managed to wipe those fears and apprehensions from my mind, and instead started an experiment to test how loud I could hum a middle 'C' before people started staring at me. London people, as I was soon to learn, were all either very deaf or extremely tolerant. I thought I spotted someone secretly watching me out of the corner of his eye, but I may well have imagined it.

Ian returned without any camera batteries, but with a train ticket to Newbury, which was just as well seeing as that was where we were going. We wandered over to the train, walking for what seemed like an unreasonable distance before finally coming to the end of the empty first class carriages, and eventually arriving at second class accommodation. We skipped the first few carriages as we wouldn't have squeezed onto those without being liquidised first.

By the time we reached the third or fourth carriage, we began to realise that we weren't going to get a seat anywhere, so we jumped onto the train and put our bags down in the hallway bit right next to the toilet. We stood for a while, then soon sat down as the train shifted slowly, and noisily out of the station, leaving behind the hustle and bustle of London's most ursine location, and heading back out through the isotropic spread of commuter villages and out into the open countryside.

This was to be a journey of discovery. Not just in a factual sense, like those journeys of Darwin to

the Galapagos islands, but also like those intrepid circumnavigatory voyages of Michael Palin, a great hero of mine, and that time when Billy Connolly got a village full of African kids to mess with his hair. Oh, and there was this one programme I once saw where some footballer, who probably wasn't Vinnie Jones, went to Greece for a week and ate dog meat. Sorry, that was probably an analogy too far.

One of the first discoveries we made was when Ian realised that the reason the door had been opening and closing repeatedly for the past 10 minutes was because his backpack was balanced directly over the pressure switch. It's one of those things that the British just take for granted and never investigate or complain about. A bit like the way Channel 5 daytime TV shows back-to-back adverts for whinging personal injury claims firms that irritate just about every sentient being on the planet. Maybe, paradoxically, people should complain more about these things.

Just a few weeks earlier, I had been on a very similar train between Oxford and Birmingham. This was a train which went up northwards to Liverpool or somewhere, and I ended up sitting in the hallway for that one too. I was chatting to one cheery, middle-aged lady whose name I never quite caught, but it didn't seem all that important at the time. Next to her was the obligatory drunken Scotsman that you always seem to get on these journeys. I'm sure he told me his name, but it wasn't all that easy to discern, thanks to the heavy accent and the even heavier effects of a very large and very empty bottle of Diamond White. This latter gave to him a certain relaxed humour, and the ability to talk to anyone he met about practically anything without even the slightest worry about their opinions. I wish I could be a little more like that, but without the inevitable hangover.

I love meeting people on trains. I wish I'd met someone new on this voyage, but I think they were put off by Ian's oppressively authoritarian haircut. However, I had a feeling that the next few days would have more than their fair share of obscure réunions. Last time I went to France was over 3 years ago, and I spent almost all my time talking to English people in Irish bars. This would be different. Ian's encyclopaedic knowledge of the language was surpassed only by his uncanny ability to mis-define the word 'encyclopaedia'. Admittedly, all I could bring to the journey was a basic knowledge of A-level French, a love for Beethoven and a gift for poetic licence akin to that of Wordsworth when he famously wrote "I wandered lonely as a cloud." Clearly he hadn't visited England in quite some time. The rain outside had abated for a short while, but the clouds were gathering up there in distinctly friendly numbers.

We arrived in Newbury not one moment too soon. Or, to put it otherwise, slightly late. I used to be able to blame British Rail, but now I haven't got a damn clue who's running the railways, so I still blame British Rail anyway. Damned British Rail. It has quite a satisfying ring to it. It would be a great shame if I ever learned exactly what was going on in our country, as all the older establishments are far more fun to ridicule.

Newbury nestles into the idyllic Berkshire countryside rather like a large sledgehammer nestles into a delicate piece of Ming dynasty crockery. Fortunately we were not to spend much time in this jewel of the English riviera, but rather we were immediately whisked away in the impressively black and powerful BMW of Ian's older brother. The family resemblance was striking in many ways, but not least of which in the way they both seemed to know a significant amount more about the current affairs of the day than I did.

This was hardly surprising, I suppose, given that I had spent most of my formative years avoiding anything political in much the same way as Mount Everest actively avoids taking up polevaulting. It was in my blood. Or rather, it *wasn't* in my blood. Ian knew stuff about this whole new world, whereas to me the subject was a mystery. Many were the discussions we would have over the next few days which went something like this;

Ian: What do you think about Charles Kennedy?

Colin: Terrible shame. I think it was the CIA. Still, if you will go around attacking Troy and pretending to be a powerful sorcerer, then you deserve all you get.

Ian: Erm... I think you'll find that was a combination of the late American President J.F. Kennedy, the Greek hero Achilles and the Wizard of Oz.

Colin: Oh. Right.

Ian: (seizing the opportunity) What do you think about the concept of truth?

We got back to Ian's house just in time for dinner. I was glad finally to see the mansion where my good friend lived, and I was introduced to his father briefly before he went out for the evening. I felt a

little bit like Lisa Simpson in that Episode of “The Simpsons” where she goes to visit the home of the clever new girl in class, only to realise that she doesn’t know any anagrams of ‘Jeremy Irons’. Together, we sat down to enjoy what would be our last traditional English dinner for several days.

It was only a short time before we left Ian’s house, and drove off into the night together, in a totally butch and unromantic sense. To improve the mood, Ian had managed to find a device that fitted into the cassette player, and allowed you to play CDs through the car stereo. It was like that time when I went on a sponsored walk with my school and a friend brought along a personal stereo and played “Boom shake the room” over and over again on loop for five hours. Well, thinking about it I suppose it wasn’t really like that at all. I can’t remember what we were listening to this time, but I’m sure we were having a suitably pretentious conversation about it. I imagine it was Beethoven, seeing as we’d brought practically every piece of music he ever wrote.

We arrived at Portsmouth around ten o’clock pm. The ferry sailed at a quarter past eleven. Or at least we hoped it would - that was what was written on the ticket after all. We handed it over with some trepidation, and I was most surprised when the official handed it back and told us to drive over towards a long line of cars waiting to be ushered on board. There was no customs check whatsoever, which almost made me annoyed that I hadn’t been smuggling several kilogrammes of raw opium out of the country. Maybe they figured that any country that had *pains au chocolat* wouldn’t have any particular need for hard drugs.

The line of cars slowly proceeded to the gaping cargo bay doors of the enormous Ferry, named after some bizarre French hero like Denis Papin, who apparently wasn’t a footballer as we were to find out three days later.

One by one, the cars fed into the ferry, and eventually we parked up unfeasibly close to the car in front, and were handed a parking card by a lady, who was to be the first cute French girl of the trip. Ian and I had an argument about French accents. I said I couldn’t listen to one without thinking of some mind-bogglingly attractive actress like Virginie Ledoyen or Emmanuelle Beart, dressed in a flimsy negligée. He said he couldn’t listen to one without thinking of his maternal grandmother. I conceded the point.

We fought our way through the distinctly lacklustre crowds of holidaymakers, fleeing the country in search of some cheap plonk and a series of even cheaper baguette jokes. After conversing with the lovely lady (number 2) at the information desk, we wandered over in the direction of our cabin for the night. I could barely believe the arrangements had all gone so well. I was half expecting to turn up and get arrested for crass stupidity, or something. That’s what normally happens. Maybe it was Ian.

After a short reconnaissance mission around the ship, we quickly found the door which led to our alleged cabin. Much to our dismay it was locked. Clearly this was some kind of incomprehensible French joke. I never understood continental humour. It’s like watching a non-stop series of Eurotrash. If Dante were alive today, he would have his work cut out. Abandon hope, indeed. And we all thought he was referring to hell...

We wandered back upstairs past a steady stream of no people whatsoever, beginning to wonder if we just tried to open a door which said “Do not open - Ocean Beyond”. When we got back to the desk, we asked the girl if there was any reason why the door was locked. She turned to one of the maintenance staff, who shrugged his shoulders and said “bof”, muttering something about having to pull harder. “Bof” is a wonderful word, and I often think that English is much the poorer for not having adopted it yet. It means a whole multitude of things, many of which are impossible to express otherwise. It’s also a fantastic way of getting out of tight spots. If you ever get caught stealing agricultural produce from the roadside when driving through the Loire valley, just shrug your shoulders, say “bof”, and the Police will laugh it off and send you on your way without so much as a hefty slap round the face.

On returning to the ‘locked’ door, and making complete fools of ourselves for quite some time, Ian discovered that the trick was actually to turn the handle, and then the door opened just fine. There was at least one man the other side frowning angrily at us as we walked past. I could just imagine what he was thinking. “Damn French can’t even open doors”.

We made our way to our cabin, which was small but satisfactory. Ian pointed out that it would probably be a good idea to get to sleep as soon as possible, as we had a great deal of driving ahead. Actually, *he* had a great deal of driving ahead. I was planning on loafing. We wandered back up on deck just in time to see England dis-appearing into the distance, the Portsmouth dock beacons decorating the night sky like fairy-lights. It was beginning to get cold, so we wandered back down to our cabin.

So we found ourselves lying in bed (separately) somewhere down in the darkest depths of a surprisingly underpopulated Ferry, sailing into the inky blackness of the channel, and over towards the

continent beyond. It was the beginning of our great journey: we were finally on our way, though of course we had absolutely no idea whatsoever *where* it was we would end up. I lay down to sleep, my head finally glad to hit a pillow and my eyes happy to close after such a long and exhausting day. With any luck we would get five or six hours' sleep before we reached France, and we would be ready and alert to begin our intrepid holiday.

And then the squeaking started.

And no, it wasn't Ian.

Chapter 2

Day 2 : John of Ark

Except during the nine months before he draws his first breath,
no man manages his affairs as well as a tree does.
- George Bernard Shaw

2.1 What Wilderbeest?

The distinction between day one and day two of our journey was purely one of definition. I think I finally fell asleep around 2am, only to be woken up a little over 2 hours later by my watch alarm, which I had cleverly set to go off just a minute or two before some idiot ran round the ship brandishing the loudest bell in the Universe.

We awoke in a proper French mood. It was now 4:30 am, or as they say in France, '5:30 am'. The French always have to go one better. At least for one hour per day we have the satisfaction that they've wrapped around to zero and we're still at 23. I suppose one has to be grateful for small mercies.

There was no shower in our cabin, so we began the holiday smelling distinctly musky. Thus, my mission to pull singlehandedly every available girl in France was to be fatally crippled from the offset. Ian argued that it was pretty much dead in the water before we'd set off. I pointed out that we were still at sea, and that he'd be dead in the water himself if he didn't show a little more respect. I think this was the first time he 'pulled rank' on the holiday, reminding me that I was but a humble domestic servant and that such rudeness would get me fired if I wasn't a little more careful.

We quickly washed and dressed, ready for the day ahead. A brief orange juice in the ship's canteen gave me the will to survive until we could get our hands on some quality pastries. This was to be the last time we were able to speak English comfortably. I was slightly nervous, not having even attempted to converse in French for many many years. I had these nightmares going round in my head that I wouldn't be able to remember any of the vocabulary, or that I'd suddenly find myself talking to someone in a completely different language by accident. Or maybe there would be a meeting of the 'Cute Girls Society of France' (the SJFMF) and I'd accidentally call them all whores or something. You know, the kind of things that happen to people like me on a regular basis.

I managed to throw off my fears, ready for the long day ahead. Before too long Ian and I were directed towards our car, and were ready to set off. I was somewhat surprised to find out that our trusty automobile was still there and hadn't been dumped into the sea. I prepared to start the day's music as soon as we had breached French security and successfully infiltrated their mainland. The weather outside was frankly... well... pretty black. That was probably more due to the distinct lack of sunlight than anything else. There was a thick blanket of fog lying over the docks, thanks to which the visibility was barely more than a *croissant's* throw. For all we knew there could have been angry mobs of French patissiers armed with brioches, or something slightly more substantial and aerodynamically efficient, just out of sight. To be honest, I was hungry enough just to appreciate that.

Fortunately, we were spared any culinary assault, and after a suitably lacklustre customs check, we left the docks at Caen and headed off onto French roads for the first time. Having left our cross-channel transport, we had now come to the end of the 'approximately planned' stage of our journey, and were entering the 'utterly unplanned' phase. Lying ahead of us were nearly four days in France and we didn't have the slightest idea as to where we should end up. We found ourselves at the exit to the Ferry

terminal, faced with a roundabout and a choice of routes. Ian turned round to me, smiled and asked "left or right?" I glanced either way, chose one at random, and so we set off. And thus began our tour.

Ian was very careful to remember the correct protocol and drive on the wrong side. I was astounded to notice such a large number of otherwise patriotic, stiff-upper-lipped Brits similarly quick to acquiesce. Gone was our nation's obstinate fighting spirit. Everyone just wanted to get as far away from that harbour as possible, and find someone wearing a beret whom they could laugh at incessantly for an entire week.

Ian and I, being true gentlemen of a not inconsiderable academic reputation, were far above such petty, mindless pursuits. I balanced the CD player precariously on my lap, inserted a disc of Beethoven's early piano sonatas, and triumphantly pressed 'play'. Before long, the sublime beauty of a lone Steinway punctured the fragile tranquility of the Normandy coastline. In my opinion, it was better off for it. In fact, it didn't really matter where we were - except for the occasional road sign and the strange overabundance of white vans, we could have been practically anywhere. You could have hidden the Great Pyramids of Giza in that fog, and still had room left over for the Statue of Liberty, the Taj Mahal, and the majority of the Himalayas.

We had hoped that the fog was a purely coastal feature, but as we slowly moved inland, past Caen, and onto the Route Nationale heading towards Lisieux, the veil of white persisted rather anally. At one point I wondered if one of the French lorry drivers had sprayed our windows with Tipp-Ex for a laugh. I decided that, seeing as I would have found that funny, it couldn't possibly have been a viable explanation.

Neither of us really knew what to say, so instead made light conversation, laughing about how tired we both were, how hungry we had suddenly become and how wonderful the countryside probably would have been if only we could have seen some of it.

It's an interesting point. Just because we couldn't see the countryside, did that make it any less attractive? To what degree is beauty an innate property of a person or place, and to what extent does it require an observer to comprehend fully? If someone had taken Picasso, and placed him inside an empty room with no windows or doors, would he still have painted as he did? Or would he have painted things that actually bore a resemblance to the real world instead of hideous genetic mutations?

I wish I had the eye of a true artist - I often think the world would look a great deal funnier then. Maybe I do. That would explain a lot of things.

We arrived in Lisieux absurdly early, but rather keen to grab some sort of early morning food. It was still several hours before my normal breakfast time back in England, but somehow I was ravenously hungry. Even Ian agreed, and he was as keen as I was to get some proper food in his belly before driving any further. It was this decision which caused us to park to the side of an unnecessarily steep road in the town centre, while I made a dash out to the Patisserie with a fistful of French francs and a serious desire for chocolate. I was not to be disappointed.

I cautiously wandered into the Patisserie just down the road. The lady who served me was in her mid-thirties, and surprisingly bright and cheerful given the unearthly hour at which she must have been woken. She greeted me as a native. "Bonjour!" At that point I wasn't sure if that was a bad thing or not. I replied convivially. I like fitting in with a new culture, but I'm always embarrassed by the possibility that people will launch into some tirade of abuse about the English and their bloody 'vaches folles' and how they think they're so great just because they invented Newton and Shakespeare. Then I'd be forced to respond assertively in my best German accent "Ah oui! Sez Anglaiy!" and hope for the best.

Maybe I'm just a coward at heart. Maybe I'm afraid to defend honourably that in which I believe, such as avoidance of split infinitives and the correct placement of prepositions. Alternatively, I could just have been hungry enough to do pretty much anything for a *pain au chocolat*. Yes, I decided that was it. Anyway, the woman behind the counter had not started verbally abusing my country, and instead was staring at me rather impatiently as I carefully deliberated my choice.

English people immediately betray their nationality in patisseries. The French seem to be born with the innate gift of knowing exactly what to buy even when faced with a truly bewildering array of foodstuffs. I was looking steadily more English by the second. Eventually I extinguished all doubt in the shop assistant's mind, and carefully ordered a couple of it pains au chocolat, a *croissant* and a bar of chocolate, failing miserably to pronounce any of the 'r's correctly. This was me at my bravest. I even listened to her telling me the price instead of cheating and looking at the cash register. I decided to quit while I was ahead - a conversation about the thick fog could only end in disaster. I had enough difficulty pronouncing "*croissant*".

I left the shop with my head held high, narrowly missing the beam above the door, and striding back up the street where Ian still sat in the car, revving the engine impatiently. I jumped in, and we sped off at an exciting, but law-abiding speed towards the outskirts of town. Hardly able to resist, I reached into the bag, gingerly removed the first *pain au chocolat* and took a large bite. It was like dying and going to heaven. In fact, it was better than that. It was like arriving in heaven, and then being told that not only are you living next door to Einstein, but that Chopin and Liszt are putting on an impromptu concert series just down the hallway.

It was delicious, sensuous and tremendously satisfying, whilst at the same time giving me a great deal of vicarious pleasure. It also gave me the opportunity to use the word 'schadenfreude' in conversation, which was rather exciting. For each mouthful of this exquisite pastry that I tasted, there was some poor sod back in Blighty tucking into a soggy bowl of cornflakes. What right did I have to be here, sampling the most delicious breakfast cuisine in the world, when there were millions of sorry buggers in Britain sobbing quietly into their weak, flavourless mugs of tea? Perhaps they should send *croissants* to these starving Third World countries instead of grain. I mean, what do they expect people actually to do with it? I notice they don't go around providing them with breadmaking facilities or gin distilleries too.

Peasant 1: Look father, here's another one of those UN convoys delivering food to our poor, starving village.

Peasant 2: We're saved! Finally!

Peasant 1: I wonder what they've brought us.

Peasant 2: Looks like bags of grain.

Peasant 1: Oh bloody hell, not again!

Maybe a better definition of "Worldedness" would be measuring how many different uses each country had for grain.

Peasant 1: Look father, here's yet another truckload of food supplies.

Peasant 2: This one looks like bags of ... little moon shaped pastries.

Peasant 1: Well how the hell do they expect us to resurface the driveway with those?

Back to France where, as you remember, we had just left Lisieux, and a mile or so out of town, we pulled over into a layby next to a picturesque old church to snack on our breakfast rations.

The only reason I remembered Lisieux from my previous visits to France was that it was the place with a pointy thing on a hill. I wasn't entirely sure what the pointy thing was, but it was clearly some kind of temple or mausoleum, and I figured it would be a nice place to visit. Sadly, we never really got an opportunity to stop and search for it. Not that there would have been any point whatsoever as we wouldn't have been able to see a damn thing with all that fog around. I also seem to remember the pointy thing standing precariously close to a dangerously precipitous cliff face.

Our breakfast completed, we set off once more on the familiar foggy route towards Evreux which would, as we were soon to find out, look significantly more like the place where we actually had breakfast, throwing into doubt our memory of the entire morning. We were beginning to formulate a rather impressive plan for the rest of the day's travelling, and it sounded like a voyage worthy of two seasoned travellers such as ourselves.

The first task was to lose the fog - it was cramping our style. Then we would search out excitement and adventure in Chartres. That's if we could get over how funny it sounded, and if we could shake the white van which was currently tailing us at an uncomfortably friendly distance.

As we were heading east, we passed a bus broken down on the other side of the road, cleverly concealed by the fog. I turned to Ian.

"Did you see that bus?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "I suppose we could stop and help."

"No point" I replied, "what do we know about buses?"

Ian shrugged his shoulders. "I suppose you're right."

"What was that written on the side? Did you managed to pick it out?"

"Not really. Something like 'SJFMF Tour 2001'."

“Oh, right.”

I pondered the situation for a few moments.

“Bollocks”.

2.2 I was Talking to the Dog

Despite our best efforts we remained largely shrouded in fog up to our arrival in Chartres. By this stage we had been up about six hours and it was barely mid-morning. We rolled gently into the welcoming embrace of the town and turned Beethoven down to a more conversational level.

This, as the goon show says, is where the story really starts. For it was a Chartres that we met our first real French people, saw the sights, and ate patisserie. I have to confess I have never found patisserie quite as fine as that served in Provence, but Chartres ran it a pleasurable close second. They did quite decent coffee too.

First move was to divest ourselves of the car; not only did it give away our otherwise eminently concealable anglophonism, but we really couldn't take it into the cathedral with us.

And what a cathedral. Now, I'm no expert on architectural styles, but this was a wonderfully crafted gothic building of immense majesty and considered asymmetry. It dominated the town. The intricate decor of the earlier Catholic tower mingles effortlessly with the austere beauty of its post-Reformation neighbour. Better still was the intensely dark interior with its deep, rich stained-glass, and the looming solidity of the powerful stone pillars. Orleans scores heavily over Chartres for its formality, its grandiloquence, and the sheer scale of the place. Yet Chartres has a more intimate, subtle charm all of its own which vindicated our excellent decision to visit it first.

After the *pièce de resistance* (viz, the cathedral), I took Xol on a whistlestop mooch around the place. The chilly sunshine lent Chartres a somewhat ethereal air, and we thoroughly enjoyed nosing along some side streets to find the church of St Pierre. Actually it was locked though not, as in London, as a matter of course but, as is only appropriate in Gaul, for an extensive siesta. Xol & I decided that if the church was having lunch, the only civilised course of action would be to follow suit. We opted for a steck fritt (each) and read *Le Monde* and *Paris Match* in a sly if degenerate attempt to blend with the natives.

After the repast, Xol seemed to be getting itchy feet so we spurned the opportunity of buying a sword and returned post haste to the car park. I neglected earlier to describe the car park, and its design was of sufficient note to merit a few words. The building was underground. Nothing too odd in that for a car park. But this one is a double-helix built around an open central vault allowing natural light to penetrate even the lowest levels. Beyond even the DNA reference however, the car park had one further feature; the open-air toilet. This triumph of design over practicality allowed me to converse freely with the motoring public, or those idly looking down from the square above, whilst actually engaged in the business of relieving myself. I'm not sure that the good folks of Worcestershire would approve.

Reunited with Xol, we wound our way down to our trusty steed and hopped aboard. I had already fired up the engine before it occurred to either of us that we had nowhere to go. Not literally, of course - there is plenty of land connected to Chartres if one has the exploring bug - but we hadn't a plan in the world as to how the day should progress further. Glancing at the map, Orleans looked like a couple of hours motoring on a south-ish bearing. An informal plebiscite confirmed this as our next destination. I guided the Rover back into the open air, and we promptly roared off into the sunshine to see what fate would bring.

It brought Orleans. Fate is full of unsurprises.

2.3 That's Why They Call Them 'Hot Rooms'

Despite a significant body of evidence to the contrary, the pronunciation of the French city of Orleans goes significantly against the grain of my deep-seated musical and gastronomical education. This was one of the first linguistic nuances to confuse me throughout our brief visit to this most ridiculous of cities. Ian provided the majority of the rest.

I certainly didn't envy my chauffeur's job here. The roads were hideous, in close proportion to the driving skills of most of the people travelling on them. We were forced to drive through ridiculously heavy traffic around several insane junctions, and along what the French rather cheekily call a one-way system. It was like being back in Birmingham, but without the culture.

We had only been in Orleans for twenty minutes, and already we wanted not to be in it. We very nearly left the town right then, but instead decided on one last plunge headlong towards the city centre. Somewhere amongst those concrete tower blocks lay a cathedral of legendary beauty, which we felt was a cultural must. Ian skillfully avoided a barrage of oncoming traffic, swerving through the inner-city streets on a mad tour which reminded me vividly of the opening credits for the 'Naked Gun' movies, but with fewer shower scenes. Anyone who has seen 'The Italian Job' will probably have a much clearer picture. I was Benny Hill to Ian's Michael Caine, ironically. All we needed to complete the illusion was a souped-up mini and a dodgy old perverted academic. Well... a slightly *older* one.

As we neared the town centre, we began to pick out the fragile beauty of the famous cathedral poking apologetically between a couple of run-down office blocks. I was in half a mind to go up to those office blocks and give them a piece of my mind, but then I remembered that they were only buildings.

As the busy city roads stopped abruptly, we suddenly found ourselves driving confusedly over a particularly rough cobbled street, half expecting some generic Dickensian character to ride out in front of us in a horse and cart. Nothing about this place was really believable, and we had a distinct feeling that we were right in the middle of a ridiculous historical documentary. Perhaps we had been transported through time to the year 2247 where some malevolent futuristic civilisation was currently watching us as a perfect example of how not to do anything correctly whatsoever, yet still miraculously escape serious injury. I think it would be called "Greatest Pillocks of History" and Ian and I would make frequent and instructive appearances, alongside the Captain of the Titanic and the bloke who killed Archduke Ferdinand of Austro-Hungary.

As the opening theme to "Knight Rider" so aptly reminds us - one man *can* make a difference. Sadly, it's far easier to cock things up completely than to cure world hunger or something else useful.

Our tour round the city centre turned out to be an excellent decision. We finally arrived at the front of the great cathedral quite by accident, hardly believing our luck. The central part of Orleans is actually rather beautiful, and is dominated by the exquisitely delicate architecture of the great cathedral towers jutting into the sky above us. Amusingly enough, someone had the bright idea to build a huge concrete multi-storey car park underneath the south transept. We couldn't really work out our bearings once we got underground, so it was difficult to know exactly *where* we were.

Whilst in Chartres, Ian had been particularly pleased to tell me a story about navigating through the wilderness of Zimbabwe on safari with only his wits to direct him. Apparently he could tell true north from almost anywhere on planet Earth. When standing beside one of the largest gothic Cathedrals in Europe, this was not such an impressive claim. I'm pretty sure I couldn't navigate my way unaided across vast tracts of the Serengeti, but in such situations, the way forward is generally the route with fewest lions. Unless armed with a sieve, that is, where the options become substantially wider.

We parked underground, and then made our way back to the surface to witness the unrivaled splendour of yet another fantastic religious monument. Orleans formed the centrepiece of one of the most extraordinary stories of the history of Europe, that of Jeanne d'Arc. In the early 15th Century, much of France, including Paris and Reims, was under control of the English and their local allies. Jeanne, who was just a teenager at the time, was inspired by a series of visions to visit the Dauphin, later Charles VII of France. It is unknown whether or not those visions were inspired by an overabundance of claret, but regardless she managed to persuade the heir to the French throne to allow a seventeen year old girl to lead an army against the most powerful nation on Earth.

Judging by the embarrassing military defeats suffered by a whole list of fully grown men over the preceding years, she couldn't really do much worse. In fact she scored a series of major victories, liberating Orleans and driving the English out of central France. Eventually, she was betrayed by her own side, and sold to the English for a hefty ransom. Adequate evidence that everyone hates a smart-alec kid. On May 30th, 1431, Jeanne was burned alive at the stake, though was later to be beatified and canonised by the Roman Catholic Church, despite her worrying propensity for bloodshed and carnage. This fantastic story was recently made into a big-budget Hollywood film where, for once, they didn't need especially to create an evil part for the English actors: History had done admirably on its own.

The cathedral in Orleans, like a quality pastry, was as splendid inside as it was outside. The decoration was on an extraordinary scale, and would have been the most amazing place in which to perform a concert, if only we had thought beforehand to bring a 16-voice chamber choir with us.

This saddening oversight was to haunt us several more times during our whistlestop tour of unfeasibly pleasant acoustics.

We left the cathedral after a lengthy and fascinating visit, finally wandering round the outside of the building in order to get a much better view of the extraordinary towers towards the west entrance, and the lavishly decorative architecture around the sides. We passed several groups of skateboarders and bikers, all accumulating passively around to the front steps, presumably just passing the time before evensong.

After a leisurely circumnavigation, we wandered away from the cathedral and back down the main street of Orleans. This was partly to get a good view of the western elevation, but also because Ian had spotted a little patisserie off to one side which sold exorbitantly rich chocolate cakes.

We had decided that, though the cathedral was extremely beautiful, Orleans was not a place to stop for the night. We had hoped that we would find some cute little village along the Loire, and check into a guest house. In fact, this is exactly what we did. As in most good writing, the things that happen aren't important, it's *how* they happen that really matters, and more importantly, how much one embellishes the story in the telling. For once, our tale from this particular evening needs no embellishment whatsoever.

After exiting the cunningly concealed underground car park, we left the city centre, and spent quite some time navigating the confusing road system. Our desired direction was perfectly clear. We knew exactly where we were, and where we wanted to go. However, in France, that's not usually enough. It took us a good 45 minutes to weave our way out of Orleans, and on to a Route Nationale leading vaguely south-west along the banks of the Loire, towards a veritable crowd of cute little villages, and ultimately, our destination of the next few days: The vineyards.

We drove away from Orleans for over half an hour, before crossing over the Loire and exploring the southern side of the valley. I picked the closest village to our present location, which began with an "L", and we headed towards it.

Fortunately for us, this first village turned out to be exactly what we were looking for. I don't think I'd ever before seen so many flowers concentrated in such a small area. Whatever the name of this delightful place was, it provided the perfect location for our first night on French soil. Absolutely everything was ideal, with the possible exception of the distinct lack of accommodation, a problem which was to plague us for the following hour and a half.

A brief scouting trip around the outskirts of the village provided us with no further leads, so we decided to park the car and wander around on foot. After all, the village was easily small enough to walk across, which, as it turned out, was just as well.

Our first port of call was a small restaurant with a sign above the door advertising rooms for the night. We wandered in and Ian spoke politely to the lady behind the bar, as is his wont. We were informed that there were no rooms available whatsoever and that we would have to look elsewhere. To be honest, I wasn't too upset about this as it looked like the kind of place where binge drinking was obligatory, and a night's accommodation involved half an hour upstairs with the barmaid in a darkened room without a great deal of either rest or relaxation.

We swiftly exited, and wandered elsewhere. "L" was a beautiful village, there was no denying that, but we were rapidly discovering that it had absolutely none of the mod-cons that we had grown to take for granted in First-world England. A lengthy search of the town brought us to a superstore car park near the edge of town, which is where Ian suddenly went very quiet and pointed towards a sign nearby.

Ian: Does that say 'chambres d'hôtes'?

Col: I believe so, sir.

Ian: Excellent! Let's go and check it out.

Col: Are you sure that's a good idea?

It turns out that my fears were all for nothing, as Ian's translation rapidly confirmed. I'd had enough sleaze for one evening, which was unfortunate, as there was plenty more to come.

We followed a long, dusty road for quite some time, commenting on the terrible state of the pavement and the complete lack of traditional First-world comforts. Back in England, that pavement would have already spawned several dozen law suits, and in America it would probably have degenerated into full-scale gang warfare. However, in France it simply provided a passing lizard with a convenient roof over his head. Talking of which, by this point we had arrived at the legendary hot rooms. After not having

seen any signposts whatsoever for a disturbingly long time, we finally came across the logo for the Hot Rooms Society of France, or “SNCCF”, crudely nailed to a fence post. We entered timidly, approaching a particularly well concealed manse, located slightly back from the road within a generous side helping of wooded garden.

Timidly, Ian knocked on the door. I warned him that perhaps he should have knocked more loudly to give a good first impression. After all, we wanted to demonstrate the undeniable masculinity and butchness of English men, and what better way to do that than striking something loudly with one’s fist, as John Prescott was so keen to affirm. Ian was about to knock again when a middle-aged lady opened the door, and he only narrowly avoided punching her in the face.

Now, it has to be said that I’d never stayed in a hot room before, and Ian had only done so once. Moreover, this particular place looked disturbingly like someone’s own private house, which may help you to understand how relieved we were when Ian’s first question, namely, to ask if there were and free rooms for the night, was met with a resounding “Oui”.

We followed the lovely lady inside, through an impressively large-scale lobby, and up a set of slightly less-impressive wooden stairs towards the landing, which snaked round towards the far wing of the house, where two double bedrooms were located. “Which one do you want?” asked the lady. I pointed towards one of the rooms, casually mentioning that it didn’t really matter. Ian was looking worried. I ignored him. “How much is it?” I asked, in my best French accent. “300 francs” was the answer. A good deal.

Ian took over. “Could we have both of them?” he asked. I frowned, wondering if he was expecting company. Perhaps he thought we might get lucky on the town. Bearing in mind the distinct lack of anywhere to pull women, that seemed unlikely. There was always that small supermarket that we had passed. Perhaps that’s where the youth of “L” hung out each night. We should have gone back to Orleans - the cathedral seemed like quite a social centre.

The lady looked slightly taken aback at my boss’s request. Presumably she hadn’t encountered such fiscal flamboyance for quite some time. She nodded. “I suppose so,” she replied, “but that will be 250 francs per room. Is that OK?” Ian quickly confirmed that this would be just fine, his bulging wallet barely able to detect such a miniscule outlay. The lady handed us our keys, gave us a few moments to drop off our bags, and then explained the unfathomable layout of the house.

Just before she left, we explained that we had stupidly left the car over half an hour’s drive away, and that we would go back to fetch it. There was a convenient car park to front of the house, so we wandered off to find our transportation and bring it back, half expecting an angry mob of French farmers to have attacked it with pitchforks and other miscellaneous garden implements.

I took the opportunity to ask Ian about his sudden change of heart. “Well, isn’t it obvious?” he said. I shook my head.

“Well, she clearly thought we were gay.”

I hadn’t even considered that. Clearly Ian had paid quite some thought to it.

“Think about it - two hunky foreign men driving around France together, turning up in the early evening looking for a room. No female companions. I know what *I* would think.”

“Does it really matter?” I asked.

“Well, we don’t want to reinforce the English stereotype, do we?” Ian replied. “And besides, there’s no way in the world I’m sharing a double bed with a butler.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “You’re probably right. Come to think of it, we must look pretty camp. It’s a good job we didn’t tell her we were from Cambridge. That would have been the last straw.”

We fetched the car with much jollity. We didn’t come across so much as a drunken peasant on our travels, making us wonder if perhaps the village of “L” wasn’t some sort of ghost town. I think I’d seen a Stephen King film about this place before. I knew it was familiar. I spent the next twenty minutes looking for pumpkins.

We drove the car back to the hot rooms, and then wandered out on the town for dinner. Due to the appalling lack of restaurants, we were forced to raid the local boulangerie where we bought some strange looking pastries and a couple of homemade pizzas. Finally we returned outside to find a comfortable place to sit and eat. The seat we found was a dilapidated park bench beside one of the main roads through the village, not far from the Route Nationale, and next to a particularly small and uninspiring lake. It was here that we had a great many complicated discussions about the validity of religion, birth control and at least one other controversial issue that I can’t even remember. Ian was on top argument form, and I found myself thinking towards my maximum capacity just to avoid shoving a slice of pizza in my ear.

We decided that now would be a good time to wander around “L” and chat about philosophy. Ian had detected the possibility of a complicated discussion, and I had a feeling that I wasn’t going to discourage him. This was mildly concerning, as the last time I remember having a coherent thought was way back in my pre-school years. Ian, however, certainly gave the impression that he regularly debated the finer points of logical positivism with himself just for fun.

What follows remains a blur. We wandered around “L” for quite some time, weaving through the streets and drawing a number of stares from people who obviously thought we were a couple. The details of the arguments we each presented are irrelevant, but I found myself changing my point of view at regular intervals, just as Ian convincingly ripped apart my inferior comprehension of the world’s more contentious issues. We had a great debate which could only be described “The Car Insurance Sketch”, where Ian tried to argue that it was unfair for women to be charged less for their car insurance, despite the fact that they are statistically safer drivers. Then we moved on to a ridiculous argument about sexual equality in the workplace, and I knew it was time to stop, having never been anywhere near a place of work in my entire life. At the end of the evening, I wasn’t really sure *what* I believed, only that it was time to go to bed, and if I stayed awake for a minute more my head would explode.

Three hours later I finally left Ian’s room. I think I saw a pair of eyes staring at me from round the corner, and a faint murmur of disapproval wafting through the hallway. Regardless of what the landlady thought, we had remained fully clothed throughout. We had been talking of philosophy, and Ian had managed to prove comprehensively that everything I had ever believed was utterly false.

Truth, it turns out, is just an illusion.

I returned to bed a sobbing mess, my world in tatters. Wrapped timorously in several layers of duvet and blanket, my teeth chattered in the harsh chill of a poorly insulated French country house. Before long I drifted into an uneasy slumber, my mind filled with the pathos of a myriad broken illusions and a critically fractured self-worth.

Then I had this great dream about supermodels. That made me feel a lot better.

Chapter 3

Day 3 : Cha(m/n)bo(u)r(d/g/t)

When I examine myself and my methods of thought,
I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy has meant more to me
than my talent for absorbing positive knowledge
- Albert Einstein

3.1 How Annoying is That?

I woke up from one of those weird dreams. You know the sort - the ones that you want to continue, not because they involve armies of scantily-clad nymphomaniac nineteen-year old college girls, but just because they're amazingly surreal and remind you of your favourite Terry Gilliam films. I didn't wake up screaming, which is probably a good job. I'd hate to reinforce the ideas the lady who owned the house was probably already developing. Fortunately I awoke alone, and it's not often you hear me say that either.

Each of our rooms had their own en-suite bathroom area, with a luxurious modern shower that didn't really fit in with the rustic ambience of the rest of the house. It was a strange juxtaposition of forms - the ultra-modern contrasting with the distinctly old-fashioned. It was like being in the Houses of Parliament, but with fewer whips. Now that would *really* have got the land lady thinking. Perhaps one to remember for next time.

We wandered down to breakfast conspicuously at exactly the same time. In hindsight, this was probably a mistake. Fortunately, the lady wasn't around, and it took us quite some searching to find her. I was beginning to wonder if she had perhaps left early, leaving Ian and me sitting there on our own without so much as a baguette to devour before we left. On the plus side, we hadn't yet paid for our rooms, so it would have been quite a good deal.

After spending some time rummaging through a pile of maps and tour-guides of the region, our host finally arrived with a generous selection of bread, jam and butter. We each had a stiff coffee, for medicinal purposes only, devoured our fill, and then made arrangements to pay for our rooms. We parted with the cash, pausing only momentarily to contemplate the fact that we had just effectively paid an extra twenty quid to prove we were straight.

We left a very confused landlady, jumped into the car, fired up some Beethoven on the CD player, and slipped off into the morning mist, leaving behind a village that began with the letter 'L', and driving south-westwards towards our first port of call; le Chateau de Chambord.

Chambord is located in the middle of a large park estate, populated entirely by deer in silhouette, if the road signs were to be believed. I certainly never saw any. Perhaps the light wasn't right that early in the morning. I can't remember exactly how early it was, but when we arrived at the Chateau, the car park was only just beginning to fill up, the shops weren't open, and there was only one coach load of Japanese tourists there, so it must have been pretty early. I thought about striking up a conversation with one of the cuter girls, but it would have led to disaster and a significant amount of picture-taking.

I hate photos. Cameras may never lie, but that's because they don't speak. If they did they'd probably claim that they personally masterminded the entire history of Western civilisation. I'm not sure who that rather strange looking guy in all the photos of me is, but he always jumps right in front of where I was standing just as the picture is being taken. Most inconsiderate.

I'm not sure if Chambord was ever used as a location for a James Bond movie, but it certainly should have been. The building itself is strikingly beautiful. It is also unnecessarily pointy, almost crying out for a celebrity bad-guy impaling. There was also a large yard with horses, a lot of dark corridors and spiral staircases, a vast amount of parkland with ample room for a car chase, and a rather cute girl checking tickets at the gate. What more could any self-respecting secret agent require?

I would have chatted up said gate-keeper, but usually the girl working at these houses ends up being the one who tries to kill James Bond using a poison dart gun or something. Having said that, he normally gets at least a little bit of between-the-sheets action, regardless of whether he knows she's trying to kill him or not. I had a second glance. She didn't look like a killer, but then again you never can tell. I began to wonder if she had a ludicrously innuendo-laden name, but then I stopped because Ian was talking to me about something and I thought I had better listen in case, in a resounding break with tradition, he actually had something interesting to say.

The courtyard was rather large, and has a strange unfinished feel to it. I'm not sure whether that was due to the fact that Chambord was never actually used as an official royal residence in its entire history, and thus never had the opportunity to develop any sort of imperial ambience, or perhaps because there were two large portakabin toilets standing in front of the main entrance, entertaining a steady stream of bulbous tourists, fresh from a healthy breakfast of doughnuts and coca cola in the local McDonalds.

We entered through the main entrance to the chateau. The plan of this remarkable building had first been sketched by the renaissance master Leonardo daVinci. The chateau itself was occasionally used as a retreat for French kings, especially Louis XIV. It was under his auspices that the French dramatist Molière first produced his great works 'Monsieur de Pourceaugnac' and 'Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme' in this very place. The building virtually oozes with charisma from every nook and cranny, and Ian and I rose to the occasion with unparalleled style and intellectual panache. I say unparalleled, but that was mainly because we always considered ourselves at right-angles to conventional fashion and wisdom.

The main staircase in Chambord is a masterpiece of architectural one-upmanship. The centerpiece of the oldest section of the chateau, the double helix spirals majestically heavenward like an angel on marijuana. It was an absolutely perfect location for hide-and-seek games, such as those played in Royal abodes all across France during the latter parts of the 18th century.

Decapitations aside, this place must have seen a great number of fascinating events. One of those was not the display of appallingly bad modern art that someone had decided to show on the first floor gallery area. I have no desire whatsoever to look at black-and-white photographs of trees when I can just wander outside and see thousands of the damned things in technicolour. I never did understand modern art. Still, as long as it keeps on taking money away from stupid rich people, I suppose it can't be all bad.

After walking through a lot of rooms full of remarkable tapestries and decorations so exquisite that they would have given Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen a truly explosive orgasm, we decided that enough was enough and we headed up towards the roof for a few absurdly panoramic views and a breath of fresh air. We were not to be disappointed, for the vista was truly remarkable. We were also extremely lucky with the weather. There wasn't a single cloud in the sky. It was bluer than an Eskimo's private parts that had just been painted blue and covered with a layer of translucent blue film, and which had "got up this morning" with a harmonica.

After spending some time touring the roof, admiring the unnecessarily pointy bits and perusing a lengthy exhibition about the making of the Chateau, we returned back downstairs and out into the courtyard, avoiding the modern art along the way. We had yet to see the chapel, which was hidden snugly in one corner of the chateau in a most concerningly secular fashion. Where were the lavish stained glass windows so fitting in such a devoutly catholic country?

Pretty though it was, we left the chapel and returned to ground level, slipping back out of the gates and into the grounds outside. A well-trodden path lead all the way round the outside of the Chateau, and along the perimeter of a large exercise area, in which a number of ornately attired horses were trotting round, carefully balancing even-more ornately-dressed humans on their backs. It always amazes me how horses manage to develop such poise and balance. It can't be easy trying to keep a human being upright on one's back whilst galloping round a field and jumping inconsiderately placed fences at regular intervals. I know I couldn't do it. However, if it were up to me then I'd probably gallop round the edge of said fences instead of risking life and limb hurdling them at the aptly-named 'breakneck speed'. Maybe that's why humans rule the world and horses run round in circles for sugar lumps.

We sat down in the gardens at a point directly in line with the middle of the Chateau. It was the

most beautiful of buildings, with more pointy bits than King's College Chapel, and a considerably larger moat. There was just one thing that annoyed us: it was slightly asymmetric. Well, to be honest, it annoyed me. I think Ian just nodded and ignored me as much as he could. To be fair, the asymmetries were only second or third order, but they were still infuriating nonetheless. One one side there was an extra chimney or a slightly larger window. On the other side there was an extra pane of glass, or a slightly more pointy pointy-bit.

The one question that I had to ask was - why? Why bother? Surely it's significantly more hassle to make something asymmetric. You have to draw both halves of the chateau instead of just one. In the days before photocopiers, that must have been quite a nuisance. Didn't they realise this? Had they no consideration for the generations of absurdly pedantic tourists that would come to see their flawed masterpiece in the years to come?

We came to the startling, and unique conclusion that it must have been deliberate. Clearly, this was some sort of art form. The 'asymmetric' form. It was probably the modern art of the time, and was certainly just as infuriating. I cast my mind back a few centuries, and imagined two absurdly stereotypical French builders just having put the finishing touches to yet another tower.

Jacques: Well, we 'ave fainally feenished billding zees zecond taower.

Jean-Claude: Zat is raight. You know, I zink we maight have accidentally built it backwards.

Jacques: Euh oui. I zink you maight be rrrraight, mon ami. Wat do we do?

Jean-Claude: We lift our shoulderz like zees and say 'bof'

Jacques: Ah oui. Bonne idea. Nice beret by the way.

Jean-Claude: Merci. Can we stop zese outrrrraejous accents now?

I came to the conclusion that my own personal view of the world was probably not worth contemplating, as Ian was beginning to wander off back round the perimeter of the lawn in a most refreshingly symmetric manner. I followed after him, plodding back round to the front gate, narrowly avoiding two enormous uber-horses and some small child on an ancient 1950s jet-powered bicycle.

We stopped for a while in a small cafe, drank some fruit juice and trapped a couple of wasps inside appropriate glass receptacles. After this, we went to buy a postcard to send home, and then returned to the car.

Chambord, I discovered, was a most beautiful place, but flawed by its naive artistic pretensions. But we were only just beginning our exciting foray into the world of the Loire Chateaux. As we set off from that picturesque forest, Beethoven's second symphony playing slightly too loudly on the car stereo, we recognised for the first time that we were actually becoming French. All these castles and French breakfasts were beginning to convert us to their way of life. We were getting annoyed by people speaking English, and we actually felt the need to drink lots of wine and avoid work at all costs. We perhaps should have brought some French music, but we couldn't think of enough good stuff to fill one CD.

And so we departed from Chambord, still unsure of exactly how it was supposed to be spelt, and headed off towards our next port of call, the stunningly beautiful tourist city of Blowiss.

3.2 Blowiss

I'd enjoyed the morning in Chanmbourdg. The place has style beyond that of the average country pad and another crisp, chilly morning did it justice every bit as much as the intense, sultry, sunbaked occasion of my previous visit.

Departing Chambord, we turned up the Beethoven and headed deep into forest country. By this time, Herr Beethoven had become a seamless part of the French experience, and our choice of music strayed little for the remainder of the voyage. Although limited in scope, the size of our CD collection cannot be taken as sufficient explanation for this preference for the Viennese. There's no great mystery though; with an orchestra in his hands, the man is sheer genius. In fact Xol and I would willingly dedicate this whole jaunt to the great Ludwig Van B.

After the forest byways came to an end, a signpost suggested turning right to Orleans or left to the town of Blois. Our effective options thus reduced to one, Xol and I made for the town we would soon come to think of as Blowiss. I feel sure we must have heard some inept American tourist struggling

to pronounce the name: It seems hard to imagine that it hasn't ever happened, but perhaps memory deceives about the event itself.

The road we now joined ran along the bank of the Loire in an open, flat valley. Although Xol shewed no signs of having noticed, I couldn't suppress the thought that such country, in such a climate, means one thing, and one thing only - Wine. Sure enough, several acres of vines had passed us by the time Blois shimmered her way over the horizon.

The old heart of the town lies north of the river across the ancient and characteristically pointy stone bridge. We meandered our way across the river and through the narrow streets onto the hillside above. Here we found a square with parking (a Place de la Republique I believe - there's one in every town in France) and obediently parked in it.

Blois teeters on a narrow strip of land between hillside and river. The cathedral sits to one side, the chateau to the other. The respectful distance implies perhaps a tactful separation. Presumably, the purveyors to Royalty of fine chateaux knew better than to antagonise such an augustly peaceable body as the medieval Catholic church by setting up stall too close for comfort.

Whatever the reasons for its location, Xol and I found a way down past the precariously positioned cathedral and made for the river front. Our thoughts were on finding somewhere to stay relatively early, and the frontage offered a small selection of tasteful auberges. We plumped for the most modern and checked in.

On the assumption that we were still effectively imitating a pair of sore thumbs, Xol and I determined that it was time to blend again. Café culture seemed the logical choice, so we ordered a selection of lunch and tried to look as pseudo-Marxist as possible. Xol talked of his much-repressed anxieties about the class struggle and how his Northern roots really brought the dialectic of socialism into his living sphere. I think that's what he was getting at anyway. The geyser at the next table looked Mexican, confused and at us askance. Maybe they don't do café intellectuals in Blois, or maybe all of their ilk are terrorists; either way another *faux pas* for our growing collection.

To help ease Xol's proletarian angst, the obvious move was to see social progress in action. We opted for the chateau de Blois, that former preserve of the aristocracy, which can now be visited even by an ordinary gentleman and his humble man-servant. The chateau lui-même is very fine indeed. It is situated on a high outcrop with a commanding view of the river. We eagerly parted with a few francs and made our way inside.

The rooms of Catherine de Medici were our first port of call. Decorated in a deeply Continental and fussy style, I appreciated the suite more than I liked it. Xol was more interested in appreciating a latter-day C de M, who is doubtless still turning heads all over Europe. I hustled him along to the adjacent area where the famous coup didn't happen. The coup (or not coup) had a fabulously complex plot, involving the Duc de Guise planning to kill the King (Henri III) in his (the King's) bedroom. Only he (Henri) realised what he (Monsieur le Duc) was up to. So he (Henri) got in ahead by assassinating him (Guise) first. On 23rd December 1588, he (Guise) was lured up to his (the King's) rooms where he (Henri) had him (the Duc) slain. So there never was a coup de Blois, which is probably just as well; otherwise the course of the war might have changed dramatically and the French might by now share a land border with Iran.

History does appear to be full of these little set pieces. The fixed-period war is a classic example. We've had the hundred years war, the thirty years war and even the six day war. Perhaps this is the ultimate proof that modern attention spans are woefully short. But on a more serious note, the incalculable suffering inflicted on mankind through any period of war raises serious issues about those who think it would be a good move to decree that there shall now be a war lasting a given period. My stream of consciousness was plunging into deep waters, so Xol dragged me out for a reviving dose of sunshine. It was the right move.

Heading on from the scene of the crime, we descended the spiral staircase built at the behest of one Gaston d'Orleans (who deserves a mention just for the name). We proceeded up to the somewhat eclectic galleries where the pictures all hung rather too close together. We nosed about in the armoury too, admiring the wrought-iron pieces ranging from ornate swords to lever-action candle snuffers. We delved into a modern art exhibition too, presumably there to make the chateau seem relevant, whatever that means. The real joys of the place, however, are the grand marbled courtyard and of course, Catherine de Medici.

We stepped out of the chateau to explore once again.

3.3 Shaken, Not Stirred

The tourist information office in Blowiss was a most perplexing building. Leaflets were laid out on the tables in a mesmerising array of patterns, designed specifically to hypnotise the foreigners into visiting certain historical landmarks. I found my eyes strangely drawn towards a local clock museum. It was a hard fight to resist.

Ian and I selected several leaflets which looked interesting. Merely by chance, they all mentioned alcohol. Quite a striking coincidence, we were forced to agree. Just in case we'd missed anything, we decided to ask at the counter, finding ourselves in a queue behind a group of foreigners. Wherever they were from, these people were speaking English to the lady at the counter, but with a foreign accent.

Somehow I feel a great deal of pride whenever I hear two people from different countries communicating in my own native tongue. For all the complaints people have about maintaining their national heritage, English seems to have made things an awful lot easier for the majority of tourists who simply don't have time to learn a whole multitude of European languages. Ian and I were both lucky, having as our mother tongue the one language which was now used to unite the world, and coincidentally the most bizarre and illogical language of all.

We approached the counter, fully prepared to launch into deep discussion. I asked if the lady could tell us anything about vineyards. Just in case we ever decided to go and find any. Just on the off chance. In the almost negligible probability that we might consider one day perhaps to go near some kind of wine production establishment. Perhaps.

She asked me where I was from. I said 'England', as if it wasn't obvious, but explained that French would be just fine. I needed to practise, and from the sound of the previous conversation, I think she needed a break. Besides, I knew that I would never be lost for words with Ian standing right beside me. Once again, however, his presence was not required. The lady behind the desk spoke just like those strange fictional characters from GCSE French listening exams, whose vocabulary seemed almost magically to mirror one's own, and whose speech flowed along at a refreshingly slow rate, masked occasionally by a passing train or an articulated lorry in the background.

A few minutes later, armed with a sizeable chunk of knowledge about local geography, we left the tourist information office, and headed back towards the car. We had a small map, upon which was a hastily scrawled line in blue biro which passed out through the southern edge of the city, circled round a few times, and then disappeared off towards a place called Cheverny. Apparently, this was the place to be when it came to wine. The lady behind the counter looked like she would be following us in a few minutes, as soon as her shift ended. It must be difficult trying to make oneself understood in several languages simultaneously. I certainly didn't envy her task.

The mad wine chase began in earnest at around 5pm. We returned briefly to the hotel, then jumped back into the car and sped away from the town centre towards the southern quarter and out into the countryside. Just in the manner of a comedy French listening exam, we found ourselves desperately looking out for any signs or road features that corresponded to the jumbled mess of directions that we had managed to translate from our previous guide. It involved a roundabout. That much I knew. After the roundabout there was another roundabout, followed by what looked like a dying goose. I'm not quite sure what that was. No doubt it would be obvious when we got there.

The countryside around Blowiss was picturesque, dotted with vineyards and farm buildings, along with the occasional white transit van. Cheverny, it turned out, was not too far out of town, and we reached it only after a few minutes. I vaguely spotted a sign saying how disgusting something was as we entered the village, but thought little of it. A while later we spotted some arrows with grapes on them and, presuming this to be a good idea, set off down a series of narrow country lanes in order to locate their intended destination. This, we decided, was probably what the lady at the tourist information office was talking about, though there was still no goose, which should probably have aroused our suspicions.

Our mad chase through the countryside left us without any plausible leads. The vineyards were all around us, but they didn't appear to have any sort of entrance or central buildings. In fact, were it not for the sound of a busy road not so far away, we could have sworn that the entire area was completely deserted. It was a ghost country. I half expected to see zombies rising out of the ground, patrolling the fields with sharp scythes. In the name of personal safety, I urged Ian to move onwards as soon as possible.

We drove round Cheverny a couple of times, still not noticing either a goose or, more importantly, a wine tasting invitation. It was then that I mentioned the sign on the way in.

Me: "Well it looks like that sign was right, then."

Ian: "What sign?"

Me: "The one at the entrance to the town. It said it was disgusting, and I quite agree. Terrible state of affairs."

Ian: "Frayn, you incompetent pillock"

How was I to know? Damn faux amis.

We drove swiftly back to the place we had passed half an hour earlier. Sure enough, there in broad daylight, was the sign advertising free wine tasting. We pulled in round the back to be greeted by a loud, and slightly suspicious bang. "That'll be the goose," I thought. "She never said it was armed."

The back entrance to the farm looking as promising as Arnold Schwarzenegger's chances for a "Best Actor" oscar, we swerved round to the front, and pulled up right behind a young couple who had clearly also come for the same reason, infant in tow. Not literally - that would be illegal. We asked them if they minded us joining in. They didn't. All in all they seemed like a fairly friendly pair. In a vineyard, that was probably a selection effect.

Fortunately the husband of the couple had already gone to fetch the bloke who owned the vineyard. That was just as well as I later discovered that I didn't understand his accent at all, and I would probably have deeply insulted him if I'd spoken to him much. He lead us into the dark, dusky wine cellar. This looked on the outside just like a small shed to the side of his house, but it was somewhat of a tardis inside, filled to the ceiling with tens of thousands of bottles of wine. I asked him how many there were and he said something about pigeons. I'm not sure if that was relevant.

The stout, cheery and distinctly wrong-side-of-middle-aged cellar owner waddled over to behind what looked like a small mini-bar. He grabbed a couple of glasses from behind the counter, and a selection of wines. "Here," he said, pointing to a list behind his head, "is the price list. What would you like to try?" I was about to ask for a G&T when Ian stopped me preemptively with a smart jab to the ribs. I fell back, whimpering in the corner, bemoaning the distinct lack of salt & vinegar flavour crisps.

It was one of those occasions when you feel ashamed to be British. Those bottles of wine were only a few pounds each and, though not magnificent, were certainly drinkable. In Britain the only kind of wine you can get for under 3 quid is the type my parents buy. It's quite horrible, and I often wonder if it's just their attempt to force me into being teetotal. I'm sure that, after I leave, they bring out the Chablis Grand Cru and guzzle it down by the vase.

The tasting began. I was new to this, but Ian admitted that he had tried it before. Wine tasting that is, not wine itself. Certainly not. The red was first on the list. It had a very strange taste, slightly watery, but pleasantly light. An ideal accompaniment to a summer's afternoon, we thought. As for the whites, well, we didn't much care for those. Ian mentioned something about goo to the proprietor, which I thought was rather rude, but I politely declined to comment. Instead, I downed another couple of glasses, my vision beginning to blur slightly.

The couple who had come in with us managed to buy enough wine to bathe in, and Ian made a quick witticism about how they would certainly make a lot of friends if they carried on like that. Well - it was something about friends. I can't remember, to be honest. By this stage I was too busy gargling my way through "la Marseillaise". Ian grabbed me roughly by the collar and restrained me in a most formal tone, and I spat out a mouthful of claret over his face.

We bought 4 bottles of plonk and made a run for it, him sober as a judge and me, paradoxically drunk as a lord. It was a good job we were staying in a hotel that night. If we'd returned home the previous night with me blind staggering drunk and Ian dragging me roughly by the arm, our hostess might have gotten entirely the wrong impression.

We returned to Blowiss very pleased with ourselves. This was a momentous occasion. One of the main things that we knew we had to do when in France was a wine tasting, and we'd done it. We also had to visit some chateaux - check - and speak French to people - check - and eat a large number of *croissants* - also check. Our holiday was going well to plan, and this was only day three. Now we could sit back and relax. Tomorrow was Sunday, and we knew that most places would be closed. It would give us an opportunity to sample French at a life slightly more leisurely pace. Provided the patisseries were still open, or else there would be hell to pay.

When we got back to Blowiss, we decided that the time was right for a romantic meal for two on

the town. We headed along the river front, looking for the restaurants that we had passed earlier that day. There were plenty to choose from, but Ian, being the connoisseur of ha(u)te cuisine that he is, decided that we would do best going to an authentic French one. I tended to agree, so we soon found ourselves sitting down on the patio of a large river-front restaurant, perusing a rather excellent menu and choosing from a selection of slightly more pricey wines. We looked for the Cheverny on the list and it wasn't there, suspiciously. Well - it had only cost us ten quid for four bottles. Presumably they kept that in the back for the locals.

We had an excellent meal. I was determined to try something outrageously exotic, which I believe I did, though my memory fails me. I was still a little tipsy from the wine tasting, so just to finish me off we had a bottle of Saumur red, which was absolutely excellent, and Ian even had an aperitif too. I'm pretty sure that he resented the way I was guzzling down free alcohol earlier when he had to remain sober enough to drive. Sucker.

Another fine culinary experience finished, we wandered out around the town and back to our rooms. Ian had warned me that, if I got him drunk, he would start talking about complicated issues of philosophy at me. I say talking 'at' me, for that is a far more accurate expression of what it was like. I dreaded returning to our room that night for the very same reason. Sure enough, we ended up sitting on our respective beds and chatting about a whole range of subjects, especially the European Union, and once again I found my previous complacency ripped to shreds by a determined assault. That night I learnt the problem with having fairly strong opinions about subjects that I didn't really understand. I felt like I was trying to argue the finer points of Catholicism with the Pope. In latin. What chance did I have?

We got to sleep late, determined to have a good lie-in the following morning. We had no firm plans for the day, but we certainly had one or two ideas. We were going to take it easy. Nice and calm. No hectic races across the countryside. No more chateaux.

But we were wrong. So very, very wrong.

Chapter 4

Day 4 : The Agricultural Tour

I don't pretend to understand the Universe -
it's a great deal bigger than I am.
- Thomas Carlyle

4.1 Benedic Domine Nobis et Croissantibus Nostrum

Sunday is traditionally a day of rest, and Ian and I were more than happy to comply on this particular occasion. Actually, in my own personal belief system, every day ending in the letter 'y' is a day of rest. I find myself much calmer when I adhere to these simple rules. A comfortable night's sleep in a hotel bed had done wonders for my temperament, if not my head, for the previous day's excesses were making themselves known at every available opportunity.

I staggered out of bed and wandered over towards the bathroom. To do justice to this magnificent room would take a tome in itself. One thing struck me when I first saw the decor, and that was by far and away its most obvious trait. It was pink. VERY pink. Actually, pink probably isn't the right word for it - it was more of a flesh colour. It brought back memories of me as a small child, desperately trying to draw pictures of my mummy and daddy, yet wondering why they always looked a little odd. It was because I had tried to colour them in pink. Somehow it took me a very long time to realise what the problem was. I was always very right-handed.

We couldn't help but think that perhaps the bloke at reception had housed us in the 'gay' room in the hotel. Perhaps all the other bathrooms were blue, or grey or other similarly masculine colours. Touring with another man, particularly one as classy and rich as Ian, was certainly causing more than our fair share of misunderstanding. Still, we found it entertaining. So far, however, there had been no independent confirmation of my cousin's claim that 'gay men always get followed round by crowds of gorgeous women.' Maybe that only worked in England.

After showering (separately) and dressing for a day's relaxation, we left the hotel room and wandered downstairs, through the luxurious lobby and out into the fresh morning sun. French towns are significantly more quiet on Sundays, and I had forgotten quite how that felt. One thing that had struck us was the number of very Catholic traits that still lived on here. Most villages had a very prominent crucifix standing at their entrance, and several also contained shrines. I began to wonder what would happen in England if anyone tried to erect a 20 foot crucifix in their front garden; it would probably be vandalised within hours. That's if the atheists hadn't filed a court case first.

Fortunately, Ian and I managed to overcome our intense religious objections, and went shopping for some breakfast. As it was Sunday, most of the shops were shut, but we fortunately managed to find the best patisserie in the universe, which sold us a selection of intensely satisfying *pains au chocolat* for a distinctly reasonable price.

We had decided to wander around Blois for the morning, taking in the sights. Fortunately, the town is built mostly up the side of a rather steep hill, affording a particularly beautiful view of the valley below from a number of locations. We wanted to wander up and check out the cathedral, and perhaps try to find a suitable vantage point from which to admire the view whilst tucking in to our delicious breakfast snack.

Blois is full of the most beautiful narrow lanes, winding romantically through the heart of the historic city and joining up the major landmarks in a most exciting and unpredictable manner. We spent quite

some time wandering along them, learning interesting new items of vocabulary, such as “riverain”, and just imagining how intensely amusing the whole place would suddenly become if it were to snow. Judging by the weather we were having towards the end of September, this was looking to be a rather unlikely prospect. We had been exceptionally lucky on the Saturday, and Sunday was shaping up to be another beautiful autumn day.

We found a suitable place to rest in front of the cathedral doors, nibbling on *croissants* and generally enjoying the view. As we sat there, a number of people drove up into the car park and wandered into the cathedral for the morning mass. I felt a slight twitch of guilt, but rapidly squished it with another mouthful of *pain au chocolat*. The problem with sin is that it's so much more enjoyable than being nice to people. Any passer by would probably just think that Ian and I were ignorant of the events going on inside. It reminded me of a question posed on many billboards a few years ago. It asked, “If you were on trial for being a Christian, would you be found guilty?” I think I'd probably have an alibi, if I wanted it. *Sic transit gloria mundi* and all that.

We left the cathedral and began to wander over towards the east side of town. Ian thought that we might get a good view over the river, but sadly he was wrong. Instead, we found series of small roads, and an unnecessarily large wall. We turned back, heading instead over to the west where we had previously seen a rather impressive flight of steps leading from the main street through the city centre, all the way up the side of the hill to the level of the cathedral. At the top of the steps were two rather comfortable looking park benches. We sat down and admired the city, all stretched out beneath us. All of a sudden we had this strange sense of superiority, watching the (sic.) ‘hoi polloi’ milling around below.

Just to kick start the day's controversy, Ian started off a conversation about eugenics. I was too busy watching a bright red balloon drift slowly down the steps to pay much attention. It danced magically downwards, occasionally blown back up by a sharp gust of wind, only to drift back down again. It reminded me of life, in a sense; you wake up each day feeling that little bit older, but every so often you get lifted up so high you feel like a child again. Then the next day you return to the inexorable roll downhill. This weekend, so far, had been a true gust of wind. In fact, it had been more like a hurricane. Ian felt it more than me. I think that's probably because he's not as heavy.

Half way down the steps was a large statue, standing triumphantly upright, facing directly away from both of us and looking over the people below. I wondered who that proud man might have been, staring thoughtfully out over the city. Some leading statesman or philosopher perhaps. Maybe a military hero. Ian suggested he was probably a footballer. Since neither of us could be bothered to go and look, we left it at that, and got back to our controversial discussions.

For quite some time, our suspicions had been aroused about the strange goings on in Blois. There was a substantial overdensity of people wearing suits, wandering in almost completely random directions, and chatting with each other jovially. Perhaps it was a kind of cult. Maybe they were all going to church? Well in that case, why were some walking away from it, and others walking towards? Why were they all wearing absolutely the same clothing? Why were some of them carrying briefcases? It didn't make any sense. Moreover, it was well after 11 o'clock, and rapidly approaching midday. Surely their services would have finished by now?

After several of these groups of half a dozen had passed us by, nattering amongst themselves, Ian and I were beginning to get rather more confused. This latest group consisted of seven or eight men in smart suits, many carrying briefcases or satchels, and I'm pretty sure I overheard one of them calling another “Monsieur le maire.” Was this a high level diplomatic party? Ian and I shrank slightly into our park bench, half expecting these foreigners to start babbling to us in their native tongue. Probably about all those damned English tourists wandering around and taking over their beautiful city. I almost wanted to go up and shake him by the hand, but I imagine my French accent wouldn't have done a great deal for international politics.

As soon as they had left, Ian and I looked at each other with one of those expressions that people normally only use when they narrowly avoided cycling into Stephen Hawking. We returned to our controversial conversation, taking care to check around us for more parties of political dignitaries out for a mid-morning stroll. An elderly couple sat on the other bench next to us, and the wife wandered down the steps to check out the name on the statue below.

“Well that shows us, doesn't it?” I began. “We couldn't be bothered to wander down there and look, but yet this venerable old coot has managed it.”

Ian grinned. “Perhaps she just wanted to get away from her husband.”

I glanced across. “Yeah. That wouldn't surprise me.” It was an amazing feeling, being able to speak

to someone freely about the most offensive things, but yet knowing that nobody around you could understand one word.

"His name's Denis Papin," came a voice from down the steps. "He invented the steam cooker, apparently." Well that was nice to know. I turned to Ian. For some reason, he was shrinking into his coat. "What are you hiding from?" I asked. There was no reply. The old lady began to wander back up the steps. I sat there for a moment, contemplating recent events. The old man dug a guide book out of his jacket pocket. It had a picture of a chateau on the front cover, and the words "Discover the Loire Valley" emblazoned over the top. Still nothing. I glanced down the slope, and then back up again, casually tapping my fingers on the arm of the bench. Five seconds later, I was hiding behind a tree.

Fortunately, the English couple hadn't heard anything that we'd been saying, which was just as well, even though my account of the event was almost entirely fabricated. However, it's always worth considering the worst case scenario on these occasions. I can't remember exactly what we had been talking about, but I'm sure it involved genocide. Perhaps not the best possible start to a conversation.

Ian sat upright again, feigning an uncomfortable smile across to the other side of the steps. "Thanks for the information," he called out. "We thought he was a footballer."

The man turned round to face us. "Oh, sorry I didn't realise you were English," he lied. "Are you on holiday too?"

"Yes. We're just visiting the Loire for a long weekend."

I could see what the woman was thinking. 'Oh how romantic.' She didn't say it, but I knew that was what she thought.

"We've been round a few chateaux," continued Ian. "Very beautiful."

Oh you complete pillock. Now what does she think?

"We're sharing a hotel room in town. We're old friends from University."

"Oh really? Which one?"

Don't do it, Ian. Don't mention the University.

"Cambridge."

Damnit.

"Yes, we both sang in a choir together."

The lady smiled sweetly. "Oh how wonderful."

I could see what she was thinking again. 'Which one is the counter tenor?' I deliberately shifted into my 'Clint Eastwood' voice. You can't get much more masculine than that.

"Yes, Ian's girlfriend is away for the week, so we managed to arrange a short sight-seeing visit."

I think I'd managed successfully to reassert my masculinity. She just thought that I was trying to make an excuse. She looked at me as if to say 'oh don't worry about it, son, we're very broad minded.' I offered an uncomfortable smile.

"We went to Cambridge many years ago, didn't we love?" The woman nudged her husband in the ribs.

"Ye.. yes .. yes we did dear."

"Yes, I remember Cambridge," she continued. "It was very... "

'Camp?' I wondered.

"very pretty," came the continuation. Well, that could have been worse.

"So then," she continued, "have you been to see many chateaux?"

"Just a few," replied Ian, "we haven't really had enough time."

"Well, if you get the opportunity, make sure you see the chateau at Cheverny. It's an absolute gem. We went there yesterday, didn't we love?"

(nudge)

"Oh, yes dear. Lovely, it was."

He actually sounded a lot more genuine than that. It was quite an enthusiastic recommendation.

"Well, we'd best be going," continued the lady. "Nice to have met you."

"Same here," Ian and I chimed in unison. We cringed.

"Hope you enjoy the rest of your stay!" We had a feeling they would, which was ironic, because they were probably thinking the same about us.

As soon as they had dis-appeared out of sight, Ian turned to me and grinned. "So, that's our afternoon sorted out."

"What's that?" I replied.

"Cheverny. I said we should visit at least one more chateau."

“Fair enough. It’s only round the corner.”

“So was the wine tasting yesterday.”

He had a point. Still - he was driving and had the final word. Fortunately, that word was ‘yes’. Well, actually I expect the word was probably “okay”. Knowing Ian, it was probably “OK”, which is more of an acronym than a word, but at least it’s sort of homophonic.

Our discussion continued for a while longer, then we wandered down that long flight of steps towards the road below. All of a sudden, the French townsfolk began to look considerably bigger, reaching up to our shoulders if not higher. It was quite a descent from power, and I was mildly dis-appointed that my apotheosis had not lasted.

We weren’t quite ready for lunch, so decided instead to jump in the car and drive around, find the chateau, and then hopefully find somewhere to eat on the way. Cheverny was a small chateau, and should have been easy to find, we hoped. After the wine tasting fiasco, we really wanted a slightly less hectic drive this afternoon, because it was becoming increasingly apparent that the following day would be somewhat stressful otherwise.

The chateau of Cheverny was well signposted. It nestled beautifully into the centre of a disturbingly stereotypical French village, complete with bars, patisseries and absolutely no large chain stores whatsoever. We parked in the Chateau car park, which had a notice announcing “For Visitors to the Chateau only.” Well, we would be visiting it shortly. We didn’t feel guilty. Besides, Beethoven 4 was playing on the CD. What could go wrong?

A short walk through the village yielded absolutely nowhere to eat whatsoever. A slightly longer walk yielded very little more. We decided to bite the bullet, and go for an extremely long walk, setting up base camp a few hundred yards down the road, and then conducting preliminary scouting expeditions, followed up by full-scale ground assaults into the heart of the village. I say village, but it seemed a little larger than that to us. Worryingly, virtually none of the shops were open.

Just as starvation seemed imminent, one of the huskies smelled a patisserie down the road, and we set off in hot pursuit. I’m not sure why we were in hot pursuit, as it wasn’t moving anywhere. The shop, that is, not the husky. The husky was fictional, or metaphorical or something, so probably wasn’t moving either, except in the emotive sense.

We entered the shop, and a stereotypical French patisserie owner walked through to greet us. We each chose a variety of foodstuffs, and I mistakenly went to pick one up, for which I was cruelly scolded. Apparently that was a faux-pas. Interestingly, English doesn’t have a word for that. Perhaps we’re not quite so anal. Then I remembered that I had arranged my CD collection at home in chronological order of composer, then numerically by opus. Well there goes that explanation, then.

So we gathered together a good supply of lunch materials, and a couple of scraps for the dogs. Marching back up the high street, I tucked into a sausage roll, whilst having a conversation with Ian about earning lots of money. What would we do when he became a millionaire, and I was just a humble gentleman’s gentleman? I hoped he would continue to treat me well, and not tie me to a harness and force me to carry his luggage. Fans of Beckett would be disappointed, no doubt.

We returned to the Chateau and sat outside in the town square, nibbling gingerly on a colourful assortment of foodstuffs. I know for sure that we had at least a couple of strange conversations, but they escape me at the moment. I’m sure the main reason for that is that these lesser memories have since been erased by the events that followed.

We finished our lunch, and set off towards the entrance to this most surprising of chateaux. Cheverny beckoned, and we did not want to disappoint.

4.2 So What Exactly *is* an Orangery?

Cheverny seemed a veritable magnet for all manner of tourists, come to absorb the grandeur and elegance of one of the Loire’s most closely guarded secrets. I let Xol order the tickets, which was probably a mistake, though he eventually managed to stumble through after a bungled attempt to smuggle us both past the barrier on the student tariff. Xol’s simplicity is one of his few charms as a butler, though sadly few recognise this true nature due to the facade of a Cambridge PhD and other trappings of the consummate sophisticate.

So, to Cheverny, a chateau which, unlike said butler, held far more charms inside that one would ever have imagined. Its 17th century grandeur was reassuringly well maintained, despite the occasional asymmetry which grated unpleasantly with Xol’s gratuitously retentive aesthetic sense. Indeed, this

more modest of Chateaux was, until very recently, actually inhabited by a real French family. Consequently, this made it feel more like a home than a castle, with the interior decor dating from the time of Louis XIII and a rich selection of marvellously ornate furnishings displayed in every room.

Xol seemed fascinated by the armaments hanging from the walls, so I allowed him a certain amount of leisure to indulge his martial fantasies. Better those than some of his more lurid but mercifully less documented leanings.

I strolled through a thoughtfully planned route, following painstakingly recreated bed chambers, studies and indeed even a sumptuously decorated lounge with a selection of priceless artifacts believed to date from the masters of the Italian renaissance. Amongst the pieces which caught my attention particularly were the exquisite furnishings including a rather foreboding pendulum clock, which provided a bewildering array of information including the present date and lunar phase (although not obviously the time). I was rejoined here by my butler who seemed as astounded by this marvellous piece as I was. We were distracted by two particularly stunning chests, one of which was made from mahogany, and the other very nearly earned Xol a slap round the face.

The stories which are based around this Chateau are no doubt numerous. One that particularly caught my attention was that of Henri Hurault, one time owner of the estate and notorious bastard par excellence. He was known to lock his wife away in the Chateau for extended periods of time while he was away on state business. One time he returned early to discover the object of his dubious affections in an unfortunately passionate situation with the head stable master. He had the pair of them summarily executed. I'd like to believe that, if I were ever to find myself forced to leave a mistress behind when away on business, I could trust my servants to behave in a more appropriate manner.

Our tour finished, we wandered back out into the sunlight to enjoy the grounds of this marvellous chateau. The moat was now dry, but Xol needed very little inspiration to launch into a wild alloquy about his designs for my future lodgings. A moat, it turns out, is a rather convenient device. It not only allows ample space for healthy recreation, but also can be used to deter unwarranted visits from angry neighbours complaining about the cacophonous outdoor concert season Xol plans to hold in the back garden. My back garden that is...

On further study, the exterior of the chateau revealed a number of mysterious extra windows which didn't appear to correlate with any that we had noticed on the inside. Our suspicions suitably aroused, we began debating the nature of these secret rooms, and the horrors contained within. Somewhere hidden away, behind a false painting and down a cobweb-lined passageway, lay the skeleton of one of Henri's mistresses, having been locked away and promised that he was just 'popping down the road for a quick croque monsieur.'

The orangery was our next port of call. Other than the obvious, we couldn't envisage any particular explanation for this otherwise impressive summer house. Apparently it was now used to entertain richly-financed corporate guests, fresh from their high-flying Sunday morning business meetings. I wondered if there might perhaps be a collection of similar buildings nearby, but we failed to uncover any further evidence of them. Frayn had abruptly left me at this point, meandering into the undergrowth on a quest to collect horse chestnuts for his own nefarious purposes. I went off in search of a lemonery, but was sadly dis-appointed. The applerly proved similarly elusive, leading me to suspect the Loireux French of rank fruitism. That said, the evidence would have left any conviction on this charge distinctly unsafe.

Wandering in one extensive loop round those stately gardens, we began conversing about the possibility of my future home. Frayn had already decided for me that it was to be located in Provence, and was to feature an adjoining vineyard with amply-stocked cellars to match. I found it difficult to disagree with such a suitable proposal, though began to develop suspicions as the plans for an outside swimming pool and adjoining waterfall found their way sneakily into the scheme. By this time I had engaged mental auto-pilot and simply replied with gentle nods and the occasional well-placed affirmation.

Instead, I was enjoying the rather pleasant parkland scenery and undeniable historical ambience of what had turned out to be an exceptionally satisfying day. The afternoon had even become tolerably warm for the enhanced enjoyment and convenience of patrons. How considerate.

Sadly our visit was cut as cruelly short as I was caught. I left Xol muttering to himself about underground bunkers and ballistic missile defence systems, claiming he was off in search of the kiwi-fruiterly. Sometimes it is best to let these people indulge their fantasies, so long as the more disturbingly erotic elements are kept to a minimum. Practical examples of this approach are given throughout this account and could serve as an excellent model for anyone whose otherwise excellent butler displays a disturbing tendency to vice.

Upon my return, Xol was waiting faithfully beside the gift shop, proudly displaying a bewildering

display of citrus fruit to passing tourists. I quickly dragged him to safety, opting instead to return to the car lest the locals became unfriendly.

It was late afternoon, but the sun was still warm and our spirits were high after a culturally beneficial ante meridian. The delightful lady and gentleman of that very morning had provided us with good advice, and we were indeed glad that we had followed it. Cheverny was a gem, a real gem, in every sense of the word. Except of course the literal.

I decided that we should saunter slowly back to Blois, perhaps visiting one further chateau along the way. I could see by the worryingly malevolent expression on Xol's face that he had other ideas.

4.3 Veni, Vidi, Vici

Benny Hill would have been proud of Ian and me this afternoon. We did him justice, I think, in the most comic fashion. We left Cheverny behind at top speed, heading off into the French countryside to begin the Great Agricultural Tour of September 2001. Our goal was to tour the vineyards of the Loire valley in their entirety, arriving back at Blwa by about dinner time. It was currently late afternoon, and we needed to work up an appetite.

Those dreamy roads beckoned onwards. The French government had very kindly provided us with a completely contradictory set of signposts leading in a large ring around this area of the Loire valley, touring the major wine regions one after the other, and then hopefully returning us ceremoniously back where we started, to the west side of our home-town. We set off, the wind in our hair, without a care in the world. This was our time. This was our road trip, and we were damn well going to enjoy it.

After a few miles, we stopped at another small chateau to have a look round, but we had missed the closing time. Pity. It looked like a rather nice one, too. It was the Chateau with perhaps the most amusing name ever invented. The first time I sat down to write this section, I couldn't remember it. "I don't really think it matters," I had written. Ian reminded me. This was the Chateau of Fougères sur Bièvre. That very name alone caused an incessant series of infantile giggling for at least the next half an hour. I can't exactly remember where this place was with respect to all the other landmarks of the area, but what really matters is that it was along the route of the Great Agricultural Tour, to which we returned at top speed.

Some day I'll wander back to Fougères sur Bièvre and hopefully I'll get a chance actually to wander round the Chateau. I hope it's not a disappointment after all that hype.

You know those times when you suddenly have a really funny idea that, at the time seems like the most amusing thing you've ever thought of? You know the ones - the "we absolutely have to do this - it would be so funny" ideas? You don't even need to be drunk, but it normally helps. In this case we were both stone cold sober, but you wouldn't have noticed. Anyway, well it was about now when I had one of those ideas.

Me: "Hey, I've just had the most amazing idea."

Ian: (reluctantly and sceptically) "Yes?"

Me: "Well, you see that field of sunflowers, and that field of grape vines, and that field of ... whatever that stuff is."

Ian: "Yes, what exactly is that?"

Me: "I'm not entirely sure, but there's a field of it there anyway."

Note - I still don't know what it was. It might have been mustard, but I haven't been able to find out exactly what mustard plants look like yet. It could grow on trees for all I know.

Ian: "What was that?"

Me: "Um I think it was an editor's intermission."

Ian: "Oh right. Yeah, where were we?"

Me: "I was about to tell you my amazing idea."

Ian: "Of course. I remember being hardly able to contain my anticipation."

Me: "Well this is it. I propose that we drive round the French countryside and steal one of every type of crop we can find."

Ian: "Why?"

Me: "Dunno. Seemed funny at the time."

Ian: "You're right. Come to think of it is rather witty. I'm up for it."

And that's how it started.

I smiled. My humorous plan was beginning to be put into action. I'd been yearning to do something silly and not-entirely-legal for quite some time, and this was it. Ian had been thinking the same. Working in an office, so I'm told, does that to you. It insulates you from the outside world. You become more and more restricted and closed within your own diminishing universe, gradually severing all ties with reality until your life just becomes a long string of days, punctuated by nights, which was when you sleep, and weekends, which was when you felt guilty for not being at work. I was keen to avoid that, and Ian was keen to get away from it before it got too strong a hold on him.

I snapped out of my daydream as the car pulled over to the side of the road. Ian smiled at me. "Well there you go," he began, "there's the first lot."

I turned round, and noticed that we'd stopped next to a field of sunflowers, all maturing under the warm French sunshine. I stepped out of the car. We were in the middle of a mostly deserted country road. I checked left, then right, then left again. I wasn't even crossing the road. I was about to do something extremely silly. I unpocketed my penknife, opened the largest blade I could find, and made a run for it. I sprinted towards the field, hurdled the ditch, and ran up to the first rank of sunflowers. Nervously, I began to slice away at the thick, green stem. It was mercilessly unyielding.

I looked around furtively. The road was still empty, but there were a few farmhouses in the distance. If there just happened to be a farmer with a pair of binoculars, who just happened to be sober, and also happened to be looking in my direction, then he would certainly have noticed. I severed the last strand of stem, grabbed the sunflower, and sprinted back to the car, swinging open the door, accidentally kicking the CD player, and throwing the sunflower head down in the foot well. "Go! Go! Go!" I yelled, like some sort of lame gangster making a getaway from a particularly nasty bank robbery. Ian calmly put the car into gear, looked in the mirror, and pulled out into the country road, driving away at a modest and law-abiding pace.

My blood was pumping fast. My heart was racing, beating like a drum inside my chest. This was it. The adrenalin was coursing through my veins. I'd not felt like this for years - I was liberated from the conventional shackles of my dull, monotonous life. Ian managed a wry smile. He was enjoying it too. Well I now had a taste for this excitement. "What next?" I wondered. We were approaching some vineyards. We both knew what was going to happen.

I found myself kneeling down a few yards into the side of a vineyard, hacking away at a small bunch of underripe grapes. We were dangerously close to a large farmhouse, and the corner we'd just passed was fairly blind, so any number of high-speed pursuit vehicles could have been following right behind us. The grape stem was even harder than the sunflower plant. Ian yelled at me from the car, "Hurry up Frayn! I have a reputation to uphold, you know." I managed to cut through the last bit of stem, grabbed the bunch of grapes, and ran back to the car. I kicked the CD player again. Ian laughed. "You were right. This is most enjoyable." We drove off again, desperately looking for a field of ... whatever that previous stuff had been. Sadly we didn't find any.

The countryside dis-appeared rather inconsiderately here, dumping us back in a series of quaint little villages. I was tempted to jump out and nick a shrubbery from some old lady's front garden, but my conscience got the better of me. I'm not a criminal after all. Well... I suppose I am, but I'm not a bad one. I mean, there must have been tens of thousands of sunflowers in that field, and it was one field out of dozens. I tried to justify my crime. I looked at Ian, but he was concentrating on the road. The adrenalin was slowly subsiding. I smiled. My conscience was clean. "I really enjoyed that. It's a pity we didn't get any of ... that stuff, whatever it was, but I think we did rather well." I glanced down at our meagre offerings. We weren't exactly Great Train Robbers.

"You know what we should do?" pondered Ian.

I shook my head.

"Well, I reckon we should hold a ceremony."

"What kind of ceremony?" I asked. "A very silly one," he replied.

I concurred.

"Well, what about on the ferry tomorrow?" I suggested. "We could smuggle the sunflower and bunch of grapes onto the ferry, and then ceremoniously chuck them over the side when we're in the middle of the channel."

Ian grinned. "Frayn," he began, "that is one of your best ideas yet."

I like my ideas too. They make for good anecdotes.

We returned to Blwa the long and scenic route, ending up in the western side of the city. The is the side that perhaps let the town down a little. It was the side that we knew to be there, but didn't want it to be. This was the side which, if Blwa had been a person, would have shown that it was really human after all. That doesn't actually make much sense, but I'm sure you get the idea.

We drove round the peripherique for quite a while, eventually filtering back through the old quartier and back towards our hotel. We parked opposite in the possibly-free car park, and stumbled out. We still weren't sure if that car park was indeed free or not. Ian reckoned it was free up to half way, and then you had to pay. None of the people around us had tickets in their windscreens, but then again, none of them had a bag full of stolen agricultural produce either, so we probably couldn't carry out a fair comparison.

We dumped our ill-gotten gains into the hotel room, and then wandered out for dinner. This time, we decided to explore the far-side of the city centre, over towards the chateau. We'd not explored this bit properly the previous day, having gone wine tasting instead if I recall correctly. We decided to do it justice, walking through the back streets and exploring the old precinct, peering through show windows and wandering past the few oases of parkland that we found on our travels.

It was approaching dinner time, and we were beginning to feel the first few twinges of hunger. We spotted an Italian restaurant that looked rather nice, so decided to grab a meal there later on. We had 45 minutes to waste before it opened, so we wandered down to the water front, and sat on a wall, discussing our lives, and our expectations for the future. We had the timeless conversation that people of our age tend to have rather too often whenever they begin feeling old. "What do you think you'll be doing in ten years time?" Ian didn't know. Neither did I. We had to start making predictions for other people instead.

It's odd really. I have absolutely no idea how my life is going to continue over the next few years. I could be doing literally anything by the time I'm thirty-three. Well.. within reason. I suspect that I won't be serving at McDonalds, but then again, you never know. What else can you do with a PhD in Astrophysics? Not a lot, it has to be said.

It was quite a sobering thought, sitting there and checking off all of our college friends one by one. "What about X," I would say. We'd ponder it for a short while. "Married, kids, small detached house in Somerset. Two cats, goldfish, large saloon car plus Renault Clio for the wife. Slightly shaky relationship caused mainly by the fit blonde girl three doors down the road." Our precision was quite astounding. I only wish we'd made a list of our predictions to compare them to the truth. Ten years ago I think I wanted to be a botanist. I wish I'd stayed on that route, then I wouldn't need an excuse for not shaving.

We somehow managed to stray onto the topic of the following day's travel. I hadn't really given it much thought, to be honest. It seemed like such a long time away, and I really didn't want this weekend to end so soon. Our ferry sailed at 4:30pm from near Caen. We had somehow to get there under our own steam, or in a car if that proved faster. I presumed the journey would be a short one, but I'd fallen for the age-old trick of assuming that all countries are exactly the same size. Astronomers' assumptions often get them into trouble. I rapidly began to alter my calculations based on the fact that France was slightly more than 300 miles from top to bottom.

Me: "Well I reckon the journey should take us about 4 hours, right."

Ian: "Have you ever visited the planet Earth, Frayn?"

Me: "Not for a while, sir. Why, what would you estimate?"

Ian: "I'd be surprised if we could make it in under 6."

That was an awful lot of driving. Fortunately Ian didn't mind. Or at least he claimed he didn't mind. He's probably still cursing my name at every available opportunity. I took his thoughts off the subject by suggesting that we went for dinner. He agreed, so we set off uphill, back to the restaurant we had seen earlier. As if by magic, it was now open, and we wandered over to the waiter, asking politely for a table for two. He sat us down on the gay table, complete with scented candles and a floral tablecloth.

It was a difficult decision, but I decided that seafood would be my meal of choice for the day. We ordered our food, and sat down to a pleasant conversation about something suitably relaxing and jovial. After a few minutes, our food arrived and we tucked in. It was delicious. I vaguely overheard a man with an American accent say 'gee' at a table half way across the restaurant. I looked over at Ian and

grinned. "Well no more American jokes tonight, then. Pity - that's at least half my repertoire." Ian nodded. I laughed about how often we'd managed to offend people whilst in France by assuming that they were French when in fact they spoke fluent English, but were just too polite to smack us in the face.

It was at least 10 minutes later when the couple on the table immediately next to us, who had been sat there since shortly after we had arrived, finally started talking to each other in a hushed voice. 'That's odd,' I thought, 'that sounds exactly like an American accent.' Ian was cringing again. I remembered that face from the last time, and knew that something bad had happened. Fortunately I realised before I said something I shouldn't have. We started talking about obscenely intellectual things amongst ourselves, and checked every so often to see if we'd managed to confuse them. They were blatantly listening in to our conversation. Ian mentioned Nietzsche, and the bloke next to us started choking. I grinned evilly.

Ian had been explaining about how society treats all people equal, when it should favour the geniuses as they are the ones who push our understanding and quality of life forward. That was Nietzsche's whole angle on things. He argued that Beethoven was justified in his notorious harshness, simply because he produced some of the greatest works of art ever to grace this planet. It was a particularly bizarre argument, and one with which I had to sympathise to an extent. If Einstein had been a wife beater, would you have put him in prison, knowing that he would never discover relativity? If Newton had been operating a full-scale narcotics empire, would you have let him off the hook, knowing that this was the only way the world would ever be exposed to the Principia? I think I probably would. It's one of those questions that tears your moral beliefs to pieces.

Eventually, we managed to fire up a conversation with the American couple next to us. Apparently they were from Oregon, a state on the west of the United States which was, according to this one man at least, extremely good for fishing. I must admit they did tempt me into early retirement. Very early retirement. This particular couple were currently in the process of cycling round France on a tandem. That impressed me. I think it impressed Ian, too. If we'd tried to cycle around our journey, we'd still be somewhere on the Route Nationale to Lisieux. In fact, we'd probably be sitting by the side of the road pretending to know how to mend a coach.

At this point, the couple one table along joined in. Just to confuse matters, they were Dutch, but had lived in France for many years. Just like most Dutch people, they spoke English better than the majority of English folk, and they were completely trilingual. They were also extremely nice. We had a lengthy discussion about Universities in the countries that we knew about. I even offered to try to converse with her in her native tongue at one point when her French and English both failed her. She started speaking in Dutch, and Ian immediately translated her every word, somehow understanding the Dutch words for 'tributaries' and 'pollution' while I was still trying to parse the first verb. That put me to shame. He's a multi-talented guy, my friend Ian. He never ceases to amaze me.

We left that restaurant decidedly sober. We knew that we would have a long day of driving ahead of us the following day, so we only drank a half-bottle of wine between us, and dawdled off fairly early back to the hotel room, bidding our new friends goodbye, and good journey.

As soon as we got back to our room, we pulled out the maps, and began to plan our route. For some time we were seriously considering taking the autoroute, and paying to travel almost twice as far but at slightly more than twice the speed. Even I could see that this was a certain way to save some time. Ian was extremely pessimistic about our chances for a smooth run through on the back roads, but I was playing the optimism card once again.

We gradually revised our journey time up and up, knowing that we absolutely *had* to make that ferry on time. Eventually we came to the conclusion that we were going to have to rise obscenely early the following morning, and check out by 7:30 am if we were guaranteed to make it on time. I reluctantly agreed. We had no choice.

We got to sleep shortly after midnight, savouring our last night on French soil. Tomorrow we would be speeding back north through the French countryside towards Caen, and within fifteen hours we would be sitting on board a Ferry, named after some strange foreigner that we'd never heard of, talking about our wonderful tour in the past tense. It didn't bear thinking about.

I didn't want to return home to Blighty. I don't think Ian did either, but I suppose he had a job he couldn't afford to miss. I could easily have wrangled a few more days off. The danger was then that I would probably never return. We had become completely besotted with the French way of life, and we didn't want to work another day ever again. Our plans were set in stone. We would definitely return and do this again sometime.

It had been a great day.

Chapter 5

Day 5 : And Did Those Feet

For every person with a spark of genius,
there are a hundred with ignition trouble
- Kurt Hanks

5.1 Early O’Clock

There are certain times of day that should only be approached from one direction. 6:00 am is one of those times. It should only ever be experienced at the end of a long night watching movies, and should never be considered part of the morning. Similar times include 5:30 am, a quarter to seven, and the aptly-named ‘6:15’.

Just what was I doing awake at this stupidly early hour? I couldn’t remember, but my watch alarm had gone off so there was a good chance it was something important. I stumbled out of bed, narrowly avoiding a wall I didn’t have, and then staggered through the hallway into a bathroom that wasn’t my own, and fumbled for a toothbrush which most certainly wasn’t in its usual place. I gradually opened my eyes. My first thought was “That’s strange. I don’t remember my bathroom being quite so pink.” Then it hit me. I was still in France.

This was the beginning of our last day in Blois. It was a Monday morning and I felt terrible. I should have known! With blatant disregard for personal safety, I jumped into the shower, narrowly avoided falling asleep on my feet, and then slipped back out, stumbling towards the hallway once more. Fortunately I remembered to throw a towel on, or else the rest of my morning could have proceeded rather differently.

Ian was vaguely pretending to be asleep. I poked him with a pen and he muttered something about “very attractive,” before rolling over and snoring like a gibbon. If there was one thing that I didn’t need whilst changing, it was the ever-present fear that my room-mate might suddenly wake up and fumble around the room as inelegantly as I had done a few minutes earlier. I poked him again and mentioned *croissants*. That woke him up.

Twenty minutes later, we had both washed and dressed and were looking our usual, ravishing selves. We gathered together our belongings, including the proceeds from the previous day’s agricultural misappropriation, and left our hotel room for the last time, carefully grabbing a handful of the mysterious sweets that kept appearing on our dressing tables each day. I was beginning to wonder if there wasn’t some sort of ‘decay fairy’, the sworn enemy of the ‘tooth fairy’, who left sugary food by your bedside every night just in case you felt a bit peckish. I imagined what she would probably look like. I say ‘she’, but that’s probably only because the first clothing material that sprung to mind was ‘lycra’.

We paid for our hotel rooms. Rather, Ian paid. I had already spent far too much on this holiday, and it was a welcome change for me to pay nothing for once. That was far closer to the true ratio of our pre-tax incomes. I grabbed another handful of those mysterious sweets from the reception area, and then walked out into the street, half surprised to find that, not only were the roads not entirely deserted, but that they were actually rather busy. I began to wonder if France worked on a different time scale to England. I was sure that there were never this many cars on the roads at 7:00am in Cambridge. Then I remembered that I wouldn’t actually know.

One of the greatest achievements of our entire holiday was in out-earlying the French. We managed it that morning, much to our intense dis-approval. None of the patisseries were open for our early-

morning pre-breakfast snack. It was a nightmare situation. We hadn't planned for this. This wasn't supposed to happen. I had the terrible task of telling Ian that we may already have eaten our last freshly-baked *croissant*. He pulled up by the side of the road, engine revving. I jumped in.

"Where's the *croissants*?" he asked.

"Not baked yet," I replied.

There was a short silence, followed by much unpleasant cursing. I had never heard Ian swear before, and were it not for the fact that both this sentence, and the previous one are both utterly false, I would have been shocked to the core. We were both rather hungry, but decided to soldier on regardless.

We set off en-route, or as the French like to call it, "en-route." I didn't think that was particularly imaginative of them, but then again they couldn't be bothered to think of their own word for 'restaurant' either, so I wasn't entirely surprised.

We made the decision to set off towards Caen and attempt to stop on the way in order to get ourselves some breakfast. We were passing through several small villages and quite a few towns, so we knew that there would be something to eat at some point that morning. I sincerely hoped so - I had heard that Ian could become rather obnoxious when hungry, and I didn't want to find out.

It took us quite some time to weave our way out of Blois, passing once more through the part which we didn't really like, and through onto the Route Nationale heading vaguely north towards Alençon. On our route we noticed that we would be driving just past Le Mans. We hoped that this wasn't an omen. We had nine hours to reach the port, and not a second more.

Fortunately for us, the roads were not too busy. Or at least, the first few roads were fairly empty, and we were able to keep near the speed limit without too many exceptions. Unfortunately, the white van tailing us at a dangerously close distance seemed to have other ideas. Yet again, we found ourselves driving through the fog without either a clear indication of our route, or any particular verification that we were indeed where we thought we might be. My map reading didn't help much either.

Fortunately, the first stage of our journey passed without incident. French roads are significantly less congested than English ones. I suppose they have the same number of cars spread out over a distinctly larger land area. Not that you could have known, given the distance the middle-aged man driving the white van behind us was leaving between his front bumper and certain death. If the crash didn't kill him, then Ian certainly would.

Hunger was becoming a significant concern, and a short detour in search of a hypermarché proved fruitless. We decided that the best plan would be to drive through Le Mans and find ourselves a small bread shop. We also needed to top up the fuel tank at some point in the not-too-distant future. Fortunately, we found just the place - a small convenience store on the outside of town beside a road which was almost certain to run past a petrol station at some point. I checked my watch. We had been driving for a little over 90 minutes, and we had travelled almost exactly the distance we predicted in that time. We were running slightly ahead of schedule, which was a very relieving thought.

Slightly less relieving was the thought that went through our minds when we realised that the shop was not open, and would not be opening for another ten minutes. We could see the food inside, but yet it was left tantalisingly out of our grasp. Fate was laughing at us once more. Fortunately, I saw the funny side, as I often do. I think Ian managed to laugh too. I'm not sure what he was thinking about, though.

I'm not sure what was going through the mind of that checkout assistant when Ian and I arrived with a substantial quantity of pre-packaged *pains au chocolat* and *pains au lait*. I guess she assumed we would be launching a counter-offensive against the angry mob of patissiers currently laying siege to the docks at Caen. Either that, or we were just two hungry foreigners on their way home. I handed over the money, and then got out of there as quickly as possible.

I hadn't eaten *pain au lait* for a long time. The last time was when I toured around Europe with two college friends back in 1997. We had practically lived on the things, despite the fact that I was the only person who actually liked them. I'm not sure how the French eat them, but we used them for practically everything. We stuffed them with ham, cheese, jam, chocolate spread. More or less anything we could get our grubby, impoverished hands on, if memory serves. Now I wasn't quite so strapped for cash any more, but nostalgia forced me once again to buy some of those most mysterious of breads. To this day I have no idea what they're made from, except that it obviously involves milk. I thought all bread used milk, but I would never claim to be an expert.

We set off from Le Mans after filling up our tank with fuel once more. As Ian went to pay the attendant, he called over to me that I should turn the lights off. It was brightening up a bit now and

the fog was beginning to lift. I reached over towards the steering wheel. Unfortunately, not having even the slightest idea how to drive a car, I am always a little apprehensive about fiddling with any sort of lever on the driver's side. I think I've probably watched too many James Bond movies, but I always expect there to be a secret ejector seat button or laser cutter that nobody ever told me about. I fumbled around, located the light lever, and turned it until it clicked. Fortunately nothing fell off, detonated or began a short countdown sequence. Ian looked back out of the window of the service area, shaking his head in disgust. He could see that I'd only dimmed the lights. I could see him conversing with the service assistant. I could tell what he was saying. "Don't mind Frayn, he's just a butler."

After leaving Le Mans, we returned to the main roads leading through Alençon towards Caen. Clearly we had just missed an antique car show of sorts as a stream of impressive sportsters trundled by on the other side of the road. I can't remember exactly how many porsches we spotted, but then again in my mental image of the scene we were driving on the left hand side of the road, so I would probably severely distrust the majority of my claims.

The route to Caen was not a long one, or at least I presumed it wasn't because it was quite a short road compared to the size of the entire country. I think I managed to open the map correctly only once or twice in the entirety of our journey through much of north-western France. I am unique as a human being in that my learning curve has a negative gradient. Every time I tried to open the map I was presented with an upside-down version of Marseilles. Each time I then frowned, turned the map through 180 degrees and flipped it over. I was then presented with an inverted map of of Tours, just like the last time. Honestly, lab rats do better than me. Reduced sunflower-seed rations were looming once more on my culinary horizon.

I could see myself back at junior school desperately trying to hammer rectangles through the 'cylinder' hole. I have no idea whatsoever how I managed to get into Cambridge. I don't remember sleeping with anyone.

We came across several other English people on the roads that morning. In fact, many of the people we saw had English number plates. Except for the white vans, that was. They were all French. In fact, I swear they were all driven by the same middle-aged French man and his slightly younger friend. Moreover, they all drove like lunatics. We began to wonder if this wasn't some specific taxi service used solely to transfer young French men from one place to another in the most dangerous manner possible. It seemed slightly inefficient. Maybe there were more of them in the back.

After a very long trek through the French countryside, we eventually arrived at the outskirts of Caen. It was approximately lunchtime, or shortly after. On Ian's suggestion, we began orbiting the city centre on the confusingly labelled peripherique. I had been to Caen several times before, but I had never actually left the city centre. Ian assured me that the largest superstore in Europe was to be found somewhere nearby, and he thought it might have been towards the north of the city. We drove round in a big loop, eventually arriving back almost where we started, next to a very large sign pointing directly away from the city centre, and towards a place that almost defies description.

We completely failed to navigate the car park properly the first time, so decided to drive back out and have another go. This time, we managed to find a convenient parking space near the store entrance, where we sat for a while and nibbled away the remainder of our food from that morning. Eventually we conjured up enough confidence to venture inside, where the most intense shopping experience met our eyes.

Those who know me will be aware of my intense distrust of alcoholic beverages. Before my eyes was an array of wine that would have tested even the most fervent teetotaler. I had no chance. The wine was speaking to me. "Buy meeeee!" it said. I couldn't resist. I quickly grabbed a bottle of red from the shelves and stuffed it into the shopping trolley that Ian had somehow managed to conjure out of thin air before my very eyes.

Together we almost cleaned out that supermarket. We moved from wine to whisky, then on towards the cheeses. We stopped to grab some junk food for lunch, together with a wide selection of sweets and chocolate for those we left at home. Ian bought an expensive bottle of wine in order to placate his boss when he got back to the office rather late. We also bought a few fruit, just to keep our consciences ticking over.

We loaded all our purchases back into the car, and Ian finally remembered to write the postcard that we had bought all the way back in Chambord. I can't remember what we put in it, but I seem to remember finding it very amusing at the time. I was tired. Ian was probably significantly more tired, but he wasn't complaining quite so much about it.

We left Caen at 2 o'clock, setting off on the last leg of our long trek to the port. This final stretch

was only thirty minutes long, and then we would arrive back at the ferry with quite some time to spare. However, we were glad that we'd left a fair safety margin on our calculations as we'd luckily been able to have a slightly more relaxing drive across the country. We rolled up to the docks with an hour to spare before we had to check in. Our great journey was over. We had arrived back where we started from just three and a half days earlier.

Ian turned to me with a wry smile on his face.

"How about a trip to the seaside, Frayn?" he asked.

"I should imagine that would be a wonderful idea, sir," I replied.

So that's exactly what we did.

5.2 In Deep Waters

Frayn evidently needed no second bidding to take a trip to the seaside. His enthusiasm alone was nearly enough to start the car again. We cruised along the coast through a variety of villages of D-day fame, such as the splendidly-named Lion-sur-Mer. When the scent of the sea became too strong to resist, we dropped off the trusty motor and descended hell-for leather onto the shingle. Literally thousands of neat round stones presented themselves.

The ensuing all-England stone skipping and rock skipping championship was a non-competitive affair as dictated by the ultimate arbiter, la Manche herself. No matter how hard one tries, if a wave catches the stone then it doesn't bounce far. And trying to arbitrate by number of bounces is hopeless since the stone just planes along the surface in the final stage before its inevitable descent. Nevertheless there is something intriguingly, even fascinatingly, primal in man's ability to make a rock bounce on water. It defies immediate sense. It satisfies the desire to overcome, to beat nature as our ancestors did when they made tools from stone and slew mighty mammoths with fire. Skimming stones is less practically beneficial, but the timeless fascination of this art is surely rooted in man's desire for dominance over the world which cradles his kind.

Xol and I cannot really have spent so very long there. But it felt like hours, and seemed that we had deposited a large part of Normandy into the channel in the interim. Since there has been little public call to re-map the French coast, we must assume that this latter impression was erroneous. Reluctantly, we clambered back up to the car and made once more for Ouistreham, the ferry, and England.

Before home could be delivered unto us, France still held one mean trick up those dastardly sleeves of hers. Back on the quayside, the Rover which had guided us flawlessly these past two thousand miles, refused to start. Maybe it was a protest. Perhaps the poor car had no desire to face the English winter ahead, and had hoped instead to see the Riviera, Cannes, or perhaps the Alps. Whatever the reason, we had a problem. No start, no allowed on ferry, no get home, no make it to work tomorrow, him boss no happy, him job shaky, no money for rent, no home. A slight over-dramatisation you might well think, but the trepidation as we sat in the stricken vehicle was excusable.

I patiently allowed two minutes to pass before trying once more.

Would it, wouldn't it? I turned the key. Silence, a cough then ... Rarely has the merry hum of internal-combustion engine on tarmac been such music to the ears. Frayn looked faintly relieved, the couple in the adjacent car looked highly amused and I, for my part, looked to the sky in what passed for reverent gratitude.

On board the ship, Xol and I made directly for the deck and sat in the sunshine. It was rather chilly sunshine, in the rapidly waning afternoon of late September, but the scene was too beautiful to miss and we stayed out there with our weak old economist (that would be a week-old Economist - ed) as the only source of entertainment.

I should perhaps retract the word 'only' from there. Because one of the joys of being on holiday with Xol is that there is rarely a dull moment. Between the two of us, we had more than enough unlikely tales remaining to get yet another of our crazy debates going. This time, we made a random wander over a great armful of subjects from terrorism to job-interview tactics. Xol went bin Laden-lookalike spotting en route to the toilet: He returned with no suspects and no decent pictures. Furthermore, he still doesn't have a job so clearly any advice I gave on that subject was of no merit either.

Some hours into our crossing, one final event took place which summed up something of our sejour. We decided it was time for a solemn commemoration to pay tribute to the freedom of an Englishman and his personal gentleman's gentleman to be at loose in the world. To pay tribute to England. To pay tribute to France. And most particularly, to pay tribute to the great generosity of the farmers of

the Loire valley. For it was they who had provided the sacrifices for this, the one and only Agricultural Ceremony.

With some considerable pomp, and a sizeable crowd of baffled onlookers, the choice items - picked just days before - were cast one by one onto the incomprehending yet untroubled waters of the English channel. A great cheer and applause followed the casting of our final commemorative produce. We watched with tears in our eyes as the sea foamed and lashed, and the head of our sunflower disappeared from view. It was that kind of moment.

The sun set, and darkness gradually fell, taking the temperature with it. Very shortly we were back within sight of our own island. We made tracks for the indoors, aiming to make landfall as soon as possible.

5.3 Alle Menschen werden Brüder?

One of the few things I remembered about the outward Ferry journey from Portsmouth to France just four days earlier, was the immense feeling of anticipation and excitement. There was also a certain amount of trepidation due to our complete lack of organisational competence in the weeks preceding our departure. This journey was different. We were coming home, and I was beginning to feel distinctly nonchalant.

With the excitement of the previous few days firmly behind us, the last stage of our trip was just a formality. Barring any serious maritime disaster, that was. I looked out over the ocean briefly, half hoping to see the lights of an approaching warship, or a giant tentacle poking out of the waves, but fate had spared us such a comic ending to our tale. Just a few miles away were the lights of Portsmouth docks, looming ominously out of the late-evening mist. As far as I could see, nothing was on fire, and there was not the least bit of civil unrest. Pity. I drummed my fingers on the railings before disappearing back inside and down to the door which led to our car park I failed to spot any terrorists, and there were no pools of blood on the floor, much to my great displeasure.

We pulled in to the docks some time after 10pm, local time. It had been a long day so far, and we weren't home yet. We knew that we wouldn't be back in time for the last train into London, so we decided to stay overnight at Ian's parents' house instead. A voice over the intercom announced that we could now return to our cars, so we joined the queue and filtered into the vehicle deck, managing to locate our trusty carriage from amongst a menagerie of motors in a paradoxically ungallic variety of reds, whites and blues.

As we stepped into the car, we both knew what was about to happen. The last time we had used this car, the engine had cut out and failed to restart. Ian thought that it might have been the extra power taken by the CD player. I personally thought that it might have been Ian, but I kept quiet. We sat, musicless, for several moments before it was our turn to drive off. Fortunately we were up a ramp, so at least we had a certain gravity-assist in our descent. Crossing our fingers, Ian turned the key in the ignition, and the trusty old motor roared to life. I turned to him and smiled. He ignored me, instead concentrating on the rather lame mime artist dressed as some kind of naval official in front of us. I think he was trying to swat a fly or something. Either that or I was very tired.

We passed through customs for one last time, yet again glad to avoid arousing too much suspicion. "Anything to declare?" asked the man behind the counter. "Nothing but my butler," replied Ian, in an almost Wilde-like display of wit. We pressed 'play' on the CD player and screeched off away from the port, out onto what would have been a Route Nationale if we were still in France. Which, sadly, we weren't.

It was at this point that Ian admitted he was far more happy with driving on the continent. "The thing is," he began, "I hardly ever drive on the left hand side of the road any more." 'That's a bit careless,' I thought. 'Imagine all the accidents he must cause.' Apparently that's not what he meant.

The journey back to Newbury was not a lengthy one; perhaps a little under an hour. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was distinctly over an hour. We knew that we were going to have to skip bits, unless we wanted to stop somewhere on the way back. We had a splendid image of driving back through Ian's parents' tiny village with Schiller's great ode bellowing out at full volume, triumphantly announcing our return.

I was wide awake again. I'm not entirely sure why, except that we were almost at the end of our journey, and by one of the greatest miracles ever known to humankind, we had emerged entirely

unscathed. At least in the physical sense. Perhaps the shock of that statistically unlikely scenario had awoken my brain from its temporary slumber. The first movement reached a particularly momentous cadence, ending rather loudly and melodramatically. The second movement soon took over. We had only forty minutes left before we arrived back at Ian's parents' house, and I was pretty sure we were going to arrive too early.

We didn't really speak much on the journey home. Neither of us really had anything to say that we hadn't already spoken about over the previous few days. Besides, Ian was tired and I didn't want to distract him from his almost mechanical fixation with the road ahead. I began to look around. A few hundred yards behind us was a large, grey lorry, and rapidly passing us on the other side was a blue van. Something was missing, but I couldn't quite put my finger on exactly what it was.

Just as the jovial second movement began to draw to a close, we found ourselves driving along an almost deserted section of A-road, still saying nothing, but both of us clearly pondering the events of the previous few days. I had a feeling that nothing would really seem quite the same ever again. I certainly couldn't ever look at Ian in the same way since the discussion we had the previous night. I'll leave that one up to the reader's imagination.

I spent some time thinking about what we had learnt over the past few days, both about each other and about ourselves. I had learnt that I can't really speak French very well any more. I'd also learnt how much fun it was to be subservient if only one takes the opportunity also to be impertinent once in a while. I think Ian had learnt quite a lot about himself too, most notably that he didn't want to be stuck in an office for the rest of his life. He claims that he'd pretty much decided on that some time ago, but it was obvious that he was beginning to be swayed by the imminent promise of a ludicrous salary and a job which actually made him feel wanted. With a philosophy degree, I gather that's quite a rarity.

"We're almost there," Ian began, just as the third movement finished and the glorious fourth movement began with its exposition of the theme which would, in just a few minutes' time, be announcing our return. Soon we would find ourselves once more in the place where we first stepped into this trusty vehicle, which had served us so incredibly well over the course of our journey and at least a thousand miles of French countryside. "I think we'd better leave her with a full tank of petrol," he continued, thoughtfully.

Ian knew of a little petrol station just outside his parents' village. It was only a couple of minutes' detour, and soon we found ourselves pulling up in the deserted forecourt, the fourth movement beginning to reach a distinctly climactic fortissimo. We were going to have to skip the rest of this movement if we wanted to finish the entire work on time. Ian was busy filling up the tank, and then he wandered off to the kiosk, handing over one of his shiny credit cards, signing a receipt and wandering back to the car, pleased with himself and his impeccable moral standards.

"Right," he chirped, "let's get home." He turned the key in the ignition. The engine chugged for a while then fell dead. We looked at each other with expressions that said "Oh pleeeeeease... not again!". He turned the key once more. Same problem. We turned off the CD player just as the woodwind were beginning a particularly confusing staccato section. We sat there in the petrol station, just waiting. This really wasn't the kind of ending that we wanted to our great journey round France. We had visions of being towed the few miles back home, tired and disappointed. We waited twenty seconds and then tried again.

This time the ignition worked, and we were in business once more. We both gave a collective sigh of relief, deciding to leave the CD player off for a minute or so while Ian made sure the engine was working properly. Then we set off towards the last leg of our journey. Ten minutes away was Ian's parents' house. I pressed play for the final movement of the great symphony, and we sat back as the fantastic dissonance of the opening chord broke the stillness of the night. Then there was a lone baritone voice, beginning the immortal words;

"O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!"

This was it. This was our journey home. We felt like we'd just emerged from a Hollywood spectacular, the broken remains of a giant alien death-machine smouldering in the background.

"Sondern laßt uns angenehmere
anstimmen, und freudenvollere."

Crowds of cheering Americans lined the streets, flags held at arm's length, ticker tape falling from on high. The chorus joined in, and we smiled, knowing that this was to be our homecoming anthem. The soloists returned;

“Wem der große Wurf gelungen,
Eines Freundes Freund zu sein,”

That was what it was really about. “He who has the great fortune to be friend to a friend.” Schiller had it right; that really was a great fortune. Despite our differences, we'd managed to spend almost four entire days together with virtually no other company, but yet had remained relatively amicable.

We pulled into the road which lead towards Ian's parents' house. With immaculate timing, the reprise of the great chorus began, and Ian and I joined in, singing without a care in the world. We were a few hundred yards from home and this was the denouement, the ending, call it what you will. We liked to call it the finale.

“Freude, schöner Götterfunken
Tochter aus Elysium,
Wir betreten feuer-trunken,
Himmlische, dein Heiligtum!”

Well, I'm not sure if we were drunk with fire, but the sentiment was there. I'm sure a casual observer would have attributed our behaviour to a certain amount of alcoholic intoxication. We drove through the narrow lanes, and finally back through the gate into the drive which marked the end of our journey. The final dramatic moments were playing out.

“Such' ihn über'm Sternenzelt!
Über Sternen muß er wohnen.”

We turned off the engine, and just sat there as the music drew to a close. The brass became louder and louder, the strings played ferociously and I could almost see Karajan jumping around like a madman at the front. Then finally, with one last momentous chord, all was silent. We sat for a few moments, not saying a word. Neither of us wanted to end the experience.

Then Ian spoke.

“Shall we go inside, Frayn?”

“I think perhaps we should, sir.”

Ian's mother had arrived to greet us, and we both thanked her profusely for the kind loan of her car. She was eager to hear of our exploits, and we were eager to tell. First, however, we unloaded all the various bits and pieces from the car and carted them into the porch.

A bed had been kindly prepared for me for that night. Ian and I were to leave early the following morning and catch the first sensible train into London. Sadly we had to use Ian's definition of 'sensible', not mine. It was probably at this point that I suddenly realised that we would have to carry the majority of our accumulated junk through the underground system. We hadn't really thought about that.

Of course, after going to all the hassle of buying camera batteries in Chartres, we never got round to taking any photos whatsoever. We told Ian's parents that they would just have to take our word for what happened.

“Don't worry,” I added, “there'll be a book about it before too long.”

“And how are we supposed to believe that if you don't have any evidence?” Ian's father asked.

“Oh I should think it will all sound pretty plausible,” I lied.

We left the lounge and wandered upstairs, where I sat talking to Ian for a few minutes before we both departed to our individual rooms.

“If we're going to give a copy of this book to our parents, you'd better not mention the conversation we had last night, Xol,” Ian suggested, out of character.

“Oh don't worry about that, sir,” I replied, “I won't mention a word of it.”

Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction.

Fortunately for us, we had both.

Chapter 6

Epilogue

Get your facts first,
and then you can distort them as much as you please
- Mark Twain

I woke up gently, as if from a particularly strange dream. Often, dreams blend into reality, and vice versa, in a most confusing fashion. For the second day running I found myself in a strange place, and I wasn't entirely sure where that was. On the floor beside me was my trusty backpack, and lying next to that was an unopened bottle of red wine, Domaine de Cheverny. Suddenly a rush of strangely vivid images filled my mind. We'd actually done this ridiculous tour and lived to tell the tale. Not only had nothing gone spectacularly wrong, but on the contrary, most things had actually gone outstandingly well.

I showered, then stumbled downstairs to eat breakfast with Ian's parents. Together we watched the squirrels frolicking about on the lawn, eagerly gathering their winter rations. Ian fell downstairs shortly after, not looking particularly like the kind of man who regularly rose before eight in the morning to work in a high-powered city job.

We had to catch an early train into London that morning. Ian needed to get to work as soon as possible, and I had somehow to trek back to Cambridge carrying enough booze to start a small off-licence. It was going to be a hectic day, and probably a rather difficult one too. Some people claim that the best way to preserve a great set of memories is just to get back to your daily routine, and not to dwell on them. Having said that, it's always hard just to return to work, sitting in front of a computer screen eight hours a day, without the occasional daydream.

We were given a lift to the station in Newbury by Ian's mother, in the very same car which had just carted us all the way round the Loire valley just a couple of days previously. It seemed strange not to have Ian in the driver's seat. It also seemed strange to be driving on the left hand side of the road, and not to have to fear for our lives at every major junction. England still had one or two things going for it.

We jumped out at the station, and joined the crowd on Platform 2 waiting for the 8 and a bit service to London Paddington. All of a sudden we were there, back in the midst of it. All around us were businessmen, parents with their children, lawyers, doctors, dentists. Ian and I were carrying heavily laden backpacks, full to the brim with alcohol and cheese. We got a few strange looks. Ian returned a few of them, just out of politeness.

I almost felt above those other people. Looking back on it, I'm ashamed to say that. I looked around myself, wondering why nobody seemed in the least bit interested in the monumental voyage from which we'd just returned. Then I thought about it a little bit more. How would they know what we've been doing? How would any of those people have the slightest idea about the Great Agricultural Tour, or the late-night philosophy conversations over a bottle of red wine? How would they know about Chambord and Blois? How could I expect them to appreciate the humour of Fougères sur Bièvre? I chuckled at that last one. They couldn't possibly have even the slightest idea. To them, I was just another weirdo whom they could quietly observe out of the corner of an eye whilst pretending to read the Financial Times.

I began to let my mind wonder. On an ordinary day, and if I didn't know considerably better, I might well have passed Ian on the streets of London and not batted an eyelid. I wouldn't even be able to guess that this man had just returned from an almost legendary journey of exploration. I began to

think a bit more carefully. I wondered what stories these people around me had to tell. I wondered what strange and exotic lands they'd visited in their times. I wondered if they had ever contemplated the concept of truth. I know I had.

The train chugged into the station, laden with passengers. Clearly someone had released a pack of rabid dogs into the First Class compartment, because it was completely empty. The second class compartment, however, was considerably more highly populated. We were lucky to find a seat, dumping our backpacks unceremoniously on the floor and our various bags of wine on the seats beside us. The train left Newbury, and began its slow return journey to the Capital, thrusting us back once more into the world of high-tech commuter villages and large cuboid office buildings. Someone, somewhere actually gets paid to design those things. Enormous rectangular prisms painted red. Now that's not much of a job. Even I could do that. I wondered if they charged extra for windows.

CEO: Right, we want a large warehouse for our new supply depot.

Architect: Certainly sir. I was thinking of a neo-classical approach, utilising an array of Corinthian pillars adorned with acanthus leaves and...

CEO: Erm... actually no. We just wanted a large red box with doors on.

Architect: Oh. Okay.

When on a train, it is all too easy just to find yourself staring out of the window, gazing thoughtfully towards the horizon. As more and more people piled into the train over the course of the next few stops, I found myself chatting less and less to Ian, and more and more perusing the countryside as it passed by my little world at a ludicrously pedestrian speed. These other people didn't want to hear our conversations about farcical journeys through foreign countries. They just wanted to remain in their own little worlds, contemplating their lives and planning out their hectic work schedules.

Maybe that's why mobile phones annoy me so intensely. All of a sudden you find yourself thrust involuntarily into someone else's world, and it's difficult to cope. We try to ignore other people as much as possible and focus on ourselves, in general. It's a basic human trait. We see a lot of things on TV and ignore them, so long as they're always someone else's life. All of a sudden, here is someone else's life becoming part of your own. I find it enormously challenging. Other people actually exist! They have lives and thoughts which don't involve you in the slightest. The sheer scale of it is truly mesmerising.

London arrived a little later than usual. We had been forced to wait for twenty minutes next to a large industrial estate with very little explanation as to what was going on. I wondered if perhaps there had been another terrorist attack. I'm not sure what Ian was thinking, but I'd be surprised if it didn't cross his mind. Fortunately, it was just leaves on the line or the wrong kind of oxygen or something. I can't remember the excuse, and to be honest I'm sure the driver just made it up on the spot. Typical British Rail.

Paddington was still very much how we left it. I'm not sure why I expected it to have changed, but I was glad that it hadn't. It was nice to know that the world could get on just fine without me. We wandered along the platform, across the headlines, through the cryptic crossword, and down into the underground station. We had narrowly missed one train, which was just beginning to pull out of the station as we arrive. A few days earlier I probably would have sprinted for that, but now it didn't seem to matter quite so much. It was clear that the trip had relaxed us both. Obviously that was much harder in my case as I was such an idle git to begin with.

We pulled away on the underground train, passing through a variety of stations before I had to jump out. King's Cross was, for me, the end of the line. Quite literally. We had a short moment to wave goodbye, and I shook Ian fiercely by the hand before stepping off the train and onto the platform. He was heading home to change into a suit, ready for work. I had to catch a train back to Cambridge. After almost 5 days together, we finally parted ways, vowing to meet up again in the near future, and perhaps to write up our exploits into some kind of cheap, witless book.

I set off up the escalators to the mainline station above. I had no idea when the next train to Cambridge was leaving, and I didn't really care. In the immortal words of the John Barry song, I had all the time in the world. I could almost hear Louis Armstrong's gravelly voice from behind the overlying hum of a thousand stressed commuters. It was most comforting.

I didn't have to wait for long at King's Cross, managing to jump almost straight into a train leaving on a non-stop journey to Cambridge, my final port of call. I'd done this part of the journey dozens of times before, and I was now on autopilot. I sat back and thought of France, and the many amusing

anecdotes that I would soon be able to tell. I found myself grinning widely as I recalled the various ludicrous things that had happened to me over the past 5 days. Several people had begun to stare at me, and I pretended not to notice whilst hiding my large stash of alcohol out of the way of the aisle. I started humming to myself. For once, I was the drunk Scotsman, and I was beginning to see the attraction of it all.

I think the great France tour of 2001 left only two unanswered questions. They were;

- (1) Was it worth it?
- (2) Will there be another tour?

I can confirm that the answer to at least one of these questions is “yes.” I’m afraid that I’m going to leave this epilogue, just like many things during our tour, with a certain amount of unresolved ambiguity.

I’d like to think of myself in fifty years’ time, dressed in black tie, striding through the front lobby of Ian’s luxurious fifteen-bedroomed mansion in Provence. He would be sat there in his reading chair in front of the fire, leafing through the Financial Times and sipping delicately at a glass of amontillado. “Ahhh, Frayn,” he would begin. “Take a seat! Rest your legs for a while.”

I’d oblige, settling down in a comfortable reclining armchair. The fire would crackle away gently in the background, occasionally flaring slightly as a fresh chunk of wood settled down on to the glowing embers. Ian would speak again, “Do you remember being twenty-three, Frayn?”

I would nod. “Yes, I believe I do, sir. Why do you ask?”

“Well,” he would continue, trailing temporarily off onto his own thoughts, before returning back with a wry smile.

“Do you remember that holiday we took in France? The one where we went round all those Chateaux listening to Beethoven?”

“Yes, sir. Yes, I remember it fondly.”

I would lose myself for a moment as a fleeting memory, sadly faded over the years, resurfaced for a brief glimpse before disappearing once more into the inky depths of my mind.

“Did we ever take any photographs from that trip, Frayn?”

“No, I don’t believe we did, Sir.”

“Oh, right.”

Ian would sound a little dis-appointed. A brief silence would descend, broken only by the occasional crackling of pine-sap in the fireplace, and the quiet chirping of the cicadas outside. Another fleeting memory would suddenly return. Vivid, clear like the day I first thought it.

“I think we wrote a book about it, didn’t we Sir?”

Ian would frown intensely, trying to remember back into his long, distant past. After a few moments his eyes would widen, and a warm smile would appear, followed by a low chuckle, barely audible.

“Yes, Frayn. I think you might be right.”

And then we’d dig out the book, somewhere under a pile of manuscripts, screenplays, papers and photo albums. There it would lie, lovingly placed at the bottom of a box of curiosities in the corner of the attic. We would dust it off, carry it downstairs and begin reading. And a whole host of magical memories would suddenly return, as if the breath of life were flowing through them once more.

And we would sit there for several hours, browsing through the tattered old pages, laughing at our ludicrous exploits, cringing at the bad puns and cackling like small children at “Fougères sur Bièvre”.

And for just a short while we would be transported back there, living the experience all over again, jealous of our younger selves. Glad that we had decided to record our journey for posterity. Above all, we would be proud that we had taken the time out of our hectic lives not only to go *partout le magasin*, but to do it with style.

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