



GARE DU NORD

*God knows what I'm doing here today
cold and lonely in this place
crowds all rushing around me
I'm just another face
confused by all these foreign locations
the Gauloises and garlic make me heave
can't understand the conversations
but I'm strangely reluctant to leave
Paris - Gare du Nord
oh Paris - Gare du Nord*

Arthur's impromptu triumph had taken the sting out of his hostility, but didn't quite sober him up. However, after plenty of strong coffee, and once he'd acknowledged his new admirers with coy smiles and thanks, we went outside and sat by the river. Rather than try and explain my many worries, I'd brought along Jack's email to confront him with; but first, and in consideration of recent behaviour, I asked him why he'd come here asking for help in any case. Surely, I suggested, he must have realised shit would fly and most of it land squarely on his own leery mug? Not so funny, eh?

On this obvious point he was reluctant to respond until Lester, up till now a paragon of quiet dignity, dug Arthur in the ribs and told him in broad Geordie, 'Howay man. Get on wae eet y'old mazer.'

Arthur scowled but just said, 'Kate told me to.'

'Stottie Kate?' I was flabbergasted. 'The café woman? What's she got to do with it?'

'Hey man - do I really have to?' He looked across at both of us pleadingly. 'Okay, if it'll get you off my back - here it is, from the off. My life. I was born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts, but my ma died when I was seven. So, for the next few years Dad took me to live with him. That was cool, at first. Always moving. Seeing the world and all that? He was a civil engineer - worked on construction sites - never stayed in one place long. But after a while it became a drag. The old man was always busy - hardly ever showed up, for me anyway. Eventually, when I was eleven, he met this other woman and...well, I guess I was in their way. You know?' He looked at me as if I might understand. As it happened, I did. 'So, I was sent packing off to the UK, to stay with my old nanny.'

'Yeah?'

'She lived down your way then.'

'What? Surrey?'

'Not far off.'

'I see,' I said - though I didn't. Why had he been so mysterious before?

'Well, Kate - Auntie Kate, I called her - she more or less brought me up and...'

'You mean; Stottie Kate lived just round the corner when I was a kid?'

Ignoring this last question he went on. 'She was good to me man. Better than my real folks - useless jerks.'

'That's all very touching,' I said. 'And I don't know if I believe a word of it.' But, I thought for a moment, what about the many other unanswered questions?

- The money he'd supposedly ripped off his ex-wife?
- And the wads he now seemed keen to part with?
- Not to mention how he'd escaped certain death in an industrial mincing machine?
- And what had all this to do with me?

- And, the biggest question - what was he really after?

As a starter, I handed him a copy of Jack's email. Never one to live up to expectations Arthur did not break into laughter upon unfolding the sheet; slowly scanning the words, he just quietly wept. To be honest, at least at first, it was me who nearly laughed. But, as he finished reading and stared blankly into the distance, somewhere over the Tyne Bridge and beyond the old castle to St James' Park stadium, I could see just how difficult this was for him.

'Just tell us the truth,' I said.

'The truth!' he began. 'Ah! The truth, the truth, the truth - tis a slippery customer. Facts are one thing, but...'

'Coom on!' said Lester. 'Stop ya blather, will you? The man needs ta nar.'

'All right - but you know what they say: The truth is like a rabbit in a bramble patch. You can circle around it. Point at it - say it's in there somewhere - that's all...' ⁽¹⁾

'Coom on,' snapped Lester. 'We have na got all fookin day.'

'What I'd like...' smiled Arthur, speaking slowly, '...is for Susan to tell you herself. But...' He held up a hand against any protest, 'I know that won't be easy.'

'You're not kidding,' I interrupted. 'She lives four hundred odd miles away, on the other side of the bloody country.'

'I'm coming to that - don't worry,' said Arthur. 'As I was about to tell you; the night of the accident - you know, in Leicester? She was with me.' He went quiet and said softly, 'Ah, what an angel.'

'Obviously,' I remarked. 'Putting up with you for any time would crack up a saint.'

'Yeah well...' he sighed. 'She was driving - got distracted and smashed into this factory wall.'

'All her fault then?'

'To be fair - no. I was pissing around, you know? Anyway, she was knocked unconscious but I was more-or-less okay. A lucky drunk move I guess - relaxed like - just a few cuts and grazes. So I got out and went looking for help. I must have wandered into the factory, through the hole we knocked in. It was late - very dark - and, as I said...'

'You were well out of it?'

'Yup! But not so out of it I couldn't see the possibilities - you know? For solving all my problems in one far out moment?'

'To jump into the mincing machine and end it all?'

'Don't be a mug - I wasn't that stoned. Nah! I took off my bloody gear and dumped it all in this giant vat and pissed off - left my cap as a memento. Oh, and the genius bit - I'd smashed a tooth in the crash, so I waggled it out and shoved it in a pie. Forensics would need something to go on.'

'Smart move,' I said. 'You might almost have planned it.'

'Nah!' laughed Arthur. 'Never planned a thing in my life.'

'So why was Susan such an angel? I thought maybe she'd saved your life. Pulled you from the brink of pie heaven - just as you were about to leap in and call it a day?'

Arthur's old smirk returned and he was soon guffawing. Even Lester started looking more like he'd been supping on a pint of ale rather than a bag of lemons for a change. It was an odd relationship the two of them had, now I came to think about it - sometimes quite formal and at others over familiar - was there more to it than met the eye? Just as Stottie Kate had a secret, could Lester have one too? Maybe he was really Arthur's love child? It was an unsettling thought - best left for now.

'No, Susan's angelic qualities came to the fore afterwards - aiding and abetting a felon, you might say.'

‘But why? From what I heard...’ I indicated the email, ‘She didn’t owe you much - anything in fact. Indeed, had good reason to shove you in the mincer - not help you out.’

‘Yes, my boy. The ways of a woman are indeed strange. But maybe...’ he went all coy. ‘It was that old four letter word you strummers are always banging on about.’

‘Love?’

‘Hell no! Cash! If I remained on the loose, or worse, went back inside again - she might never get a cent back. And also...’

‘That’s very cynical if you don’t mind me saying.’

‘You don’t know Sue like I do.’

‘So...?’ I was struggling to understand all this. ‘Can we get to the point - where’d you go after the pile up?’

‘Back home, where nobody knows my name.’

‘London? Kingston? Newcastle? Swanage? Where? Grimsby?’ I laughed. It occurred to me that the port of Grimsby was not far from Kingston upon Hull. Maybe that connection was where he’d picked up the name from - assuming it was an alias, which seemed likely.

‘The good old USA, of course.’

‘But why?’

‘Three reasons; I had family assets there I hoped to dig up; secondly, it was well away from England - especially the law and other gangsters on my tail - and, lastly... well, you’ll have to hear that from Susan herself. Only then maybe you’ll believe it.’

‘Believe what?’ I asked.

Though I spent another twenty minutes grilling Arthur, trying to wheedle more out of him, it was hopeless. Flippant one moment or tight lipped the next. Flagging from old age, the after effects of so much excitement and booze or whatever, I got nowhere. In the end, since there seemed no alternative, I agreed to go with him to Swanage a week later during half term. As an inducement, and the last thing he would say on the matter, was that it would be, ‘worth my while’. Travel arrangements were yet to be worked out but, I assumed, it would be lounging in the back of a certain chauffeur driven Bentley - all mod cons, caviar and bubbly, on tap. Why not? Wasn’t I doing him a favour? If only a short freebie break was all I got out of it, I supposed, it would be better than nothing.

I drove home still wondering what the daft bugger was up to and, had to admit, becoming increasingly curious. What’s more, with the looming holiday promising little more than a date at B&Q (don’t imagine teachers’ partners haven’t also noticed they get long holidays – ideal for all those VERY IMPORTANT household jobs) a wild goose chase might well be preferable. Such chases were, in Arthur’s eyes, what life was really all about. But things could take a turn for the worse – as I recalled from my first big trip abroad.



I’d arrived in Alicante from Ibiza with nothing but loose change in my pocket. Out the window went any grand ideas of picking up casual work, it being winter when the tourist

trade was dead and agriculture dormant. As with coming to write this book, I'd obviously not thought it out beforehand but, fool that I was, still trusted in fortune. The only good luck I had, heading north for the first time, was getting a lift in a car over-loaded with oranges - could I handle any more? Why the jolly German driver had so many God alone knows - with fruit trees everywhere he may simply have let greed get the better of him - or maybe he too was into marmalade, but was now having second thoughts. Whatever - he generously told me to grab as many as I wanted. Until reaching the border these would be my only source of sustenance so I stuffed all available pockets and pouches.

The journey was uneventful till I got to Barcelona and then, after a punishing hike through the city and out the other side, collapsed by the roadside late at night. I was too shagged to erect my tent but found a derelict concrete bunker and, somewhat fearfully, entered the rubble strewn dump. Clearing a patch of floor by match light, having no torch, I lay down in my sleeping bag and, despite the shitty surroundings, fell asleep almost immediately - only to be woken an hour or two later by little feet scurrying over my body.

Pulling the bag up tight over my head as the nasty little critters began scratching, nipping and gnawing, I lay terrified in the pitch dark, expecting them to break through any minute and make a meal of me. The only reason I waited till dawn to scramble out of that stinking hell hole was the nightmarish vision of rats going for my throat if I emerged.

Things did not improve the next day as a lift, which I was assured would be a short cut into France, dropped me in a remote region of the Pyrenees. These Spanish drivers certainly had a good sense of humour. Though it was beautifully peaceful wandering along rural mountain roads I began, in my sleep and food deprived state, to slip into a semi-delirious state. When night came I found an isolated spot among the pine trees - having been told Continental police arrested anyone found camping on a non-official site I was always careful to find secluded places. Though without any food, I did still have some sachets of instant coffee donated by an American serviceman who'd given me a lift in his jeep some weeks earlier (there were many more US bases all over Europe then), so set up the primus stove. It was something of a palaver; assembling the parts, pouring meths into a little reservoir, then lighting it at exactly the right moment after pumping up the pressure till eventually you had a hissing glow. On this occasion, as it was dark and chilly, I broke my number one rule and lit up inside the tent. I was also using dodgy paraffin bought in a primitive little hardware shop from a guy who spoke no English (and me no Spanish) and suspicious he'd sold me petrol by mistake. Trying to get comfortable on uneven ground, I knocked the stove over and the contents ran out across the groundsheet. As I scrambled desperately in the fading light to stamp out the flames the paraffin soaked my shirt and jeans. That night I was awoken by a stinging sensation all down my side where the spilled fuel had begun burning into my flesh like acid. Though I tried damping it down with what little water I had left, the pain endured and would stay with me for weeks, even after I'd bathed many times.

Clearing the customs post late next day, I went into the first food shop I saw and bought a baguette and some Emmental cheese (all they had) with my remaining few francs. Never had food tasted so good. In fact, after all these years, I still go wobbly kneed at the sight of that sweet Swiss delight. Reinvigorated, I set off next day in good heart and made pretty good progress for a change, managing to get just over halfway to Paris by nightfall. Although I didn't see much snow along the way, the air got progressively colder as we travelled northwards until it became torture to stand by the road for any length of time. The coldest winter in many years had not abated since being away and still held sway over northern Europe. Having spent my last available cash - saving a few francs for a bed in Paris where I really didn't want to sleep rough - I was forced to seek shelter anywhere I could.

Eventually, just outside a small town near Orleans, I found a little sports pavilion in a playing field. Though the place had no walls, just supporting columns, it would at least keep me off the frozen ground and be a shelter from blizzards. I was so cold I put on every available article of clothing and then, after squeezing into my sleeping bag, wrapped the little tent around me like a giant cocoon. Woken in the night with what felt like frost bite and needing a leak, I nevertheless stayed put, not being able to face unwrapping everything and venturing into the arctic void. When it became light enough to see I reached out for the primus with the idea of warming myself a bit, but soon gave up the idea as my hands were too numb to feel anything let alone operate the fiddly controls and, in any case, my water bottle was solid ice. Soon I was frozen stiff too, almost paralysed and unable to repack my bag. So chilled to the bone was I, had it not been for a kind workman discovering my plight and offering help, I'd never have managed to load up. I only began thawing out after eventually getting a lift and sitting in a warm car for a couple of hours - though even then it wasn't till weeks later I'd fully recover.

The hostel at La Pigalle now seemed empty and bleak, but I was just relieved to be back under a roof of any kind. Thankfully, the night's charge included a breakfast of bread and coffee - after which I was right out of cash with no idea what might happen to me. Maybe I could hitch up to Calais or Dunkirk, sneak on board a ferry and prove my old English master wrong once and for all? Then, over breakfast, I met a fellow Brit who, like me, was also broke and busted, stranded alone in Paris. Unlike me, however, he didn't seem bothered.

Nicky, a fellow musician about my own age, had been in this boat before - on several occasions apparently - and said you just went to the British Embassy and got repatriated. It sounded serious to me and I wasn't too sure, but Nicky said not to worry. Some officious suit would tear you off a strip for being irresponsible and all that guff and then, in exchange for your passport, issue you with a one-way ticket home. What else could they do? Leave you to rot on the pavement? It was only a few quid after all and, once you got home and repaid the money, your passport was returned and all forgotten. So he said.

We walked across town, unable to buy train tickets but scurrying down into each Metro station along our arctic journey to grab a few moments warmth, arriving at the imposing Consular building near Place de la Concorde with some trepidation. We sat where we were instructed, like naughty schoolboys waiting outside the Head's office, talking about the UK music scene. Nicky told me he played banjo and clarinet with local bands in and around his home town of Reading. I pumped up my game too by saying I was rhythm guitarist with a South London R&B outfit. In fact I'd recently begun meeting with an eclectic bunch of mates in suburban bedrooms and kitchens, thrashing out a mixture of mainly American folk and country blues. The instruments included guitars, bass, trumpet, drums or cardboard boxes and occasionally, vibraphone. That last one, incidentally, was John Dummer's⁽²⁾, I think it belonged to his Dad, but he was usually on drums. Later, with the John Dummer Blues Band and also Darts, a doo-wop band which had a few chart hits during the 1970s, he had quite a bit of success. I flat-picked and strummed along the best I could, eager to learn and experience as much as possible but, for my new friend's benefit, didn't let on how amateurish we were. But, in contrast to the bleakness of our situation and the freak weather outside, we chatted optimistically about the future, promising to meet up for a jam back in Blighty.

Nicky's prediction turned out as he said and we were soon packed off to the Gare du Nord and the next train for Calais. Arriving in Dover (having pocketed the English train fare money as per Easy's doctrine) I was surprised to find the weather as bad, if not worse, than when I'd left. The Kent countryside was covered in thick snow but a lift came quickly and I was soon trundling along in a chilly old lorry, the jovial driver revelling in tales of winter doom and disaster. After an hour or so we pulled into a truck stop and he treated me to a slap

up fried breakfast washed down by gallons of hot sweet tea - the best meal I'd had for weeks. It was good to be back, even if England was still a freezer.

Once home I discovered all domestic water supplies down our street were iced up and families had to take buckets to a stand pipe. Other public services were unreliable and most roads and paths very treacherous, slowing all journeys down to a snail's pace. Most houses, of course, were like fridges as central heating was rare then and people simply wrapped up more in winter and piled coal on the fire - if they could afford it. Kids didn't suffer all the time though, as they took advantage of solid rivers and ponds to go skating or slide down hills on old tin trays and homemade sledges - despite my age (seventeen), I joined them.

Within days of returning I was over at Andy's house recounting my adventures and he, despite his high minded philosophical and literary leanings, said he couldn't wait to get away himself - maybe together? After a short discussion it was decided we'd head for South Africa, since he had an uncle there who might be willing to accommodate us, and we began making plans to head off. (In those days there was little talk of apartheid, but in any case I wasn't in the least interested in politics and just saw this as another adventure.) I say 'plans' but, as usual, we did little more than fantasize about luxury car rides, accommodating female drivers and unlikely invitations to stay at grand French chateaus, Italian beach resorts, or Greek villas, etc. You'd think I'd have known better after the recent trip but, when we arrived in Casablanca a few months later, we still hadn't even got a map of the route. Scouring the shops and bazaars we eventually found a carpet-sized one of all Africa, spread it out on the dirt floor, and then nearly fainted with shock. Africa was simply huge. We'd hitched through France, Spain and Morocco, but it was a stroll compared to what was yet to come - and that included thousands of miles of desert, jungle, mountains, and other hostile terrain. A bit late to have regrets about poor planning.

However, before embarking on that trip I needed to replenish my resources, build up some savings and, not forget to pay back the Embassy and retrieve my passport. I found a job on another building site, but this was a completely different scale to before. A huge new office complex was being erected on a green field site a few miles away which meant I could cycle, though it was a hilly and freezing ride. The job was almost exclusively manned by seasoned Irish navies who worked hard and drank even harder, stuck together and were, almost to a man, incomprehensible. I got on OK with one or two of the younger guys, but felt pretty alien in this bitterly cold environment and when, one dark day, I mishandled the controls on the hoist sending two barrow loads of concrete crashing down from the top floor and wrecking the gear, I guessed it was time to leave. That was not my only blunder there either and, though the money was good, I reckoned I could do better elsewhere and so did the ganger.

But I was wrong. Though at first, when the Labour Exchange said there was a vacancy with the local Highways Department, I thought I might have found a nice little earner to while away the time till our African safari. I'd heard that council employees had a right cushy time, fiddling worksheets, moonlighting, playing the system with all kinds of scams and, generally, doing as little work as possible for maximum gain. The very first day a few of us were ordered onto the back of a truck with big stiff brooms and told that instructions would be given on arrival. I was dumped alone right outside my old school and told simply to sweep the gutter from one end of the street to the other - that was all, nothing to complex for us broom handlers - and they'd return to pick me up about half-four. Pulling my collar up and turning to hide my face from the classrooms, I pushed the broom along, dreading recognition. Of course, I was seen eventually and became something of a freak show at break times as familiar faces ogled from behind the railings yelling 'hilarious' jibes. The old Gorilla's lair, just by the front entrance, was the worst obstacle to negotiate and I must admit to skipping that stretch.

The only thing to keep me going was a thought I'd had for some time that, unlike most of my old class mates who'd opted to remain at school into the Sixth Form simply because they were too lazy or scared to move on, whereas I'd got off my arse and been out there in the world. Like my hero, Woody Guthrie, I'd done some hard travelling - served time on the great highway of life. Maybe I'd not returned with fame or glory, but at least I'd tried. Like an old soldier, I'd faced enemy fire - well, the wrath of the British Consulate - and almost frozen to death on a foreign shore. What's more, I'd followed my own dreams rather than those of parents, teachers or careers advisers - done my own thing man, in other words, and intended to go on doing so, however disastrous.

FOOTNOTES - Chapter 10

(1) From Pete Seeger's 2009 edition of his book, 'Where Have All The Flowers Gone', attributed to his father, Charles Seeger. "The truth is a rabbit in a bramble patch. One can rarely put one's hand upon it. One can only circle around and point, saying, it's somewhere in there."

(2) The last time I saw John Dummer in person was the late Sixties. We were both working at Bentalls, a big department store in Kingston upon Thames, in between more important gigs. He swore he wouldn't stay there long and he didn't - nor did I. It seems he's remained connected with the music business over the years, either as a musician or manager, but now lives in South West France, mostly selling antiques and renovating properties.