

A Thumb in the Rain

By Andrew Mills



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Chapter One

This was my final week of college.

I was at art college and during my summer holidays which were then ten weeks long, I found temporary work to make some extra money. I had completed my pre-diploma course and my next year of study would be at a college in the midlands.

At weekends I worked serving petrol in a service station in the village in southern England where I lived and I loved it. I met people all day long, most of whom were friendly and often gave me tips. I found that just a little help with the car wash or cleaning insects from the windscreen and lights prompted generous rewards. Remember when insects in the summer could cover the windscreen like rain? Garages kept a bucket with soapy water on the forecourt with a squeegee specially designed to remove the insects. Many insects contained prodigious amounts of fatty bodily fluids and when smashed against a windscreen and exploded to ten times their body size, it required some effort to scrub them off. A gallon of petrol, graded as four star or five star octane rating was less than five shillings, or more accurately, five bob. I never knew who bob was, or why a shilling was a bob, but it was twenty five pence, and the gallon that it bought was often accompanied by a shot, a shot of upper cylinder lubricant injected into the fuel tank with a syringe on a cone shaped canister. It was totally unnecessary but diligent advertising meant everyone wanted it. "Four and four shots" was the familiar order which came to slightly less than a pound. This was an expedient sum as most cars only did about thirty miles to a gallon and some of the bigger cars, like Jaguars, did as little as fifteen or twenty miles to each four and a half litres. We hadn't yet decimalised, or gone metric, or had any inkling that our love of heavy cars with inefficient engines was going to be instrumental in global warming. Petrol still contained lead to stop the valves from overheating and hence causing pre-ignition or pinking.

The garage was frequented by Mods and Rockers, never at the same time! I was so envious of the parka-clad rich kids on their Lambretta TV200s complete with a dozen rear view mirrors, six spot lights and a whip aerial with a 'tiger tail' attached. Esso advertised fuel that would put a 'tiger in your tank' and they hit upon the idea of giving away a cloth tiger's tail to tie on to the filler of your petrol tank – you had a 'tiger in your tank'. The mods always had mod girls leaning seductively on the mandatory rear pillion backrest. I was jealous. I preferred motorbikes but the rockers were aggressive looking compared to the rather more twee mods. Once they got to Brighton, their favourite destination on the south coast, they were as aggressive as the rockers and the two factions beat the living daylight out of each other causing consternation among the local constabulary and making the news headlines. The mods and rockers era was in full swing. Contrarily the family man who was reaching his middle age and who had recently been involved in an entirely more aggressive conflict, the second world war, was seeking a much quieter life and if he was fortunate enough to have a well-paid job or profession he might have a car. My dad had bought a car only three years previously when I was fourteen and that was a tiny Austin A30. Those who could afford them had new Ford Classics or Vauxhall 101s. A highlight of my day in the garage every Saturday was when a local man came in with his E-Type Jaguar to have his tank filled and the car washed. He always gave me a pound tip. It was a big tip. The garage had a showroom and I sometimes had the job of removing the transport protection from newly arrived cars, a coating of wax over the whole body and films of paper on particularly vulnerable parts. Cars then had a lot of chromium. It was an awful task. The chemicals for removing the wax were almost certainly toxic, but the cars were plush and had that distinctive 'new car' smell.

On this particular balmy Sunday summer evening, I was tinkering with my ailing old Lambretta LD150 scooter in the empty workshop behind the forecourt. The mechanics didn't work on Sundays. It was a fickle machine and I had scant mechanical knowledge or ability.

It would start OK but run really roughly. I couldn't afford to take it to a motorbike repairer and did my best at keeping it running myself, but I couldn't rely on it. The main bearings were on their way out. The mechanics would give me tips and lend me the occasional spanner but it was unfair to ask them to maintain it.

Twenty-four hour shops and petrol stations didn't exist at the time and they closed at six in the evening. Garages opening on Sunday was a new idea and frowned upon by religious people and sabbath observance societies and the garages didn't have shops or cafes either.

As I was thinking about closing, a Volvo pulled into the garage. It had foreign number plates. The car had pulled up near the workshop part of the garage forecourt right in front of where I was still fiddling with the contact breaker on the scooter. The car pinked and ran-on before it finally stopped as a puff of steam rose from the radiator grill. It was over-heated. The young family got out and stretched. They looked somewhat travel weary and stood taking in the surroundings.

I left the scooter and approached them as I would any customer and the teenage girl whom I assumed to be the daughter, asked me if there was anywhere nearby they could stay for the night, a hotel or guest house perhaps. She explained that the engine wasn't right as she pointed at the car and at her father who was opening the bonnet. They were Swedish, her mother and father didn't speak English, nor did her younger brother. She was their spokesperson and spoke English fluently with a sort of endearing semi-American accent, if there can be such a thing, perhaps it depends on the source?

Her father had asked her to explain that the engine was overheating as there was a leak in the top hose of the radiator. I pointed to the workshop and explained that it was closed and I told her I wasn't a mechanic but the workshop would be open from early the next morning with people who were qualified to mend cars. I washed the screen, checked the oil, topped up the radiator after releasing the pressure by undoing the radiator cap under a towel. It gushed and gurgled and finally settled down. Her father helped me push the cooling and ticking car to the pumps and I filled the tank wondering where they could stay. The village had no hotel within about five miles. They could get a taxi? They weren't sure. I knocked the door to the flat above the garage showroom where the owner lived and explained the situation. The owner was a benevolent old soul albeit a shrewd businessman who lived above the garage, and he seemed to like me. He had a redundant caravan parked out of sight on a hard standing behind the workshop and suggested they could stay there for the night and get the hose repaired in the morning. He gave me the key to the garage rest room, which unusually was kept quite decently clean by Harry, the ancient odd job guy, who tidied the forecourt, cut the grass and cleaned the windows of the showroom. The family were enormously grateful and offered to pay as the owner waved the suggestion away. As I closed the pumps and locked the garage dropping the keys into the office, the family had taken a couple of bags to the caravan and were wandering back out onto the forecourt. I directed the family to a local pub a few minutes' walk away which I knew could rustle up a meal. I managed to start the scooter and trolled off home, spluttering all the way with what would now be unacceptable clouds of pretty blue but smelly two-stroke smoke.

Next morning I was due to ride the scooter the ten miles to college for the final week of my final year pre-diploma course before I took up my graphic design course at the midlands polytechnic when the summer break came to an end. The scooter refused to start! I kicked the starter pedal to the floor, it fired and stopped, I kicked, it gave a tantalising roar for a couple of seconds and stopped again. I ran with it and bump started it. It went for a few more seconds and died again. Damn! I tinkered again to no avail. I'd already spent far too much time messing about with it and the bus had already gone. Nothing for it, I'd have to hitch a lift into town. I hitch-hiked a lot. It was the best way for me to get about and it was far

more reliable than my scooter. Making sure I looked presentable, I walked to the main road at the top of our street. I found that a tweed jacket and a tie, trousers and not jeans, a respectable rucksack and shortish hair with my college scarf clearly in evidence made it much easier to thumb a lift. This was my college garb and not unusual. The now passe beatniks and teddy boys, the uniformed mods and rockers were really the only people to wear anything more outlandish. There was a layby a few hundred yards past the turnpike roundabout where a potential lift could pull off the road. I stuck my thumb out. After only a couple of minutes a car stopped. The door opened and the Swedish girl grinning from ear to ear pushed her brother to the far side of the back seat and beckoned for me to join them. She explained that the car had been repaired in just a few minutes by Malcolm an apprentice mechanic and a friend of mine, and they were on their way again. She explained that they never picked up hitch-hikers but were so grateful for my help the previous evening that her father had condescended to stop for me. I guessed she had coerced him.

Although I didn't know at the time the short trip to college in the Swedish car was a marker in my life. It would change my perception of myself and a few other things about human nature and Europe.

Maj introduced me to her brother, Per-Anders and her parents and showed a much more forward approach to me than any of the girls I knew at college. She was keen to practice her English and this was the first time she'd ever spoken to an English person in a conversation outside Sweden. She was sixteen and so excited she couldn't stop grinning and talking and flushed when I said how clearly she spoke English, information which she immediately shouted in gentle Swedish forward to her parents sat in the front seats. Per-Anders was much younger, about ten years old, and could understand much of what I was saying but kept quiet. All schoolchildren in Scandinavia learnt English as soon as they started school but he hadn't yet learnt enough to overcome his shyness to speak. Maj was leaving high school to go to college and this trip was a gift to her for achieving good passes in her matriculation exams. They were on a tour of Britain which started in Dover early the day before and would finish when they sailed back to Esbjerg from Harwich three weeks later. I told her I was a student, about to take up a higher level course and that I was planning a trip to Europe, probably Italy, in the weeks before I started at my new college and joked that I might hitch-hike to Sweden. I discovered that her father worked in a steel works in a town north of Stockholm and her mother was a primary school teacher. She spoke rapidly to her parents as we approached the floating ferry across the tidal river close to the ancient art college I had attended for the last two years. She was asking them if she could write to me when she returned to Sweden and after some toing and froing, reassuring grunts from her father and a reasonably benign smile from her mother she squealed imperceptibly as she took out a notepad and wrote my address; she wrote hers on a sheet she tore from the pad and gave it to me as we reached the ferry landing ramp on the far bank of the river. I noticed the pad was a diary she was keeping, detailing the trip. A few hundred yards later they dropped me outside the college after I'd given directions to Per-Anders.

Per-Anders was their navigator and sat with a pile of road maps. I showed him the best way across the town to find the road which would lead them westwards towards Cornwall. I waved goodbye as the Volvo B18 Amazon disappeared into the morning traffic complete with a new top hose.

I rushed late into my first class, agitated for being late and bewildered by what had just occurred. My tutor that morning was not an artist as such. He was an English teacher and had the task of presenting liberal and alternative studies to a bunch of seventeen year olds who thought that as artists they were above the need for any academia. I discovered later, when I became a lecturer in an art college myself, that art students would even try to avoid writing theses for their degrees, claiming that it wasn't relevant to their art.

Bill Kirby was more than an inspiration; I adored his lectures and I was angry with myself for missing even this first half hour. It just added to my confusion. I was elated at meeting a rather lovely young girl who actually talked to me, like she might even like me, at the same time, my less than friendly scooter was taking jibes at me and refusing to cooperate with my pleadings.

Bill had promised in this, the last of his lectures, he had something special up his sleeve. He had the college radiogram in the room and was playing records. His lectures were supposed to open our minds to the history of art, to literature, theatre and this, finally, music.

Bill had taken us to see Peter Brooks "Midsummer Night's Dream" which had been trialled in our local playhouse to rapturous reviews before it opened in the Aldwych in London's West End. He took us to see the '54 – '64 exhibition of new art in the Tate and he introduced us to J.G. Ballard and Ray Bradbury, Joseph Conrad and Robert Frost. That morning was no exception and as I walked into the room Ravel's Bolero was halfway towards that heart stopping key change and crescendo.

Bill Kirby was instrumental in single-handedly unlocking my mind to arts which intrigue me to this day. As I entered the room he simply put his finger to his lips to stop me speaking and indicated a chair where I should sit. There was never an admonishment, he had infinite patience, he remains one of my all-time heroes. It was a sad day, it was the last day I would share the ecstasy of his enthusiasm. That week was spent saying farewell to artists and lecturers who had taken me from being a scattered schoolboy to an adolescent with some ambition and a rough idea of a direction in life. When I started college I had to look up the word intuition when one of the lecturers told me to use it. By the time I left I had a handle on why people invest in art and education. I'd also sampled the delights of a dried green herb which one of the other students had procured from the West Indian quarter. It wasn't the big issue it would turn out to be for later generations of students. Cheap German Hock was the drug of choice for most. Pot was a novelty being quietly discovered through some West Indian friends.

Chapter Two

At the end of that week summer break started. I had twelve weeks before I would begin my new course and I intended to earn enough to supplement my meagre grant, we had grants in those days. Grants were means tested and my parents earned a tad above the average so my grant wasn't great. The idea was that they would make up the shortfall. They didn't find this easy and my father, who objected to my college education in the first place was even more reluctant. He would have preferred me to have taken an apprenticeship and become a tradesman. I believe he had my best interests at heart and in many ways he was right, I'd have probably had an easier time making a living as a plumber or electrician. But I wanted to be an artist, after all it was he who taught me to draw and paint when I was very young. I was always top of the class in art. He was a superb draughtsman and craftsman and painted hundreds of oil paintings in his life.

My grant wasn't enough to cover accommodation, food, college requirements and beer. My grant then, was the same amount for a whole term as a week's rent for a room in a halls of residence is now. About eighty pounds. The equivalent of just over seven pounds a week during term time. My rent for my room in a shared house near college would be about two pounds fifty per week. The extra cash from a summer job would help. Plenty of companies took advantage of the temporary glut of cheap labour and I applied for a few positions, which were usually labour intensive. At first I worked in the local laundry and folded towels for a day. They smelt like hot toast and burnt my hands as the came out of the massive tumble drier. I lasted a day in the laundry. The TV factory was better, but it was a few miles away and would cost the bus fare. I still couldn't rely on the scooter even though the extra cash meant I could get it repaired properly. But, the TV factory paid particularly well; it was a plum job for the summer.

I was told to report to the despatch department where boxed TVs awaited loading on to delivery trucks. Bob was the storeman in charge. A big rotund fellow with a permanent grin and full of good humour he asked me to pick up a telly and heave the box up onto a stack which was already four boxes high. This was a time when TVs were heavy, large solid cathode ray tubes, metal chassis and massive transformers, not to mention wooden casings like real furniture. I was dumfounded. He knew I couldn't do it. My five foot five frame at just over eight stone just didn't have the inertia or horsepower to lift the box more than my waist height. Bob put his hand on my shoulder and told me to go back to the office and ask them to give me a lighter job, mumbling something like "poor little bugger" as I sighed with some relief that I wouldn't be stacking tellies.

I spent that summer distributing transformers to the production lines through the fug of solder flux vapour which hung at head height across the factory. The boxes were heavy but I had a sack truck and a bunch of new friends from another nearby college with whom I polished off bottles of cheap hock in the evenings after work. The canteen was great; free food! The wages were the same for us students as any of the factory workers and were decent enough for me to save quite a bit. The days were physically demanding but the production

line workers were a friendly bunch and always had something to say. Light relief came when a cathode ray tube would become detached from the production line gantry. The conveyors carrying the tubes wound their way across the factory at about fifteen feet above the ground before they swooped down to floor level to have the thick plastic safety cover sealed onto the front of the screen, then on to the assembly line where men and women sat using soldering irons and compressed air screwdrivers to install the tubes into the metal chassis, with the transformers and printed circuit boards, a fairly new method of electronic circuitry. The tube would fall to the ground with a very loud bang and glass flying across the floor, the whole factory cheering. Health and safety was in its infancy.

At weekends I often went to stay with the new friends I'd made in the factory. They were a lively lot and we cruised the local fun fair and haunted the seafront, the pubs and clubs, and saw the odd concert. At the time the Rolling Stones were rising rapidly as were the less well known Graham Bond Organisation and the Animals, concerts were cheap and easy to get tickets for, although Chuck Berry was better known and was a special case.

I never did really take to the hock. Wine was not a pleasant drink for me until much later in my life when I would be introduced to fine wines by people who knew about these things and who were willing to pay more than two or three quid a bottle at a time when hock was seven and six (seven shillings and six pence), about forty pence.

This was a period of optimism. The world I lived in was definitely seeing improvements with Harold Wilson's election to Prime Minister and strides were being taken to end the criminalisation of homosexuals, to extend the liberalisation of censorship laws, abortion and divorce, the abolition of the death penalty and positive steps towards the stopping of discrimination against women and ethnic minorities. The future looked bright. I never imagined that I'd find getting employment a difficult issue. Being born soon after the second world war meant that for me and millions of other baby boomers, life just improved from day to day even if we weren't aware of it. We had no experience of disaster or failure. A luxury detached house at that time was less than five thousand pounds and the average wage was about twelve hundred pounds a year. A mortgage was still a twenty year affair.

Everything was blossoming, particularly music, with Elvis, then the Beatles and Rolling Stones. Wendy, my secret classroom sweetheart, she was totally unaware of my infatuation, brought a record into our class when I was seven or eight, which Mr Webb, our form teacher, played for us on the school gramophone. It was the 'new rock and roll' although Bill Haley had been 'Rockin' Around the Clock' for a while by then. It was Elvis's 'You Ain't Nothin' but a Hound Dog'. I can't say I was very impressed at the time. Films made great leaps to colour and Panavision. Sexuality was becoming more open and the relaxing of censorship encouraged writers and film makers to be bolder. The trial of Penguin books over the publication of the so called obscene 'Lady Chatterley's Lover' by D.H. Lawrence had a huge impact on literary freedom.

In 1965 I was feeling a bit left behind. While everyone seemed to be practicing their new found free love, hippiedom was just a couple of years away, I was still too shy to ask a girl on a date. I just didn't know what to say or how to behave. Free love and the brave new world passed me by somehow. I was still very much an adolescent schoolboy. Having a good time with a bottle of wine and friends dancing in the Friday night youth club hop or an arts ball were just an extension of the playground. Smoking twenty Park Drive every day just made me feel sick and didn't confer the confidence I craved.

My father resented my wit even though my mother encouraged it. I wasn't allowed into his workshop and although he showed me the rudiments of drawing when I was very small he left me to discover everything else for myself. I realised much later in my life that his experience of surviving through what must have been the most horrendous six years of his youth, seeing what he'd seen abroad in the aftermath of the war in northern France, Belgium

and Germany left him determined to stay safe and content with no surprises, adventures or upsets. He had no interest or skill with mechanics and I was on my own with the scooter. Where other kids' dads helped them with their motorbikes, or even bought one for them, I had to be content to struggle with the maintenance of my two stroke death trap, as my dad called it. This indifference to my ideas and ambitions stretched to my growing need to assert my independence and sense of adventure. His words to me when I left for my new college and a career in the graphic arts was "You'll never stick it!" And when I said I was going to hitch-hike around Europe that summer, he just snorted and said "You must be mad. Where's the money coming from,? You haven't got a clue. Use your common sense Andrew!" Luckily my mum was more benign about my plans. The idea of taking a trip during summer break preceded the 'gap year' favoured by university graduates before they took up their internships or doctorate studies. I certainly couldn't afford a gap year, unlike the later generation who were provided for by the bank of mum and dad. I didn't really know anyone else who'd done that sort of thing. One or two of my closer friends did similar things a little later but right then I had no one to ask. I didn't really have any heroes. I was deeply impressed though by picture books of speeding foreign railways I was given when I was a child and I was touched very deeply by a short film made by Shell in 1957 about international air travel called 'The Song of the Clouds'. The Dakotas, Constellations, Britannias and the new ultra-modern Comet, flying in clear blue skies, landing in exotic locations, fired my imagination and sealed in me a desire to travel. It re-awoke in me that romantic and intangible yearning to discover the world around me that I felt as a child, the desire to learn and make real the stuff of dreams and fantasy. Added to which I'd already flown in a Dakota to the Channel Islands for a holiday with my grandparents. My parents never flew anywhere in their whole lives, or for that matter ever went abroad but I couldn't wait to go further, and for longer.

I had made up my mind to hitch-hike to Italy.

I'd already had the sense to consider booking a return ticket in case I ran out of money. At least I'd be able to get back across the Channel and my thumb could do the rest. My boy scouts rucksack began to take on the weight of items I thought I'd need for the trip. Toiletries and a couple of changes of shirts and y-fronts, a torch and a basic first aid kit. I'd had a school trip to Paris, had a passport. I had already crossed the Channel on an un-stabilised British Rail ferry in a gale and it didn't put me off.

Then things changed.

About half way through the summer break, changing rapidly from a confused schoolboy to a an even more confused adolescent aka young adult, I received a letter from Sweden. In delicate handwriting on dedicated notepaper and in a matching, lined envelope Maj wrote how much she had enjoyed our meeting and hoped we would meet again. Her English was impeccable and her writing glowed from her heart. My heart stopped for a beat. A pretty girl interested in me? I wondered if the sensitive touches in her letter were a result of misplaced translations of adjectives and misunderstood emotional descriptions, I couldn't believe she could have held so much about me in her mind from such a brief encounter.

My romantic streak survives to this day. I like remaining naïve, if that's possible, open to possibilities. Even then I was aware of the constipation wrought by machismo and the vulnerability of wearing one's heart on one's sleeve, of eschewing the tough guy image in favour of sensitivity. I'd early on made a pact with myself to stay wide open to anything except crime and illegality. The more you're willing to learn and participate the more you can enjoy. You can like Beethoven *and* The Stones, Caravaggio *and* Paul Klee, Macbeth *and* Marvel, football *and* the British Museum all at the same time, it's endless if you want it to be.

I didn't understand Shakespeare or abstract art, but, I knew more about the British Museum than football. Bill Kirby had said, "Fake it till you make it". Educated people liked

the arts, even though I didn't understand it I assumed there must be something worth having in it.

Being willing to experience my emotions, even if they were painful at times, led to me conjuring all sorts of romantic images, and romance was exquisitely painful. My adolescent mind was a box of fireworks ready to go off in a magnificent display as soon as the blue touchpaper of sex and romance was set fizzing. Maybe I wouldn't go to Italy after all, Sweden had a nice ring to it.

Money, I'd need money. I'd already started saving some of my wages from the TV factory for my European trip.

I had a few other friends with ambitions to go places. They took longer and worked in cafes and bars along the way. The journey through France and Spain to north Africa was a favourite. It took a while, a couple of months, and more money than many students could hope to accumulate. Roger, a close friend did this. He was inspired by Laurie Lee's book 'As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning', which would be published a couple of years later, about his trip to Spain and his involvement with the International Brigade supporting the Republican Army against Franco. He worked in a café on the Ile de Re for several weeks and almost stayed there but ended up going all the way to Morocco and the Atlas mountains.

My inspiration started with a bloke I met in a tiny café near to the college. I would spend my lunchtimes there being very bohemian and pseudo-intellectual. It was an interesting place. One regular customer was a young electronics engineer who worked for Mullard, an electronics company which had just developed the first silicon chip transistors. I remember his incredulous excitement as he described "Whole circuits like a radio or an amplifier on a sliver of silicon the size of your fingernail!"

The café was called "The Mighty Acorn" and sat on a corner equidistant between the art college and the technical college. I'd never heard the quote about little acorns growing into mighty oaks but I found the name intriguing. It was run by a Canadian who was probably in the first wave of the hippies. His menu consisted solely of soup with an optional cheese topping and hot bread with home-made lemonade or coffee. It was more about the atmosphere and the conversation. The owner would occasionally allow backpackers from other countries sleep on the floor for a night. The guy who inspired my ambition to travel was one of these. He was a New Zealander. He held me spellbound while he told me and a couple of other willing ears how he'd travelled hitch-hiking from New Zealand to this café. He'd found a Dutch cargo vessel going to Peru by visiting the Auckland docks each day. The boat took him on as a galley help which would pay for his food and passage. He discovered very quickly he would have to lock his cabin door at night as the very drunk Dutch deck hands would otherwise try to seduce him. The crew were constantly stoned on pot and none of them drunk alcohol, hence the galley store was full of beer no one wanted, except the cook, who was constantly drunk. He crossed the Andes in Peru in a truck which went as far as a village perched above the rain forest. He stayed for a few days among the friendly mountain people, riding and hunting with them. Before sunrise early one morning they roused him and told him to get ready for a ride. They rode for an hour or more in the dark and as they emerged high above the rain forest the mist was lit golden by the dawn sunlight casting long shadows across the canopy. His description of this was vivid. They descended to the forest and stopped for a minute above a clearing circled by village huts. While the rest of the party pulled their neckerchiefs and scarves across their faces the leader of the group told him to wait for them. He thought they were going into a part of the forest where there might be an unpleasant atmosphere. What then happened shook him rigid. The group burst into a gallop and a few moments later shot out into the clearing where they started screaming and shouting as men, women and children fled from the huts into the forest. The riders dismounted and

proceeded to systematically steal everything in sight. Food, horses, weapons, fabrics, valuables, pelts and even the dogs. If there had been any straggling children they too would have been taken to be raised as slaves. He'd unwittingly witnessed a raid. When he left the Andean villagers the rest of his trip across Brazil was quiet by comparison. The biggest expense was the boat trip from Rio de Janeiro to Spain. He was on his way to London to make his fortune. I have no idea if he was a truly intrepid character or if he was a brilliant story teller. Either way I was impressed.

Well, if he could do that then surely I could do this.

The couple of weeks before my departure were spent organising. Garnering ferry timetables, calculating distances and times. I reckoned a week to get there, to a town called Sandviken, about a hundred and twenty miles north of Stockholm. It was close to fifteen hundred miles from home. With a fair wind at my back I could do it in about a week. A couple of hundred miles a day. I just needed to work out a route and find all the youth hostels along the way.

Each stay would cost between eight and fifteen shillings a night, (forty to seventy five pence). I'd need at least a dozen nights with the possibility of some nights spent on ferries and some in lorry cabs driving overnight and hopefully some free accommodation from benevolent lift givers. The worst case scenario would mean I'd need about fifteen pounds for hostels. The Harwich to The Hook of Holland ferry was about ten pounds return. I reckoned forty five quid would be enough. About a pound a day for food. This doesn't sound like much but in 1965 you could buy eleven pints of beer for a pound. Forty five pounds was well over two weeks of an average wage which at current values would be around one thousand pounds or more. In effect I would be taking the equivalent of about a thousand pounds for a solo holiday, without a car or flights, for three weeks in Europe.

My dad still thought I was mad. My mum secretly admired my audacity. My ex-headmistress Isobel Carlisle, who happened to be a family friend, suggested I write a book about the exploit. She thought it was unusual and interesting enough and it's taken me over fifty years to get around to it. My colleague Beefy, who also worked on the pumps at the garage at weekends, was convinced that I'd never make it. He was not averse to risk himself, he rode a three fifty single cylinder Matchless at mind altering speeds, of which I was rather envious, and later in life started and ran a garden centre. Other friends and family had varying levels of encouragement and enthusiasm.

I sewed a small fabric Union Jack to my rucksack. It was a notion that people might be inclined to pick up an English lad. We hadn't yet entirely soured the world against us and our imperialistic exploits were still rarely discussed in disgust. I tried to look as harmless as possible. There were tales of hitch-hikers being robbed and raped, but they seemed remote. These issues and all crimes were much less publicised, no internet or cheap tabloids or conspiracy theorists, and the television news, still in glorious monochrome, read in a plum, home counties BBC accent, rarely made incidental crime a highlight. The tabloids were yet to spread their sordid jingoistic message, Murdoch bought the Sun in 1969. The Moors Murders were still a recent memory and we were less than two decades on from an unequalled violent war crime. (Since writing my first draft Vladimir Putin seems to have taken on Hitler's mantle is determined to equal the dictator's atrocities in Ukraine.) There was violence. Knife crime was an issue with Teddy boys gangs going at each other with razors, bicycle chains and knuckle dusters, but it seemed contained. Mods and rockers were on the rise. Domestic violence and burglary, rape and abuse were just as bad then as they are now but much went unreported. It was a time when a 'phone had to be plugged in to a wall, and half the population didn't have one. Policemen still walked the beat and would book you for riding a bicycle without lights, not having your hands on the handlebars or riding on the pavement.

People had a sense that you might not get away with stuff. There was a general optimism and longing for stability, repair and peace.

Unpleasant travel experiences were always going to be a possibility but I'd never go anywhere if I let anxieties keep me at home. The excitement of discovery and adventure outweighed the fears. A bit later in life when I could afford to fly to places I discovered I had a fear of flying. A particularly rough flight to Zurich on a business trip during a period of multiple hi-jackings put me into panic mode. I hated having the phobia. It didn't stop me flying. Wherever I went I just gripped the armrests of the aircraft seat, kept the seatbelt on for the whole flight and swallowing my heart thumping anxiety, never ate or drank anything and never left the seat until we had landed. I eventually surmounted that irrational phobia by attending a fear of flying weekend. The result was dramatic and now I can't wait to get on a plane. Every time I fly somewhere I'm like a child enthralled, grabbing the window seat so that I can look down on the world, and up into the infinity of space from eight miles high. Comfortably hurtling along at nearly the speed of sound I'm transported to a world that could never have been seen more than about a century ago. I feel privileged to hurtle through towering cloud formations, to watch thunderstorms from above and inside the clouds, flying into a rising sun or over moonlit landscapes punctuated by pinpoints of light, bright cities and in some places oil wells burning off gases, and flaring refineries. I love flying. Even though hitch-hiking was a much higher risk it wasn't irrational, I could rationally choose to put it neatly into a box labelled, "I'll handle that if I have to".

I was more worried about getting caught in rain. Should I carry an umbrella? I thought it would be a hindrance. Fold-down umbrellas were not patented until 1969 or in my purview of knowledge so I opted for the plastic mac. Everyone had a plastic mac. Plastics started to pervade every aspect of life in the fifties and sixties and the plastic mac was a godsend. They were designed to be thin, flexible and could be folded into a small pouch and carried in a pocket. They even had hoods. Perfect.

It struck me that I could use any number of reasons and excuses to stop myself. Every time one came into my head I rationalised it out again or found the solution. What if I get robbed? Where do I keep my money? I ought to pack pyjamas, it wouldn't look so good creeping through a youth hostel dormitory to the loo in my normal sleeping attire; that is, naked. Would one pair of shoes be enough?

I was very much on my own. Not exactly isolated, but my friends couldn't offer much advice, I was going into territory not trodden by many. It appears trivial now with so much internationality, ease of travel, the European Union, as was, individual wealth and the internet; however, in the mid-sixties the planning and resourcing of information and a fear of the unknown, especially for a working class kid was a formidable hurdle. I'd get no advice from my family. What my father had witnessed in Europe in the aftermath of D-Day affected him deeply and meant that he never travelled outside Britain again in his lifetime. There were still a mass of unknowns. There were still bomb sites in British cities as yet unrepaired. How would foreigners see us and treat us? Much of Europe, the Dutch, Danish, Belgians and less so, but still thankful French, were grateful that as an island we were able to keep the Nazis at bay and with the Americans, devise methods to end the devastation. Germany might be a different matter. It was a concern. To get to Sweden by road meant that at some point I'd almost certainly need to enter Germany. The only real stumbling block was Germany. I was scared to travel through Germany. Going to Italy, which was my original intent, would have meant that I could avoid Germany. The indestructible hawser which now bound me to a small town in central Sweden overrode all anxiety and stretched through German territory. The yearnings in my groin cancelled any internal protest I had from the threat of German dissent. I'd have to find out for myself if Germany was contrite or held a grudge. Older Germans wanted to forget the war and forge ahead with a revised pre-Nazi culture but some younger

people wanted to know what had happened and were willingly influenced by western European and American ideals aiming towards an anti-nuclear and a somewhat diminished capitalist approach.

In those days, before the internet, how did I manage to find the information I needed? I don't know why my original plan was to hitch-hike to Italy but it would be a simple matter of crossing the channel, probably at Dover although ferries also crossed from Southampton. A trip to a travel agent probably gave me an idea of the cost of the fare. I packed maps and the 'Youth Hostelling in Europe' book. Other books on travel in bookshops revealed addresses, phone numbers and information about currencies, borders, customs and descriptions of cities and other forms of transport besides thumbing a lift. The resources were the same for everyone. I knew there must be ferries between Germany and Denmark, between Denmark and Sweden; I'd have to negotiate these when I arrived at the ticket offices on their loading ramps.

I was sure I'd be able to handle the unknowns of roads and ferries, youth hostels and national characteristics; the state of hitch-hiking in other countries was there to be discovered.

At least I knew how to hitch-hike. I was sure that the methods I used in Britain would achieve the same results anywhere.

The previous year I had hitched to Cornwall with Paul, a college friend. We were just sixteen. One of our first lifts was with a naval officer who was driving from Portsmouth to his home near Plymouth. He was driving a Jaguar XK150 the forerunner of the E-type. What a lift! Even squeezed into the tiny rear seat, (such an advantage being small), the ride was breath-taking. We arrived in Penzance later that evening and it was dark. We found a seafront shelter and planned to kip there for the night. At sixteen we didn't consider the problems coupled with this course of action, however, a fairly large friendly looking policeman found us at around midnight who had a rather more pragmatic view of the situation. "If the wind blows up on the high tide you'll be washed away from here lads!" His broad west country accent made him even more amenable. We must have looked pathetic. He told us to go down to the back of Penzance railway station where we would find carriages parked for the night. They wouldn't leave till later in the morning. You can find a seat and sleep in there. I can't imagine any modern policeman being as benevolent. The yard was open. We found a carriage which was still warm from its last journey from London. There were bench seats in the compartments and we slept soundly. Our very own hotel room. The water in the carriage tanks for the toilets was still warm when we woke and we were able to wash before we left to carry on our journey to Land's End.

Being clean, smart and with short hair should instil a confidence in the approaching driver that I wasn't an anarchist threat. The Beatles and the Stones had already started a trend for longer locks with other rock bands determined to outdo each other in looking nasty, so my 'clean cut' image stood out by way of contrast. My Union Jack would show a candour bordering on naivety. That openness gave the lift giver a head start by knowing at least something about me before stopping. When hitching to college I wore my college scarf. Prior to Douglas Adam's "Hitch-hiker's guide to the Galaxy" and your 'towel' became the essential travelling companion, the college scarf was *de rigueur*. Perhaps I'd take that with me too, the broad coloured stripes stood out in the gloom and against nondescript foliage on the roadsides. I'd already worked out the best places to stand to make stopping easier for drivers. On fast roads a layby helped, at other locations it might be best to get to the next roundabout or junction. Many European countries hadn't yet embraced roundabouts, but I didn't know that at the time; on the other hand there were far more truck stops and roadside cafes and rest places in Europe. The distances travelled were much longer than in Britain. Those cafes and more frequent laybys proved to be a saving grace. Waiting on the exits of

these roadside respites allowed drivers to not only stop easily but gave them a chance to assess me at a slow speed.

Everything considered, I felt ready. I buried my jitters. I'd committed to this and I wasn't going to let petty misgivings get in the way. What I was not prepared to admit to myself was the glaring reason for my apparent courage, a girl. At seventeen my testosterone was high as a kite. The pull was irresistible. I had no plan beyond getting to Sandviken. What happened after that would be a topic for further discussion between myself and myself.

Chapter Three

I left the house and walked the half a mile or so to the main road. It was mid-summer and it was a hot August. My rucksack was jam packed with a jumper, my scarf and my jacket which was neatly folded and squeezed under the top flap and held down by a leather strap and buckle. No zips on this post-war boy scout's bag. Grey canvas and leather, a design based on the army model. I went for the grey, I didn't much like the army khaki or olive green which were popular at the time, the grey canvas seemed less macho. It was fairly heavy when it was full but I didn't ever intend to carry it too far. Maps, guide books and the youth hostel manual were forced into the front pocket and in the depths of the bag lurked clean pants and socks, pyjamas, a torch and my dad's army jack-knife with the spike for extracting boy scouts from horse's hoofs. My passport and money were buried deep at the bottom of the bag. It did feel bulky and too heavy. But, I couldn't take less on such a long journey so far from help and home. Although there were no mobile 'phones there were 'phone boxes, but there was never one nearby when you needed it. Correspondence was mostly by land-line or snail mail, or mail, as we called it then. Making an international call was something which was getting easier, a cable to Sweden had been laid about four years earlier, All Figure Numbering had only just been introduced to major populated areas and Subscriber Trunk Dialling to Paris from London had only been introduced a couple of years previous to my departure. Calling abroad could still be time consuming and was expensive. I knew nothing about how to 'phone home when I was abroad.

I'd written to Maj almost by return when I received her first letter, enthusiastic that she'd written to me and declaring my intention to visit. The post was not that fast and a few days between our missives could be agonising. Maj was excited that I'd make that journey just to see her. She wasn't sure of her parents reaction to the news but she was sure they wouldn't mind. I assured her I'd stay in a nearby youth hostel. There was one in Sandviken, I assured her. I wouldn't bother her parents.

I loved getting her letters. She wrote as she spoke. Her English was perfect and full of transatlantic idioms. She wrote on special pastel paper and sent the letters in envelopes with a soft coloured lining. It became an obsession waiting for her replies. I'd get very close to missing my bus to the TV factory waiting for the post to arrive in the morning. I'd finally given my week's notice to the factory and left on the Friday saying farewell for now to my new found friends from the nearby art college who only demanded that I send them a postcard. I don't think they thought I'd make it either but they admired my spirit. Maj's letters drove me on, and waiting for my first lift early on the Monday morning I began to relax, a bit. This was familiar. Hitching would be as easy as it ever was for me and this time there was a glowing goal. I really had something to aim for.

Hitching in England wouldn't be a problem. I'd long worked out my strategy if felt that I was in any danger from a lift. There's not a chance that I could overpower any assailant. It would be many years before I eventually took up martial arts, and even then it was more for the exercise and discipline than for my protection. I'm just too small.

I worked out that an assailant would most probably be driving, or, if there was more than one occupant in the car they would both be sat in the front seats. I could stop the car and get out and run. Handbrakes were mechanical and could seriously slow or even stop a car if slammed on. (Electric handbrakes wouldn't allow this but they weren't yet a sparkle in the automotive designer's eye, technology still had a long way to go.) This was my best bet as far as I was concerned. I'd take the gamble. I'd never yet been assaulted in any way and there was no reason to assume that would change. Everything is a risk when travelling, but apparently there's more probability of dying in your own home than being assaulted. I did appreciate that hitching increased the odds significantly but, still nowhere near the odds of

coming a cropper at home, or crossing the street. I was more perturbed by the lift giver's driving than assault. I remembered the priest who gave me a ride once who took his hands off the wheel in a gesture of praise after negotiating every roundabout shouting "The Lord will see us through!". Lorry drivers were always fine and sitting so high above the traffic at a steady speed fostered such a sense of security that it was easy to drift off. Lorry drivers were happy to drive quietly or chat and those who stopped to offer lifts were usually easy going. You never knew who would be your next lift though. It was one of the things I loved about hitching. Meeting some interesting, even crazy people or quiet calm businessmen, sales reps or sometimes whole families was seductive for me. I heard unbelievable stories that were believable and unbelievable stories that were clearly unbelievable and interesting facts about professions or academia and hobbies. A couple of years later when I was at college living in the midlands, I hitched to my parent's house on the south coast at weekends. It was the way my parents made their contribution to my grant, feeding me at weekends. The trip would begin around factory closing time on a Friday and could take a while to cover the hundred miles if the lifts I received were in short hops, I'd sometimes arrive after midnight. One Friday evening my first lift was a lovely metallic pale blue Jaguar Mark Two. The driver, Mr Corrin, worked for a civil engineering company on a project near to my college, boring enormous tunnels intended for storm drainage. He went home every weekend to the south coast, and he lived about a mile from my parents. Mr Corrin not only became a friend who I could call on a Friday afternoon to arrange a lift, he was interested in my college work and discovered I was studying graphics and photography. He gave me a great freelance commission photographing progress on his project. Being lowered by crane into a hole one hundred metres deep in a bucket on the end of a cable was one of the first exciting and slightly dangerous things I did as a photographer. Health and safety were less "gone mad" then, but I was given a hard hat.

When I was in my teens I was very small for my age and it took a long time for me to slough off the veneer of childhood and youth. It's paid dividends later in life as I am fortunately older than I look, or feel. In my mid-teens I always assumed that I looked too young for girls to take an interest, my more mature looking friends seemed to have more appeal and what was an asset then may not have such a benefit now as they look older and more wrinkled than I do. I discovered much later in life that many girls at college did find me attractive but I was just too naïve to notice. I couldn't read women then and I can't read women now and they seem to have no trouble reading me.

I looked pretty for a boy, no rugged good looks. This had a secondary effect; I was very attractive to gays. The laws regarding homosexuality were only just being changed, and it was going to be a long slow process for society to warm to diversity. Gay people were very cautious and still under the radar. I was often picked up when hitching by gay people who may well have been hoping I was gay too. I was accustomed to being propositioned. Walking around town in my lunchbreaks from college I'd receive the occasional offer of a ten bob note when walking past a public toilet or the offer of a fiver to accompany a gentleman back to his flat. A fiver was a lot but I was never persuaded, I liked girls, full stop. If I was given a lift by a gay man it became clear very quickly. I learnt polari from these guys and the conversation would soon peppered with polari terms with the intention of discovering if I was gay. As soon as I heard "bona", "omi", "chick" or "palone" I was in no doubt. My whole experience of this and all gay people I encountered, and there were many, was that they immediately accepted that I was here only for the ride when I said I wasn't inclined to be attracted to men. Some would simply drop the idea and be my chauffeur for the duration pleasantly talking about other subjects and some would discuss being gay. I learnt a lot. Almost no one ever went further than asking. Every one respected my reply. I remember the slightly odd man with a northern accent who reached across and felt my balls saying "Wow,

you've got a football hidden in there!" He apologised when I told him I wasn't gay, "Sorry lad, you've got to try haven't you?" The experience helped me establish a tolerance towards difference early in my life and that people are people, especially when their views impinge on no one else. I wondered how I'd get on in different languages, I hoped that "niet", "non", "nine", "nej" and "ingen" might be enough.

Getting to Harwich in one day wasn't going to be particularly difficult. It's about a hundred and eighty miles. I calculated my progress in England to be about thirty miles an hour on average. I only ever waited longer than about half an hour for a lift if I was hitching late at night, purely because there were so few cars. With luck, I always considered myself lucky even though I eschew superstition, I'd be there in six to eight hours. I didn't know I was lucky till later in life when things often turned out in my favour even if I was frequently a naïve idiot. I realised later in life that we create our own luck much of the time. Luck seems to be a matter of intention and creation, knowing what you want. My preparations and calculated methods to entice lifts must have made a difference. Many people told me they never stopped for hitch-hikers, but they stopped for me because I looked decent. At night I would walk miles along roadside verges to get to a roundabout or even a crossroads where there would be a chance of street lighting. I'd keep my thumb out even as I walked and on occasion someone would screech to a halt, because they were the sort who always stopped for hitch-hikers, and some lorry drivers took the opportunity to relieve the boredom, but generally I was far more successful at junctions and stopping points. Motorways were in the process of being built and hitching was illegal on the motorway carriageways, so the slip roads from service areas or on and off ramps were the only places to stand and wait.

London would likely be the only stumbling block. I knew about the North Circular road which was there long before the M25 and I aimed for that.

I made an itinerary with alternatives and I studied road maps with as much detail as I could find. GPS wasn't started until late in the seventies and not really available for personal navigation until the nineties. Maps were the preferred instruments for finding your way and I loved maps. Still do. I was only familiar with the route to London. From there on I was venturing into new territory. I'd worked out which ferries I would use and I had gleaned their timetables from travel agents. Companies would send holiday brochures if you 'phoned them and asked for details. Would I be able to understand foreign road signs? I decided that I couldn't take a set of phrase books for four different languages. Too heavy. I'd need to rely on deduction and sign language. Where would I eat? On my hitch-hiking travels around Britain the drivers would stop for a break and get their own food, lorries frequented transport cafés and all kinds of lift-givers had favourite stopping places and watering holes. Garages and filling stations had yet to introduce forecourt shops and cafés. Most service stations were on the front of garages. Service originally meant car servicing and it was the motorway service area which eventually gave a new meaning to a "service" station. A few enterprising souls had begun to park their fast food vans in laybys, burgers weren't yet much in evidence except in Wimpy bars but faggot and pea batches for instance, were common in the midlands. There might even be a café slightly more upmarket than a transport café such as a Little Chef built close to a garage; the first inklings of roadside service areas. Occasionally drivers would share their packed lunch. There were no sandwich shops, but a Mars bar or a pork pie from a butcher's shop would stave off serious pangs. I wasn't aware of cholesterol, obesity, or diabetes when I was seventeen and thin as a rake. If the lift ended near the driver's home I might even be invited to share a meal. This was one of the advantages of being small and looking barely adult and naïve. It brought out the mothering instinct and I was even asked if my mum fed me enough? Would it be similar in Europe? I couldn't count on it so I hoped the youth hostels would have food provision, and most did, or there would be villages or towns nearby. The Youth Hosteller's Guide to Europe had been published just a couple of years

before with local maps for finding their locations off the main roads. I marked the hostels on my map along the various possible routes.

The A33 to London via Bagshot and Staines joining the North Circular road at Chiswick was uneventful. One lift to Basingstoke and then a lorry which, as luck would have it, was going to Ipswich. I could sit back and relax. The driver was taciturn and I soon stopped badgering him with questions. I was excited. He was of course unexcited about his trip, but he was interested in how I thought I'd get to Sweden and didn't show much confidence in my chances of success. Like most lorry drivers he was amiable and welcomed the company. We stopped for lunch in the Ace Café on the A406 which was by this time attracting bikers in the evenings. It became famous and although it closed in the late sixties was reopened in the nineties and is still a favourite meeting place for motorcyclists. I made a note that when I eventually bought a 'proper' bike, not the pathetic little scooter I owned, (I apologise if you're a Lambretta or Vespa fan, too slow for me!), I would have to go back there. Beefy had already inspired me with his three-fifty Matchless.

I was dropped on a roundabout outside Colchester on the A12 and walked a few yards to the beginning of the A120 to Harwich, which was another twenty miles on. There was a constant flow of vehicles heading for Harwich and the ferry. It took two lifts to get there. The first lift from Colchester was with a couple and their two children with whom I shared the back seat, going to Clacton for a holiday at Butlins. The second took me to the ferry in Harwich where I arrived at about six in the evening. I bought my ticket, an open ended return, for eleven pounds and waited until it boarded at about nine. Eleven pounds was a tidy sum, I thought it was very expensive. It was around half a week's wages for an average workman at the time. Even now the fare hovers around two hundred pounds. I had no cabin or even a couchette so I spent much of the trip outside watching the ferry set sail and, when we were under way, the sea, the stars and other shipping and I gave myself a tour of the decks.

The crossing took all night, from eleven in the evening till six thirty the next morning. Fairly placid seas and a clear night meant that the stars were clear and bright. Away from the coast the sky had very little Earth light. The faint glows from towns on the coasts were right down on the horizon. It gets cold at night out on the ocean, surprisingly so even in the summer especially if it's clear. I needed my anorak and my scarf. The atmosphere was damp and the deck seats were soaked with dew. Eventually I had to go back into the warmth of the lounge and I found a seat where I dozed.

In the morning, around five o'clock, people started to emerge from their cabins to get coffee and breakfast. As I queued for my coffee in the self-service cafeteria a large black gentleman started talking to me in a broad American southern-states accent. He was very friendly and invited me to join him at his table where his wife and daughter were already waiting patiently. I'd grown up in a society where we rarely saw any people of colour. The only black girl in my school was from an orphanage which looked after children from London. I felt that this was a great privilege, something I wouldn't have experienced if I'd not been travelling and I relished the conversation I had with them. I can't imagine how naïve I must have been. I had no idea how to address them or if aspects of race were taboo when interacting with black people. I'd just have to use common sense which I severely lacked; my father's favourite admonishment – "you've got no common sense Andrew!" rang in my ears. I discovered quickly that my host at the breakfast table was in fact an American and his wife was British from East Anglia where he had been serving at Lakenheath, one of the American Airforce bases. He was in the USAF and was now serving in Hanover, Germany. After babbling on about my plans to hitch-hike to Sweden I think they thought I was quite adventurous and asked if I'd like a lift with them when we disembarked. They could drop me off anywhere on the road from The Hook of Holland to Hanover. I consulted my maps and

asked if it would be OK for them to take me as far as the Dutch border with Germany. No problem.

The American serviceman told me to disembark with the other foot passengers as he had booked his car on a ticket including the passengers. If I waited near the exit to the port he'd pick me up. It took a few minutes to show my passport, pass through customs, unsure whether to stop or keep walking, and out into the early morning finding my way, following the line of cars to the dock gates.

This was my second day and I was already abroad. I encountered my first dilemma, it didn't take too long manifesting itself. If I waited for the USAF officer I may miss other lifts if he'd forgotten or just decided that he didn't want to take me after all. On the other hand it was a chance of a lift right across the Netherlands. I took the risk, not too much of a risk, but I took it anyway. And, was I glad I'd waited? Most of the light traffic from the ferry came off first, so I reckoned that if I did miss the lift with the USAF officer the lorries would follow with a real possibility that I wouldn't be stuck there. At the tail end of the departing cars, vans, caravans and campers appeared a nineteen sixties Nash Rambler Ambassador in pink. It was massive and sighed to a halt alongside me with its V8 engine burbling. I couldn't believe it. I was clearly astonished and he said "Like the car eh?" "Wow,! Yeah!" I slid into a back seat which was as long as a bed which I shared with their six year old daughter whose feet barely reached the front edge. She was delighted to have me in the car with her, giggling and chatting until she drifted into sleep an hour later.

When I was planning my route I didn't know what to imagine these foreign places would look like. The photographs I'd seen and pictures in travel brochures were tourist shots, carefully chosen compositions retouched to give the impression of a sunny, happy, modern or historic town. My imagination pictured exotic places but much looked so, ah, normal.

As we left the Hook of Holland the sun was already bright, it was late August and as we passed the docklands and industrial fuming of Rotterdam I began to notice the small differences in architecture. Not the big old stuff like town halls and cathedrals, but the design of houses. In Holland the bricks looked a bit slimmer, the roofs were steeper. Many houses had driveways which disappeared down under the house, where I assumed would be a garage or a cellar. It was great not to be able to understand shop signs. But there were some which didn't take too much effort to work out. I soon discovered that a shop in Holland is a winkel! Brilliant. And a bookshop is a boekwinkel.

The roads were often lined with poplars, windbreaks on these flat lands. Farms were surrounded by rectangles of tall trees, and what looked like mile upon mile of greenhouses were surrounded canals and dykes. I was amazed to see the lawns and small meadows sloping down to the water being kept trim by grazing sheep. There were allotments. Not the sort of allotments adjacent to British towns; these were more like gardens with substantial sheds. The sheds were chalets, summer houses for the inhabitants from blocks of flats in the cities. They were supplied with electricity, verandas with picnic furniture outside and windows adorned with curtains. There were TV aerials on some of them. Holland really was flat but everything beyond about a mile was obscured by a haze so brightly lit by the sun that it made me squint. I travelled to Europe many times over the next few decades and I was impressed by the white haze every time if it was sunny or not raining. Electrical distribution was above ground with massive pylons and small concrete towers for local lines. I was beginning to notice differences. The dykes were long and straight, everything was so neat and clean in Holland, compared to home.

The novelty of being driven on the wrong side of the road in a car with left hand drive took a while to wear off. How do you drive in a country where you can't understand the road signs? Most of the graphic picture signs are fairly obvious, but "Omleiding doorgaand verkeer ri" would be a problem. It means Detour, through traffic direction – but there were a

lot of signs like that. I discovered much later, when driving myself across Europe that you just ignore the ones you can't translate quickly. This method had me driving to dead ends and needing to double back over some fairly long distances. I was never in any real hurry so I regarded it as a minor hazard of driving abroad.

We passed by Utrecht and as we approached Apeldoorn I noticed there were the beginnings of hills. We must be a fair way across Holland. These names conjured exotic visions of places I'd have loved to have explored. That would have to wait till I could visit in my own transport.

I should explain. I have a dreadful memory for names at the best of times. As a university lecturer I devised methods of avoiding needing to remember my students' names. "Hi there" would suffice. I would remember a name a couple of minutes later. It was fine for tutorials but casual meetings were always, "Hi there!". So I've only used names where I can remember them. Which is not very many. In any case I won't be using real names, just approximations. Sally for Susie, Robert for Roger and so on. The best I can do is name by description. Currently therefore, in the story, I'm travelling with the USAF officer and his wife and daughter. I've never been accused of being quiet. I can talk the hind leg off a donkey. My American host and his wife were very chatty and we discussed being posted in Europe, the differences between England and Connecticut, between English food, "Really? You call that food?" and English weather versus New England extremes. How long would I be at college and what did I want to do when I graduated. Graduated was a new word for me and I discovered that it meant when I achieved a degree and left education. He said that he was from Tennessee which explained his southern accent but he'd been posted to Connecticut for many years before coming over to Lakenheath.

We stopped in a layby near Enchede where there were toilets and washing facilities. All very smart, acceptably clean, and the USAF officer explained that they stopped here for a loo break and a snack every time they drove through. It was a short detour from the main road to Osnabruck. He had brought his car from The United States, because he could. Many of the American servicemen had brought their own cars with them. They could be on five year postings, consequently they thought it was worth the effort to ship their car not really trusting what might be available in Europe, especially post war and the wartime disruption to manufacturing and garage facilities. On their bases they had mechanics familiar with their vehicles.

Enchede is right on the border with Germany and as we approached the border post and customs I rummaged in my bag for my passport. I was surprised, we slowed down but just sailed through. There were guards but no one stopped us. There were lorries parked with officials checking them but everything else was progressing as if the border wasn't there. I did notice that as we slowed right down that we had been watched by a guard standing outside a booth in the middle of the road. I guessed he noticed the American number plate and the registrations of all the cars passing through. It would still be many years before the border posts would be unmanned across Europe. The Schengen Agreement was not signed until 1985 although the European Union was formed in 1958 and freedom of travel was one of its main criteria.

I was in Germany.

I said goodbye to the officer and his family just beyond the border. He dropped me on a junction where a road going north would take me to Nordhorn and Lingen on the way to Bremen. This was it. This is where it really was going to begin. No longer anything familiar like an English speaking driver. I had to rely on my maps and my planning. I was aiming to reach Bremen in time to find the youth hostel. It was still early afternoon. Bremen was between three and five hours away if I managed good lifts. The nearest hostel to where I had been dropped was only an hour away and the hostel I was aiming for near Bremen was a little

way beyond Bremen in a town called Rotenburg about a hundred and thirty miles, that could take longer than four hours. Should I play safe and stop for the night in Lingen? I was spurred. I didn't want to stop. I'd take a deep breath and head for Rotenburg. I stood in a slowly clouding day. The sun disappeared and it became cooler and more pleasant standing and waiting on that junction.

I didn't wait long. An elderly couple stopped. I ran to the car. They spoke no English. In a way I was secretly pleased about that. For the first time in my life I was in unknown territory.

I've known many friends and acquaintances who only ever travel to English speaking territories. They're restricted by minor fears. A fear of flying stops a lot of people travelling and a fear of needles has people avoiding vaccination. These fears are tacit and people elude detection and avoid reference to them in their conversations and everyday interactions. I really don't like standing at the top of tall buildings. A fear of those particular heights. I found I could confront the phobia by being overt about it. I could go to the top of the Rock in New York, the Rockefeller building, and enjoy the view by taking the fear with me, not trying to hide it. My guess is that many conspiracy theories are hatched as smokescreens by people unwilling to reveal their fears. At the time I was hitch-hiking to Sweden, conspiracy theories were seen as a bit of a joke and never taken seriously, at least by most people. I felt sorry for an old hippy friend when he thought he was being spied on and being followed in his ancient Morris van. He really believed it but no-one else did. Too much weed, they said. Dissent against vaccination, the belief that climate change and global warming are a hoax, that China and North Korea are developing a nerve gas to take over the world are conspiracies which may be vehicles for the disenfranchised or slow minded individuals to claim a right to be, to be important. To focus attention on themselves. It's not all unacknowledged phobias and paranoia. Certain politicians know exactly how to stimulate this need. Russian leaders have a tradition of denying everything. Everyone knows they're lying but arguing against their blatant statements is pointless. It's propaganda for their own populace, not the rest of the world.

I still didn't feel like an adult. It would be much later in life that I would lose my sense of immaturity. I always felt like an inexperienced tyro even when I genuinely had expertise in many aspects of life. I was never able to sail like an old seadog, even though I could, or ride a big bike like a biker with insects spattered across my forehead, even though I worked freelance for a biker magazine and rode hundreds of different bikes. I remained naïve, but right at that moment I sensed the last ties had been cast off. After the umbilical had been cut I was still very much attached. The police whistle my mum used to call me home for supper tethered me to home and family when I spent whole days away with friends on local adventures in woodlands and lanes searching for birds' nests and building tree houses. It had a phenomenal reach and I swear I could hear it from a mile away when she wanted me and my brother back at home. The apron strings continued to be woven into my fabric as I went to college and took on responsibilities in academia and earning some of my own income.

Here I was now suddenly adrift. Everything from now on would be based on my decisions alone. There was no-one to provide a soft landing if it all went horribly wrong.

The elderly couple were gentle and friendly, they drove sedately in their Opel but to me they were the height of adventure. They gave me a lift for about ten miles and turned off into a village.

I stayed on the junction and was soon picked up by a brown, old styled Mercedes van with sliding doors which were ubiquitous in Germany at the time. It had yellow signwriting in a gothic German script and I had no idea what it meant. I found myself with my rucksack at my feet sat high between two rather rotund and rosy cheeked elderly men. I was sat on the engine housing with the gear lever between my legs. They were dressed in brown overall

coats covering traditional clothes, they had checked shirts, coloured braces and Tyrol style hats...they were egg and dairy merchants delivering to local shops. This was their uniform. My new hosts also spoke no English. I would have to get used to this, but somehow I really liked it. I was truly abroad, embraced in a foreign land. They somehow managed to show me on my map how far they could take me. Not a great distance but it was fascinating. They must have stopped at least five times while I was with them in front of a range of local grocers to deliver eggs, the shop windows were full of things I'd never seen before and with signs I couldn't read. I was amazed at the profusion of curled sausages, whole legs of ham hung in rows from meat hooks, massive loaves and wines in barrels. One girl shop assistant had a plaits of her long hair pinned like headphones over her ears. It wasn't just a stereotype, they really did this with their hair. It was in one small town where we stopped that I saw the big red sign over a shop which said simply FUCK. It was the name of a 'buchhandlung' a bookshop. It made my day. They were a jolly couple of fellows and laughed a lot. They gave me chicken legs and apple juice. I could imagine them drinking in the evenings in a brauhaus with steins of beer and lederhosen. If all the Germans I was going to encounter were like my last two lifts I need not have worried.

No-one knew where I was. Even if I sent a postcard to my mum I'd be long gone from wherever I posted it by the time it arrived on our doorstep at home. There were no cybercafes or libraries with desktop computers. It would be another twenty two years before Tim Berners-Lee came up with the World Wide Web, and even then it would take a while for it to catch on in a big way; as a tool for information it is brilliant. When it did realise its potential it was quickly usurped by those out for a quick buck. Tim Berners-Lee never intended that it should become so commercial, that wasn't his vision, he gave it to the world for free, and others have abused and monetised it in what can only be described as appalling ways. It's a dangerous tool, and if we use it, we're constantly at risk. We've had to develop a new set of skills, not using the internet is easy, but if we do we have to recognise and defend ourselves against all that is bubbling beneath the surface of human virtue; obscenity, fraud, crime, psychopathy and a get rich quick culture. Nothing has ever debased our communication like 'social media'. Our younger population blithely scuttle along in the lowlife twilight of their smart phones thumb pressing lower orders of language, never discovering their true purposes in life and their own self-awareness. It's now used by presidents to slander their rivals and the large parts of their societies who don't like them or vote for them and to incite riots and dissent among the more gullible, sub-average IQ populace who they've duped with battered populist survival rhetoric. It's used by governments to spy on other governments and on us and, worst of all, there is now so much mendacity, misinformation and coercion that simple standards of integrity and trust can't be found anywhere or relied upon. I really can't see any real improvements in modern internet communications other than speed.

How did I get on with no immediate access to the rest of the world? How would I cope in a crisis? For a start I'd need to be willing to communicate with the people around me by speaking with them face to face. How could I possibly do that in a foreign country, where I did not speak the language, without a translation app? I used a range of other skills which I had at my disposal. I could sketch things in a notebook and show the other person. I used my hands and some facial expressions. If you mime eating, someone immediately know what you're talking about. Point in a direction and at a road sign and they know where you want to go. I treated these skills as a simple enough challenge and relished the satisfaction of succeeding when the other person understood me.

I'd help anyone who asked me for help and I think nine tenths of the population would too. Many years later when I visited Romania soon after the fall of Ceausescu I found the country bereft of fuel, food and money but ordinary village people were willing to give

what they had and offer assistance with no thought of recompense. On reflection, perhaps I might not include Paris in that assessment.

Being without a 'phone in my pocket, organising the whole trip without a single mouse click meant nothing. I had no idea what it would be like with it, the idea was very much still science fiction. Technology had yet to rear its ugly head and hold the world to ransom. Flat screens and tiny batteries were a long way off. The cathode ray tube I'd seen drop from the factory assembly line wouldn't fit in a pocket. It would only just about fit in most people's living rooms. I remember the flat screen televisual tablets the fictional astronauts were using in Arthur C Clarke's and Stanley Kubrick's film '2001' made at around that time. Kubrick began filming in 1964 and released the film in 1968, I never thought I'd be using one which would be far superior only forty years later. I concede that the internet is useful and has benefits but we've lost perspective and we fail to notice or address the dampening effect it has on society.

I stood waiting for my next lift aware that there was no simple way out. I'd started so I would have to finish. I would need to use my wits and ability to communicate to go further, or acquire help if I needed it. I didn't have the world in my pocket on a smart 'phone but, in another sense, I had the world at my feet.

As the day wore on the sky clouded over. It was way past lunchtime before my egg couriers reached their destination and dropped me off. They had taken me about twenty miles. My time with them was wonderful but I hoped that my next lift would be a bit quicker and further. As I found a junction next to the major road I was following, it started to drizzle. The road was a dual carriageway, not exactly a motorway, but fast. Speed limits were being trialled in Britain and were made permanent at seventy miles per hour in 1967, family cars were designed to cruise at less than seventy but Midland Red, the bus company were achieving over eighty five on the M1 sections between Birmingham and London. I'd heard that there were no speed limits in Germany and as I stood searching in my rucksack for my plastic mac a large black Mercedes hurtled past at what must have been a hundred miles an hour. I couldn't believe that the tyres could stick to the road at such speeds on a rain soaked surface. The spray it kicked up covered me just as I'd donned the mac. I'd not seen a car go so fast in the wet other than on a race track. I did wonder how safe my next lift would be.

I hadn't had my thumb extended for very long but I was soaked from the spray of cars and coaches, the lorries were much slower and didn't have such a wake of water. A big silver Mercedes stopped. I was full of concerns. Would the driver mind my dripping mac and my now soaked rucksack? How fast was he going to drive; how far? I shook as much water from the mac as I could and looked quizzically at the driver wondering what I should do with it. He nodded at the back seat. I opened the back door and dropped the mac onto the floor. When I returned to the front and slid into the seat he turned and smiled.

The driver was a smartly dressed small man in his late sixties. He had a benevolent face, slicked back grey hair and was wearing a tie. The car was new. The seats were grey leather. He was listening to a radio. Classical music. As I dumped the rucksack onto the floor in front of me he spoke in English. "So, where are you going?" I relaxed. This was going to be much easier than I'd anticipated. I told my story almost by rote. I was a student at art college. I was between colleges and using my summer break to travel. I was going to Stockholm first. I didn't tell him about the girl, I didn't want him asking questions about her, I was too embarrassed for that. I was chattering on and as I often did, I checked myself. I knew I was loquacious, my dad frequently quietened me telling me I talked too much and one day it would get me into trouble. I couldn't work out how exactly, but I heeded the caution. I asked the elderly gentleman where he was going. For me at the time, sixty was elderly.

He began to talk in a slow but precise manner as if enjoying speaking English and rediscovering the vocabulary. He brought me up with a start when he told me he was the

general manager of Krupps. This rang some alarm bells for me. Krupps were a major arms manufacturer for Germany during the war and its owners and directors were prosecuted for war crimes. The company was largely reduced post war but it still operated producing trucks. He could see that I was suddenly quiet and a bit uneasy, as I asked him if Krupps was still a going concern. "Ah! No! Not that Krupps. My company is in Solingen, a town further south than Essen where the arms manufacturer was based and the name is spelt with just one 'p', it's Krups. We make kitchen appliances." He told me he had done everything in his power to keep a low profile and avoid the Nazis during the war. He'd spent much of the latter part of the conflict in a prisoner of war camp in Scotland. He was taken prisoner in the North Africa campaign in 1942 and considered himself very lucky to be comparatively safe for the duration. He thought he'd been treated well by the British and was grateful. He learnt English in the camp. It's why he picked me up, he said. He didn't normally stop for hitch-hikers, but he'd noticed my union jack.

He was on his way to Bremen and his family home. He spent most of weekdays in the factory in Solingen, but he still considered Bremen to be his home. I knew the name Solingen, along with Sheffield, Toledo, Thiers and Sandviken they made some of the world's best blades, from swords to razors. We stopped for food, a meal of what I could only describe as sausages and mash, with enormous spicy sausages in a traditional restaurant. He saw that I was searching the menu for a cheap snack, I couldn't afford restaurant prices, and waived my anxiety saying the meal was on him, he'd enjoyed my company. I had relieved the tedium of his regular, trip which was especially mundane when it rained.

When we reached Bremen we didn't stop and emerged from the eastern side of the city. The youth hostel was in a smaller town called Rotenburg, another twenty five miles further on and he took me to the front door. He calmed my protests and said it was nothing, he would soon be home.

My Krups manager shook my hand when I left his car. He made me feel as though he was thanking me for the ride. I couldn't thank him enough. Somehow I was in the youth hostel early in the evening. The comfortable ride with a conversation for most of the way had made the time pass unnoticed. From where the egg men had dropped me to here was over a hundred miles. We must have been travelling quite fast all the while we were on the road and not in a restaurant.

The Jugendherberge at Rotenburg was a traditional German building. If I hadn't been in Lower Saxony I'd have called it Bavarian. I wouldn't have been surprised to see children wearing lederhosen. (The hostel has been rebuilt since the sixties and is now a modernist looking affair.) Inside was clean and the staff were very welcoming as they took me to the dormitory and indicated my bunk. The whole place was old wood panelled. There's a hostel etiquette which included doing your own cleaning and tidying plus a bit for the house like sweeping the floor or cleaning the kitchen if you had time. Lights off after midnight and quiet in the dorm, especially if someone was already asleep. I took care not to leave my rucksack unattended, otherwise it was comfortable. Rotenburg jugendherberge had an all you can eat buffet and a breakfast bar. Excellent! There were only a couple of other guests on my floor; a pair of very young boys on a local walking tour and what appeared to me to be an old and possibly homeless man. There were others on other floors in the house and I saw them at breakfast but it was quiet and I went to bed fairly exhausted around ten o'clock. The thing which is strongest in my memory was the thick brown blankets on the bed which had "FUSSENDE" woven into the fabric. I appreciated not having to smell anyone else's feet, at least directly.

As I went to the bathroom in the morning taking my bag with me I noticed the old itinerant was still wheezing away in deep sleep. Drool from his bad teeth or something even less desirable had dribbled from his open mouth on to his pillow. Not the most appetising

sight but I still ate a hearty breakfast of cereal, eggs, ham, spicy sausage slices and something I'd never tried before, dark pumpernickel. I wasn't that hungry but like a fox who discovers a cache of leftovers in a dustbin, I didn't know when I might next get a chance to eat, so I filled up. When I travel with my wife to far flung lands we stay in good hotels where there are usually sprawling breakfast bars with foods I've not seen before. I have to try everything. It doesn't help my BMI but it's a great way to try different cuisines without needing to opt and book for a whole meal. I find this especially delightful in Japan where nothing is more different, more civilised or more foreign. I love Japanese breakfast bars.

Rotenburg was on the junction of a main road proceeding north to Hamburg. It wasn't a long walk before I was waiting on a sunny verdant junction. A 2CV, (Deux Chevaux-Vapeur, literally "Two Steam-Horses", a French farmer's car, eased to a halt. 2CVs were first made in 1948 and very popular across Europe and in the United Kingdom around the 1960s and 70s. They weren't economic even though they only had a twenty nine horse power, six hundred cc air-cooled, twin cylinder engine. They didn't have green credentials either, they had toxic emissions, gradually burnt their engine oil and in the early days needed leaded petrol; still they were favoured by the emerging "greens" and hippies because they looked friendly in a down to earth kind of way so they imagined that they were environmentally friendly too.

As I ran to the car I could see through the rear window that the 2CV was packed to the canvas roof. The door opened and a young guy emerged grinning and holding his hand out in a welcoming gesture. When I got closer and looked inside there two more young men who looked like students. The one who'd got out pushed and shoved piles of bags and coats as high and far behind the rear seats as he could. The seat was no more than an elaborate deckchair, canvas stretched over a flimsy tubular frame. He reinserted himself across the rear seats and invited me to join him. I took the remaining seat, which was surprisingly comfortable, and managed to put my rucksack between my feet. There was a lot of noise. They all spoke at once, in German. There was a lot of smoke, they were all smoking. The 2CV has a really soft suspension. It was designed to cope with the rutted farm tracks and ploughed fields of rural France. On the road it rolled around corners threatening to capsize, and smoothed all but the deepest potholes. As we moved off the car seemed to suspend itself for a second before lurching into action and we were on our way, never reaching more than about forty five miles an hour. The speedometer was wildly inaccurate and when it rained later in the day I discovered it was driven by a rotating cable which also operated the windscreen wipers. When the windscreen wipers were engaged the speedo needle and the wiper blades swung back and forth in unison.

I was fascinated by the gear lever which jutted from the dashboard and slid forward and back and twisted around its axis to find the four gears and reverse. As the shaft of the gearstick emerged into the engine compartment it continued forward to the very front of the car, just behind the large cooling fan, where it was attached to the gear changing mechanism of a gearbox which was mounted in front of the engine. This was very different from the conventional layout of common cars except for the BMC Mini perhaps which was also front wheel drive with the gearbox mounted beneath the engine. The Volkswagen Beetle and the Fiat 500 had similar configuration for their rear engine cars. It was when I first discovered that there were many innovative ideas and designs in cars and motorbikes other than the standard front engine, rear wheel drive models.

The three young men in the 2CV were law students from Frankfurt. They were in their second year of three and were taking a trip to Oslo to visit the driver's sister who lived there with her husband, a Norwegian.

The driver was a tall, at least to me he was tall, probably nearly six feet, and thin with short blond hair. He was the quietest and only interjected to ask about the route, whether we

should stop for food and drink or pull in to a garage for fuel. He checked the oil at each of these stops, it's how I discovered the engine arrangement; this 2CV burnt a lot of oil. I discovered that he wasn't at all taciturn, he just didn't speak much English. His quiet interactions in German with the other two were brief but frequent. They told me that he understood but he wasn't so confident with speaking English. He spoke a little Norwegian which would prove helpful when we reached Copenhagen later that day. Scandinavian languages are all very similar and other than Finnish, which is essentially in a lingual group with Estonian and Hungarian, the Swedes, Danes and Norwegians can understand each other. From what I could ascertain the Danes spoke a more guttural version than the Swedes or Norwegians. I imagined that a Swede listening to a Dane was a bit like myself listening to a fast talking Glaswegian. I could understand him and he could understand me but with some words slipping by unexplained and the rest bathed in a cocktail of unfamiliar vowel sounds delivered at an unfamiliar pace with a growling edge and a hint of violence. There's a wonderful quip about a fellow having a prolonged coughing fit in a restaurant. Another customer brings it to the attention of the waiter who investigates and when he returns he tells the anxious diner, "It's OK, he's just speaking Danish!". Much later in my life my wife worked with Danes and Dutch who she remarked were very tall. I quipped that the Dutch were tall because they spent a lot of time stretching to peer over the dykes. When she later related the idea to her Dutch colleagues they collapsed in genuine mirth having never thought of it before.

The young student in the back of the car with me spoke fairly decent English and the passenger in the front who was our navigator spoke a little. Like most foreign people I've met throughout my life and travels they didn't expect me to speak their language. The French are different in this respect, or rather the French just don't bother speaking to you, at least that's what seems to be true in Paris. The two guys who could talk with me wanted to practice their English. For them speaking English was a distinct asset in their lives.

We were smoking HB cigarettes. A very popular brand at the time in Germany. The guy in the back seat with me was Rudy, the driver was Peter and the front seat passenger was Max. They were distinct characters and naming them at this point will make talking about them easier. Rudy said he preferred HB because of the "catch" in the back of your throat when you inhaled the smoke. You really knew you were smoking. Not as harsh as the French Gauloises but "stronger than your English, no?" I was a hardened smoker by this time in my life and it would be another thirty years before I'd finally give it up.

When I was about fifteen working in the garage on a winter Sunday there was a delivery of Petrol. When the tanker had finished replenishing the underground tanks and pulled off the forecourt it was my job to 'check the dipsticks' to verify the delivery. The filler caps, which had shaped guides for the two metre long brass dipsticks, were under large heavy manhole covers. It was very cold and icy. As I lifted the manhole cover from one of the tanks it slipped away from me on the ice and crashed onto my foot. I hopped around a bit but my feet were freezing cold and numb. It wasn't until a while later that I noticed the blood had reached the lace-holes of my shoe. The garage owner whisked me off to the local doctor who covered my flattened toe with antibiotic cream and told me to go home and rest it up. , Thankfully it was just my toe. As I sat back and my mum supported my bandaged foot on a cushion my feet had warmed up and it began to hurt like hell. Writhing, I could barely contain the agony. This was what sealed my addiction to smoking. My grandfather, inspired by a wartime habit of offering a cigarette to a wounded or dying man gave me a packet of Craven 'A'. I smoked the lot in one day and never stopped after that.

The link between smoking and lung cancer had only been established a couple of years earlier and was yet to have any impact on people's habits, but anyway it was already too late for me, I was hooked. The tobacco industry endeavoured to stymie the effectiveness

of the studies which showed clear links and it was well into the 1970s before the public began to take notice. Smoking is still one of the world's major killers. It was never a pleasant activity but the addiction is at least as strong as the addiction to heroin, and the addiction was adamant that we didn't care if it would kill us.

Once the initial banter had died down and the Germans had exhausted all the jokes they could muster about the English we settled into exchanges about who they were, who I was, where they studied, where I studied, where they were going and where I was going and what they wanted to do when they graduated. Finally we exhausted the immediate inquisitive conversation and became quieter as Hamburg emerged from a greyish afternoon. We drove on through without stopping. They wanted to reach Copenhagen that evening.

Peter asked Rudy to ask me if it would be OK if we took the longer ferry route to Denmark from Rostock to Gedser. He explained that it took longer but there was really good food on board which was in fact a Danish smorgasbord. I had no idea what this was, but I was game for anything especially if we were continuing in a generally northern direction.

I was a little disappointed not to have seen Hamburg. Peter drove across the river Elbe to the city centre and along the Reeperbahn, Hamburg's famous nightlife street, and I could see docklands in the distance but we didn't stop and we were soon on our way out of the city on the road to Lubeck.

During the war my father had travelled through Lubeck on his way to the Baltic. I had not planned to visit this area with that in mind but here I was on the same roads that he'd been on twenty odd years before. He spoke very little of his wartime experiences but over the years I gathered that he'd been sent to Belgium soon after D-Day to take part in the follow up operation as the main thrust of the allies headed towards Berlin. He saw terrible things. Dead bodies, animals and humans; waifs and orphans, destruction, hunger and abjection and worse. I believe it's why he never travelled abroad again.

He joined up at the beginning of the war as a man in his late teens to escape the clutches of his religiously fanatical and domineering mother. She didn't believe in the pleasures of the flesh or of much else in life for that matter and he couldn't wait to get to a cinema and have a pint of beer. For him volunteering for the army was a quick and easy diversion, a way out. What I always found remarkable was that he survived six whole years of army life, battles, being bombed, strafed and had lived to tell the tale. From a Royal Engineer on searchlights in the New Forest, protecting Spitfires on the airstrips, to the Argyll and Sutherland highlanders. He was fortunate to have joined the Argylls after the North Africa campaign where they suffered enormous casualties. After a stint as an RMP he ended up on the Baltic coast for six months in a tranquil sanatorium in Travemunde.

We drove through Travemunde and on to Rostock. Years later I would visit Travemunde when I re-created this road trip and try as I might I never found the sanatorium even though he made superb drawings of it. I would have recognised it if I'd seen it. It had views of the Baltic and meadows sweeping down to the sea where he spent the rest of the summer after VE Day on May 8th 1945, swimming, drawing, learning to play the harmonica and relaxing. It may well have been demolished before I got there in the two thousands.

Our ferry tickets included the buffet. The fare was twelve Deutchmarks one way, just over a pound. The car was parked on the car deck and we found our way to the cafeteria. There was the much vaunted smorgasbord. One end of the café lounge had a long bar for drinks and sweets and the main counter, complete with hot plates and refrigerated containers, stretched for over ten metres and was crammed with steaming fresh food both sides. It was self-service, a civilised free for all. There was so much food there was no need for anxious queueing. We took a tray and plates and proceeded to attempt to try everything. I was amazed to see caviar which I'd never tasted before and a vast array of seafood and fish, meats and sausage, stews and casseroles. There were two dozen different salads and great bowls of hot

vegetables. There were sweets, pastries, sauces, fruits; I couldn't believe it. There was no way I could try everything as much as I wanted to. As the platters and bowls emptied they were continuously refilled or replaced with fresh ones. Rudy did his best to explain what things were. Some things were not obvious and I was surprised to see what looked like raw tripe and crabs in their shells. There was a whole salmon. I'd never seen a whole roast salmon before. By the time we were bursting and loosened our belts we were about an hour and a half into the crossing. We went on deck to sit burping, farting and smoking in deckchairs watching seabirds and fishing boats as Gedser harbour came into view.

Other than trying exotic food in the increasingly popular Chinese restaurants which began to burgeon after the early 1960s I had very little experience of foreign cuisine. Unlike the older members of my family I was willing to try almost anything. I reckoned that if the locals ate it, and they were still standing then I could risk it too. If I didn't like it I didn't have to eat any more of it. But I did like it, most of it, and this trip introduced me to spicy salami style sausages, dark breads, marinated herring, caviar and continental salads, which I thought were fabulously indulgent, especially compared to the lettuce, tomato and cucumber with a dollop of Heinz salad cream which passed for a salad at home, which, I studiously avoided. Even though my mum was a superb cook most of her dishes were traditionally English. She eventually trained to be a professional chef and expanded her range dramatically. My dad stuck to fish and chips and steak pies though.

As we disembarked, the 2CV struggled a bit with the off ramp. The front wheel drive causing the narrow tyres to slip on the seaweed and algae slime. There's no big tidal differences in the Baltic, about a quarter of a metre at most and the water is brackish, very low salinity, so the slimy bit was quite narrow and didn't cause too much of a problem. We were soon over it with a bit of a run-up. The ferry ramps and slipways around where I lived in Southampton were covered and uncovered by five metres of very salty sea water every twelve hours. They *were* slippery. As we disembarked we were leaving Germany and entering Denmark.

Like Britain, Denmark had applied to join the European Union in 1961 a move vehemently opposed by De Gaulle until he resigned in 1969. Pompidou took a more pragmatic approach and Britain, Ireland and Denmark joined in 1973. Hence, at that time, there was a border to cross. We handed our passports to Peter who dutifully handed them to the waiting guards at the border post. After each passport was opened and our portraits checked against the real thing, we were waved through. I stuffed my passport back into my rucksack as we drove into Denmark. It was about seventy miles to Copenhagen and with a couple of pee breaks we were soon entering the outskirts. I was wide eyed trying to take in all around but with no reference or previous knowledge of the city very little had any meaning other than that we were in a city. Max found the Youth Hostel, the "Vandrerhjem" meaning 'wanderer's home', the Danhostel. It was right by the docks in the middle of the city and a about a quarter of a mile from the Tivoli Gardens fun park. As soon as we were settled, left our bags in left luggage lockers and had a quick wash we headed out into the darkening evening. We worked our way towards Tivoli, stopping on the way to buy pilsner, and pølser. This was another first for me. Beer in England had somehow deteriorated to bland keg beers like Watney's Red Barrel and Double Diamond and pubs pulled flat bitter and mild from suspect barrels. I wasn't keen on beer. Here was pilsner. First brewed in Bohemia in the middle of the nineteenth century it became popular across Europe and the original Urquell was copied wholesale. This was different to the stale smelling beers in the pubs at home and I was drinking the tasty light fizzy ale like lemonade. I was still too young to drink legally in England so I wasn't a big drinker anyway. After two bottles I have vague memories of going through the magical Tivoli Gardens. After a couple more I can remember nothing except a lot of laughter and a spinning room when I laid nauseously on my bunk when we returned late to

the hostel. There was no curfew in the Denmark vandrerhjem. There was one thing which stood out. Rudy provided a non-stop supply of HB and, while he was draining yet more pilsner from a bottle he declared that he was an “English boy, I only speak English, I do not speak Deutsch, I am English boy.” He was probably taking the mickey out of me but it was funny, and he kept it up until I, and he, passed out.

If I’d been at home I would have slept in till midday and then crawled out of bed groaning. All things are relative and the rate that time elapses depends greatly on expectations and stimuli. A lecture about how paint dries from Prof. Green, who stands speaking to the whiteboard on which he’s writing, seems interminable. The same two hours spent at a match between Saints and Arsenal flashes by, unless Saints are losing! So it is with hangovers. At home it lasts all day and requires several cups of coffee and further ‘lie-downs’ before any further activity can be contemplated. On this morning in Copenhagen with a bright sun shining through the windows of the dormitory there wasn’t any contemplation. Although my head still swam frantically trying to avoid drowning in whatever I drank last night, I was up, washed, packed and ready to go. We had a quick coffee and a Danish in the hostel canteen. I relished an apricot Danish in Copenhagen. This was a portent of another good day.

Before the Oresund Bridge was opened in 2000 spanning the Oresund Strait the only way from Denmark to Sweden was by boat. Helsingør is about forty miles north of Copenhagen where, right opposite Kronborg Castle, the ferry departs for Helsingborg in Skåne, the southernmost county of Sweden. The ferry takes just twenty minutes and runs frequently. Kronborg Castle is the castle of Elsinore in Shakespeare’s Hamlet. It’s an imposing edifice controlling the narrowest point on the passage into the Baltic from the Kattegat to the Oresund (Ore Sound). Helsingør derives from old Norse “hals” meaning narrow. As we left the ferry in Helsingborg I handed my passport to the Peter the driver and we were in Sweden.

A short meander through the small town and we were approaching the junction where I would say goodbye to my newfound German friends.

I left England with a fairly firm conviction that everything British was superior to anything else, anywhere else. Our wartime integrity, bravery and success could hardly be questioned, except perhaps Bomber Harris’s devastation of Dresden. Our inventiveness, education, judicial systems, politics, research and universities were second to none. Many nations emulated our attributes shamelessly. I wasn’t necessarily proud of this, in fact I didn’t really think like that, it was simply the narrative I grew up with. My last few lifts, some of my first experiences with ‘foreigners’ and foreign stuff had already changed my views. Travel doesn’t just broaden the mind, it humbles an arrogant mind, especially one open enough to question and broaden tacit unconscious beliefs. Our recent semi-conscious drive to re-establish the ‘British is best’ nationalistic ethos by removing Britain from an immersive cooperation with European partners is in my view retrogressive and painful. I loved being fully European. Populism and nationalistic fervour by a minority of the population ransoming the rest into a coercive acceptance is not only retrogressive, it’s downright short-sighted. We’re accepting the push back to an unqualified national superiority complex which should have been consigned to history along with the Empire but is being kept alive by self-interested politicians and to be frank, narrow-mindedness and a lack of IQ in a section of the population who thought that by “sticking it to the man” they were gaining a right to be, to feel important in the face of the authoritarian snobs in government and the south-east. It seems to be a current worldwide sickness. In the heady days of recovery and growth, of hippiedom and free love, of rock and roll, rapidly improving standards of living for most people and finally the ending of communistic dictatorships it felt as though it would always

be getting better, safer and secure, but, no. Instead of collaboration, unification and economic strength we're drifting inexorably into dislocation, despotism and a dearth of resources.

While making a list of all the issues which are taking the world to the edge of global disaster I realised that it's impossible to rectify without a radical change to the way we think, about our overarching, unconscious and unaddressed need for survival. Global warming, pollution and consumption of resources will continue unabated. Why can we never stop the tyrants, megalomaniacs, paranoid madmen and self-serving idiots from rising to power?

In 1965 my worries all concerned girls and getting a job when I graduated. The world was at my feet and famines, the destruction of rainforests, fossil fuel contamination and genocides were not yet major issues for Europe, just the spectre of communism and the Berlin Wall, the threat of Mao's China, 'the yellow peril' as it was called by commentators and an influx of fake goods from Asia. Problems in the wider world, apartheid in South Africa, the conflict in Vietnam, were too distant to affect us.

Chapter Four

My German comrades peeled off north on a road leading to Halmstad and then on to Gothenburg before entering Norway and continuing to Oslo. I took the north easterly road towards Stockholm. I hoped to get there by that evening. It was over two hundred and fifty miles so I wasn't over confident but it was possible.

I headed towards Jönköping, which I discovered is pronounced 'yoonshooping'.

My first lift looked at me askance when I said John-coping. But he knew what I meant. He could take me as far as Ljungby. He was a quiet middle aged businessman in what looked like an old Volvo. It reminded me of the shape of a Morris Minor or the larger 1950s Standard Vanguard with the large smooth round back. The car wasn't that old. He told me it was his company car. I discovered later that it was a Volvo 544, a car designed at the end of the war and although it looked old fashioned was very popular in Sweden, although manufacture was discontinued in 1966 giving way to the new B18. Swedes thought the 544 handled well in the snow, he said, despite the rear wheel drive. He worked in Ljungby for a company selling farm machinery, everything from garden rotavators to combined harvesters.

The lift was uneventful and my businessman drove fairly rapidly proudly telling me that this car was fitted with the new eighteen hundred cc engine. We arrived in Ljungby halfway through the morning. What I hadn't foreseen was that for most of the journey I wouldn't see much beyond the dense pines lining the road much of the way. There was some farmland for a while as we left Helsingborg but I saw very little of the lakes I could see on my map. This wasn't the scenic route I'd imagined.

Before going to his company he very kindly took me to the northern edge of the town and left me on a wide junction wishing me well.

I waited for a while, probably over half an hour. Traffic was light. Sweden was slowly preparing to change from driving on the left. Cars were still right hand drive and it would be another year or so before the change but newer cars were now being manufactured with left hand drive. The move was not popular and I realised why the government had decided to implement the change with my next lift.

An Opel estate car stopped. It look stylish in two tone black and cream. I realised when I had to walk into the main carriageway to get into the car that it was left hand drive.

The driver was a very pleasant youngish man, very thin with short blond hair. He spoke excellent English and took no time in practicing on me. I noticed the car was automatic straight away. Not fully automatic. It still had a gear shift, the clutch was automatic. I hadn't seen this setup on a car before. My uncle had once owned a Lanchester with a Daimler engine and pre-select gearbox. He would change the gear but nothing would happen until he depressed the clutch (or gear change pedal) and a sprung mechanism would engage the gear. The idea was to make smooth gear changing easier for the driver in the days before the advent of fully synchromesh gears. Straight cut 'crash' gearboxes required some skill to coordinate clutch and gearchange smoothly.

This car worked somewhat differently. As the driver released the accelerator the car went into a coasting mode; the centrifugal clutch was automatically disengaged. The driver changed the gear and when he reapplied the accelerator the clutch automatically re-engaged. One of my early mopeds had only one variable gear but a similar clutch system.

He could see that I was quizzical. He explained that he had limited use of his left leg after an accident when he was young. He could still walk but found an action like operating a clutch difficult, although he could do it if necessary. Luckily his braking foot still worked as well as any other person.

After asking the usual questions about where I came from and where I was going he said he could take me to near Stockholm and there I could board a bus which would take me to the city in less than an hour. I relaxed.

He was a doctor working in a hospital in Odense in Denmark. He specialised in paediatrics, which I learned was the care of sick children. He worked there for three weeks at a time and then had a week off. He was going back to his home in Nynäshamn a small coastal town just south of Stockholm.

More miles of forest and not much else. The doctor drove at about a hundred and ten kilometres per hour and I spend a few moments calculating what that would be in miles per hour. The conversion is nine kilometres to every five miles. Just over sixty eight miles per hour. In no time at all we were stopping at a café near a lakeside in Jönköping. The lake was Vättern. At last a lake. Sweden is covered in lakes and I had already spotted Vättern and Vännern as the largest in southern Sweden on my maps. I wasn't disappointed. The view across the lake, the pleasure boats and yachts, the tall blond people, and clean waterside parks were idyllic. I noticed the street we were in was spotlessly clean and called Huskvarnavägen. I only noticed because Huskvarna is a Swedish company which manufactures all sorts of things, but for me specifically, motorbikes. Huskvarna is a borough to the east of Jönköping. I was impressed that this is where the bikes were made. It reminded me of the first time my father drove us through Cowley in Oxford where Lord Nuffield founded the Morris car company and named one of his cars the "Cowley". I was always sad that Vauxhalls weren't made in Vauxhall but in compensation all railway stations in Russia are called 'vocksal'. The name Vauxhall comes from a thirteenth century mercenary in King John's court called Sir Falkes de Breauté and his large manor in Lambeth was called Faulkes Hall. When in the mid 1800s Tsar Nicholas sent a delegation to England to learn about British railway construction they were taken to Vauxhall station where they mistakenly took the name to mean the type of building, consequently all stations in Russian became vocksals. A more plausible idea is that the new pleasure gardens around St Petersburg station were named Vocksal after the Vauxhall Pleasure gardens in London at least three years prior to the delegation arriving in London. I like both stories, especially stories about names attaching themselves. In my travels I'm fascinated by exotic names which when translated are as banal as English names, Shinbashi in Tokyo means Newbridge and a town we were soon to drive through, Norrköping means Northtown or Northampton and a little further on Nyköping means Newtown or Newmarket, köping being a small town or market town. Nynäshamn where we were headed means Newhaven or Newport.

By the time we were approaching Stockholm having passed Nyköping the light was beginning to fade and by nine thirty it would be dark. The doctor offered to put me up for the night but that he would have to leave fairly early in the morning, if that was OK with me. I jumped at the chance. I wouldn't have to mess around with the Stockholm vandrarhem. We turned off the main road at Södertälje and headed south east through more pine forest and farmland on narrow minor roads to the coast. We parked in the underground garage of a small four storey block of plush looking flats in Nynäshamn. We had a beer and an open sandwich on the balcony overlooking the bay and when we returned to his living room I fell asleep on his couch almost immediately.

The day was bright. The doctor gave me orange juice and cereal, ham and bread which he'd been out and bought before I was awake. He said he'd drop me in the town by the bus stop and a bus would be leaving for Stockholm around ten thirty. It was barely eight. As he said goodbye and shook my hand he pointed and told me to walk a few hundred metres to the shore. "You'll like it!" he said. A gently sloping road led between a few small shops and out into pine woods. The pines continued right out into the sand on the beach. More idyll. In front of me was a bleached white sandy beach with pines and rock outcrops, some wooden

chalet type cafes with folded parasols and beach furniture, not yet open. Not far off were island, lots of islands which I could just about make out from the balcony the evening before. These were the southern part of the massive archipelago of thirty thousand islands which surround the whole of eastern Stockholm. I wanted to come back and live here.

A few people were walking, it was quiet, very few cars passing. I wandered along the beach a way and then strolled back up to the main road and the bus stop. It was still only nine fifteen. I sat on the bench under the small wooden shelter and took stock. I had twenty five of the forty pounds I left home with, I had a couple more clean pairs of pants and socks. If I could get to Sandviken this evening I would have plenty enough for the return journey after a few days in the youth hostel near the town centre. It wasn't the cheapest hostel but I could probably stand three nights.

An older man with a long haired dachshund entered a newspaper shop nearby and a couple of minutes later emerged with a paper folded under his arm. He approached the bus stop and sat down on the bench near me with his dog snuffling around my feet. He was dressed very much like a retired thespian or army officer with a linen blazer, cravat and straw trilby. I guessed he might be gay so I was on my guard ready to reassure him that I was hetero and not in the least bit curious. He spoke to me in near perfect English. He'd noticed the union jack and asked where I was going. Was I on holiday, did I know someone in Nynäshamn? I explained my trip and he was impressed that I'd hitch-hiked from England. Where in England? When I told him I came from near Southampton on the south coast he lit up and started telling me how he had visited Southampton during the war and had spent time on holiday in Bournemouth since then, a favourite destination for Scandinavians in the post war era. There were language schools in Bournemouth and as their children began learning English at school many older Scandinavians spend holidays in Bournemouth attending one of the languages schools alongside their children, taking advantage of the immersive experience. As time went by the nationalities of students at the schools changed as the economics and requirements of European nations gradually gave way to pressures for learning English flourishing in the far east and south America.

He suggested that if I'd be willing to wait another half an hour while he attended to a few things at home he would be driving into Stockholm and he could give me a lift. He lived in a cul-de-sac of a few houses about a quarter of a mile away and asked me if I'd like to wait for him to return with his car. As I waited I saw almost no-one. It was tranquil in the extreme. It was so crisp and clear I wasn't sure I could take it all in, everything was sharp and contrasty, the colours were intense. A soft breeze soughed through the pine needles blanketing me with a white noise of contentment. I could easily have dozed off again.

Precisely half an hour later the gentleman pulled up opposite me in a red Volvo P1800 sports car. The car favoured by the young Roger Moore in the television series "The Saint" which was still popular at the time. As I settled into the leather seat my chauffeur for this morning put my bag on the tiny rear seat and placed his dachshund on my lap. On the way to Stockholm he told me how Nynäshamn was becoming a favoured commuter town for Stockholm and the roads were being improved partly for the increased traffic, and for better access to the harbour where ferries ran to Visby the capital of Gotland, the largest Swedish island in the Baltic, and to Gdansk in Poland. The harbour was large enough and open to the sea and it could accommodate the larger shipping which couldn't get into Stockholm. The Baltic has almost no tidal range, the water is almost fresh and it is quite shallow but deep enough to be plied by some very large ferries and cargo vessels.

When we reached the outskirts of Stockholm he asked me if I was in a hurry. I explained that I'd like to get to Gävle that evening, and not too late, if at all possible. That should be easy he said, it was about hundred miles. If I left Stockholm by two in the afternoon I could be there long before dark. In the worst scenario I could always catch the

train. The fare was about fourteen or fifteen kronor. I didn't like to tell him that I didn't have much cash, and I guessed, I hoped, I wouldn't need the train anyway. "In that case", he said, would you like a quick tour of the city?" For the next two hours he drove me around Stockholm, pointing out the landmarks and prominent buildings and usefully, the youth hostel which was a three masted antique sailing vessel called the AF Chapman moored near the city centre. I made a point to myself that I would have to stay there on my way back. I was fascinated by the islands, canals and bridges, the railways running directly to the main station right next to the Gamla Stan island, the picturesque old town. We stopped and parked near Gamla Stan to watch the changing of the guard at the Royal Palace after which he bought me a coffee and a smörgås, a Swedish open sandwich (smørrebrød in Denmark). It was more a meal of shrimp, eggs and mayonnaise with salad on a big piece of ryebread, than a sandwich.

I said goodbye to the dachshund and the very kindly elderly gentleman on the north side of the city where he left me on a road called Uppsalavägen as he turned back south. This was the road to Uppsala and Gävle.

A brand new red Volvo 122s B18 stopped. The driver was a young businessman in his late twenties or early thirties, dark glasses and a broad smile. His English was also excellent.. He wasn't going far he said but he could take me out of the city to a spot where I might find it easier to get a lift. I nodded as he said he had to delivery some files but it wouldn't take long. We shot off. I was amazed how fast the car accelerated. It was the tuned version he said and he loved showing me what it could do. It had a really long gearstick, but it was impressed how precise it was; not like the long gearstick in a BMC Mini which disappeared under the low shelf beneath the dashboard and flapped around as though it was attached with elastic bands. Before I knew it we were back at Gamla Stan where I'd been eating shrimp only half an hour earlier. We rumbled over the cobbles, stopped, and he ran out, shot into a building, emerged from a doorway and we were off again. Compared to the sedate elderly gentleman this rather more accurate version of Roger Moore was on a caffeine rush and in no time he was dropping me at a junction well out of the north side of Stockholm. I wished he was going all the way to Gävle, I was enjoying the ride. I always fancied owning a Volvo 122 B18 after that but as life became more complicated as I struggled with a career, mortgage and marriage it never happened. I did eventually have a comfortable six cylinder Volvo 264GL with leather heated seats and an automatic gearbox, but it didn't have the same panache.

I didn't have to wait long. I was picked up by a youngish couple in a cobalt blue Saab 96. They were on their way to Sundsvall another hundred or so miles further north along the Baltic coast from Gävle. The Saab was unusual in that it had a three cylinder two stroke engine. It required a certain driving technique which, until you became accustomed to it, was unnerving. The two stroke engine relied on oil added directly to the petrol for its lubrication. When decelerating the engine was receiving little or no fuel, therefore no oil. To overcome this problem and to make sure the engine was always being lubricated the transmission had a "free wheel". The clutch disengaged when the transmission was going faster than the engine and the engine would then 'tick over' and be correctly lubricated. When you took your foot off the accelerator the car would coast, consequently there was no engine braking and slowing required brake pressure.

The car was comfortable and I settled back to take in the scenery on the final part of my journey to Sandviken. There was some farmland but for much of the trip we once again travelled through dense pine forests. There was the occasional flash of a lake or a small village and the first large city we passed through was Uppsala. The young couple were talkative. They told me that Uppsala was the fourth largest city and is home to the country's oldest university. The road passed by the main part of the city although I could see the cathedral to the west. A few miles further we passed Gamla Uppsala, 'Old Uppsala', an

ancient town, which in the third and fourth centuries was once the seat of the kings of Sweden and held great power in northern Europe.

All across Sweden wooden country houses and farm buildings are painted in a rusty red colour, Falun Red. As we drove they showed me on a map whereabouts we were and the location of Falun, a mining town not far to the north west, more or less in the middle of the country, about fifty miles west of Sandviken. For thousands of years it was famous for its copper mines and the slag from smelting was deposited near the mines above ground. The ensuing red sludge was found to have various chemical properties and when heated, mixed with oil and rye flour, produced an anti-weathering paint which, as it deteriorated, was very easy to renew. The red buildings are something which distinguishes Sweden in my memory and Falun Rödfärg is very much a part of Swedish cultural heritage not unlike the ubiquitous Falun or 'Dala' horses. The carved wooden horses, popularly painted bright red echoing the red of the painted houses and decorated with a flowery harness, are purported to bring good luck. Other colours have similar associations in Swedish folklore. They were made by early furniture makers in the Dalarna region as toys, and became popular as traditional gifts. I eventually bought one the size of a large key fob for my mum.

The hours sitting in cars watching the scenery gave me a lot of time for reflection, even more so during the hours traversing Sweden's forests when the scenery was a wall of pines on either side of the road. I hadn't yet become an angry enough young man to feel the need to be deeply self-searching or analytical, that would come later, but I had an innate urge to understand myself and how I fit into the world. When I first became curious as a child entering the mirror phase and becoming aware of how things grew, I was struck by an awe and wonder which has stayed with me. It all seemed just too obvious, too fantastic, it was an experience I've never been able to describe to myself, let alone write down. I always thought there was a magic bubbling beneath the surface of the mundane banality of the day to day struggle and the maintenance of body and soul in polite society. It remained outside my grasp for a long time and took a considerable piecing together of just how our survival works, and how it was working in me, to get enough of a handle on it to haul myself into the light. Up until this point in my life, contemplating pine trees, I could honestly say that I lived in a state of perpetual confusion. I'd never been taught the 'how to' of life. How to learn, how to create ambition, how to research or realise my own potential. What I was doing was mechanical, a means of achieving an immediate experience that would be pleasurable or memorable but with no basis for the building blocks of my own philosophy. I'd been told, and probably believed, that success came from innate talent and I wasn't at all sure I had any. It seemed dishonest to force my abilities via ambition and persistence. I didn't like the idea of self-promotion at all. It was ruthless or vain, and in my mind probably in vain.

Here I was getting nervous about meeting a girl, and more so, her parents. I was in that limbo between being excited about what I was achieving, meeting a girl who I imagined actually liked me and the unknown quantity of her family who may or may not approve of my presence around their seventeen year old daughter. Maj had celebrated her seventeenth birthday a few weeks earlier while they were in England. At home I would have met a girls parents for a few minutes as I met them at the door when collecting my date to take her to the local flea-pit. Here I may be meeting her for whole days, and be intensely involved with their daughter for several days. Should I call it off? I was nervous.

It was then that I had one of my first 'aha!' moments. I was proving something. Not just proving to myself that I could do this but underneath it all I needed the approval of my parents. I knew my mum was comparatively content with my achievements in life so far but not so my dad. He spent a lot of time telling me how wrong I was about everything, how I'd never amount to anything and how I didn't match up to his ideals. It would be decades before

I realised that this was all borne out of a profound jealousy he had of me. I was the first born and I took my mum's affections. As I developed I was garrulous, contrasting his tacit nature. I was following a privileged path in my education and grasping opportunities he'd never had, or perhaps never had the courage to pursue. He never encouraged the bigger decisions in my life, or demonstrated any love for me. I had to prove myself to him. To everyone else he was the kindest, most benevolent of characters but I never did scale the wall he built for me.

This little trip would prove nothing, it would be a frivolous amusement as far as he was concerned. So what did this mean for me? I already knew I could do it. I had nothing to prove to myself. It wasn't a particularly bold adventure, not like climbing Everest or sailing to the Antarctic with Shackleton. I imagine it's the same with any achievement, once you've succeeded it becomes part of your landscape with the next challenge looming over the horizon.

It was mid-afternoon and sunny. The outskirts of Gävle materialised and I thanked the young couple profusely in an obsequious manner, of which I'm not proud. It comes from wanting to be liked, most people want to be liked but I think I was, and still do at times, seem to be seeking the acknowledgement I never received from my father. My dearth of self-esteem can have me oscillating between a self-righteous nihilistic arrogant anger and pathetic attempts to be erudite or agreeing with everything that is said. I have to stop myself from following someone's well told story with one of my own. I don't always succeed and wonder why I detect glazed expressions.

My fawning gratitude was perhaps, for once, justified and I threw my rucksack across my shoulder as I turned to walk to the junction in the road which would lead me to Sandviken only another twenty miles away. If all else failed I was close enough get on a bus.

I'd found the "Sleepover" Vandrerhem in Sandviken, a few hundred yards from Maj's home. It wasn't cheap but I didn't intend to stay there for more than two or three nights. Finding it set my mind at rest. If I met a frosty reception from Maj's parents I could relax.

An hour after I wandered into the junction on the road to Valbo I was given a lift in a small truck. The driver said he was going to one of the steel manufacturing companies sited near the lake, Storsjön on the south east side of Sandviken. It was perfect. Maj's home was in the same area.

Sandviken is famous for high quality steel and makes tools, cutlery and a host of specialised stainless and spring steel products. Maj's father worked as a supervisor in one of the factories. A small note in my favour as far as Maj's parents were concerned was that my father was an iron founder, working in a not dissimilar industry. Blue collars were all the rage. We had a conversation starter.

The truck driver dropped me close to Linnévägen and I walked the last three hundred yards to Maj's house.

The street was quiet, hardly a soul stirred, it was like a siesta at tea time. Did Swedes have tea? Was everyone already home from work and school and sat around tables having tea? My heart pounded in my chest as I rang the doorbell. What the hell was I doing, dragging myself halfway across northern Europe on a teenage hormone driven quest to see a girl I'd met for an hour at most. I almost fled, and then the door opened.

Maj invited me in and introduced me to her mother. Her father was still at work. Per-Anders sat on the stairs grinning. I was in a state of confusion, adrenaline-coursing anxiety. I didn't really register anything except the formality of the substantial detached wooden house. There was nothing loud, nothing stood out. Subdued colours, modern style simple furniture, Maj was talking, fussing a bit, taking my rucksack while her mum busied herself rather shyly making a cold drink for me and finally we sat. Over the next hour or so as I relaxed a little I answered Maj's questions; how many lifts, how long had it taken? She had calculated this already as I'd written to tell her which day I was going to set off from home but she relayed

my brief narrative to her mother. When her father appeared I did a precis of the tale I had just told and I described a couple of the more interesting encounters in detail. To me it wasn't particularly exciting. The trip was what I'd expected it to be, or at least it seemed that way. Each moment of progress, each added mile, each anxious five minutes with my thumb pointing to the heavens was much like any other moment, like the mile before. There had been no significant dangers or moments of terror, only the plethora of new experiences which I'd not yet had time to organise into a narrative.

This trip had opened my eyes to something of the nature of what it means to be a conscious being. I would discover Zen and various philosophies in the ensuing few years as I slipped into hippiedom and experiments with marijuana. The impetus was nudged along by the nagging suspicion that there was more to life than simply surviving. I'd seen that possibility when I realised I was a discrete entity, wholly connected to the nature around me. As a four year old experiencing one-ness, I had no way of explaining this to myself, but it stuck with me. And one thing which has endured for half a century of reading about religions, atheism, Buddhism, philosophy, with much self-searching and naïve confusion is that everything is the same as everything else. It's the perception of our interpretations, our survival mechanisms, the pre-installed codex of reality, how we construct our senses and the image before us, plus the taught attitudes, moral and immoral which give it any meaning at all. I eventually realised what the Zen masters meant by 'no-mind, beginner's mind', the oneness of everything and how everything is connected to everything else. One of my best college friends was John, a Yorkshireman, a sensitive, larger than life character who in some ways protected me, just by being my friend. He was wily, mischievous and a brilliant artist. I lost touch with him when he left college but I later heard that he'd given up much ambition in the commercial art world and was mowing parks for one of the London boroughs. He had taken a Zen approach to life. When I asked what Zen was, the answer was nebulous. The mutual friend who had met John didn't really know but said that he had described it to him as something like mowing and being totally aware of every blade of grass that you walk on. I was baffled but intrigued.

I got over the initial impact of entering another family, another house in another country with another language. This was the most anxious part of the whole trip. Maj's father was taciturn, didn't smile much and had a look of mild concern on his face but Maj assured me he was happy enough to have me there for a couple of days and that I would be staying in the house. She subdued my protests that I could easily stay in the youth hostel.

Oh God! Would my manners and habits be acceptable? Maj's family lived in much the same lower middle class manner as my own family, were there going to be any great differences in how Europeans and Swedes lived compared to the British? Probably not.

We had meatballs! Traditionally Swedish. After the meal Maj and I walked a short distance to the town. A very ordinary place with no outstanding features other than the steel works, the school which Maj attended and a park at the further end of town. I had expected a mountainous terrain but it was pretty flat. Lots of trees, all very neat and clean. We would explore more in the morning.

When we returned a bed was made up for me on a rather high divan in a parlour separate from the lounge. A rarely used dining room. This would be my digs for the three days until I left. It was Thursday and after watching some black and white Swedish television we went to bed. The family had plans for the weekend to give me a tour of some local places of interest. For the next day though, Friday, Maj's father had arranged for us to have a look around the steelworks where he worked.

It seemed that every day was bright and sunny. I couldn't see Sweden as anything but a paradise. Pine forests, lakes, clean streets and everything so well organised. I never saw the neglected, scruffy sidings of railway tracks, the overflowing bins behind shops, the dumps of

tyres and tree waste left by unscrupulous 'tree surgeons' in car parks and laybys and the deteriorating road surfaces as potholes go unrepaired, that were all too familiar back home. There were no industrial revolution terraces of houses or coal-smoke blackened stone buildings.

The steel works was no different. The campus, the industrial site, was spotless. There were no discarded bits of machinery, abandoned defunct vehicles or piles of swarf. The walls were painted and the doors fitted perfectly. Inside was the same. Despite the fiercely glowing furnaces with their hearths in constant use, molten metal being poured into the fireproof ladles, the crucibles used to transfer the metal to moulds for making ingots, there was no mess. The ingots were beaten by huge steam hammers and then flattened in huge rolling mills to make spring steel sheets, to be ultimately made into saws, knives components and tools. This corporate obsessive compulsive disorder (order!) continued throughout every department, one of which had a shiny metal floor the size of a tennis court covered in a thin film of oil to allow the easy manoeuvre of great coils of steel, still glowing red and ticking as they cooled, to a storage area where they would eventually be collected by fork lift trucks when they were cool enough.

We were following a large friendly public relations officer who was describing the process and progress of the metal from pig iron to spring steel via a Bessemer Converter. He had clearly told the story many times before. The Bessemer was invented by Henry Bessemer, an English inventor. Air is blown through molten pig iron and the process removes impurities and carbon. It's a spectacular scene even seen from a distance through several layers of thick glass as sparks gush from the top of the converter. In some parts of the factory the noise was deafening and he handed us ear defenders.

The PR man spoke perfect English and Maj's father had left him to escort us. He walked ahead of us making sure we were a safe distance from any dangers. As we crossed the oily metal floor he indicated to be careful of the slippery surface.

That's when it happened, the move which sent my senses reeling. Maj saw this as the opportunity she'd been waiting for and she grabbed my hand, tightly. My balls were suddenly seeking attention and tingling as she turned to look at me to see if I approved. She could tell immediately from my broad smile that this was certainly OK by me. Her hand was warm and soft. These were sensations new to me. The small surprise caress, the first touch as she took my hand, the tentative brush, barely more than the weight of a breath and the tiniest hint of humidity were indescribable. That ephemeral excitement, impossible to grasp and retain, would remain forever as a memory, like an aroma which suddenly transports you back to a childhood moment of ecstasy. It set a standard by which all of my future liaisons would be measured. She kept hold of my hand right through the rest of the factory.

Her father had sent a message for us to not wait for him and to walk home, a distance not much more than half a mile. It was still a sunny bright day, we were on fairly featureless streets but as we walked into the street where Maj lived there were woodlands. We wandered in among the trees, me being led by Maj, who, when we were well hidden, turned and kissed me. Short but very sweet. We stood staring at each other with that soppy grin of the recently besotted and finally we were hugging in the locked embrace of a confirmed love and adoration.

I suffered from a deep respect for girls instilled in me by my mother. It had left me shy and embarrassed to initiate headway in any relationship I had with girls. I did not and still do not want to impose myself even though my groin might be aching with a yearning enough to challenge the zip on my trousers. The moment I was given a green light, an indication, no matter how small that a girl liked me and wanted me to continue, I'd be fine, but, I was hopeless at interpreting the signs and I needed the girl to be bold enough to make the first move. True to the stories English boys told each other about Scandinavian girls, Maj made

unambiguous her intentions towards me. I was in heaven. I asked her if her parents would have any objections if we were open about our attraction to each other. She thought not but perhaps we could keep it cool when we were in their presence. I agreed. That took a great deal of weight out of my staying for a few more days. I was already sad that I would be leaving and I'd considered not going home. What would I do though? I had no foundation anywhere but home. I would have to leave after the weekend. I wasn't old enough or experienced enough to take the bold move of starting again from where I stood. The idea of carpetbagging, being willing to start from scratch became a useful attitude when I was building my own businesses, but then and there in Sandviken was not the time test the theory.

From the time we arrived at the house until the following evening one of her parents or Per-Anders would be around. We grabbed an occasional furtive kiss and I was sorely tempted to visit Maj's room that night but restrained myself even though I knew I wouldn't be rejected. It was the distinct possibility of being discovered by an irate father which stymied my attempt before it started.

The next day after breakfast Maj's mum packed a lunch and we all took off in the Volvo Amazon. First stop was very nearby on the shores of lake Storsjön. Sandviken sits between the two main bodies of the lake which has the shape of a butterfly. It's full of fish and about a hundred and fifty islands.

From there we went to Falun, where I bought the tiny Falun horse for my mum and then on to an open air museum dedicated in part to the steel industry to the north of Sandviken called Högbo. I was fascinated to see an actual Bessemer converter on display. I hadn't realised the extent of the influence this simple giant cooking pot had on the world. In Sandviken, where it had formed the basis of industry and wealth for an entire community, it was revered. The tour took most of the day and we arrived back in Sandviken for tea. More meatballs. This time with a splendid salad. Maj's mum said she noticed how much I'd liked the meatballs the night before.

That evening Maj's father took us to Högbo again. This time to the same museum, Högbo Bruk but to a broader aspect of the park where an arena had been set up for an open air disco, or hop, as discotheques were sometimes still called in the sixties. He left us there and said he'd be back at eleven to pick us up.

Maj's schoolfriends were there. They crowded around us. They wanted to see the English boy who she had told them was coming all the way from England to visit her. She gripped my hand ever tighter as they took an interest in me. The signs were much clearer to me now and I could see that these rather pretty girls would have gladly wrested me away if I'd let them. One or two of them making it rather more than obvious. Once the spectacle of my appearance had settled down Maj gently guided us to a quieter spot in the crowds of local young people gathered at this regular Saturday night youth club style dance. We wandered out of the arena and among the historic buildings in the museum. Behind one, away from prying eyes we spent the next hour in an ecstasy of late adolescent snogging and groping. It was too cold and getting damp in the late evening for anything more ambitious. I was never one for knee trembling encounters, it didn't fit my ideas of romance at all. It was nearly eleven and I hoped we might get another opportunity later, her father arrived to collect us.

I didn't sleep at all well that night. Going over in my mind what could have been, what could be, would we get another opportunity to be intimate? I had to remain honourable. I wasn't like so many kids I knew at school who just wanted a shag in the bushes or a fumble in a field after the youth club discotheque. I wanted any girl who would have a relationship with me to be discerning and romantic and not be insecure and incautious, unable to say no to boys. I wanted her to see that I respected her, and in no way coerce. Even though I may never see Maj again I would stick to my principles, my self imposed moral standards. In retrospect I may have been spurning genuine desires in girls I became close to, but, I needed that clear

green light. As Jessica says to Morty in an episode of Rick and Morty; “Being nervous is kinda selfish sometimes, y’know?”, and my mum said a similar thing to me when I began showing interest in girls: “Faint heart never won fair maid”. The origin of this is obscure and had been attributed to a play by Thomas Lodge from the sixteenth century but probably originated much earlier in Roman times. It stuck with me though. I could be bold in my approach with my heart in my mouth, but the step from friend to lover would always be taxing.

When I met Maj the next day I realised the deep desire for intimacy I was harbouring would have to stay that way. After breakfast when we went out for a walk with the possibility of finding a quiet corner in the woodlands by the lake, Maj suddenly doubled over grasping at her lower belly. She quietened my concern and with no hint of embarrassment told me she had started her period and that it was often painful in the first day. She spoke in a candid personal manner. She was uninhibited in the same way an established couple would be with each other. She was genuinely disappointed we wouldn’t consummate our burgeoning relationship.

The few passionate tender moments we shared that morning in the pine scented woodlands near the lakeshore would be as close as we would get, at least for the time being. Perhaps on a future visit, both of us would be free of the shackles of our tender ages, having crossed the legal line in the sand and become adults able to meet and make our own arrangements. The whole adolescent, romantic dream I set out with had in many ways come true. I had never imagined as much, it was way above my expectations.

That afternoon Maj’s father took us all on a tour of the lakes, islands and nature reserves around lake Untrafjärden, a little way south of Sandviken. I was finally able to see the lakes and pines in an open vista rather than obscured by walls of forest.

I never felt that Maj’s father was very comfortable with my presence as he rarely smiled, it may have been his normal character, but I guessed no father is happy to have boys sniffing around their daughter especially since being invited to a parent’s house would happen well after a relationship with their daughter had been established elsewhere, at college or the youth club.

Inside I was distraught, I would be leaving a girl who I genuinely thought I was deeply in love with. There were no solutions. I had to face up to it, Maj would literally be my dream girl. My adolescent sexual turmoil ignored the fact that I’d known her for less than a week but against all my naturally driven desires, I had to leave, I would have to dream. I’d hope and yearn until I couldn’t yearn any longer, until the next love of my life appeared.

Chapter Five

I had planned to leave Sandviken on Monday around midday and I felt it was the right time to go. I would arrive at the vandrerhem in Stockholm late afternoon.

Swedish schools had already returned after their summer break and Per-Anders had gone off to school. Maj was taking up her place at the university in Uppsala which began its year a couple of weeks later, so she was still free for a few more days. I said goodbye with profuse thanks to Maj's mum. Maj's father took the morning off work and drove us to Gävle where I would be on the direct route south. He stayed in his car as we walked away to the junction.

It was a long and emotional farewell. It had been a remarkable extended visit.

Maj waited with her father in the car until a truck stopped to pick me up. Waving frantically as the truck pulled away, until I could no longer see her, I thought this would be the last time I would see her for a long while.

The ride all the way to Stockholm was uneventful, the driver didn't speak English but he was very jolly and friendly and pointed out landmarks, lakes, and islands. Trucks are comfortable with superb panoramic views from high up. They're also soporific and not having slept well meant I was dozing by the time we reached the outskirts of Stockholm.

The driver knew I was heading for the youth hostel and dropped me on Gamla Stan island within about half a mile of the magnificent three masted clipper on the other side of the harbour moored next to Skeppsholmen island.

It was still early in the afternoon, the truck had taken just a couple of hours to reach the centre of Stockholm. I walked around the island and over the bridges in sunshine, did it ever rain here? I was glad it didn't at that moment.

I reached the ship. The STF Af Chapman named after Admiral Chapman, shipbuilder and vice admiral. It was built in Whitehaven, Cumbria in 1888, travelled the world and was saved from being broken up in 1947 eventually becoming a youth hostel in Stockholm harbour.

I couldn't wait to stay aboard the ship. It was a sight, gleaming white and fully rigged. This was a treat. The ship had been restored and was an ideal accommodation for a youth hostel, right in the centre of the city at a fraction of the cost of a land based property, and, it was very attractive.

I walked on board.

I approached the reception desk and was given a registration paper to fill in which I needed to hand back with my passport.

Passport, passport, passport, where did I put it? The rucksack contents were emptied out onto the reception floor, and systematically reloaded with each item thoroughly searched. No passport! Then it dawned on me! Sheepishly I had to say I'd lost my passport. They wouldn't let me stay in the youth hostel without it. Like all hotels it was their only way of guaranteeing payment. Not many guests would do a bunk without their passport.

When I'd entered Sweden with the German law students in the 2CV each of us had handed our passports to the driver to be checked at the border post. Scandinavia has for a long while had free movement between the countries with no border checks. Both the driver and I forgot about the passports in the excitement of getting to Sweden and arranging where he would drop me off for my best chance of getting my next lift. My passport was still in the rudimentary shelf beneath the quirky speedo and behind the amp-meter assembly on the steering column of the 2CV, easily missed and forgotten amongst the cigarette packs, sweet wrappers and maps. I needed to get to the British Embassy.

The embassy was about a mile and a half away and I still had time to get there before they would close. I half ran and half walked, following the map given to me by the very kind woman in the reception of the vandrerhem. I reached the embassy in plenty of time, it was near the harbour in semi-parkland. I was relieved. I approached the gate and the guard asked me what I wanted and thinking I'd get a warm reception, I told him I'd mislaid my passport and I needed help to continue my journey home. He politely told me that as it was bank holiday in England it was also bank holiday here at the embassy and no one would be here till Wednesday. What about tomorrow? I asked. Ah, well to make it a nice long weekend they were taking Tuesday off as well. I think I might have sworn.

I certainly couldn't afford a hotel. The youth hostel was a no-no, I'd have to go back to Sandviken. Maj's father was pretty pleased to see the back of me, I couldn't imagine how he'd take to me lodging for another two nights.

These were the days before money was anything but virtual. Cash was the order of the day. If you needed to take a lot of money abroad it would be in traveller's cheques or money orders. In either case you would convert them to cash for spending. In each country you visited the first item on the agenda was a visit to the currency exchange booth. The system meant loads of unwanted small coins when you arrived home with notes which could be exchanged at a bank. The coins tend to stay in a drawer either until you visit the country again or, forever. This state of affairs was useful at that moment in time. I had several krona and öre in a pouch in my rucksack. I had Maj's phone number. I found a phone box and fortunately Sweden had subscriber trunk dialling between major towns and cities and I called.

Maj was over the moon that I'd be coming back even if only for a day. I heard her running to tell her father. There was no discussion, I think she simply told him I'd lost my passport and I was coming back. She said I could get a train for not much more than a pound, about fourteen krona and if I was near the embassy, as I'd explained, the station was about two kilometres away, which a quick calculation told me was nearly a mile and a half. Not too far, I could be there in half an hour or so. I hoped I'd be in Gävle by seven or eight o'clock.

The train was on time and left soon after six. It took an hour and a half and was a comfortable unrushed ride through the evening light across fields, forests and lakesides. I learnt the Swedish for 'No Smoking', Rökning Förbjuden, and found a smoking carriage. I was more nervous now than I had been when I was arriving in Sandviken the first time. I really didn't know how her father would react. We pulled into Gävle Centralstation (Centralstation it is all one word) at almost exactly eight o'clock. Maj was waiting on the platform and ran to meet me. Her father was outside the station waiting in the car and we felt free to hug and kiss for a moment. What had happened? Her dad was a bit suspicious. Her mum and Per-Anders would be happy to have me there for another day or so but I'd need to explain it to him clearly.

When we arrived at Maj's home I explained how I had every intention of being halfway to Denmark by tomorrow afternoon but I had foolishly lost my passport and I couldn't get any help from the embassy until Wednesday. Her father listened quietly and in my view quite sternly, and spent the next few minutes finding the British Embassy phone number. I'll never know whether he was checking my story because he patently didn't believe me or if he was hoping to help by expediting my requirements. I'm pretty sure it wasn't the latter. However, the embassy backed me up and said that they wouldn't be able to deal with my case until Wednesday. He'd heard this from a Swedish person working as a secretary in the embassy, so the information wasn't subject to Maj's censorship in translation.

He relaxed, and we settled down for a couple of hours watching game shows and the news on Sweden's only TV channel in glorious black and white, their second channel wouldn't be on the air till 1969.

The next day Maj's father went off early to work, Per-Anders went off to meet his friends and on to school and her mother drove us into town and the market. It was early and we looked around the stalls with her for a while then arranged to meet her again a couple of hours. We went off to the mall. Sweden already had malls. The American influence was more than just the accent in the way they spoke English, teenagers' style was jeans, dungarees and bobby socks, quiff hair T-shirts and Converse bumpers. The lads all rode mopeds, even younger boys of fourteen or so, and they didn't wear helmets. I became aware that my scooter had been a minor magnet to Maj even though it was a minor wreck. There was a certain wholesomeness about the kids I met and they seemed to like me. They were rural in the sense of being outside Stockholm in a country with a population of only about eight million. Even a large town in Sweden was like a small market town in England. We were all a bit more naïve in the sixties but British teenagers seemed more streetwise and becoming more experimental with style and music. I had already tried marijuana by that time, but Southampton did have and still has a thriving West Indian community, and I was attending art college, rock and roll was here to stay and very much ours, I mean British, and in the vanguard. The whole rise of hippydom, the submergence into rock music, drugs and free love almost passed me by. I never felt very 'grown-up', I always imagined I was naïve and immature. My dad had convinced me that I'd amount to nothing, that I talked too much, I was a 'big-head', his need to oppress me had worked in many ways, my lack of self-esteem didn't help. My friends and other teenagers seemed to have a lot more wherewithal when it came to girls and the wider world. In a way I blended into the Swedish youth culture more than I did at home. The superiority that I projected to offset my inner reticence looked to others like arrogance. I needed to know more, be more positive in the way I said things. In fact I'd become my father's scapegoat, he and mum presented themselves to me as perfect, an ideal couple. I would be into my late twenties before I realised that they weren't. I became their cover for any unhappiness or disruption in their lives. Consequently my manufactured arrogance was transparent and gave others a clear view of my instability, I became anyone's scapegoat, especially those with a lower self esteem than me. It was easy for them to counter any jealousies they had of my achievements, just like my dad. But, here in Sweden, I had carte blanche. No-one had the time to have seen my inner workings. At home I was an open book. Here I could be just another immature teenager. The need to be 'grown-up' was less apparent. All the young people spoke English to a greater or lesser degree and I had interesting and lively conversations about England, schools and colleges, music and hitch-hiking. I have a suspicion some of them wanted to try it. Other than the wonderful day that Maj had grabbed my hand this was by far the best day of my trip. I was glad I had been forced to return. I felt very relaxed with Maj, I was very settled and felt at home hanging out with her friends. I knew that when I left early on Wednesday to get to the British Embassy I would have fulfilled my quest, the adventure was a success.

I had eleven pounds remaining from the forty I left home with. I thought I could make it in four, or at most, five days. I had eaten well with Maj's family so I could probably get by on snacks. The ferries and youth hostels would take the rest. I still had my return ticket for the Hook of Holland to Harwich ferry which, if I managed to time it right, would be the overnight crossing.

It was Wednesday morning and Maj's father had already left for work. Maj walked with me to the main road to Gävle. I asked her not to wait with me because it would be easier to get a lift. We had an almost tearful five minute hug in the woods behind the lay-by where I would depart. She waited until I got my first lift after about twenty minutes and I watched her waving frantically as we joined the main road. I thought I saw a handkerchief.

The two lifts to central Stockholm were very rapid, a van delivering machine parts and a small truck, and I arrived at about ten thirty in the morning. I found my way to the

Embassy. The Embassy staff were kind but I suspected that they thought I was mad when I told them I was hitch-hiking, but I was sure they were relieved when I only wanted a passport and not money or tickets. It took no time at all once they had my details and about half an hour later I was handed a single sheet emergency passport with instructions to “don’t lose this one!” They knew I had a ticket to Harwich and asked me to make sure I handed the passport to the border guards when I arrived back in England.

I managed to get a lift out of the city and joined the road to Nörrköping, Jönköping and eventually Copenhagen.

An Opel estate stopped. It was an older right-hand drive, not one of the newer left hand drive cars. A young cheerful Dane said he was going to Copenhagen. Would he mind taking me all the way? Sure, no problem. He spoke English with a distinct accent, again it was slightly Americanised but with a sort of warm guttural undertone. We talked for much of the journey. We stopped for lunch in a rather pleasant hotel at Vätterleden overlooking lake Vättern. He saw that I was concerned not to spend too much on my food and bought me a meal. This was his favourite stop overlooking the lake. He worked in a town called Billund but was married to Swede and they lived near Stockholm. It transpired that he worked for Lego. These were early days for the company and he’d worked there for about seven years since they had introduced a new toy he told me. When the original old carpentry company had burned down they concentrated on manufacturing the building blocks which were becoming very popular. The company had just started planning a whole miniature town called Legoland which was due to open in a year or two. We chatted about everything from education in European countries to science and philosophy. He was particularly interested that I was atheistic. He agreed in principle but was fascinated by religion and why humans would have invented such a thing. His explanation chimed with my own thoughts on the matter, a fear of the unknown. Incomprehensible natural events would naturally lead to ideas of magic and superstition. At one point, as the afternoon wore on and we were approaching Helsingborg, the lowering sun lit the clouds with a silver outline with strong beams and rays streaking to the horizon against an unusually intense blue sky. He grinned at me and said, “This is what you call a ‘holy ghost sky’, huh? You can see why they believed!” It’s the background to so many classical paintings of religious scenes and representations of God in His firmament. “It almost makes me believe!” he said.

He dropped me outside the Copenhagen vandrerhjem. I had my passport. I stayed the night and left mid-morning after a shower and coffee. Nine pounds left.

This must have been a fortuitous few days for me. The main road in front of the youth hostel followed the waterfront south and after a couple of local lifts I reached the main road which would take me towards Rødby and the short ferry crossing to Puttgarden in Germany. I’m not superstitious, luck seems to me a spurious attribute even though I can notice myself falling for the same frailty of crediting events or plans which make life easier as lucky. I can offer no proof but I think my planning, choice of locations and care with my appearance trumps the luck factor in my ability to get lifts fairly quickly when I stick my thumb in the air.

A van whizzed past and slammed the brakes. The van backed towards me at quite a pace and stopped right alongside me. A fairly stout gentleman smiled and beckoned me. He was going to Bremen, would that be OK? He barely spoke any English but it was enough. We didn’t say much but he was friendly, as most lift giver are, inevitably. Unless they actually have malintent, people who stop generally have an outgoing nature, they aren’t afraid of people and are happy to offer assistance even if they don’t find it easy to communicate. They have a willingness to communicate and that’s all it takes. The intention. This man fit my archetype. He was able to make himself understood about the subjects and actions he wanted to communicate and clarify. Importantly he told me to stay in the van when we approached

the ticket office and boarded the ferry to Puttgarden. He had a pass for the ferry and it covered the driver and his assistant. For this trip I was his assistant. The sailing was just over half an hour. A walk around the deck and in a few more minutes we had disembarked, passing through the border post. We were on our way again. The driver stopped in one of the large lay-bys, more like a service area without the shopping mall, where there were toilets and a rudimentary transport café. He had a packed lunch and gave me half his sandwiches. Heavy bread and sausage, not what I was used to but very tasty. A few yards further on was a garage where he filled the tank. All fuel was served by pump attendants. There was no self-service and a young smiling fellow in a petrol company boiler suit came out to serve us.. Filling up was a small social event just as it was in our garage at home. Attendants would take the money and return with change and written receipt, they checked the oil, cleaned the screen and topped up the windscreen washers. We were almost like local tourist guides and this forecourt attendant was no different. After a short conversation with my van driver the attendant told him how to find the youth hostel in Rotenburg.

We reached Rotenburg near Bremen and he dropped me at the jugendherbergen. It was still late afternoon. I registered with my new passport and spend the evening walking along the river bank into the town and back. The town was what I imagined all typical German towns probably looked like. High red roofed heavily timbered buildings with opulent looking beer kellers and squares with statues. The fairy-tale clocks in towers gave me the impression of being in real Brothers Grimm territory.

This was going well. The next morning I managed to get a lift just beyond Bremen itself and on to the road to Osnabrück.

The journey to Osnabrück was the slowest I'd yet experienced on the whole trip. The weather had changed, it was dull and a fine drizzle made me wish I'd packed the umbrella. It took four lifts, two of them covering only a few miles. I was dropped by one of the lifts at the junction of a rural farm track miles from any major junction or lay-by and for an hour I walked. The couple who dropped me there had no idea where I was going of course, and I couldn't expect them to know my strategy. I was grateful for any lift but well intentioned local people could really prolong a journey. I couldn't refuse a lift. People stopped with good intentions, they were looking forward to that gentle elation you feel when you've been altruistic, when you've helped. There a certain warmth in that small selfish expectation. My rucksack was wet but the canvas had kept most of the water out. I was always surprised when a benevolent soul would stop and give me a lift when I was soaked, apparently having little regard for my dripping plastic mac leaving small puddles on the rear floor of the car, or at my feet in a lorry cab, an even nobler act of kindness.

Walking along the verge of a wet road was grizzly. Fast moving vehicles kicked up a lot of spray and hearing a lorry approaching from behind me at speed would have me jumping further from the kerb to avoid getting not only wetter but dirtier too. The plastic mac took most of the buffeting aerosol and by the time I was finally dropped in Osnabrück it had stopped raining. A few violent shakes of the mac got rid of most of the water.

I sensed a certain resentment in Osnabrück towards the British. There was a large garrison stationed there after the war and even in the 1960s I found the shopkeepers and café staff rather icy. This may have been my expectations distorting my perception, I'll never know, but by 2009 when the last soldiers left the town they were sorely missed. There had been a lot of intermarriage, many local children were mixed nationalities and businesses were missing the trade from the army. It was a lively town, I thought I might go back at some point later in life but for now, with little money left, I needed to get to the Hook of Holland.

It didn't take long to find the main road to Enchede, the town on the border between Germany and the Netherlands. It was my next point on the map. In a few minutes a small Wolseley Hornet stopped. The driver was a man in his late thirties and his wife a blond

woman in her mid-thirties. He had black hair which was thinning on top but she had a magnificent mane of blonde curls. They hadn't long been married. There were still words written with lipstick smeared on the back window and ribbons were still attached were cans had been tied on to rattle as they drove away from the reception. The narrow seat I was perched on in the back had traces of confetti. This went some way to explaining her Hollywood hairstyle, still set and curled. It would be another ten years or more before Dallas appeared on our television screens but that was her wedding style.

They had come from Warsaw and stayed in Hannover the night before. The gentleman was Polish and was a biologist and senior lecturer in the newish University of East Anglia in Norwich. His wife was a charge nurse in Norwich hospital. They went to Poland to get married where he had a large family. They thought it would be easier for her parents and her sister to get to Poland than it would be for his family to come to England. They were on their way back home to embark on their honeymoon in Scotland before the beginning of the new academic year. They would take me as far as the ferry at the Hook of Holland and then go north to Norwich when they left the ferry.

The Wolseley Hornet was almost new. It was bright blue with the white roof which distinguished all of the luxury versions of BMC minis and included a small boot extension and luxury fittings. It boasted a wooden dashboard and door fittings, leather seats and a slightly more powerful one litre engine. The rear seat was definitely superior to a standard mini but it still accurately transmitted the contours of the road through the crude rubber ball suspension to my backside.

Soon after we crossed the border into Holland we stopped for an early afternoon lunch. They had a hamper full of food. His mother had cooked a whole chicken in a Polish style with rice, various pickles and salads. They were extremely talkative and generous with their food, there was plenty of it, and we took our time. I was in no hurry now. I knew that if all went well and the little Hornet wended its way with no hiccups I would be in the Hook with plenty of time to spare for the ten o'clock sailing.

The couple had a cabin and I said my farewells to them in case I didn't see them at breakfast. It was a calm evening and I wandered around the deck watching the lights of Hook of Holland harbour disappear over the horizon. I slept for the rest of the crossing on a seat in the passenger lounge. I woke at about six when the ship was in sight of Harwich. Half an hour later we docked and in another half an hour I was handing my emergency passport to the border guard and when he waved me through I stepped out onto the road leading from the port.

I guessed a lot of cars would be going to London and I didn't make much effort setting myself up in an accessible spot. This was a mistake. The cars leaving the ferry were rushing past. There was an urgency, a rush to get home. The occupants of the cars were returning from visits and holidays and had little time now for picking up a hitch-hiking teenager. The lorries might be a better bet. The trucks and pantechnicons always came last off the ferry. I was anxious. Once the lorries had gone there wouldn't be another ferry arrival until that evening. The road to London joined the main road from Ipswich at Colchester. I'd need to get a lift that far at least if I was going to make headway. Would there be any local traffic? Harwich itself was not a large town, however, a junction from Clacton, a larger town with a Butlin's Holiday Camp, would be a much better bet, but it was the best part of ten miles away. I decided to walk a bit to find a decent junction with some traffic emerging from the town. A few hundred yards on a youngish fellow with a scooter was stopped and strapping his holdall on the rear carrier. As I walked past I said hello and he very cheerfully stood up to chat for a moment. He saw my rucksack and asked where I had been and where I was headed. He was impressed when I told him about Sweden. "I can take you to London" he said. There was no law regarding Helmets until 1973 and he wasn't wearing one. I said "Why

not? Thanks.” The weather was warm enough, I had my plastic mac which would keep out the wind and I could carry the rucksack on my back. Off we went on his newish Vespa. We had a shouting conversation and I told him I had an old Lambretta, he told me he’d been to see his sister who lived in Amsterdam.

It was impossible to talk without very loud shouting and we gave up after a while. The journey took almost three hours and we crossed the North Circular at Wanstead soon after ten thirty. It was still early in the day. The ride was not particularly pleasant but I was still young enough to withstand a fair amount of discomfort. My hands suffered most without gloves. The scooter rider lived in Chiswick. Half an hour later having navigated central London we were on the Talgarth road and passing Hammersmith. He turned north at Chiswick roundabout and left me on the A316 where I was given a lift to Staines. Then another to Bagshot. This was much slower progress. The lifts were local vans delivering and salesmen driving to see clients. Eventually I passed a sign declaring that I had reached Basingstoke. I was dropped on the bypass road which led to the A33 and on to Winchester.

I could have almost got a train from here. I could ’phone my parents and they’d pick me up. But I didn’t have much money left. I wouldn’t check how much I had because I was determined to see the whole trip through to the end on my own volition. Catching a train when I didn’t need to would be deferring to comfort and a lack of fortitude. I somehow had an internal dialogue which reminded me of the dogged determination of the greatest men in history who never gave in to laziness, comfort or suicide when the going became difficult. Churchill was still bright in the minds of free men and my particular hero, Shackleton, achieved the impossible against all odds to save his men. For me, refusing to give in or cede to the ache of toil when there is no end in sight is part of my integrity. Integrity is simple, it’s doing what is necessary, what is right for you, not lying or cheating, especially to yourself and more especially when no one is looking or knows what you’re doing and will never know. I suspect many autocrats, politicians and businessmen never define integrity for themselves.

It wasn’t long before I was saying goodbye and thank you to my last lift of the trip. I stood wearily at the northern junction of the road where I lived. I walked just half a mile and stood by the back door of the house. I’d made it. My parents were welcoming. My dad was not a bad person, he was just subject to internal dialogues he didn’t even know he had. He was still pleased to see me back safe and sound and I imagined he may have a tiny bit of admiration for my achievement. I was tired and the relief of arriving home drained the tension from me and I almost fell asleep sat at the dining room table as my mum gave me food and told me to go to bed once I’d eaten. She could hear the details later, she said. When I found the Falun horse in my rucksack to give to her I found my coin purse. I had exactly three shillings and fourpence remaining, that’s seventeen pence in our present currency. We were still using pounds, shillings and pence before 1971 and three shillings and fourpence was forty old pennies out of two hundred and forty in one pound. One sixth of a pound. To Sweden and back on forty five pounds, more or less.

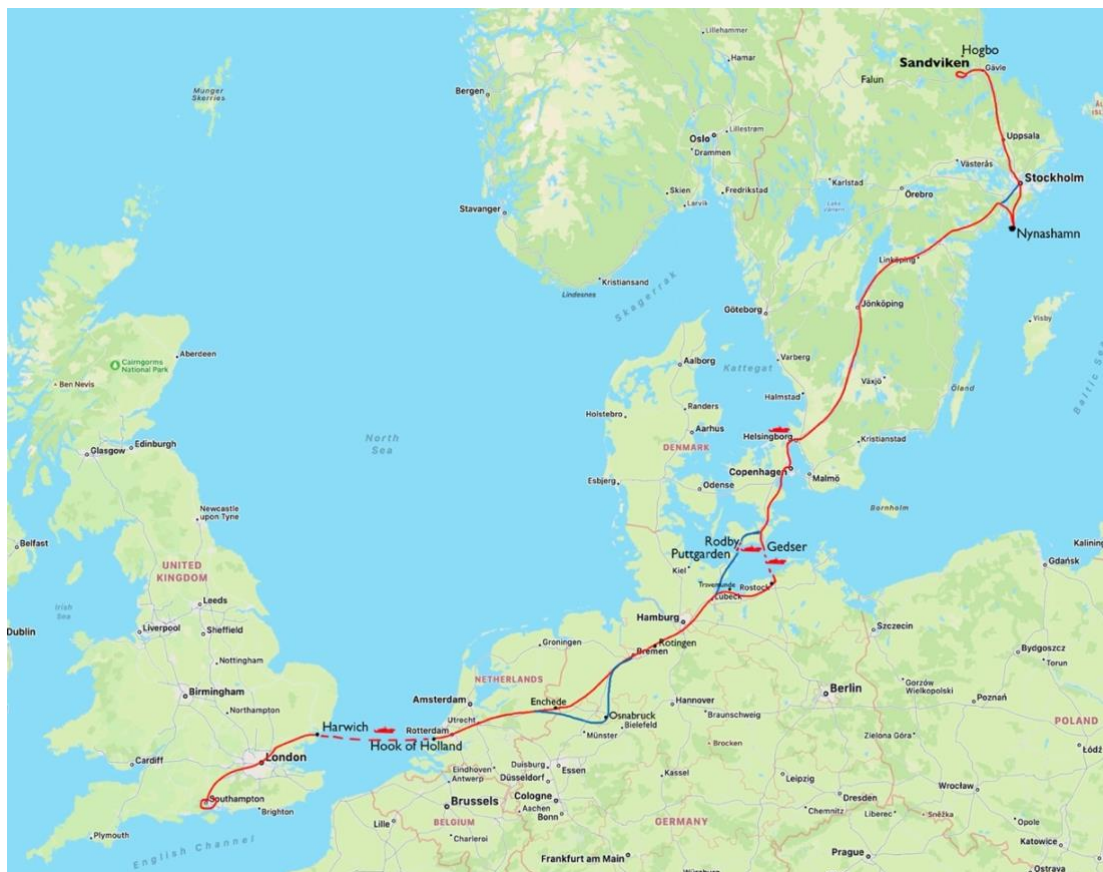
I’ve travelled around most of Europe since then, from southern Spain and Gibraltar to the northernmost point, Nordkapp in Norway, from Galway in the west coast of Ireland to Constanza on the shores of the Black Sea in Romania. I’ve been very happy to be European, to be part of an incredible continent where the diversity of nations is ancient and intelligent. Where great ideas were born and democracies began. For me it’s inconceivable that the United Kingdom should have divorced itself from a brilliant collective, where every voice can be heard and where the United Kingdom had a major role. Most of the laws which Europe values were introduced by the United Kingdom in the first place. We have never been second fiddle to any statutes or resolutions passed in Europe we have always been in control and our input has been valued greatly. I can only assume that those who sought to take all of

this away from us did it for self-serving reasons or perhaps have never had the courage to communicate with, or the privilege of meeting ordinary Europeans and discovering that they're a lot like us. They have the same aspirations. If you only ever take holidays in English speaking countries or go to resorts catering specifically to British tastes, fish and chips and weak beer, you can't know the pleasure of hearing other languages, of communicating with intent. Perhaps the patina of xenophobia creates a fear of the unknown. Our twenty miles of ocean separating us from access to all of Europe is like a defensive shield for some, protecting us from unknown aliens. For me it's just a ferry trip.

I continued to write to Maj spasmodically with snippets of news for many years. I gave up ideas of returning to Sandviken as events took over and I went to art college, was lured towards other girls by my still coursing testosterone, started a career a professional photographer, got married and eventually became a lecturer in a university. I last heard from Maj when she married. Her brother Per-Anders had become an accomplished photographer and she sent me one of his pictures taken at her wedding of Maj holding a sprig of lily of the valley. A gentle understated Scandinavian aesthetic.

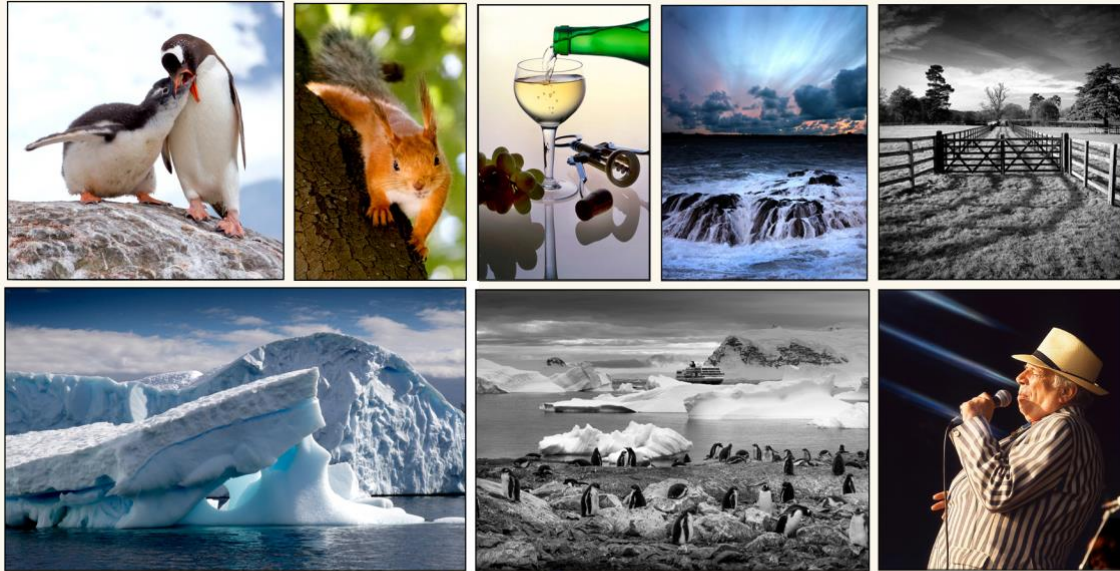
I'm proudly married to a European, a brilliant Romanian doctor from Bucharest. I worked for many years as a photographer on motorbike magazines and consequently rode many, many different motorbikes. I currently ride a Triumph Street Triple. Even Beefy's 350 Matchless would seem pedestrian compared to the outrageous performance of its three cylinder 675 cc engine. I travel to many different parts of the world from the Arctic to the Antarctic all, I have to say, with much greater speed and much more comfort than what was probably my greatest real adventure.

The Route – (return route variations shown as blue line.)



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