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THE HAIRPIN BENDS

The rain was almost torrential. Drenched and despondent, I stood on the side of the busy main road. It was a Friday evening in early July 1985. I had been waiting in this deluge for almost an hour. I was wet through and my arm was sore from holding my thumb out to hitchhike. I could usually get a lift from here in five to ten minutes. There was a large petrol station with a grocery store on one side, and the road itself led to a popular beach resort so it never took long to get a lift, except for this rotten evening. Either the heavy weekend traffic couldn't see me because of the persistent downpour or they didn't want a sopping wet hitchhiker sitting next to them.

It had started raining at 4:30pm when I left the village where I worked. My colleagues kindly offered me a lift to the bus station in the city from where I could catch the 6pm intercity express bus home. The rain was so heavy while driving to the bus station that it slowed us down considerably. Then, to top it all off, the wipers of the old Ford stopped working about five minutes into the journey. As I was sitting in the front, I became the 'wiper', pushing a long-handled sweeping brush out of the passenger window and up and down the windscreen. It was effective, but slow, and also cruel on the arm.

'Look, Kay, at least it's not a yard brush,' Tom, who was driving, guffawed out loud, almost in convulsions.

In spite of the danger, the four of us in the car laughed and joked for the entire journey. That week had been good. Our work was outdoors and it had been a perfect week of sunshine with the temperature in the mid-20s and a lovely cool breeze to go with it. We were all as brown as berries. Today, however, the weather forecaster on the radio had predicted a change for the worse, and it was correct to the hour.

My workmates dropped me at the station door but I missed the bus by three or four minutes. I had no choice but to trek across town and hitch home. It was a miserable walk, getting splashed by cars and tripping into puddles as I hurried, even jogged some of the way through the city, taking several shortcuts. About forty-five minutes later I reached the local hitching spot. By then I was exhausted and just wanted to be home and dry. There had been no let up in the downpours. In spite of a good anorak, I was soaking wet. My rucksack was also saturated and weighing heavily on my aching shoulders and back. In this wretched state, I started to thumb.

After one very long hour, I was elated when a dark-coloured Citroën stopped. 'Want a lift love? I'm not going to the city, but near enough.' I replied, 'thanks, that would be great.' One of my friends had always told me to write down the car's registration number before getting in but of course that evening it was the last thing on my mind; it was only when I

got into the car that I remembered. I felt stupid but then I knew everything would be grand as I had hitched a number of times previously and only had a few minor incidents with a handful of idiotic gombeens. One chap asked me for advice on how to tell his children the 'facts of life'. Then there was the sleaze-bag from California, originally Irish, who put his hand on my thigh and said he thought I was 'on the game'. I promptly slapped his hand away and ended up back on the side of the road. Most people who gave me lifts were sound. Why did I have to work in out-of-the-way places with no buses? It was primitive. My folks would never have approved.

As I sat in the Citroën, out of the corner of my eye I observed the driver. He was solemn. I can still remember his face to this day. He had deep parallel furrows on each side of a narrow nose. The colour of his face was dark tan. It was a face used to the outdoors and was hewn with grooves, almost like the bark of a very old oak tree. He had dark, curly, greasy hair, but not a lot. It's a face that has faded a little, but nevertheless it's always there in my mind. It was like the face of a fox, a sly one at that. He didn't smile either; it was as if he had something on his mind. He wore a navy blue gilet, a thin one, and navy blue corduroy jeans, well-thinned corduroy in fact. On the dashboard lay his dirty, tweed peaked cap, probably green coloured originally. It seemed at first to be a tidy car but as I sat there for the first few minutes in silence, I realised there was nothing to tidy; it was bereft of items. I could see a well-scratched magnetic plaque on the dash, showing the giant-like Saint Christopher carrying the Christ infant across a swollen river; that could have been in today's weather, I thought to myself. The patron saint of travellers was looking after me that evening. The driver and I had only exchanged a few words up to that point.

Fifteen minutes down the road and the rain had eased slightly. He had talked a little, mainly asking me about myself, where I had been, where I was going and so on, and as I was a chatterbox, that was easy. Suddenly I felt his hand lunge down my jumper and hold onto me. I screamed. I roared at him to let go and to stop the car so I could get out.

He smiled and said with a leer, 'I will let you out all right.'

The car braked and veered into a lay-by. Still he held his grip. I made a go for the handle of the door. It was locked. I was struck with utter terror, realising his plan.

'You're not going to get away that lightly; you can earn your lift!' He said it with such venom that he was spitting directly into my face.

'Sure isn't that what hitching is all about? Getting to know one another and getting a return for my kindness? Wouldn't you be soaking wet if I hadn't stopped?' he whispered menacingly, all the time hanging onto me.

Again I screamed, shouting that I wasn't interested. With that he lunged at me.

A white Opel Kadett suddenly stopped behind the Citroën. By some miracle the door on my side opened and I got out quickly, grabbing my wet and soggy rucksack. The rain was still pouring. I hit the waterlogged ground on the verge of the road. As I picked myself up, another noise gave me a fright. The driver of the Opel, a grey-haired man, called to me as he approached the driver of the Citroën. I ran.

Big woolly black clouds had gathered above but I was roasting with the ordeal that had just taken place. I ran blindly away from the road, splashing into numerous muddy puddles until I came to an opening in a field fence. I almost fell in. The field was bumpy and uneven

and scattered with furze bushes. I scurried, tripping, frantically trying to find a place to hide. There was no way out. Large briar-filled field fences prevented me from climbing into the next field from any other route than the one through which I had entered. I kept losing my footing in the deep holes in the ground. There was nowhere to hide. My foot hit a large rock. A blast of pain went through the arch of my foot and I just stopped myself from crying out. I realised there was an opening in the side of the rock. I limped and crept and wriggled with great difficulty into the crevice.

In an instant outside there was a flash of light, followed a few seconds later by a rumbling sound, which seemed to shake the very ground I was hiding in. I normally liked the spectacle of lightning in the sky but right now it was not very pleasant. I could think of far better places to be. I backed in as far as possible and lay huddled in this small cavity in what seemed the very bowels of the earth. It was neither cold nor warm and the ground was dry and earthen. I realised it was the entrance to an old cave. It couldn't collapse in, surely? It must have been here for thousands of years. I felt safe here, from man and nature, for the meantime.

The doors of two cars slammed shut and I heard the voices of two men coming towards the field. Why on earth would the two car drivers come along together? Unless ... they knew each other? I lay as still as I could. Their voices were coming closer. I inched quietly back further into the cave. It was so black.

'She must have gone out over the field boundary wall,' one of the men said to the other. 'She's a strong one, nicely rounded and fit.'

The other man laughed. 'Yes indeed, but got away? The night is young yet.'

I was taken aback that the two men were so familiar with one another. What on earth was their game? Their steps became louder. I inched back even further. As I did, I felt unusually soft textured stone. In the dark cavern my hand tried to find an outline, but no luck. It didn't feel good in here. There were holes in the rock, like nothing I had ever felt before. A heap of rubble seemed to obstruct my advance further back into the cave. Someone must have used it as a dump. As I crawled around the small area inside the cave, I clambered carefully over branches; they felt as if they would break easily. One cracked and I jumped, thinking suddenly of rats; how I loathed even the name, I hoped there weren't any here. I trembled with the notion. I froze as I heard the voices of the men who were now outside the cave.

'Yes, she must have got out. She would never have gone into the crypts?' said one of the men, whose sneaky voice I recognised as the Citroën owner.

'Doubtful, but let's have a look at any rate,' the other man replied.

A light flashed across the sky, followed by a thunderous crack. A heavy downpour fell out of the sky. The two men yelled at one another and their voices faded. I breathed a sigh of relief. But what did one of them say? A crypt? I didn't recall seeing any in the field but then I was in a hurry. I shuddered with a sudden realisation: God almighty, I was in a tomb! Almost half afraid to move, I started feeling around the ground. Those stones and sticks were bones. Human bones. I scrambled to the front of the tomb. I had to get out of there. The hard rain poured into the opening. Then the sound of the men's voices returned. I shuddered again, and thought my heart would stop. I scrambled quickly back inside the

tomb. This time I tumbled over uneven ground. As I felt around the floor carefully, for the second time, I could now identify piles of what were most probably bones everywhere, mixed with stone and wood. I couldn't stomach sitting here. I was petrified of the voices above ground as well as what was in the tomb. I thought my brain would explode. My knees were sore, my foot hurt, and my legs cramped. I had now started shaking, almost uncontrollably. I didn't know whether I wanted to scream or cry. I could do neither anyway with those mad men outside. Were these bones in the crypt the bodies of female hitchhikers to whom these men had given lifts? Were they foolish young girls, like myself, unsuspecting prey for these lunatics? I had often heard of girls going missing but I had never given it much thought.

I thought of escaping but the voices came closer. While their whispered conversation continued, my head was all over the place. The pair passed near the spot where I lay still and huddled in my cavernous refuge, trying desperately to hold my breath. I was sure they would hear my heart racing. All I could think of was being buried alive in that tomb. My body was aching from the confined conditions, and parts of my feet were numb. Fearful of going back further in the cave, I curled into the smallest ball of myself I could produce and stayed, petrified, for ages. I was so cramped I felt I could never again move.

It must have been twenty minutes with no sound before I thought it was safe to stir. It was now drizzling. I could not see anybody in the area. The men must have left the field. In spite of my aching limbs, I ran out of that field like the hammers of hell. I sprinted to the boundary wall, making sure the cars had left the lay-by, and then started racing along the road, keeping as close to the shadows as I could.

I reached the start of the Hairpin Bends on the steep hill before town. I was so exhausted, I felt as if I was dragging my legs with my hands. As I got to the first hairpin, I heard a car revving up behind me. I dived into the roadside ditch. It was a white Rover. I waited another ten minutes before moving on. At this stage, I felt like crying and just curling up on the side of the road. Nevertheless, covered in a wet, mucky mess, I walked slowly up the remainder of the hill to the second hairpin. It was 9pm when I stood at the top of that hill, looking over the valley and the fields, and in the distance the nearby town and estuary. It was quiet and getting dark. Specks of light were slowly appearing in the town. It looked pretty. The rain stopped. In spite of the horror and madness of all that had happened the night was warming and there was a wonderful scent from the wet hedgerows. It was a secure, familiar smell, which made me feel safe and lucky at my escape.

Even though I had walked so far, I was still a half-hour car drive from home. I couldn't ring for a lift. I had no option but to hitch again. I convinced myself that everyone on the road tonight couldn't be bad. My body stiffened with fear as I heard the sound of metal immediately behind me. Then a voice called, making my heart stand still. A shadowy figure was walking slowly towards me.

'What in heaven's name is a slip of a thing like yourself doing on the side of these dangerous bends at this time of night?'

It was a very old, stooped man, with a brimmed hat on his head, closing the gate to a field as he came onto the roadside. He must have been in his eighties or nineties. He walked with the help of a crooked stick. At his feet was a black and white collie dog, crouched and

looking as if it was going to spring up and treat me like one of the sheep that would be shooed into the field.

'I missed my bus and got a lift to this spot,' I replied. I just did not want a lecture on the hazards of hitching. I had endured an insane night and didn't even want to talk too much, especially since I knew I shouldn't have been hitching.

'What kind of job would leave you in the middle of the Hairpin Bends? And in the dark at this hour. Sure, you'll never get a lift from here. Best move beyond the bends, where the straight bit starts.' He talked very quaintly. 'And if I were you, take my advice: you shouldn't be on your own looking for a lift again. Too dangerous. Too many strange characters.'

'Thanks,' I replied, and started to walk away. Then for some reason I turned. 'What's that field at the bottom of the hill?'

He gave a peculiar look. 'Why do you ask?'

'No reason in particular.'

He put his hand firmly on the gate to steady his old frame. Looking down at the field, the farmer pointed, with a furrowed frown on his face. 'That field is a private cemetery for the Howard-Leaches. It has several vaulted tombs.'

I just stared back at the old man, with my mouth wide open. I took a deep breath and let him continue.

'The last bodies interred were that of the wife and newborn son of the last owner, Randolph Howard-Leach. However, body snatchers stole their corpses. Randolph believed there was something bigger behind the robbery. He asked for an investigation into the hideous crime but no one from the establishment supported him, and consequently no one believed him. Randolph spent the rest of his life trying to prove that the medical school, along with the physician who had treated his wife and baby son, were behind this lucrative and sordid business. Others in local positions in the corporation knew what was happening. They all silently looked on as Randolph made claims and allegations.'

The farmer was a bit agitated and began giving more of the story. 'So in the end the public were lead to believe that Randolph was out of his mind, which did happen a few years later when he had a mental breakdown.' Then he gave himself a shake, almost like his dog. 'It's very late, young lady, off you go. Reminding one of these sad tales does no one any good. It was such a long time ago, indeed a very long time ago; history now, to be sure, but history that no one has written about, or should I say, been allowed write about.'

A realisation hit me. 'You're this Randolph, aren't you?'

With that he seemed to get bothered and he turned and walked slowly back from where he came, followed by his dog. He looked a very sad figure. As he vanished through the gate, he raised his arm with the stick, waving it, and feebly called after me. 'Dangerous people on these roads, mind yourself and no more hitching.'

I felt safe again with his kind and calm words. I headed off and got to the top of the last hairpin bend quickly. It must have been near 10pm at this stage. I had just arrived at the beginning of the straight bit when a black Jaguar saloon stopped. An older, suited man was returning to the city. He was a pharmacist. He was very kind and told me several times the dangers of hitching. He did not want to see me hitching again, he said. In half an hour, he

had dropped me to the door of my warm dry home, and security.

I never told him, nor my family, about Randolph, or what had happened in the first car, or in the cemetery. As the years went by, my thoughts and some of the memories faded but I often thought of the man with the unforgettable long narrow face who was driving the Citroën. I still kick myself for not memorising his car registration number. Then I thought of those two kind men who helped me get home, Randolph and the pharmacist; people like that removed the evil of the world from my thoughts and gave me immense inner consolation. I felt I had been so fortunate in many ways that night, and I obviously never hitched a lift again.

The following Monday when I got back to work, I mentioned the incident to one friend, Emer, while on the phone to her, and told her about Randolph and the pharmacist. Later that day she rang me back with some information from old newspapers. She worked in the local library and was very interested in local history and folklore. In fact, she knew the cemetery where I had hidden. Over the phone, Emer read out snippets from a newspaper.

'Randolph Howard Leach spent many years in a mental institution. Eventually the medical consultants released him as he was a threat to no one.'

'How long was he there, in the mental asylum?' I queried.

'I suppose it must have been forty years,' Emer replied. 'He was elderly when he returned home. He had nowhere to go, as his greedy relatives had seized his property. He hadn't a penny to his name.'

'Where did he go?'

'Well, he found a small outhouse which a neighbour let him live in above the cemetery, near the Hairpin Bends. Late on summer nights, around the time of the anniversary of the deaths of his wife and son, he was seen walking at the top of the road with his sheep dog. He recounted to passers-by the truth about the fate of his young family, who he believes were taken as "specimens" by the local physician for the medical school. Body snatching was very common at that time. There was a considerable demand for corpses. It was a big money-making racket.'

'I thought robbing corpses happened in the nineteenth century. Randolph must be very old.'

Emer slowly replied. 'That was the nineteenth century. Randolph died in 1877. One perilously cold night, at the age of one hundred, he fell outdoors and got knocked unconscious. His sheep dog lay over him, keeping him warm. Both were found dead the next morning.'

THE GLEAM OF LIGHT

My coat and equipment were sodden and caked in wet mud making movement almost impossible. My chest was sore from coughing. It was dark so I couldn't see if my brother Jack was asleep or if he had moved further down the trench. He had been the first to catch this barking cough. He was probably exhausted from it. I would have to be extra alert to cover his watch and let him rest tonight.

The deafening, explosive noise had abated. In fact, it was eerily quiet. We had endured a week of gales and torrential rain, along with a constant artillery barrage from the Germans. Never in my worst

nightmares could I have thought of such madness and carnage. It had taken several days to collect all the wounded. One chap, John, was seriously wounded in the leg, with blood flowing out of him so quickly he should have died but for the weight of his dying fellow soldiers lying on top of him and preventing him from bleeding to death. An older man named Tommy kept begging one of us to shoot him in the leg so he could be taken away, anywhere but here. He was demented. No one could rise to that. Shrapnel struck him during another bombardment and he winked at us as he was being carried off on a stretcher. We had been waiting for reinforcements, waiting for several days. In all, sixteen

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of our unit's lads were hit by shrapnel; nine had died.

I closed my eyes and imagined I was in Mack's snug with my pipe lighting and a drop of Irish. Even the idea made me feel warm. I snapped back to attention. On the ground above the trench a mule's decaying carcass was still reeking. He had been there for days. He must have got stuck in the mud as I had heard him braying for a short time while someone called Tom fecked and blinded. He must have given the beast a blow to shut him up, and then another blow.

A light flickered in the distance, probably from a fire or flare. My feet were cold as they stood in the muddy swill of water. What was mam doing now, I wondered? She would be hoping I was wearing those socks she knitted. I wasn't sure if she had got the letter I sent after Christmas. I told her we were doing well and that we'd have those bloody Krauts stamped out in a few weeks. But the few weeks had crept by ever so slowly, and now it was three months later.

I did tell her that on Christmas Day the Germans were so close to us that we waved at one another over the trenches. One of them even came out with a cigar. A few of us joined him and then half a dozen Germans came up too, just for a few minutes, with their cigars and our stale bread and jam. We hadn't a clue what each other was saying, except for Jack who spoke to them in the few words he had. They were just like us, pleasant, eager to stay alive and get this war over with.

'We will pay hell for that truce,' the commander in chief said when he heard of it. I couldn't care less, we were paying hell anyway.

It was pa's fourth anniversary about now. Mam would want us there to visit the grave, to be with her. Hopefully, one of her sisters would step in, Johanna or Mary, or maybe she'd go to stay with them for the anniversary. They were lucky, mam said, about her sisters: they had no boys, only girls. Their girls could stay home, she said, while her two boys were sent away, her only two children. 'Fodder for the leaders of the world and not a thing could the poor miserable people do about it,' mam would say.

My thoughts were shattered when I heard a splutter and a sucking.

I dared not move for what seemed ages. I could hear two of the lads at the far end of the trench whispering, and then quietness. The sucking noise again and a splosh, several yards away. I stayed still.

'Jack,' I whispered. 'Is that you?'

It was pitch black and shadowless in that end of the trench. The noise was made by someone but they didn't speak. I leaned forward as far as I could towards the side wall. My feet were all now almost numb as I hadn't even wiggled my toes for an hour. The water was still swilling in over my boots. I could stay motionless for a short time

more. Soon I wouldn't be able to move my feet at all. The water was freezing.

Jack had not returned. A soft bluish-green light appeared above the top of the trench. A matronly woman stepped through it. I thought it strange she would be here by herself and not a bit of stress on her. Her grey uniform was clean and pressed, with glinting white shirt collar and cuffs, dazzling in that bright light. She was a nurse, but not one of ours, a German nurse. What the heck was she up to? I whispered furiously to her to get down and out of sight. She kept staring at me and, though she nodded, she did not budge. I picked up some mud and threw it at her feet. My god, she vanished so quickly I didn't even see her move. What in the world was she doing in No Man's Land? She couldn't be lost, unless she was deranged from shellshock. She wasn't here for the wounded since the injured had been transferred to the village. Where the hell was Jack?

The daft nurse emerged further away. This time she seemed to be washing some cloths in a pool of water. The water was turning red. I realised her head had a long gash above her right eye and it was her

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own blood coming from the wound. It was a bad injury. Blood was splashed on her white and grey cape. She turned and nodded; her stiff matronly face seemed warm and kind. I beckoned to her to get the hell out of here, and again she stared at me. Just then I heard a splosh; probably mud dislodged from the top of the trench by that bothered woman. When I looked up she was gone again. A piercing sound like a siren cut right through my ears. I must be losing the plot altogether. I could badly do with a kip; I hadn't had a minute since early morning. I was weary. Yes, I did need some relief. This hellhole was driving me nuts. Maybe I should injure my leg to get away if I was already going daft but I knew it was foolish even to think like that. I wished Jack would come back.

I decided to move from my sentry post. Slowly I wiggled my toes and inched my way along the dark side of the trench, being careful not to trip over anything. I was about thirty feet along when there was a massive explosion behind me at my sentry point. The shattering earth blew out of the ground throwing me and all manner of objects into a heap. I couldn't move. I could feel my legs were very wet and sticky. The nurse appeared and bent over me, giving me water and wiping my forehead with a cloth. She had dragged me out from under the mound of broken wooden planks and earth. She remained silent. I couldn't see the torch she carried but it glowed that same blue colour I'd noticed earlier. In spite of my dizziness, I remembered her own wound but I couldn't see the gash on her head. I could hear in the distance the noise of men coming in this direction. Three arrived and two of the lads put me on a makeshift stretcher, while the other looked around the trench where I had been. I faintly mumbled that they should help the woman, who was now nowhere to be seen.

'A woman, is it? Indeed. You must have been having a great dream. Lucky you had left your sentry, lad, otherwise you should have been blown to smithereens. You are some lucky lad. What made you move?'

'The nurse,' I repeated faintly.

The pair of them shook their heads.

When I woke I was in a tent along with other men on stretchers lying on a ground sheet. There must have been twenty stretchers, all

waiting to be moved to the makeshift hospital in the nearest village. I was now a casualty. Thankfully my legs were still with me but they were covered in bandages that hid my shrapnel wounds. I was in good order, I was told.

With a rush of relief I spotted Jack on one of the stretchers at the far end of the tent. He had a huge gash over his right eye. He winked at me, in spite of his heavy breathing and that harsh cough, and gave me the thumbs up. 'That was some powerful lass. Pulled me out of the water. Like a weight lifter, she was. Would have drowned in that filthy muck ... only for her. Couldn't crawl any further up the trench. Broke my leg. What a girl!'

I had started to think I must have imagined the nurse. Now Jack had seen her. I asked one of the two nurses if the German nurse was safe. The younger of the two pointed out they were the only nurses here for miles, and that the trenches further up the line from our sentry had been bombarded heavily, leaving no survivors, no casualties, no nurse.

The older woman, Marion, waited for the young nurse to move on. Then she leaned over me and whispered in broken English. 'De apparition of the lady, she died from head injuries when she tried to stop the army taking her thirteen year old son.'

'Is her son safe?' I asked, disturbed. 'When did that happen? What army?'

Marion replied. 'Thirty or forty years ago, by the Prussian army. She was the wife of a high-ranking officer in the French army whose

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house was looted and burned. Their only son was taken. The lady was inconsolable, she ran after the soldiers attempting to stop them but was badly injured by the butt of a gun. She followed them.'

'What happened to her?' I asked.

'Her corpse was found by one of her servants on the narrow road at the side of the meadow, where the modern trenches have been dug. In fact, just where you and your friend were found, after the explosion.'

'What about her son? Did she find him?' queried one of the other casualties, who were all by now listening.

Marion answered. 'Yes. She found him. She was cradling his dead body when her corpse was found. She had found him hanging from a tree, and cut him down. They both probably died together, in each other's arms.'