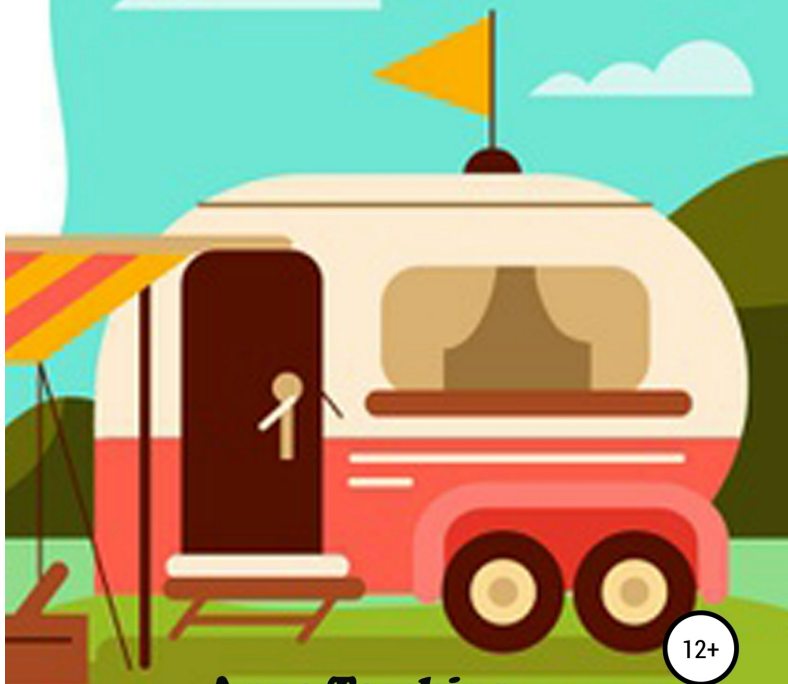


My childhood adventure

from

Manchester to Spain 1969



Anna Tomkins

Анна Томкинс
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Аннотация

My most cherished memories are those of our family trips to Spain during the school holidays. It was then I caught the travel bug and have many tales to recount of my adventures twenty years later.

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Анна Томкинс

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Chapter 1: A Taste for Travel

An important legacy from my parents is my taste for travel. Actually that is not a strictly accurate statement. I love being in different places and enjoy experiencing new cultures. I don't necessarily enjoy getting to them.

One of my earliest memories is of accompanying my father on his rounds. At the time he was an area manager for Security Company and would often have to make late night inspections. Spot checks to ensure the security guards were awake and at their posts at the various business and industrial sites he covered. Often I would accompany my father on these late night inspections (he claimed it was the only way they could get me to sleep) and I would be safely strapped into the front passenger seat beside him.

Dad would keep me entertained by telling me about the places we were driving by, the work being done at the various sites we visited.

He is a natural raconteur. Sometimes he would tell me of the

places he had been to in the Middle East and Mediterranean when he was posted overseas by the British army. During his time abroad on active duty, he would take the time out to visit nearby countries rather than spend his leave on visits back to UK. And he had many tales to tell. Vivid tales of his travels in the Holy Land. Of staying with monks in an ancient mountain top monastery, living off bread, goat cheese and wine made by the monks. Tales of his time in Cyprus during the troubles between the Turks and the Greeks (hasn't there always been trouble between the Turks and the Greeks?).

One day under enemy fire while on ski patrol in the snows of the Troodos mountains. The next day to find himself on leave, snorkeling in the rich warm waters around the coast, or enjoying a spot of sunbathing and a cold beer.

Other times he would regale me heroic tales of the Celtic legends of old – Cu Cullen, Finn McCuill and the Red Branch Knights. As a young man he had toured Ireland and England extensively by cycle, staying in Youth Hostels, at a time when the roads were quieter and safer than they are today

These car journeys had a several curious effects on the infant Brian. The most significant was that it spurred me on with a desire to experience these foreign places at first hand. Secondly it meant that even to this day I find it almost impossible to go to sleep before 1.00 AM. Unless of course my wife is prepared to drive me round town in the dark for 2 hours telling me interesting

stories. Most unlikely as she doesn't drive.

A curious side effect was the distorted perspective I developed of the world outside the immediate area of my home. As I was so small (I could hardly be described as a potential high jump champ now, either) it was impossible to see directly out of the car windows. Consequently I became convinced that the world in between the places where the car stopped and I got out; consisted almost entirely of clouds, starry skies, street lights and the occasional disembodied church steeple or high rise apartment block. My head spent so much time at an angle of 65 degrees; it's a wonder I didn't decide to become an astronomer.

At the tender age of three, I now had a baby brother and sister for company, and was about to set off on my first long haul travel experience. My father's best friend from the army had managed to get a job as the manager of a famous hotel on the shore of Loch Ness. The family was invited to be his guests.

Back in the early 1960's there were no motorways or even major roads in that direction. The trip North from Manchester was set out on with much the same sense of adventure as Marco Polo set out for China. As it turned out, he got there much quicker.

To this day my father insists that mother acts as map reader and navigator on long journeys. I have no idea why. Perhaps it's because she is so nearly perfect he needs an excuse to shout at her occasionally. God love her, she has absolutely no sense of direction whatsoever. She could get lost in a telephone kiosk.

Have you ever done that when you have been really drunk? You know, phoned for a taxi then forgotten which wall to push against to get out. No? Must just be me then.

Anyway take my word for it, Mum is hopeless with directions and she knows it. The time to set off had arrived and Dad handed mum an out of date tourist map of Scotland. She held it in trembling fingers, uncomfortably aware of her total inability to tell a road from a train line. She seemed vaguely aware that anything coloured blue was likely to represent a form of water. A river or a lake maybe. The rest of it could have been in ancient Sanskrit for all the sense it made to her. She studiously poured over the map for about 20 minutes before eventually announcing that she had located our destination on the map and was ready to go. It was felt at the time that the cartoon monster with the name *Nessie* beside it should have helped her locate Loch Ness sooner. But it didn't.

Off we went on the roughly 350-mile trip north. We crossed into Scotland near Gretna Green to a big cheer. My first foreign country! Even if it is, albeit somewhat reluctantly, part of Britain.

Then things started to go awry. The British government seems to be pathologically against spending money in Scotland. While the rest of the UK is blessed (some would say cursed) with an extensive motorway network, Scotland has until recently missed out on any such expensive public works, especially the further North you go.

You would think that it was long term Government policy to

make travel around Scotland as difficult as possible and thereby keep the semi naked, wide painted hordes of barbarian Scots away from the civilised south. Anybody who has ever visited the holiday resorts of Blackpool or Morecombe during Glasgow holiday weeks would realise the plan was doomed to failure.

Back then the roads were lousy with few signposts. We seemed to be perpetually stuck behind slow moving lorries. It was slow going indeed.

Despite our early morning start, darkness had descended and the weather had closed in. Heavy rain affected visibility so that it was easy to miss a signpost on the unlit roads.

Every town or village we came to dad would bark out the place name and the phrase “which way next?” Mother was clearly becoming more and more flustered and less sure of our position.

At one point we had reached quite a large town. As we drove through the center we noticed mother looking frantically about the place through the windows. Dad assumed she was looking for a place name so that she could tell him exactly where we were and how far we had to go.

Dream on sucker!

She had actually spotted a bus terminus and was desperately praying that she could locate a bus showing “INVERNESS” as its destination that she could follow. Obviously she was not praying hard enough. We were still 200 miles from our destination and inexplicably heading West instead of North.

Two hours later with the rain beating a heavy metal drum

solo on the roof, the road got even worse. At least before it had been fairly straight. Now it twisted and turned and became even narrower. We were the only vehicle on the road, no longer hindered by lumbering wagons.

“Are we lost?” I asked unhelpfully.

My father was muttering under his breath and glancing daggers at the map bearer in the front passenger seat.

“Have you any bloody idea where we are woman?”

“Yes, yes I think so”, she said with a definite lack of conviction.

“We should be coming up to a major junction where you take the left turn.”

“There, there it is!” she announced, a note of unexpected triumph in her voice.

The car turned sharply left, descended a steeply sloping concrete slipway, and came to rest axle deep in the icy waters of the Irish Sea.

Oh, how we all laughed! Actually nobody laughed. Dad was banging his head monotonously on the steering wheel (at least he wasn't banging mums head on the steering wheel) and we were contemplating life as part of a one-parent family. Mum was pretending not to exist. Well you would, wouldn't you?

We did eventually make it to Loch Ness and my parents did eventually start speaking to each other again. Nine months later I had another baby sister. Sandy has also inherited our taste for travel. As a research doctor and lecturer she travels the world,

attending symposiums and presenting research papers. This has helped her to amass the finest collection of Hard Rock Café commemorative cocktail glasses known to man, and I am very proud of her.

In the following few years we discovered much of Britain together as a family. Mostly it was by way of days out at the weekend, blackberry picking, and picnics in the gardens of historic houses. That sort of thing. Dad changed his job and joined a food distribution company as a salesman, which meant a pay rise and a company car. We also had a couple of summer holidays at holiday camp in North Wales, which I particularly enjoyed. I learnt to swim one year and earned my first ever “certificate of achievement”. I was seven years old and I still have the certificate – is that anally retentive or what? I put the certificate on my bedroom wall and when we went back the following year I pretended I still couldn’t swim so that I could get another one. Sad but true.

However much fun these times together were, you could always tell that Dad wanted something more. Something just a little bit different. Something really, really foreign.

One fateful day, dad came home late from work. On the back seat of the car were a big canvass sack and a collection of aluminium poles.

“And this is what exactly?” enquired Mum.

“It’s a tent darling. Family sized.”

Clearly this was not the fully automatic washing machine that

the overworked mother of four had been hoping to get with Dads annual bonus.

“Bill, can I have a word with you please. Away from the children.”

There followed a hushed but heated debate off to one side.

“Where did you get it?”

“One of my customers let me have it cheap. His kids are too old to want to go camping anymore, but he says they had lots of fun weekends away all over the place”.

“I don’t care how cheap it is, take it back. I am not going to spend my weekends sleeping on wet grass, watching my kids going rigid with boredom in some field in the middle of nowhere, while you and me slowly go blue from hypothermia. Apart from that I hate insects, you know I do.”

Dad was not to be deterred. “OK we will try it out for one weekend and if you are still not happy, it goes back. Fair enough?”

“Oh come on mum. I’ve never been camping before”. John had appeared at Dads side. Like the last minute arrival of General Blucher’s men at the battle of Waterloo, victory was clutched from the jaws of defeat.

“Ok. Well try it. But if I get the flu, it goes back .No discussion”.

The new tent was taken into the garden for an immediate trial run. Dad’s customer had given him directions for assembly scribbled on the back of a beer mat, so it took us ages to put the

thing up. Finally it was done. The bloody thing took up most of the garden, and was the size of a Victorian summer house. The roof was so high, only mum and dad could reach it.

That night the five of us slept in the garden under piles of blankets. We loved it. Mum called us a bunch of bloody idiots and slept in her own bed. But being mum, she was there for us first thing in the morning, with bacon, eggs, tea and toast. You need a good start to the day when you're sleeping outdoors, she advised.

The next Bank holiday weekend we went camping in the Lake District. What a beautiful place for our first camping expedition! The drive to the campsite, just North of Lake Windermere was just breathtaking. Spectacular views of mountains, lakes and rivers appeared round every corner. The buildings and houses of our village were all of brick – the older buildings blackened by decades of chimney smoke. The only building made of stone was the Town Hall.

Up here the buildings were made of Lakeland stone. The blue – green rock giving the area a unique otherworldly appearance. The place was gorgeous!

Mum need not have worried about either boredom or hypothermia. We were lucky with the weather and spent an idyllic weekend roaming the hills around the campsite, fishing in the streams for tadpoles and sticklebacks. The campsite was very well organised and clean. Plenty of shower and toilet blocks strategically placed around the site. There was even a fish and

chip shop, so mum didn't have to cook on the Saturday night.

The best thing for families was the evening entertainment. The campsite owners had turned a collection of old farm buildings into a little village; with a shop, village pub and kids club. In the evenings the adults could have a beer knowing that the kids were safe next door, being entertained by an amateur magician dressed as Robin Hood, with a female assistant dressed as Maid Marion. We had a brilliant weekend. As for camping holidays, we were hooked.

The weekend had been an unqualified success. Even mum had to admit that she had enjoyed herself and couldn't wait to do it again. It was after we had returned from this first successful expedition that dad revealed the true intent behind buying the tent.

The year was 1969. Man had just stepped on the moon. My future wife had just been born in the far, Far East of the Soviet Union. We were about to become known round Europe as the Quasimodo family.

Dad had read an article in the Sunday newspaper supplement about a family that had spent six weeks one summer touring France and Spain in a caravan. It sounded fantastic!

The heroes of the story had made their way southwards at a leisurely pace, travelling a few hours a day. They would stop for lunch at any quaint country village that took their fancy. Or sometimes they would buy fresh cheese, pate and wine from the many farm shops that lined the route, then picnic by a river.

We could do that, thought dad.

Sunday dinner was a traditional affair in our home – roast chicken, roast potatoes, chestnut stuffing, vegetables and gravy. All eaten off the best crockery with the family seated on carver chairs around the imitation priory style dining table. Attendance was compulsory.

It was at the end of Sunday dinner that dad revealed his master plan for our main holiday in September – we were going to go camping in Spain. The announcement was timed to give dad the maximum amount of moral support, i.e. all four kids, and mum the least chance of having any possible objections listened to in any kind of fair or impartial manner.

He briefly outlined the article that he had read. Then he waxed lyrically about how great it would be for the children. A real education. One long geography field trip.

Dessert (usually apple pie and ice cream – my favourite) was abandoned as dad produced an atlas from under his carver chair and we all gathered round to look at our proposed route.

South via London to the coast, over to Paris, and South once more to Perpignan and the border with Spain.

From there it would be on to Barcelona. Our destination was to be a campsite recommended in the newspaper article right on the coast, just a few miles further on from the Catalan capital, by a village called Castelldefels.

And best of all, right, dad had to take his vacation in September. So we would miss the first two weeks of the new

school term. Fantastic or what?????

All four kids were bouncing up and down with excitement. Not so mother. She was looking at all the lines and squiggles on the map with nothing short of despair in her eyes, in the full knowledge that she would be the unwilling navigator once again.

As she collected up the dirty plates, I swear she was quietly sobbing.

Chapter 2: The Adventure Begins

Mother accepted the fait accompli with good grace and gradually warmed to the idea. Over the next couple of months we did a whistle stop tour of every camping and outdoor supplier in the North of England. No longer would we sleep under a pile of blankets on a ground sheet.

Now we all had airbeds to sleep on and thick comfortable sleeping bags to keep us warm and cosy at night. For cooking, mum chose a foldaway gas stove with twin burners and a grill. It folded up to the size of a small briefcase but was ready to use in just 2 minutes. She also picked a set of lightweight aluminium pans that fitted inside each other like a Russian doll. A sturdy 10-gallon water drum with a foot-operated pump would mean we had our own fresh water supply in the tent.

For nighttime, we all had a rubber torch each and a gas storm lamp for trips to the loo at night. Dad came across a set of 12-volt lights that plugged into the cigar lighter socket in the car. These made it possible to read after dark and cook in safety inside the tent. We would certainly be a lot more comfortable and self sufficient than on our first trip.

It would have been easy to get carried away with the range of accessories available: portable toilets; shower tents; gas heaters – the list was endless. Our problem was one of space. There was

never going to be enough .Dad would have to find a way to get everything for a family of six for two weeks, including luxury accommodation (ok, a tent) into a family sized saloon car.

Oh yes, and the wife and kids.

To help with this, dad bought a specially designed roof rack. It covered almost the full length of the car roof and could be packed high in a turtle shape, the contents being held in place by a tough waterproof covering and stretch cables. When taken off the car and re-assembled, the roof rack became a kitchen unit with storage shelves, wash basin and work surface.

Even so, it was going to be very cramped inside the car indeed.

We had another couple of weekends away to get the hang of all the equipment. This included a thoroughly miserable trip to a site in Rhyl in North Wales, when it rained cats and dogs from the minute we arrived and is probably still raining to this day. We got soaked putting the tent up, and never got either warm or dry the whole weekend. The site had only the barest of facilities and we had a thoroughly depressing time cooped up in the tent with some colouring books and puzzle books for entertainment. This, reasoned dad, was exactly why we should be going to Spain for our holidays, and some more predictable and reliable summer weather. At least he was right on that score.

By the beginning of August final preparations were in hand for the assault on Southern Europe. Dad got permission from his employers to use the company car for the trip, and they helpfully arranged for a “Green Card” extension to the car insurance cover

for driving in Europe.

There was a major difference between our family and the happy travelers. Dad had read about in the newspaper article – they had six weeks to make the trip and we only had two.

So reasoned my father, if we were going to be in Spain long enough to get a suntan, we would have to get there and back as fast as possible. Oh god.

It is a long long way from Manchester to Barcelona. A bloody long way. Dad had it all worked out – He had contacted the automobile club to ask for advice. They provided him with a series of map cards detailing suggested routes, advising on road conditions and expected travel times between major towns. Thoughtfully they also provided a card with useful motoring phrases in French – later to be a source of endless amusement. We could tell somebody in French that we suspected the front wheel bearings needed inspection and possible replacement. We could not however order anything useful, like a cheese sandwich. Or chips.

So, armed with the route cards, a Michelin road guide and a list of recommended campsites in France and Spain, Dad planned the trip in detail. Honest to god, Alexander the Great took less time planning the conquest of Xerxes and the Persian Empire.

Like all great military disasters through the ages, the plan was simple to follow and practically foolproof. Leaving at midnight from Manchester to avoid traffic delays, we would reach Dover

and the English coast in around six hours. Allow an hour for any possible delays (yes, you mother) and catch the seven am hovercraft to France, with time for Dad to grab a catnap on the 45 minute crossing. Then drive hell for leather down the fast autoroute to Paris and on to the South, stopping only for fuel. We would have to make our bathroom trips coincide with garage pit stops. A combination of caffeine tablets and witch hazel eye swabs would keep the driver awake and hopefully alert for nearly two days. There would be plenty of time to sleep on the beach when we arrived.

At last the day arrived for our great adventure to begin. We all helped to pack the car. Most of the camping accessories, tent and poles went on the roof rack. We joked about it being stacked so high we would have to be careful going under low bridges – you know that line about many a true word said in jest? The car boot was full of clothes for six people for two weeks, pots and pans and the rest of the camping gear that we couldn't put on the roof rack for fear of causing a hazard to low flying aircraft or upsetting the flight path of migrating geese.

Mother was packed into the front passenger seat; sardine like, her legs hemmed in by tins of baked beans, packets of breakfast cereal and other essential items of food that we wrongly assumed might be unavailable in Spain. On her lap were perched the map and route cards. Before we left, I turned the map the right way up for her so at least she might get off to a good start.

If mum had it bad sat in the front of the car, life in the back

of the car was no picnic either. The foot wells were filled in with the inflatable airbeds, the rear seat covered in a thick layer of six sleeping bags. When the four children were shoehorned in for take off, we found ourselves packed in so tightly that we were sat with our knees up around our ears and next to no clearance between our heads and the car roof. In days to come it would be a constant battle between us to be last into the car and get a coveted window seat. For the two kids in the middle it was like the nightmare of being trapped in the rubble of an apartment block after a 7.5 Richter earthquake. No fresh air and no possible way out without outside intervention. It would have had Harry Houdini howling from claustrophobia. Animal rights campaigners insist on more space for battery hens. Still only for two days...

So we were ready. At exactly midnight (we actually had to synchronize our watches would you believe), the family saloon started up and we set off on our great adventure. The poor car was so heavily laden it had the ground clearance of a lazy crocodile.

It was just as well it was dark when we left – if the neighbours had been witnesses to conditions in the back of the vehicle they might have alerted the authorities. My father would have faced charges of causing unnecessary suffering to minors and we would probably have spent our summer holiday in council care. To keep us amused on the long trip, mother had thoughtfully bought us a magnetic travel chess and draughts set. Unfortunately it is well nigh impossible to play if your arms are pinned to your sides by

the immediate proximity of your siblings.

No matter! We were on our way to high adventure and nothing could dampen our spirits. With Radio Luxembourg blasting out the latest hits in the background we trucked south, the family singing along with all the musical harmony of a rusty nail trapped under a revolving door.

We made good time all the way to London. Now the easy thing would be to go around London on the ring road. Yep. That would have been the easy thing to do, right enough.

To save time dad decided he would drive straight through central London. He had lived and worked in the capital when he had first come to England in the 1950`s, and he was sure he could take us right through without a hitch. Mum abdicated all responsibility saying that the route cards recommended going around not through – if dad wanted to choose his own route, it was down to him.

It did not prove to be a wise decision. As we got closer to the center, we became hopelessly lost in a maze of one way streets, all of which seemed to lead us round in circles. In the twenty years since dad had lived here the place had changed beyond recognition.

Then a stroke of luck. We spotted a French refrigerated truck heading in what we took to be a southerly direction. We assumed that having delivered his load he was now heading back to France via the channel ports. It seemed a reasonable bet at least. So we followed him, glued to his taillights. At one point we even

jumped a set of red traffic lights so as not to lose him. It was ok. It was 4.30 in the morning and there wasn't another soul around.

The French truckie certainly knew his way around London, throwing the big truck around the narrow city streets as if he did this trip every day. Then without warning he stopped. We waited some moments for him to start off again. Instead the truckie came to the back of his truck and began to gesture angrily at us to back up. We slowly obliged. Then the angry Frenchman opened the doors on the back of his truck and made preparations to offload his cargo.

It was at this point that there were lots of men around dressed in white coats and hats, wheeling around stacks of boxes. There was also an all-pervading smell of fish.

My father rolled down his window and hailed a white coated young man pushing a trolley loaded with boxes of what looked a lot like fresh haddock.

"Excuse me mate, where are we exactly?" asked my father meekly.

"Billingsgate fish market" answered the chirpy cockney as he sped past with his load.

I could see my mother's smug expression clearly reflected in the rear view mirror. Up yours Mister-know-it-all, it said.

Time was now not on our side if we were to make our ferry booking at Dover. Then my father had an idea. "I have an idea," he said. Told you he did.

He jumped out of the car and ran across the road to talk to

the driver of a black taxicab. In fact he was the only person in our vehicle physically capable of jumping out of the car without help. The rest of us would need the assistance of specialist rescue teams equipped with those cutting machines that firefighters use in the aftermath of a major rail disaster. Then the car could be searched by highly trained sniffer dogs and infra red cameras to make sure they hadn't missed anybody. It really was that cramped in there.

Anyway, dad spoke to the taxi driver for a minute or two, and then handed over a note of the realm. The children all looked at each other, mindful of the fact that we had not as yet been given any holiday pocket money. Dad jumped back into the drivers seat and announced simply "That's that sorted". The taxi pulled away from the curb and we followed in hot pursuit. He led us out of town onto the main road south. In front of a sign indicating the way to Dover and the Channel ports, he pulled over, pointed at the sign and gave us a cheery wave and toot on the car horn.

"Good luck" he shouted as we sped on by. I appreciated the sentiment.

We reached the ferry port with twenty minutes to spare. The speed cops thankfully must have been taking well-earned forty winks. Tickets checked at the kiosk, we were directed to a line of vehicles waiting to board. Ahead we could see our hovercraft racing majestically towards us. Our spirits soared at the prospect of being on board such a magnificent craft.

I had been lucky to travel this first leg of the journey with a

window view. Now I had an opportunity to glance out the window and observe some of our fellow travelers.

On our right were lined up all the cars with trailers or caravans, a minibus and a transit van. Directly adjacent to us was a large red Volvo estate towing the biggest luxury caravan I had ever seen.

Now I am not a fan of Volvos, especially the estate models. I find them about as ascetically pleasing to the eye as a house brick with headlights. Who actually cares if it's the safest car on the road to drive? Do you really want to drive around town in the Scandinavian equivalent of Hitler's Berlin bunker on wheels? Thanks but no thanks.

However that was not what was occupying my mind at this precise moment. Instead I was staring enviously at the cavernous space behind the drivers seat.

Two young children about my age lounged in this vast indoor arena. They had enough room in there to play table tennis. From my cramped quarters I could only imagine what it must be like to travel in such pomp and splendour.

I caught the younger child, a boy, staring back at me. A puzzled expression on his face. The boy craned his neck as though trying to work something out in his mind. Then he nudged his sister and she joined him at the window. A short conversation ensued, and then both children poked their mother in the back. She also turned and stared. The father leaned across his wife to look at us.

“Good lord, there are six of them in there”, he mouthed.

Luckily our lane started to move. Slowly we climbed the ramp into the belly of the hovercraft. A man in orange overalls and wearing ear protectors guided us into position on the car deck. He was waving a set of luminous red ping pong bats around like he was positioning fighter aircraft on the deck of an aircraft carrier, no doubt with the theme music to “The Dambusters “ playing through his ear defenders. He banged on the bonnet of the car to indicate he was satisfied we could go no further toward the vehicle in front without actually shunting him out the front of the hovercraft and back onto the car park.

“Handbrake on and out of the vehicle, please sir”.

Somewhat stiffly dad got out of the car. Nobody else moved. Nobody else *could* move!

Mum’s left leg had gone to sleep where it was jammed between some tins of baked beans and the passenger door. My father went round to her side of the car and helped her get gingerly to her feet.

It took considerably longer to get us out of the back seat. After some seven hours or so cramped in the foetal position, our limbs were in a very uncooperative mood, so we were pretty much dragged out and onto the vehicle deck. Unable to stand up straight we hobbled along after my limping mother towards the passenger deck.

Behind us the Volvo family looked on with undisguised amusement. “Good lord, if it isn’t the Quasimodo family”, hooted Daddy Volvo.

“Har, har, har”, laughed the other Little Volvos.

“Sod off and die dogbreath”, I thought to myself, but being only ten years old decided it prudent to keep my thoughts quiet.

Our family went to the very front of the passenger deck where the seats gave the best view. Dad appeared from the direction of the buffet with a can of cola and a chocolate bar for each of us, which we soon polished off.

When the last of the passengers and vehicles were safely on board, the captain started the engines. The biggest of the engines quickly filled the skirt with air and the body of the hovercraft gently rose up off the ground. Four smaller propeller engines mounted at each corner on the roof of the hovercraft provided the forward thrust and steering.

The hovercraft picked up speed as it turned out of the car park, crossed the shingle beach and slipped smoothly on to the surface of the sea.

Travelling by hovercraft is a most unusual and unique sensation. The craft skims over the surface of the sea making the most minimal of contact, held aloft on a cushion of air, so it travels much faster than a conventional ferry.

Soon we were racing over the Goodwin Sands – a natural sand barrier that lies just below the water but becomes visible in paces at low tide. For centuries it has been a hazard to unwary ships. We could see the skeletal remains of some of its unlucky victims stuck fast in the treacherous sands, rotting masts pointing at the clouds.

Sand barriers, sea, beaches, car parks – it was all the same to our hovercraft. We didn't even have to slow down.

My father had just closed his eyes to get half-hours sleep when there was a tap on his shoulder. Daddy Volvo was about to engage him in conversation.

“I say old chap, couldn't help noticing you people s we were getting on the ferry. Not going far are you? You seem awfully overloaded, if you don't mind me saying so”.

“Barcelona”, replied dad curtly hoping the smarmy sod would go and bug somebody else. Not an earthly.

“That roof rack of yours looks rather unsteady and it is awfully high you know. You may find that the Gendarmes will have something to say about it when we land in Calais, old chum.”

We find it much more convenient to travel with the caravan. A regular home from home you might say. Of course we are old hands when it comes to tripping around France. Been coming here for years...”

Daddy Volvo had a really plummy upper class accent coupled with an extremely arrogant attitude. The overall effect of listening to him being somewhat less attractive than the sound of fingernails being dragged across a blackboard. I found myself wondering if you could hit him really hard on the head with a spade, could you make it adopt the same shape, like happens in Tom & Jerry cartoons.

He droned on and on, neither listening to nor interested in anything anybody else had to say. Dad gave up any hope of

getting his catnap and tried manfully to get a word in edgeways.

But I had my own problems to contend with. Once over the Goodwin Sands, the sea had become very choppy. The hovercraft was no longer gliding smoothly along but bouncing from the top of one wave to the next one. Or worse, bouncing off the top of one wave and dropping heavily into the trough before the next big wave hit.

Now, I love roller coaster rides. I can spend a fortune in an amusement park. This trip was fast becoming the roller coaster ride from hell. What I like about roller coaster rides is that you have that adrenaline fuelled two or three minutes, then it stops and you return to terra firma. Nobody sensible uses all his or her ride tickets up one after the other without pause for breath. Not me anyway.

Initially we four children were having a lot of fun. We invented a game of seeing which one of us could stand in front of our seat the longest before the erratic motion of the hovercraft would steal our balance, forcing us to fall back into our seat.

My spine was slowly straightening out, the stiffness leaving my limbs. I was returning to my normal shape and height. Internally things were not going nearly so well.

If you are prone to seasickness then do not, if you can possibly avoid it, cross the seas by hovercraft. Just trust me on this one.

Many years of foreign travel have taught me that I hate being on the sea and the sea hates me. Being possibly the world's worst sailor is a serious drawback when you are born to an "island

nation” like Britain. To get off the place and visit anywhere else on the planet, you have to somehow cross the sea. I can actually get a queasy stomach watching a documentary on migrating whales, or even worse, Jacques Cousteau re-runs. If I had been Christopher Columbus the world would be a much different place today. Aztecs would possibly still rule South America and the plains of North America would still be teeming with herds of migrating buffalo. Why? Simple. I would have sailed once round Cadiz harbour, thrown up that morning’s chorizo sausage and called the whole thing off.

As far as I am concerned mankind’s greatest technological achievement is not the internal combustion engine, satellite communications or the computer chip. Without a doubt it is the Channel Tunnel. Now, not only do you no longer have to risk the open waters, you don’t even have to look at them. An outstanding contribution to civilisation in my book. All those whom contributed to its construction should be awarded knighthoods and offered early retirement. Back on the hovercraft, I was about to have my first experience of that ghastly sensation known to fellow sufferers as “just kill me now please and end this misery” that is severe seasickness.

I was no longer in competition with my siblings to see how long I could stay on my feet. Rather I was sat on the edge of my seat, stomach clutched tightly and head between my knees. It wasn’t going to help. Having never been seasick before, I had no idea why I was feeling so bad, what to do about it or what might

happen next. Like children usually do, I decided to consult with the fountain of all knowledge. Dad.

I turned to the side, “Dad?”

“Just a minute son, I’m talking”. He wasn’t actually. He was being talked at.

“Dad I feel really ill. Dad, honestly, I think I might be ...Dad?”

“In a minute, son”, he totally missed the tone of growing desperation in my voice.

“Please Dad, I’m definitely going to be...Dad .Daaad... Urrgh...Raalfffff.”

Conversation across the aisle ceased in mid sentence. Dad stared dumbly at the equally speechless Mr. Volvo Driver.

Mr. Volvo Driver was staring in disbelief at his legs. From the knees down they were coated in a body temperature cocktail of chocolate and coke. The event had been so sudden and volcanic that I half expected to recognise some of my internal organs flopping around on the deck. It was not a pretty sight.

I just about had time to mumble “Uh, sorry”, before Mother grabbed me by the arm and half dragged me outside onto a narrow promenade deck for some fresh air.

A kindly stewardess, carrying a box of tissues to help clean me up accompanied us. Her assistance would have been a lot more appreciated by Mr. Volvo Driver, for sure. I had escaped relatively unharmed. After all I had done my best to get the goo as far away from me as possible. The stewardess agreed.

“That was amazing,”she confided to my mother. “I never

would have believed someone so small could throw something so far without using their hands. I've been doing this crossing three times a day for the last five years and that is the most awesome example of projectile vomiting I have ever witnessed.”

I can't say I felt particularly proud.

Dad joined us on the promenade deck. I was holding on to the handrail like a drowning man gripping a rescue rope. Mum went off to check on the others.

“How are you feeling, son?”

“Absolutely crap,” I answered convinced I could not get myself into any more trouble. I waited for the clout on the back of the head, the obligatory reward for an outburst of uncouth language. It didn't come.

I turned to look up at my father. His face was split by a huge grin and he was struggling not to laugh out loud. He slipped some silver coins into my pocket.

“Here take this, but don't tell the others, or they will all want to throw up over annoying assholes.” He winked at me, conspiratorially.

“Just one thing, don't spend it on coke or chocolate on the way back. You're too bloody dangerous on that stuff.”

No problem, I thought. If it means another trip on this bouncing torture chamber, I'm not bloody coming back. Dad distracted me.

“Look son, Europe!” he pointed ahead.

Fast approaching were the sand dunes of the French coast. My

ordeal was almost over.

Funny how things happen in life sometimes isn't it? The opening of the Channel Tunnel marked the end of the hovercraft ferry service between Ramsgate and Calais. The hovercrafts were too expensive to run. I remember seeing the last service on the evening news several years ago and felt a touch of nostalgia – I had many happy crossings on the hovercraft once I stayed off the coke and chocolate and discovered the benefits of travel sickness pills.

I have been living and working in West Africa for a while now. Usually if I have to fly to Freetown in Sierra Leone, I take the short helicopter shuttle from the airport at Lungi, across the river to the city. Now there is an alternative service, introduced just this year. They have bought the very hovercraft that I first traveled on all those years ago. The trip takes longer, but it's worth it to say hello to an old friend.

Chapter 3: Bienvenue en France

We had arrived! The hovercraft entered a gap in the wall of sand dunes and reduced speed to a fast walking pace as it approached the car park. The engine note faded to a low drone and our craft gently lowered itself onto the tarmac, the air leaving the supporting skirt in a hiss.

The drivers and their passengers hurried to their vehicles anxious to continue their journeys. I wondered if any of them intended to travel as far as us.

Sadly our first moments in Continental Europe were marred by an undignified brawl. Nobody wanted to have to sit in the middle of the back seat – starved of air and only able to look straight ahead. Our parents separated us and allocated us our positions on the understanding that it would be “all change” when we stopped for fuel.

The row of vehicles on our right disembarked before us. Mr. Volvo driver looked icy daggers at me as he crawled past and the little Volvos pulled faces. Hey, I said I was sorry. So post me the dry cleaning bill! When I am old enough, I'll get a paper round to pay for it.

Our car soon followed and we joined the procession to the customs barrier. Here a bored customs official and a couple of equally bored Gendarmes gave our documents a cursory

inspection before handing them back. Even though our car, being from Britain, was right hand drive, they insisted on standing on the left of the car and dealing with the driver through the passenger window. Just a subtle way of letting us know we were in their world now. The officials took no notice of our heavily laden vehicle and merely waved us on.

Clearly it was inconceivable to them that there might possibly be anything in Britain worth smuggling into France. Like what? Cheese? Wine? Cognac? Mais non mes amis! Any smuggling would only be conceivable if it were going in the opposite direction.

A sign in English reminded us that pretty much the rest of the universe drives on the right hand side of the road, and we were off.

Dad popped some caffeine tablets to keep him alert. All the traffic seemed to be heading out of Calais. We followed and it wasn't long before we picked up signs for Paris.

I am not sure what I expected, but the towns and villages we passed through all looked so different from home, so *French* if you like. I can't actually come up with a better description.

The skies were clear and blue. The ambient temperature already several degrees warmer than when we had left Manchester.

It was strange to see things like advertising billboards, some advertising familiar products, but not being able to make head nor tail of the captions.

Indeed at the time none of us spoke either French or Spanish. However we did have a list of useful phrases for the traveller supplied by the auto club along with the route maps. One of these phrases became the immortal “Trente litres d’essance s’il vous plait.” The list of useful phrases did not supply any variations on this request, so we were obliged to order ‘thirty litres of petrol please’ any time we needed fuel.

The height of the roof rack and heavy load on board made the car slightly less fuel efficient and aerodynamic than The Houses of Parliament. Our fuel consumption was roughly the same as a badly maintained Concorde passenger jet, so we ended up visiting practically every other petrol station between Calais and Barcelona asking for {you guessed it}, thirty litres of petrol please.

This slowed us down a bit but at least it gave us the chance to exchange places in the back at fairly regular intervals.

We tried to fill up on fuel only at Total and Elf service stations because they had free gifts with every fuel purchase. By the time we returned to England we had a complete set of miniature plastic busts of famous French writers, artists and composers, courtesy of Total. Courtesy of Elf, we had enough high ball glass tumblers to kit out one of the Queens garden parties. I am sorry Shell; your freebies were rubbish.

By late morning we had reached the outskirts of Paris. I was disappointed that we would not be able to spend any time here, and hoped at least for a glimpse of the Eiffel tower on the

way past. The route map recommended going around Paris on a big ring road known as the Peripherique. It indicated where we would join the Peripherique and the best place to leave it to continue our journey south.

It didn't indicate that this was the most dangerous place on earth. The road to hell. No diversions. I suggest anybody forced to use this horror of a bypass would be well advised to take a large dose of LSD at the last toll booth before Paris – the nightmare of a bad trip could be no worse than the terrors of driving on this evil stretch of tarmac.

It has been suggested that the chariot race in Ben Hur was based on a movie mogul's abortive attempt to circumnavigate Paris at rush hour.

The Peripherique is many laned. Cars drive flat out at all times. They drive so close to one another that direction indicators are useless. To signal your intentions to other road users the custom is to blare your horn repeatedly then just execute the manoeuvre, change lane or whatever, even if it is against the laws of Physics to be able to get your car into the available space. French drivers don't have a lot of time for the laws of physics. So far as I can tell French drivers have heard of the Highway Code, but don't believe it has a significant role to play in the day to day life of La Republique. Basically a nice idea but not very practical if you want to get to work on time.

We were approaching the highway with great trepidation. It did not seem possible for us to slot into the traffic flow, so

tightly was it packed. We were lucky, you might say. The coach directly in front of us just threw himself off the slip road on to the main highway, forcing several cars to swerve or brake hard. Amid a cacophony of angry car horns we slid into the gap. Dad swallowed a handful of caffeine tablets, clearly uncomfortable with what was happening around us.

Soon we came upon another approach road. Traffic joining our lane at high speed, uncaring that our family was actually already in the space they wanted to occupy. Dad was forced to swerve into a faster lane accompanied by more blaring car horns.

Mother's eyes were glued to the map. It was a lot less traumatic than watching the traffic around us. For the first time I wanted to swap places with my brother and sit in the middle.

“How much further to our exit Maria?”

“Not much further. Two more junctions I think”

“What do you mean, you think?” Panic rising. Dad did not want to be here at all.

“Just come off when you see a sign for Orleans.”

Some twenty minutes went by before the sign for the Orleans exit appeared. Dad kept looking over his shoulder, hoping for a gap in traffic so we could pull over into the exit lane.

Suddenly we found ourselves being overtaken on the inside by a monstrous truck – another manoeuvre the Highway Code advises strongly against on safety grounds. The monstrous truck was towing an even more monstrous trailer, both bearing the symbol of a laughing cartoon character cow on the sides. Dad

didn't find it funny. The thing had more wheels than a centipede has feet and it was thundering along just inches to the side of us. I have been on shorter commuter trains than this truck ensemble. Now the driver had slowed so that he was just keeping pace with us, studiously ignoring our flashing indicators.

There was no way past him. The exit for Orleans passed us by. "Bastard" screamed my father impotently.

The monster truck was enjoying his little game with us. When we slowed down, so did he. He made us miss the next turn off as well.

"Right, that's it. Now I've had enough of you clowns". Dad's face now set grim and determined. As we approached the next exit, he hit the brakes hard and executed a move not unlike the one Michael Schumacher made to win the Formula One championship by wiping out his nearest challenger on the first bend of the decisive race. You remember that unfortunate accident? Certainly not deliberate, right? Yes, right.

Dad's move worked without a collision and at last we had escaped The Peripherique. Thank God.

We drove a short distance and pulled in at a parking spot. Dad was shaking as the adrenaline slowly ebbed out of his system. He took several moments to regain some composure.

"Okay then. Where are we exactly?"

Mum looked just a touch blank. My little brother came to her rescue "France, daddy".

"Nobody likes a smart ass, John, so leave the map reading to

your mother please”.

He turned back to mother. “Any ideas? Any at all?”

“Not really too sure. Got a little confused when we missed the Orleans turn off. Did we overshoot by two junctions or three? Tell you what, why don’t we get back on the ring road going the other way until we get back to where we should be.”

This suggestion was just enough to send dad’s new found composure to the back of the draw where you keep odd socks, just in case one day you happen across the missing one.

“Are you mental, woman? I am never, ever, ever going on that road again. Not even if it means we have to go home via Copenhagen to avoid it.”

He had started to shake again at the mere thought of getting on and off the Peripherique again, his left eye developing a nervous twitch. He gripped the steering wheel and began muttering to himself: “Think calm thoughts. Think calm thoughts. Remember there are children in the car. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. In pastures green...”

Half way through reciting the psalm he regained control, took a deep, deep breath and asked to see the map. Mum was happy to hand it over.

Dad has always had a brilliant sense of direction – my Uncle Alan reckoned he was three parts Irish and one part homing pigeon. He studied the map for a few minutes, then went through an elaborate charade with the sole intention of entertaining us kids.

Firstly he leaned out the window and checked the angle of the sun against the time on his wristwatch. Then he wet one finger and held it up to check the wind direction.

“Hmm, Chartres dead ahead. We can pick up signs for Orleans there,” he announced. A couple of minutes drive later the sign for Chartres appeared.

“Awesome Dad. Way to go Tonto!”

“All in a days work for an ex cowboy like me,” he said modestly. This statement was only partly accurate. As a boy back in Ireland he used to spend his summer holidays on a farm helping out. Sometimes he would look after cows. Cow boy sounds just like cowboy if you say it quick. And he could ride a horse.

On the way into Chartres we picked up the signs for ‘Centre Ville’ or town centre if you like. Once in the town centre another sign, ‘Toutes Directions’ led us back out again. A turn off the main road indicated ‘Orleans’. We were back on track, but on a minor road not a main route.

This was a single lane in each direction. The road had a pronounced camber with drainage ditches running along each side. Tall poplar trees flanked the route, providing a welcome shade from the afternoon sun.

It was easy to imagine it packed with refugees fleeing ahead of the advancing German troops just thirty years before. Now the road was quiet. The only people blitzkrieging their way along

it were us. Dad was trying to make up lost time. We were going through sleepy villages and hamlets so fast, that it is a wonder they didn't scramble the French airforce to intercept. For the rest of the holiday, my little sister was convinced that all the sheep and cows were about thirty feet long and blurred in shape.

It was late afternoon when we reached Orleans and found the "Toutes Directions" signs. All the car windows were open but it was still stifling hot inside, as we crawled along the busy rush hour streets of the city. At one point the road ran alongside a broad river spanned by several bridges. We stopped at a set of red traffic lights. On our left stood a charming pavement café, where a family of four were enjoying delicious looking ice cream sundaes. At another table an elderly chap in a grey flannel suit was reading a newspaper, sipping alternately between his coffee and a large brandy.

"Lord I would murder for one of those ice creams," Mum voiced aloud what the rest of us were also thinking.

"Know what you mean love" agreed Dad. "Never mind. With a bit of luck this time tomorrow we will be on a beach in Spain sipping pina colada."

I had no idea what a pina colada was, but I was very much looking forward to finding out.

The lights changed to green and our car followed the general flow of traffic onto a bridge and across the river. Progress out of Orleans was proving to be very slow going. It's a big place and everybody around was heading home at the same time. After

about forty-five minutes we were again running parallel with the river and stopped at another set of traffic lights. They certainly went in for charming riverside pavement cafes in this place.

Wait a minute – isn't that the same elderly chap in the flannel suit? So it was. The family had gone. By now the man had finished his newspaper and was reclining in his chair, head back and eyes closed. A fresh brandy in his hand, he was enjoying the last of the afternoon sun on his face.

Judging from the steam coming out of our driver's ears and the groan of dismay from the front passenger seat, I was not the only one to have noticed.

"I think we should carry straight on past the lights and keep the river on our left," suggested mother with little conviction. "What a great idea," said the driver sarcastically.

"Eventually the river will reach the Atlantic. Then we can hug the coastline down past Portugal, round the Straits of Gibraltar, up the Mediterranean and approach the campsite from the south. Hey! That saves us getting lost in Barcelona! Brilliant"

He was losing his sense of humour, I could tell. I was already dreading the rest of the trip.

"What do you think kids? Anybody in the back know the Portuguese for thirty liters of petrol please?"

He ate some more caffeine tablets, wiped his tired eyes with a wet wipe and sullenly drove on, keeping the river on our left.

More by good luck than good judgement we found the way out of Orleans and rediscovered the auto route south.

Once again we were low on petrol, but we insisted dad keep driving until we reached a Total filling station so we could add to our collection of miniature plastic busts of famous French people that we had never heard of. The lady who took our money handed me a small plastic Voltaire. I showed her our expanding haul of plastic busts to indicate that we already had a Voltaire. She kindly exchanged it for a Debussy and threw in a Jules Verne for good measure. The day wasn't going so badly after all.

Evening turned to night. In the back of the car we dozed fitfully as dad drove on, ever closer to the Spanish border. By now dad had been driving for over twenty-four hours, much of it on the opposite side of the road to what he was used to. It was a stressful journey, particularly for dad.

Despite having consumed the caffeine equivalent to a couple of Starbucks Coffee Houses, his head was starting to nod and he was struggling to maintain concentration.

"Its no use love," he admitted to mum. "I'm going to have to pull over and rest for half an hour."

Ever since his time in the army he has been able to catnap for half an hour, then wake up refreshed and ready to go. A very useful knack if you have it.

At the next services we picked up some more fuel, thirty liters to be exact, and a plastic Chopin. To one side of the service area was a large car park with a picnic area. We parked up in a quiet corner. Mum woke us all and pulled us from the car so dad could recline his seat and stretch out a little.

We were somewhere in the Massif Central. The elevation made the night air cold, so we pulled on our coats. Tired and irritable, the Quasimodo children followed their mother to a nearby wooden picnic table, where she distributed soft drinks and the last of the sandwiches she had prepared before we left Manchester.

All four of us were fussy eaters. Mother always indulged us by making a pile of sandwiches to cater to our individual tastes. She need not have bothered this time. By now the sandwiches were so stale that they were not so much food, but more like a new form of composite building material. After a few half-hearted bites I left mine on a wall for the birds. Really it was not an act of kindness. Any poor bird that managed to eat some of my leftovers would probably find itself too heavy to take off for a week. We spent a very boring hour sat around the picnic table, before dad at last emerged from his chrysalis like state in the car. Fresh as a daisy, just as predicted.

“Let’s go guys. With a bit of luck we could be on the beach by tea time,” he assured us.

By the time dawn had risen we were within an hour of the Spanish border. Time for another fuel stop. No Total station around this time, so we had to make do with patronising an Elf station and collecting some glassware instead.

We had reached a large service area with an out of town shopping mall. Mother had noted our lack of enthusiasm for last night’s sandwiches and suggested we visit the hypermarket for

some fresh supplies.

I love shopping in hypermarkets abroad. Okay, it may take two hours to walk round the place, and sometimes even longer to negotiate the check out queue. And the owners should face criminal prosecution for the tacky background music [Beatles cover versions played on a Hammond organ – you know the stuff I mean]. At least you can just pick up the products you want without having to overcome a language barrier or tote around an English to whatever-language dictionary. Having to deal with completely disinterested shop assistants in your own language is bad enough, but abroad? You'll see what I am getting at later.

So, thirty litres of petrol heavier, we turned out of the fuel area and towards the central car park serving the mall. Trucks and buses to the left, cars to the right.

“ Bill *STOP!* Screamed mum. Just for a change he didn't ask why, he stood on the brakes. The car came to an abrupt halt mere inches away from an overhead barrier with a sign on it indicating <maximum vehicle height 2 metres>.

Why do they do that? I mean what bloody difference does it make how tall your car is. All you want is a convenient place to park so you don't have to carry your shopping half way round the continent. It's not like you're at the front of a drive in movie theatre and nobody behind can see the screen. It's just a sodding car park.

Even the local fast food burger place has an overhead barrier on the car park. Why for God's sake? Is it to keep out those

riffraff truck drivers? Hardly. Those riffraff truck drivers have got more sense.

When truck drivers are hungry they stop at places that sell real food cooked by people that actually know how to cook, and not a slice of gherkin in sight.

They stop at places where you are not still hungry after spending ten pounds on processed junk food, served by a bored adolescent with acne so bad even his own mother wont kiss him goodnight.

Truckers stop at places where they can get a decent mug of tea or coffee and not be offered a choice of: regular; medium or large and the ubiquitous “do you want fries with that?” Incidentally, it is not ‘regular’. It is small. S.M.A.L.L. So let’s stop kidding ourselves shall we? Since when did the catering community officially list the word ‘small’ as a dirty word?

Sorry, I lost the plot there for a minute. Just don’t get me started on ‘theme pubs’, all right?

Now where were we...oh yes. South of France, stopped inches away from a big steel warning notice that our car was too tall to pass beneath.

“Phew, that was a close call,” said dad.

“Yes, we just about got away with that one,” agreed mum. Just about, but not quite.

It all happened in a split second, but looking back I remember it in slow motion. The six of us leaning forward, peering up at the sign. The sudden jolt forward as the car behind hit us, not

having any reason to expect us to stop so suddenly.

The steering wheel hit dad in the chest winding him. Mum managed to put her hands out in front of her just in time to avoid rearranging her facial features on the windscreen.

On the back seat, the four of us were packed in so tightly there was no chance of any impact injury. Despite that, with the unfailing response of children everywhere to an event they do not fully comprehend, we started screaming our little heads off.

“Wah, wah, wah, wah,” wailed the kids on the back seat.

“My babies, my poor babies,” cried mum.

“Shit, shit, shit,” complained dad, nursing his bruised chest.

The car had been shunted forward about two feet and was now firmly wedged on the overhead barrier. As always happens in such situations, the sleepy little rest area had immediately transformed itself into the car park queue for this year's Rolling Stones annual farewell concert.

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