



JOURNEYS

Performances by

Chapel Arts Creative Writers

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Journeys

Simone Hubbard

We're all on a journey, along with every living thing on the planet, and now it seems that artificial intelligence (AI) is also establishing its existence alongside us. Growing, evolving, moving; every second moulding our own life journey, however long or short it may be.

For many, the first parts of our life journey are mapped out in a similar way: nursery, infant school, junior school, secondary school, further education, and university for some. And then our first proper paid job.

As the seconds, minutes and hours turn into days, months and years it sometimes feels like it's for ever. But as each phase ends, it soon feels like a distant memory. For most people, the daily mundane stuff is only filed at the back of the brain. But for most, the memorable bits of the journey can be recalled, whether they be good or bad. Those key incidents in our life journey shape us and can influence the path we're taking. We can influence some of them; but more often than not, they will probably be out of our control.

On a physical journey, we can look at a map and see the route. In our life journey, we might have a rough idea of where we're heading but we can't predict the twists, turns and deviations.

Throughout our life journey we'll make countless physical journeys - on foot, wheels, horseback or maybe trains, planes, boats or buses. But in the future, who knows? We might have journeys in a rocket; or perhaps we won't travel at all. If the climate crisis continues, travel for tourism might be banned. Then what? A virtual journey? Imagine that! The world, and even space, would be accessible to all without stepping out of our homes.

So today we'll be hearing our Creative Writing Group's interpretations of our chosen theme. To start us off, here's a poem called *Journeys*, written using an Artificial Intelligence site. It took about ten seconds to compose:

Journeys are exciting, that's for sure,
Through mountains and valleys, distant shores,
Exploring new places, discovering new faces,
Journeys can take us to amazing places.

A journey can be a physical trek,
Or maybe an emotional check,
A journey of the mind, a journey of the heart,
Either way, it can be a brand new start.

Sometimes the journey may be tough,
Feeling like we've had enough,
But with each step we take,
Our courage and strength awake.

Journeys can teach us so much,
With every turn and every touch,
A journey can change us in ways we never knew,
And we'll come back stronger, wiser and anew.

Maud and the Whale

Caroline Vallance

There's a virtual resort on QuickBreak: Palmjestic,
Rated highly on Space-B-and-Board,
So Mr and Mrs Whitehead
Logged in with their child-person, Maud.

On went the sensory circuits and leads.
The suits came as part of the deal.
By the time they'd signed up and downloaded the App
They could have all gone there for real.

It was quite an authentic experience all round,
Too much so for mother's taste.
Strip searched at the spaceport, air sick on the flight,
It all seemed a bit of a waste.

But when they arrived at the six star hotel
Things briefly began to improve.
The food was divine, mother tasted the lot,
Then found that she couldn't move.

The feeding IV set up for comfort,
To keep them sustained on their trip,
Had malfunctioned briefly on mother,
Requiring the change of a chip.

While technicians attended to mother,
Father fancied some water sport fun.
He opted to surf with his youngster Maud
So they both ventured out in the sun.

The water was well realistic,
With waves almost two metres high.
Maud shouted, 'Look Dad, I'm like up in the air like.'
And it did seem she'd started to fly.

Now Maud was a tech loving child,
Liked messaging, Whiz-App and such
So she'd added a phone connect option,
With her friends she could now keep in touch.

The surfing she soon found boring,
No wipeouts, t'was all very tame.
She asked her friend Dell, 'What can I do
To add some spice to the game?'

'There must be a menu of options,' said Dell.
'Try pressing the pad once or twice.'
There appeared a long list of extras,
Most happily in with the price.

Well, Maud was amazed, she said 'OMG,
There's dolphins, turtles the lot!
You can swim with them all, but which shall I choose?'
And that's when it all went to pot.

Down slammed her board and her finger slipped.
She nearly passed out with the shock.
Flailing about, Maud rose up from the sea
She seemed to be beached on a rock.

In great consternation she looked behind,
And there was a ruddy great tail.
She'd apparently selected an icon, well random,
To spend half a day with a whale.

Father, meanwhile, relaxed on the beach,
His exertions over for now.
He chilled while he could as when mother came back
He knew they'd be in for a row.

'I want a refund!' Mother banged her fist down
To no avail it would seem.
Insurance they'd none; the T&Cs they'd not read
Explained they would not get a bean.

Back in the resort her mood was not helped
When father she couldn't find.
Neither offspring nor spouse were around the hotel;
They'd gone off and left her behind.

She marched down the beach. 'Find my family on scan.'
She followed the blinking red light,
Spotted father alone, eyes shut, glass in hand.

She geared herself up for a fight.

‘Where’s Maud then?’ she shouted. His drink nearly fell,
And he gestured resigned out to sea.
‘She’s surfing out there, it’s all very safe.
She’s much better at it than me.’

‘So why is she not on the screen?’ Mother hissed,
Waving her arm in the air.
‘She can’t come to harm love, none of it’s real,’
Father sighed, giving in to despair.

A whole day went by and mother was fraught.
Her child was not to be seen.
The shops, cafés, theme parks and rides -
Nowhere could they find the young teen.

That evening she stood all morose by the cakes,
When a waiter saw mother and said,
‘Are you Mrs Whitehead? There’s a call at the bar.
Come this way,’ and off he led.

The robotic voice announced in her ear,
That Maud had left the resort.
‘Well, bring her back!’ Mother shouted, alarmed.
But that was not all the report.

When hearing the rest, Mother clutched at her chest
And father ran over to help.
‘They say that our Maud’s been ate by a whale!’
She gasped, then collapsed with a yelp.

Maud had managed somehow to select by mistake
A different adventure and site,
One where a huge whale would swallow her whole,
Then she’d have to get out with a fight.

She’d used her connect to tell her friend Dell,
Who’d emailed the company head.
He’d asked them to let her parents both know
Just in case they thought she was dead.

But that wasn’t all that was bothering Ma;
No, far worse, she had to say:

The adventure Maud picked wasn't part of the deal
And more credits they'd all have to pay.

'Pay for a whale to swallow my child!
What a rip off!' She got to her feet.
'Father! Call up the local network,
We'll tell them and arrange to meet.'

And so they appeared on the late evening news.
Mother said it was a disgrace.
With her false lashes on it looked like she'd got
Two tarantulas sat on her face.

Father demanded they bring his Maud back
Or someone would have to pay.
They were on an emotional rollercoaster,
And she'd only been gone a day.

Meanwhile, Maud had enjoyed her adventure.
She'd passed through most of the whale.
She'd learnt lots of things about the great beast
Since she'd slid off the end of its tail.

Maud selected to end, and return herself back.
She was feeling relaxed, very happy.
That's how they found Maud, the very next day
Washed up in some fine ambergris.

Back together again the Whiteheads returned
To their home, where they'd been all along.
The company contacted Mother and said
They were sorry about what had gone wrong.

They offered the family, to make some amends,
Another big trip for free.
But mother exclaimed, 'What! And need more stress counselling?
Not ruddy likely, not me!'

The Corridor

Sarah Marshall

The first time they wheeled me to that long corridor, I barely had the strength to hold my head up. The four minute journey on that large blue hospital wheelchair, with its squeaky wheels and squashy seat, had exhausted me. It was less than a week since it had become impossible to talk whilst breathing, since an ambulance had typed my address into SatNav, since doctors and bright lights and beeping machines had become my world. It was less than a week, but the muscles that were had already shrivelled to nothing; the heart that had powerfully pumped was now enlarged and mis-shapen; and the lungs that had taken sixteen breaths every minute for the past thirty-two years were now struggling with their one role. It was less than a week, but already I was changed.

For days now I'd laid on my hospital bed. Still. Trial and error had demonstrated that even the smallest of movements required more strength and breath than I now had, and left me shockingly fatigued and poorly afterwards. So, fearful of the repercussions of moving, I'd stopped moving. Literally, stopped moving. Thus, every minute of every hour of every day of that first week, my weary frame had lain stock still on the sterile white sheets of the hospital bed. I didn't try to rearrange the pillow that was causing my neck to ache, or try to lift the teasing water cup to my parched lips. I didn't scratch that itch on my foot, or brush away the hair that was tickling and tickling and tickling my cheek. Too terrified to move, I became weaker; too weak to move, I became more terrified.

It's surprising how many muscles are needed to keep the body upright. How much strength and energy is needed to sit - just sit - whilst someone pushes you along. By the end of the four minute wheelchair ride from bed to corridor, my arms and back and neck and leg muscles had long since given up. The effort, the exertion, the endeavour to keep me upright was too much. I was left a slumped mess, a tent without poles, a melted ice cream, only saved from spilling all over the corridor floor by the padded wheelchair armrests a-cradling me. And it was there and then that my hospital consultant announced that I was to walk. Alone. Up and down that corridor. For six minutes.

Impossible, futile, inconceivable! I screamed inside at the absurdity of the situation, but had neither the breath nor the energy to explain why not to the white coats. My husband-come saviour became my voice whilst mine was slowly dying. She can barely lift her arms, she needs help to get out of bed, her legs shake. Walking is impossible, unaided is impossible, six minutes is impossible. Their words back-and-forth floated down the long, empty corridor and out through the opened window. In return, the sound of life outside floated in: car engines quietly revved as they inched forward towards the full car park, a tired youngster pleading to be carried, teenagers laughing together as they ran along the pavement. As I sat there listening to the big wide world, I'd never felt so far from it. Far away and becoming further by the hour. If I wanted to return to those shouts and screams and laughs and revs, I needed to do what the doctors requested, push myself despite the consequences, fight the fear. If I wanted to live, I needed to conquer the impossible, conquer my impossible.

So for six minutes I gave it my everything. My absolute everything. I stood upright, I lifted each shaky leg, and I slowly – very, very, very slowly - propelled my weight forward. One exhausting step at a time. Ignoring the burns in the muscles, ignoring the weight of my body pulling me downwards, ignoring the screams from every cell to stop, to stop, to stop. I walked until every ounce of energy had been emptied, and then walked some more on the fumes. I walked until my thighs could no longer lift my feet off the floor, then shuffled them a little further forward. Even as my body slowly collapsed downwards, as the back bent over, the neck faced downwards, the tent poles broke, I wouldn't stop. Even as my legs and arms shook and shook, as whiteness paled my skin, as nausea inched upwards, I kept going forward. The white coats, the clipboards, the time checks, the gadget readings; none of them registered. It was just me and the corridor. Me and the cracked white floor tiles. Me and my impossible.

Twenty-three metres. I managed twenty-three metres. Far further than I'd ever dreamed was possible. My inner voices of encouragement celebrated and cheered and rejoiced at the achievement, my inner voices of doom wailed and cried and reminded me that less than 300 metres predicted death within the year. My depleted body collapsed into the cradle of the wheelchair once again. I'd given my everything, and now I had to pay the price. For hours afterwards, I became locked inside my body. So depleted, so empty, so destroyed, I couldn't move any part of me. At all. At all. At all. I'd become trapped inside the vessel that had pushed me so valiantly forward. A living soul inside a frozen corpse. A statue with eyes. It was truly the most horrific few hours of my life.

Those shaky twenty-three metres were the first of many journeys up and down that long, long hospital corridor. Every few months, they have borne witness to my latest effort to conquer my impossible, my latest attempt to walk as far as I could in six minutes. Thanks to white coats, medicine, and hope, my health has slowly, slowly improved, and thus the distance achieved has also: seventy-five metres in six minutes, 150 metres in six minutes, 230, 260, 350, 400, 550 metres.

Unbelievably, ten years have now passed since a squeaky wheelchair wheeled my collapsed corpse to that corridor. Posters now adorn it, the cracked floor tiles are long gone, but the window to the world outside still remains; a world that wonderfully, miraculously, I have improved enough to be part of again. Now, when I stride up and down that corridor, trying to beat my PB, I remember that first attempt, that first marathon, that first journey, and am reminded of how far I have come.

Poland Before the Wall Came Down: a Journey of Discovery

Mark P. Henderson

In 1982 I was invited to speak at an international conference in Poznan. British Airways took me to Warsaw airport via Frankfurt-am-Oder. I arrived complete with luggage, but my joy thereat was curtailed. The customs and immigration officials didn't try to intimidate foreign arrivals, but they spent so much time menacing and harassing the native Poles returning home that we were all delayed. By the time I got out of the airport, my train to Poznan had departed, rendering my ticket useless. I was stranded in a city I'd never visited in a country I'd never visited, I didn't speak the language and I hadn't much Polish currency, so I was in something of a pickle. This was long before the days of mobile phones.

I needed to improvise. I stepped into a café, gestured an order for tea, handed over a fifty zloty note and received a pocketful of change. The tea was ghastly, but with the aid of guesswork, a good deal of trial and error and a public phone box, the pocketful of change enabled me to ring the Dean of the University in Poznan.

'Jerzy,' I said, 'I'm stuck in Warsaw because the train had gone by the time I got out of the airport. I don't have many zlotys. What shall I do?'

'You have western currency?'

'Yes, sterling.'

'Take a taxi.'

'Jerzy, it's two hundred miles! How much -?'

'It will be fine. Take a taxi.'

I went to the taxi rank. The first driver stared at my suit, identified me as a visiting westerner, opened the door and asked what I suppose was the obvious question. I said 'Poznan'. He burst out laughing. I took a five pound note out of my wallet and waved it. He nodded and started driving.

First discovery about Communist Poland: western currency got you anything you wanted. Warsaw to Poznan by taxi for five pounds.

I joined the rest of the conference delegates in the main hall of the university and Jerzy addressed us in English, the majority language and the academic lingua franca of the twentieth century. Two or three centuries earlier it would have been Latin.

'You will wish to exchange currency,' he told us. 'For visitors from the United Kingdom, the official exchange rate is 240 zlotys to the pound. I can arrange 650. See my secretary.'

Second discovery about Communist Poland: the Dean of Poznan University ran the local currency black market.

Two days later we had a free morning. Together with a friend from Mainz, Heinz Giegerich, I set out to explore the city, an amalgam of attractive old buildings juxtaposed with post-War concrete and glass monstrosities. Third discovery about Communist Poland: everyone smoked. It was like living in an Ealing comedy. Then the fourth discovery: the food shops contained very limited supplies, mostly bare tins with narrow labels naming the alleged contents wrapped around their middles. The contents were all the same. Ask for anything else and in response you heard the most frequently-uttered word in 1980s Poland: *njema*. None.

But the most memorable discovery on that week's journey was the fifth. 1982 was the time of the revolt in the Gdansk shipyards and the rise to fame of Lek Walensa and his Solidarity movement. Heinz and I were walking along a quiet street – did I mention how little traffic there was in Eastern European towns and cities during that segment of history? – when a man approached us brandishing Solidarity badges and jabbering.

‘Shall we?’ asked Heinz.

‘Yes, why not?’

We gave the man a few zlotys, proudly fastened our Solidarity badges to our jacket lapels and continued our walk, exploring, observing and discussing. Hardly five minutes had passed when we encountered two policemen, who on seeing our badges drew their revolvers, pointed them at us and jabbered. We didn't need to know any Polish. We relinquished the badges. Then they said something else, probably Polish for ‘Don't do it again’, and marched away. Slightly shaken, we walked on.

Ten minutes later, a man approached us brandishing Solidarity badges and jabbering.

‘No,’ said Heinz.

‘Oh, come on,’ I said. ‘The authorities can't do anything serious to us. There'd be an international incident.’ I took a badge and pinned it on. Reluctantly, Heinz did likewise.

Guess what happened five minutes later? Two police officers. Revolvers out. Jabber jabber. We gave them our badges. Jabber jabber. The policemen marched away.

‘Heinz,’ I murmured, ‘give it a couple of minutes and then let's follow that pair.’

‘I think that is not a good idea,’ said Heinz.

‘I have a suspicion. I'd like to see whether I'm right.’

I turned round and set off in the officers' wake. Heinz followed, shaking his head. After a couple of minutes, the policemen turned left into a narrow alley between tall buildings. We stopped at the end of the alley and peered into the gloom.

There was just sufficient light for us to see the officers selling the Solidarity badges to the Solidarity activist. Maybe he wasn't the same Solidarity activist; but same difference.

That was the fifth discovery about Communist Poland: a method for keeping your currency circulating in a depressed economy. Our country could learn from the example of Poland forty years ago. Come to think of it, perhaps it has.

The Dream Journey

Anne Cawthorn

The speaker was an elderly man with greying hair and spectacles. Despite the summer heat outside the venue, he wore a smart suit that dated from the 1950s. However, when he began to speak, his charisma snared everyone's attention.

He asked, 'Who amongst you are dreamers?' To those who said they were, he asked 'What are you wanting to know?' Some of us, new to the dreamworld, said 'Everything'. A grumpy man said he didn't want to know anything because he never dreamed anyway, and he was only there because his wife insisted he accompany her.

To our many questions, the speaker answered: 'It would be easier to show you what I mean, if any of you are brave enough to join me on an adventure, a journey of enlightenment'.

'Where to?' someone asked.

'That's part of the trust,' said the speaker. 'Once started, there will be no turning back until we're safely home again. If you want to come, decide now, and be ready to leave soon!'

Those of us who were up for the adventure formed a group. The speaker asked us to approach a large grey door in the corner of the room, which transformed into a wealth of vivid colours as we drew nearer. 'Wow!' I thought.

The door opened and we followed the speaker down a short path, which soon ended. Below us was a deep ravine, and above us the dark night sky. Briefly, we were nervous. What next?

'Who can fly?' grinned the speaker.



Before we could answer, a murmuration of starlings rounded the corner, luminous bright lights on their wing tips illuminating the night sky.

'Hold hands,' said the speaker. 'They'll lead the way.'

The starlings surrounded us, enfolding us with their wings. We all shared a magnificent sensation of lightness, of excitement; this was going to be special. As we flew, we felt the comfort of the air and the security of the birds. They wouldn't let us fall. They were treating us as precious cargo.

We flew over oceans, cities, and mountains, moving towards a civilisation more ancient than ours. At last, we descended. The starlings deposited us on the ground as gently as they'd lifted us and then soared away into the sky, a magnificent display.

Beautiful sunlight streamed through bright green trees. The warmth caressed our faces. In the middle distance was a large temple surrounded by several smaller buildings. We were invited to sit on the ground, whereupon young women in ancient clothing served us warm drinks and delicious pastries.

The speaker told us we were at a place of healing in ancient Greece, where medicine began, though not as our modern world knows it; it was where dreams were incubated.

“Temple sleep”, dream therapy, can bring healing. Some people you'll meet have come here because they're terminally ill and hope that their dreams can bring self-healing. Others, like yourselves, have come because they wish to learn more about their dreams.’ He paused. ‘You'll gain knowledge about your dreams by sleeping in the temple,’ he continued. ‘When you wake, you can recount your dreams, if you wish, to either the temple priests or the master dream interpreters. They'll help you understand them.’

A priest invited us to the temple. As we walked, someone asked the speaker if he'd lived here in ancient times. He said he was born nearer to our lifetime, but he came here to introduce others to the healing power of dreams.



The priest handed us over to the temple maidens, saying ‘Even if you don't dream, this will be a wonderful healing experience.’

We ate supper and were shown to our sleeping mats. I lay still, breathing the wonderful soporific odours of lavender and camomile, and awoke to sunlight streaming through the temple windows and the dawn chorus of birds.

Breakfast was under the shade of an ancient olive tree. The aroma from a nearby lemon tree wafted across us. We savoured the simple food, privately digesting the dreams we'd incubated during the night. Once the meal was over, the speaker suggested that anyone who wanted to talk through their dreams could see a dream interpreter. Many of us had dreamed more here than we did at home and were eager for interpretations.

Each evening we ate supper around a campfire, then some of us shared our dreams. One lady shared a recurring dream in which a man was chasing her.

‘Next time you have this dream,’ said a priest, ‘turn and ask the man why he's there.’

She did so the following night, and the man said he was there to persuade her to stop repeating things that were unhelpful in her life. She followed the advice and, I believe, never had the dream again.

The grumpy man underwent the most dramatic change. He had a dream in which he was the central person, in fact, the only person. Something was weighing him down, but he didn't know what. The next day, the temple priest encouraged him to walk towards a mirror, which would show him what was responsible. He did so and was shocked to see his reflection wearing a big black heavy cloak. His shoulders were bowed under the weight and his face wore a weary, downtrodden look.

None of the rest of us saw the cloak, though we recognised the description; but he'd never seen himself in this way before.

‘I wasn't like this before life's events trod me down,’ he said.

‘Do you want to change the cloak or take it off?’ asked the priest. ‘Keep looking in the mirror and open your eyes wide. It's within your power to change the cloak if you wish.’

The grumpy man said he looked and looked until his cloak turned white and felt much lighter. He then saw his shoulders lifting; the weight had gone.

‘Do you like it that way or do you want to add colour?’ asked the priest.

He said he liked the blank canvas, but then he changed his mind. Looking around at the bright yellow of the lemons, the green grass, and the deep azure blue of the sea, he added some of those colours his cloak. Then he felt wonderful. His shoulders were where they should be, and he walked with a confidence he hadn't had for years. He was amazed at how much lighter he felt. He kept looking again and again at his new image.

When he returned to the group he was smiling. His wife ran to him, and they hugged each other. His rigid posture was gone. He was more relaxed. His wife said she'd got back the man she'd married.

A few evenings later the speaker said we would return home the following day. Next morning, the starlings arrived. They now seemed a normal mode of transport. We took up our places on the hillside and waited for the birds to surround us, gently scooping us up into their midst. They flew us home through the night.

We arrived in bright sunlight near the building from which we'd departed. The starlings gently deposited us on the path and flew away. The colourful door opened. We walked through it. When we turned to look, the door was grey again.

After refreshments, the speaker said he was saying Goodbye; he must continue his journeys. I thanked him on behalf of all of us, then asked, ‘Before you go, will you tell us your name?’

‘Some of you may have heard my name. It is Carl Jung. I worked with dreams during the twentieth century, introducing people to their own conscious awareness; and to those who truly believe in the unconscious, the concept of the collective unconscious. I wish you all well. Remember: your unconscious mind is there for you to dip into anytime you wish.’

Then he left. His work with us was done. Other dreamers would now benefit from his insight and wisdom.

Wrecked Garden

Julie Harratt

Retirement was just around the corner, so the time seemed right to re-landscape the garden. Totally.

I had a mental picture of my two-tiered garden: top garden with formal lawn, surrounded by paving that didn't wobble, and planters; bottom garden, currently an overgrown sloping patch of grass rich with weeds, transformed into a patio area and a walled gravel garden. It would be easy to manage; not much grass cutting and weeding, just lots of coffee and relaxing.

I read endless glossy brochures, visited impressive websites, and got three quotations from local companies. I thought if the work started in March, I could look forward to a long summer in my dream garden.

I found a company that could not only start in March, but also promised a smooth-running six-week project with minimal mess and disruption. They weren't the cheapest, but dreams don't come cheap, do they? What could go wrong?

The start date of March sixth arrived; the gardening team didn't. Another job had overrun. Must have been quite some job; it overran by three weeks. But just as I'd decided to give up on them and go back to square one, they pitched up.

Understandably, I had to pay for materials in advance, but when the team arrived with three shovels and a dilapidated wheelbarrow I wondered where the money had gone. All the materials were on the way, I was assured, along with a skip.

Well, at least the journey to my dream garden had started. All my cherished planters and statues were placed on the lawn. Dumped, really. I'm not sure what happened to the "minimum mess and disruption" promise. *OK, breathe. It will be OK.*

One week in; no sign of anything vaguely resembling materials. All the current paving was removed using the available implements, mainly their shovels and the tools from my shed, and added to the clutter covering the lawn.

'You do know I intended to keep that lawn,' I said.

'Yes.' (Sounding mystified.) 'We're not touching that, just using it for storage space, love.'

OK, breathe. It will grow back.

Day six: grass removed from bottom garden. Four men drinking copious amounts of tea all day must mean progress. Later, I was disappointed to see that they'd only skimmed off the grass. *OK breathe.* They must be digging out for the gravel garden later.

The turf joined the clutter on the lawn.

'There's a skip coming soon, love.'

Six weeks in, and nearing the project completion date, my whole garden consisted of mud and a large central scapyard, formerly a lawn. Another week passed; emergency job, apparently. I'm not sure what qualifies as a gardening emergency, but surely a completely wrecked garden must be up there. *OK, breathe.*

I returned from shopping one day to find the following in my drive: five tons of crushed stone (MOT for those in the know), a pile of gavel and a skip. All difficult to get hold of, I

was told, what with Brexit and the war in Ukraine. Hence the delay. Progress, then! But I couldn't get the car on the drive and there was still no sign of the gardening team.

Further progress over the next fortnight was slow because the team only turned up for the odd day. So far, nothing like my dream garden had emerged. The time had come to challenge the team and stand my mud-covered ground.

'I expected a wall to contain the gravel garden,' I said, 'not planks.'

Much teeth-sucking; the pressure-treated planks they'd used would last for years.

'But they look so ugly!' I said, 'and the incline you were going to flatten out is still there.'

'Your soil's very dense, love, so it's difficult to flatten out. It's a big problem in the Peak District.' (Well, who knew that?) 'Those planks will do a great job of holding the gravel, as long as you rake it over a couple of times a week.'

Right. No grass to mow; just gravel to rake instead. I was considering paint options to make the planks less aesthetically displeasing. *OK, breathe.*

I was assured that everything would look fine when it was all finished. The team returned and started to pave the paths. No wobbly slabs; but it was uneven, and some slabs hung so far over the edge they looked like a row of teeth smiling at me. 'Not funny,' I said, dodging the mud to perch somewhere with a coffee.

'OK, now I've started talking to paving slabs. This has to stop.'

Ten weeks in, I decided I must put a stop this money-haemorrhaging disaster. The gardening team weren't happy, to say the least; my expectations were apparently unrealistic. I threatened them with trading standards and stood my still-sloping mud-covered ground. I wrote off a considerable amount of money and went back to square one.

By chance, a friend told me about a gardener and son team who'd just done a brilliant landscaping job on her mum's Garden. No glossy brochure or website, but I rang their number and asked them to come round.

I'd learned my lesson. I'd be much more assertive this time, and ask them to quote for the bottom garden project only. If I was happy with that, there'd be more work.

Their quotation was reasonable. They could start in three weeks' time, and they told me the work would take **about** two weeks. I asked if they'd considered the dense soil, how steep the ground can be in the Peak District, and the impact of Brexit and the war in the Ukraine on material supplies. They stepped back quickly to make more space between us. Then they smiled and explained that some of the work was weather-dependent so jobs could overrun slightly, but they didn't foresee any other issues. They left quickly.

Thankfully, they arrived on the agreed start date, eight o'clock on the dot, with a van full of tools and equipment. Skip, stone, sand and cement had been delivered the day before. What was going on?

Day one, and my unworkable dense soil had been dug out, the ugly planks had been discarded and cement had been prepared for building my wall. My dream gravel garden was on the way.

Every day, before leaving, they cleaned up and secured the steps so I could let my dogs out without them getting stuck in wet cement. Considering the customer was a novelty. I had an overwhelming urge to kiss them, but resisted. I wanted them to come back. So I made them cups of tea instead.

Three months later, they'd completed the whole of my dream garden. They seemed to understand that my initially strange behaviour was a temporary loss of sanity, so they kept coming back until the project was finished.

It was well into winter, not the summer I'd envisaged. But not all journeys go to plan.

Weekend Return to Stourbridge

David Orrett

Piccadilly

The journey began well enough: lift from Trafford Park to Manchester, no trouble getting there on time. The weather was less than clement. It had snowed from when I got up at five in the morning and it was still coming down, the wind biting through everything it could, coat, jumper, tee shirt and then me.

Above me, the little monitor resembling an ancient version of Ceefax, showing departures, slowly worked its way through the alphabet. C? What had happened to Birmingham? It carried on scrolling through, and eventually Birmingham showed up. Two hour delay. Bugger! I hated waiting and decided to look for an alternative. Euston leaving in ten minutes, stopping at Crewe and Stafford. My brain worked through the permutations. I decided there would local trains from Stafford to Birmingham New Street, so made my way to the platform. The train arrived, the platform emptied. The only parts of the train without a passenger were the luggage racks. Every seat had a bum on it, every square foot of passageway was occupied by a foot. I stood, hoping for a seat. The train headed south through the snowy blackness.

Stafford

The journey to Stafford was trouble free and we arrived close to the ETA. I forced my way through the throng and alighted. The tannoy burst into life. 'Welcome to Stafford. The next train will be the delayed 5:50 train from Piccadilly to Birmingham New Street, arriving at 8:30.' The departures notice offered no alternatives. "Local" trains to Birmingham didn't exist. Two hours to wait. Hey ho! I entered the unheated waiting room on the platform. All seats were occupied, so I still had to stand, shuffling from foot to foot trying to get warm. Every time the door opened, the place looked more and more like Ice Station Zebra. The snow would blow through the opening and cover the floor. The minutes dragged. I wondered if the designer was more used to making wind tunnels than waiting rooms. The only thing missing was a plane having its aerodynamics tested.

Finally, after two hours of feeling as warm as Ivan Denisovich, the already packed Manchester train arrived. It began to resemble a bullet train, with people forcing themselves into any and all available gaps.

Wolverhampton – nearly

The train stopped high on a snowy fifty foot embankment. Below us was a major junction. I could see buses, cars and pedestrians fighting their way through the snow trying to get home. The tannoy crackled and the conductor announced that frozen points were the problem and that passengers were only allowed to exit the train at official stops. As I watched through the window I noticed people, ex-passengers, sliding down the embankment with cases and bags, making their way to the bus stop below. I decided not to join them. My decision-making so far had been flawed, and getting from Wolverhampton to Stourbridge would be impossible.

Thirty minutes later, some guy up the line with a blow torch had freed the points and the train resumed its way to Birmingham. Only two more train journeys to get to Stourbridge. They were easy compared to the previous four hours.

Some cunning plans end up not being cunning at all. I really should learn, but I don't!

Shetland Salutation

Ann Orrett

We had a wonderful opportunity to go to Shetland for the first Up Helly Aa since pre-pandemic. We stayed in a rooftop apartment in the centre of Lerwick, opposite Harry's Department store - the Harrod's of the Shetlands, according to the banner advert at Sumburgh Airport. To reach the front door of the apartment we climbed a spiral staircase, which seemed eternal but ensured a good step count. The restaurants were wonderful, mostly with full menus of vegan and non-vegan food, which suited our party. No cooking for me! Tesco just outside Lerwick was a Godsend.

Surprisingly, the weather was warmer than the High Peak. Unst, the island at the top of Shetland, is 200 miles from the Arctic Circle. A strong, blustery and relentless north wind brought occasional flurries of snow. We were glad of our thermals.

Shetland had changed since our visit thirty years earlier. The Scandinavian feeling extended from the brightly-coloured Norwegian wooden self-build prefabricated houses to the food. However, the hugely popular traditional fish and chip shop on Commercial Street was a real treat, with fried things you couldn't even imagine. Lerwick harbour was packed with fishing trawlers, ferries and private sailing boats, all hunkering down against the gales.

Tuesday early morning, the day of Up Helly Aa: me, my very warm dressing gown and slippers, my coffee and a previously rolled cigarette stood at the top of the spiral staircase, being serenaded by the bagpipes at the Town Hall and the Up Helly Aa red flag with black raven flapping on its pole against an azure blue sky. What a way to start the day!

The Jarl Squad had congregated, dressed, finished breakfast and were already three or four hours into the twenty-eight hour marathon that is Up Helly Aa: they were visiting community centres, schools and care homes. They always dressed in Viking attire and provided marshals for the Fire Festival later. Twenty-plus squads from all over Lerwick are involved in the climax of the Fire Festival; over a thousand torch-bearers, and that doesn't include all the junior Jarl Squad.

We wanted to see the Galley close up, so we dashed – well, got ready quicker than usual - and made our way to the harbour where the Guizer Jarl, chief organiser of the festival, leads all the Jarl Squad and the Galley to the harbour for a photo opportunity. People get to see the craftsmanship of the Viking Galley and the wonderful costumes. It was at this point that we first encountered 'YAAYYY!' - a shout of joy reciprocated.

One of the Squad saw someone he knew in the crowd. He threw his arm into the air, brandishing a huge axe, and shouted:

'Yaayyy!'

All the Guizers in the squad and his mates in the crowd returned his actions and his cry:

'Yaayyy!'

A punch in the air, a sense of achievement, a feeling of happiness, glorious and infectious. It continued throughout the day.

Random calls as the senior and junior Jarl Squads continue their daylight march through the town with the bagpipes and a resounding cry as they finish their anthem:

'Yaayyy!'

At the end of the Fire Festival concert when the junior Jarl Squad sing their song with fiddles, accordions, banjos and guitars:

'Yaayyy!'

The Lerwick Council switch off the street lights:

'Yay!'

The Lighting of the Torches begins the parade:

‘Yaayyy!’

Randomly, in all the different Squads carrying torches, looking like a gay pride parade combined with Whit Walks with attitude:

‘Yaayyy!’

Marching past the Guizer Jarl standing proudly in the Galley:

‘Yaayyy!’

The culmination of speeches, jokes, tributes to bagpipes and brass bands; at the end of loud community singing of stirring traditional ballads; ‘Yaayyy!’

The climax: the smell of petrol from the torches congregated round the Galley. The large bright orange embers from the torches tossed and erratic in the fifty mile per hour wind. Then the first torch thrown on the Galley: ‘Yaayyy!’

More torches arch their flight to the Galley: ‘Yaayyy!’

After yet more singing, as the Galley burns, ‘Yaayyy!’

As finally the dragon’s head of the Galley slowly collapses in flames, ‘Yaayyy!’

A couple of glasses of water of life with your chips when you get home: ‘Yaayyy!’

We couldn’t get tickets for a hall, so we never got to experience the all-nighter pulled by, apparently, most of the town at the ceilidhs where the Squads entertained the crowds.

The next morning, me, my very warm dressing gown and slippers, my coffee and a previously rolled cigarette stood at the top of the spiral staircase. I watched as people returned home from the halls: musicians carrying instruments, attempting to find their keys and open the door; two mates, arms round one another’s necks, staggering down Commercial Street in their kilts with some appropriated Squad’s costumes. The red and black raven Up Helly Aa flag slowly and smoothly descended the flag pole on the Town Hall amidst low cloud and drizzle.

Lerwick was shut on Wednesday.

Sumburgh Head looks wonderful from the air. Although there are cross-winds the takeoff is quick (it’s a very short runway) and we reach a quieter space above them. I watch the green-topped cliffs and scattering of islands off South Mainland disappear into the rippling white-horse-topped waves of the North Sea. We pass over Fair Isle. More sea. I settle to watch the waves. Coffee is served and I watch the coast of Scotland emerge. I’m sure the little town I see is Tongue. I follow the coastline, remembering past trips along its wiggles; then the Cairngorms, with remnants of spectacular snowdrifts on the peaks like rock cakes with sculpted icing. Green valleys, farms and busy rivers cutting into the land. More major roads; urban conurbations.

‘Ping Pong.’

A message from our Captain. She warns us that the head-winds and cross-winds round Glasgow are very strong; not strong enough to warrant redirection to Edinburgh, but it will be a somewhat turbulent approach.

This is a small plane. It’s full. It’s old. It’s darting about like a fart in a bottle.

My partner has his eyes shut. The chatty children in the seat in front are quiet. Their mum looks round and our eyes meet. She rolls hers and I grin and shrug my shoulders, looking first heavenwards, then out of opposing windows at the shaking fuselage.

Needless to say, the captain is skilful and we land at Glasgow Airport on time and intact.

As we touch down, I hear a shout from the back of the plane, a vegan voice I recognise:

‘Yaayyy!’

Directions

Stephanie Billen

Yup, yup, gotcha ...
Straight on, you say?
School on the left?
With you so far.
Traffic lights
Yup, yup, gotcha.
Straight on again.
Big church on the right.
OK, so straight past that.
Keep going is it?
Yup, yup, gotcha.
Hospital at the junction.
Slow down at the bend.
But keep going,
That's the main thing
Totally gotcha.
No, it's OK.
No need to repeat.
School, church, hospital,
Go round the bend -
Yup, yup, gotcha.
Crematorium did you say?
And after that?
Direction of travel?
Up or down?
Not too sure.
Ah. I see. Gotcha.
So that's pretty much it, is it?
That's where I'm going?
Well, that's fantastic.
Tremendously helpful.
No, all good. Gotcha.
I've got all that thanks.
Perfect.
Sorry to keep you.
Bye.
Thanks again.
Bye.

Thank Christ.

Thought he'd never go ...
So, where are we going?
No idea ...

Straight on to the morgue?
Sounds about right.
I'll just follow my nose.
Usually works.
Keep on going.
That's the main thing.
Keep on driving.

Living for real

Stephanie Billen

Right, so here's how it happened. Long after most people had stopped travelling, I decided to see if I could actually get anywhere - physically I mean. 'Keep in touch won't you,' Mum said. 'There's no excuse now you've got G-Chat Plus on your phone.' Funny how we still call them phones. The actual telephone function has long since gone but old habits die hard. I checked everything before I left - that my G-chat avatar was up to date, that voice command still worked despite all those manky last-century cigarettes I'd started smoking. I knew my voice had changed. Mum thought it was hormonal - a kind of extended voice-breaking thing. Sweet. She would never have imagined I'd found great granddad's cigarette tin, nor that I would think to try lighting them if I had. But the truth is I'm an old head on young shoulders. I may only be seventeen but I've always been drawn to past lives, past eras. Cowboys, film noir, even the trenches, just for the visceral thrill of it, and all of it enveloped in a fug of blue cigarette smoke.

VR's all very well and they've done their best with the textures, smells and add-ons but it's not the same as experiencing the world in the flesh, however difficult that might be post pandemics. It's funny. All this technology yet we've lost so much too. Old-fashioned aeroplanes used to whizz people off to other countries in a matter of hours. Then people realised they were a sure way to pick up a super bug plus the environmental cost became a bit too obvious and we all waited while they figured out something better but it just never happened.

Most people would say there is no need anyway. I can have India in a matter of minutes. I can fill my whole bedroom with it - the jostling streets, the elephants nonchalantly crossing in front of me the way a cat might over here. Best of all it's old India before people became marooned in their houses just like here. I try not to look but if you follow some of the news outlets, India looks like Mars, old Mars I mean, back when it was completely desolate rather than the space junkyard it is today.

But like I say, I'd been hankering for something real. I wanted to get out there. I found a rucksack thing, great granddad's again, and I put stuff in it. Clothes, coats. Then I set off for the shipyard. It shouldn't have been such a big deal given where we live. You can walk it in sixty minutes from our estate. It's just no one does. Ted, my great granddad I mean, he would have thought nothing of it. But then he was a merchant seaman, plus even when he retired he was still going places - people took high speed ferries long after they stopped taking planes. Seems like they only really lost their nerve after the fifth pandemic, the biggie. Plus the heat. That's really limited when and where you can go. No one I know bothers to go anywhere much any more.

I mean you can still go to France, actual France, by train when it's not summertime, but it's not that pleasant sitting in a carriage in all that PPE. No, I'm doing something different. I've got a job working on a container ship. I'm like the bouncer - I just keep guard on the gangway and since we set sail (wow, I love that phrase!) I've been hosing things down, doing paint jobs, whatever needs doing. They've got a gym and, yes, a VR suite, but for me it's all about being on deck, seeing the sea. Which is where I'm going right now, so I'll pause this.

.....

Testing testing. OK. So I don't really know who I'm doing this for, but here goes anyway. I still can't really believe I'm on the ship! We're going to end up in the Far East - can you believe it? We may not be able to get off at Shenzhen Port if the temperature's what they say it could be, but hey, we have to dock so I think that counts as seeing the world.

I've been scraping old bits of paint off railings and doing maintenance. I work from noon to four then midnight to 4am. I've met some really cool guys - yes we're in a bubble of course so I mean really met. It's not like it was with my school friends when we were remote learners. These are people I sit and play cards with - remember cards? It was quite a shock at first just being with other lads, their sweat and everything. I mean we are a bit enclosed below deck at times.

But right now as you can probably hear I'm out on the deck, like I said, and there are all these seagulls wheeling round me. They come close to pick up our scraps. Herring gulls, lesser black-backed gulls - some guy's been teaching me. OK so they're a bit thuggish but they are also kind of beautiful.

And the sea - oh my God. It's like there are these areas that are all dark, then there will be this aquamarine area, really turquoise, and all of it dazzling with sparkles of sunshine. And this is just the English Channel - we haven't exactly got very far yet. So like I say I don't know who I'm doing this for, not mum that's for sure. She said keep in touch but she's not really interested. She just wants to send me her g-chats of all the holidays she's doing - Niagara Falls, Japan in the springtime (back in the day obviously), The Great Wall of China - all from 21 Orchard Close. Like she's saying, what's the point of what I'm doing and aren't I bored and how's the VR suite?

Well, I haven't even been in the VR suite. I spend all the time I can on deck just feeling the salt spray on my face and smoking the last of Ted's musty cigarettes. And I don't do the gym either because what I'm doing is quite physical anyway, seems like I'm always climbing up and down things. I've never been so active.

So yeah. Well, actually I'll tell you who I'm doing this for - it's for Ted. I'm looking out across the sea right now with the evening sky all pink and streaky and Ted if you are out there I just want to say, your memoirs, all those pages you typed out about your seafaring with the Merchant Navy, they really stuck with me. We don't have many books in the house. No point flicking through pages when it's all online, but like I say, I'm a bit old fashioned. I like things you can touch so I went straight to it on the shelf. Mum didn't even know what it was.

Ted, I was in a bad place. But you've made me think it's still worthwhile. Living for real, I mean. This is it now. I'm not going to college. This is what I want. Hey, there's a seagull on the rail that just cocked its head at me. I reckon that's you, isn't it, Ted? Cheers mate, just cheers. That's all I wanted to say.

Double Widowhood

Caroline Vallance

It wasn't her first time. Suzie had been here before. The wood beneath her feet was hard and warm. She didn't know the other females packed in with her. As he'd handed her over, the man had been calm and very gentle. But as the other one had put her inside with the strangers, she knew what was going to happen.

The noise and rocking as they set off had unnerved many. It must have been their first time. The smell of ammonia was getting stronger now, but the closed curtains and gentle road rumble soon calmed everyone and some even managed to sleep. Suzie tried; she knew she would need it. She had an inkling of what was coming. They'd been well fed for a few days before and had only short bursts of exercise. She wasn't nervous. She wasn't scared. She was looking forward to the trip home. The freedom, however brief; the cool air and the scents. Ah yes, the scents! Then, at last, arriving home and being let in to see her partner and babies. Though her babies had grown now and would soon be making the same journeys.

She was special, though. She felt it, knew it. She had a talent. She could smell water. Not just the sea or lakes but small amounts from a distance. On her first run she'd been so thirsty. She hadn't been able to drink enough before they were released. She'd hung back, confused, not pushing herself forward in the scrum. There had been twelve of them in the small space that time. The others had all known. Known what to do. This time they were only eight.

She closed her eyes and nodded. Her neck fell forward on to the pillowy softness of her chest. She must have been like that for hours. The transporter stopped briefly and a man's head opened the curtains, a slit, and checked on them. Then the jolt and noise of a restart and the rhythmic drumming of travel continued. More hours and then a final stop. It was dark now. Suzie knew it even with the curtains drawn; the air was different. They were given water; then they slept until daybreak.

The sound of birdsong filled the air. Suddenly! Rattling and banging from outside. Some of her companions started grunting in alarm, but then the curtains opened and they could all see the sky and sense freedom. Fresh water appeared in the small trough in their enclosure. Suzie immediately started to drink amid jostling from her companions. When she felt ready, she stopped. She was better able to judge this time how much to have without feeling too heavy inside.

A short time later, after they had all taken on liquid and settled again, another man appeared and the two men commenced an inspection; peering in and counting. Then they stood to one side looking down at a large clipboard and a watch. Soon. It would be soon. Suzie could sense the tension. Then the sliding noise and crash as the front of their enclosure fell away. Clapping started and Suzie stretched and clapped her wings also. Then she was off, into the cool blue sky, up and up. The breeze was a plaything to ride with and frolic on until a thermal would take her higher yet. All the time the scents brought up on the air spoke to her. Along with the pull of the forces across the globe over which she moved with such speed, as fast as the metal boxes below, faster often.

She tried to recollect the smell and feeling of her stopover. She knew she would recognise it when she was near but she had no idea if she was the same distance away as last time. The flock had thinned out now. All finding their own paths. One old pigeon who had shared her cage was still behind her, following in her wake. She didn't mind; the company was welcome.

After a couple of hours she started to feel weaker. She could tell the other one was also failing. They both slowed and used the air better to save their strength. She was thirsty and started to fly in an arc to see if she could scent the place she needed. She was getting desperate. Then, suddenly - yes! The water and the fruit, the sweet fruit, and earthy softness. She scanned for visual clues, then located her target and dived.

Relief! The solid feel of the wood beneath her feet was familiar, and, such glory: there was the soft moist sweet rich dark sponge with fruit inside. Her beak prised out the plumpest sweetest morsels first. Then she drank, drank the cool fresh water, before going back to the drier pieces of the feast.

There was a shaking and she turned to see the following bird had landed. The old lady looked exhausted, completely spent. Eager as she was to get home Suzie stepped back and let the other pigeon peck at a few morsels. Then she gently nudged it towards the water.

They spent their time wisely, alternating between solid and liquid. Suzie heard a click as a window opened. A head peered out and the woman's voice cooed soothingly across to them.

'Oh! You brought a friend this time, then.'

There was a gentle thud and footsteps as the woman walked over to them. She had brought some seed and she spread it across the table so they could both eat together. She gently opened Suzie's wing and checked the feather with the number stamped on it. She approached the older bird and did the same. Talking to herself, she wrote something on a piece of paper. Neither of them minded. They were used to being handled.

Suzie was revived and wanted to get back home to her mate. She jumped, clapped her wings and lifted off. The older bird was still feeding and could find its own way, she was sure. She was soon up to altitude and didn't hear the woman calling:

'Away so soon this time?'

Another hour and she could sense home. She could see the loft even from her height, thousands of feet up; she knew it. She could hear the shuffling and stomping of those left inside. She could smell her mate, knew he was in there.

She accelerated down. Then, finally, she was home. The man wasn't there. He didn't need to be. In the past he would have been waiting. He'd have grabbed her, removed the tag on her leg and gone to push it into a machine. No longer. The chip on a ring was read automatically as she stepped on to the rubber pad at the entrance. Not that this bothered her. Neither did her average speed nor her time to complete. All she knew was she would be with her mate soon.

The man finally arrived. He picked her up and looked at her, carefully checking her over. Then he sighed with a heart full of love and laughed.

'I knew you were coming. She rang again and told me. Said: "Your bird was here again but just landed, ate, then took off. Brought another bird. It's still here." I'm so proud of you. You're so clever!'

He put her down and then opened the door into the other side of her room. She smelt him before she saw him, waiting eagerly. She nuzzled him and listened to her babies in the loft cooing softly. Yes, she was home again.

Journeying to Durham

Mark P. Henderson

Six years ago I revisited Durham Cathedral, where St. Cuthbert's earthly journey ended. I bought train tickets (Glossop to Manchester, Manchester to York, York to Durham), booked hotel accommodation, walked to Glossop station and boarded the train at 1.35 p.m. The early September sun smiled. I started re-reading Cuthbert's biography.

Cuthbert was born of a rich Northumbrian family in 634 CE, the year St. Aidan of Iona founded the Lindisfarne monastery. I was born of a poor Peak District family in 1946 CE, the year Emperor Hirohito announced he was no longer a god. Cuthbert was first a warrior and then a monk and hermit. I was first a doctor and then a writer and folklorist. Differences notwithstanding, I wanted to meet the saint.

In August 651 CE, said his biographer, seeing a light descend to Earth and return to the night sky, the seventeen-year-old Cuthbert realised that a great soul had ascended to Heaven. Indeed, St. Aidan had died. Inspired by this vision, Cuthbert became a novice in Melrose monastery, which Aidan had founded. When he left Melrose he helped found another monastery in Ripon. After the Synod of Whitby in 664 CE he was appointed Prior of Lindisfarne.

I alighted on platform 1 of Piccadilly Station, Manchester, at 2.02 p.m. The York train was scheduled to leave platform 14 at 2:26; but no sooner had I hiked to platform 14 than the loudspeakers announced that the 2:26 to York would leave from platform 1. I retraced my steps.

Shortly after 2.30 a train stopped at platform 1. A hundred York-bound passengers boarded, seeking their reserved seats. Then a woman pushing a trolley loaded with snacks told us it wasn't the York train, which would arrive further along platform 1. We all disembarked.

At about 2.40 we learned that the 2:26 to York would leave from platform 3. We went to platform 3. The 2:26 to York arrived there at 2.55. We took our seats. After a while, somewhat to our surprise, the train began to move. I opened my book again.

For ten years, Cuthbert administered the Lindisfarne monastery. Cheerful, compassionate, a guide to the lost, he was also an active missionary. But when he was 40, God called him to fight spiritual evil in solitude. Obediently, he built a hermitage on the small island of Inner Farne. He lived alone there for the next ten years.

The driver's voice apologised over the crackling speakers: a freight train had broken down near Huddersfield, disrupting services throughout the UK. An official wrote 'Delayed' on my seat reservation for the York-Durham leg of my journey. This would guarantee my seat, she assured me.

When Cuthbert was fifty, the King and the Church commanded him to quit his hermitage and be appointed bishop. He obeyed; but two years later, feeling death approaching, he returned to his hermitage. He died there on the twentieth of March, 703. His body was buried on Lindisfarne.

Cuthbert's tomb became a place of pilgrimage and miracles, so he was canonised. When his coffin was opened during his Elevation in 714, his body was complete and undecayed,

proving his great holiness. A cult was born: people travelled from near and far to visit St. Cuthbert's shrine. The cult survived the Viking raid of June 793, and when Lindisfarne monastery was abandoned to the invaders in 875, the fleeing monks took St. Cuthbert's body with them.

When we reached platform 15 in Leeds we were told the train would terminate there. Passengers for York should board the Middlesborough train on platform 16b. Platform 16b was hard to reach because 16a was packed with people who aspired to become passengers. Once we'd fought our way through them, we learned that the Middlesborough train would arrive at platform 15, so we fought our way back. I took a seat on platform 15 and continued to read. Time passed.

The Lindisfarne monks wandered for many years, carrying the saint's body, journeying as far as Melrose before settling in Chester-le-Street in 995 CE. But then a further Danish-Viking incursion drove them to Ripon, the monastery Cuthbert had founded three and a half centuries earlier. Then they were forced to flee yet again. Bishop Aldhun led them.

We were promised that the Middlesborough train would be only thirty minutes late. Inexperienced passengers complained; those accustomed to Britain's privatised railways shrugged. The afternoon ticked away. At last, a train materialised with the word 'York' emblazoned on its front. I pictured an engine driver in a monk's habit. Then I boarded the train and read more of Cuthbert's story.

When the monks tried to return to Chester-le-Street, the cart carrying the saint's coffin stopped and wouldn't move again. That night, Bishop Aldhun dreamed that St. Cuthbert ordered him to seek Dunholme, where he would finally rest. Neither Aldhun nor the monks knew where Dunholme was. Then they overheard a dairymaid asking another woman whether she'd see her dun cow, which had wandered. The woman told her she'd seen the dun cow heading towards Dunholme. She pointed the way. The dairymaid followed the direction, and the monks followed the dairymaid. The cart carrying St Cuthbert began to move again.

The dun cow is a familiar motif in English folklore. A giant dun cow was killed by Guy of Warwick on Dunsmore Heath near Rugby. The dun cow of Whittingham, Lancashire, gave milk to all comers until a witch milked it into a sieve, whereupon it died. There's a similar legend in Shropshire. However, at the time of Cuthbert's posthumous journey, the north-east of England was being settled by Danish invaders; so was the 'dun cow' of his legend a corruption of *Dena gau*: Danish land?

When I disembarked at York I discovered that a Newcastle train, stopping at Durham, was scheduled to reach platform 10 in six minutes. I went to platform 10. This train duly appeared - at platform 9. I galloped across the footbridge to platform 9 and caught the train, out of breath. The carriages were crowded, so despite the 'Delayed' note on my reservation I had no seat. I read the final pages of the book standing.

When they reached Dunholme, later called Durham, the monks built a stone church, the White Church, to house their saint. After the Norman Conquest, the Benedictine community in Durham built a great cathedral to replace the White Church. In 1104 they reburied Cuthbert's remains beside the High Altar, and there he still lies. Requiescat in pace. Amen.

I reached Durham station a little after 8 p.m. The cathedral and castle were silhouetted against the setting sun. It had taken St Cuthbert's body seven years to get here; it had taken

me seven hours. I went to my hotel and slept. On the following morning I walked to the cathedral up a steep, narrow passage called Dun Cow Lane.

Many of England's cathedrals are magnificent but Durham is special. It's the oldest. Its massive stones are saturated with centuries of worship. St. Cuthbert's tomb lies where the Benedictine monks placed it at the beginning of the twelfth century, modest and venerated.

'Does my visit make me a pilgrim, a tourist, or a delver into folklore?' I asked.

The saint vouchsafed no reply, but I felt we'd shared a joke.

'To beg a favour of you might seem impertinent,' I continued, aloud, 'but I'd be grateful for a straightforward train journey home.'

Overhearing my prayer, a group of middle-aged visitors glanced at me and sidled away into the south aisle, murmuring.

Coincidentally, my return journey to Glossop was straightforward. Every train arrived at the right platform at the right time, departed on time and ran to schedule.

Had the dairymaid ever located her dun cow, or found a home in Danish land? If she'd asked St. Cuthbert for help, she probably had.

On the Bus

Sarah Lionheart

I only have one bottle of water. Hopefully the bus won't be stranded for long in this stupid January blizzard. I don't mind sharing but there are several of us. I have no loaves and fishes.

An hour later the woman behind me hands me a boiled egg.

'Thank you.'

'Don't mention it. I cooked the whole box.'

We've been here four hours. We're stationary and the snow is piling up around us. We're all cold.

'Where were you going, love?' asks the woman behind.

'Leamington Spa. I'm a student at Warwick University.'

'Been home for Christmas?'

'I went to see my parents at their house in Spain. They live in Saudi. And you?'

She nods through the seat gap.

'A Zen spanking workshop. Wanted to do it for a while.' Seeing my astonishment, she adds: 'It wasn't that good. I preferred the dominatrix retreat in Devon last year. That's my living; challenging but fulfilling.'

The man next to me adds: 'I love challenges: Everest, Annapurna, the Eiger.'

He's tall and old. Well, older than most of us on the bus. Is he pulling my leg?

'Don't think I've met them.' Egg Lady laughs.

'I climbed Mt Kenya once,' I add.

'Did you? How was it?'

'Cold, scary, difficult and exhilarating.'

I don't say it put me off mountaineering for life and taught me how easy it is to die accidentally. Everest Man nods, unwrapping a penguin biscuit. He doesn't offer any. I can see how he survived on mountains. I crack open my egg. Tasty, but a bit of salt would improve it. A hand appears between the seats with a salt sachet.

'Here you go, love.'

'Thank you.'

'Don't mention it. You into S & M?'

'More M&Ms.'

'You're not a virgin, are you?' says the Everest Man.

'And you think it's okay to ask that *because*?'

'She is,' says Egg and Salt lady, 'otherwise she'd say "of course not".'

'I just prefer to keep such information to myself.'

No one responds. I look out at the snow, shivering. My shoulders rise.

'She's in a huff,' says Everest Man. 'Your fault, Miss Dominatrix.'

'Madam Dominatrix to you.' Egg Lady laughs.

The man directly in front twitches in his sleep. At least he IS asleep. The woman across from him scribbles in a notebook. The driver counts the passengers and hands out small

bottles of water. I rummage in my backpack and find my book, eager to lose myself in a world of dragons and giants.

The lights go out.

‘Sorry. Conserving power in case we need to turn the heating up.’

Notebook Woman fishes out a torch and keeps scribbling. Everest Man and Egg Lady murmur.

‘Do you have a boyfriend?’ asks Egg Lady.

‘Do you?’

‘Yes, two. One of them’s a probable long term partner. The other’s just for fun.’

I stare out into the black night, then concede: ‘I had one. Didn’t want to be with him any more.’

‘Why?’

I shrug.

The teenager with pigtails sitting two rows back says, ‘I was bored with mine. The sex was blah.’ She glugs some water.

Egg Lady is about to issue potentially interesting tips but the girl holds up her hand:

‘Don’t even start. I’m asexual. Ace. Not interested. Don’t understand all the hoohah.’

We all say nothing.

‘Does it bother you?’ I ask after a while.

‘Nah. 1% of the population are. It’s just a pain that I don’t see the world the way 99% see it, interpret it, decode it, experience it.’

‘Blimey,’ says the bus driver. ‘Can you fix it?’

‘Why be something you’re not?’ she asks.

‘Because it feels like everyone else is different from you?’ he counters.

Egg Lady: ‘Bollocks, love. In my work I meet asexuals, lesbians, trans, aromantics, non-gender-specifics, all sorts. My last client was a lovely asexual Avon lady. Loved an orgasm and a Greek salad. Not at the same time.’

This is journeying well out of my comfort zone. Well, not the Greek salad. I love feta. The man in front thrashes around and wakes up shouting. Everest Man sits beside him and talks him through his nightmare. The bus driver starts teaching Nightmare Guy how to lucid-dream so that he can control the monsters. I can’t help listening; he talks about regular reality checks in waking hours, how to spin to the right when you realise you’re dreaming so you stay rooted in your dream and don’t wake up. Their conversation turns to mescaline and mind-bending trips on hashish.

‘What are you scribbling?’ I ask Notebook Woman.

‘Maths. I’m a Maths Professor. Same University as you.’

She shows me her scribbles.

‘Can you explain what that means, simply, to a humanities student?’

‘I can try. I’m working on shapes that exist in infinite multi-dimensions; so each side of, say, a cube has another side in a fourth dimension, and each of those has a fifth dimension, and so on.’

‘Mind blowing,’ says Everest Man.

‘It’s kinda like holding a whole other world in your head and moving around different levels in it and trying to hold them together.’

A different silence. My brain flops at four dimensions.

‘I don’t think I could travel there in my own head.’

‘Think of an ant on a flat surface. Everything is either forward and back. He’d be blown away if you introduced up and down.’

‘Except he wouldn’t be blown away; he’s an ant.’

‘He would, because he can’t hang on,’ says Nightmare Guy. Any strong wind could blow him away.’

‘Can we stay on topic?’ I ask.

‘I like ants,’ says the bus driver. ‘Years ago I went to Kenya. Watched them in their termite mounds. Now I lucid-dream my way to Kenya. Cheaper and less stressful. I take the roads more travelled: M1, M40, M25.’

‘Impressive,’ says Everest Man.

‘Tell us about Everest, then,’ says the bus driver.

‘Cold, scary, difficult and exhilarating.’ Everest Man winks at me.

I smile.

Turns out he’s a real mountaineer, a famous one. Even I know his name. So we ask him about ascents and accidents. An hour or so passes before he tires and we slump into the dead hours of the night. I ponder stories about being pushed to the limit and crawling back, often literally.

‘I really admire you,’ Nightmare Guy whispers.

‘Well, most people I meet are half way up their own cliff face, trying to find a safe way out or down, or just trying to face the difficulties they’re in.’

‘True,’ says Egg Lady/Dominatrix.

I think of myself: twenty years old, unable to go near food without counting every calorie, losing weight but battling hunger. My inner world of feeling fat doesn’t tally with my outer world: successful student, happy sociable image. None of them knows that my mind thinks about food 90% of the time.

‘My mum used to say everyone’s on a journey,’ says Nightmare Guy. ‘They all carry different loads. Some loads you can see from the outside, some you can’t.’

‘Spot on,’ I think.

Pigtail Girl says, ‘I just want to be happy as I am, and be allowed to be who I am and how I am, whatever that may be.’

‘Amen, sister,’ I say.

A guy knocks on the door and tells us we should be able to start again soon; the snow ploughs have cleared the way ahead.

‘Take care, love,’ says Egg Lady when I disembark.

‘I’m trying to.’

‘Go well,’ says the bus driver. ‘Change to a different road when you need to.’

‘Alert others when the going gets too difficult,’ says Everest Man.

‘Admit weakness,’ says Nightmare Guy.

‘Don’t hide,’ says Pigtail Girl.

Maybe I needed more time with them all. ‘Thank you for the egg.’ I wave goodbye.

I shall use each of them in a story one day.

Their advice takes a few more decades to digest.

Journey Monologue

Pete Stellings

My journey, it is ongoing. I don't quite remember the start. No doubt I'll not remember the finish either.

But so far it has been very interesting, remembering times at sea, trying to finalise monthly accounts in a force ten gale, thirty degrees plus, rolls of the vessel, the clinking of loose materials being thrown hither and thither; seeing the cook walking up the stairs to your office, thinking 'Is he going to tell me all the lunch is on the galley floor after the last big roll?' Thankfully not on this occasion. Just wanted a bag of rice from the dry store.

A distraction nevertheless.

Recollecting some of the ports visited on our voyage, dusky maidens in dusky smoke-filled bars selling drinks only a seasoned sailor would wet his lips with; not the kind of girl you would take home to show mother. Usually some financial transaction was involved for the pleasure of her company. But after twenty days at sea, when even the lowly spotty galley boy was beginning to look attractive, it was good to feel the heady perfume and occasionally the soft tender flesh.

There were days on the journey to join a vessel, when after a six-hour flight, the next twenty-four hours were spent in a transit lounge under guard because it was Friday in a Muslim country; followed by the trip to the hotel, when after an hour on the bed catching up on lost sleep, you were woken with 'Please hurry, there's no time, your ship has arrived'. Then ceremoniously getting dumped on the quayside for another hour and a half while the vessel was made fast and port authority officials dealt with.

The journey home: from receiving the news you were being relieved after a six-month voyage - the elation, the excitement of flying home from some exotic place - to be greeted on your arrival with, 'How long are you home for?'

The journeys on the night trunk run 'twixt Blackburn and Birmingham, dreading the sign "Motorway Closed Use Diversion", only to be confronted with a fourteen foot five inch bridge... when you're driving a sixteen foot double deck trailer.

Sitting on the loading bay, then being called in to sign for thirty-six laptop computers - for which you as the driver will be responsible if they're lost or damaged; refusing to sign, saying, 'Take them off the load,' and finding them still there at the other end.

Watching the cars that try to overtake you on a roundabout when your trailer demands you have to straddle both lanes to negotiate the junction.

A recent trip took me and my son on a long weekend during which I recounted the tale of an overnight journey on a ship from Elsmere Port to Scarborough, where I was generously given carte blanche to take several bottles of spirits and well over a thousand cigarettes home with me; quite within the legal paperwork and rules. However, to avoid a search, I had to be accompanied through the security gate by the HM Customs Officer. He also went home with a couple of chickens, joints of lamb, and beef.

The irony was I had stopped smoking on my arrival home, and Father had sampled most of the spirits. That was in the days when a bottle of duty-free whisky cost a no more than a pound.

There have been many journeys in my life. The first I can recall was being in a pram during the Second World War, my mother collecting kindling and placing it on the pram cover.

I suppose all the rest of my journeys have followed from that.

The day we caught the train

Simone Hubbard

The train pulled into the station. Richard was eager to lift his suitcase into the suitcase store, find his seat and settle down to enjoy the scenic journey along the Cote d'Azur; and to reminisce.

It was on this journey in 1998, on his way to the Monaco Grand Prix, that he'd met Claire. They'd both got on at Nice. She'd asked Richard if he'd swap seats, as going backwards would make her feel travel sick. He gladly obliged. Travelling backwards wouldn't be an issue for Richard, especially if he was going to be chatting to such a lovely girl. They hit it off immediately.

Claire was travelling to the Hotel de Paris for an exhibition featuring artwork from the Monaco Grand Prix. She was even more enthusiastic about racing than he was.

'Here, take this.' She held out a brochure. 'This is my favourite print,' she said, pointing to a print called *Senna's Domain*. 'That was the last time he raced at Monaco. He was killed the following year in that wretched crash in Imola.' She suddenly looked sad.

'Yes, it was quite awful,' Richard replied. 'I was watching the race on the TV at home with my dad.'

There was an awkward silence, but Claire brought the joviality back.

'I shouldn't really do this, but here's a ticket for the exhibition tomorrow.' There was a twinkle in her light blue eyes.

Richard was in awe of the Hotel de Paris when he arrived, soaking up the atmosphere. He'd never been to such a posh hotel. He didn't recognise Claire at first; she was wearing an exquisite black cocktail dress with her hair up. She'd told him it was a black tie event, and luckily he'd stumbled on a tuxedo hire shop so he didn't feel out of place. Swept away by all the excitement, Richard bought the Senna print for ninety-five pounds. After the exhibition, he and Claire enjoyed a meal in the Café de Paris and rounded off the evening at the casino. It was their lucky night; they left with a nice haul of winnings. They had an amazing night, though parts of it were very hazy. They'd stayed in touch with the odd postcard and phone call during that summer, but then it had fizzled out.

Richard's thoughts were broken as the train slowed at Villefranche. A young man took his seat opposite Richard.

'Are you here for the Grand Prix?' Richard asked, assuming for some reason that he was English.

'Yes and no. Yes to the Grand Prix, but I'm also on a bit of a wild goose chase. And you?' Before Richard could answer, the young man's phone rang. 'Sorry, I'd better get this. It's the wild goose bit of my trip,' he laughed.

Richard turned his attention to the stunning scenery again. Not a cloud in the sky. The sea was sparkling. He was so glad he'd chosen to celebrate his fortieth birthday here. He kept hearing snippets of his travel companion's conversation. At one point it sounded quite heated,

'Just calm down, I'm sure we can sort something out when we get there,' he said at one point, mouthing "sorry" to Richard. The train was slowing for the next station, and he whispered to Richard, 'Enjoy the weekend.'

‘And you, and good luck.’ Richard replied.

It was a shame they hadn’t chatted longer. Richard felt as though he knew the young man from somewhere, but he couldn’t think where.

The train arrived at Beaulieu, where Richard was staying. He retrieved his suitcase and set off on the short walk to the apartment on the beach front that he’d booked months earlier. He was going to change as soon as he reached the apartment and go for a swim in the tantalising sea, and then relax ahead of the busy few days that lay ahead. He plonked the case on the bed and unzipped it.

‘Oh no!’ he exclaimed. ‘It’s not my suitcase!’

But that wasn’t all. He couldn’t quite get his head around the framed photo sitting at the top. He lifted it out.

‘Well I never!’

He was looking at photo of himself and Claire. On the back, it simply said “Richard, Hotel De Paris, 21 May 1998”.

So lost was he in his discovery that he hadn’t registered the door bell was ringing insistently. He answered it. His travel companion from earlier greeted him. He was now with a young woman. Richard was confused. He’d suddenly been transported back in time and thought he was looking at Claire.

‘Oh hi, fancy meeting you again!’ said the travelling companion. ‘I’m so sorry, I picked up this suitcase. It has this address on the label. I’m hoping you’ve got mine! If not, my sister is going to kill me because our only photo of our mum and dad is in there. That’s the wild goose chase part of my trip. We’re retracing my mum’s visit here in 1998. I’m Ayrton, by the way. This is Sienna. We’re meeting our mum at the -’

‘Hotel de Paris,’ Richard finished his sentence.

‘Wow! How did you know that?’

‘Just a wild stab in the dark,’ Richard replied.

‘This is a bit of an odd question, but you don’t fancy joining us for an art exhibition there, do you?’ Sienna asked. ‘And a meal afterwards at the Café de Paris? My aunt had to cancel at the last minute, so there’s a spare ticket and the meal is booked for four of us.’

Richard was speechless. Sienna’s voice sounded just how he remembered Claire’s.

He had a feeling that his birthday trip had just changed for the better.



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The Journey

Anne Cawthorn, Simone Hubbard, and Pete Stellings

Doris and Ethel are two elderly ladies who meet up each morning for elevenses. They have been neighbours for years and love gossiping over a cuppa. Doris has been a widow since her Bert died a few years ago and Ethel's long-suffering husband is Fred. They are sitting at Ethel and Fred's kitchen table having a cuppa and biscuits.

Ethel: Do you ever do daft things Doris, like tripping up over nothing?

Doris: Oh yes, I do it all the time. Bert used to say, 'There must be something wrong with you, Doris.' So, I told him; yes, there is - and do you know what it is?
(Pause) Old age!

Ethel: (Laughs) That makes me feel better. My brother John was laughing his head off yesterday about the time I went hurtling down their garden at his summer BBQ.

Doris: Hmm - very supportive! I'd forgotten about that. What happened, Ethel?

Ethel: Well, we'd just had our sausages and burgers and some charred vegan bliss balls the youngsters brought, and I was ready for something to take the taste of burnt food out of my mouth.

Doris: My Bert hated BBQs. He always said they ruined good food. And worse still, our son Ian always gave us endless drinks to stop Bert keep asking 'When's the food going to be ready?'

Fred: Then I bet you were ratted by the time it was ready, because we always are!

Ethel: That's exactly what happened to me. I'd had my sausages and half a bliss ball and decided to go up the garden in search of a pudding and some more wine. As if I needed it! On the way back, I went carefully down the patio steps, complete with my bowl of trifle in one hand and a glass of Chardonnay in the other. But obviously not carefully enough. I found myself hurtling sideways down the garden.

Doris: I bet you looked like Hyacinth Bouquet.

Ethel: Our John said that. I remember picking up speed and wondering how the devil I was going to stop myself falling over.

Doris: Ooh-er. Did you end up in the bushes?

Ethel: No. Fortunately, my niece looked up and saw someone rushing towards her and stuck a chair out to break my fall. Then she took me arm and sat me down.

Doris: That was lucky.

Ethel: Very lucky, as it happened; I didn't spill a drop of my wine and my trifle was also still intact.

Doris: Jammy devil. Did anybody see you?

Ethel: Not many, thankfully. So, I just sat there; ate my pudding and finished my wine as though nothing had happened.

Fred: But that was a *trifling* incident, Doris, compared to another eventful journey when me and Ethel were in Mexico a few years before. Do you remember us going?

Doris: I do. Didn't you splash out with your retirement money, Fred?
(Fred opens his mouth to reply but Ethel beats him to it.)

Ethel: Yes. It was a trip of a lifetime for him, but I couldn't say it was for me. Fred had always been into Cowboy and Indian films, watching them over and over again. So, whilst we were there, he booked us on a train journey, like the ones you see in the films, where the Cowboys and Indians fight on the train roof.

Doris: You always were a big kid at heart, Fred.

Fred: I suppose I am. *(Grins.)*

Doris: Tell me about it.

Ethel: Well, we were on this rickety train, when all of a sudden it stopped in the middle of nowhere. The guard announced that we could get off if we wanted to, but warned us to take great care as there was no platform, and below us was a ravine full of boulders.

Doris: Like the ones you see in the films, I bet.

Ethel: Exactly like those. Just like the ones the cowboys hide behind when they are shooting the baddies. I was nervous about jumping off, but Fred was all for it.

Doris: You never jumped off, Ethel?

Ethel: Yes, and that wasn't the half of it. Once I had jumped, I couldn't stop. The next thing I knew, I was hurtling down the ravine towards the boulders.

Doris: How did you stop hurtling?

Ethel: I was very lucky. Two men saw this daft old bat hurtling towards them and had the good sense to position themselves one either side of me. They grabbed both my arms, which brought me to a grinding halt. I don't mind telling you, that if they hadn't, I can't imagine what would have happened.

Doris: And where were you, Fred, while all this was going on?

Ethel: Well, he was doing what the guard said: taking his time to get off the train!

Fred: I don't mind telling you, I was also working out whether our holiday insurance would cover Ethel's hospital bill if she'd hit any of the boulders.

Doris: Well, I say you have been lucky, Ethel, having had two eventful journeys without sustaining any injuries.

Ethel: No, not quite. When I finished my trifle at our John's that day, I stood up to go home, only to find I had an excruciating pain in my right foot.

Doris: Oh dear.

Ethel: It *was* 'Oh dear'. I had broken a bone in my foot, so I went to A& E and ended up in a moon boot for six weeks!

Doris: That reminds me of when me & my Bert went on a cruise to India. When we got to Mumbai, Bombay to us oldies, we chose an organised trip for fear of getting lost there. Our guide was very strict, especially with the 'authentic' train journey we'd booked on. 'Watch me and follow my instructions carefully,' she said.

Fred: And did you?

Doris: Oh yes. Watched her like a hawk. It was all about getting the timing right and being ready to get on and off quickly, as the trains over there only stop at the station for fifteen or twenty seconds.

Ethel: Did you manage OK?

Doris: Me and my Bert did, but a woman in the group misjudged it and ended up falling on to the platform.

Fred: Oh heck. Was she OK?

Doris: In a word, no. She was carted off in an ambulance, and we heard she'd fractured her hip and had to go to hospital. We never saw her again. I don't know. You've got to laugh, haven't you?

Fred: Oh, I have a limerick for that.

Doris: Go on then, let's hear it, Fred.

Fred: On a rail and sea cruise holiday,
Doris and Bert visited Bombay.
As the train moved slowly along the track
A woman fell off and her hip she did crack.
Then an ambulance whisked her away.

(All laugh)

Fred: Oh, we've done some epic journeys over the years. Do you remember that holiday to Egypt, Ethel, where we went on a day trip to Jerusalem?

Ethel: Do I! For a start we had to meet up at 4.30 a.m. outside the hotel.

Fred: They gave us a packed lunch, but Ethel being Ethel managed to eat it by 5 a.m. I couldn't believe my eyes when I turned round and there she was, sat on the hotel wall with two young men, who she'd just met, all tucking into their lunches like three school kids having a midnight feast!

Ethel: Well, it was their idea, and it would have been rude not to join them! (*Fred shakes his head*)

Doris: What did you do for dinner then?

Fred: Well, when the minibus stopped for a comfort break, Ethel and her two new best friends hopped off to buy some goodies. She also bought us a hot chocolate each.

Doris: Oh lovely.

Fred: Well, it would have been if the driver hadn't set off like Lewis Hamilton at the start of a Grand Prix.

Doris: Ooh-er ...

Ethel: Yes, you've guessed it. I hadn't sat down yet. So, there I was, hurtling down the bus, and I toppled over and spilled my hot chocolate over Fred. Most of it landed on his manhood!

Fred: (*Wincing*) And boy, was it hot.

Doris: Did it burn you, Fred?

Fred: Not half.

Doris: Oh dear, so when you say 'not half' ...

Ethel: He's scarred for life! Not that anyone will see that!

Fred: I was just about to ask the driver to pass some tissues from the dashboard when he launched into a 'hard sell' about all the things we could buy from him.

Ethel: Fred kept trying to shut him up.

Fred: I was in pain!

Doris: And did he shut up?

Ethel: Oh yes, but only when Fred shouted, 'Will you shut up, man? We have an emergency back here!' I have never heard Fred shout like that before. He sounded quite manly. Really sexy. Like Clint Eastwood in Dirty Harry.

Fred: I didn't look sexy at all, or manly. And trust me, Ethel, Clint Eastwood would never have gone on a trip with you.

Ethel: No (*giggling*). And worse still, Fred had his new beige safari suit on. He had to walk about all day covered in brown sludge. It looked bad enough from the front, but when he stood up, and I saw the back of his trousers ... Well!

Doris: (*Shakes her head*) Oh Ethel, you have to admit you're a bit of a nightmare!

Ethel: Oh I am. At least we can look back and have a good laugh about it.

Fred: Speak for yourself. The driver kept offering me toilet stops after that.

Doris: (*laughing*) Oh, you two are a caution! Well, for my next little adventure I'm going to ... Now where was it? Somewhere with East in the name.

Ethel: The Far East, Doris?

Doris: No ... It's come back to me now: I'm off to *Eastbourne*. On Shearing's coaches! (*All laugh*)

Fred: Well, if there's any places left, I think it would be safer for us to join you, if you don't mind that is.

Doris: That would be great, Fred. My only worry is whether *Eastbourne* is ready for Ethel. What do you think, Fred?

Fred: I'm not so sure. She never changes as she gets older, just gets dafter.

Doris: But we wouldn't have it any other way, would we? See you tomorrow.

Fred: Before you go, Doris, I just have a limerick I made up about us.

Doris: Go on then, Fred.

Fred: There's Ethel, Doris, and Fred.
There once was a Bert, but he's dead.
In the mornings they'd gather
For coffee and blather.
Put the world to rights. Then 'nuf said.

(*All laugh*)