



## Vertically Challenged Anecdotes

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#### A technical note

These stories have been written in two columns in landscape mode and as such, they display beautifully on a computer or ipad screen. On a mobile phone, they are still quite readable but you have to remember to 'swipe sideways' to get the right hand or the left hand column.

I have not bothered to put any hypertexting in but may at a later date. Any comments/thoughts to the special email address: [vca@mailfence.com](mailto:vca@mailfence.com)

The short form of the web-address for this file is:

**<http://po.st/vca>**

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## Preface

Over the years, I seem to have acquired -or more accurately remembered- a series of stories, anecdotes or even just 'occurrences' each of which has a humorous twist to it. So many people have said to me '*Why don't you write them down?*' that I thought I would and this is the result...

*Why Vertically Challenged Anecdotes?* Well, the definition of a *tall story* is a 'story or tale that seems highly unlikely or believable' However, each of these anecdotes is firmly rooted in reality (with the exception of the *Jokes* section which are included because I have found them particularly amusing and/or memorable). Hence these are not *tall stories* but the obverse (not quite the opposite) and hence *Vertically Challenged Anecdotes* is a more accurate description.

Where there are references to actual persons, nearly all of these are no longer on this mortal earth so I feel that I can tell the tale with impunity but there are a few disguises in case any distant relative discovers this manuscript and gets offended or upset by it.

My intention is to bring some kind of humour into your life by recounting these stories but if I have failed, then you can always email me and I remove them from any future editions. In the same spirit, I would be delighted to know which of these anecdotes you find particularly amusing.

I can assure you that each entry is securely rooted in reality apart from the fact that I may have mis-remembered or unintentionally elaborated some details. However, I would want to stress that each of these has actually happened to me or been relayed to me. In many instances, I have gone beyond the immediate anecdote and given some of the context much as if I was in an actual conversation with you.

I do accept that the fact of writing this account is an act of supreme self indulgence - but if it brings a smile or even a tear to your face then I feel I will have succeeded.

It is conventional to say that any reference to any living persons is entirely accidental but, of course, in this case any such reference is entirely deliberate.

If any family members or friends can remember any stories I have told in the past and completely forgotten do let me know so that I can update at an appropriate juncture.

## Catholics

### 1. The woman taken in adultery

[This may have originated in a cartoon in a Catholic newspaper but in any case it was told to me by a Catholic colleague]

In the New Testament, there is an account of the punishment about to be meted out to a woman taken in adultery. At the time, I understand, the victim was buried up to their necks and then the local population stoned them to death. Jesus had an observation of incidents of this kind and issued the warning

*'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone'*

At this point a middle aged woman (dressed perhaps in blue) started to energetically throw stones at the unfortunate victim even though the rest of the population held back. At this point, Jesus turned to the woman and said *'Mother? You know there are times when you really p\*ss me off'*

### 2. Bishop's Babies

This story originates from some of the remarks made at my mother's funeral service which was held in the spring of 2007. I was recalling the fact that my mother used to tell the story to her own school pupils of a little boy who used to walk a mile in the journey home from school in order to shorten the bus journey home from school. Then the (old) penny which had been saved was donated to a collection at the local Catholic primary school to a fund which was called **The Bishops Babies** which was used to help orphaned children in the diocese. [I discovered subsequently that the little boy in the story was actually myself]

In my address to the congregation I could not resist pointing out that in the 1950's the phrase *The Bishop's Babies* was clear and unambiguous but in 2017 mindful of some of the events that occurred in Ireland, we could not be sure that the phrase *The Bishop's Babies* was not literally true!

The priest conducting the funeral stared hard at his feet at this point...

## Christmas

### 3. Santa's reindeer

For many years, I was privileged enough to play the role of Santa Claus at my daughter-in-law's primary school in central Birmingham. We had a well-worked script in which I would ask the children if they had been good boys and girls and how many 'sleep' nights there were until Christmas.

After a few years, I decided to enliven the script a little and this is what emerged...

*Now then, boys and girls, I wonder if any of you have eaten a burger - shout YES if you have! And also shout YES if you have a cat or a dog as a family pet....*

*Now you may be wondering why I am here and my reindeer are not here with me. Well, I have to report to you that Rudolph, my chief reindeer has been set upon by a pack of wild dogs and killed. They tore all of the flesh from his body and then, rather than waste it all, meat from Rudolph's body was stripped off and minced down into fine bits and then put into burgers and tins of dog food and cat food. This was then sold all over Birmingham in the last month or so. So if you are wondering where Rudolph is, I can tell you that you and your family pets have probably all eaten him up by now...*

*Now then, boys and girls, there is no need to cry.. you probably have all enjoyed eating Rudolph in the first place...*

*If you are feeling sick, can you make sure you are doing it in a neat pile in front of you and not over the little boy and girl next to you as you don't want to ruin their party clothes, do you?*

*Also, boys and girls, beware of many false Santa Claus who may impersonate me. You can often see them in department stores like John Lewis and you can tell them apart because they have nicotine stained fingers and smell of gin.*

My contract with the school as Santa Claus was abruptly terminated and I was never asked to play Santa Claus ever again- I cannot think why?

[PS The above sequence did not actually happen - it was only a thought experiment. ]

**[PPS With acknowledgment to Tom Sharpe's *Wilt* from whom the idea originated.]**

## Dream

### 4. Don Giovanni

Every so often, one has a particularly vivid dream which seems so real that when one wakes up, it feels as though the events of the dream had actually happened. What follows is an account of a dream which I had when we were visiting Mexico on the occasion of my son's international scholarship to Universidad de las Americas (UDLA) in Puebla in 1986-87. It may have been that in a different society, one senses were especially heightened and hence this found expression in the vivid dream.

Being avid opera goers, Meg and I were seated in a theatre waiting for the performance to begin at 7.30. The time was actually 7.10 when one of the opera house staff approached me with the news that their principal singer was indisposed and therefore would it be possible for me to play the lead role in the Mozart opera of Don Giovanni. I readily agreed saying that although I was familiar with the score, I might have forgotten some of the words of the libretto - would it be possible to have a few prompts hidden in various places on the set so that I could remind myself of the words to sing. I was assured that this would present no problem and they would organise it for me. I was escorted to my dressing room where I applied my stage makeup and donned my costume, all the while rehearsing in my head the role I was shortly to perform.

At 7.27, three minutes before 'curtain up' the Assistant Stage Master came to the dressing room and said - '*Right Maestro - are you ready for this and are you sure you can do it?*'

'Yes, yes' I replied full of confidence - at which point the ASM said to me '*Did we say Don Giovanni - Sorry! It's actually the Count in the Marriage of Figaro!*'

At this point I woke up screaming in terror- it was quite evident that I could prepare to sing the whole of an opera at 20 minutes notice but 3 minutes notice was too short, even for me!

[There may have been a psychological component in this as in my professional life, I was sometimes called upon to do something with only about 20 minutes preparation time - but 3 minutes was a step too far!]

## Holidays

### 5. The Salobreña waitresses

Meg and I have often stayed in the Hotel Salobreña, initially when it was a small-ish independent 3-star hotel in Salobreña in the south of Spain. More latterly, it expanded, was taken over by the Best Western group and offered some excellent value Saga holidays.

Some of the guests had stayed at the hotel for the last seventeen years. One of our number pointed out to us the old grandfather whose hotel it had originally been. The question was also posed why so many of the hotel's waitresses looked so alike each other.

It transpired that the original owner had been very liberal with his favours with several local women. As soon as the illegitimate girls were of working age, they were automatically offered employment in the hotel. So the similarities in the appearances of the waitresses was not a coincidence

After a pleasant evening in the bar, the group of Saga pensioners were fumbling with their room keys and remarking we had not been having a *key-party*. A young Spanish waitress with good English overheard us and then remarked *'Oh, I've been to one of those!'*

### 6. Salobreña complaints

One of the Saga reps at the hotel told us of a complaint with which she had to deal when she was newly qualified rep at the hotel. Several of the English guests complained that there seemed to be a continuous orgy amongst a group of English residents. The evidence for this was a large number of running up and down corridors late at night, doors being slammed and frequently overheard comments such as *'Oh! I can't possibly have you again tonight because I've already had you as a partner at least once during the day'*

These comments were relayed to the hotel management who seemed very relaxed about the behaviour pattern. *'Ah!'* the manager had said, *'you must be referring to the English residents who are organised into a large **bridge party!**'* - this explains the frequently overheard references to new partners being required!

## 7. Salobreña bridge slogan

The Salobrena Hotel in which Meg and I had several memorable holidays lies on a headland some 2-3 miles along a main road leading out of Salobreña. However, it is possible to take a short cut from the hotel into the town itself which involved some cross-country traversing. Approaching the town this way, there was an area, perhaps prone to flooding from the sea, in which a long wall ran alongside a type of raised causeway.

On this wall, a presumably irate local villager had painted the message in letters at least one foot high so it could easily be read :

*Su muher tiene cara de un insatisfecha*

This translates as:

*Your wife has the face of a women who can never be satisfied!*

The message was prominent for several years and is probably there to this day, being almost impossible to remove. The price of living in a small community?

## 8. Robert in Granada

As Salobreña is due South of Granada (home to the fabled Alhambra palace) Meg and I decided to catch a bus and spend a day there with our friends, Robert and Dorothy. After our sightseeing, we arrived at the bus station to catch the coach for the return journey. As we had about 10 minutes before the coach departure, Robert and I thought we had better 'spend a penny' as it was a journey of least one and a half hours back home.

Granada bus station has a long rectangular layout with toilets at each end. When Robert and I arrived at the toilets, the male toilets were out of commission but there was no time to traverse the whole length of the bus station to the other toilets and make it to the bus on time. What to do? After prompting by a local man, we were advised to use the women's toilets. What follows next was almost exactly like a re-run of the scene from *Father Ted* in which a group of Catholic priests get trapped in the female underwear department of a large department store and have to organise their escape one by one.

I waited for the opportunity and then ran as fast as I could to the nearest cubicle, I then opened the door a chink and beckoned Robert to do likewise when the coast was clear.



Having relieved ourselves, we then had to organise the whole episode in reverse - I waited for an opportunity and indicated to Robert 'Go, Robert, Go!' It could only happen to the English!

Another completely unrelated toilet incident occurred when I was waiting for Meg outside the toilets in a converted convent (it might have been Monserrat, but no matter) The gentlemen's toilets had some magnificent tiling (*azulejos*) and after I had waited for Meg for some time, I thought I might be able to run in quickly with my camera at the ready, take a snap of these and then depart.

What happened from the point of view of an Italian tourist who was relieving himself was that a mad Englishman dashed in with his camera at the ready, photographed him when he was no position to extricate himself and then dashed out again. Perhaps he was traumatised for life! I have often wondered whether he told the story to his family and friends when he returned home!

## 9. At the airport

I am grateful to my daughter-in-law. Mandy, for reminding me of the full details of this incident, which I had completely forgotten about.

Mandy, Martin (our son) Meg and I were spending what turned to be a fairly disastrous Christmas in Barcelona. For a start, one of the guests - an elderly lady accompanied by her sister and two nieces who had been brought to Barcelona for a Christmas treat - dropped down dead in the room next to us. Martin had a terrible episode with a bad back and spent the whole week flat on the floor in his hotel bedroom, only to emerge on the final day to the astonishment of the other guests on the holiday to whom he was a complete stranger.

On the journey home, in the airport at Barcelona. Martin was flat on the floor (again) as was Meg who was also plagued by back problems. The one surviving sister and her nieces were consoling themselves, tearfully, as the coffin of the deceased aunt was being loaded on the plane. At which point, I was said to have remarked '*Well I don't know - the whole place is starting to resemble a morgue with bodies flat out everywhere!*'  
I don't remember this but Mandy wanted the earth to swallow her up...

## 10. Meal in Amsterdam

Meg and I were on honeymoon in Amsterdam in 1968 when the following incident occurred which sticks in our memory. We decided to eat in a good restaurant attached to the central railway station in Amsterdam. What follows next is an account in which you have to visualise the evident sequence of events...

In the centre of the restaurant were a German couple. The female member of the couple was well-built and in an extremely low-cut dress. The waiter advanced slowly towards her balancing a whole tureen of hot tomato soup on a tray. As he approached, the tureen performed a perfect trajectory through the air and deposited the whole of its contents completely on the most sensitive parts of the woman's body... her screams rang round the restaurant and are remembered to this day. To make matters worse (if they could be) the waiter grabbed a napkin but was immediately faced with a dilemma - to dab or not to dab the woman's breasts directly. Eventually through screams and sobs she was led away into the kitchen where no doubt they could apply some Acriflavine or other suitable remedy. The remainder of the guests in the restaurant concluded their meal in a subdued silence, wondering if they could translate the German imprecations that had been uttered...

## 11. Meal in La Coruna

Mike was in one of our favourite restaurants, part of the Hotel Maria Pita in La Coruña - Meg was unfortunately at home in Bromsgrove assailed by a migraine. We were assembled to have a pre-party to celebrate 50 years of marriage attended by close friends and relatives. The restaurant had a little private meeting area which we colonised to show wedding photographs, play our original wedding music and drink a toast. I had tipped off the hotel staff who really entered into the spirit of the occasion and ordered as much Cava (champagne) as we needed - the instruction to the waitresses was to just fetch another bottle when the preceding one had run out. In attendance were two blonde waitresses (quite unusual for Spain) and the restaurant manageress, also herself a blonde. As is customary on such occasions and full of bonhomie, there was lots of kissing of the waitresses who helped us all to celebrate.

Eventually, one of our closest friends, Dan, exclaimed '*Mike! I think this whole fiesta is just a subterfuge to kiss as many Spanish women as you can!*'

Of course, Dan was not absolutely wrong but it is fair to say that Spanish culture is much more tactile than English culture and there was a lot of champagne around...

## **Jokes**

### **12. Rumpole of the Bailey [1]**

[This story and the next were told on BBC Radio 4 early in the morning so they must be in reasonable taste..]

Rumpole of the Bailey was a character invented by John Mortimer and the subject of several anecdotes and books - I think he was played by Leo McKern in a TV series decades ago. Anyway, here goes...

Rumpole came home from the court and announced to his wife:

*Hilda! You will never guess what? I have just got Bessie, who runs the brothel down in the town, off a charge of living off immoral earnings. She was so delighted that that she has given me a little 'chitty' so that I can have a free session in her establishment!*

Hilda replied 'Now, now Rumpole don't get too excited. I would sit down and have your tea and then why not go down into town and visit Bessie's establishment where you can disappoint another woman for a change!

### **13. Rumpole of the Bailey [2]**

The elderly but kindly judge was trying a case of alleged sexual assault. When the victim came herself to give evidence, the judge asked her to repeat the exact words that her assailant had used. The victim replied '*I am sorry, m'Lud, but the words were so obscene that I could not possibly bring myself to repeat them.*'

The judge, sympathetic to the victim informed her '*That's quite all right - you can, if you wish, write down the words that were used*' Whereupon the victim wrote on the piece of paper provided the words

*'Do you fancy a f\*ck'?* and then promptly handed it to the judge. Having read the note, the judge handed to the jury so that they could all read it as well. The note was read and passed down the line and eventually arrived at the eleventh jury member, a buxom young blonde who then tried to pass it on to a dozing elderly male juror member. On receiving the note. he nodded enthusiastically and popped the note into his top pocket. The judge observed this happening and directed '*Jury man No. 12 - Can you bring me that note immediately*' whereupon the elderly gentleman replied '*But it's nothing to do with you, m'lud- it's a totally private arrangement between this young lady and myself!*'

#### 14. What does 1 + 1 make?

I always found it interesting to observe that the mind-sets of decision makers in organisations often reflected the original degree disciplines of the individuals in question. For example, a person who was brought up in the traditions of Pharmacy might always want to reduce everything to a formula. In like manner, an economist would tend to see things as related to 'opportunity-cost', a political scientist might see all decision making as essentially the balance of power between the contending parties and a computer scientist as a combination of loops and decision points.

This was well illustrated in a correspondence sequence in *The Times* where the question posed was 'What does 1 + 1 make?'

The answer depended upon one's profession as follows:

| <u>Profession</u>   | <u>Answer</u>                                |
|---------------------|--|
| Mathematician       | 2.0 precisely                                |
| Physicist           | Something in the range from 1.9 - 2.1        |
| Engineer            | 2 but let's call it 8 to be on the safe side |
| Computer Scientist  | 10 (in binary)                               |
| Political Scientist | A non-zero sum                               |
| Accountant          | 2 - but what answer do you want it to be??   |

The accountants with whom I worked reckoned that were always three types of people - those who could count and those who could not!

#### 15. Priests and Shepherds

In a television quiz show, the two contestants (the priests and the shepherds) scored an equal number of points. The tie-breaker was to set the two teams to compose any limerick ending in the word *Timbuktoo* and so the two teams set to work. Here is the effort of the priests:

*I've been a priest all my life  
Got no children, got no wife  
I read my bible through and through  
And journeyed on to Timbuktoo*

Meanwhile, here was the effort of the shepherds

*Aargh, Tim and I to Paris went  
Met three women - cheap to rent  
They were three but we were two  
So I booked one and Tim Booked Two!*

The Shepherds were adjudged the winners!

## 16. Dog in the telegraph office

In the days when the telegraph was the quickest mode of communication in the United States, a dog responded to the sign which read:

*'Telegrams - send ten words for one dollar'*

The dog walked in and announced he would like to send a telegram. The telegraph clerk replied *'Certainly sir - would you like to dictate it for me now?'*

The dog dictated as follows:

Wuff, wuff, wuff  
Wuff, wuff, wuff  
Wuff, wuff, wuff.

The clerk having written down the message to be sent in the telegram indicated to the dog *'Well, sir, you can send ten words for a dollar but you have only indicated nine. So shall I add an extra 'Wuff' on the end?'*

The dog's reply:

*'Certainly not - that wouldn't make any sense at all!'*

## 17. Visual jokes

Two entirely visual jokes now, the first of which was in a little booklet on baptism we acquired about the time of our son's christening in 1968.

The scene is the back of a church with a priest or vicar about to perform a baptism. He has his sleeves rolled up with his arms up his elbows in the water and is fishing about in the font.

The caption is: *'Slippery little blighter, isn't he?'*

--oo00oo--

The second illustration comes from a cover of the satirical magazine *Private Eye* after the recent scandals of paedophilia in the Catholic Church. Two cardinals are chatting, in a contemplative mood, on the steps of St, Peter's in Rome. One is saying to the other:

*'I remember the days when boys used to enter the priesthood, not the other way around!'*

## Languages

### 18. Cookery ingredients

One of the pitfalls of acquiring a competence in a second language is that as one becomes somewhat more fluent, one often has to make an educated guess at a word you don't know or cannot remember.

This happened to me whilst we were chatting with some old friends in a restaurant in Madrid. The subject has turned to cooking and I was trying to convey the fact that I enjoyed using garlic and occasionally used garlic 'pearls' I thought that I had better translate *pearl* as a *tablet* in this instance and I was vaguely aware that the word for a tablet was derived from a word which something compressed (i.e. a powder that forms the tablet) So I blithely said (in Spanish) '*Me gusta mucho cocinar con compresas de ajo*' which translates as '*I much enjoy cooking with garlic tablets*' Unfortunately, the word *compresa* does not mean tablet - what I finish up saying (in English) was '*I much enjoy cooking with sanitary towels made of garlic!*' Our friends kept saying 'No!' but I persisted in saying what I was saying, blithely ignorant that a *compresa* is a sanitary towel (from the days when they used to be made from compressed cotton wool?) instead of the correct word that I should have used which is *comprimido*.

### 19. Constantly waiting and looking

The Spanish have a wonderful verb *esperar* which means *to wait* or *to hope*. So far, so good- but you can be waiting for something but not hoping for it (death?) Anyway, I only know five words of Spanish which I use constantly '*Estoy esperando à mi mujer*' [I am waiting for my wife] which is highly useful when you are hanging around the entrance of a lady's loo and the local police are starting to view you suspiciously. I one occasion after a good meal and bottle of wine I was waiting for Meg and two young waitresses were evidently coming off shift. Somehow, we got into conversation and I (perhaps deliberately) shifted from '*Estoy esperando à mi mujer*' to '*Estoy esperando à **un** mujer*' which doesn't sound very different but actually means that I am looking **for** a wife. I said also 'Hay muchos por aqui?' [Are there many around here] and the reply was '*Si Señor!, hay muchos y estan libres*' ['Yes, Sir, and they are uncommitted as well'] This led to you 'Are you free?' 'Yes. I'm free' and her mate said 'Me as well!' '*Es posible hacer dos por el precio de uno?*' [Is it possible to have two for the price of one? to which the reply was '*Porque no?*' [Why not?] At this point, Meg appeared so I kissed the two waitresses goodbye (see No. 11) and Meg asked 'What was all that about then?' 'Ah', I said, 'it's a bit too complicated to explain...'

## Medical

### 20. Discarding bits

So there I was, minutes before I was due to undergo surgery for bowel cancer in June, 2018. My (Asian) surgeon asked me if there were any questions I would like to ask before the surgery commenced.

*“I have only question”, I replied to my surgeon. “When eventually you are holding me in one hand and the diseased portion of my bowel in the other, can you make sure you throw away the right bit!”*

*‘I’m sorry’ my surgeon said to me ‘but I don’t understand the question you asked me?’*

[I apologised immediately for telling crap jokes minutes before bowel surgery]

### 21. Coming round from surgery

In 1973, I was involved in a bizarre accident on the campus of Leicester Polytechnic where I then worked. Briefly, a driver fainted at a T-junction on the university campus (which was split over several main roads) and I was hit at 40mph by a Hillman Imp, severely damaging both knees. Eventually I was admitted for surgery (it was the time of the ancillaries dispute and on the day of the accident I was sent home with completely severed leg muscles and told to take an aspirin for the pain). I was told they did not know exactly what surgery they were going to perform until they got me onto the operating table and they could properly assess the damage.

When I came from the operation, I peeped under the sheet to see how many legs I was left with (two as it happened) but I had been plastered from ankle to groin on both legs - as you might imagine, there must have been plaster flying everywhere. To my dismay, I discovered that there were masses of plaster all around my penis which was still warm but hardening rapidly (the plaster that it).

I rang the bell and with as much authority as I could muster asked the assistance of a male nurse - I assure you when you are in severe pain, sex is the last thing on your mind attractive though the nurse was.

I was cleaned up by the male nurse but word had spread rapidly around the ward. I was in a small private amenity room but there a cluster of female nurses had gathered outside the door, eager to know from their male colleague what he had been asked to do.

Ah, the power of mental images! When he told them what had happened to me in the plaster room, you could hear the peals of laughter resounding down the ward (it was a long old-fashioned 'Nightingale' ward)

[Just a short postscript of how things have changed in the NHS. After enduring three hours of the most severe pain, I have ever experienced, a nurse came along to check on me and said '*Let's just check what pain relief you are on. Oh dear, we've forgotten to give you any!*' Needless to say, I was angry - one expects to suffer pain but not needlessly because someone had forgotten. By contrast, after my more recent surgery *Tramadol* was shoved down my throat by the bucketload and I was never in any real pain during the whole of my stay.]

## 22. A medical query

There are many hospital stories I could tell but one particularly sticks in my memory. The old boy in the bed next to me was becoming increasingly agitated and kept on asking the nursing assistants the same question: '*Can you tell me - are my testicles black?*' The nursing assistants would reply that it was not their job to know that but eventually the request was transmitted up the chain of authority until a nursing Sister took control. '*Well, she said we will try and find out if you like*' and then proceeded with intimate examinations that including holding various body parts at various angles.

Eventually, the Sister opined '*No, they are fine*' But the old man eventually complained '*What was all that about then?*' The Sister replied to him '*Well, you kept on asking 'Are my testicles black?'*'

Eventually the old boy whipped off his oxygen mask and said '*But all I wanted to know was - are my test results back?*'



### 23. Little boy in clinic

As part of my Ph.D. research into *'Waiting Times in NHS Outpatient Clinics'*, I was attending a child health clinic in a community centre in Leicestershire. The system was that the consultants came out of their hospitals and into the community to work in some very deprived parts of the community who find a visit to the city centre hospital particularly difficult.

Each child was weighed and had their height measured each time they attended the clinic and details recorded in a little 'Red Book'. On this particular occasion, the nurse held out her hand to a little boy to take him away for his measurement - the little boy had evidently had a lot of contact with nurses before and you could almost see the 'bubble coming out of his head' as he wondered what to do. Without a moment's hesitation he took both his hands and immediately pushed his trousers down to the floor! The clinic who had observed this dissolved into laughter.

I speculated whether he would persist in this behaviour pattern whenever he met a nurse when he reached the age of 18+ - the consensus view was that he probably would!

### Meg and Martin

#### 24. Meg

One of the advantages of living in the South of England when we moved to Hampshire was that Eurostar was quite accessible (then running out of Waterloo) and offered frequent upgrades to first class for minimal extra outlay. When you arrived in the Netherlands as well, the fare included onward transport to any other train station in Belgium or the Netherlands.

Meg and I were on our way to Antwerp for a conference that Mike was attending there. We negotiated Schipol railway station to find the correct platform for the train to Antwerp and then the train arrived, got onto it noting that it had a huge '1' painted on the side. Naturally, we assumed that our first class tickets on Eurostar transferred to the rest of the system.

In due course, our tickets were inspected by a ticket inspector who was in a resplendent uniform with lots of braid as I remember it. The ticket inspector addressed Meg in a very polite way saying *'Unfortunately, Madam, your tickets although valid for first class on Eurostar are not valid for first class travel throughout Belgium - so you have the option of either moving to a different carriage or ele paying the extra fare.'*

Meg stared at the ticket inspector and in now famous words declared:

*'What? A modern progressive, democratic and classless society like Belgium - I thought you had abolished all these kind of class distinctions years ago!'*

The ticket inspector looked pained and (almost) clicked his heels before replying *'Unfortunately not, madam - that is not the case.'* We then took ourselves to the appropriate class of carriage (which seemed to us identical to the first class carriage in any case) and carried on with journey to Antwerp without further ado.

## 25. Meg in Torremolinos

We had a particularly stressful time one summer (Meg's mother becoming terminally ill, Martin our on leaving us to spend a year in Mexico, we were moving house and our place of work was shifting from one university campus to another) As soon as we could, we bought the first cheap flight we could (pre-internet days!) and journeyed to Torremolinos, one of the cheaper resorts on the Costa del Sol in Spain.

There was evidently a terrible bug going round the hotel because people tended to collapse with sickness and diarrhoea within 2-3 days of arriving. This happened to Meg and, as we waiting for our key from the reception staff, Meg promptly collapsed on the hotel floor in front of them [I might point out that Meg collapsing in a variety of locations is not an unheard-of phenomenon]

*'What has happened?'* the hotel staff said to which I replied *'This is what happens when you have to wait too long for your key!'* Whilst on the subject of collapses in hotels, it was not unknown in the large 425 bedded hotel in Harrogate (in which I worked) for the occasional guest to die. The typical solution was to bundle the corpse up inside a carpet and bring them down in the service lift - after all, nobody looks twice!

## 26. Martin in Cheshire

I was driving in Alderley Edge in Cheshire with my wife and son (aged 4) down a long, slow winding hill marked with double white lines (i.e. no overtaking) The old boy in front of me was going at about 20mph and was evidently looking for an address but causing absolute mayhem behind him. Eventually, in sure exasperation I overtook him, illegally, only to be immediately flagged down by a patrolling policeman on a motorbike. Martin just about knew at his age what a policeman was - his little face puckered up and he starting crying *'Don't send my Daddy to gaol!'* How the policeman kept a straight face, I do not know but after a suitable admonition, the policeman left me go on my way [He did later pull up the errant elderly motorist, presumably to warn him of the havoc he was causing] Later, when it was Martin's fifth birthday, he was bobbling about near our front gate and chatted with our next door neighbour *'Oh, it's my Daddy's birthday today'* The neighbour enquired of Martin *'So how old is your Daddy today?'*

Martin thought about this for a moment and replied *'Well, there's a 2 and an 8 in it so he's either 28 or 82, I don't know which!'* [both large numbers when you are 5] Now a senior manager in our National Health Service, I sometimes tease Martin whether he still confuses a 2 and an 8 - £28m? £82 million? Martin is not amused

## Neighbours

### 27. Rose and the boyfriend

Meg and I have generally been blessed with very good neighbours with one exception who, for the sake of anonymity, I shall call 'Rose' who was a next door neighbour but one.

In Leicestershire, the house next door was occupied by an old man who died and the house was sold on to a couple in their 40's who had a teenage daughter aged about 18. On the day that they moved in, the daughter came along with her boyfriend and they had a 'kiss and a cuddle' in the car before the daughter let herself into the house. All of this had been minutely observed by Rose who decided it was time for action. On the second day, the new girl neighbour and her boyfriend arrived in the car and started to have a good night kiss. At this point, Rose tapped on the window and the boyfriend wound down the window. Rose then seized hold of her bucket of cold water and threw it all over the young couple with the words *'It's just that sort of disgusting behaviour that lowers the tone of the neighbourhood!'*

The young girl immediately fled and never came home again, preferring to live in the nurses hostel to which she was entitled!

## 28. Rose at the Golf Club

Rose's husband, who I shall call Adrian, led a demanding life - he was made to Hoover every room and clean the windows of each room *every day!* His hearing had been badly affected by falling off the roof of his house after Rose demanded that the TV ariel be tweaked. On another occasion, our son had to rescue him whilst he was attempting to move a glass greenhouse one foot to the left and he had become trapped by the feet.

Adrian was the Treasurer of his local Golf Club but this did not always accord with Rose's domestic plans. When he was in a committee meeting one day, the door were flung wide open and Rose declared '*Adrian! You should be at home cooking my tea! Immediately!*' [The Golf Club terminated his membership immediately]

If there had been a report in the local newspaper that '*Local man run berserk - beheads wife with axe*', we would have said to each other '*That must be Adrian!*'

We subsequently met him on holiday when he informed us that Rose had died - and he grinned from ear to ear! For her funeral, Rose wanted a glass fronted coffin drawn by a bevy of black horses preceded by a New Orleans jazz band. Adrian and the local vicar put a stop to the jazz band but her other wishes were fulfilled.

## 29. Next door neighbour's cat

From a very early age, I had harboured an ambition to become a surgeon - so much so that after our GCSE 'O'-levels when we could research and present a topic to the rest of the class, my chosen topic was *Reconstructive Breast Surgery*. My ambitions for a medical career were dealt a savage blow when I unexpectedly failed my 'O'-level Physics despite having a good mark in the mock examinations (and subsequently passing it a year later with minimal revision)

At the height of my medical ambitions (aged 15) I offered to perform an ovariectomy (spaying) of the next door neighbour's cat. As I announced to them '*The operation is technically very easy as both the ovaries lie on one side of the cat's body, you know*'  
'*Oh, yes*' they said. '*And which side is that then?*'

At this stage, my theoretical knowledge ran out but undeterred, I replied '*Well it doesn't really matter which side you start from - if you don't get it right at first, you just flip the cat over and start from the other side*'

My neighbours refused me permission to operate on their cat and for the life of me, I cannot see why!

### 30. On the kitchen table

At one time, one of our neighbours was a formidable Belgian widow who I shall call Mrs Cleverly. She was very friendly and chatty and in no time was helping us to move in by putting up curtains and the like.

The Belgian's (and other Flemish, like the Dutch) have a reputation for direct and forthright speaking and Mrs. Cleverly was no exception. As she explained to us *'My husband's foreskin was too long and he was no use to me like that. So with the aid of the local doctor we got a carving knife out of the drawer and cut off the relevant bit ourselves on the kitchen table - my husband was fine after that!'*

Mrs Cleverly was an inveterate smoker of menthol cigarettes which she smoked continuously letting the ash drop everywhere - including the gooseberry wine she donated to us.

We were always amused by her two adult children (the operation on her husband had evidently worked) Her two children would always talk to each other in extremely loud voices when they were assisting her in the garden- her son had an incredibly high, almost falsetto speaking voice whilst her daughter had a really deep voice which seemed to emulate a Russian bass!

### 31. Fire in Wigston

When our son was about 5 or 6, he came bursting into our bedroom saying *'Mummy! Daddy! There's a fire engine outside our house!'* *'Well, it's nothing to do with us'* I said and opened the bedroom curtain windows only to see the flames from an old garden shed shooting at least 30-40 feet in the air and even visible over the trees in our orchard [I ought to explain at this point that our garden was at least 100 yds long and although we didn't know anything about the fire, our neighbours at the back certainly did as their garage was threatened']

I raced to get dressed absolutely as quickly as I could and raced down to the bottom of the garden only to see two firemen wielding a huge pressured fire hose [it took two of them to hold the hose with the force of the water]. They are being supervised by a fire chief who was leaning on his fire rake.

It just so happened that a few days before I had laid a long hose pipe all the way to the end of the garden to give me a water supply for my vegetables. So I raced to use the hose to assist the firemen but so much water was being drawn from the main water supply that I could manage a dribble of an inch or so. The fire chief observed this with an air of amused detachment and indicated *'I think you had better leave this to the professionals, sir!'*

My next door neighbour told me afterwards that he had never seen anything so funny in his life - but it was in an era before mobile phones and video cameras were expensive so none of this was caught on film.

Evidently, fires have to have causes but the explanation which satisfied the fire authorities was 'Exploding old paint tins stored in the garage' So it was absolutely nothing to do with (a) my next door neighbour habit of flicking lit ends-of-cigarettes (dog ends) onto the garden or even (b) a bonfire lit at the bottom of the garden, near to the old shed, which had not been properly extinguished!

### 32. Teenagers in Bromsgrove

My neighbours in Bromsgrove refuse to accept the veracity of the following story but it only happened a year or so. A group of teenagers emerged from the local park in an air of high excitement - whether it was just adolescent high spirits or a combination of alcohol and drugs, I cannot say.

One of the boldest of the girls approached me with a half-opened condom in its foil packet which she showed to me and enquired '*I understand you are still sexually active - could you make use of one of these?*'

Entering into the spirit of things I replied '*That would be of no use to me at all - I would need at least five or six for an evening*'. The girl shrieked in disbelief and immediately ran off with her companions...

One of my friends cannot believe this actually happened and I have invented the whole story. To which I can only say that jealousy is one of the most destructive of human emotions...

## Politics

I quite like good political jokes and although they are not original, they are very memorable.

### 33. Eva Perón

Eva Perón was the first lady of Argentina from 1946-52 but she was not all popular in Spain where her origins as an actress were regarded with a great deal of suspicion (probably quite unfairly)

On a tour of Europe, she was treated to an 'open carriage' ride alongside the Spanish Dictator, Generalissimo Franco. The crowds came out in great numbers but as the carriage passed, they pointed at her shouting and waving their arms with cries of '*Putá! Putá!* [Whore! Whore!]

Although visibly upset by this, the Generalissimo tried to comfort her. '*Don't worry, my dear*' he said to her. '*I retired from the army some twenty years ago but they still call me Generalissimo!*'

[You have to think about this a little - what was Eva Perón doing 20 years before?]

### 34. Denis Healey

The Labour Government was elected after '13 years of Tory rule' 1964 and one of its most prominent members was Denis Healey who serves as the Defence Secretary. Not a great deal was known about him by the civil service elite of the time, although he did achieve a double first in Greats at Balliol in 1940. So no intellectual slouch, he!

When a minister is first appointed, there is always a certain amount of intellectual jousting as the civil servants (themselves with first class degrees from Oxford or Cambridge and having been in post for the past 20 years) attempt to establish some superiority over the newly appointed minister who, after all, might he 'here today and gone tomorrow' and almost certainly their intellectual inferior. [This whole theme was well illustrated in practically every episode of *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*.]

So on the first day of office, Denis Healey was discussing policy options with his senior civil servants one of whom opined '*This is a case of *deja vue* - i.e. we have visited this issue before*'. Translating *deja vue* for Denis Healey who had excellent French was a critical tactical error. 'Ah', said Denis, '*I suspect you are confusing the past participle with the second person plural but I am more than happy to carry on in French!*'

At this point, Denis Healey switched to his fluent French whilst the civil servants struggled to keep us with very schoolboy French such as , 'Oui, ministre, je suis d'accord mais...' Having established superiority over them in French, Denis Healey , then switched to his fluent Italian with '*Parliamo Italiano*'. Healey had been a tank commander in the Second World War and had fought his way up the spine of Italy where no doubt the local girls keen to be liberated by a dashing and handsome young tank commander bestowed their gratitude upon him in the traditional manner. Once bored with this (and the civil servant left completely foundering) Healey continued in a broad Yorkshire accent (as he attended Bradford Grammar School) '*Ee, we lads from Yorkshire can also talk as if we'd just come oop from t'pit*'

Having established complete dominance over his civil servants, Healey was **never** patronised by them ever again - no doubt, he could utilise other similar incidents in the future for any battles that lay ahead!

### 35. George Brown

George Brown was a charismatic politician who was a prominent member of the Labour government of 1964-66. George established a reputation for not being able to hold his drink (although I discovered, by chance and from a relative of his, that he had an enzyme deficiency that meant that he became inebriated from a small amount of alcohol very quickly.)

The story is told that George was at an embassy party where he spied a gorgeous woman in a long flowing red dress on the other side of the room. George approached and said

*'Beautiful women in red - could I possibly have this dance with you?'*

The reply has now gone down in the annals of history -

*'I am not a beautiful woman in red - I am the archbishop of Valparaiso!'*



### 36. Denis Thatcher

Denis Thatcher was the husband of Margaret Thatcher (who, incidentally, was the **second** Mrs Thatcher - a fact not well known) He deliberately cultivated the image of a old, bumbling, gin-soaked golf club bore (with the identity of 'Dear Bill' in the columns of the satirical magazine *Private Eye*)

I have heard this story told by Denis Thatcher himself and by their daughter, the journalist Carole Thatcher.

One day, Denis was undertaking a train journey and sought out for himself a nice quiet railway carriage, not knowing that the carriage had been reserved for a day trip for people with Learning Disabilities. When the organiser found Denis and asked him to move he remonstrated '*Do you know who I am ? I am the husband of the Prime Minister!*'

The organiser replied to him '*There, there now my dear - that's all right! You are one of us now*' and he stayed in the carriage.

### 37. French Minister's Cat

The French Minister of Culture had acquired a cat (or, more likely, the cat had acquired her) The cat had some rather strange habits - it was constantly mewling to be let out of the door but when the door was opened it refused to go outside. Eventually, the Minister got hold of the cat and threw it out of the door whereupon the cat just stood there staring back at the doorway from it had just been ejected with a baleful and resentful air.

The problem was the cat had not acquired a name but it was soon evident what it should be called- **Brexit!**

### 38. The Queen and her visitor

I am told that the Queen regales people with this story herself. It was an official state visit for a very important visiting African Head of State. There was to be an official procession along The Mall in an open carriage, drawn by a team of four grey horses.

Half way along The Mall, one of the horses let out the most enormous fart. The Queen turned to her visitor and laying her hand upon his arm said *'Oh, I do apologise!'*

The reply was engaging - *'Oh that's quite all right, Ma'am. If you hadn't mentioned anything, I would have assumed it was the horse!'*

### Shopping

#### 39. In my shopping bag

Well, it is not often that the following occurs but it happened to me. I had gone shopping in my local supermarket and I flung the shopping bags that I generally used at the end of the conveyor belt. Suddenly the checkout girl screamed and raced as fast as she could to the other end of the store. So what had I done to cause this? Well, I generally stored my shopping bags in our garage. On this particular occasion, an absolutely enormous and very black spider at least some 3" in length emerged from my shopping bag and ran determinedly towards the checkout operator. The supermarket assistant manageress was called but she was not allowed to show any fear although she did go very white, not to say pale. With a presence of mind, she grabbed a polystyrene cup and placed it over the offending arachnid. From here, it was flicked onto the floor and I promptly put my foot on it. The rest of the supermarket queue who had not really observed what had happened apart from the fleeing behaviour gave me some extraordinarily funny looks as they unloaded their shopping!

## Strange yet true

### 40. OU Summer School Student

I was the team leader for an OU summer school in the hot 1970's held at the University of Nottingham when I was employed as a lecturer at Leicester Polytechnic which was some 25 miles down the road. When we introduced ourselves, we were encouraged to not only introduce ourselves but indicate where we worked in our 'normal' jobs. At the end of our introductory session, a youngish student some 25 years or so old came up to me and asked if she could have a lift back to Leicester at the end of the week. This I agreed to do.

In the course of a week, we had some 200 students through our hands, so to speak. When the week was over, I found the student and I picked up her suitcase and put it in the boot of the car.

Then a bizarre set of exchanges commenced. As she put on her seat belt, she enquired '*Where exactly are you taking me, at this moment?*' I indicated that there were several routes back to Leicester but we generally had a choice of two routes, which was either via the Melton Mowbray route or down the M1 motorway. 'Yes', she said, '*but where exactly are we going just now?*' I said I could go through the centre of Leicester and could drop her off wherever it happened to be convenient. She still looked puzzled and said

*'But I would like to know exactly where are you taking me this afternoon?'*

At this stage, I was starting to run out of patience - it had been a long and hard week, after all. 'Well', I said with some exasperation '*after all you did ask me for a lift back to Leicester'*

*'No, I didn't'* she said '*but I would still like to know where exactly we are going this afternoon!*' I then realised that I must have got the wrong girl, so we got out of the car and I took her back to the main queue of people waiting for husbands, boyfriends and the like. I found the correct girl and we got into the car and everything proceeded normally.

But why had the first girl got into the car with me?

*Life is full of mysteries!*

PS I was considerably younger then!

#### 41. The fire extinguisher

When I was at Manchester University, I shared accommodation with Tony, who like me also had a Lambretta scooter - but mine was in Leeds and his was in Croydon. We thought it might have been a good idea to share a scooter, not least because it assisted our party-going activities at the weekend. We worked hard during the week and did not go out much, apart from an occasional half-pint of beer but only we had worked until 10.00pm (a house rule!)

The parties at the weekend were held on Friday and/or Saturday nights and followed a more-or-less predictable pattern. There were no night clubs to speak of in Manchester in 1966 but the name of the game was to arm oneself with a large 7-pint pack of beer or a couple of bottles of wine and a handful of Beatles or Rolling Stones records (my own particular favourite being Joan Baez, the Mexican-American folk singer) and rely upon someone else's record-player.

The parties tended to start at about 7.30 and were generally held in student flats or, sometimes, the Common Rooms of University Halls of Residence. The first phase of the party consisted of much drinking and dancing as you would expect. The second phase consisted of a certain pairing-off and could last for a few minutes or several hours, depending upon the circumstances. The third phase, and generally the most satisfying, consisted of lying on the floor with all of one's bodily needs satisfied, discussing and solving the

problems of the world (we generally had a pecking order of those who could argue well - we particularly liked the lawyers, town planners and geographers but had an extremely low opinion of both medics and engineers who generally could not argue outside their field of subject knowledge).

Tony and I developed a brilliant system which worked very well for our first term at university. Basically, we took turn and turn about with the scooter and whoever got the scooter, got the girl. (The young women of that time were quite savvy and realised that if you had a scooter you could be whisked away to a generally empty flat for canoodlings, and afterwards there was always the lift home!) Whoever did *not* have the scooter stayed with the party and got quietly drunk.

Anyway, it was my night without the scooter. For some quite unexplained reason, I got quite drunk and then developed an overpowering urge to liberate a fire extinguisher which I did (from Allen Hall of Residence, across Platt Fields park from our digs) Getting this home, proved to be a little tricky. First there was the little manner of the drainage culvert which had steeply sloping concrete sides - whenever, I tried to throw it over, it rolled down the concrete sides into the water. I remember retrieving it whilst singing the old Salvation Army song '*Throw out the lifeline! Throw out the lifeline! Someone is drifting away!*' Then there was the tricky moment to negotiate the huge wire fence surrounding the Platt Fields Police Sports and Social Club where 200

policemen were having a party of their own together with the fire extinguisher.

Eventually, I got the fire extinguisher home, navigated the three flights of stairs and popped it securely into the wardrobe of the attic bedroom which Tony and I shared. The next day being a Sunday, I think, we were all quietly working away in the front room of our digs when there was the most enormous **B-O-O-M!** We all ran out into the street and all the neighbours pointed to the sky in the direction of our attic bedroom. I realised, with a horrible sinking feeling, that the fire extinguisher having been so jostled about the night before, had exploded and would have completely wrecked our bedroom.

Tony and I crept up the stairs - I have never wanted so much **not** to open a door in my life. But we did - and the room was absolutely intact! We cautiously went over to the wardrobe - and there was the fire extinguisher, also in one piece! So what was the source of the tremendous **B\_O\_O\_M!** we had all heard? It transpired that a Navy Buccaneer had flown (illegally) over central Manchester, breaking the sound barrier and disappearing out of sight within seconds. A guilty conscience supplied the rest...

It was communicated to me by an informal source that if the fire extinguisher were to be returned surreptitiously, then no questions would be asked. It was indeed returned, smuggled inside a suitcase.

[In these Health and Safety conscious days, a similar incident would no doubt involve a disciplinary hearing and immediate

expulsion from the university but we a bit more relaxed in the 1960s!] Incidentally, this whole party-ing pattern broke down after the first term after I had met Meg. But we did have some wild pyjama parties as I remember - I had a somewhat dashing pair with a silk Paisley top and black and white striped trousers. Our most successful party had over 70 people, many of them gate crashers as it happened. We had a system of special whistles which we used to get rid of drunken gate crashers. Upon hearing the whistle, all of the regular house residents got hold of the offending gate crasher and draped them semi-conscious over the railings of the adjacent Platt Fields Park - they were generally gone in the morning!

## 42. Our attic bedroom

The preceding story makes reference to the attic bedroom, I shared with Tony. Well, we had only been introduced to each other for the first time the afternoon before and had just spent our first night asleep in our attic bedroom in our house in Platt Lane, Manchester. As we were waking up, Tony heard a strange, loud '*Bwaagh! Bwaagh*' sound emerging from the end of my bed. Tony sat bolt upright in bed and turned slowly to his right. The look on his face was one of utter amazement, not to say incredulity, as he wondered what kind of strange nutter he had just been sharing a bedroom with.

What neither of us realised was that my bed was next to an old-fashioned, blocked off fireplace. Evidently, some of the local pigeons had learnt to roost on the chimney pots immediately above us and their raucous cries echoed down the empty chimney and seemed to emanate from my bed.

I think Tony was relieved to find a logical explanation for the strange sounds he had just witnessed. By the way, bedrooms were unheated in those days and we often had to chip ice off the windows when we woke up in the morning.

## 43. Tearaway Jimmy

There were four of us lads, sharing digs in Platt Lane, Manchester and our landlady was a Scottish lady, married to an Irish builder, called Lizzie Finnegan. She had two rumbustious children of whom the most memorable was Danny, a tearaway 4-year old.

As the four of us were working at our table, Jimmy came in with his newly acquired toy tommy-gun and pretended to shoot us all. We decided to 'play dead' so we all leant forward on the table, clutching our chests and with our heads on the dining room table.

Jimmy shot through to announce to his mother '*Mummy! Mummy! I've just shot dead all of the students!*' Lizzie raced through to see what had happened and saw four apparently dead students in her front room. '*Oh, Jimmy!*', she cried '*What have you done?*' At this stage, we were laughing so much that we sat bolt upright - Lizzie was not amused. By the way, she did not believe in baby sitters. When she and her husband Mick went out at the weekend, she gave each of her children, a large shot (some 4-5") of neat whisky. The next morning, the kids would wander round with flaming red cheeks, whining '*Mummy*' '*Mummy! My head hurts!*'

## Students

### 44. Practical Joke

I am not given to practical jokes, not least because they tend to 'backfire'. I taught a Business Organisation course at Leicester Polytechnic and the way that the course was organised, I gave the first lecture hall to about 70-80 students whilst a colleague of mine, a psychologist whom I shall call Jim, gave a lecture immediately afterwards.

Knowing that Jim would be waiting outside the lecture theatre awaiting his turn, I asked the students if at the end of my lecture they would clap, cheer and applaud as though that was the best lecture they had ever heard. Upon the appropriate cue, the students obliged - and it was then my intention to walk out as though that kind of reaction was normal after one of my lectures.

The whole venture completely backfired. Jim was a somewhat introspective, not to mention self-centred individual. When he heard the great round of applause and cheers, he assumed that was for him **entering** the lecture theatre rather than for me just **leaving** it.

So, as I said, jokes often backfire and this one certainly did!

### 45. Personnel Management

As a teacher in higher education, it was always important that you maintained some credibility with students so that it was evident that you knew what you were talking about and were conversant with modern business practice. But there was one occasion in which I have to confess my credibility was 'shot to hell' and I was forced to admit it. The occasion was a class on interviewing techniques in preparation for a job interview. I said '*There are certain basic things that you always check before you go into an interview. For example, if you are a man, you always do a quick check to make sure your flies are properly done up - you couldn't possibly sit in an interview with your flies wide open*' The one of the female students asked '*What do you check if you are a woman?*' I said, '*Well you would check for a start that your slip wasn't showing*'

At this point, the whole class collapsed in absolutely gales of laughter. '*What's so funny?*' I enquired. The reply came '*Mike - you evidently do not realise that **nobody, absolutely nobody** under the age of 40 would dream of wearing a slip!*'

So my lack of knowledge of contemporary female underwear destroyed my credibility once and for all!

## Tradesmen

### 46. Blocked drain

When we lived in Hampshire, our house was at the bottom of a slight slope. On one occasion, we had a problem with a blocked drain which was probably caused by a problem further up the system which, given systems of interconnected drains, eventually became our problem.

We had a very experienced person who applied years of practical knowledge who helped to solve our problem. *'You must have solved some tricky problems over the years'* I mentioned to him. Then we had the story of how he had been called upon to solve a drainage problem in quite a large mansion which belonged to the managing director. Eventually, our drainage expert found the source of the problem which a mass of congealing condoms that were occluding an outfall pipe in one part of the system. Our expert spoke to the lady of the house and said *'This is a delicate matter but I have found the source of the problem for you. In order to make sure that it does not happen again, can I ask that you and your husband never ever flush used condoms down the toilet'*

*'But we never use condoms'*, the lady exclaimed. Then, as if a light came inside her head, she said *'Wait a minute!'*

It transpired that a pattern had built up over several years that every Friday she would leave the house and spend the day shopping, whilst her husband would play a round of golf. Except that her husband was not playing a round of golf but 'playing (not exactly) away from home' entertaining his secretary in the marital bed. The wife had found an explanation for the mass of congealed condoms!

At this point, the husband happened to return home. *'Oy, I want to have a word with you!'* she shouted and the most blistering of domestic rows ensued.

The drainage expert did not want to get caught in the middle of this domestic dispute so he muttered *'I'll leave now and send in my bill later'*

*Morale of the story* - your sins will find you out, even years and years later!



## Walking

### 47. Walking on Snowdon

In our younger days, Meg, Martin and I loved to climb the Lake District fells and in due course we decided to climb Mount Snowdon in North Wales. On this particular occasion, we had decided to climb from the west (the Rhyd-Ddu path or the Snowden Ranger path and descended along the Pyg path or the Miner's path to the east.) We made company with two lovely walking companions who were young German girls of a classic type (blonde hair and blue eyes etc.) When we got to the top, we decided to stay together to journey on down the east side. Just below the summit of Snowdon on the east side is a huge lake, the Glaslyn. It was a blazing hot day and although the Glaslyn is by repute the coldest lake in the UK, our two German companions said to us excitedly *'Ooh, a lake - let's go for a swim!'* Being English, we said *'We would love to - but we don't have our swimming costumes with us'* whereupon the girls replied *'Oh, you don't have to bother with that'* They then preceded to strip off and ran straight into the lake. Martin and I could not bear to be outdone, so we likewise stripped off and went to follow them. The water was so cold that we could only stay in for a few minutes but I can definitively report that whatever the biological differences are between the sexes, they disappear into absolute nothingness when the water is so cold.

Whilst on the subject of bathing in cold water, my mother when she was alive told me the story of the first real argument she had with my father which on their honeymoon in Scarborough in North Yorkshire. When they were engaged, my mother had assiduously knitted woollen swimming costumes for herself and her husband-to-be. All was fine when they were swimming in the sea until they emerged from the sea- I leave it to your imagination what happens to sodden wet woollen swimming costumes when they came out of the sea!

[They dropped off, the recriminations started and the rest is history]

## Work

### 48. University garden party

One of the nicest enduring traditions at the University of Winchester, persisting from the days when it was a much smaller and more intimate college, was the annual staff garden party. This took place in late July when all the arduous work of marking, Examination Boards and the like had been undertaken and everyone was in a relaxed frame of mind. Generally, you could eat and drink as much as you liked for a normal fee of £1-£2 and it was a good opportunity to socialise with colleagues from your own and other departments. The college Principal (later to be called the Vice Chancellor when full university status was granted) would circulate around and visit various tables to engage in pleasant chit-chat. When the Principal dropped by our table, I said to him *'Principal - what is the difference between a College Principal and a supermarket trolley?'* The answer was, of course, *'You can fill them both full of food and drink but only a supermarket trolley has a mind of it's own!'*

The Principal was actually highly amused by this anecdote and repeated it several times to his immediate colleagues whereas the rest of my friends said to me *'You're dead! You'll never work again!'*

### 49. Tiffany's

When I was a university student, I worked as a barman in Tiffany's establishment, part of the Mecca empire and where the resident band were eventually to become the *'New Seekers'*. [In the case of a discovered fire, the band would play, as a signal *The Teddy Bear's Picnic* which the clients would treat as a joke but staff proceeded with fire drill duties]. The bar staff were commanded to stand by the tills to guard them whilst the fire raged around us lest any of the clients thought they would steal the takings as they left!

We worked long shifts from about 6.30 until about 2.30 the following morning. In the course of one of my two coffee breaks, one of the bar staff mentioned that she had a cellar like mine in a terrace house -there was a metal grill in the pavement and the coal was shot straight into the cellar. She mentioned to me that she had a pet cat which had a strange habit of sitting on top of the coal but she hadn't seen it for a couple of days.

In a rather jocular fashion, I said *'You haven't had a ton of coal delivered in the last few days, have you?'* This was prophetic because the next day she saw me, ashen faced and tearful, and her pet moggy was indeed eventually discovered (dead) under the latest delivery of coal!

## 50. The National Lending Library

My first professional job after I left school at 15 but before I went to university was working at the *National Lending Library for Science and Technology* [now renamed the *British Library - Lending Division*] at Boston Spa in Yorkshire. This establishment stored copies of the world's scientific periodical literature and as storage space was critical, the NLL as I shall call it was housed in a series of old war-time built munitions stores (known imaginatively as A-Store, B-Store, C-Store etc.)

When a periodical was received into the library it was recorded in some large Kalamazoo ledgers staffed by an army of young (generally female) staff. Eventually, I worked in C-Store in the quaintly entitled *Machine Recording* section - nowadays we would call it a DP or Data Preparation department. Our work consisted of producing and maintaining all of the library records using IBM punched cards and an incredibly ancient sort of primitive computer system, known technically as a document writing system. We had to program this primitive beast (developed in the late 1940's and already obsolete in 1962) with the aid of a plug-board with the aid of which we 'programmed' the document writing system which parts of the library record to print and in which order.

On Fridays, my colleague Dennis and I used to work incredibly hard all morning without taking any coffee breaks so that the day's quota of work was completed by about 2 or 3 in the afternoon. Our boss was off to Leeds Technical College on Fridays to read for a Dip. Tech (precursor to a degree) whilst Dennis and I were left to 'get on with it'

When our work was done on a Friday afternoon, two of the more forward girls from Kalamazoo used to wander over to C-Store with a piece of paper in their hand (the trick was that you go anywhere on the site with a piece of paper in your hand because you were 'resolving a query') We then engaged in the kind of adolescent horseplay familiar the whole world over until it was time to go home.

I must mention at this point that in order to transport periodicals all over the library, we made extensive use of what were termed *coffins* which were stout containers measuring about 3ft x.1.5ft by 1.5ft As part of our fooling around, Dennis and I thought we would put each of the two girls into a coffin and then place the coffin on the work table. There was a somewhat hidden agenda in all of this because it was the day of the mini-skirt (just) and panty hose had not quite seen the light of day. So our intention, in which we succeeded (but I have to say with a certain degree of collaboration between the girls involved) was to get the girls' mini-skirts to ride up so bare thigh was exposed above each garter top. We then proceeded to stamp each thigh with a big red 'CANCELLED' stamp which happened to be lying around and then watched with amusement whilst the

girls struggled to free themselves, skirts around their waists, from the coffins which we had placed upon the table.

I hope you get the picture! Just then, the big fire door rattled and in walked the Library Director with an august committee called SCONUL (the Standing Committee of National University Librarians) My mate saw was about to happen and as he happened to open the door kept on walking out of the room leaving me alone with the two girls, the Library Director and the SCONUL committee. As I remember, I remonstrated with the girls to get out of the coffins - the members of the committee either tut-tutted in disapproval or giggled.

You might ask what disciplinary procedures were applied to me after this incident. The answer was - absolutely none! I was leaving in a couple of weeks to join the *Central Office of Information* so my bosses probably concluded that no disciplinary action was called for - it was 1964 after all!

## 51. Works football team

At the National Lending Library [see preceding story for details] someone had the bright idea to organise a football match against the prisoners from the nearby open prison. Actually, some of the prisoners worked in the Library - they were generally in gaol for offenses such as bigamy and the like. The football match was duly held and the prisoners won by a margin of about 11-0 - after ll, they were fit young men who spent hours in a gym working out unlike us dissolute civil servants. The match was characterised by extremely violent conduct by one team [*'Take that you effing bastard'* was a typical riposte was the other was incredibly polite - *'Oh, I'm sorry sir - did I trip you up?'*] In case you haven't already guessed, the incredibly polite team were the **prisoners** [after all, the prison screws were the officials at the match and were recording all instances of behaviour] whilst the foul-mouthed and outplayed opponents were the young civil servants. My next football experience was playing as a member of London Hostels Association team on the football pitches in Hyde Park. We generally lost by a considerable margin until the day arrived when we acquired a whole set of strip of our own choosing (tight black tops, cut-away Italian style shorts - we all looked like referees) which is probably why we won 10-1 as our opponents thought the referee actually was one of us!

## 52. Computer Software

The Polytechnics had a deserved reputation in the provision of part-time education, typically at degree level, and Leicester Polytechnic was no exception. On one occasion, I was due to give a computer class in advance of the first lecture in which I would formally introduce myself. So the students did not know the identity of the tutor (myself) giving them their first lesson. However, the students knew that they had to buy a book (the then market leader in Quantitative Methods) which was augmented by some specialist statistical software I had written (*Microstats*, a kind of scaled down *Minitab*) which the students could install on their home computers.

One of a pair of students had already bought the book and exclaimed to me, reading from the book cover *'Oh, this software is written by Mike Hart who works in the Leicester Business School- do you know him?'* I replied quite truthfully that I thought I had met him at least once or twice.

One of the students said to her mate *'Look - you don't have to buy a copy of this book because all we have to do is to make a copy of the disk'* They didn't know that I had installed some copy protection that made the software un-copiable once it had been run.

*I said to the students 'Well, I don't think the author would be very pleased if he knew that you were ripping off his software' to which they replied 'Oh, he'll never know! We are always copying things' (which was true at the time) I persisted and told them 'Well copying software is illegal and the author might take proceedings against you if he ever found out!' 'Oh', they replied 'there's absolutely no way he would ever find out - let's do it!'*

Now was the time for the lecture - a large lecture group of about 90-100 students. I located where the pair of students were sitting in the lecture theatre and then proceeded to introduce myself. *'Good evening', I said, 'my name's Mike Hart and I think I have probably met some of you already!'* I then fixed a steely glare upon the two students who were attempting to copy my software.

At this, the two miscreant students gave out a type of anguished yelp, having been caught in the act as it were!

It does not happen very often but sweet when it does...

### 53. College Idiot

So at Leicester Polytechnic, we decided to put together our independent part-time degrees of Social Sciences, Economics and Business Studies into a large faculty-wide part-time degree. There were considerable resource savings in doing things this way, as you might imagine.

Things were proceeding satisfactorily but at our very last meeting, the Dean of the Business School thought he would put in an appearance to check on our progress. *'Well'*, he opined, *'I think it might have been quite useful to have a course in Business Ethics in there somewhere'* The course leader in Social Sciences, very much the radical in her own way, exclaimed *'Well that's an oxymoron for a start, Richard!'* At this, Richard (the Dean) took violent exception and demanded *'What DID you say!'* Liz, the Social Sciences course leader looked a little defensive but stood her ground and said *'Well, you know Richard - an oxymoron - opposites linked together like bitter-sweet - jolie-laird. That sort of thing - and perhaps Business ethics as well!''* Richard, the Dean, relaxed a little and said *'That's all, then, - I must have mis-heard you'* *'What did you think I said?'* demanded Liz. A little defensively Richard admitted *'Well I thought I heard you say - and you're a poxy moron!'* What was so amusing is that is what we were all thinking that anyway!

### 54. Double Bed

Leicester Polytechnic absorbed the City of Leicester College of Education in the 1980's and this became known as the Scraftoft Campus (where Meg and I eventually worked) The campus possessed a fairly imposing Queen Anne mansion which looked imposing but proved difficult to maintain, being a listed building.

The mansion contained a residential flat in its upper reaches and when this became vacant, the then Vice Chancellor decided that it would be rather fine to have this as week-end love nest, where he could entertain his lover (who was herself Director of one of the London Museums) The 'love-nest', however, required a double bed to make it complete. Word spread around the campus late on Friday afternoon as groups of interested staff looked on as some delivery men tried to navigate the double bed up the narrow, twisting stairs of the mansion. Eventually, after several hours of fruitless effort they had to abandon the delivery - the double bed was put back into the van and driven away!

The Germans have a wonderful word *schadenfreude* which translates as *'Malicious delight in another person's misfortune'* which exactly described our emotions that afternoon!

## 55. The Sauna

In the 1990's, De Montfort University changed its *Degree Regulations* and allowed staff to complete a PhD by writing a thesis around a series of previously published papers (in which venture I was eventually successful in 1997). A very bright graduate whom I shall call *Larry* and myself were busy accumulating conference papers and to this end, we sought out opportunities to deliver conference papers but money was always a constraining factor. To keep the costs to an absolute minimum we needed to share a room (always a source of amusement in the department). More importantly, you could only get cheap return flights if you came back on a Sunday and such proved to be the case when we both attended a conference at Bad Tadmansdorf, a small town in southern Austria. The hotel doubled as a sports resort and as we had a day to kill, Larry and I thought we would utilise all of the facilities to the full. There were a party of Finns in the hotel at the same time and subject to the same travel arrangements '*We will teach you how to sauna properly!*' they said. So Larry and I went through the cycle of warm, tepid and cold pools before entering the sauna. There were a choice of two saunas - we chose the hottest one where the needle was quivering at the top of its range. '*I shall be quite all right so long as a woman doesn't come in*' Larry whispered to me where upon a very well endowed German lady came in swinging all before her, as it were. '*Oh, bloody hell*' complained Larry, '*I can't cope with this*' whereupon our Finnish companions admonished us with a '*Sssh! It is impolite to talk in the sauna*' Nevertheless, cope we did,

even though the heat was intense and the steam made all the whole atmosphere opaque as it was thrown onto the hot rocks.

When we got back to England, Larry and I were retailing our experiences to a group of colleagues, including one of our own graduate students, who I shall call Elizabeth, who was enrolled for a PhD. Although Elizabeth was from a medical family and was actually doing research into the BMA as a pressure group, she was nonetheless quite naive about some matters. For example, if she had to make reference to a woman with gynaecological problems, she would say that she had problems '*down there!*' As we recounted our story of the sauna, Elizabeth exclaimed with an air of incredulity '*Mike - you are Larry - when you went into the sauna, did you go in n-a-k-e-d!*' I explained the situation to Elizabeth, thus- all of the other Europeans went naked into the sauna. But given the sensitivities of the British, there was a special coat rack with green rubber mackintoshes and green wellington boots, with the rack being labelled '**For the exclusive use of English quests only**'

Elizabeth thought about this for a moment and then said '*No - Mike!*' And I replied '*No! Elizabeth*' Elizabeth seemed to grow faint at this mental picture and eventually she said '*So Mike - you and Larry - you went into this sauna together NAKED?*' I replied '**Yes, indeed, Elizabeth - NAKED**' I thought Elizabeth was going to faint with shock and embarrassment!

Although we were a friendly department, I had one major 'row' with a colleague. I had just returned from a term teaching Information Technology to Public Administration students at the Complutense University in Madrid. *'How was it?'* I was asked and replied *'Well, it went fine but everything took about 3 times longer to prepare'* *'Why was that?'* I was asked by a particularly ethnocentric member of the department. *'Well'*, I replied, *'it was because I was teaching in Spanish!'* My 'colleague' then said to me *'You! You! In Spanish! Well, why didn't you teach them in English?'* I replied *'Well, they were Spanish students in a Spanish university so they deserve to be taught in Spanish'* After a moment's reflection my colleague said the immortal words *'Well, I can only say that I am proud that I can only speak English!'* At this I exploded and retorted *'Proud! Proud! You ought to be ashamed of yourself'* and I told him in no uncertain terms what I thought of him and his narrow-minded attitudes!

## 56. Reginald

Whilst at Leicester, we had a very close colleague (who I shall call *Reginald*) who had had a fairly distinguished military career and had risen to the rank of Captain in the army. Although Reginald was very well meaning at heart, he would sometimes display both language and attitudes that bore the hallmarks of his earlier military career. At one point, I was trying to indicate one of our students to him and said, *'Reginald - he's one of our black students'*. Reginald turned to me and said *'Oh Mike! You can't call them that! Don't you mean to say he was one of our coloured students'* I tried to explain to Reginald that under modern terminology a black student was quite happy with that epithet and that black community had taken the term 'black' to themselves and were now using it as a mark of self-identity. *'Well'*, Reginald explained to me with a perplexed air *'I've only just learnt to call them coloured students'*

On another occasion, Reginald came rushing down the corridor in a state of some agitation, exclaiming *'All my balls are in the air!'* When we giggled, he had no idea of the impression that his words were having on us. On another famous occasion, a group of 4th year (female) who had just returned to college after their sandwich year were chattering excitedly with each other, not having seen each other for a year. They had clustered around the noticeboard that just happened to be outside Reginald's office. *'Ah, young ladies'* exclaimed Reginald *'can you come into my*



*office where I want to de-brief all of you!* When the girls all giggled, Reginald persisted *'Well, I want to de-brief these young ladies here and now!'* We overheard all of this and had to gently explain how you couldn't use a term like de-brief to young women as it had a more up-to-date not to mention sexual meaning. *'Oh, you are awful'* Reginald said *'How was I supposed to know?'* On another famous occasion, Reginald and I were perusing a list of students who had signed their names on a class register - almost inevitably, there were some 'fake' entries such as *Lone Ranger* or *Tonto*. As were scrutinising the list we found an entry which said 'R.Sole' - 'Ah', said Reginald *'I think I know this student - is he called Roger? I can picture him now'* 'No, I don't think so', I replied to Reginald. *'Think about the name and say it out loud to yourself - R-Sole'* 'No, I am sure I know this lad - if it's not Roger perhaps he's called Robert...'

I sighed! Where to start? Having said all of that, Reginald did work incredibly hard to interact with the students, even inviting them all round to have a magnificent end-of-year party in his large house in a village near Leicester.

## 57. College Photographer

At a college in which I worked, I taught some elements of Personnel Management - this led me to wonder whether the College had experienced any cases of *Instant dismissal for gross industrial misconduct*. So I made some enquiries in the Senior Common Room from people who had worked at the college for some time to see if any cases particularly came to mind. As it happened, there was one case that staff had heard about but it happened well before my period of employment. There had been at one time an official college photographer who was allowed to have a sort of den in the attics of one of the older buildings. He evidently had a computer connection and I suppose it was the early days of digital photography as well. This individual had a complete collection of all of the faces of each member of staff. In addition, he had learnt how to access pornographic websites in which there featured couples in various modes of sexual congress. The photographer for his own amusement and had taken the photograph of each member of staff and digitally insert/superimposed it upon the pornographic images which he then displayed all around his attic. After discovery, he was marched off the premises within minutes! [I did wonder what had happened to his collection - was it kept in an archive somewhere in case it was needed for any future legal proceedings?]

## 58. Yorkshire undertaker

This story emerges as part of a BBC documentary some years ago, detailing the entrepreneurial activities of young Muslim Asians in Bradford. The relative of one young entrepreneur had died on a Friday and there was nobody available from the local authority to dig a burial plot immediately. So the young Asian got to work, digging the plot and organising the whole of the funeral within 24 hours. Having done it once, his services were called upon time and time again and he soon appreciated that there was as a useful niche in the market which he could fill. To cut a long story short, over the course of a few years, he built up a large and successful undertaking business catering for the Asian community.

As his business expanded, relatives used to travel to Yorkshire from the Asian sub-continent but they did not have any idea how to interact with any of the locals in Bradford. So he decided to set up a little training course for visiting relatives. He would get some of his staff to form a line and then he would say to the first-time visitors *'Well, all you have to do is to shake somebody by the hand, look them in the eye and then say 'Hey oop, then!' to each person you meet'* The documentary filmed this little training course in action as the younger male relatives met their Yorkshire counterparts for the first time!

## 59. Yorkshire 'Old Girl'

My mother had recently retired but was doing some shopping in the Headingley district of Leeds when she fell over a badly cracked paving stone and broke her hip. To rehabilitate, she spent some time with my sister and her husband who were living in Knaresborough. At the time, my sister and her husband had a clutch of Border Terrier dogs which they bred and occasionally entered into local Dog shows. One of these dogs had lived a long life and was evidently getting towards the end of it.

*'Ah', my brother-in-law remarked 'reckon t'oud girl's ready for t'needle' [To translate from the Yorkshire 'I would imagine that the old girl is ready for the needle which would administer the euthanasia']*

My mother overheard this remark and got visibly upset as she assumed that they were talking about **her** rather than the dog!

[Readers may recall an episode of *Mrs. Brown's Boys* on British TV where the theme was essentially the same. Mrs Brown's relatives were saying *'Yes, the poor old dear keeps weeing all over the floor and she doesn't realise she's doing it - can we put her into a home?'* Of course, Mrs Brown assumed that her family were talking about her rather than her dog!

## 60. Yorkshire Farmer

The wife of a Yorkshire farmer had died and her grieving husband was organising her gravestone. He approached the monumental mason with a request for the headstone which contained a quasi-religious text - *'God, she was thine'*

When the farmer came to collect the headstone, the mason had evidently miss-allocated the spacing for the letters and the headstone read *'God, she was thin'* (!)

*'That's no use, man'* the farmer remonstrated to the mason - *'You've missed out the bloody 'e' '*

*'Don't worry about it'* said the mason *'we have ways of correcting these sorts of errors. Leave it with me and call back at the end of the week'*

This the farmer did, to be greeted with the final inscription which now read as follows:

**Ee! God, she was thin (!)**

## Postscript

So here I have come to the end of my 60 anecdotes with a certain amount of sadness. No doubt, others may pop out of the recesses of my memory but that is all I can recall at the moment. I hope I might have brought a certain amount of mirth into your lives - at least, my close family and friends will be relieved not to hear the same old stories over and over again-I shall have to find other ways of diverting them. If you would like to email me at the special email address below, I would be delighted to know which you found to be particularly entertaining and/or fantastical.

If I might make one practical suggestion to any readers - these anecdotes do not sound at all as amusing when they are read on the screen. I would suggest reading them to a friend or a family member over a pint or a glass of your favourite tipple which makes for a better all-round experience!

Any comments/thoughts to the special email address: [vca@mailfence.com](mailto:vca@mailfence.com) The short form of the web-address for this file is:

**<http://po.st/vca>**

*Mike Hart*



## Vertically Challenged Anecdotes-Extra!

|     |                        |
|-----|------------------------|
| 61. | BBC classic gaffes     |
| 62. | Little bit on the side |
| 63. | Funny Funeral          |
| 64. | Schoolboy Howlers      |
| 65. | The novelist           |

Some of these I have only just remembered so here they are as a random collection of extras!

## 61. BBC classic gaffes

The BBC has some classic recordings, most of which are kept under strict 'lock and key' but occasionally some of the recordings are used in special comedy programmes e.g. around Christmastime.

One of the classic recordings was made by Commander Tommy Woodrooffe in a Royal Review of the fleet at Spithead in 1937. The commander had evidently heavily imbibed his ration of rum before the broadcast and he was paralytically drunk although his commentary was not slurred - the original can be heard by Googling '*The fleets lit up*' The commentary proceeds with the now immortal words '*The fleet's lit up - lit up by fairy lamps - the whole thing is in fairy land*' Eventually he collapses under the table but still carries on commentating '*It's gone! It's gone! the fleet's gone, it's disappeared...200 warships.. now they've gone! There's nothing between us and heaven*'. Hilarious!

Another famous occasion was the cricket commentator Johnson ('Jonners to his fans') renowned for his on-air schoolboy humour and puns. In one incident during a Test match at the Oval in 1991, Jonathan Agnew suggested that when Ian Botham was out hit wicket, trying to hurdle the stumps, it was because he had failed to 'get his leg over' (a British slang term meaning to have sex). Johnston carried on commentating and giggling for 30 seconds before dissolving into helpless laughter.

The following account of a recording was made during the Second World War when General Charles de Gaulle was stationed, together with his wife, in London. The couple were interviewed together but Madame De Gaulle's command of English was rudimentary.

BBC commentator (in a very slow, deliberate and 'upper class' accent):

*'Now Madame De Gaulle, can you tell me what you most desire in life?'*

The reply was '*A penis!*' At this the interviewer was a little disconcerted and asked the question again to which the reply was the same '*A penis!*'

At this, Charles De Gaulle nudged his wife and reprimanded her "*.. 'appiness, you fool, 'appiness*"

## 62. Little bit on the side

The English language can be very subtle at times and particularly when it comes to phrases or expressions which appear to have hidden or extra layers of meaning. One of these phrases is '*a little bit on the side*' which means to have a sexual relationship with someone who is not married to you, or the person with whom you have a relationship. We were with our close friends from Spain, Laura and Lucas and on holiday together in the Lake District. I was anxious to teach Lucas a bit of English repartee which he could try out with the locals.

As it happened, the opportunity was quickly presented to us. We were having a meal in, I think, the Borrowdale Hotel which is one of the older hotels with a good restaurant in the main street of Keswick. There we were being served a very traditional English meal of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding by a very competent waitress who hailed from either Latvia or Lithuania - although her English appeared perfect, there were nuances that perhaps might fail to grasp. As we were being asked if we would like to have some horseradish sauce to accompany our meal, I said '*Yes, Miss, I would like a little bit on the side, please!*' Laura was speechless with laughter but nonetheless, I persisted '*I am sure my friend, Lucas, would like a bit on the side. Lucas - would you like a bit on the side?*' By this stage, Laura was almost apoplectic with laughter but the waitress served us all with portions of sauce, perhaps wondering how mad English and Spanish people could be when put together.

## 63. Funny funeral

Funerals are generally sombre occasions when people are filled with sadness - and not typically occasions of great mirth. An exception was an aunt of Meg's who I shall call Auntie Molly who had died a few days short of her one hundredth birthday. At the funeral and in the front row was her son, David, who had suffered quite a severe stroke which left him severely disabled but although he had no memory or knowledge of his surroundings, his speech was still very clear. Needless to say, David did not really know he was at his own mother's funeral.

The service was conducted by a very competent young Methodist minister. But after his opening remarks to the effect that we are '*here to pray for the soul of Mollie Wilkinson*', David pumped his fists into the air and shouted to the rest of the congregation '*Good old Mollie!*' From this point on, the congregation had their heads in their hands some (like Meg) overcome with genuine grief but others who had a more distant relationship with the deceased absolutely helpless with laughter. As the minister intoned various liturgical phrases such as '*We are all sinners*' David would repeat very solemnly the minister's words '*Yes, we are all sinners*'. When it came to the end of the service, David acclaimed, perhaps thinking that he was at a football match '*Eh! Well prayed Vic*' at which point there was not a dry eye left in the church. Truly, a funeral never to forget!

#### 64. Schoolboy 'howlers'

A 'howler' is an unintended error written by schoolchildren under the stress of exam conditions as they are dredging bits of information from the recesses of their memory.. Some that are particularly memorable I reproduce below (but I have taken the liberty of highlighting some of the unintentional errors!)

*Sir Francis Drake was playing with his **bowels** when the Spanish Armada sailed up the English Channel*

*Magellan **circumcised** the globe with his 40-foot clipper*

***Migration** is a headache which birds get when they fly south for the winter*

*The meaning of a red cross painted on a front door in mediaeval times was that there was a **fully trained Red Cross member** standing inside each door*

*One change that occurs in boys at puberty is that their **vice** deepens*

*Joan of Arc was **condom-ed** to death*

*Desmond Morris wrote that man is just a **knackered** Ape*

*Christians are only allowed to have one wife- this is called **monotony***

Those who set the examination questions occasionally committed some terrible 'faux pas' such as:

*Name three things that a live rabbit can do that a toy rabbit cannot do.*

Complete an essay on the subject which starts as follows:

*'When Peter and Jane decided to have a game of hide-and-seek in the vicarage garden, they had no idea it would have such exciting consequences...'*

## 65. The novelist

In one of the colleges where I worked, there was a lecturer in History who I shall call Maureen. Maureen's husband had a prominent position in the county council but he took early retirement and so Maureen also retired so she could spend her own retirement with him. However, she soon got bored with retirement but had good writing skills and knew how to make any research historically accurate. This skillset stood Maureen in good stead and she quickly became one of Mills and Boon's best-selling authors (Mills and Boon is a publisher of cheap romantic novelettes, characterised by the fact that the publisher's name - Mills and Boon - is more prominent than the actual authors) As she became more and more successful, the publishers asked Maureen if she could spice up her already successful books with some more sexually suggestive material, all as a boost to sales. Maureen obliged in this request but one of my fellow lecturers got hold of Maureen's latest works and read the result.

Maureen came into college one day and we started to tease her about her recent writing. '*Come on, Maureen*' we said '*How did you do all of the research for this sexually explicit writing - did you get yourself a toy-boy or something?*' Maureen looked diffident and then slightly hurt. Eventually, she was driven to retort '***Well, after all - I am a married woman!***'

The laughter could be heard all of the way around the college's Senior Common Room...