

Reprise of a Momentous Cycle Trip I made with Wolf in 1995

PART ONE: THE BACKGROUND

Last Time

In July 1995, Wolfram and I set out to cycle to Germany. We had been planning a visit to his home village of Ringsheim in the Black Forest since the previous year, and it was his idea to cycle there. I asked a cycling friend, Ron Sant, to work out the best route for us. I was so proud of Wolfram for being able to do this, being blind, that I thought more people should know about it, and contacted various tv people. Channel 4 decided to include us in the Real Holiday Show - which I did not know was a rubbish programme as I had never watched it.

When you see these shows on tv, if you do, it looks like the holidaymakers have done their own filming, but in effect they send a 'researcher' along with you, whose aim is to make you look stupid. Unfortunately for the poor girl they sent with us, she was unable to achieve this aim. My attitude was, Look Louise, this is our holiday. If you want to come along, fine, but don't expect us to change anything because you're here. She was not really 'with us' anyway, since we were on bikes and she came in a camper van. She had an easy day of it, and expected to meet up with us at night, when we were trying to eat and relax after a hard day, so that did not go down well. The film company did not even provide us with something so simple as a mobile phone so she could keep in touch. In fact they were absolute skinflints - we did expect to get some hospitality out of Louise for our pains, she bought us one cup of coffee on the way down and said, "that's all you're getting". So all in all, we didn't really feel we owed her anything.

We set out from Leeds to cycle to Felixstowe, and lost her on the trek across the fens, she was waiting at Walsingham, but we had to cut that part of the trip when we were delayed by winds. In fact we ran out of time at Ipswich, and had to take a train to Felixstowe, as I had booked the boat before setting off.

It took us six days to cycle down through England and we were so battered, bruised and demoralised by the time we got to Felixstowe, that Wolfram said when we got to Zeebrugge we should take the train down to Strasbourg. This looked like failure to me, but as Wolf pointed out, we never said we would cycle both ways, all the way, and we had done the England bit. We could do the other bit on the way back. Consequently, we had to spend three weeks in Ringsheim as Wolf was due to collect some insurance money on August 1st.

We gave ourselves a week's break before facing the unpleasant task of ringing Louise and telling her where we were. She flew over, and stayed in a local hostelry run by a one-eyed man and his son. Hearing she was vegetarian, they fed her two eggs at every meal. That was it, two eggs, nothing else. She subjected us to seven days of cross-examination, and left. She missed the best part of the holiday, the trip home.

See full report of '95 trip on its own page

Now, fourteen Years Later - I planned to do it all again, but in reverse

Nine of Wands - the Vision Quest

There are no pictures of that ten day trip we made in 1995 because, on the second day out, Wolf's money belt, camera, passports and credit card, were all stolen. It was then that I realised that we were now on the Vision Quest which my Aztec Guide had predicted, standing in a row of beans on the allotments, the week before we left England. And the day before setting out from Ringsheim, I had picked up a single playing card in the street - the Nine of Clubs (tarot equivalent Wands) which ever after became the Vision Quest card for me - a supreme difficulty, which may overwhelm you, but which, if you win through, will put you several leagues further on your Path. This was what we were about to go through.

The eight days of Invisibility

The Aztecs worship the planet Venus as a God (male) and take especial note of the planet's eight-day period of invisibility when it disappears behind the Sun at Inferior Conjunction, emerging as Morning Star. What we learned, experienced and gained was the equivalent of the Aztec God's Descent and Rebirth. On the fifth night (the fourth of the Descent) we arrived in a town as darkness was falling, to find the campsite had shut the previous year. I was too exhausted to go any further. We illegally entered the old camping grounds. That night there was a riot in the road. We had camped up right beside the high wall that sealed the site off, but there was a gate through which our tent could be seen. Luckily we had not lit a fire. Youths were fighting, rioting and smashing up a phone box. There was much anti-English feeling at the time, and we felt, if they saw us and our English bikes, we were done for. We sat up the whole night with knives drawn.

“Why on earth didn't you ask sooner? I would have come any time.”

At last, in my extremity, terrified, I called on my Aztec Guide to help us. Wham! I saw him clear as day as he dropped down and landed in the tent entrance. Looking over his shoulder at me, he said "Why on earth didn't you ask me to come sooner. I would have come at any time."

With him in the doorway, I felt safer. I knew he would protect us. After a while, the rioting youths moved away, but we would hear the sound of them flare up from time to time in the distance. Then the Guide began to move, and I knew he was going. I reasoned that, if he was a figment of my imagination, I could force him to stay. As soon as I had the thought, he looked at me over his shoulder again,

"Don't try to stop me," he said, "I am going now, and you will be safe. But I will wait for you tomorrow on the road."

"How will I know where you are?" I asked.

"I will call you," he said.

Next day I heard him calling from a small chapel on my left as we went down a steep hill. Wolf was in front, and speeding away from me. I called and called to him but he could not hear me. About halfway down the hill, the Aztec said,

"If you go too far you can never return. Beyond a certain point, I will not be here."

"I know," I answered, "But I cannot leave Wolfram." I felt myself pass the point where it was too late to turn back, and I caught up with Wolf at the bottom of the hill.

"You should have gone to him and left me," he said. "Can you go back?" I explained to him that I could not. "Ask him if he can come again, somewhere else," said Wolf.

That night I communicated with the Aztec. "I will try to come tomorrow," he said.

"I can join you together in Spirit, if that is what you want"

The last church we passed before leaving France and entering Belgium, he called me from a church, again on the left. We went in. We found the Mary corner and sat together, the Aztec communicating with me. At the end he said, "I am leaving now and I will not come back. But before I go, I can join you in Spirit, if that is what you want." I told Wolf what he said, and he said he wanted us to do that. So we sat and held hands, and were joined in Spirit, and the Aztec left.

The Binding of the Years

On the ninth night we camped in darkness at *Le Lac des Vieilles Forges*. In the morning when I crawled out of the tent, I was face to face with the Aztec sign for the Binding of the Years, carved on a water pump.

Fourteen - a special number

We talked of that trip often, and always said one day we would like to do it again, but never did. Now Wolf is on the Other Side and cannot bodily go, but he can come with me in Spirit and we can share this journey together.

This is the most fitting year to do it - fourteen years since the first time. Fourteen was always a special number for us. It was the difference in our ages, my birthday, and the number of steps up to bed.

I'm doing it for Love

So Wolf - I'm doing this for you - and for me - and for the Aztec Guide - and for our love - and for all the love that exists in the world between two people.

2 The Results: the reality

I set off full of anticipation and so looking forward to doing this trip. I am a person who likes to be doing things, and there has not been enough of that in my life lately. Too many summers have gone by without going anywhere or achieving anything. True, there have been setbacks, setbacks from which it might have taken a lesser person longer to recover. Seven years ago my mother came to live near me, this was stress enough considering the long history of mismatch between us - neither of us was what the other wanted in a mother/daughter - one of us was willing to compromise, but the other wasn't. A year later my husband Wolf walked out and went where he felt he was more appreciated. Considering we had grown together over the years, like two trees whose branches, once touched, grow and graft into each other, each sharing the other's life essence, it felt like being torn in half. He must have felt the same, the new woman couldn't fill the gap, and he left for Ireland to start a new life.

I visited him in December 2005, nothing that time had done had ever succeeded in separating us, but I was not yet ready to set up

home with him again. I planned to return in February, when the magnificent camellias in the Killarney Arboretum would be in flower, and then go over for the summer and look for a house myself. But we were not granted that time, and on February 3 2006 he died, suddenly and unexpectedly, keeling over, hitting his head on a bedside table as he went down, dead before he hit the floor. But, as Medium Stephen Holbrook said, "*He soon got up again!*" Amazing to think you can hit the floor dead, and rise up immediately in a new body.

The many friends I made at his funeral in Killarney encouraged me in my wish to live in their wonderfully welcoming country, and in March 2008, after a long search, I moved - physically packing all my belongings and making the long journey by truck and ferry with the van driver and my dog Benji. Three weeks later I had to pack it all up again and move back, when my new country rejected me - the rules had changed and I was not able to get the pension and funding I needed to live there.

So I had it all - all the major life events considered stressful - taking on an elderly relative; desertion; divorce; death; removal; removal again. And now I was once more ready for adventure.

Preparations

I still had the old maps, and new ones cobbled together from autoroute. These latter proved to be a mistake, and they were the cause of my going wrong several times in the first two days. I would have done better to photocopy my original maps, section them and blow them up, as autoroute proved unequal to the task.

I took a tent, as I estimated it was going to take between eight and ten days (I expected to be faster than with Wolf, who was blind, and could not speed down the hills) and I would not be able to afford to stay in hotels. The disadvantage of continental hotels is that you pay per room, so one person is in effect paying for two. It is much the same in this country.

I already have two tents, one a canvas three-person which Wolf had insisted on buying, saying he needed the comfort, everything could go under cover including bikes if necessary, and he did not mind carrying the weight; and a small single skin dome tent which we once bought in Lidl, on the "too good to miss" principle, and never used.

I rejected both these, one too heavy, the other not weatherproof enough - though I could not imagine under any circumstances camping in heavy rain, and knew I would head for a hotel if that happened. I bought a new tent, the *Lichfield Treklite 200* - described as a two-person - though you wouldn't get two people in it unless *blissfully* married - it weighs just under 2kg and cost around £97 - well worth it, I thought, in terms of savings on hotels.

When I pitched it on a friend's lawn I was dismayed at the lack of headroom - even in the highest part my head touched the top. I didn't know how I was going to manage to get dressed and undressed in it. In fact, I didn't. I kept all my clothes in a bag which I hauled off to the ablutions each morning. Anyway, there was no question of being undressed in that tent, it was far too draughty. I put on different clothes for sleeping - warm track pants and my one sweat top. I then squashed into my (lightweight) sleeping bag and didn't budge till morning, unless answering a call of nature, for which reason I always pitched near the toilets. I must say I found this tent amazingly quick to pitch and dismantle, though it had many drawbacks. The lightweight pegs provided with it buckled, even though I only pressed them in with a sunlotion bottle wrapped in a cloth, later taking to using gentle heel pressure.

I also took a self-inflating sleeping mat and I think that was my salvation. I would urge anyone suffering from aches and pains or not used to sleeping on bare floors to get one. I got up in a morning without any stiffness and without a single ache or pain. I think it cost £18 on ebay. Well worth it.

I wanted to take, and agonised over, but left behind, a sort of fleece blanket which zips up into a bag (another Lidl's 'find'). I thought

that I would be able to insert both mat and sleeping bag inside this and be all warm and tucked in. In fact it was just what was needed, and on warm nights would have been ideal on its own. Every morning I woke up shivering, and on windy nights had to pack the pannier bags alongside me (both sides) to keep out the draught.

I had no intention of cooking, perish the thought! As an ex head chef, I only cook in well-equipped kitchens, and have been known to refuse to barbecue for the same reasons. Besides, today there is so much cooked food available, why bother prattling around with grisly aluminium saucepans on your knees in a high wind? No thank you! But I knew it to be a necessity to be able to brew coffee - a lifesaver in the mornings and saving a considerable fortune. I am mainly fuelled by coffee. So I bought the smallest, lightest stove from a camp shop - two small gas canisters costing 4.99 each instead of one larger one, on the grounds that when one was finished I could throw it away - and a foldaway burner attachment which can be attached and reattached with safety - the older ones had to be just about welded on in a dangerous operation which if not done properly resulted in a punctured can and the release of all the gas. I was assured by a smiling assistant that this could no longer happen. The burner cost around £12 and I saw a one litre kettle - half the size of the one I had, and bought it. I used our old method of making coffee - boil the water, funnel the coffee through the spout, using a folded paper, bring it back to the boil and leave it to brew. A few good shakes of the kettle helps. It tasted like shite. Funny, it was always wonderful with Wolf. But then, so were most things.

I bought a new camera - Sony Cybershot - not because I needed one, but because I fell in love with it when I saw it in a shop window. I justified the purchase by telling myself a) I had had my present one a long time; b) the shutter thing you have to pull out to expose the lens had started sticking and that could be a problem; c) recently, the flash had sometimes not gone off.

I set the thing up and familiarised myself with it before setting off. It did occur to me to take both, and leave the rechargers at home,

but that seemed silly, like buying a dog and barking yourself. I should have listened to that note of caution, as the new camera took five photos and then packed up, putting an incomprehensible message on its screen. I texted this to a friend, along with the name of the shop, type and price of camera and asked her to find out what if anything I could do. I thought if I could get to a camera shop, maybe there was some essential thing I should have bought and didn't. The friend did not seem equal to this task, and I reflected that there had been no photos on the original trip, due to our being robbed on the second day out, so it was fitting that there should be none this time. Besides, the pictures in your head are always better, and photos would mean nothing to people who weren't there, and, finally, there are plenty of photos on the internet of any region you want to search for, and I intend to see if I can find some.

Here I am forgetting to mention the main thing, the bike, though that was of course not bought for the trip, being my everyday means of getting about. However, I did spruce it up a little before leaving, courtesy of Ossie's Bike Shop, Nelson, and the Third Ossie of that name, Trevor. It is a Claud Butler and you can see it in the pictures. I got it a new saddle, new handlegrips, new back light and got Trevor to check all the brake and gear cables to make sure nothing would go wrong. I can no longer manage puncture repairs, and fortunately these are not always necessary with the more robust tyres, but bought as a precaution a canister of something that squirts foam into a puncture and supports it while you get to the next available bike shop. Six pounds worth of insurance! My pannier bags were four in number, as I have a front carrier as well as a back. At a sample packing session, I got everything in the two back ones but thought it would be handy to have the front ones to carry stuff I needed during the day, such as coffee kit, spare clothing, sandals (my new shoes were hurting and needed breaking in) and notebooks. I made the right decision in taking the front bags, they saved a lot of tedious packing and unpacking, especially as the inflatable mat was strapped on top of the rear panniers.

As to clothing, I resolved to take the minimum. I anticipated to be mainly in shorts, and this was so. I took two pairs in case one got soaked. One pair jeans I agonised over but could not bear to leave behind. I wore them very little. One pair track pants. I absolutely refused to take anything to be worn when I arrived at my destination, telling myself I could go and buy something in a charity shop if I had to. I took two vest type tops and one tee shirt and one light fleece top. This was not enough, as I had to sleep in it every night and also wore it every day. I dare not wash it as it sometimes took days to dry things, and I needed it constantly. I took one bra, three pairs of light knickers and three pairs of short white socks which I wore all the time with trainers. Trainers give better transmission (more power per pedal pushed) than sandals, but the latter were essential for when my feet hurt, and for easy entry and access to the tent. I had a voluminous, lightweight rain jacket made for a large man, on the grounds it would cover everything, and an old pair of lightweight waterproof pants bought for the 95 trip and which still fitted - these proved not to be waterproof, but nevertheless were good as extra cover when cold and windy. And being purple, they were cheery.

I took two hats - a peaked one that makes me look like a demented Lesbian, and the other like Farmer Giles. The Lesbian cost £3 at Matalan - white cotton, washes a treat and has a kind of squeeze in the brim, so that even a strong downhill rush does not dislodge it - pull it a little further over the eyes and it stays. The Farmer Giles at £10 from Boundary Mill was a total washout - supposedly an Explorer hat, it came equipped with a black mosquito veil (for going up the Amazon I presume) which reduced all my neighbours and friends to helpless laughter, and which I eventually cut off as you had to wear it packed on top of your head, adding to the heat. Its one good point was that it was waterproof, but the brim not being stiffened, it blew up in any kind of light breeze and was hopeless as a sun shade. The brim had a wire in its outer extremity, resulting in all kinds of strange shapes and angles after being squashed into a small space. I was tempted to throw it away. Ten quid down the drain really.

I have to say I definitely did not have enough clothes, but then I never have enough clothes. It's the story of my life.

The trip

The message here I think is, team up with other cyclists when you can. They probably know more than you, and are good at passing information on. It was a saving grace to meet the British Legion charity riders when getting off the boat at Zeebrugge, when I was feeling really very scared and lost. They took me to Blankenberge station, saving me a change of trains. I met another lone cyclist at Sedan, who expressed his intention of riding along the "Muse" but decided against suggesting we ride together. He looked considerably younger and fitter, had been on the road six weeks already, and my speed wouldn't have suited him.

The second message is, don't panic Mister Mannerling, and consult the map. Panicked by the traffic outside Couvin, I set off in entirely the wrong direction and missed the beautiful roads I found on the way back.

Summing up, I would say that this jaunt did not live up to expectations. I *expected* to be relaxed, meditative and in full inspirational flow. I found the going extremely challenging, but that was not the main problem. I was far too stressed, pressured and driven, and never relaxed at all. Additionally, nothing looked any different from England, it was just the long, long road and me, a sore bum and the bike. There was far more walking than I would have liked, but the hills were too steep to be practicable, perhaps the load I was carrying had something to do with that. There were no human beings except in the towns, and no conversation.

The facilities at the campsites were disgusting to say the least. There was only one half-decent one and that was the first night at Bourg-Fidèle. That was a private site, but even then nothing to shout about. Good job I did not know that worse was to come! The rest of the time I stayed in the 'municipals' in which even the

showers were not places you would want to enter. As for the toilets, better left unsaid. The smell and condition were abominable, and when you leant sideways to wipe your bum (as the elderly need to do) the pot moved with you. There were no seats, and the French in general appeared to climb aboard to do what they had to, messing all over the rim. So not many were usable.

I found the traffic worse than I had encountered with Wolf in '95, the extreme courtesy we found in the French drivers has largely disappeared, the cars came far too close, and I was subject to parallel shouting syndrome at least three times (when a driver draws level, then shouts in your ear through the open window) - common in England, but never encountered on the continent before. There was also one worrying afternoon when two farm lads roared up and down a country road on a quad bike, shouting and harassing me. I worried in case they went further. On tour you are an obvious target, it's clear you have all your possessions with you - cards, money, camera. For this reason I carried a good cook's knife, extremely sharp, which I intended to stick in anyone who tried to take anything off me.

On the plus side, all the minor aches and pains that had worried me at home disappeared on the road, my legs held up well, my breathing was fine, the bike ran like a dream and even pushing it up hills was not a problem. Everything I took was lightweight, and I am sure weighed considerably less than what I had to push in 1995. I slept extremely well and was not stiff jointed in the mornings. The food was marvellous - I stocked up in the mornings at the boulangerie, so many delightful cakes and pastries - I bought sweet ones for breakfast and savoury ones to stow away for later in the day. I found a pint of milk to be essential, as well as the water.

Three days into the trip I decided I could not cope with any more. I was on the road 7-8 hours a day and only covering I would estimate 30 miles which did not seem in any way enough. I was walking a lot of the time, and one day most of the time. I thought it was only going to get worse, and the further I got into it the harder it was going to be to get out. Although actually I always reached my

target, and when people in cafés or shops asked me how far I had come, they seemed to find the answer jaw-dropping. So perhaps I did not do as badly as I thought.

The stages

From getting the train to Couvin I rode from 3pm to 6pm to arrive at Bourg-Fidèle the first night. The second night I made Sedan, the third Dun-sur-Meuse. That was Saturday. I then turned round and headed back to Sedan, as I knew there were trains there and I planned to return to Zeebrugge, and possibly cycle a little in Belgium which I believed to be flat.

It proved impossible to get back to Belgium by train without going through Paris, so I was faced with the whole return journey. I decided only to aim for Charleville-Mezières that night as I was completely done in. I booked in a hotel as it took me the whole day and I could not face another night in the tent. I then cycled from Charleville to Chimay and stayed the night in a village called Lompret, cycling next morning to Couvin to get the train. I got on the ferry that night (Wednesday) arriving back in Hull Thursday morning.

I did not complete the task, but I proved I had the courage, imagination and stamina to attempt it. Although I turned round on the third day, had I known the French do not send trains to Belgium, I think I would have carried on, as in another three days I would have been well on my way, and I could expect to pick up speed - though it did not seem like it when I turned back.

My friend Sara, at the Homecoming Dinner she provided, asked me had I learned anything about myself? Read 'Ten Things I Learned on this Trip' (below). Her next question was, *Would I do it again?* I replied that I would, but not on my own. Whereupon she offered to go with me next year. Good lass, Sara, I won't give up next time!

TEN THINGS I LEARNED ON THIS TRIP

1. *Ultracrepidarianism* - don't ask the sandalmaker to know much about what goes on above the ankle (*Roman proverb*). ie - don't ask more of your friends than they are able to give.
2. If I want to do something with my life, this is not it.
3. You cannot recreate the past
4. Old people should stay home if they cannot travel the world in style.
5. Holidays are still boring even if they are on a bike.
6. At home you may be an eccentric, here you are just a mad old fool
7. Yorkshire Bikeline is the Holy Grail of holidays for the impoverished elderly.
8. Two are a Team but One is Alone.
9. The dead are not preserved in amber, they are ongoing and living on another plane. They are not their photographs frozen in time on a marble gravestone, they develop and grow - so must you.
10. When you leave home you are Stateless - you have no status and no past. This may be exciting when you are young and lovely - but when you are old no one wants to know or help you. Sad but True. Help is only given to the young, who do not need it, and the old left to fend for themselves. This is Nature's Law - the young are capable of reproduction but the Old have no purpose.

next page: diaries

PART TWO: THE DIARIES:

What it was like in detail

Thursday 18 June - On train going through Belgium.

The ship was fine, the passage calm, the dinner expensive, but actually cheaper than the 'advance offer' on the net. Hardly slept, there were so many unknown noises. I'd spent the previous night at my friend Janet's, where I'd taken Benji (my dog) and I noticed him listening to every sound - letting his ears tell him what was going on, the sounds of the house, who was doing what. So it's only natural I do the same.

Hull was horrendous - raining - but there were cycle paths all the way to the docks - good wide ones. Met a cyclist on the train from Leeds who chatted all the way. No bother over getting bike on trains.

Just looked at travel schedule. Can't believe this! I will get to Couvin at 1.33pm! How is THAT possible! I am on the train now - 10.10 from Blankenberge to Brussels-Zuid, arriving 11.28, change for Charleroi-Sud, leaves 11.35 and arrives 12.23 - then to Couvin departing 12.34 arriving 1.33 and then I begin my maps. Cost - 24.40 Euros. It's 158 miles. Amazing.

Getting off the ship this morning saw a group of cyclists in another lane so joined them as we waited for passport control. They were a group from the British Legion doing a charity run - four days - Zeebrugge-Calais-Ypres. They asked me where I was going and said it would be easier to go from Blankenberge which was on their way and they would show me. They were very courteous and took me right to the station - riding all along the sea front. It was a beautiful day, not a bit like the weather I left behind in Hull. I kept up with them reasonably well, the bike going a treat and everywhere very quiet. By going from Blankenberge I have saved one leg of the journey - missing out Bruges or Brugge. This train is amazingly quiet - I love it! No problems at all.

So we got the train in 95 from Couvin not Chimay. Therefore my route may lay from Chimay, have to look at map but not much difference I fancy. So it was Chimay where we camped and met Stephen Fry and where the woman laughed in the casino and we ate Wolfram's most memorable meal - huge bowls of spaghetti bolognese. He never forgot either the spaghetti or the woman laughing. She laughed all night. Maybe she won!

ps the train conductor looks like the English policeman in Allo Allo.

18 June on train Brussels-Charleroi

Brussels was not scary at all - of course when we were there on the way down in 95 it was midnight and everything closed. We had got the Day Ferry from Felixstowe and got on the train in Zeebrugge at 5.30 or thereabouts.

I missed my connection at Brussels, not realising we had arrived. While I was waiting for the next one (12.07) the train was suddenly moved from platform 21 where I was waiting to 19 - it was a lift job up/down all over again but I caught it. So it's Charleroi next change, Couvin, then on the road.

I remember arriving in Les Mazures (Lac des Vieilles Forges) it was late, we were tired, it was full. Of course it was August. The room was full of sweating men clamouring for a pitch. M. Bernard the camp commandant looking very splendid in his pseudo-police uniform. He took us in as cyclists - apparently they cannot turn you away if you come on a bike - and put us "*sous les arbres*" as all the tent pitches were taken.

We pitched in the dark and were off early next day so didn't explore eating possibilities - but next morning we happened on a little village and discovered Pain Chocolat - never knew it existed - and just when we were about to leave! Quelle dommage!

18 June 8.30 pm Bourg-Fidèle

Made it here about 6pm, after arriving in Couvin at 3pm instead of 1.33 as promised - delays were due to unfamiliarity with the rail system, no one to ask, bike presenting problems at Charleroi as there were no lifts and it was a step job, had to take all luggage off and carry up separately. Also platform numbering system confusing, and the station appeared to be in two halves, had to cross a road for some reason to find the platform. Like one of those dreams where nothing works.

Getting out of Couvin a nightmare, horrible traffic packed roads, hot sun, and once out of the town several long uphill where I had to walk. I seemed to climb all the time - Bourg-Fidèle is really on top of everything. Les Mazures is just along the road from here but I decided enough was enough. I remembered the road to LM as difficult.

This is a small enchanting site in the back lot of a restaurant - yes, great pull! Camping cost 6.70E. Guess what, the restaurant was shut! But they make snacks for campers. Lovely people running it. I am sure of a peaceful and undisturbed night. I had a shower, and washed and hung out my clothes. Had lasagne at 9E was straight out of Lidl's but what the hell I needed a hot meal. They made me a green salad with it and I had two glasses (tiny ones) of red wine. I just ordered a coffee. The tent went up with no problems but it will be another matter if wet. I have the self-inflating mat - it's very narrow. Texted Diana. The meal cost 15E in all - Lasagne 9, salad 1.50, 2 glasses of wine 3, coffee 1.50. So a bit of a splurge.

Took a few photos on the way here, then nothing. After taking five, camera packed in, putting up some notice about internal memory being full, which is nonsense, it is supposed to take 420.

Friday 19 June, Bourg-Fidèle

I am sitting in the restaurant at the campsite where they do breakfast - coffee in a bowl, bread and jam. I will ride past Les Mazures

this morning. Sad I will never see the water pump with the Aztec Binding of the Years - they would never let me in with a cock and bull story about being there fourteen years ago!

Well incredibly I did sleep and more incredibly actually do not ache. Whether this is due to the inflatable mat I don't know, but it sure helps. Not wide enough of course and yes I did need the fleece bag which I did not bring. Quite cool when I woke. I was up in the night at 4am to the toilet - should have gone earlier but wouldn't. Woke at around 6.40 and got up at 7, dressed and packed away by 8.30.

Well, Second Day coming up! Sun coming out now this is good. What will today bring? In the Lap of the Gods. Aiming at Douzy (map 3) by tonight. 6pm is a good time to stop.

Friday evening

Something went wrong somewhere this morning. Those autoroute maps are not always so good. I should have got the *real* maps out earlier. I was on my way by 10 to 10 (10/10 our wedding anniversary) but somehow got wrong and following the road to Charleville-Mezières ended up going in a large circle back to where I should have been. Anyway these things happen. Heard Wolf telling me it's not a race it's about enjoyment. He also told me a kilometre is 3/5ths of a mile - have to check it out. He will be right on target.

I am writing this in the tent as it is cold and windy. The wind just dropped for the second time, the evening sun is at the back of the tent. I got a pitch near the toilet block - I am here at the Municipal at Sedan. I arrived and there was no one in the office and there was a notice in the window saying the agent was on the site and to ring this number - a French mobile. They can go and fuck themselves. There were dire warnings not to enter the site without permission but I came on and pitched, then went back and there was someone there. They did not seem bothered that their instructions were not followed.

I don't remember Wolf and I being here. I was seven hours on the bike - have a sore bottom. I had breakfast at Bourg-Fidèle, coffee some place, and some leftover bread from breakfast and some cheese. At the last town before Sedan (Floing) had a cup of Earl Grey in a café. At a greengrocer across from it I bought a huge tomato, bread, apricots and a nectarine. Made my first coffee. This place is reasonably quiet and I am next to a fence where I can hang my clothes to dry. The showers are appalling but the toilets usable.

I texted Maud asking her to contact Wilkinsons re camera, gave her all details but she has done nothing. I repeated the request but still nothing. Well there were no photos last time, so it seems appropriate that there will be none this time either.

Ah well. Should sleep tonight unless cold. We are by the river here

Saturday 20th June 8.25am at Sedan

Up at 7 and made coffee again - tastes like shite. Either it's me or the English coffee. No shampoo left now, used up what I got on the boat. Have struck camp and the tent pieces are drying on the handy fence.

Yesterday was hard but possibly the second day is. I was worried about getting through Charleville-Mezières but it was a lovely place and very historic. Went in the old Basilica but it had been 'evangelized' - stripped walls, stripped out all the old plaster, no doubt mediaeval painted, stripped out all side altars and removed the Saints. Just bare spaces now. Thank God they dare not remove Mary (as yet). She was still in her corner. I lit a candle for Wolf and didn't pay as he never would. The church has enough money he would say.

Headed for Wadelincourt now, will either make Dun-sur-Meuse or Sivigny tonight

Saturday 20th evening - Dun sur Meuse

This is a poxy spot. I was done in when I got to Stenay, only to find no tent camping until 1 July - only motor homes. Had to go to Tourism Office to find this out, where a kind of jobs-worth chap explained to me why he could not let me on. I had to do another 13km to DSM. This is another Municipal with disgusting toilets and a good job I did not want a shower as you would NEVER undress in that one! Added to it all there is bloody music blaring out. There was a small camp a bit down the road but it looked run down and I thought I would continue to the Green Lake where I had been directed.

There has been only one decent camp so far at B-F. And there is no signal here so no messages. I meant to phone Bob or ask Diana to get him to text so he can sort out the camera. Had a shock today first lot of money nearly gone. Still got some of it left, but I shall have to start on the remaining 200 tomorrow.

I am making very slow progress. Today was nearly all walking - eight hours of it. As my arse was very sore anyway perhaps that was not a bad thing. I think I chose the wrong side of the Meuse. I was up some very steep and heavily trafficked roads. I must start asking the pendulum these kind of things. I did around 10m to complete Map 3 and the whole of Map 4 which is 22 - so I only did 32 miles. Mind you mostly walking. Thank god these last 13km were largely level. A practically straight road. Now I have to work out how to get out of here!

My total so far is 86 - first day was 23. 23+32 is 55 and taken from 86 this is 31 - so around 30 seems to be the limit. The roads have been very hilly so far. Okay tomorrow I am on Map 5 to Liny sur Dun or on the other side of Meuse. Map 6 is 20m. Now I am worried about campsites. There is one at Verdun - the posh one. One further on at Sommedieue.

Some bikers (motor bikes) are camped alongside - very young. They have three tents.

Interposed

The music turned out to be a concert which went on until 2am. It was impossible to ignore and impossible to sleep, the music being of a particularly irritating variety and on a 'loop'. If I had not been so tired I would have upped sticks and gone to the other campsite, but I could not face repitching. I went out and asked some people if they knew what time the music would end and they said "Une heure" which I took to mean, in one hour, but they must have meant 1am. A little language difficulty.

I was also worried about the bikers and when they came to bed at 2am they were shining torches all over the place. I kept quiet and held onto my knife. Eventually they went to sleep.

In the morning I felt I could not face any more of it and would turn round and go back. I went the wrong way up the road, came back, headed for the main road and thought I would decide which way to go when I got to the turnoff - I knew it was Verdun one way and back to Stenay the other. However I found after a few miles that I was actually on the road to Stenay and if I wanted to go to Verdun it was now a long way back, so I kept on.

I reached Stenay by the long, straight road then made sure I took the other side of the river. It had been a total mistake to go the way I went the first time. This was still hilly but manageable and better. There was no traffic but that can be a worry too. Stopping to check the map I leaned the bike against a hedge and then from a gap in it, out came a pack of dogs! Five of them, none had any collar. It was worrying for a moment, no people, I spoke nicely to them and they were docile. They sat watching me from the side of the road as I rode off.

I did not go into Mouzon, I kept to the same side of the river I had chosen. Somewhere along this road it began to rain, and rained all day. I was totally soaked. As it came on I had stopped in a small village and entered a square in front of the church. There were some houses fronting onto it, but it was obviously a public square. First this kid came up and said something, I don't know what. I

thought he was objecting to the bike being on the grass. I moved it and found a corner out of the wind and set up my stove to reheat the breakfast coffee and got out my food. That was when the rain started, but I was unpacked with the food out so there was nothing for it but to eat. Out of the house where the boy lived came a man who got in his car then drove over (all of three feet) and addressing me from the window told me that there were some trees further along where I could shelter. I thanked him kindly and continued with my lunch. I was as wet as I was going to get by this time.

The rain continued almost all the way to Sedan but with the strong wind I had dried off when I got there.

I knew there was a railway station at Sedan and I thought I would get the train back to Zeebrugge, and if I felt better maybe cycle a bit in Belgium. At Sedan I stayed on the Municipal again. There was again no one on the entrance. I pitched on a dry bit where someone had probably just moved off, and went back. Still no one there. I had my purse with me and went into the town to find some food. Smelled some gorgeous German sausages cooking on open charcoal. Found myself on the pavement outside this kind of Arab-French café with the most extrovert wonderful people - music pouring onto the pavement, everyone, staff and clientèle, not walking but dancing across the floor. Asked the price of sausage, 3E in a half baguette. Every time some were cooked people would come out of the café and take them! No one seemed to be paying. Then their children began to come into the café to their parents and they were fed also. I don't think they were cooking them to sell until I came along. When I was on my third a woman came out with a piece of paper on which was written 3E and stuck it on a pillar.

There was this man who had features like Alexei Sayle, and who was chunky like him. There was something about him, the way he moved, the mad way he was singing to the music! There was a man inside who was singing, I went to the toilet and passed him, he was about as bad a singer as I am, all flat notes! No one cared. He was the principal entertainer. This Alexei Sayle character hung about in the doorway, looking at me when he thought I wasn't looking at

him - which wasn't often! I was fascinated, intrigued by him - I wanted to grab him and dance with him all over that café!

All the people were exotic, strange. There were tarts coming in off the street, in inappropriate lace tops, peculiar shoes, clutching bags. It was obvious what they were. There were mad lesbians in leather caps, there was a half-wit boy trying to get near enough to grab my purse. Everyone who came in got kissed, on the cheeks as they do, but as if they meant it. Everyone obviously knew everyone else and they were all regulars. It was more than that, they had a life there. Oh how I wanted to be part of it! I wanted to say, "do you want a cook?" I wanted to stay there forever! Toulouse Lautrec and those other artist guys would have moved in!

In the end I left, went round the corner, there was a cabin selling frites, wonderful wonderful frites. I ate half of them and left the rest on the balustrade overlooking the river, hoping some half-starved beggar would eat them, mayonnaise and all. Back at the campsite the office was locked up and the staff gone.

I slept 12 hours straight through.

Monday 22 June, at Sedan

This has taught me - two are a team and one is alone. "One is one and all alone and ever more shall be so." If I need to do something with my life, this is not it! Wolf always said I had to find out the hard way - I have to be knocked on the head like a tent peg before it will go in. This is my second lesson. The first was - you cannot recreate the past. It cannot live again; just as the person who died cannot live again. Also, they are not preserved in amber they are living and ongoing in a different dimension - they are not their photos frozen in time on a marble grave. They are translated and enabled - glorified.

My prayer for today is - *let there be trains to Zeebrugge!* I can do no more. My legs have finally had it. Last night was so cold - that tent is not windproof. It hangs at odd angles and the outer touches

the inner, which should never happen. Last night I did pitch with a slight (very very very slight) slope so will have to check tonight. It is unlikely I can ferry home tonight if I get to Zeebrugge as Mondays are more expensive than Tuesday-Wednesdays - also have to pray there are cheaper cabins left. It is not "THE SEASON" after all, is it. Wow will I be glad to get back to UK! Blighty.

I was also reset the lesson I had (but did not learn) in Ireland - I have made myself stateless - I am not young and lovely - no one wants to know/help me. As an OLD PERSON I need to stay in my community where I am known and have history - I can be "eccentric" at home but away from home - on the road - I am just "queer". Also I reveal my status/id/class - an old person needs hotels - why are you in a tent? You have no money/status and are therefore of NO CONSEQUENCE.

Well I hope the outer has dried. I will go pack up.

ps - recreating the past - I can remember NONE of it. I am not relaxed or receiving inspiration. I am driven, stressed and cannot even remember the last few days - where I was or what I saw. Oh and another lesson. Yorkshire Bikeline - the impoverished elderly salute you. I will in future take your TOURS! I have learned that lesson at least. NO MORE HUMPING LOADS.

Gods please get me out of here and on a train to Zeebrugge or nearest today - Geraldine your Servant salutes you.

Monday 22nd 5.10pm

I was sorry that I did not get the name of the café of last night, but guess what, as I left the camp site (not having paid, what the hell) I saw one of the women from the café walking past on the other side of the road. I called "*Bonjour, Madame!*" it is so polite here how everyone calls you 'madame' it is so nice and I love saying it. She recognised me too. I went only a little way then realised I could ask her the name, turning round I sped after her and called, "*Madame, quel est le nom de votre café?*"

She replied, "*C'est Le Régent!*" I could not believe it! My address is Regent Street. Symbolic or what?

Went to the station at Sedan only to be told there are no trains to Belgium. I could go to Paris, or Lille, to get a connection to Brussels and that was it. If I went to either place I would not have got out of there tonight. Since no one wants to be stranded in goddam Paris with no place to stay that was it really. Nothing for it but to ride all the way.

I decided to make for Charleville-Mezières as I could not possibly get further - it was about 21km and it took all day. Taking a break in a village street with one of the very few benches provided in France an old Algerian tried to beg from me. He got quite nasty when I pretended not to understand.

Got to C-M around 3.30 before the tourist offices closed but had trouble finding one. Went to ask in a post office which took forever and they did not seem to know anyway. Someone eventually knew where it was "*tout droit, tout droit, tout droit,*" as they say when they mean go a very long way in one direction. Took me the first day to work out that *droit* is straight and *à droite* is right. Can be confusing. Was directed to *Place Ducale*. Whilst going *tout droit* passed a sign to the campsite, but the point of going to tourism office was to find a hotel or *chambres* but desperately needed to remember direction of campsite in case that proved impossible. Arrived at the *Place* at top of long uphill slog only to find on asking that it was considerably further on. Decided not to bother as in danger of losing campsite direction so went back, thinking I will look for a hotel on the way. Turned the corner and there was a very nice hotel, *Le César*, at 47E for a large room. What bliss to sleep in a bed! 47E is almost near as dammit pounds, but do not care. I feel safe, will be warm and comfortable and can recuperate. I had a pot of tea in my room and boiled my kettle in the bathroom for an extra (very weak) cup.

Tuesday 23rd June - Lompret

Did an absolute mammoth ride today from Charleville-Mezières all the way to near Chimay. Stopped at a shop in a small village when I saw a sign 10 to Couvin 5 to Chimay. Thought I would ask if there was anywhere to stay, as if I continued to Chimay I was adding to the distance to be covered in the morning. The shopkeeper was more than helpful, producing a booklet with hotels and *chambres* in. Well I ended up heading for this place at Lompret, which he said was 2km up the road but was in fact 4 - directly opposite his village and he had not asked the price when he rang them, of course when I got there and they said it was 65 it was a bit too late to argue.

Well it is lovely here but at the end I came down a bloody long hill which I have to walk back up in the morning. There is another way round the back roads to Couvin but I dare not take it as I do not know what the hills will be like and it could take half the day and I need to get to the ferry.

There is a bath here! I will get one then go for a beer.

I am wondering how it is that no one at home seems to realise I have turned round and am headed for home when I have been absolutely open about it? Janet asked me was I in the South of France with no other comment at all. Sara asked when I would get to my friend's house? Diana understands it but can't understand why I didn't get a train to Erika's. Boredom? Expense? Problems getting bike home. Wanted to go home.

The weather was superb today and the road to Chimay charming. When I came to a roundabout I was going to take the road back to Couvin, the one I came out on. I looked at the maps, considering heading for Chimay as I know the campsite is there, but it looked much further and I was worried about getting back. As I was about to take the Couvin road I heard Wolf ask me to take the Chimay road. I said to him that it was further, I needed to be safe and I needed to get back.

"Just look at the map" he said. I told him I already looked twice. "Please look again," he said, "I will be so disappointed if you don't go." I knew what he was thinking. That I might see the church where we were joined in spirit. I had not seen it on the way down, probably as I had come by the wrong road. I agreed to look again. Then I saw it was no further, and decided to do it.

I did find the church, I knew it when I saw it and it had benches outside and so I had lunch there. It was locked but that did not matter. A short time after leaving I knew it had been the right one as I passed the frontier post, disused now. It had been the last church before leaving France.

I think I just had my first politically correct bath. The taps were temperature controlled and would not go above 40 - well whatever that was it was tepid. I had a SCALDING hot shower in Charleville-Mezières but this was dismal. It must be arranged so you cannot sue the proprietor for scalding you. Fuckin ell!

Wednesday 24th June 10.25am

When you are a witch you can count on nothing - you must never assume. You cannot say "*Now I will get the train*" - anything could happen. Always remember who is in charge - the Gods. Always request.

So now I am in the train at Couvin. It will depart at 10.34 and arrive Charleroi 11.26 then I have possibility of train at 11.37 to Brussels but Charleroi station is difficult. Will I make the connection. Don't know.

Don't know much. Don't seem to have got any thinner. Maybe the high Cake intake. No veges or fibre results in squashy poo. Last night a horrible experience. Idyllic setting but they were obviously in it for the money - felt it was a cash cow for them - and by breakfast time realised they did not even enjoy it. That woman's face never cracked. Last night she never asked if I wanted a tea or a coffee and when I had unpacked and had my tepid bath she had

locked up and gone! No one there. This morning saw bottles of Polish fruit juice from Lidl's and sliced cheese and cheap salami obviously from same place. If you're going to charge these prices then for heavens sake give good quality. Four croissants sitting on a dish! They actually expected paying 1.50E for a packet of crisps left in the bedroom - had eaten them before finding a price list! Anyway did not pay. It all stank of money but in the most awful way. Only time she looked at all happy was when she told me if I had said the night before, her husband could have given me a lift to Couvin but now he had gone! I said, *C'est la vie, Madame, c'est la vie!*

Anyway a curse on their poxy hotel and may they fail at it, they do not deserve it. When I told her the room key was faulty and I had a job to get out, she just stared at me and said "I will try it". There was no concern, no apology. She returned and predictably said there was nothing wrong with it. When actually this morning was worse than last night. Well wait till someone gets locked in. When I said they had gone last night when I wanted to ask her advice about the way back and get her to phone the ferry, she said, "We cannot be here all the time." Oh no? why not? They should be. They obviously hate it. They want the money but not the bother.

Sara texted that she read her poems to an audience. Wish I had been there. Next time I will.

On train to Brussels, 12.10pm

Met a very interesting young man on the first train who asked to speak English with me. He told me he had been training to be an English teacher but gave it up after two years to do design. He now does eco-design. We talked about wind power - he says inefficient and you need too many. Wave he says kills the fish especially migrating species. He says solar is the way. Told him about electric bike with solar panels. He had not heard of it. He says solar power is not yet perfected, it cannot be stored for long periods and it can be too strong and burn out circuits. On the subject of roads he said he had been knocked off his bike by a car which caught his han-

dlebars. He went down at the side of the road, actually IN the road, unable to get up. Car did not stop! Then other cars came up, saw him as an obstruction, slowed down and went round him! After five mins a car stopped to help him, took him to hospital. Unbelievable! as Gordon would say. As he had asked me the favour of speaking English, I asked him if in return he would help me with the bike at Charleroi and help me find the Brussels train. Which with his excellent help I did.

Some Weirdo just got on and sat near me. I think the man opposite is his mate. Hope they do not plan to rob me.

On train to Bruges, 12.55pm

I have two hats - in one I look like a demented Lesbian, in the other like Farmer Giles. I chose the Lesbian persona and put the Farmer away.

On train to Zeebrugge 2.09pm

Think this one takes half an hour.

THANK YOU GODS THANK YOU GODS THANK YOU
GODS FOR PRAYERS ANSWERED BLESSINGS RECEIVED

On boat 5.25pm - sailing soon!

Why do old men have to have Harley Davidsons? - or nearest equivalent they can afford. Poor sods it must make up for lost virility. There was a queue of them at the ferry. I wasn't aware of the phenomenon until joining a dating site. So many of them put on pics of their bikes - you can hardly make out what the bloke is like as the bike seems to be the main thing on offer. One guy wrote me he had one. I said, *bring the Harley Davidson here and I will fuck it immediately*. But when he arrived he had no chin. I am awful BUT and I know at my age I am supposed to be grateful for anything but I still prefer them beautiful or at least with STYLE. H-D syndrome does not make up for having no chin.

While we are on about dating profiles - what cheeses me off - men with kids on their knee - IT LOOKS SO SICK! Also those who say they are "very clean" - I mean, CLEAN is NORMAL for God's sake! If you think being clean is a virtue then it seems like you have to make an EFFORT to be clean and so probably you are NOT. Also those who think their grandchildren are a hobby - UGH!! Now men with Dogs I like. And show us a fuckin Ferrari for a change - I'm sick of these motor bikes!

Oh yes, my ad says - *Wildly improvident, impecunious Grasshopper seeks industrious Ant in order to destroy fortune.*

Once at an interview I was asked "*and where do you see yourself in five years time?*" Ask a bloody stupid question I thought. So I said, "*sunning myself on a beach in the South of France after I've embezzled all your money*". They said it was the best interview they ever had, but did not offer me the job.

Anyone asking "*why do you want to work for this company?*" should be told, "*Because I need a bloody job - why do you work for them? For the good of your soul?*"

And finally, The Restaurant Fiasco

On the boat going over I had the buffet dinner. It's extortionate but what the hell you have to eat. You go through a sort of gate and this head waiter chap asks to see your ticket. You wonder why. Then he shows you to a table. Knowing that they shove single people out of the way I was prepared to ask for a different table, but it was not bad. However I was plagued by some kids later on as mine was a kind of addition on the end of a row.

On the way back I determined this time I would sit by the window. The head waiter showed me to the same table as before. I said I would prefer to sit by the window. He said I could not, as "we have luxury class passengers on board, and they may come in". The whole window area, three tables deep, was unoccupied. Everyone had been put to sit at the side of the food area. I pointed to a table

for two by the window, and said "there is a small table. Can I sit there?" He replied that no I was not allowed to.

The table was not bad, I could see out of the window from it. I got my dinner then I started thinking. I decided to enjoy my dinner and then have some fun.

The waiters were very attentive, the whole crew seems to be Filipino - one wonders where all the British or other Europeans who used to crew ships have gone. No doubt Filipinos are cheaper. While I don't grudge them a better life or whatever they come for, I have to ask where our young people are to get their training?

Near the end of my meal, a waiter again appeared and asked me if there was anything I would like. I replied that yes, I would like to know where to go to complain. He looked shocked, and asked what was wrong, was it the food? Or the service? I replied that the food was excellent and "you are all lovely". So he said I should go to the information desk and asked me what was wrong.

I replied that I did not see how anyone had the right to tell me that I had not paid enough to sit by a window. I said I had paid over a hundred pounds to come on this ship and I should be allowed to sit where I wanted. He said he was sorry and asked me if I knew where the information desk was. I replied no, and he told me. He was very nice. I then asked him where "Mr Smart Pants" was.

"Who, Madame?"

"Mr Smart Pants, your boss. I want a word with him before I go." I was determined to cut this character down to size. He was bigger than all the other waiters, in a very smart suit and acted like a god.

"I think he is somewhere, Madame." I waited. I finished my glass of wine, and Smart Pants returned. I beckoned to him and he came over.

"See those tables there?" I said pointing to the Forbidden Zone. "I have finished my dinner now and *no-one* has come to sit there." He immediately became flustered.

"I can show you a list," he said, "The Chief Engineer might come in - and there are others on the list".

"I don't care who is on your list," I said. "I have as much right as them to sit where I want. I am going to complain now, and when I come in to breakfast, I am going to sit by the window. You are operating an undercover class system here," I went on, "and that is outrageous. If you want a reserved area for luxury class passengers, then put a bloody notice up, don't do it under cover." I made a dignified exit, leaving him blustering in the background.

I went to the information desk and said I had a complaint.

"Would you like a complaint form?"

"Certainly"

"What is it about?" Briefly I outlined the conversation in the restaurant, adding,

"You are running an undercover class system here, and that is disgusting in this day and age."

"I expect those tables were reserved," the woman said, "only luxury class passengers are allowed to reserve tables."

"Well that in itself is wrong," I said, "and they weren't reserved. The head waiter said only that 'they may come in'."

"They have paid extra for their cabins," she said.

"Yes, and they have got what they paid for," I said, "a better cabin. They did not pay extra for their dinner. It is not good enough and I will not put up with it. I am going to write to my MP, The Times,

Radio 4's You and Yours, and Gordon Ramsay is a correspondent of mine, and I am going to let him know about it. What do you think Gordon would say if he came in here and you said he could not sit where he wanted?"

"I don't know, Madam," she replied, "possibly something beginning with F."

"That's right," I said, "he would say 'I've effin paid for my effin ticket and I will sit where I effin well like', wouldn't he?"

"Yes Madam."

"Well, be prepared for him coming in undercover."

I took the form, wrote all over it in all the boxes, regardless of what they were for. I had to take it back to get the details of the ship and the schedule and the manager's name, but told the clerk (a different one) I wanted to send it in myself and would he give me the address. He started reading it through then asked,

"Can I make a copy of this?"

"Yes," I said, "then you can all have a laugh."

At breakfast, I was not bothered where I sat. I had had my fun the night before, and was not interested in taking the matter further. I had got quite friendly with Brian Lirazan, the waiter, when he had returned with a paper carnation he had made out of a serviette. I was touched and gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Where did you learn to do this?" I asked. "It's perfectly lovely."

"On another cruise ship, a long time ago, Madame," he replied. I asked him about his job and his family, his face clouding over when he spoke of home. He does six months on the ship and then can go home for two. He was counting off the months, telling me he had done three.

"And how long will you go on doing this, Brian?" I asked him.

"Madame, I already did it thirteen years." He had three children, the eldest fifteen. So they had never known what it was to have a full time father. It is sad that people are forced to live like this.

I told him I will put him and his lovely rose on my web page, but alas, it got squashed in transit.

Brian, thanks, you are lovely.

Thursday 25th June

Docked at Hull, smooth journey to Skipton, ride from there nearly killed me. In end I went onto canal at Foulridge and riding along came across my friend Libby, wheeling the two youngest kids in a push chair like the kind of thing you attach to a bike. She was thrilled to see me back off the trip, and I was happy that she was the first person I saw on my return.

Friday, 26th June

Went to Sara's's in Colne for my homecoming dinner. She had done wonderful things to the room, and invited a musician along to play his guitar. Good effort with the meal, amazing decor in her new dining room, and Seth made a brilliant table from pieces of a four poster bed. All in all a very special evening, which gave rise to a poem later.



Homecoming

In a café in Sedan

Music spilled onto the pavement

Exotic people danced and laughed inside

All life and movement.

Standing at the gateway of their world,

Spellbound, I longed to enter.

On a pavement in Colne

A vagabond girl said she loved me

Shared her music, food and laughter

And sang her fractured heart's song

Deep into the night

On the mean streets of home.