Improbability Theory

Mark Harris

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Summary

Wry accounts of various unfortunate situations encountered by a displaced, and often misplaced Brit.

Introduction

After foolishly asking me what I had been up to recently, and then foolishly listening to the answer, a friend once told me that I must be surrounded by an improbability field. That may be so, or maybe I just don't run away fast enough when unusual things start to happen around me. Either way, I've managed to collect a number of stories that in retrospect are entertaining, even if they weren't at the time. I hope you think so too.

About the author

Mark Harris started life as a very small child, and was raised in the U.K. He then lived in America and Sweden, working as a research chemist and a photographer. He still doesn't know what he wants to be when he grows up, but perhaps a writer.

What they are saying about Improbability Theory

"This book changed my life!
Not in any dramatic way, but it brightened up a rainy afternoon."

"If I could have my life over again, I would buy this book a week earlier than I did. It's that good."

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I haven't dined with kings

When faced with intimidating people, it must be good for your self-confidence to be able to say to them, or even just yourself, "I have dined with kings".

I can't do that. What I can say is "I have almost dined with kings", which only really works with very slightly intimidating people.

I was at a remote ski cabin in Lappland, two days from the nearest road, when a police helicopter landed outside my window. I tried to think if I had any outstanding parking tickets, or had recently dropped any litter, but was pretty sure I hadn't, so I came out from under the bed and just assumed there had been an accident nearby.

But no, they were there because the king and queen of Sweden were quietly making a film about The King's Route, on which I was tour skiing, and they would be making a surprise visit. That sounds fun, I thought, and so I hung around, but eventually got restless and thought I'd take a quick ski and catch them later.

I was out for about an hour, in horrible weather, so I didn't even have much fun, except when two policemen on snow scooters came to check me out. One parked behind me and one in front, like there was a risk of me starting a James Bond style chase, which I must say was very tempting just for the story.
But in fact I simply told them I was a tourist. Or possibly terrorist, having not yet really mastered Swedish vowels.

But they let me ski back to the cabin, where I discovered that in my brief absence the royal couple had arrived, treated all the other skiers to a salmon lunch, and then gone on their way.
It's events like this that explain my self-confidence levels.

I've not met the royals on several occasions since, most recently in Uppsala, when they parked their car behind me and walked 100m into the cathedral, passing very close as I stood with a ton of camera gear round my neck, obliviously taking a stock picture of a crane in the other direction. They must think I'm avoiding them. Or that I'm the worst photojournalist ever.

Art for heart's sake

It was a Saturday morning soon after I had moved to Uppsala, and although I had been in Sweden long enough to get invited to the party that had rewarded me with a reasonable hangover, I hadn't been here long enough to become as well off as the natives. So I was wearing a ragged second-hand leather jacket and was drinking coffee at the cheapest place in town, which happened to be the civic art gallery. And as luck would have it, there was an opening of a modern art exhibition that day, which meant that a) there were free peanuts to balance my diet, and b) I looked really out of place amongst all the Sunday-bests.

Now, I'm rather fond of modern art when it shows some inspiration, but standing in front of a pile of old Volvo bumpers before the coffee had percolated my nervous system, I was pretty sure that this example was just a pile of Volvo bumpers.

At which point a brunette with spectacular blue eyes came up to me and said "Hurdygurdywurdy?". Swedes really do say that, it's not just the muppet chef. In fact it's all they say, but the meaning can vary from a simple "Hello", to an extended discourse on Bergman's influence on the suicide rate in Scandinavia.
But given our current situation, I assumed that in this case it must mean “What do you think of this piece?", so being as honest as I could, I summoned up my entire Swedish vocabulary and said "Yes, it's very good, yes, yes, very good.".
To which she replied "Hurdygurdywurdygurdywurdy".
The coffee had now gotten far enough that I realised that I was painting myself into a corner (call it performance art) and I had to come clean that I had no idea what she was talking about.
"Oh, I'm sorry, but you have such a Swedish name"
she said in perfect English.
"Errr, how do you know my name?"
"It's written underneath."
"Errr, what was that first question again?"
"I said, Did you make this?"

Yep, my raggy clothes and glazed eyes had made her think that I was the sort of person who would pile up a bunch of car parts and call it art, and I had admitted to it in a less than humble way.

So we chuckled and chatted away the morning, and then sort of dated for a few months, during which time she introduced me to Nordic ice skating on natural lakes, for which I’m eternally grateful.

Since then I've hung around a lot of art galleries in tatty clothes and looking hungover, but it doesn't seem to be a reliable method to meet women.

Across the Finnish line

At the peak of my career (30 years ago...), I worked for a wonderful little biotech consultancy company, which after 5 years of blissful employment was bought up and closed down by a client. It wasn't a fiendish plan to eliminate us, or to make a ton of money, it was just a badly thought through idea that benefited no-one.

Anyway, the day I was fired I went off to a student bar to console myself, but instead somehow found myself being consoled by a sultry French medical student called Emmanueeellllle. Over a few beers I discovered that she wanted to learn more about Scandinavia, and so was planning a train tour of Finland.

My social skills are poor, but this conversation was easy – the obvious next line was "Why Finland???". Sweden is cosy, Norway is spectacular, and Denmark has a wonderful cultural scene with gregarious people. While Finland has, ummm, heavy metal (remember Eurovision's Lordi?), Nokia telephones, and trees. And one of the highest suicide rates in the world, which maybe explains why their language has no future tense.

I know that every year Finland is declared the happiest country in the world, but that is calculated happiness, assumed on the basis of high salaries, equality, and free health care. All good things, but it turns out none of these factors can compensate for living in the dark in the middle of nowhere, listening to Lordi, and needing a word (kalsarikännit) for binge-drinking alone in your underwear. Each year when they are told how happy they are, the Finns themselves say "Really?".

"Why not?" was Emmanuelle's response to my question, and while I had plenty of answers to that, she was a sultry French medical student, and I had just lost my job, so I asked if she wanted company. And she did! But she also gave me a warning-
"I em a beet wild. Are you zure you are up for zis?
YOU SHOULD GET ZUM ZLEEP!".
Which pretty much guaranteed that I lay wide awake staring at the ceiling for a very long time that night.

The next evening she came to my place and cooked me a 5-course French dinner as a formal introduction, and the following night we were sleeping on the roof of the Stockholm to Helsinki ferry, staring at the stars over the Baltic sea. So what if I didn't have a job?

Our first host was a delightful platinum-blonde ambulance driver, who may be the reason Finns are expected to be so happy. When we arrived she told us she was trawling medical text books for information on the highly infectious disease that one of her patients had been carrying that day. Maybe you have to say that sort of thing if you're a delightful platinum blonde in Finland.

Next stop, Kuopio, truly the middle of nowhere. We found a telephone box, and the side of the conversation that I heard went like this :
"'Allo, it ees Emmanueeellllle."
"Emmanueeellllle Dubois…"
"From ze conference..."
"In Spain"
"A while back"
"Aneeway, you zaid if I waz ever in Kuopio, I should look you up"
"'Allo?"
"OK, zee you zoon"
The bewilderment of our hosts disappeared after Emmanuelle took over the kitchen and produced some excellent bottles of French wine, and a happy evening was had by all. But I'm guessing they were a little more cautious about invitations to visit after that, even if they do live in Kuopio.

Next on the itinerary was Joensuu, even more remote, close to the Russian border.

I vaguely knew Hannu from work, and he had come to one of my parties and been found upside down in a nearby ditch the next morning with a broken collar bone, something that Finns shrug off (albeit asymmetrically) as an inevitable part of partying. Still, he owed me some hospitality, so I had mailed him that we were visiting Finland and could we visit his lab? In what Finns consider a long and chatty reply, he had said "You're welcome, Hannu".

As we stepped off the train I realised that my vagueness of knowing Hannu included vagueness of what he looked like. Passengers dispersed, and when there were just three of us left on the platform, I guessed that the one that wasn't sultry was him. "Hello" he said, and that was about the extent of the conversation till we got to his apartment, which had a desk, a chair, a sofa, and a fridge containing some pre-sliced cheese.

Emmanuelle whispered "We're leaving on the next train!". But then Hannu suggested we drive to the Coli Hotel (don't drink the water was my first thought), further remote still than Joensuu. I don't really know why the place exists, but it's up on a hill overlooking an infinite expanse of forest, and at last Hannu opened up. He started talking about how his grandmother had been invaded by the Russians, and gave us a long history of the area. The ice was broken.

The next day we got a very enthusiastic reception at his lab, which made me wonder how long it had been since they last saw a strange face.

Then it was time for the long train journey home, reflecting on what I'd learned about Finland. The fundamental question of why you would go there was still tricky to answer, but it had certainly been an educational and interesting trip, and that's all you really need, isn't it?

To Russia without love

On my first trip to Sweden back in the eighties I took a long weekend trip to Leningrad, as it was known back then.

The journey started with the legendary Finland ferry from Stockholm to Helsinki, which is occasionally used to travel from Stockholm to Helsinki, but most use it to consume and stock up on vast quantities of duty free, and the cheap fares reflect that. Many don't even step off the boat in Finland.

I was a little dismayed to find that my 6-berth cabin already had 5 biker-club jackets strewn around when I arrived, and I expected a less than peaceful night, but I needn't have worried, as when I disembarked the jackets were still there, the owners having apparently spent the entire night in the bars and nightclubs. I was more restrained, and after dinner and a beer, I decided to grab a quick sauna just before it closed.

Travelling alone a lot, I face the problem of what to do with valuables when doing things in little or no clothing, like swimming and taking saunas. Leaving my wallet in the biker cabin didn't seem like a great idea, so I ended up hiding it and my door card and clothes rolled up in a towel in the changing room outside the sauna. After a while in the heat, I heard someone come into the changing room, and realised too late that it was a cleaner, and it was probably now past closing time. Saunas are very relaxing, and my brain was running even slower than usual, so it was a while before I realised that she was probably collecting towels, and thus also my clothes, money and door key.

By the time all this processing had gone on, and instructions had been issued to my body to stand up and peep out, all my belongings were gone, and I was standing naked, with no towel, and a long way to my locked cabin or reception. Decision time - sit down and think out a good plan, or chase down the cleaner while she was still nearby. I went for option B.

Now, Scandinavians are rather comfortable with nudity, and very good at English, but those who work the Finland ferries also meet some of the more interesting sides of humanity.

So the cleaner's response wasn't altogether positive when a bright red, sweaty, naked foreigner chased her down the corridor with pleas to rummage through her dirty laundry. We eventually managed to resolve the situation, and I could get dressed and head back to my mercifully empty cabin for a peaceful sleep.

A peaceful sleep presumably not had by the party that joined me on the ongoing charter bus from Helsinki to Leningrad. And I mean party. I'm guessing it was an office trip, as everyone knew each other, many far more intimately than they probably should. They had clearly been drinking all night, and weren't going to stop now just because it was breakfast time and we were heading for a border which back then was still an iron curtain.

The driver kept up a running commentary of all the things we shouldn't do in Russia, but my Swedish was still rather primitive, so all I heard was: "And whatever you do, don't even think of hurdygurdywurdy or oobedoobidoo". I turned around to ask the row behind me what it was that communists disapproved of so much, and was confronted by a naked breast thrust between the headrests, the owner of which I guess was trying to explain one of the no-nos to her seat-mate. Having missed the introduction, I decided to just be very good and try not to set up any profit-making corporations on my visit.

We arrived in Leningrad to wind-blown sleet, and two minutes off the bus a local tried to buy my jacket from me. I declined, and checked into the Lenin Hotel, a concrete block with sad rooms and rust-coloured water in the taps. After dinner I headed out to see the sights, planning to find the centre of the city with help of the underground.

This was my first time in a country where almost no-one spoke English, and I couldn't even read the alphabet, so I realised that finding my way back could be tricky, and so carefully noted down the cyrillics of the big sign in the subway station to point at later, realising that the words "Hotel" and "Lenin" probably wouldn't be too unique here. The word was выход. The subway stations are all great works of art, and I thoroughly enjoyed cruising around, popping up to the surface occasionally, but finding everywhere above ground looked like the same dreary suburb.

I'm sure there is an interesting centre somewhere, but maybe planning, and timing other than late at night in December are needed to experience it. More disturbingly, I found that every station was called выход, because it's not a name at all, and means 'exit'. By 3am the beauty of the underground infrastructure was wearing thin, but I finally recognised my original station, and reached my hotel via a brief encounter with a car full of young women who did a handbrake turn across a wide street in order to offer me a very good time, which I politely declined.

The next day I was traipsing around in the sleet, still failing to find a city centre, when a big man with an even bigger gun and a uniform nodded at me. So as I do with scary people with guns, I smiled and nodded back. He countered with "You will speak with the inspector". Thinking he had misinterpreted my greeting/attempt-to-not-be-shot as a request for information, I walked away saying "No, no, it's OK", to which he shouted "YOU WILL SPEAK WITH THE INSPECTOR!", and I said "Oh, OK then". It turned out I had been jaywalking, and it was going to cost me 10 rubles.

So here was my dilemma - back in 1986 foreigners weren't allowed rubles, and were only allowed to shop in the special foreign-currency stores with highly inflated prices. So giving the inspector 10 rubles was a much bigger crime than jaywalking, but was it entrapment, or just a shake-down? I was pretty sure it was the latter, but to be cautious I started by looking all innocent and saying that I couldn't pay him because I wasn't allowed rubles. To which he gave me a look which I think anthropologists call the: '*Yes-but-we-all-know-you-did-an-illegal-exchange-and-have-been-buying-goodies-in-rubles'*-look, so I hunted a bit deeper in my pocket and miraculously found 10 rubles that the inspector slipped into his pocket. I resisted the urge to ask for a receipt.

All I remember from the rest of the weekend is the bus being disassembled at the border, guards with screwdrivers appearing and taking off panels to look for who knows what. I slipped the remains of my rubles down the back of an unused seat, and put on my cherubic face.

The Oslo trip

Since my job gave me a company car so I that could come to work out of hours, I thought I'd better familiarise myself with the controls, and so drove to Norway for a week. It was another memorable trip, with lots of interesting and friendly people to be met along the way.

One policeman was especially friendly, going to great lengths to catch up with me so he could wave and get my autograph.
What I loved about this pull-over was that there were no flashing lights and shotgun silhouettes involved, as I had become used to in the US. The passenger just waved what appeared to be a table-tennis bat on which his 5-year-old had tried to write the word “Police”, and come up with “Polis”. (When I got home, I took an old table-tennis bat, wrote “Kemist” on it and put it in the car ready to reply the next time, but sadly, or maybe happily, I never got to find out if Swedish policemen have a sense of humour.)

And then there was the red-headed hitchhiker that I picked up. She was very drunk, and spoke almost no English. I battled away in my best Swedish, using most of my stock phrases ("Hello", "I'd like a beer please", "No, I'm not that way inclined", "I don't understand Swedish", "I don't understand anything", "Bye"), but all I understood was that she was "bad because she was thirsty", which I think mean't she was one of Sweden's huge stock of professional alcoholics. Or maybe she just gets thangry.
When I offered to take a detour to drop her in town rather than by the side of the road, she told me that I was "snäll". This not being a word essential to getting a beer, I didn't know what it meant, but being a Germanic language, I thought maybe it meant I was driving too fast, so I slowed down, but still I was snäll. Maybe she wants me to drive faster, I thought, so I sped up, but to no avail. She then picked up the dictionary that I always had handy back then, and pointed to the word "smäll".
Well, it seems "smäll" translates to "spanking".
My mind went mushy. Then it became very clear. Horribly clear. Five hours later we arrived in town. Well, it was probably five minutes, but it seemed like hours. There she stepped out, said "spanking" a few more times and disappeared from my life.

Some time later I understood what had happened. It seems she misread the small print of my dictionary, as it turns out that "snäll" means "nice". Trust the Scandinavians to confuse such words. What more can I say? Well, if you've never been driving at a fair speed down Euroroute 18 with a drunk red-headed Swede sitting beside you waving the word "spanking" in front of your face, well, I can only urge you to try it. It sticks in the mind.

After that, I was quite unfazed by the guy who left me in charge of his hamburger joint while he popped out to find a map for me. My command of Norwegian being even more limited than my Swedish, I was unable even to get the customers to buy me a beer, and could only stall them by smiling and saying "Hello, I don't speak Norwegian".

The second hitchhiker was also entertaining. She was a large lesbian, also drunk, who had had a fight with her girlfriend the night before and been thrown out of their house, so she was trying to get home to her mother's. She was too big for the inertia-reel seat belt, which ran out of travel before it reached the clip. Unwilling to admit this though, she dutifully held it a couple of inches away from the clip for the rest of the journey. I don't know if this was for my benefit or that of the police.

Running later than I had intended, I ended up staying in a hideously expensive hotel in Lilleström, where a friendly local offered to show me around Oslo the next day. Unfortunately his friendliness went further still, culminating at 1am in an invitation to forget about my hotel booking and go back to his place. The wife and daughter, with whom he had a few hours earlier said he lived, having mysteriously disappeared from his life.

Yes, it was one of those trips that makes me check the mileage on the car, in case I didn't really go, and it was just something in that week-old curry. In this case there were 1500km unaccounted for by the curry theory, so it seems it really did happen. And then there's the bruises.....

småskratta (*smōā*-skraht-ah) *v*
chuckle
smäll (smehl) *c* spanking; crack
smälla (*smehl*-ah) *v* spank; crack
smälta (*smehl*-tah) *v* melt, thaw

Swedish whispers

Sweden has very long winters - even in Uppsala (which is a fifteen hour drive south of the really cold bits) for six months of the year it's warmer to sit in your fridge than to go outside, and there's usually at least a week when it's warmer to sit in your deep freeze. The winter bus timetable starts on the 21st of August, and around then we often get nights just a few degrees above freezing, at which point I start thinking about preparing the house for winter, and then I think “Nooooo, it's August!”.

So I can't quite explain why my friend Al and I thought it was a good idea to hike and camp in Lappland in August, but we did. Perhaps because back then I loved riding the night train up north, leaving the student/commuter town of Uppsala and stepping into the Northern Arrow train, which was always full of Gore-Tex clad adventurers and various interesting individuals returning from Stockholm to places like Bastuträsk, which means “The Sauna Swamp” (northerners, by the way, refer to Stockholm as Fjollträsk - “The Sissy-boy Swamp”).

The train journey starts with getting to know your compartment-mates, followed by dinner in the dining car, and then a very sad Swedish film in the rolling cinema (do any other countries have those?). Then it's off to bed with 3 or 5 random people depending on how rich you were feeling when you booked the trip. Sometimes you end up marrying one of them, but that's another story. Other strange things happen in the night - carriages are uncoupled and sent off to destinations unknown, and towns that according to me exist only in the twilight zone are stopped at, but nobody gets on or off. As I’m being rocked asleep, I puzzle over why these places exist, and usually conclude that it’s logging.

Then dawn breaks on a landscape of beautiful lakes and mountains softened by millennia of glacial erosion. It's not as spectacular as the Alps, but has a charm of its own.

On this trip we get off in Vassijaure, and start hiking up to Troll Lake, a small but deep, beautifully blue lake, occupied apparently, by trolls. Life is good.

Then we encounter a 45° steep section of trail, which is a bit more than we were expecting with our 20 kilo packs, but we struggle up to the top, where we are hit by a ferocious wind. As a nerd who likes to document my travels, I pull out a wind meter, whose bead during one gust shoots off the end of the scale, which is at 30 m/s (70 mph).

We struggle on. Al offers me something sweet, which turns out to be sorbitol - no nutrition, just intestinal distress. It starts to snow. Never good on a summer hike, and we are approaching a glacier that we can't locate because everything is white. Al comes over to me and shouts over the storm "Isn't this brilliant!". It's not, but it's brilliant that he thinks it's brilliant. It's this enthusiasm under any conditions that makes him such a good adventure mate. He's equally enthusiastic after falling into a crevasse that we couldn't see in the white-out. A tiny one, luckily, maybe a metre deep, but it looks weird, like one side is made of wood. Eventually we have to stop, and we pitch our tent on the glacier using the biggest stones we can find to anchor the guy ropes. It's still blowing a gale, and while making dinner the frying pan blows away, becoming an Unidentified Frying Object. (A year later I'm hiking under the glacier and thinking about what a great end to the story it would be if I found the frying pan, but I don't).

The night is not fun, with sleet building up and crushing the delicate tent that I borrowed from friends because I didn't trust my own much more sturdy tent, and with Al regularly shouting "The tent is blowing away!".
I think of Shakespeare -"Now is the winter of our discount tent!". Somehow we survive, which seems like a low threshold for the criterion of a successful trip.

The next night we spend at a manned cabin and tell the host about our adventures, including the strange timbers we thought we saw in the crevasse.

Some days later the sun comes out and we have a brief glimpse of how pretty summer Lappland could be, but seldom is, before heading home.

Not much of a story so far, but two weeks later I get a phone call from a professor at the geological institute who excitedly says “Hello Mark, I guess you know why I'm calling!”
I don't. He explains that it's about the spectacular discovery of the remains of an historic building trapped in a glacier in Lapland. Which we have apparently discovered.

I'm a bit confused until I realise that we started a game of Chinese Whispers in which we told the cabin host that there was something that looked like wood in the crevasse, and she told passing researchers that it was a wall, and they told their boss that a long-lost building was trapped in the glacier. I explain this, but he already has a helicopter booked to explore the site and invites me to lunch to explain exactly where we were.

They don't find the spot, so a week later I’m booked on a flight to Kiruna, where I’m picked up by another helicopter to retrace our steps by air. I find the stones of our camp site and so can plot a trajectory backwards, but we never find the lost city. I'm not surprised, nor are most of the team, but the professor is still excited, and says “We'll come back with ground-penetrating radar!”

He can dream of getting tenure, and I had a fun weekend being flown around a beautiful autumnal landscape, but we don’t make it into the history books.

Information from SL

The winter timetable is now available on sl.se

The winter timetable starts at August 21 (with some exceptions) and can be downloaded from sl.se. Printed versions are available at SL Center from August 16. For more information visit sl.se/en.

The accidental park ranger

I have the privilege of being able to break up my working day with a long walk in the nature reserve that starts right by my house, and I used to refuel at the café in the Co-op at my turning point. But when the pandemic came (and I hope when you read this it's still The Pandemic, and not just a pandemic), I decided to improve my odds of growing old by taking a picnic alone in the forest instead.

So it was rather ironic that on my first day doing this I suddenly noticed that I was sharing my beautiful little grove with a 50-year-old mortar shell. I knew the area used to be a shooting range, so not super surprising, and not really an emergency, as most of the grenades found here are practice pieces, so I reported it on the non-urgent police number. After 20 minutes in a queue I was answered by a computer (which makes no sense - people might be busy, but surely a computer can multitask any number of people ringing in, and then direct them to an appropriate queue?) Anyway, our conversation was short :
"Please. state YOUR. question."
"I have found an old military grenade."
"Connecting you. TO. Lost and Found."
Another wait, which at least made sense, but I gave up since I was obviously heading to the wrong department (although it was tempting to tell them that I had lost a grenade, which might have sped things up). I spent another 20 minutes coming up with a better answer to Ms Computer's question.

"Please. state YOUR. question."
"It's complicated."
"I do not. understand YOUR. answer."
"May I please speak to a human?"
"Would YOU. like TO be connected TO Human Resources?"
"No!"
"Please. state YOUR. question."
{silent treatment}
"Please. state YOUR. question."
{silent treatment}
"Connecting YOU. to an agent."

A nice lady then asked me to email a photo and location to her, which is something that doesn't happen to me often these days.

The next day my cosy little dell looked like a bomb had hit it, which is perhaps a bad simile here, but it looked like half of Sweden's military (~ 10 people) had trampled everything down checking that my shell didn't have any siblings lurking in the undergrowth. There were no body parts in the trees, so I'm guessing it went well.

Fast-forward 2 months, and I'm walking on a popular path in the valley, when I see two fins sticking up out of the mud. Much like the fins of a rocket-propelled grenade. In the middle of a popular path. To speed things up this time, I emailed a photo and location directly to the address given to me by the nice lady who it turns out wasn't asking me on a date. Assuming processes would be set in motion, I carried on my walk, followed by a herd of cows, which is something that happens if you stand near a herd a while and then start mooving. These cows were big, many, and headed for my grenade, so I have to confess to walking backwards with my camera trained on them. You know, just in case.

With hindsight I should have followed up my report, but at the time it was hard to believe that this bit of metal that many people had already kicked and stepped on could really be that dangerous, and I expected an irritated policeman to call and tell me that it was just a surveyor's trig point, and would I please rein in my imagination and stop wasting their time. I did think of surrounding it by sticks, but decided that would probably just draw attention to it, and prompt kids to use the sticks to dig it up.

On my next walk it was still there and sticking further out, as more walkers had kicked up the surrounding dirt. There was now a pin visible that looked like it would make the whole thing go bang, so it looked less and less like a trig point, and more and more like a bomb. So I now sat in the phone queue again, and learned that the police only read their email account when they have requested an email. Interesting. Anyway, they took my new report, and I felt happier that they were finally on the case. On day three it was still there, but I got a call from a policeman who was looking for it.

We met up and I showed him the fins. He said something like “Oh dear, oh dear”, made a lot of hurried phone calls, and rather soon there was a 300m cordon, local media were urging people to stay away from the valley, and the bomb squad were on their way from Stockholm with a huge metal sphere in which they planned to take home a souvenir of their day out. Except they wimped out and decided that it was too dangerous to move, and started careful preparations to blow it up on site. Turns out the EOD are also OCD (health and safety gone mad!). I got hungry before the fun part started, and went home for lunch, during which I heard the detonation from 2km away.

The footpath now takes a detour around a small crater that fills with rain water to create what I like to call Lake Harris.

Surprised that no-one else reported it? Me too. Until a few more weeks went by and I stepped out of my house for a quick walk in the beautiful summer evening, and was hit by the smell of burning wood. At first I worried that our house or the neighbour’s was on fire, but we seemed to be OK, so I carried on into the valley where I saw a huge plume of white smoke rising out of the forest. Many other people were out walking, and some were coming out of the forest, all of whom must have been very aware of the fire for some time, so surely someone must already have reported it? Odd then that I saw no fire engines, and had heard no sirens. So just in case, I called the local fire station and said “I assume you know that Nåsten is on fire, right?”. “Really?” came the reply. Nobody had called it in. All those people happily ignoring a fire that was detectable 2km away. Probably mumbling “someone should report that, but it’s not my responsibility”.

The fireman said he would bring his mates over, but could I localise it more precisely? So off I went into the forest, until I found the 20 metre diameter surface fire, and called in the position. But it turned out that the fire engines were too heavy for a bridge, so they were staging some distance away, and driving an ATV with a little train of trailers behind, variously containing squatting firemen, water tanks, a pump and small gauge hose. I hope they know how silly they looked when they came humping into view through the trees.

That process took over an hour, during which time the fire was spreading slowly outwards, but only in the undergrowth so far. While I was waiting, my boy scout training kicked in, and I started tearing up the moss and blueberry brush to make a circular fire break, and then beat my way inwards using an uprooted fir sapling as a brush. Akela would have been proud.

The professionals then hosed down the trees and finished off the beating, while I went home to dinner several hours late.

På sin promenad i Hågadalen hittade Uppsalabon Mark Harris vad han kände igen som en granat.
Foto: Mark Harris/ Läsarbild

Uppsalabon var på promenad – hittade skarpladdad granat

På torsdagseftermiddagen hittade Uppsalabon Mark Harris en granat på en promenadstig Hågadalen. Klockan 15:30 hade polisen och Nationella bombskyddet sprängt granaten. På sin hemsida varnade polisen för att smällen skulle komma att höras långväga.

Home Invasion

The first time I met Swedish Putte he tried to explain his job to me in English and told me that he worked with the mentally retired. I just loved this new term and the idea of people one day deciding that they had been thinking for way too long, and it was time to stop.

But I'm in no position to judge language limitations - I'm sure there are Swedes telling stories about me too - "He says that he earns a living shooting people, and then dealing with the results in a dark room in the cellar."

The next time I was due to pass Putte's town, I suggested a visit. He said I was very welcome, but they might not be home when I arrived, in which case I should just let myself in and make myself at home. Sweden still has a lot of places where people don't lock their doors, or if they do, they hang up the key outside so you can get in anyway. There was no answer when I knocked, so as instructed, I let myself in and snuggled down on the sofa with a cup of tea as I waited.

During this time I noticed that there was little evidence of their two small children. Nor indeed of two reasonably young parents. And there were walls and doors that I didn't remember from my last visit. And indeed much didn't make sense, so I hunted around a little and found letters addressed to other people.
I wasn't in Putte's house, but his neighbours'.

I backed out, trying to leave everything as it was, but I can't help wondering what would have happened if the neighbours had come home while I was drinking tea on their sofa. I would have assumed that Putte had come home with friends whom he had politely ushered in first, and I would have just casually said 'Hello' to them, and maybe offered them tea from the pot.

In movies, such behaviour seldom ends well. Hopefully the neighbours wouldn't have seen those movies, and wouldn't have just returned from a hunting trip.

The incompleat angler

I'm a hopeless fisherman. Or rather, I'm a hopeful fisherman, because despite being able to name every fish I have ever caught in my adult life (and yes, I have named them, because they are five in number, and 'adult' is in inverted commas), I still carry and use a small telescopic rod every time I go camping.

I was out on one of my random drives, cruising around looking for somewhere pretty to enjoy Sweden's excellent 'right to roam' policy, which includes the right to fish along the coast and on all the big lakes. I decided to pitch my tent by a nice little lake with a wonderful view. As usual, I gave up fishing after a few casts (wait, is that why I never catch anything?), and pottered off to my tent for a good night's sleep, dreaming of the problems of overfull keep nets, and under-dimensioned lines. In the morning I hiked back to the car, which had a note on the windscreen that read : "Hi, hope you had a good night. We saw you fishing last evening, and that's forbidden. If you don't bring 300 Kr (30 pounds/dollars) to the big yellow house on the hill, we'll notify the police.
We have your car registration number".

Now, I'm pretty sure blackmail is naughtier than poaching in the eyes of the law, and I had genuinely missed the detail that I was fishing in a small lake, and it's only the big lakes where fishing is unrestricted, so I thought about ignoring the threat. But I also thought that the owner of a big house in the countryside might have more influence with the local police than a foreign poacher, and that he might embellish my activities with some sheep-worrying thrown in. Plus it would be fun to meet a blackmailer.

So I went up to the posh house and apologised, after which the guy said that it was his moral duty to report me unless I paid him the 300 Kr. Rather than asking him to explain his understanding of the word 'moral', I haggled, and got him down to 100 Kr, which let me off cheap while still putting him on the back foot.
I know you shouldn't negotiate with terrorists, so my apologies to any future fishermen who get shaken down.

You muppet

You really shouldn't give me a company car if you expect me to sit in the office and work. There's a big risk that I'll head off to Dalarna, in search of the Swedish heartland.

This I did in November, the ultimate off-peak month for travel in a country that never gets that many tourists. So it should have been no surprise that the youth hostel was closed when I arrived later that day. I had no intention of staying in a fancy hotel, but popped into one to ask where I could find somewhere cheap to stay nearby. The answer was nowhere, and even the hotel was closed, with just a few staff members mothballing the place. But they said if I was desperate, I could sleep in the ski shed. Well, I was desperate, and the ski shed turned out to be a rather nice cabin with a bed and some skis in the corner, so I was quite comfortable, and the staff were bored, so they invited me in for dinner, and I ended up staying for the whole weekend, fêted on fresh fish from Lake Siljan, good wine, and good stories.

One of which was that the chef was the inspiration for the famous muppet chef.

Now, you might be thinking that that's a common claim amongst chefs here, but it did ring true, in that he had very convincing stories from his time working in a restaurant in Hollywood, he spoke English with a curious combination of Californian and local Swedish accents, he had weird eyebrows, and was dishevelled and animated. You know, like a muppet...

I've been telling this story for 30 years now (with occasional breaks for refreshment), but have always felt I should spoil it with my lingering doubts of its veracity. So I was delighted to read an article recently that suggests that it was indeed true, and that Lars Bäckman, whom I met, probably was the inspiration.

He ran a restaurant in Rättvik for a while, which was sadly closed when I passed there a few years back. And then he died in 2023.

Pier pressure

It was a beautiful midsummer's day, but very windy. I'd just joined the local sailing club, and I was out in their Laser dinghy, having fun, despite capsizing a lot. But that's OK, Lasers are easy to right again, it's just part of the sport. Until the pin holding the tiller in place falls out, and your rudder becomes useless. Then you are a bit of a sitting duck, but without the propulsion options offered by the big webbed feet that are a rather important part of being a duck. But still not a disaster, as the club has a fetch boat that can motor out to help people who can't get back in, and worst case, I'd eventually drift to the other side of the lake, though not as fast as the tiller, because the sail in the water acted as a huge drogue. So I just sat on the bottom of the boat happily waiting for the fetch boat in the sunshine.

After a while I saw a fire engine hurtling through the trees, and then their lifeboat setting off from the bigger harbour, with blue lights flashing. Oh dear, someone's having a bad day I thought, and then, oh dear, I'm going to have a bad day too if they don't change course, as it looks like they are going to run me down in their hurry to save someone's life. Then they slowed down, and I realised that it was me who was their mission for the day.

Apparently someone walking their dog had called in that I was drowning. We all had a laugh, some more nervous than others, the fireman graciously said that it was a nice day for them to be out in the boat (and I suppose to have an excuse to get away from the family get-togethers that are a feature of midsummer here). They towed me back to the club, along the way returning the waves of a couple of guys who were frantically rowing a big motorboat against what was now heading towards a gale. After the firemen had left, I asked why the club hadn't sent out a fetch boat, and it turned out they had, but their motor had failed, and it was they who were now failing to get back with oars. The waving was apparently not just a friendly greeting, but an SOS. So then we had to flag down other motor boats to rescue my rescuers. Despite being a new member, everyone else in the club seems to know who I am now.

As you can see, sailing is one of many sports where my enthusiasm far exceeds my ability. I've crewed for a lot of friends with big yachts, and played with the dinghies at the local club, so I know the ropes, but I would never call myself a sailor, at least not in the presence of real sailors.

And I had never had the chance to captain a real boat to find out if I could put all my knowledge together, because none of my friends with boats were idiots, and renters in Sweden would ask awkward questions about my training. But in Guadeloupe in the Caribbean, language issues prevented the renter from finding out whether I should really be trusted with his catamaran.

So in return for a very small deposit, I could head off into the North Atlantic with his Hobie Cat on a rather windy, wavy day. Despite the conditions, I couldn't resist getting the boat up on to one keel, and yet somehow I managed to return safely. Looking back, I wonder what was going through my head at the time, and I suspect the answer is 'very little'.

Language pitfalls

The Swedish language uses two devices that are not registered by native English speakers, viz. pitch change and vowel length. Misunderstanding pitch change seldom causes trouble, but does brighten up the law of public access that states: "you may cross private land, but must keep away from the garden gnomes ", or, once you've learned Swedish a bit better: "but you must keep away from any homes".

Vowel length, on the other hand, gets me every time. The worst example is how "short" mutates into "horny" by just a tiny elongation of the vowel (approx. cort and coort). Not good for me being 5ft 6 and linguistically challenged.

So there I was in a bar with a friend who introduced me to two enormous, gorgeous, blonde Swedish girls. Excuse the tautology "two Swedish girls" will suffice. They were late because it was slow walking through the deep snow, and I replied that it was particularly difficult for me because I was so 'short'. Or that's what I thought I said, but the girls looked at me strangely, so I explained what I was talking about by holding my hand a metre and half up and saying "I'm this short".

A look of bewilderment (perhaps tinged with awe) crossed their faces, so clearly they needed more context to get my meaning, so I explained how back in England I seldom felt short, but here in Sweden, especially standing next to big Swedish girls, I often felt short. I never saw the girls again, and it was days before my friend decided it was time to tell me why, and what I had actually been telling them...

The next story is not really due to a new language, but standing at a bus stop trying to prepare change for the fare, I asked the woman next to me how much the bus cost. She looked at me strangely, thought a while, then said
"Oh, do you mean how much does a ticket cost?".
It was very tempting to say "Look, if I wanted to know the price of a ticket, I would have asked that. Now, I'm going to be making a lot of journeys with a lot of friends, so can you please tell me how much it would cost to buy this bus!". Instead I said "Yes".

Latte Markiato

I grew up on British cooking, and so I can eat and drink pretty much anything, including last winter's mixture of instant coffee and high-fat powdered milk that has been lurking in my ice skating backpack through the summer. I realise that coffee can taste better, but my roots have led to low culinary expectations, and so I sprinkle this mixture into some boiling water from a thermos and throw in some snow to cool it to drinkable temperatures, and reminisce of England.

I was doing this on a rock in the middle of a frozen lake one bitter winter's afternoon, when a fellow skater came up to me and told a sad tale of having been out for many hours and being extremely cold and thirsty, and could he maybe scrounge a little coffee from me. I said that he was very welcome, but warned him about the quality. He said he was desperate and would be very grateful for anything, so I duly made him a cup. As he tasted it, a strange collection of expressions came over his face, until he suddenly came out with : "Uh, this is great, uh, in fact this is so good that I think I'm going to save it for later!". He duly poured the coffee into his empty thermos and skated away.
I was so impressed by his politeness and ingenuity.

On a hiking trip in the Dolomites our ex-military Finnish guide was also a dedicated omnivore, and had no time for picky eaters. So when ordering ahead to the lunch restaurant, his concession to special diets was “OK, is anyone going to die if they don’t get their favourite food for lunch ?”
One lady tentatively put up her hand and said “I think I’m a little lactose intolerant”, to which he replied “Uh hu”, and repeated his question. I added that I was just generally intolerant, and he said that was fine.

A protocol for the efficient acquisition of girlfriends

A long, long time ago, in a country not so far away, there worked two nerdy guys at a small biotech company. Being nerds, neither had a girlfriend, but being nerds, they were sure that the problem could be solved with a little engineering, so one evening at the lab (where else would they be?), a plan was hatched.

How do I know all this? Because I was one of those nerds. And for the purposes of this story, we'll call the other one 'Derek'. Curiously, his mum made the same choice.

Our best chances were at SNerikes, a popular student pub, so off we headed, engineering the next step in the experiment on the way. What we needed was a table for six with two girls and four empty chairs - a bigger table would make contact harder, and squeezing on to a smaller one would be creepy. That we found such a table with a blonde for 'Derek' and a red-head for me was more luck than judgement, but then chance does favour the prepared mind. The next step was outside my knowledge base, as it required talking to the girls, and it didn't start well. In our defence, it turned out that the girls had met up that evening because a mutual friend was in a coma at the hospital, so they weren't really in a mood to be chatted up. Oblivious to this (and much else), I decided to pretend that I needed a light. Back then I carried cigarettes but no matches for such occasions, but unfortunately there was a tea-light on the table, though that conveniently went out when it was violently wiggled around on the way to my cig. "Excuse me, but could I possibly bother you for a light?" And we finally had contact, which continued well until closing. But what now? We had no endgame planned.
"We're nerds, so we'd like your numbers" didn't sound right.
"We're having a party next weekend, would you like to come?" sounded better, and they sounded interested. 'Derek' looked a bit confused but soon realised that of course we were going to have a party next weekend, and now we had 2 guests for it.
The rest of the week was spent collecting more guests, and the party was a success. And it still is, as 'Derek' and his blonde have two grown-up children, and I'm still good friends with my red-head. Go nerds!

The Finnish phantom

It's Monday morning, and my telephone rings at work in Uppsala.
"Mark Harris for Symbicom."
"Hello! This is Lotta..."
Oh good, I know a lot of Lottas, and they are all lovely.
But which one was this? I didn't recognise the voice.
"...your neighbour"
I have a neighbour called Lotta? No, I have no neighbour called Lotta. Neighbour at work? No, I have no neighbours at work.
An unmet neighbour in Norby? But she sounds like she knows me. I'll play along.
"Hi!"
"Sorry to call you at work, but it's about the translations."
Translations? I help with translations sometimes, but not recently, and not for people called Lotta. Think, think. Nothing.
"Err, and exactly which translations would they be?"
"The Finnish ones."
Finnish? The only Finnish I can translate is 'Cheers' or ‘This appliance must not be covered' (compulsory on electric fires in Sweden, ex-pat Finns not being good with hot things apparently).
"Err, I'm sorry, but it's Monday morning and I'm having a bout of Alzheimers, could you tell me a little more?"
"When we met in Buckingham you asked me about doing some Scandinavian translations for your company."
Ah, Buckingham. My neighbour in my home town of Buckingham. Nope, no Lottas there. And why would I tell her that I needed translations to Finnish?
"Was this in a bar?"
"No, outside my house. You asked me if I was Finnish.
I must have the wrong person. Sorry. Bye."
"Err, wait. I don't think that there are too many Mark Harrises from Buckingham working in Sweden, and you have this number, but I'm afraid I still don't remember talking to you."
"It was about five days ago."
"Three weeks? I was home three weeks ago..."
"No, last week, in North End Square. I'd better wait till I get back there. I'm in Finland now. Sorry to bother you. Bye."

Do I have blackouts? Do I have blackouts severe enough to somnambulate to England, chat up Finnish girls, and still be back in time for work? Do Finnish girls hallucinate? Accurately?
Can I astrally project? Or am I, as someone once suggested, surrounded by an improbability field?
I have never worked out this event.

The Norwegian love-letter

I once met a wonderful girl called Hilde on a bus in Tromsö, northern Norway, and we'd been writing to each other fairly regularly for several years, via my parents' permanent address. One day I got a letter from Germany, saying that she was down there and would be travelling north soon, and perhaps we could meet up as she passed Uppsala. Great, I said, and sent off a letter asking her for a phone number on which I could contact her and make arrangements. Four days later I got another letter signed Hilde, this time from Oslo, with an address and phone number. A little surprising that it was so quick, but more surprising was that it was a love letter, quite unlike any previous missives from this lady.

Ah ha, I thought. Ah ha. Ah ha. This continued for some time, until I could think of other words again. Hmmm, I thought. Oooooh. Gosh. Hmmm (again). Perhaps she never revealed these emotions before because we were so far away from each other, but now she thought I should be warned about what she was going to do to me as she passed through Uppsala. Not that I was entirely sure, since the letter was mostly in hand-written Norwegian, and used a vocabulary that I had sadly never needed in Norway, but the general idea was obvious. So I phoned the Oslo number and an unfamiliar voice answered.
"Is that the Olsen residence?"
"Yes, my name is Olsen."
"Ah, good, do you have someone called Hilde staying with you?"
"I am Hilde."
"Err, Hilde who?"
"Hilde Olsen."
Oh I see, wrong Hilde (probably all called Hilde there, I thought).
"I believe a friend of mine also called Hilde is staying with you?"
"No..."
"Err, But I got a letter from her with this number in it..."
"Oh, is that Mark Harris?"
"Yes..."
"I sent the letter."
"Err..."

"Did you used to work in Oslo?"
"No..."
"Oh dear, I thought you were someone I used to know in Oslo, an Englishman who moved away to Sweden, and I found your address from the Swedish Tax Register."
"So you're the wrong Hilde, and I'm the wrong Mark then?"
"Err, looks like it."
"Oh."
Pretty bizarre, huh? And their signatures were similar, there were a couple of words of English at the bottom of the letter in case I didn't understand the rest, and it was timed almost perfectly. I guess God gets bored in the summer holidays too, and plays games like this. She managed to not sound embarrassed during the ensuing conversation (Hilde, not God), despite the apparent sounds of husband and children in the background.

I wonder if she was after the same Mark Harris that orders Finnish translations? My Hilde did contact me later, and visited. She was as sweet as ever, but just as platonic too.

Norway seems to be a good source of stories, or perhaps I just spend a lot of my free time there. Either way, I should share another snippet.

I was driving through some verdant mountains in the north when I spotted a beautiful waterfall tumbling down through the greenery, and stopped to photograph it. It was a bit tricky to frame, and I had to wedge myself upside-down in a ditch to get under my tripod. At which point a VW van full of heroic Norwegian men came round the corner, skidded to a halt a little way past me, and came to rescue this obvious victim of some terrible road accident. I'm not sure that they were convinced that I really was healthy, but I was able to persuade them that I didn't have acute problems, and they went on their way.

All things come to she who waits tables

There's an intrinsic problem with finding a life partner when you are an outdoorsy person who likes to be in the middle of nowhere, because like-minded mates are probably going to be in the middle of nowhere too, and that is a very big place, so you're probably going to miss each other. But there is a loophole: the transport to nowhere, which is where I eventually met my wife, Lotta.

It was my birthday, and although I happened to have bought myself a beautiful silver Saab 900 EMS that morning, my trip to Lappland later in the day was going to be by train.

I found that I was sharing my sleeping compartment with five women, and after 12 hours of agonising deliberation, I decided to spend breakfast chatting to the tiny lady with the enormous backpack. She was taking a break from her job as a lawyer to work at the ski lodge in Saltoluokta, while I was getting off a little earlier in Murjek to start a week-long ski tour between cabins. We didn't exchange details, so we were very much ships, or trains, that passed in the night.

A year passed, and I'd lost my job, so I ended up spending three weeks ski touring that year, and by the time I got to Saltoluokta, I was rather tired of homemade porridge, so I decided to treat myself to a proper cooked breakfast while I was at a full-service lodge. And you'll never guess who was my waitress.

You did guess ? Then I'd better not move on to writing detective novels. Yes, it was Lotta, and we remembered each other. Since fate obviously had plans for us, and she had some leave due, we decided that we would meet up at the next cabin the following day. Just in case we hadn't gotten the message, the cosmos arranged for the Hale Bop comet to be floating over my cabin the next evening, to guide Lotta to her chosen one.

The cosmos also added some northern lights as decoration. Photographers were flying around the world to record this celestial arrangement, and there I was in the darkest place imaginable, with two cameras, 3 lenses, and a tripod in my bag, yet the only photo I have from that day is one of Lotta.

In my defence, it was back in the days of film, so I had a limited number of shots, and the landscape was rather flat, so there was no good foreground interest for the night-sky composition. That's a terrible defence. I'm going to be convicted of missing the photo of a lifetime, aren't I ?

Most of the ski cabins have a warden, whose personalities span the entire human spectrum except for a small gap around the 'normal' region. Some are recluses who keep the cabin clean and whole, but otherwise avoid the guests, and others are people-people who see the job as a continuous supply of captive audiences. Our host was in the latter camp, and it was early in the season at a less-popular spot, so she was desperately lonely and wouldn't leave us alone for a minute the whole evening. She even cooked a rather delicious dinner for us, which she isn't really supposed to do. A lovely lady, but not the best timing.

The next day Lotta and I skied back to Saltoluokta together, 20 km of rather flat terrain, but cold and windy, and with my 20 kg sled I would normally take several stops for rest and refreshment. But that wasn't going to happen today. Lotta's pace was 10 km of hard march, no stopping even to adjust clothing or sip water, then a quick lunch in my windsack (which is pretty much as it sounds - a large plastic bag that you climb into for protection from the wind in emergencies or just because it's a cosy place for lunch (kind of)). Then it was another 10km without stopping.

You can see why I married her, although it did take another 7 years before we really got together, and further 10 before we got officially hitched, which we did in the Swedish church in Copenhagen. We chose to elope because we would otherwise never have gotten around to organising a big wedding, and a civil service in a sad council office with a superannuated politician didn't really appeal. As it was, we had a very nice conventional service, complete with music, walking down the aisle, and a reception afterwards. It's just that the only guests were the florist and the caretaker, who played their roles perfectly.
We should invite them to our anniversary parties.

The voices in my head

The summer after we met again, Lotta had already planned to work at another mountain lodge, this one in Grövelsjön, near the Norwegian border in Dalarna. I joined her for a week or so, and we lived in a tent several kilometres from the lodge, by a wonderful babbling brook. After Lotta had left on her daily commute across the hills, I was left to my own thoughts, which were interrupted only by the voices of the elves who lived in the stream. Because, yes, after listening to the stream many hours a day, it really started babbling, and I heard the elves uttering short English phrases.

Now, I should be clear that this was not like the disembodied voices that I often hear at home, the ones that seem to emanate from the walls, or maybe from another room, the ones that compel me to do terrible things that are against my true nature, like “Mark, you must join me to IKEA to buy more cushions” or “Mark, you must throw away that favourite jacket”.

No, these voices uttered short phrases, which were clearly composed of real words, but mostly made no sense, which I at first attributed to English not being elves’ native language.
But you may remember that I trained as a scientist, so I started to harbour a growing suspicion that imaginary beings were not trying to communicate with me.

The explanation that nerdy-me came up with was this:
The stream was chaotic, and so produced white noise,
which consists of all possible frequencies, randomly arranged.
And random means that every so often a noise is going to correspond to a word you recognise, in whatever languages you understand. And sometimes more than one word. And many of hours of random noises will lead to a significant number of recognisable words, and sometimes they will be close together and sound like elves are talking to you.

Sometimes I regret my scientific training.

It’s a lemon tree, my dear.

Some years later, Lotta and I were touring southern Sweden and found that there was no room for us at the inn we had hoped for. And since Hale Bop was by this time 5 billion km away, it couldn’t guide us to an appropriate stable, so after a lot of driving around, we ended up at a funny little hotel in the small town of Hammenhög.

We booked a table at the 300-year-old restaurant next door, and set off for a quick walk around the town to get up an appetite. Then I got very excited because the doors to the tractor museum were open. Once I’d recovered enough to talk coherently, I tried to go in, but was told it was just being used as a base for the evening’s quiz walk, which is the highlight of the local community’s entertainment calendar. The others had already started, but we were invited to join in. I’m usually the one to say yes to everything, but I wondered just how much fun it would be to wrongly guess the answers to local history questions while hurrying to get to our dinner booking, so this time it was Lotta who said “Yes, of course!”.

Question 1 lead us down to the school, and asked : “In what year was the classroom extension built ?”. It’s been 50 years since I had history lessons, and I’m not even sure we covered this, so I was going to guess, but Lotta started calculating: “Well, there was a school reform in 1992, and that will have redistributed the pupils, so probably triggered the project, but planning and procurement would take a year, and then another year or so for building, and they would probably want it ready for the new school year, so that would be 1994”. And so she continued for the whole tour. All very impressive, but hardly going to compete with the locals, who we found sitting patiently and politely waiting for us when we got back. Sitting in silence, this being Sweden.

A little embarrassed that we had brought the town to a stop, we quickly handed in our papers, and were going to slip away quietly when it was announced that we had won. Even more embarrassed now, Lotta accepted our prize bag of coffee that the guy who built the school extension was probably expecting

(except he’d forgotten when the fire station closed. Ha !).
Since we were already late for dinner, we thanked them hurriedly, and ran away.

I think we may be barred from Hammenhög now.

American psycho-something

I like Americans. I love their positive, can-do attitude, and their friendly helpfulness towards strangers. (Or at least I did in the 80’s and 90’s. It’s unclear how much I would enjoy visiting now in the 2020s, though I’m guessing most people are the same as they were.)

Ten minutes into my first visit to the country, I was struggling to get a payphone to work, so I turned to the Dallas character beside me for help - 6 foot 6, tanned, cowboy hat and Texan accent, probably planted there by the tourist board.

When I explained that I was shovelling in money but still couldn't get connected, he pulled out his credit card, swiped it through the phone, and said "There, that should fix it. Welcome to America!". And I don't think he was showing off, he just saw a problem that he could easily solve, and thus did so, an attitude that I saw time and again in the 3 years I've spent in the country.

Even before I left the UK, an American girl that I had met twice gave me a list of phone numbers to friends that she assured me would put me up if I were travelling through their cities.
So arriving in San Francisco a week later I phoned Michelle, mentioned our mutual friend, and as promised she insisted that I come and stay with them rather than stay at the YMCA, however much fun that is reputed to be.

They were a lovely couple, we had a great evening together, and the next morning they left me with the keys to the apartment as they went to work. Then in good Colombo style, Michelle turned back and said
"Oh, just one last thing, my brother sometimes comes by to help out - he may seem a little odd because he suffers from, err, psycho-something, but anyway, don't be surprised if there's someone else in the flat when you come in. Bye.".
Well there wasn't anyone home when I got back from an intensive day on The Streets of San Francisco. (Sorry, but this was 1987, so '70s TV series and songs were fresh in my mind. Very fresh since using a phone box that had a notice on it asking for witnesses to the fatal shooting of a previous user.)

Anyway, still jetlagged, I took a nap on the sofa, and woke to hear noises in the kitchen, so I got up to introduce myself. This surprised the brother, who was in the process of drying a large carving knife. Very large, very sharp, very surprised. At which point I remembered that he suffered from psycho-something, and I really wished that Michelle had been more specific about his problem.

The optimistic part of me was hoping for 'psychosomatic', but my reptilian bits were screaming 'psychopath'. Tense hours passed (according to reptile-me, possibly only seconds) during which many more 70's TV programs passed through my head and adrenal glands. Then the brother put down the knife, and said "Hello, who are you?"
I told him, and we all lived to tell the tale.

It's funny how a 10-second event from 30 years ago can become a page-long story, but those seconds did take up a lot more space in my head than most others.

The massage parlour

So I'm naive. I know that, and I compensate for it by being careful. Sometimes. But sometimes I have to admit that I just get into things that nobody with any basic knowledge of the world would manage to. Here's an example, taken from my time in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Imagine that you are working in a prestigious university department, with a group of over-achievers who think that sleeping more than every other night is grounds for dismissal, and you are totally out of your depth because your boss has gone on holiday and left you to assemble the components of a 5 million dollar grant application, any technical errors in which could cause you and your colleagues to be out on the street.

Imagine the occasional little twitches in your shoulders that gradually become bigger, more frequent twitches, and finally coalesce into a constant knot of muscle. What springs to mind?
No, that would invalidate my life insurance.
No, that would land me in jail.
No, stop it. I was thinking of massage. A long, deep, massage that would render my forelimbs useable again. At this point I did actually show some wisdom. I thought
"Ah ha. Be careful, you've heard about some of these places. *Be sure to select a respectable one*".
That was the last time I recall showing any wisdom in this story.

So, off I went to the yellow pages, flipping past marriage-guidance services and martial-arts clubs (I was pleased to see that they had different numbers), to massage parlours and massage therapists. The latter I cavalierly decided were for people with injuries rather than discomfort. You'll remember that the cavaliers lost. I sifted through the parlours. I wasn't really too worried about my choice, I merely wanted to avoid the embarrassment of having to decline Mandy's "extra services", or worse still think that she meant complimentary toe-nail clipping, and accidentally accept.

University Massage. That's the one for me, I thought, can't get much more respectable than a university. Might be a bit cold and

clinical, but no worries about having a twitch of the ear misinterpreted as the secret sign for "can you just move the tension elsewhere?". I phoned them up and asked for an appointment. No, they didn't take appointments, it was a walk-in service, open from 6 until 2. Hmmm. Strange.
"Aren't you open in the evenings?"
"They are evening hours".
Oh, well, I suppose people are too busy during the day to go off for a massage, and besides, they wouldn't want to go back to work and waste the effect. And with so many service workers forced to work unsocial hours they must keep getting people coming in off shifts well into the night. Like I said, I burned out on wisdom with my earlier effort.

So off I went on my fateful journey to the small yellow house on the high street that I realised I'd passed a hundred times before without noticing what it was.

Inside it was dark. Dark green. So dark green that, for instance, you wouldn't really be able to identify anyone else who had been in the room, not to the satisfaction, of, say, a jury. In fact I was alone. Alone to contemplate how they must have planned it this way so that one became mentally calmed in preparation for the physical relaxation to come. But I couldn't contemplate this for long, as I was soon summoned up the stairs of what now revealed itself to be a normal domestic house.

Upstairs the lights were brighter. Brighter red, to be precise. Before I could dwell on that I was forced to dwell very rapidly on the three swimsuit-clad women sitting on chairs on the landing, and then on the price list pinned to the wall. There were maybe twenty items on the 'menu', and it is one of my life's regrets that I only remember the first three, which were: topless massage, mutual massage, and mutual massage in shower.

I started to wonder if something was wrong. I ran over the information available to me : I'm in the heart of the bible belt, on the high street of a college town, in a place called University Massage. But it looks like a brothel. I came to the conclusion that the received wisdom that I have an irreparably twisted mind was probably true, and that I was jumping to unwarranted conclusions

based on my twisted view of the world, and that the truth was simply that respectable massage clinics operated a little differently from how I'd imagined. So they offered some interesting services, but surely they must still give a regular massage. Mustn't they?

The simplest service cost 40 dollars, about what I expected for a good work down taking half an hour of professional time. Except it said 10 minutes. Including shower. They must be really professional, I supposed. These thoughts must have taken some time, or maybe something else gave me away as a novice, but one of the women (definitely not girls; women with a capital W, and perhaps a capital M too) gently asked if it was my first time.
"Err, yes."
"Well, we usually recommend our regular mutual massage service for first timers. Most of them are very happy with that."
Most? What about the others? Did they really want the irregular mutual massage service?
"Err, I just wanted a regular (unilateral?) massage, actually."
"OK, and which of us would you like?"
How was I supposed to judge their massaging skills with them just sitting there in their swimsuits?
"Err, I'm sure you'll do fine."
"OK, if you'd like to come in here, take your clothes off and give me 40 dollars and your driving licence."
I waited for the conditional subclause. It never came. I wondered if they had them in America. I also wondered why she wanted my driving licence. To check to see if I were a policeman?
But surely the police must know about such a blatant operation. I decided that it was more likely that she just wanted an ID in case I gave any trouble. I undressed and lay on the plastic-sheeted bed, noticing that the place was still indistinguishable from a domestic dwelling, with perhaps the exception of the giant bottle of Johnson's baby oil on the bedside cabinet. The bed was a standard divan, well used.

How did I end up here, I wondered? Oh well, at least I'll be getting my massage soon. Never mind the details. Then the

middle-aged woman came back, rolling down the top of her swimsuit as promised in the menu.

I wondered if in one of the more expensive options she kept it rolled up. But perhaps it somehow helped her massage more freely. Apparently it didn't, as all she offered was a sloppy smearing of the baby oil over my skin. After a minute or so she even gave up on that.
"Err."
Ah ha, I thought. Someone else knows that word.
"Err, you do know that 'relief' is included in this service."
"I was starting to suspect that, but really, I just want a massage."
"Oh."
She tried. I'm sure she tried, but it was painful to see her trying to stretch out her one-minute warm-up routine to 10 minutes (minus shower).

So they don't even do massages here? I was incredulous. Was I really so stupid to expect a massage at a massage parlour? At University Massage? I had to ask.
"So, err, do you get many people coming here for a massage."
"You're my second."
"Like, in a row? Or total today?"
"Ever."

I was surprised. Really. Naive is one thing, but it seems that at best I'm the second most naive person in Chapel Hill in the history of this woman's career, and I don't think that was particularly short. So what's the story? Is it part of American high-school education to learn the difference between therapist and parlour? Do other people wimp out when they get to the landing and realise that something is up? Or am I really, in the best case, the second most naive person in the world.

You choose. Don't tell me the answer.

MASSAGE

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An amorous encounter in the forest

I was stressed and over-worked again, as I was for a lot of my time in the U.S. But this time I had a cure - a long weekend in the mountains. The Monday was a public holiday, and I could actually take it off. Three days of wandering through September forests, laying by lakes, maybe swimming a bit, generally forgetting about all the details of the projects at work.
The weather was great : 15 deg C and clear blue skies, and it looked like everything was set for my long-awaited visit to Asheville and its surroundings, on the western border of North Carolina, deep in the Appalachian mountains.

I left work early, after asking around if anyone knew what time the library closed. I was just curious, you understand, it's not my fault if they leapt to conclusions. But God seems to consider manipulation just as bad as out-right lying, and as punishment sent down a military-grade wasp to attack me on the way home. It pumped so much venom into my temple that it was an hour or so before the pain subsided enough for me to feel able to drive safely. Even then I kept a supply of baking powder and ethanol handy to damp the bite as I cruised my beloved Camaro west though the autumn colours. Carrying an open bottle of 180 proof alcohol and a dish of white powder on the passenger seat could have lead to an interesting story by itself, but luckily no police took an interest in me on this trip.

I arrived in the mountains just before dark, and drove down a fire trail till it ended in the middle of nowhere, and set up my one-man tent. The colours were fantastic, my headache was receding, and God seemed to have forgiven me for leaving work early.
At this point a beat-up, red-coloured pickup truck appeared from nowhere (the only place around), and out stepped a beat-up red-coloured guy with a couple of teeth and an unsteady gait.
He was friendly enough, we exchanged Hi's, and then the conversation went like this:
“So, y'all here on vacation, huh?" (That was his line, not mine)
"Err, yes."
"On y'own?"
(Uh-oh, one-man tent, probably saw me arrive, probably not

going to fall for "well, yes, except for Mad Bill who's just counting his ammo behind the tent".)
"Err, yes."
"So y'all jus' visitin' then?"
"Errr, yes."
"Y'all married?"
(I guess I could and should have lied here, but I wasn't really up to speed.)
"Errrr, no."
"D'y'all like gay folks?"
(Eeek! No right answer to that one. Getting up to speed now...)
"Well, you know, I'm not that way inclined myself, but I have nothing against them." (And I'd like to keep it that way)
"You wanna BJ?"
"Err, no, really, no thank you."
"Don't y'all wanna have some fun?"
"I wouldn't find that fun, actually."
"I bet y'all really big."
"No, no, not at all. Anyway, nice meeting you. Goodbye."
"So y'all don't wanna have some fun?"
"Err, no. Well, good luck. Goodbye. Goodbye. Goodbye."
And off he went.

Have you seen the film Deliverance? I hadn't at the time, and boy am I glad I hadn't. If you haven't seen it yet,
a) Don't.
b) The plot is as follows (close your eyes while reading the next few lines if you're going to ignore advice 'a', or if you have a delicate soul) : Some tough guys go canoeing down an Appalachian river, they meet some mountain men who look like mine, but they didn't give up so easily, and the tough guys end up variously defiled and dead. If I had seen the film at the time, I would have been terrified, but as it was, I thought it was just another brightly-coloured thread in life's rich tapestry, and carried on with my evening.

Which involved driving back to the road to visit the famous "Bill's Bluegrass and Barbecue", where I could sit in a corner and write letters to my friends over some beers. It was a great place,

straight out of The Waltons, with good ol' boys in dungarees drinking Budweiser and hoe dancing till it was time to leave and put their pickups into a ditch. (I think I missed some episodes of The Waltons.)

But as I retold my story in letters, doubts came into my mind. What if he thought I was playing hard-to-get? What if he came back with his mates? What if he didn't, but an insect goes past my tent and makes a rustle? How peacefully am I going to sleep out there?

In answer to these questions, I checked into a motel for the night and returned to my tent the next day, expecting it to be ripped open with a big knife, but in fact it seemed to be untouched. On the other hand, my lymph nodes were painfully swollen from the wasp bite, and it was pouring with rain from a uniformly grey sky that showed no sign of breaking up. I drove around the rest of the day wondering what to do in the mountains in torrential rain, didn't much like the answer, camped one more night, woke to the same weather, and drove back home a day early, rather disappointed. There again, would I remember a sunny hiking weekend this clearly 30 years on?

Smoking in supermarkets

America can be a wonderful place, especially when you're looking for a fresh lobster at three in the morning. Run out of camembert for a midnight feast? Just pop along to Big Star, and the world is your oyster. Or fresh lobster.

I became fascinated by this leviathan of American consumerism as soon as it swept away the old A&P near my home. It was soooo excessive. 30 different packages of milk were available : low-fat, no-fat, a-bit-more-fat, chocolate- flavoured, acidophilous, sterilised, one-pint, two-pint, half-gallon, one-gallon, and all the permutations. So one day when I was getting my weekly workout by walking all the way round the mix-n-match salad bar, I was particularly annoyed to see a fat old businessman holding a lit cigar in the same hand that held his bowl, and dropping ash in half the salads. I was about to say something withering about his smoking in a supermarket when I realised that I'd never seen a no-smoking sign, and, ever aware that I was a guest in a foreign culture (hard to forget, in fact), I held my tongue. And in fact, as the number one producer of tobacco in the US, North Carolina did indeed allow smoking in most shops. Still, as I left I noticed a pile of complaint forms (sorry, suggestion forms), and returned one with the following letter :

"*Dear Mr. Big-Star, I must congratulate you on the opening of your Chapel Hill store. I do think it's very important that we small-town dwellers should share the opportunity to buy fresh lobster 24 hours a day, and I have been delighted that you've now made this possible. However, I do wonder about your smoking policy. Don't you think that it would give you an edge over the competition if we could shop in a healthy, smoke-free atmosphere? I for one was discouraged from browsing your salad bar today because of the unhealthy environment caused by a reckless smoker. Yours etc*."

I expected no reply (hence the tongue-in-cheek wording), but thought that I'd done my bit. However, a week later I received the following :

"*Dear Mr. Harris, thank you so much for your kind words, but we're sorry that you're not completely satisfied with Big Star, and so have forwarded your letter to head office.*"

Hmm. Polite of them to acknowledge, I thought.
Then a week later I received the following from head office :
"*Dear Mr. Harris, thank you so much for your kind words, but we're sorry that you're not completely satisfied with Big Star, and so we would like to invite you to discuss your problems with our managers over dinner at the Europa hotel on the following date.*"
Hmm. Free dinner, I thought, shame it coincides with my Tai-Chi class. But then I realised that I was unlikely to be alone, and that they would probably be trying to woo back everyone who had filled in a complaint form, and so all the most obnoxious, entitled and whiney people in Chapel Hill would be there. That I couldn't miss. And did the Europa hotel know the scrutiny their restaurant was going to be under, I wondered?

So off I went, suitably early to get in a few complimentary cocktails before stationing myself on the corner of a square of tables set for about 50 people. The main course was a rather fine steak, and my neighbours were a couple of middle-aged ladies, one of whom eventually worked out that I wasn't from those parts, but was surprised to find that I was foreign. "England! Oh, so how do find life in the west?". Bear in mind that we were on the east coast of the country. It was a political divide that I had apparently crossed.

Several courses and limitless wine later, the managers started oozing at us, reminding us how very important we were too them, and how very distressed they were that we were not entirely happy, but we must realise that it was hard to keep everybody happy at the same time. And then they took our individual grievances one-by-one. Mine was far and above the most reasonable. One objected to the placing of structural elements of the building; most missed some obscure product line that the simpering managers defensively but reasonably pointed out would take up space currently occupied by more popular items.

My objection was very sensibly countered by the suggestion that they would lose more customers than they would gain by a

smoking ban, but they agreed to placing 50 "Please do not smoke" signs around the store. Fair enough. Only once did the suits lose their cool, and that was with a displaced New-Yorker who couldn't believe that they didn't stock the 18oz packets of spoon-sized shredded wheat. "Don't we sir? I thought we had the whole range of that product?

Look, we have the 64oz, the 32oz, and the 16oz, and. Oh."
"So are you going to stock it?"
"Well, I doubt if they have such fine divisions..."
"They have 18oz in New York"
"But really sir. We have 15000 product lines, and three different sizes of spoon-sized shredded wheat. I don't think we can stop some other line in order to make space for the 18oz packets."
"I have coupons for 5c off the 18oz size"
Things deteriorated a little after that and I forget the details, but I suspect they quietly bought the coupons off him for a good price.

It was all definitely worth missing my Tai Chi for.

Tom

I met Tom at a small bar in Chapel Hill. It was so small that there was only one other stool beside him at the bar, and so being in the US, conversation was pretty much mandatory.

He looked a bit like George Clooney, with chiselled features, piercing blue eyes, and a wry smile. He also worked with handicapped children, and drove a racing-green two-seater sports car. So he would be considered quite a catch by a lot of people, though not really my type for romance, mostly because he doesn't wear dresses. But he was also quick-witted, a good conversationalist and fun, so we became good friends, and I got a front row view of life as an eligible bachelor.

On top of everything else, he was a smooth talker and could literally charm the pants off anyone he chose.
But he was also very modest and never bragged about his conquests, so it took a lot of effort on my part to drag stories out of him. Although he did once admit that he used to date seven girls a week. "But I don't do that any more", he added quickly.
"Grew some morals?" I added flippantly, and got the reply:
"Morals ? Huh ? Oh no. Do you know how much it costs to date seven girls a week ? And for each of them it was a special one-off occasion, so it was really hard work."

Out on a drive one evening, we stopped to buy some beer.
I popped into the shop for maybe 5 minutes, and when I came out, Tom asked if I wanted to go to a party. Wondering why he hadn't mentioned it earlier, he pointed to a car full of girls that was driving away, and said "I was just chatting to them, and they invited us." And so it was that I ended up at a large and elaborate Grateful Dead-themed party somewhere deep in the woods of North Carolina.

In general he had only one real girlfriend at a time, and few seemed to have regrets afterwards, as witnessed by the huge number of happy greetings he would get from exes as we walked through town.

But on one occasion I called to see if he wanted to go out for some beers, and he excused himself because he'd accidentally

got himself involved with two girls simultaneously, and needed to sort out the situation.

A few days later I called again, and asked how it went.
“Oh, that’s all sorted”, he said
”So who’s the lucky girl then ?”.
“Huh ? Oh, no, I just managed to make myself comfortable with dating two girls.”
I just loved that he needed an evening alone to come up with this solution. I plan to approach problems in my life with the same strategy:
“Mark, I need a program to sort through potential drug candidates by Thursday.”
“OK, leave it with me…”
Two days later: “OK boss, I’m now comfortable with not having those results for you.”

On another occasion when he had accidentally double booked himself, he asked if I could take care of one of the ladies, whom he had promised to take to a Tequila and Jacuzzi party. As a good friend, I was willing to make this sacrifice, and so was picked up by the lovely Dena in her beat-up pickup truck, and whisked to a fancy house with a number of Jacuzzis. The guests were mostly in care professions, with emotionally demanding jobs and a regular need of Jacuzzis and tequila.

Sometime during the evening I found myself sitting next to a girl who had downed most of a half bottle by herself, and who was now slipping slowly and dangerously deeper into the pool.
At which point her colleague opposite (also not entirely sober) decided that this was the time to reveal, at length, the feelings for her that he’d been secretly harbouring.

Feeling it would be rude to interrupt this important monologue, but not wanting the lucky girl to drown, I found myself trying to be inconspicuous as I hugged her tightly, fighting harder and harder to keep her head above the bubbling water, and wondering if either of them was going to remember the encounter the next day. I certainly did.

I subsequently became good friends with Dena, and she may have saved my life. It was on a camping weekend to a gorge whose name I forget. She was working three jobs at the time, and so she slept in the bed of her truck while I drove.

North Carolina summers are hot and humid, so swimming in the gorge was a must. But it also rains a lot, so the river was well filled and rather dangerous, which lead to me being almost washed over a rather steep waterfall. Dena dragged me violently by one arm as I tried to fight the current, and she eventually managed to (wo)manhandle me out of the water. Rather than thinking about major injuries and long-term care, I found the physical and emotional experience of mortal danger and rescue by an adorable woman surprisingly sensual, and this led to what turned out to be my lifetime record for the kindest and most eloquent rejection of my affections by a girl. Psychologists certainly know how to make a guy feel good, even under those circumstances.

On another occasion she invited me to dinner, during which we were discussing our lives, and I had told her how lucky I had been, with everything going smoothly and nothing really bad happening in mine. She then pointed out that her neuro patients probably thought the same thing until the moment their cars crashed. I was thinking about this as I drove home in the dark, when I suddenly saw a dead deer lying across my lane.
I just had time to swerve into the mercifully empty other lane to avoid hitting it. Apparently I'm still lucky.

We're still friends, and I met up with her in San Diego a while back. She's doing well, and I no longer hold her responsible for my life.

Another interesting proposition from Tom was going on a double date with a couple of women who were lonely because their husbands were in prison. That night I woke from a nightmare and grabbed a piece of paper on which I scribbled a reminder to myself to call Tom and suggest we don't. He agreed that maybe it wasn't such a great idea after all.

Instead he suggested a foursome with a couple of single girls who liked to party. I assumed he was joking, until later when we were at a large dinner, and a girl on our table spontaneously said “Oh, is this the guy you were suggesting for the foursome ?” Luckily or otherwise, I was leaving the country the next day, so scheduling issues came between us.

The sound of blackfish

Sometime in the 90's I was sent to a conference in Vancouver, to learn more about the paper-making industry, whom we were trying to help by developing enzymes that would digest cellulose faster, and thus reduce the energy costs of pulping. I have zero recollection of the success of that mission, but I do remember meeting a fellow chemist who became a big part of my life for the next 5 years, despite her favouring the darker branches of the chemist tree (lignin).

I also remember the kayaking trip along the coast of Vancouver Island that I managed to squeeze in afterwards. This was back in the days when organising such a trip involved posting letters to tourist offices months before, flipping through brochures, and maybe a $5-a-minute phone call to make a booking.
No Tripadvisor ratings back then, so no big surprise that the meeting point with the outfitter was an unexpected 4-hour drive from the put-in point, or that the promised VHF radio didn't work, or that the emergency air-horn was so rusty that it exploded as I stowed it in the boat. We had low expectations back then.

My first paddling stop was Telegraph Cove, one of the few villages on my route. I enjoyed my last café before the wilderness, and popped into the fishing shop just because it had people in it. One of those people was the very nice girl behind the counter, which reminded me that I had an important question to ask. I eventually settled on confirming that low tide was the safest time to cross the Johnstone Strait, as my outfitter had assured me. "No!" was the answer, the currents lag the tides by 3 hours there, so low tide still has dangerous whirlpools and tide rips. Thank goodness for nice girls, especially ones who furnish you with current and tide tables. The crossing was tough, but at least not fatal, as following my outfitter's advice might have been.

The tides are extreme here : 4 to 5 metres, so if you land and leave at different phases of the tide, you can find your boat hanging a couple of body lengths vertically up or down from where you left it.

Paddling along the coast of Vancouver Island is amazing, but Pacific North-West weather isn't. After several days of paddling in 15°C drizzle, on 12°C water, I was starting to wonder if stopping off in the Caribbean would have been a better idea. But then I saw a bald eagle swoop down to the surface of the water to snatch up a huge fish, and that bumped my morale back up.

Then later I was paddling across Blackfish Sound, taking my mind off the weather by wondering what a blackfish might be, when I saw a pod of dolphins travelling parallel with me, but maybe a kilometre away. As I watched, they suddenly changed direction, headed over to me, danced around the boat for five minutes, maybe 10 metres away, and then headed back to their original route. It was wonderful! And very hard to interpret other than that they were as curious about me as I was of them, and they had come over to check me out. Suddenly the Caribbean seemed like a poor second choice.

I did, of course, have a camera with me, in a waterproof case bought specially for this trip. A cheap case, which somehow caused my camera to autofocus on the case itself. So I have very sharp pictures of the case, with very fuzzy pictures of dolphins superimposed.

Since I was still several hours drive from the ferry in Nanaimo, I took a float plane back to Vancouver, which was fun, and then the bus to Seattle. At the border they were very thorough going through everyone's bags, and I was curious how they would respond to opening my dry bag stuffed with some pretty unpleasant laundry, but I was last in the queue, and luckily for them (and possibly me) they just waved me through.

Subtropical skiing

So there I was, my first time on skis, heading down the big slopes with everybody else. And doing pretty well, I thought, after barely an hour on the nursery slopes.

It’s just a pity North Carolina is subtropical - not a good climate for powder snow, better for sheet ice. Which I soon hit, and, adult prodigy though I may be, I soon passed the maximum speed that you can snow-plough on blue ice, and fell horribly.

Some time later I became aware of big red snow-mobiles, stretchers and paramedics. Rather excessive, I thought, for a little bump on the head, but professionals that they were, they put me through the rigours of a lucidity test. I scored just one point, for successfully guessing my own name, but the rest of the questions were way beyond me.

The irony is that when I came round I was actually fully functional immediately, but they asked trick questions like:
"What day is it?". Do I know what day it is today?
No. Do I ever know what day it is? No. Did I have the slightest chance of knowing what day it was in the middle of my holiday? Hardly a fair question.
"What is your phone number?" followed. Yeah, right, I'm always phoning myself, aren't I? And I'd just moved and got a new number too. No points. One last chance:
"Where are you from?". Ooh, me Sir, me Sir, I can do that one. Except does he mean where originally, where from in The States, or where am I staying in the resort? Hmm. Just a moment while I construct a nice sentence that covers all these possibilities.

But wait, why are you strapping me to this snow-mobile?
Why are you whizzing me off to the clinic? I'm fine. This is as good as I get.

It took many hours for the medics to realise the problem was congenital, that I wasn’t going to get any better, and they may as well let me go.

One of my friends promised to keep a close eye on me, and rush me back if I showed any signs of normality.

Some years later it was another first day, this time with a snowboard. The first problem was getting up the mountain on the T-lift. Skis give you a lot of freedom to wave you legs around independently to keep your balance, but with a snowboard it's much harder, and once your centre of gravity moves outside the edges of the board, you're kind of doomed. Or at least I was.

So on every trip up, I tripped up. When this happens you normally let go of the lift, and try to get to the side to avoid wiping out all the skiers behind you. But I wasn't going to give up that easily, so I hung on to the T and got dragged along on my front until I could flip on to my back and then pivot around so that the board was uphill from me, and then flip up on to the board again, in a manoeuvre that I learned from water-starting windsurfers.

When I succeeded with this Hail Mary, I got cheers from the kids behind, but the staff clearly thought I was going to kill myself or someone else, and after a while they started giving me lifts up the hill on a scooter.

Going down went a little better, but it was icy again, and on a traverse I caught my downhill back edge. With my feet bound together, I had no way to stop a rotating fall through more than 90 degrees, and an impact on the back of my head. Despite wearing a helmet, I saw stars, and for the rest of the day all the high-contrast features in my vision glowed neon green.

I treated this condition with beer, and survived, but my current cognitive issues are making more and more sense as I write these stories.

Mark the penguin

Although I love skiing, and have come a long way since my first day in North Carolina, I have to admit that my technique reflects being a Brit who started the sport in his 30's. I run more on enthusiasm than talent, in true Eddie The Eagle style.

This was expressed well at a conference visit to my all-time favourite resort of Wolf Creek in the Rockies, as I was blundering down a double-black route through the trees with some locals. At the bottom, one of them looked at me with a puzzled expression and said
"That was amazing! You can't ski - yet somehow you managed to get down with the rest of us, and you had far more fun than any of us did. Whatever you have, you should bottle it for sale."
Please go to EnthusiasmInABottle.com for details.
I'm so tempted to register that domain, but about 3 people are going to read this, so the money goes to my physiotherapist instead.

Somewhere in the middle of my skiing career I bought a GPS, and unfortunately it had a speed function, so of course I had to see how fast I could ski down Sweden's second steepest piste, "The Wall", in Sälen. The answer was 126 km/h, sustained over two seconds. No helmet. I was young. ish.

Then there is Sweden's steepest slope "The Shock" in Idre, but it always seemed to be closed because of a competition, or because there had just been an accident, or there was about to be an accident, but finally on my 60th birthday trip, it was open.

It's only 500 yards long but it's 47° steep and, well, the steepest we have. But it's also very narrow and it was very icy that day, and I didn't know either of these things until I was committed. My first turn went well, but I didn't quite complete the second before hitting the boundary wall and losing control. I then invented some previously unknown freestyle moves, while desperately trying to get two hands around the tip of a pole so I could use it as an ice axe to self arrest. I dug a deep gouge in the ice and still managed to reach 45 kph whilst doing so.

Afterwards I learned that an accumulation of snow at the top made it actually closer to 60° where I fell. And yes I do now wear a helmet. And 60 years is considered young these days.

Snow angels

Tucked away in the middle of the Rocky Mountains is the old mining town of Ouray, which has become a Mecca for ice climbing since locals started sneaking out on cold nights to drill holes in the municipal water pipes that run along the top of the canyon walls. By morning they had curtains of ice to climb while the council were repairing the pipes. Eventually a truce was called, and taps were installed on the pipes on the condition that they were turned off by dawn. Today, Ouray's ice park draws thousands of visitors to the town, so everyone is happy.

The only relevance of this to my story is that Ouray was the destination of our journey, but my US visa says I'm a teacher, so I felt I should add some educational value.

We had passed South Park (yes, it's a real place, so the cartoon show must be a documentary) and we were driving on a classic mountain road at around 8000 ft in December. We were on summer tyres, had a vertical rock face on one side, and a sheer drop of at least three hundred feet on the other, and no guard rail. Beautiful but terrifying. Just like my girlfriend, who at this point lost control of the car and put it into a spin on an outside bend.

You might expect this book to end abruptly now, but we had a guardian angel in the form of a six inch wall of frozen snow that the plough had left at the edge of the road, and which somehow managed to stop a ton and half of skidding Honda CRV.

Happy to be alive, we continued our journey, but around the next bend we found a blinky fire engine parked, with a bunch of guys rappelling slowly over the edge of the road. No-one looked happy, nor in any hurry, so presumably someone else had had just a little more momentum than us, and fallen a very long way.

And that's why it's so important to make snow angels - there just aren't enough to go around.

The perils of owning a Chevy Camaro

When I'm in a foreign country, I like to immerse myself in the local culture, and so when I moved to North Carolina for 2 years, I decided that I should get a truly American car. I soon came across a "small block" 5-litre Chevy Camaro Berlinetta, and didn't hesitate - it was beautiful, drove like a dream, and only cost $500. Supposedly a babe magnet too, though I tend to find that women around me are non-ferrous. I loved that car, and it behaved impeccably, needing only one visit to the mechanic in those 2 years (after getting lost on the way to a meeting, I had driven it as the Great Maker had intended, and lost the brakes because I'd boiled the brake fluid. The mechanic suggested I buy racing-grade fluid, but I decided to moderate my driving instead). What it did necessitate was visits to police stations and court houses, because I quickly learned that I had to drive much more slowly and carefully than my American colleagues who were invisible in their Honda Civics and Toyota Camrys.

My first pull-over

If you've ever watched American thrillers, you'll know that the bad guy often drives a Camaro, and the police seemed to have watched the same films, and made the assumption that even if I wasn't committing a crime when they saw me, I probably just had or just would, so they might as well give me a ticket now. So the first thing I did was buy a radar detector, but I got so jumpy from all the false alarms that I stopped using it and just watched my speedo carefully. But still they stopped me, and my first pull-over was one of the more interesting.

I was on my way to the airport, in plenty of time and driving at the speed limit on a country road, when I came up behind a Sheriff's patrol. Just to be sure, I slowed down some more and stayed well behind him. After a few minutes he pulled off the road, but predictably started following me at a discrete distance, so I kept behaving myself impeccably. Eventually he got impatient waiting for me to make a mistake, and surged up behind me with lights and sirens blazing, and with the silhouette of a shotgun clearly visible between the front seats.

Now, in Britain my instinct would be to assume that he was on his way to help someone in need, so I would make a fast evasive move so that he could be on his way. Only if he still followed me would I stop, and then I would jump out to greet him, whilst reaching into my coat pocket to find my licence. But having watched those thrillers, I suspected that doing any of those things would make my life considerably more complicated, and possibly shorter. So I carefully pulled over and sat with my hands in clear view on the steering wheel, and soon learned that Hollywood portrayals are a lot more accurate than I'd hoped (a common theme during my time in the country).

I suppressed an incredulous smile as an overweight, middle-aged cop wearing a disturbingly tight brown uniform and droopy sunglasses swaggered over to my window and drawled
"You know why I pulled you over, boiyyyy?"
"Errr, no officer, I thought I was driving slowly and carefully. What was I doing wrong?"
"Well, you came up a bit quick behind me back there, and you were a bit wide on some of those bends."
"Oh, I see, you mean I was driving a Camaro."
I said that to myself, in case you're wondering why I still have access to publishing houses.
"Oh, I see" is all that came out aloud. He took my licence back to his cruiser to call it in, and came back bewildered :
"You have a clean licence."
"Yes sir, I try to drive very carefully" (and I've just moved here).
He looked at my car as if to check it wasn't a Honda Civic, and grudgingly said :
"Well I could write you up for any number of things boiyyy, but you're lucky this time and I'm gonna let y'all go. Now just you drive carefully, boiyyyy."

And I was free. But by this time late, and so when I reached the highway I had to put to use my V8 engine and radar detector as I screamed down the empty road rather fast. Until I reached an advertising hoarding when my detector started beeping madly, and I stood on the brakes and fell in love with my 8-inch tyres as they brought me down to half my speed under complete control.

Still, by the time I got to the hoarding, another cop was waving me in to his hidden patrol car.

But this one was young, friendly, professional, and his blue uniform fitted him.
"We're talking 62 in a 45 limit, please come to my car so we can fill out the paperwork." "And you had a fuzz-buster, didn't you?" "Err"
"It's OK, they're legal here, but there's no way you could have seen me and slowed down like that without one". Very true.
We chatted a while, and he seemed to be a car guy, just doing his job. He pointed out that more than 15mph over the limit meant automatic loss of licence, and that he'd like to write me up for 60 to avoid that, but the last time he did so, the guy had reported him for making a false report, in the hopes of getting off completely. Instead he advised me to plea-bargain with the district attorney to keep my licence. I was starting to feel like I was in one of those movies.

My day in traffic court came, and I watched as a highly-paid judge dispensed trivial fines to local farmers who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time doing a slightly wrong speed. The DA was equally incredulous that I could have a clean licence, and happily traded 2mph for a confession. I was about to milk my apparent innocence for all it was worth by saying that I was shocked to learn that I was over the limit at all, when the judge turned over the ticket and said :
"Ah, it says here that you had a radar detector, so you were obviously intending to speed."
I shut up, amazed that I still got away with a $5 fine and $20 court costs, although I later found that my insurance would triple because my broker was no longer constrained by the limits for what they were allowed to charge innocent drivers.

My first police chase

I really did try to behave myself in my Camaro, but there were times when it was difficult, like when the traffic light controlling our left turn was changing to amber just as my colleague said "I thought you said this was a sports car".

He didn't say that again. Didn't say much at all really, for a very long time.

And then when I was listening to a particularly boppy Pat Benatar song on the radio as I took a right turn in town. I think I was actually under the speed limit, but the efficient power steering may have caused my big radials to squeal a teeny bit.
Still, it never occurred to me that the flashing and beeping police cruiser that came sideways around the corner a few hundred yards later could possibly be connected with me,
a well-behaved academic enjoying some harmless soft rock.

At least until they started lining up to follow me into the next left-hand turn, when I started to think about my last experience with American police. Since I still had a good lead, I thought my best option was to park behind a shop and quickly get away from the car. In that way I could act all innocent if they caught up with me, but maybe, maybe, they wouldn't bother to pursue the issue if they couldn't immediately identify me.

As it was, they couldn't work out what had happened to the car, and came to a halt when they saw that I'd disappeared. But then they backed into a driveway and waited. I tagged on to a passing family, and took a long walk around the shops until the cops finally gave up and left.

So it was rather short, and I missed most of it, but technically I've been in a police pursuit and gotten away. That's probably a felony, but I suspect the statute of limitations has gone out on my squealing-tyre offence.

Driving a Firebird to Phoenix (without insurance)

We didn't even think of the symbolism when we chose a Pontiac Firebird as our mode of transport for a month-long road trip from Seattle to Phoenix. All we thought was that we should have something very American - very big, very fast, or very visible, and ideally all three. So when we found a bright red, T-top Firebird for $500 we leapt at it, brushing aside the fact that the driver's seat wasn't attached to the rest of the car, the turn indicators didn't work, and there was no key to open the trunk. It also had interesting swirly gouges down both sides of the body, as though at some point in its no-doubt interesting life it had been squashed between a pair of big trucks at speed. But the white go-faster stripe was still visible, making up for the fact that it only had the "small-block" 5-litre engine.

My old friend Derek and I had already checked to see if an out-of-state licence was a problem for getting insurance, and it was, but that could be solved by the very accommodating agent who in true American can-do style said that we could be virtual lodgers at her place, and thus put her address on the papers.

So we bought the car, stuffed our backpacks behind the driver's seat to hold it in place, and ran wires from the indicators to a switch that the passenger could wiggle when we planned to turn.

We then filled up with petrol, and parked it outside our YMCA, at the top of big, steep, downtown parking lot. Only then did we notice that there was a hole in the top of the exhaust silencer immediately under the fuel tank, and it seemed like the escaping heat had made the petrol expand so much that it was now running out of the filler, down on to the hot exhaust, and under the neighbouring cars. That was when the symbolism hit me, along with visions of newspaper headlines like:

"Terrorist Apple users try to raze Seattle". Followed perhaps by "Mostly successful". But amazingly the fuel didn't ignite, so my rapidly conceived plans for hiking over the border to Canada wearing a false beard weren't needed.

Instead we downed some beers and decided that we would at least get the exhaust fixed before moving on.

We put the car into Midas Mufflers the next morning and were surprised at how long they took to swap the back box. When we checked out the work we found no gold, but a lot of putty, so it looked like they'd messed up the joint and tried to fix it rather badly. But we only needed it to hold for a few weeks, so we said nothing and drove away. Finally we hit the freeway and cruised the beautiful Pacific coast to Lincoln City Oregon, kite-town USA.

Despite being an energy-crisis era car, it still guzzled gas, so we had to fill up with petrol again. Derek wanted some nibbles, so while he was in the kiosk I checked out the car after its first long run. Imagine my surprise, horror, and disbelief when I looked under the car and saw a jet of fuel spurting out of the tank directly on to the new exhaust that had just travelled 200 miles at rather high speed. I could even hear it hissing, and we were parked in a gas station with several thousand gallons more petrol below us. Even if our car was destined to rise again after the inevitable inferno, we weren't, so I ran into the kiosk to tell Derek and the owner that they might like to take a stroll with me to the end of the street. Quite soon. Quite quickly. Or words to that effect. The owner considered this, and suggested that I move the car. Quite soon. Quite quickly. I offered him the keys, but quite soon we were all standing across the street considering new newspaper headlines, and piecing together what had happened. Which was most likely that the Midas guys had slipped with a screwdriver and stuck it through the fuel tank, which they then tried to fix with a putty that didn't tolerate heat.

But amazingly the Firebird again refused to ignite, apparently determined to meet her destiny in Phoenix.

Big Red continued to entertain us throughout our trip, insisting on having us strip down the distributor on icy mornings, losing her brakes at the Grand Canyon (where else?), and best of all, losing her fuel pump at 70mph in the fast lane of I17, taking with it power to the servos for steering and braking.

But there was no great conflagration in Phoenix, just a cheque from Midas to pay for the new fuel tank, and one from the insurance company returning our premium because the clerk had forgotten to use her address, and so the policy was cancelled on

a technicality. So we weren't even insured during our serial arson spree.

We sold the car for $1000, and having slept in a tent and lived mostly on rice and raisins, the holiday pretty much paid for itself.

But Big Red had one last surprise up her sleeve. Early the next morning we got a call from her new owner saying that half way home to Tucson all her electrical systems had mysteriously failed, and did we have any advice for him. We didn't, but sent him back $100 to cover his towing fees.

So in the end she decided to end not with a bang but a wimper. Thank you Big Red.

Spacey invaders

I was on a return visit to Chapel Hill, and staying with friends. They had to leave town for a couple of days, so I borrowed their car one evening to visit some other friends for dinner, and there I had some beers, so I left the car and walked back.

After a few minutes in the house I heard a car drive aggressively into the yard and skid to a halt. I looked out of the window, saw nothing odd, so assumed it was the upstairs lodger's boyfriend, closed the curtains, switched out the lights and headed for bed.

At which point the doorbell rang. That's because it wasn't the lodger's boyfriend who made the dramatic arrival, but the police, called by the lodger in response to noises downstairs while the owners were away. Police who have just seen the perp look out of the window, then quickly close the curtains and put out all the lights. If I had been them, I would have been flicking the safety off my gun (and probably shooting myself in the foot).

Being unaware of this, and indeed pretty much anything,
I opened the door, saw the two enormous, armed policemen and had the following dialogue:
"Good evening sir, is this your house?" (their line)
"No"
"Do you live here?"
"No"
"Do you have some ID?"
"No"
I wasn't trying to be obstructive, just honest, and I'm always a bit slow on the uptake, and remember those beers? My old US driving licence had expired, and I was pretty sure they weren't going to be impressed by my UK licence, typed on paper with no photo. Memories of telling a US cop that I weighed 8 stone were fresh in my mind (Dooo whaaat??). I should have thought of my passport, but remember those beers?

At this point you're probably expecting handcuffs to get involved, but in fact the lodger came downstairs, remembered I was visiting, and defused the situation. I'm still impressed by the cool and self-control of those policemen.

Travel hacks

During my time in the US, people inevitably asked me why I had moved there, and my answer was simply that I wanted to see the country, to which they countered, usually with a whiff of envy, “Wouldn’t you see more of it by living in Europe, and using some of your 6 weeks vacation visiting, rather than working here with only 10 days off ?” And they had a good point. Luckily, I got to travel a lot on business, and by some amazing stroke of luck, I was only ever available for distant meetings on Tuesdays or Thursdays, so with travel days, I always got a long weekend off at the destination, and so I managed to tick off half the states during my two years working there. And after that it was still the golden age of travel (and we were pretending we didn’t know about global warming), so if you bought a transatlantic ticket, you were eligible to buy a bunch of 7 domestic tickets for $20 each. And indeed you could buy several bunches, so on one return trip I had 28 plane tickets in my pocket. Specifically, the pocket of a jacket that I accidentally left in a cafe as I went to board my first flight. Luckily I’m always early to the gate, so I could run back and rescue it, and my 3 month holiday.

I don’t recall why I was sent to Flagstaff, Arizona, but I’m very glad I was, as AZ is one of my favourite states- warm and dry, empty of people, and visually appealing.

I learned early on that if you are vague about your arrival time to the car rental, they often won’t assign you a specific vehicle. So there is a risk that they won’t have available the cheapest sub-compact that you have paid for, and they will ask if it’s OK to give you a better car for the same price. The answer to this is “Oh dear, that will take more fuel, right ?”,
which in turn can lead to getting a discount for the upgrade.

On this occasion all they had left was an IROC-Z Camaro, a ten years younger and sportier version of my own car, but of course very heavy on fuel, so I was really disappointed that they didn’t have the sub-compact that I’d ordered…

It was the perfect car for Arizona. Remember the Eagles’ album cover with the long straight road to Monument Valley?

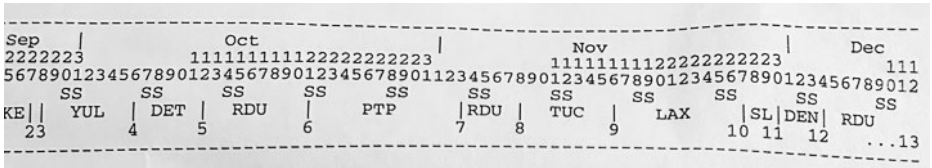
That's what I was driving on, in a car that by law must have a speedometer where the highest speed allowed in the country at that time, 55 mph, is more than halfway around the speedometer (yep, some legislator had a minor in psychology).

So I have no idea how fast I was driving because the needle had been on the end stop for a while, when it started to rain, and then a Harley Davidson loomed in my rear view mirror. He really shouldn't have had any trouble overtaking me, but for some reason he stayed in the right lane until the very last second before swerving suddenly to pass me. Swerving too fast for slick asphalt that was seeing its first rain in months, and thus putting himself into an upright flat spin. Which I didn't know you could do on a motorbike, and apparently you can't do so more than about half a revolution, after which lots of other axes of rotation get involved, and I had to stop looking in my mirror to bring myself to a safe stop to deal with what I assumed was going to be a terrible nightmare that would plague me forever. But no, the wet road and his leathers somehow saved him from nothing more than a broken arm, and even that he wasn't going to admit to.
"I'm fine, no problem."
"Errm, but your arm looks really funny, can you move it?"
"Sure" he said, as he grabbed it with his other hand and moved it around a new joint that he had just created.

After a while a pickup truck came along, and we loaded the remains of his bike into the bed. Since they knew the way to the nearest hospital, they took him, but to make room in the cab, I got one of their party with me, who entertained me on the long journey to I-forget-where with the extremely sad tale of all the misfortunes in his life.

On the return trip, a boy of about 12 flagged me down in the middle of nowhere (you may have noticed that I often gravitate there, and never ask how other people got to the same place). He asked me if I wanted to see dinosaur footprints for a small fee. I was very sceptical, but you may also have noticed that I have terrible trouble remembering the word 'no', and so followed him, and he showed me a large number of very convincing footprints.

I spent years wondering how he had made them, until the internet was invented, and I learned that there are indeed plenty of easily visible real dinosaur footprints out that way. It's sad that I didn't know they were genuine at the time. Sorry, little boy, for doubting you.



ARN --> KEF	Sun 24 Sep 12:20 - 14:40	FI 307	
KEF --> JFK	Wed 27 Sep 16:40 - 18:40	FI 615	
			(212)928-4550
LGU --> PHL	Thu 28 Sep 12:20 - 13:15	US 3883	
PHL --> YUL	Thu 28 Sep 16:00 - 17:23	US 477	
			(514)481-2513
YUL --> PIT	Fri 6 Oct 11:57 - 13:44	US 726	
PIT --> DET	Fri 6 Oct 16:51 - 17:49	US 640	
			(810)471-1275
DET --> PHL	Thu 12 Oct 10:50 - 12:20	US 437	
PHL --> RDU	Thu 12 Oct 13:30 - 14:44	US 517	
			(919)942-7926
RDU --> MIA	Sat 21 Oct 13:48 - 15:50	AA 1791	
MIA --> SJU	Sat 21 Oct 16:55 - 19:26	AA 916	
SJU --> PTP	Sat 21 Oct 20:10 - 21:43	AA 5424	
			+590(28 22 46)
PTP --> SJU	Fri 3 Nov 07:59 - 09:30	AA 5425	
SJU --> MIA	Fri 3 Nov 16:25 - 17:57	AA 1216	
MIA --> RDU	Fri 3 Nov 19:30 - 21:40	AA 1390	
			(919)942-7926
RDU --> PIT	Wed 8 Nov 09:45 - 11:04	US 1423	
PIT --> PHX	Wed 8 Nov 14:50 - 17:26	US 157	
			(520)293-3617
TUC --> PHX	Thu 16 Nov 08:15 - 08:56	UA 178	
PHX --> LAX	Thu 16 Nov 10:55 - 11:10	UA 2235	
			(310)271-7129
LAX --> SFC	Mon 27 Nov 09:40 - 11:04	UA 2076	
SFC --> SLC	Mon 27 Nov 12:35 - 15:17	UA 1246	
			(801)583-6340
SLC --> DEN	Wed/Thu 29/30 Nov Drive		
			(303)494-0491
DEN --> ORD	Mon 4 Dec 09:00 - 12:19	UA 910	
ORD --> RDU	Mon 4 Dec 13:40 - 16:26	UA 514	
			(919)942-7926
RDU --> JFK	Wed 13 Dec 11:55 - 14:44	UA 6485	
JFK --> KEF	Wed 13 Dec 20:00 - 06:20	FI 614	
KEF --> ARN	Thu 14 Dec 07:25 - 11:15	FI 306	
ARN --> LHR	Tue 19 Dec 11:10 - 12:45	SK 531	
			+44(1280)705479
LHR --> ARN	Thu 25 Jan 13:45 - 17:10	SK 532	

Women on the verge of a mechanical breakdown

I loved my Vauxhall Chevette - it was my first rear-wheel drive car, and it was beautifully balanced for drifting in the rain. It was also great for handbrake turns, which elicited the comment “oh, so you are a boy” from one young lady, who was apparently unsure until then. And then the memorable evening of a first date when I pulled off a full 180° into the middle of a marked parking spot on the other side of the road, landing parallel and 12 inches from the curb. No cars in the adjacent spots, so only 5 points for style. And sadly the last time I could ever try that manoeuvre, as I didn't want to confirm just how much luck was involved.

What the Chevette had in handling though, it lacked in reliability, which led to one weekend where I got through 5 chapters of the Haynes manual, which is a great way to test the suitability of a girlfriend. This one scored a full 10, as she scrabbled under the car with me, even managing to get a very fetching smudge of oil on her nose. Despite failing often, it was also very simple, so a Swiss Army Knife and a socket set would fix most problems (that’s the car, not the girlfriend, who required a more extensive toolkit to keep things running smoothly). The finale for that weekend was a blown head gasket, and I was so looking forward to fixing it with a cornflake packet, which was number two on my car-repair bucket list, just behind using a date’s stockings as a fan belt. Neither of these goals have I yet to achieve, as before we got to the supermarket, we infuriatingly found a gasket shop, and I felt compelled to mend it properly.

And then there was the elderly relative whom I should drive to Oxford. We never made it, and instead she spent several hours sitting in 30 degree heat by the side of the motorway, as I ran around trying to find a phone box and organise a tow home. I apologised profusely, of course, but she was quite happy, telling me that she hadn’t had that much excitement in years.

One morning I was overtaking a lorry on the M1, when the BMW in front of me spat up a piece of gravel that shattered my windscreen, making it go completely opaque.

Luckily the road was quite straight so I had time to roll down my window and stick my head out before hitting anything solid. As luck would have it, a junction was coming up so I pulled off, and as luck would have it, there was a windscreen replacement garage just off the motorway, and as luck would have it, they had a Vauxhall Chevette windscreen in stock, at which point I started to wonder if all this was ‘As Luck Would Have It’, or does that BMW cruise that section of the motorway, dropping gravel in front of Vauxhall Chevettes deliberately?

But they fixed the car quickly and cheaply, and I drove on, shrugging off my near-death experience, until I got to the office and sat down at my desk, when it suddenly all hit me, and I turned into a quivering bowl of jelly thinking “Oh my God, I nearly died back there!”.

Evolution is a wonderful thing. Apparently my ancestors thought calmly and clearly when the tiger attacked, and waited until it was gone to analyse the situation. They then berated themselves for choosing to forage in Tiger Valley, and had a nervous breakdown in the safety of their cave. The others never got to have kids. Although I somehow lived long enough to have kids, I never did. I don’t know what Darwin would make of that.

That car finally died at a service station on the M1. It was making strange sounds, so I’d pulled off the road, lifted the bonnet, and had just stepped back from examining the engine when a piston head burst. This move saved my face from taking the brunt of the explosive cloud of hot oil and water aerosol that engulfed both my car and the adjacent one, which was full of small children who disappeared from view for some minutes.

It’s how she would have wanted to go.

I don’t need no medication

My entire career is based on a false memory. As far as I know it’s the only one I’ve had, but there again, how can I know ? Maybe it was actually the only real one. Maybe I’m stuck in The Matrix.

My doctoral project was to find the three-dimensional structure of the hormone relaxin, which would probably have gone quite well if anyone had actually isolated or synthesised enough protein at that time, but they hadn’t, so I had no material to work with.

Instead I tried to guess what it looked like. Sorry, I mean I did advanced computer modelling to determine how it must look.

But this was 1981, and advanced computer graphics then consisted of primitive vector graphics, and to understand a 3D object we used orthographic engineering projections of front, side and top views, shown beside each other on the screen. We then tried to blend those three views into a solid object in our heads. Some heads managed that, but mine didn’t.

Stereoscopic 3D imaging had been known since Victorian times, and would help solve the problem, but applying it to real-time computer graphics had its issues. One device to achieve real-time stereoscopy was the ‘rotating beer can’, which was, uh, a rotating beer can, with two slots cut into it, spun in sync with the display so that one slot would show a left-eye view to the left eye, and then the other would show the right-eye view to the right. Then it’s quite easy for the brain to combine those into a 3D image. It kind of worked, but vector displays had a varying refresh rate that the beer can couldn’t keep in sync with, and many people were fond of their eyebrows, and didn’t like having them shaved off if they held the device too close.

So I thought that there must be a better way, and I remembered reading a photography magazine on a train from Leeds to Sheffield, in which they announced a revolutionary new camera called the Regina, which used a liquid-crystal shutter that allowed shutter speeds of one millionth of a second. I still remember the layout, with a photograph of the camera on the left page, and a description on the right.

Such a shutter would be perfect for a stereoscope, so I went through my stack of old magazines to find the article, but failed. I wrote to the editors of all the photo magazines, but no-one had heard of the camera. And I now know that liquid crystals can't get close to that speed, so apparently my very vivid, detailed memory is a complete fiction.

But my belief in the possibility spurred me to find fast liquid crystals, despite my supervisor telling me 'not to spend too much time on it'. I eventually found a military researcher who was trying to reach transition speeds of around 3 milliseconds, 3000 times slower than my imaginary camera, but fast enough for stereoscopy.

I took over the project and managed to get the crystals to change fast enough, and financed the 15-month overrun of my PhD by building and selling six functioning stereoscopes for 200 GBP/USD each (yes, I lived in a garret that had ice on the inside of the windows on winter mornings, and ate mostly rice and raisins).

A company called Stereographics marketed a similar device the same year, and I still don't know if I was first or not. But I did manage to have my invention covered by The Times and New Scientist, and got a prime time TV slot on the BBC's Tomorrow's World.

But what I feel was my real 15 minutes of fame was when I was introduced to a stranger in the US, and he said: "Mark Harris ? Oh, I was just reading about you in Omni Magazine".

I'm really curious about the psychology of that false memory that saved my PhD and got me my subsequent job developing virtual reality headsets in North Carolina, and is responsible for my entire subsequent career.

Was it a very vivid dream that I recalled, or did my subconscious make it all up on the spot as a way to persuade me to take on an impossible project ? I guess I'll never know, but Thank You, faulty brain.

While building the stereo glasses I still harboured a little hope of getting my hands on some relaxin, but it's mostly synthesised in the ovaries in the last days of pregnancy, and mothers-to-be get a bit whiney if you try to biopsy them as they are giving birth.

But then I heard that a dead whale had washed up on a beach on the south coast, and I imagined the enormous ovaries, which might contain enough relaxin even if it wasn't pregnant. (There's a precedent here, as the first ever 3D protein structure to be determined was whale myoglobin, which binds oxygen in muscles. They chose to use whales because they hold their breath for long periods and thus need a lot of myoglobin to retain oxygen, and they are also really big, so getting enough material was much easier than doing so from land mammals.)

I started thinking through the practicalities of getting permission to biopsy the creature with a chain saw, and then driving back to Leeds with a huge ovary on the roof, fallopian tubes trailing in the wind, but eventually decided it might be easier to get a few hundred pig organs instead.

However, that image of driving home had been stuck in my head for 40 years, until the AI art program Midjourney came along and allowed me to release the image to the world. Its first attempt at depicting my idea was pretty good, but the ovarian luggage was a bit too small, so I asked it to try again with a bigger ovary, which it refused to do on the grounds that I was violating community standards. Apparently the Midjourney moderators understand that everyone likes a little whale porn now and then, but they are not going to stand for the sort of perverts who want depictions of whales with extra large ovaries.

(While fact checking for this write-up, I discovered that whale ovaries aren't even that big, just a few hundred grams, but back then finding such information would have meant many hours visiting a library to find the right book, or phoning a very specialised vet and answering awkward questions, and my feasibility assessment didn't get that far.)

During this time in Leeds I was also still in touch with Guy Dodson, with whom I had spent a wonderful 3 months in York doing my final undergraduate project on insulin, a time so inspiring that it's probably the reason why I stayed in academia.

During that project I also met Dorothy Hodgkin, who had gotten a Nobel prize for developing techniques that led to her discovery of the molecular structure of insulin. A delightful and unbelievably smart lady who was still happy to help a student with his project.

Five years later, in that final desperate year of my PhD, Guy asked if I could come over to York for a day to help him and Biovitrum, a Swedish pharmaceutical company, with some questions about insulin-like growth factor, which is related to both insulin and relaxin.

My first thought was that this would cost 5 pounds/USD in petrol, which was about the same as a week of food, but I owed Guy a lot, and happily agreed to help. The meeting went well, and Biovitrum took me out for a fancy dinner and gave me a little tin viking as a thank you. This seemed like a good deal, but then a few weeks later a cheque for 300 pounds/USD arrived in the post, as a consultancy fee.

This was my first taste of ScandiPharma, and I liked what I saw.

Created with Midjourney

In the beginning was the nerd

You may wonder how I ended up in Sweden.
If not, there are other books I can recommend.

I was recovering from writing my final college thesis, hanging out in York again with the wonderful professor Guy Dodson, the archetypal scientist that you know from Horizon documentaries, always wearing the same jumper with a hole in the elbow, and always greeting me with “Hello, Errrr, Paul?”.

There was a conference in the south of France, and Guy said that the lab would pay for everyone to go – staff, students, technicians and hangers-on like me. So off I went, not yet accustomed to not being a student, and so still engaging vendors in very detailed discussions of their products just as they were closing down their booths for the evening, then judging just the right amount of polite hesitation before accepting their offer to continue the discussion over dinner, at a fancy restaurant, on their expense accounts.

On one of these occasions I ended up sitting next to Bob from Pharmacia who asked me what I was going to do while I was waiting for my next job to start, and I said “I don't know, do you?” and he said “Yes, you're going to come and program for me in Sweden”. He then outlined a very simple project, and I pointed out that I could probably code it on a serviette while we waited for the coffee, but he said “Oh, there’s always unforeseen problems, shall we say October to December?”.
Winter in Sweden, I thought - skiing to work, dodging polar bears and blonde amazons along the way. How could I say no?

And so it was that for my first real job I moved into an enormous apartment in an old tower above the market square in Uppsala. I had a company car, a ridiculous tax-free salary, about a day’s work to complete in 3 months, and was encouraged to work from home because of construction at the lab. My career has been a steep, slippery slope downhill from there.

In 1986, not a single snowflake fell before Christmas, and no polar bears crossed my path. Amazon blondes abounded, and crossed my path without hesitation.

Bob

Sitting next to Bob at that dinner was one of those Sliding Doors moments that redirected the rest of my life. I had so much fun on that first visit to Sweden that I returned for three more tours of duty, and eventually settled here.

During those projects duties were minimal, the salary enormous, and I was paid in used notes at the end of each month (I still wonder how they got that past audits). It was also totally illegal, as back then all foreign workers in Sweden had to be accepted by the unions, which seldom happened.

I think my employment was mostly to keep Bob company.
But since he was was charming and fun, and his hobbies were fine dining and flying small planes, I was happy to play along.

Before my first salary I had no money, so every night he took me out to dinner at fancy restaurants on Pharmacia's tab, and one night he flew me from Uppsala to Stockholm in a Cessna, to dine at the Viking Hotel. What I remember of that evening was that the wine cost 60 GBP/USD a bottle (the equivalent to 2 months rent a few weeks earlier), and that Bob drank most of it before flying me home again. As we taxied out at Bromma, he had to brake violently for a passenger jet that I'm pretty sure had priority.

Having coffee in his apartment later I noticed that his kettle was rebuilt from many small pieces glued together. Back then most Swedes hadn't discovered kettles, and they boiled water for tea in open pans, but still, it seemed odd to go to such lengths to rescue a smashed plastic kettle, so I asked about its fate.
"Oh, it was in a plane crash. Would you like more milk ?"
"No thank you, but I really want to hear more about the kettle…"
It turns out he was flying another club Cessna from England to Sweden when he hit power lines in Denmark, severing the tail rudder and the wheels, and crashing into the ground. He was slightly injured, his kettle more so.

But that wasn't the only plane crash Bob had been in, as he was also onboard when SAS missed JFK airport and landed a DC10 in Jamaica Bay in 1984. Although only a passenger on that flight, being Bob, I can't help thinking that he was somehow involved.

I later got myself a respectable job at Symbicom in Uppsala, but when they got bought up and closed down five years later, I was again unemployed, and Bob offered me another 3-month project, this time at Novo Nordisk where he was now working.

I loved Denmark and Novo, who employed me properly and told me that I probably wouldn't pay much tax since I was there for such a short time. But then in the last month they found that I would actually be charged the top marginal tax rate on all my income, on the assumption that I had another salary the rest of the year. And they also told me that the garret they had given me to live in would be taxed as a benefit at the same rate, so I ended up having to give back something like 80% of my earnings.
I called Danske Bank to ask about the practicalities of this, and they said that we could do it over the phone immediately.
I questioned the security of that, and they said "We're The Danish Bank, and we have both accounts with us. If you're lying, we'll just reverse the transaction later". Fair enough. I just wish bank transactions were still so casual and honest.

Novo had a windsurfing club, and soon after I arrived they auctioned off some old gear, and I bought a nice board and rig that I later used to surf my way up the west coast on my way home.

But Danish numbers are even harder than French, and they work on base 20. So the number 76, for example, is called six-half-four, because it's 6 more than half way to 4x20 from the last interesting number (which was 3x20). Add to that their habit of swallowing consonants (so six-half-four sounds to me like 'Awawawawa', like all other words) , and you can imagine my nervousness bidding. Especially when the prices were crazy low, because they were Novo Nordisk, and were probably already seeing Ozempic in their future, so didn't really need the income from selling used surf boards at their true value.

Another memory from that time is HR accidentally cc'ing me on an email where they questioned the suitability of employing me, and expressed the hope that no company secrets were being entrusted to 'this vagrant who has been flitting around all over Europe'.

The hitchhikers guide to the world

We oldies like to talk about all the stuff that young people haven't experienced. But the truth is that sitting here typing on a computer that is a million times more powerful than the one that landed people on the moon when I was nine, and looking back to the last century, it's actually quite hard to believe that we ourselves experienced it. Were there really scheduled steam trains when I was a kid, not long before that moon landing? (Yes.) Did we really stick out our thumbs on the motorway, and expect people to transport us for free? (Yes.) When we got cars of our own, did we pick up random psychopaths as payback (Yes.) Did we survive all this ? (Yes and No. In my case Yes, but that's how the dice roll.)

I remember the guy that I picked up who claimed he knew a shortcut to where I was going, which of course was miles out of my way, but happened to pass his house. But also the lovely Thai guy whom I picked up in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere, walking along a road in Lappland, at least 30 km from the nearest town. I really wanted to ask him how he got there, but there were only two possible answers- a mundane explanation that would spoil the story, or a nervous, hastily constructed explanation for why his previous lift kicked him out. I much preferred the mystery. I still have his phone number, but I suspect it won't reach him now. Modern email is at least often more permanent.

On another trip to Lappland (you should really go there, it's a great place) I was picked up in Gällivare by a guy with a badly packed trailer of snow-mobiles. At the first slight incline, his rear-wheel drive car started spinning its wheels, and he ask me to jump on the tow hitch to get some traction. This was just enough extra weight in the right place to get us going, but he didn't dare stop again, so the rest of the journey I spent balanced there, in constant danger of tumbling under the trailer.

That was actually safer than the next lift, which was with a locally famous adventure photographer whose name I forget. His van was crammed with high-end photography and climbing gear, but

what I remember most is his driving at incredible speeds on icy roads, steering with his knee as he used both hands to roll cigarettes.

And then there were the three large Estonians that we picked up in Norway. They were on their way to a summer job in Bergen, and we thought nothing of squeezing them into the back of my Saab 900 to help them out. But we were a long way from Bergen, and were planning to stop a lot for walks and photo ops along the way. And each time the Estonians said “That’s OK, we’ll just sit in the car and wait…”. The same with stops for lunch, when we would bring back doggy bags for them. When we needed to stop overnight, they all squeezed into one room, and were ready to join us again in the morning, having skipped breakfast to save money. Eventually the guilt trips got too much, and we told them that we were turning off, and would have to leave them at Laerdal. We knew this place had a ring road, so we could whizz off ahead of them, and get back to our relaxed sightseeing, having at least got them some way towards their destination.

But after a long hiking stop, there they were again, with their thumbs out ahead of us, having got a faster lift. I forget where we finally got rid of them, but again we relaxed, this time for several months, until I was at an event on Culture Night back in Uppsala, when I suddenly got a weird tingling in my spine that I couldn’t explain until suddenly I realised “Oh no! It’s the Estonians!”. Who by chance were at the event on their way home again. I’m sure they were lovely people, but they just weren’t supposed to be such a big part of our holiday.

Next we have the lift that I got in Philadelphia, from two guys in a paint-stained truck with a lot of paint tins and brushes in the back. As chit-chat they asked what I did for a living, and I told them, and asked what they did, even though it was rather obvious, except the answer was:
“Err, we’re err, dentists, yeah, we’re dentists”.
Red flags popped up in my head and waved around frantically, and I tried to think of other topics, but then they suddenly thought of a shortcut and veered off on to a very small road, and the red flags waved even more frantically and then caught on fire, and I

suddenly remembered that my friends actually lived exactly where we were now and not where I'd said earlier, and could they please let me out, and surprisingly they did so, hence my ability to write this now. I think I stopped hitching for a while after that encounter.

But to counter that, there was my trip home from Tranås, a town I had visited because someone I barely knew at the time had invited me down for the weekend for his separation from his wife, which was so weird that I couldn't possibly say no. I had a train ticket home for the Monday, but how boring is that? So I decided to try to hitch from the train station, with nothing to lose and maybe a fun adventure to gain. I soon got a lift north, but it was from a farm salesman, who was headed to a customer in the middle of Småland and then turning back. So I ended up a small but significant distance from town, on a tiny road with very little traffic. And spent a long time there. Even back then, less than 1% of drivers stopped for hitchhikers, so to get a lift, hundreds of cars have to pass, which they didn't here. And it was cold, so after a while I started dancing to Fine Young Cannibals who were playing on my walkman (cassette tape...), just to keep warm.

At which point a big car suddenly appeared. Having lost hope, I just kept on dancing, but incorporated my thumbs into the moves just in case the guy had no self-preservation instincts. Which he didn't, and he stopped and picked me up. He later admitted that he wouldn't normally have stopped, but was intrigued by what sort of person expects to be picked up whilst dancing. If only I were gay I would have married him.

Any of you wondering why I wasn't at work on that Monday? Well it's because of that cushy job at Pharmacia, where I should have been phoning around to find video transfer companies for a molecular graphics film that I had made (yes, phoning around, pre-internet). I started chatting with my saviour, and he told me that he was a salesman heading back to his office in Stockholm, which was only an hour from my home, so great. And what sort of salesman? Video services.
"Can you transfer computer generated sequences to video?"
"Oh yes."

“We need your services.”
“In that case you’re a client, so I can invite you to lunch.”

By the time we got to Stockholm he was worried that he might get sent out on another visit, so decided to drive me all the way home, to my doorstep. And Tuesday morning I could tell my boss that I’d sorted all the video work that needed doing, so he took me out to the best restaurant in town as a reward.
Stuff like that doesn’t happen when you google.

Illogistics

Like with so many of my interests, my enthusiasm for travel is only matched by my incompetence at it. My brain just isn't wired for logistics and organisation. So I find myself waiting for the non-existent flight 340 at 2:50pm when I have tickets for flight 250 at 3:40pm. I wait at the northbound bus stop as my bus south whizzes by on the other side of the road. And I've even been 4 hours too early for a flight because I got confused by the autumn clock change - suspecting some sort of mistake when I awoke and my watch said 8am, I panicked and thought I had put my clock back to 8 instead of forward to 10, so rushed to get ready for a 10.30 taxi. But it turned out I had actually put forward to 8 instead of back to 6, so my taxi arrived 4 hours later.

But I set my personal record for incompetence on the way to give a talk in Tromsö, in northern Norway. I've described the wonderful Northern Arrow overnight train elsewhere, and this time I'd taken it all the way to its terminus in Narvik. It was March, and the snow-covered vistas of Lappland had been spectacular. I was now going to catch the last bus north, so not wanting to get distracted by the town and miss it, I sat down at the bus stop quite early, and started reading a book. It was a good book, so I was a little irritated when my reading was interrupted by a surging diesel engine, especially when I realised that the engine was attached to my bus, which was now pulling away from the stop. But surely I couldn't be stupid enough to let the last bus pull up and then drive away without me ? This far into the book, dear reader, I think you know the answer to that one.

Running and waving didn't persuade the driver to stop, so I weighed up the cost of a hotel night plus missing my talk, against a taxi ride where I get to throw myself into the car and say "Follow that bus !".

I chose the latter, but realised that I had no Norwegian money yet, so lost a few more minutes persuading a random Norwegian to buy some Swedish kronor at a very good price.

The driver was delighted by his assignment, and drove like Petter Solberg, overtaking in tunnels, and eventually parking diagonally

across the road in front of the bus. My fjord escort cost me five times the bus fare, but was still cheaper than a hotel in Narvik, and a lot more fun.

The rest of the journey was also amazing, 4 hours of winding through the fjords as darkness was descending, isolated houses picked out in orange by the setting sun, against the blue-white background of snow.

When I arrived, my host had invited a few colleagues round for dinner, and we had a little fjord fiesta.

The next day dawned clear and bright, and my talk got cancelled due to the weather - my host pointed out that they seldom get weather that good, and that it would be a shame for a visitor to spend it indoors, so he gave me the keys to his BMW and told me to go and explore the area instead, which I did with pleasure for a total of 10 hours. Five photos from that day hung on my walls for many years afterwards, and still appear on my screensaver of favourite pics, 30 years later.

The following year I was invited back to diagnose a network problem that they had with their computer cluster. It was a stupid intermittent problem that I had one month to find and solve, and by a suspicious coincidence I found the problem in the last few days. The source of the problem was in the neighbouring department, and they weren't willing to fix it, so the solution was simply to pull out the ethernet cable while the machine was running.
"So how do we get the data out ?"
"Then you plug it back in."
"And we paid you a month's salary for that advice ?"
"Yup."

I actually did a month's work, and solved the problem, but I can see why they weren't entirely happy.

Fast forward a few more years, and a Tromsö student came down to Uppsala University, where I was now working. She was a lovely red-head of whom I became rather fond, and so after she had gone back up north, I thought it was time to visit my friendly professor again, so I called him up, and was very

confused when the red-head answered the phone. Had my devious little subconscious looked up her number and got me to call her instead ? No, it turns out that I wasn’t the only one lured by her charms, and she was now living with him. I forget how I spent my time on that trip, but definitely not how I planned.

Upsetting The Man

As a professional nerd I got to play with the internet in its infancy, and I had a website back in the mid ‘90s, where I would scribble about my travels and stuff that I had built. Nothing particularly noteworthy, but with very little else to browse back then, I got an extraordinary number of visitors, who would often write to me about my projects. Occasionally I would get spam, which back then prompted some detective work followed by an angry letter to the sender’s ISP, who would mail back thanking me for helping them to stamp out this blight, so that it would never get out of control. Great times…

One day back then the BBC emailed me to say that the Tomorrow’s World show was going to have a segment on this interweb thing that looked like it might become useful. It would feature some pioneering guys who had planned their whole skiing holiday to Norway without needing paper, stamps, or even a visit to a travel agent. And this included building a luggage sled from the design on my website, so the BBC wanted permission to show my pages as an example of the future. I happily agreed, and in return I got a cheque for one pound, which I still have somewhere, its value as an indicator of the generosity of the BBC being far greater than its monetary value.

Later on, while ski touring in Lappland, I saw an identical copy of my sled parked outside the hut, so I left a note on it inviting the owners to have coffee with me, and was delighted to find that they had indeed also made use of my web page. Later still, I found that some friends in Uppsala had also used my instructions to make their sled. Experiences like this make all the work of documenting my builds worth while.

I also got contacted by a Danish adventure magazine who wanted to print one of my reports on solo ski touring in Lappland, but when they did so they left out the bits about about how carefully I had prepared and all the precautions I took, and then at the end asked readers to go to their website and vote on whether they thought I was “a true adventurer, or a reckless fool”. Luckily websites back then were unreliable, and the voting

system didn't work, so I still don't know the answer to that question.

The next memorable exchange started with an email from the bomb squad in Atlanta saying "We need to talk". Being a good boy, and immensely curious, I called, expecting some big military type to shout at me for something I had written, but what I got was "Hello! Georgia ATF, this Lilly, how can I help ?". It turned out they wanted permission to use in their training my page on how to build electrically-heated foot warmers, so that their officers would know that sometimes people with wires sticking out of their shoes don't have to be splattered across the nearest wall. She may have phrased it differently, but again, I agreed.

Nowadays it seems there are more interesting things to read on the web, so my posts get seen by maybe 40 family and friends, with one exception : When drones started getting popular, the Swedish government decided that because they could be used for surveillance (kind of…), they should be essentially banned, but curiously they declared at the same time that cameras mounted on bicycle handlebars were not considered surveillance. Since I happened to have a broken drone, a set of handlebars, and an old camera sitting around, I mounted the camera on the handlebars, tied them under the drone, and took a picture of the assembly against the sky, which I then posted with the caption "Expect to see more of these after the new rulings". I felt a bit guilty wasting an hour on a silly joke, but thought it might lift the spirits of some of my colleagues who had previously earned their living photographing from drones. But the post went viral, or at least bacterial, eventually reaching 30 000 people, at which point I got an email from the government department responsible for this rather short-sighted ruling, again saying "Call us". Which of course I did, and the guy who answered asked if I was responsible for the picture that he'd seen mocking the new ruling. I confessed that it was, wondering where this was going to end, and he said "Oh, great, because we'd like to licence the picture for the front cover of our magazine". It turned out to be the most lucrative single-image sale I've ever made, so now I can call myself a professional comedian.

Holiday jobs

I had a number of holiday jobs, starting with a paper round while at school, the main memory of which is falling off my bike on a steep hill, and scattering dozens of papers across the road. And of wishing people would use street numbers instead of giving their houses silly names whose order was impossible to remember.

Then I waited tables, a job that I loved, subservience apparently being a quality I should put on my CV. One evening a guy came in with a whole bunch of women, and was behaving pretty obnoxiously. He ordered a cheap wine, and after tasting it he declared that it wasn't good enough, and that I should bring another, but better, bottle of the same. Instead, I stuffed the cork back in, and returned to the table with the same bottle, which was now apparently "excellent". It was almost worth losing my job to announce to everyone that it was the same bottle, and that he was a pretentious twat. Almost.

Realising that my future was alcoholic, I spent the next summer at a wine bottling factory. My first assignment was loading bottles on to the conveyor belt, which I did rather well, despite the belt running annoyingly slightly faster than a natural pace. I spent the whole time thinking that if only they slowed it by about 10% we would all be happy, but instead we could just about keep up until we needed to fetch another pallet, at which point we would be rushing like madmen to not let the belt run empty.

Being young and fresh, I coped, but it was horrible to think of those that had spent the last 40 years constantly struggling to keep up with machines that were running just marginally too fast.

When new wine arrived by tanker, it was pumped through 6-inch pipes into 20000 litre vats. Towards the end of the pumping, air would get into the pipes, so the wine had to be pushed through with water, but of course the pumping had to be stopped before the water got into the vat. This point was determined by the sophisticated technique of having someone climb a ladder to straddle the inlet to the vat 6 metres above the ground, and taste what was coming out of the hose.

This was a great job when it was a nice white wine, and we would be very careful to start tasting as early as possible. Not so much with Riccadona or sherry, where we would make very sure that water was coming in before tasting too much.

Another interesting job was cleaning the vat, and I still don't know if this was the equivalent of the new guy being sent to stores to ask for a 'long weight', but I was despatched to a vat that had recently been full of wine, and told to clean it with a mop. I went up the ladder to the inspection hatch with great intentions, slid down to the bottom, and started mopping. About a minute later the effect of inhaling the ethanol vapour took its toll, and I slumped down and started writing poetry:
"Life in a wine vat is a bit of pain,
The reds and the rosés leave a terrible stain.
Hick!"

I have no idea how I got out or how the rest of that day went.

Revisiting the story now, I'm pretty sure it was the equivalent of being asked to fetch a left-handed screwdriver.

And then there was the pallet inventory. This was real, but I have no idea why it was important. Apparently all fork-truck pallets belong to someone, but they travel widely and need to be tracked. A google search today gave me 10 million hits for "pallet inventory", so it's definitely important to some people. Anyway, we were told to write down on paper to whom all the several hundred pallets in the factory belonged. Many were ours or our suppliers, but there were also ones from Mothercare and other inexplicable companies. Deciding that this was not really important information, we would inventory one of ten rooms, multiply the results by 10, add a small random number to avoid all the numbers ending with a zero, and then head off to the bonded warehouse to check that their product was up to drinking standards.

Management suspected this behaviour, and so split us into two teams, whose reported numbers had to tally, which meant wasting valuable drinking time finding the other team, and agreeing on numbers (off by one or two).

Not that we really had to resort to sneaking off to sample the products, as unlimited wine was available with lunch, and heavily discounted seconds could be purchased to take home.
Ah, England in the seventies.

I was soon promoted to the task of spotting the bottles that had failed to get a lead seal dropped over the cork on the production line. This happened seldom, and if one naked neck passed, I could easily pop a seal on it. I even coped with two, but three or more, and I had to start assessing whether a major malfunction was developing, and if so, whether I should shout at someone to stop the belt. But should I shout upstream, or downstream ? Sitting here now it's obvious that stopping downstream would result in a backup and smashing glass as the bottles pile into each other. But after 20 minutes of daydreaming it wasn't so obvious, and I found this new job way too stressful, and swapped back to belt loading, giving my high-status job to a grateful long-term employee who had been dreaming of lead-seal checking for decades. That's when I learned that promotion isn't always such a great thing, and even in my future academic career, I remained a post-doc for 25 years instead of the usual 3, because more admin and stress, and less science, just didn't appeal. (I'm not going to tell you whether promotions were even an option, but from these stories, you can probably guess.)

Another summer I worked for an engineer who made formula-one go-karts that ran on Yamaha 250 motorbike engines. With very little weight, these accelerated faster than F1 cars (but had a lower top speed) and since they had a ground clearance of just ⅜ of an inch, they could only be driven on race tracks, so I never got to drive one.

Most of my work involved driving around the country picking up crashed bikes from which to salvage engines, but the boss also took in regular car maintenance jobs, so I ended up being asked to reassemble a VW Golf whose engine he had rebuilt. This went kind of well, but when I was finished there were still a surprising number of unidentifiable parts remaining on the floor.

The car ran fine, so we decided they weren't really needed.

Multiple exposure

I need eye glasses, mostly so that people know that I'm a nerd, but also because I can't see much without them. This myopia has lead to joining the wrong family at the beach, diving into a pool that I didn't know had lane ropes (pure luck that I dived between them), and eliciting sympathy when I asked what the time was while standing in front of a very large clock.
"It's ten past six o'clock, dear" said the nice lady slowly as she looked around for my carer.
It also lead me to joining the women's nude bathing session at the local pool and taking way too long to realise my mistake (and totally unable to enjoy it).

In return, I got lost between the showers and the lockers at a large sports centre in North Carolina, and suddenly found myself in the middle of the lobby, holding my swimming trunks in my hand. That could have ended much worse than it did.

Which leads nicely on to the Haw river story. Summer weather in North Carolina is 40 deg C and 90% humidity, so hanging out at rivers is very popular, and the Haw was a personal favourite, with lots of rock pools that made natural Jacuzzis to relax in.
It was here that I met members of the Triangle Area Naturists, along with all their other body parts. Now, I have no problem with nudity, yet joining an organisation just so you can take your clothes off feels a bit contrived. But the sort of people who do so tend to be open-minded, free-thinking sorts, and I got on very well with them, and even got invited to hang out at an indoor, winter meeting, which I still maintain was weird, but also irresistible. They even gave me a TAN tee shirt, which I should remember to wear if I ever meet another group of naturists.
Or should I ??

I'm so disappointed that I wasn't at the Haw the weekend that someone reported them to the police, and they were arrested for "behaviour likely to cause a breach of the peace". I would love to have it on public record that seeing me naked could cause people to riot.
There again, I'd also like to be able to return the US.

Risky business

During the 90's I spent a lot of my spare time rock climbing. And I did so in what is known as traditional style, placing temporary pieces of protection into cracks to catch the rope if I were to fall. It suited me well, as it's as nerdy as it is physical, because the rope management and protection placement is very much applied physics. (An alternative style is 'sport', where the protection is permanently installed in the form of bolted eyelets that can be trusted without thinking. Trad climbers mock this style with bumper stickers that say "Sport Climbing is neither". They could mock us for climbing less difficult routes in order to be able to place our protection, but curiously they don't.)

When people ask if climbing is dangerous, I usually say that it's as dangerous as fishing, in that you can choose to sit by a small stream with a rod and line in the summer, or to be out on the North Sea hauling in nets on an open boat in the winter. The sort of climbing I did was probably the equivalent of rowing out to the middle of a big lake in the autumn. Yes, people die doing that, but not often. And in general, climbers are very careful, making slow, considered risk assessments. No-one I climbed with ever needed hospital treatment for a climbing injury, unlike the skiers, skaters and mountain bikers that I know. Counter that with the story of the Swedish adventurer Göran Kropp, who bicycled to mount Everest, climbed it without oxygen or Sherpas, then bicycled home again, but later died on a simple climb much like the ones I played on each weekend.

When Swedish National Radio wanted to make a program about risk taking, they chose to compare radio producers (I guess as much for availability as their risk-free occupation), with climbers, which I think was a poor choice for the above reasons. Motorcyclists would have been a much better choice for risk takers. Perhaps the most telling difference between the experiment groups was that one of the radio producers questioned the hygiene of blood tests being taken in a corridor at the radio station, rather than a sterile health centre.
I questioned only the legality, and the phlebotomist admitted that some rules were being bent.

But anyway, that's how I found myself being part of the program, and being submitted to various psychological and genetic tests.

The biggest surprise of the mental assessment was finding that I have a hidden talent for rapid maze solving, apparently getting the highest score the assessor had ever seen. And it was true that despite being a mediocre climber (for fellow climbers, my hardest trad lead was grade 5.10, which I achieved soon after my mother died, when taking a bad fall seemed like it wouldn't really register on the pain scale), I did beat all my friends in speed climbing, where rapidly finding the next good-enough hand hold was more important than finding the perfect hold. Just as with my job, I was good at 'quick-and-dirty' rather than slow and perfect. I'm totally OK with that, the world needs both types of people, and at work I built a lot more computer programs than I would have if I'd chased every last obscure little bug to make each one perfect. Just don't ask me to write the control system for a nuclear power station.

Most surprising was the genetic test, which showed that I have the 7R variant of the DRD4 gene, which is associated with low dopamine sensitivity, and risk-taking behaviour.

Now, I've always considered myself a rather careful person, but it's true that I enjoy minor adventures, and have also driven cars rather faster than the authorities would like. After a lot of thought, I came to the conclusion that I do actually enjoy risk, but am also lucky enough to have the awareness to counter that by extremely careful risk assessment. So despite hobbies that many of my friends consider dangerous, I have never broken a bone, and in 40 years of enthusiastic driving, I had only one accident, and that was the first day after I passed my test.

I would also like to say that playing with the limits of my cars under safe conditions on empty roads paid off big time when I was driving home from Wales and an on-coming car misjudged an overtaking and ended up head-on to us on a two lane road. By miraculous luck there was a lay-by that I could swerve into and avoid a 60+60 mph collision. And thanks to years of misbehaviour, I could judge exactly how hard to swerve towards the trees and back out again, without overreracting.

I was so proud of saving our lives, but my passenger just shouted “What are you doing! We have eggs on the back seat!”

I have been subjected to far higher risks by other people than I have by my own behaviour.

My best friend from school, David, was a great driver, but also a 99% driver, always pushing the limits. I used to love being driven home from the pub by him, when a couple of pints had disengaged the smart parts of my brain, but engaged the sensory parts, so I could enjoy the rush of the countryside racing past the windows without thinking about the consequences of a 1% error.

And he managed to do this an extraordinary number of times before the inevitable happened. We came into a roundabout that most people would take at 30 mph, but David usually took at 65 mph. On this occasion he took it at 70 in his sister’s borrowed Ford Escort, and even before anything happened, I realised he had finally crossed the line. The car drifted just a couple of feet more than usual, but that was enough for the nearside front wheel to mount the curb, and flip us clockwise into the road (if we had just hit the curb, it might have flipped us anticlockwise off the road). We then started spinning on the roof around the vertical axis as we hung from our seatbelts. Then we hit something else (not sure what) and flipped back on to our wheels, extraordinarily on the correct side of the road facing the correct way. As we rolled to a stop I made an inventory of limbs, and was happy to find that I was still attached to my left arm that had been resting on the open window ledge before the gymnastics.

We then saw another car ahead of us, with the occupants bent over and looking kind of weird. I worried that we had hit them, but then realised that they were laughing. They soon jumped out of their car to see if we were OK, and when they were sure we were, they said “You should have seen that! It was so funny – the car spinning on its roof, you guys hanging upside down, looking totally composed, and then flipping back on to its wheels. You are OK, right?”.

The car was still drivable, just a bit flatter and beaten up than previously, but surprisingly David didn’t want to keep driving.

Instead the spectators gave us a lift home to David's parents, who had no reason to react when we came in. But then David said “We’ve had an accident”, and his mum panicked, jumped up from the sofa, and then immediately collapsed back on to it in a faint. His more relaxed dad finished the paragraph of the paper he was reading, then asked if the car was towable. It was, so he drove us back, and I steered the rather sad looking Escort back to town behind his car. Local youths who saw us cheered.

Some years later, a relative’s husband drove me at over 130 mph (210 kph) on his motorbike along the roads of northern England. When I later mentioned that I couldn’t read the speedo after 130 because my vision became blurry, he said that he had the same trouble at that speed. Some more years later, in Encinitas, California, a friend’s husband took me up to the same speed on his bike, drove through a red light, and overtook a police car. When I asked if he’d seen the police car, he said “Sure, but he wasn't going to catch up with me, was he?”.

My self-inflicted close-shaves seem minor in comparison. Like hiking up Skuleberget in September, and then wanting to get up the last 5 meters of near vertical rock to watch the sunset from the very top. Scaling it wasn’t too hard, but after relaxing on the top for a while, my blood sugar started dropping as rapidly as the temperature, so I began to wonder if I could make it down. Falling could easily have resulted in a broken leg, at least an hour’s hike from my tent, and further still to the nearest help. But the alternative was a very cold night on the summit, and much lower fuel reserves in the morning, so I went for it, and somehow found all the footholds that are so much harder to find when descending.

Even at my office job I managed to scare myself. Buried deep in the basement we had a gym, which was very seldom used, especially on the Friday night when I ventured down. I wanted to use the punch bag, but someone had twisted the suspension chain so that it was too high for me. So I climbed up the bag to untwist the chain. I succeeded, but as the bag dropped, I realised that my finger was way too close to getting caught between the links that would now be supporting a 20 kg bag, and 70 kg of me.

For some time after that, visions of me hanging from the ceiling for days until the next user arrived alternated with visions of me chewing off my own finger.

To add symmetry to my life, I once got my favourite fishing lure caught on a root at the bottom of a lake. It was only about two metres deep, so I swam down to rescue it, but as I wrestled it loose I had similar visions of it embedding in my finger, and me being faced with the same problem, albeit inverted and on a much shorter time scale.

I’m very curious what my epitaph is going to be.

Flights of fancy

I first boarded an aeroplane aged 26, during the recovery from writing my PhD, for a holiday to Gran Canaria with my girlfriend of the time. I found it a wonderful experience, and somewhere around 200 flights later, I still love the feeling of soaring through the clouds. The logistics and horrors of the airport experience are another matter, but the flying itself never gets old.

Something like flight number 5 took me to the US for my 2 year post doc there. I booked it through the travel agent in Buckingham, who apparently didn't get out much himself, as he left me one hour to transfer from JFK to Newark, which are in different states. Realising a bus might not make it, I opted for a helicopter, which remarkably only cost $30, and made a stop in Manhattan, at dusk, along the way, which was quite an experience. (I still missed my flight, which ended up costing me a week's budget on an emergency hotel booking in Chicago.)

It's such a pity that we can no longer visit the cockpit, as I once did while flying over the alps, with such an amazing view that is quite different from peering out of a tiny passenger side window. But returning home to Heathrow I always aim for seat 27F, which gives a wonderful view of London as they bank right over the city to line up on runway 27L, and is far enough behind the engines that the exhaust doesn't distort photos too much.

My Pharmacia boss, Bob, introduced me to small planes and the local flying club, and after he left I would still visit and ask if anyone wanted to split the fuel costs on a flight to keep their mandatory hours up. This is a win-win strategy for getting cheap sightseeing trips.

When I started earning my living as a photographer, a client asked a drone operator to shoot aerials of their site, but the results were so bad that they asked me to redo the project with a proper camera from a proper plane. They had blown their budget on the drone company, so I only got offered expenses, but they and I knew that I was going to take the job anyway. That's the problem with earning your living from your hobby, everyone knows you'll work for free if the job is fun enough.

So I accepted and asked around for a pilot, finding an 81-year-old dentist who was willing to take me up for petrol money. I was a little hesitant about his age, but since he hadn't yet crashed during 3000 hours of flying over 65 years, I felt rather safe, even when I saw his plane turn upside down as he approached the landing strip to pick me up. Apparently aerobatics is his thing, so on the way to the job, he showed me how he could place a glass of water on the instrument panel, and how it wouldn't spill even as he did a barrel roll. This subjected us to positive G forces, which was OK despite his age, but since he had an artificial artery in his neck, he couldn't do negative-G manoeuvres, because that might make the artery burst.

There are so many parameters to think about when flying, but I wasn't previously aware of this one.

On that trip I got great photos that the client uses extensively, and I still can't work out who exploited whom.

It feels much better to do free work for charities, and one of my favourites was the lifeboats. I could call it Corporate Social Responsibility, but of course it was actually free rides on fast boats and hovercrafts. It was so much fun, and they were so grateful for professional photos. Win-win again.

But I did once have an ethical dilemma, when they were on manoeuvrers with the coastguard helicopter. There's really only one photo you can take from inside the chopper, the one with the rescue swimmer and victim just outside the door. Whereas there are many different external shots. But I really wanted that inside shot. So I asked the swimmer if I could go up with them, and he said that was OK, but I needed to join the others for the instruction on how to get out of the machine if we somehow found ourselves upside down under water, and then confirm with the pilot.

The instruction went well, but when I asked the pilot if it was OK to join them, he said "Normally I'd say yes, but when I landed I blew away that neighbour's fence, and he's really mad at me, so I don't want to land here again". I wanted to say that they could take me back to their depot and I'd hitchhike home, and also ask

if that neighbour was really more scary than flying in conditions that sink ships, but I also didn't really want to push my luck. But I'm a bit disappointed that I never got up in a SAR helicopter.

I also knew a nurse who manned a Lear jet that was used for repatriating tourists who get sick on holiday, and was negotiating a project with them, but a colleague somehow beat me to that. Close but no cigar, again.

Mostly I exited aircraft on the ground, but I did once do a tandem parachute jump, with an instructor strapped to my back. It was surprisingly easy to forget that he was there, so it felt very much like the real thing. I wasn't nervous, as I assumed that they wouldn't still be in business if many of their clients didn't survive, but it still felt so wrong to step out of the door and on to the wing strut at 10 000 ft.

But the real surprise was what happened when I let go. I had assumed that with no visual reference points, it would just feel like floating in space. But no, your ears know all about acceleration, and it feels very much like plummeting off a building, which initially is not a good feeling. But after a few seconds I could enjoy the experience, and even steer a bit with my arms and legs, and after that it was almost boring when the chute was deployed, and we seemed to just hang in the air for a very long time. But the free-fall is definitely an experience I would recommend.

Then while driving through Voss in Norway I stopped for coffee and saw that there was a parasailing outfit that was taking people on rides. It was a beautiful day, and I realised that there was never going to be a better time and place to try the sport.

So up I went, again tandem, with a test pilot for the sail company as my instructor behind. We were pulled up behind a boat, and as soon as we got up a few meters, the slight haze disappeared, because now we were looking through its rather limited height, instead of looking through kilometres of its width.

So the views were spectacular, with the Norwegian mountains all around and the incredible colours of the lake. Sadly I wasn't

allowed to take my camera up because unsecured items could be a problem on a bad landing.

Since he was a test pilot, he too couldn't resist offering to do some aerobatics with me, and of course I agreed, so he put us into a 4G spin, during which I started to get tunnel vision and was probably on the way to passing out. I like to think that he knew where my limits were.

Photographs I haven't taken in public conveniences

So there I was, in a public toilet in a park in Cambridge, when I noticed a hole in the wall. No, this isn't another George Michael story, because I then saw that underneath was a sign labelling the hole as a disposal point for sharps, so presumably they've had trouble with junkies littering the floor with needles. Then I saw that the label was repeated in Braille, and my brain started to spin. Do they also have trouble with blind junkies littering? Perhaps even more so, since they probably get through more needles whilst trying to hit a vein by trial and error.

But do blind people really run their hands all over the walls of public toilets just in case there is a message for them? Or have I got this all wrong, and do all the Braille messages that you find under restroom labels actually say "Euuueew, now wash your hands please"? Anyway, I wanted to photograph this sign to remind me to find out more, but the booth was too small for me to get to my backpack to get my camera out, and I didn't really want to go outside and have people wonder what it was that I'd done that made me rush back in with a camera.

Similarly, in a dilapidated petrol station in Rocky Flats, Colorado, where the sign read that the water was not potable due to plutonium contamination. Whether or not that was true, I still wanted a picture of the sign, but with a badly fitting door leading straight out to the cashier, again I didn't want to have to explain flashes of light coming out of the toilet.

Though I could always blame it on the plutonium, I suppose.

Have molecule, will travel

I was driving through Sheffield with a large plastic model of the molecule dihydrofolate reductase filling the back seat, as you do, when I stopped for petrol at a tiny little garage in the suburbs. It was attended by an very old man, who as I drew up was sitting in an armchair on the pavement outside. As he filled the tank he peered into the back, and said :
"Is that a molecule?"
I confirmed that it was, and he continued, rather hesitantly, and sort of fading away into thought at the end of each sentence :
"I saw one of those on TV once...."
"Apparently we're made up of lots of those..."
"And in turn, the universe is made up of lots of us..."
"Funny when you think about it, isn't it?"
"That'll be 10 pounds 20 please."
And with that he went back to his armchair to refine his unification theory.

I like to think that he's still retelling the story too.