SOPHIE, RICE AND FISH

MARK HILL

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OBOOKO EDITION

This is a true story.

All the events in this book happened as described or at least as well as I can remember them. However some names have been changed to protect individual privacy and the timing of some minor events has been altered slightly to keep the narrative flowing along at a good pace.

Sophie, Rice and Fish

by Mark Hill

I can't breathe.
She sits about twelve feet away. Just two desks over.
When I look up, which I do often, I see her. And I can't breathe.
She is Sophie.
And I love her.

*

"Rice and fish," I say to the waiter.

It's all I can manage to say. I don't look at the menu. I don't ask for suggestions or inquire as to what's fresh. I don't read the daily specials chalkboard. I just ask for "rice and fish."

I am in Lisbon, my landing point in Portugal. I want rice and I want fish. Any rice. Any fish. I don't care.

The waiter looks at me like I'm the world's dumbest tourist. "Menu?" he says.

I repeat, almost pleading. "Please," I say. "Rice and fish."

He brings me a plate of salty sardines and a bowl of slightly overcooked white rice. Not fancy. Not even very good. Certainly not a dish that Rick Stein would lose any sleep over. But, for me, perhaps the best meal ever. And quite possibly the first step on the road to saving my life.

*

I am looking for a village. Lisbon, of course, is not a village.

I love Lisbon to death.

I love the up and down twisty winding hilly streets. I love the 25 de Abril Bridge which everyone tells you was designed and built by the same people who constructed San Francisco's Golden Gate but actually wasn't but is cool anyway.

I love the clunky funky yellow streetcars that wheeze up and down the streets providing locals with an easy way to get around and tourists with a convenient way to see the city close-up and have their pockets and purses carefully picked all at the same time.

I love the fresh seafood on offer at dozens of markets around the city and the crowded little restaurants where they cook the fish outside over coals and serve it up with rice and a glass of wine for about ten euros.

I love the calcada, the traditional Portuguese pavement. I love the way you can walk into any of Lisbon’s many pracas (squares), look down and discover a glorious work of art under your feet.

I love the people who manage to be friendly and nice and helpful but without falling into that horrible "professional customer service" attitude that characterises so much of the western world.

Lisbon is a great city. But I am not looking for a city. I am looking for a village.

*

My hands are shaking. I'm sitting in a backpacker hostel at a table with a group of young people from all parts of the world. We're chatting. I am desperately trying to seem normal. But my hands are shaking. Even using two hands, I can hardly bring my cup of coffee to my lips without splashing it about my face. It is everything I can do not to look like a drooling idiot.

It's a bit after eleven o'clock. It's also the first time in years that I've gone this far in the day without a drink.

It's the first time in many months that I haven't woken up at 7:30

in the morning and immediately reached for the half pint of vodka and orange juice that I'd placed beside my bed the night before along with a small spoon to stir the drink because, over eight hours, vodka and orange has a tendency to separate (the vodka goes on top; the juice sinks) and you need to give it a mix.

I make it through breakfast and head down the spiral staircase to the front door. I'm shaking. My legs quiver. There is no handrail and I am seriously worried about falling down the stairs.

At the tiny shop a few minutes walk from the hostel, I manage to get a one litre bottle of Sagres beer out of the cooler and onto the counter without dropping it. The shop owner picks €1.60 from the pile of coins in my shaking hand.

What must he think of me? He probably thinks I belong with the winos and addicts at the park just down the hill. I probably do.

Back at the hostel, the bottle is almost empty before I am back to normal.

Normal? This is my normal.

I need to talk. I always need to talk.

For the past three months I have talked about nothing but Sophie. My friends are long sick of hearing my story. Even my family is getting tired of it by now.

The backpacker hostel offers up a plethora of fresh ears. And telling your story is a normal part of hostel life. "Where are you from? Where are you going? Why are you here?" Everyone asks and everyone listens. Ask the right questions and people will return the favour. If I do a bit of listening, I get to do a bit of talking.

I manage to feign a sort of "don't really want to talk about it / okay, well if you insist, it's like this" approach.

I condense my story. Much as I want to talk forever, nobody wants to sit for an hour hearing about Sophie. But by talking to a dozen people for a few minutes each, I accomplish the same thing.

It seems to work. It helps.

*

"Dear Sophie," I wrote in an email.
"By the time you get this you will know that I've given my notice at the agency. Many reasons for that. But there's a personal side.
"You hear this phrase called "mid-life crisis" and when you're young you think it's a myth or just something kinda funny. It's something stand-up comics make jokes about. It's something TV writers use as

fodder for sitcom scripts. Ha ha. Good laugh, but you don't think it's real.
"But then you get to a point in your life and without any warning it suddenly hits you out of nowhere. And it's real. And it messes with your head. And it fucks you up. And it can turn you into a crazy person.
"Some men go really nuts. Some divorce partners. Some abandon their homes and families. Some men cash in their life savings and blow it all on an open-top Ferrari.
"In my case, I got overly and inappropriately fond of a charming and talented young woman who sat next to me in the office.
"I realise that my mid-life crisis has caused you pain and hurt and stress and probably some considerable embarrassment.
"I can't apologise for that. I would if I could. But it would solve nothing and only add more needless drama to your life. And lacking a magical time machine, I can't go back and undo everything.
"But there is one thing I can do. I can leave. I can go away.
"I had to give a month's notice. But, with holiday time deducted, I'll probably be gone in a couple of weeks.
"That's it. That's all. No need to write back or respond. Just wanted to say this. The world is a nicer place for having you in it.
"I wish you every happiness."
I pressed the SEND button, topped up my drink, sat back and thought "now what the hell do I do?"

*

Portugal?

It's not the obvious place to go and find yourself and I'm often asked to explain it. I did consider Italy, India and Bali, but apparently that's already been done as a good book and a bad film.

Silly jokes aside, Portugal for me is a natural choice. I've been here many times before. What appeals to me is the balance of the place. There are plenty of modern, western countries where everything is in place and efficient and cutting edge. I have a passport from two of them. But the modern world is too dull, too fast and too corporate. And too damned expensive, to boot.

Then there are the backward countries, or the "developing nations" as we're supposed to call them in these politically correct times. Out of respect, I won't name them, but they're the usual suspects. Dirt cheap, but chaotic and dangerous, poverty ridden and diseased.

Portugal is in a nice sort of middle ground. The pace is slow, but not glacial. The important things work reasonably well or at least well enough. The trains run pretty much on time. The health care is fairly good. Children are well educated. The police keep order.

But it's not so corporate. The vast majority of businesses are independent and local. Go out for dinner and the person cooking your fish is likely to be the owner. The waiter is probably a boy or girl from the neighbourhood.

There are national chains, but they are few. There isn't a Starbucks on every corner, though there are hundreds of little cafes where you can linger for hours over a single coffee. I've seen the golden arches just twice.

And it is surprisingly open and liberal. Portugal was one of the first countries in the world to banish the death penalty. It has decriminalised or tolerates most drugs. Same-sex marriages are legally recognised. All this from a country that once took its national direction from the Pope.

It is a nation of contradictions. According to The Economist, Portugal has by far the lowest per capita income in western Europe. They have called it "the sick man of Europe." Yet that same magazine ranks it 19th in the world for quality of life, ahead of France, Germany and the UK.

It's as if, at some point in its modern history, the country decided to improve its prospects, but not too quickly and not at the expense of everything else that makes life worth living.

It's my kind of place and that's why I'm here.

*

"Boa tarde," I say to the young lad on the desk at the hostel.

He smiles. He is surprised. Few people bother to learn Portuguese. People learn French and Italian for romance, Spanish for travel and German and Chinese for business reasons. But nobody learns Portuguese.

Every tourist is told that "obrigado" means thank you. But that is as far as it usually goes. An entire conversation in English, then ended with a smugly self-satisfied "obrigado."

I decide to go further. I commit to learn. I resolve to start with simple words. I will practise common greetings. I will make an effort. I will try.

I have found a website with simple audio clips. It is difficult, but I pick one and practise hard. I listen closely and repeat the phrases to

myself over and over again.

"Boa tarde."

I pass the hostel check-in desk. "Boa tarde," I say, nervously. They smile. "Boa tarde."

"Is it okay?" I ask. "Good afternoon?"

"It is good."

The next day, I am going for a look around. Before I set out, I go on the Portuguese language website and practice. "Ate logo." It sounds like "atta logg" and means "see you later."

I listen over and over again and repeat it endlessly. Portuguese is a hard language. I want to sound casual. My goal is to breeze out the door with a relaxed wave and a cheery "ate logo."

This is my goal for the day. If I can do this, I will have achieved something.

There is a song by an '80s Canadian music group, The Parachute Club, called "Small Victories." This is what I am seeking - small victories.

Today, "ate logo" is my small victory.

There's a new guy in my dorm at the backpacker hostel. He's talking on a mobile phone in some weird language from a strange place.

"Where are you from," I ask, standard hostel question.

"No English."

"You speak. What you speak?"

He shakes his head.

"French? Francais? Spanish? Espana?"

No

What's with this guy, I think. Honestly. Some people just don't have a clue. He's gonna be in deep shit soon enough.

"What is your country? Country: Canada. America. Australia. Russia."

"Country?" I ask, pointing to him.

"Ahh!" he says with a grin. He taps his chest. "Portuguese."

These people must be so glad to have me in town.

*

I am at a fish restaurant in the Bairro Alto. Jana is with me. She is Slovak, 23 years old and beside herself with grief. The boy she likes has not called.

I dig heartily into my plate of fresh sardines and white rice. Jana

picks at her food, more moving it about the plate than actually eating.

She's been pouring her heart out for most of the afternoon. I've been pouring my heart out to the world for most of this year and I reckon I owe the world a bit of listening so I've taken her to dinner.

I hear the same story over and over again. He's Portuguese. They met when she was in Lisbon on a student exchange. He said he wanted to see her again so she's come to the city for that reason alone. She's called and called but he never answers.

"I'm sure he wants to see you," I say. "He will get in touch. I promise you."

I go through all the possible reasons why he may not have called. "Maybe his phone is out of credit. Or broken or lost or stolen. Or a family emergency," I say. "Maybe he's just not one of those people who check messages very often. I bet he's making plans to see you right now."

I top up Jana's wine, listen to the same story one more time and repeat the same reassurances plus a few more that I invent along the way. I'm not convinced myself, but I don't show it.

"Come on," I say. "The hostel bar will be open. I'll buy you a mojito. You'll feel better."

Next morning Jana bounces into my room carrying the widest, brightest and happiest smile I have seen in a long time. "Mark! He has contacted me!"

She'd got an email from him asking why she hadn't returned his messages. There had been a problem with her voicemail. He'd been calling all the time.

I have a bit of a smile myself.

It is morning and I am getting washed. In one of the shower stalls nearby, a couple are having sex.

I can hear them. He is pounding. She is moaning.

I don't know whether the shower is a preference or just the only way to get a little privacy. But good for them.

There's a funny side. The showers have a button that starts the water flow. Then a timer kicks in for a couple of minutes before shutting off the flow. To take a shower, you have to keep hitting the button. It's the same principle as those hand dryers you find in washrooms.

With this couple, as the water flows, the pounding and moaning continues with gusto. But as soon as the water flow stops, so do the intimate sounds. Then someone presses the button, the water streams out and the pounding and moaning resume.

It's almost as if the shower stall is not only regulating the water, it is actually controlling the sex.

*

I was getting old and not handling it well at all. My fiftieth birthday was slowly coming up over the horizon. It was not something I was in any way prepared to meet.

My body, which in all objective truth looked no better or worse than average for a guy my age, physically disgusted me. I quite literally could not endure the sight of it. I took the full-length mirror in my bedroom and stuck it far away in the back of the closet. I bought my shirts in size large and hung them slack over the waistband. In the bathroom, I carefully re-arranged the cabinet mirrors so as not to catch sight of myself when I was towelling off.

The only part of my body I could stand to look at were my hands. I do think I have nice hands. But the rest of me felt like the human equivalent of a bad smell.

I can't explain why I felt this way. I'd always thought I'd be someone who takes aging as it comes. I've never been a particularly handsome guy. It wasn't as if I had movie star looks to lose. So I reckoned I'd be one of those people who are said to be "comfortable in their own skin."

Not so. Not even close.

*

"Excuse me," the young fella says in a strong Scandinavian accent. "It is burning."

I am cooking my own rice and fish. The hostel has few pots and pans and all are far too large for single-serving cooking. The burner has two convenient settings: "Off" and "Raging Inferno."

Melissa, from the hostel, has recommended a number of small villages along the Atlantic coast. I'll check them out this week. One village, she says, is perfect for fish. There is a small restaurant where the husband catches and the wife cooks. It sounds just like what I'm looking for.

In the meantime, I will cook my own.

I manage to scrape a small serving of rice from the charred remains in the pot. The rice is not great, a bit bland but not terrible. But the fish is absolutely perfect and I manage to eat about half of it.

And after months of skipping supper or eating cheap microwaved

ready meals, I am cooking my own food again.

Well, in this case, burning my own food again.

But it's a start.

*

There is a charming German girl staying in my dorm at the hostel. I will call her Martina. She is impossibly pretty. Golden shards and wavy ringlets of sunny blonde hair. Big bright blue eyes. A huge and lovely smile. An open and disingenuous personality.

We have become friends. She tells me about her day and the places she goes and the people she meets. I tell her about mine. She sits next to me at breakfast and talks about her plans. She shows me the pretty dress she bought in town and the comfy sandals that only cost eight euros. She is a true delight.

I think of her as something like a favourite niece. She looks at me as some sort of harmless kindly uncle.

She gets ill one day with a minor, yet sexually related, illness and confides in me all her intimate symptoms, telling me things that she isn't comfortable disclosing to others, even the other young girls at the hostel. I do a bit of googling, figure out what she needs and help her to buy medicine from the nearby farmacia. She gets better.

It is an entirely appropriate relationship. Two very different people living in the world and just getting along. It's normal. No weirdness. No craziness. No drama.

If she sees me in the street she calls out my name, says hello and is perfectly comfortable to chat and talk. And she's equally comfortable to say "have to dash, I'm going into town."

She feels no need to cover her face and hide and stare into an empty shop window.

*

It was a beautiful, hot and sunny afternoon in south east England when I realised that I was an alcoholic. I was no longer "Mark who likes a drink" or "Mark who can pack away a few."

I was Mark. And I was an alcoholic.

I'd been out the night before and by the time I'd headed home all the shops were shut. By morning, aside from a small can of a very weak pre-mixed gin and tonic, I had no booze in the house. Before leaving for work I gulped it down. It was not nearly enough, but it would have to do. If I could hang in there for a few hours and take a

slightly early lunch, I thought I would be okay.

I wasn't.

One the girls at work wanted some help with her CV. "I'll take you out to lunch and we can go over it," she said.

"Deal."

Noon hour came. One hour until lunch. It got hard to hold out. I just sat at my desk doing nothing. Just trying not to look weird. Trying not to shake.

I looked at my watch every three minutes. "Come on, dammit!"

My email pinged. "Waiting on a client call. Is 1:15 okay?"

Fuck!

"Sure. No worries," I wrote back, adding in a smiley just for good measure.

It was twenty five past one before we finally made it to the bar. Luckily my friend was buying lunch so I could just stand there while she ordered and paid. I picked up the pint of lager with both hands. One hand and it would have been all over the floor. Unsteadily I managed three paces from the counter and downed about a third of it.

I made it to the table and the glass was empty mere minutes after I sat down. It wasn't enough. I was still shaking. I needed another.

I prepared. I took a five pound note out of my pocket, clutched it in my hand and approached the bar. "A Kronenbourg, please," I said, forcing myself to look relaxed. I managed to hold steady long enough to hand the money over. I messed around with my pockets so the barman would put the drink on the counter rather than handing it directly to me. That would have been too risky.

The second glass took a little longer to go down. Long enough to explain to my friend why I was shaking like a leaf in the wind.

I took out another fiver. "Would you go up and buy me another pint," I asked. "If I go up this soon, they won't serve me."

Halfway through my third pint in under half an hour, I was back to normal.

"Now," I said with a grin. "Let's have a look at that CV."

*

I'm at the dining table writing this book. Martina and Jana come by to invite me to join them at the beach.

I pass on the offer. I'm flattered to be asked, but it's a girly day out.

They are both dressed in bright, lively sundresses and grinning

from ear to ear. Happy girls.

"Your boy has called," I say to Jana.

"Your health has returned," I say to Martina.

"You are young and pretty and healthy and the sun is shining and the beach is waiting for you," I say. "If you are ever in your life sad, remember this day."

It's an awfully cheesy thing to say, but they bounce off to the beach smiling and I am happy.

*

My mobile phone rang. My landlady was on the line. "Mark, my daughter is coming back from university and needs your flat," she said. "I'm afraid I'll have to give you notice to vacate."

My life was becoming just one damned thing after another.

*

I hop a cheap train to Cascais, It is not to be my village, but I go anyway because you never know.

Cascais was once a fishing village and is now a day trip for Lisboeta. That's what you call people from Lisbon. People from Manchester are Mancunians. People from Liverpool are Liverpudlians. People from Sydney are Sydneysiders. And so on and so forth and people from Lisbon are Lisboeta.

It's early afternoon when I arrive at the hostel in Cascais.

"I need to buy a beach towel," I ask the pleasant woman checking me in. "Is there a shop." She suggests a huge mega-mart not terribly far from the town centre.

"I need a few things myself," says a young girl with a broad American accent standing next to me waiting to check in. "We could go together, if you like."

"Sure."

Kirsten is her name and as we walk through the mega-monster-super-store looking for a beach towel for me and a sun dress and cheap sandals for her I see more shop assistants appear in the shortest period of time ever. I have never in my life seen so much retail help anywhere in the world.

"May I help you?"

"Do you require assistance?"

"Can I do anything to help you?"

It is a level of personal service not seen in the retail world since

the 1950s and it is all directed at Kirsten.

Little wonder. She is as fit as a fiddle.

She is also half my age which is why the hundreds of randy young Portuguese sales clerks who are climbing out of the woodwork to inquire if "I can do anything to help you" assume I am her father.

"They think I'm your dad," I say.

"I know," Kirsten chuckles. "It's hilarious."

"Let's mess with their head," I say.

"Yeah. 'kay."

And we do. Kirsten flirts with one eye cast over her shoulder. I glare paternally at every male who approaches. She flits her eyes in a don't-tell-Dad sort of way. It is great fun.

*

The advertising agency where I worked was failing.

We really only had two accounts. So when we lost the second one, it kicked about a third of the business off the books. After a staff vote, we all agreed to forgo redundancies and take a pay cut and a reduced work week instead. It sounded like a good idea. Everyone would keep their job, but at a lower rate. We'd stick it out together until business picked up.

In fact it was a recipe for trouble. Business didn't pick up. Those who lived from pay day to pay day suddenly found themselves under financial pressure. People started looking around. And with a full day off every two weeks, going to job interviews was easier than ever. No need to fake a sick day or concoct a phoney dentist appointment. Simply wait until your off day, put on your best interview suit and go find something new.

Which is what everybody started to do. As a writer, I could see it more clearly than most. Every week someone would casually ask me to have a look over their CV or make a few tweaks to their LinkedIn profile or help craft a covering letter. The parking lot was regularly filled with staffers muttering covertly into their mobile phones.

*

Next day I am poolside. Kirsten comes down wrapped in a towel.

"Beach?" she says.

"Sounds like a plan."

Cascais has three beaches all of which are fairly small and not terribly impressive. But if you just want a nice sandy place to lie in the

sun, catch a few rays and, if you're feeling really energetic, have a little cavort about the water, they're perfectly fine.

We put down our towels. I pad back into town to collect a couple of cold beers for me and some sort of horrible chocolate covered ice cream for Kirsten. We lie out on the sand collecting sun and slowly making our way towards a form of skin cancer that will eventually kill us but looks pretty good right now.

Then the boys turn up. Dozens of them. All young. All tanned. All athletic. All with the sort of taut ripped bodies that men my age tell young women that we used to have "back in the day" but, in truth, we never really did. They have a football which they play up and down along the beach.

Eventually (and by eventually, I mean about seven seconds) they set eyes on Kirsten.

From that moment on there is a never-ending parade of randy young Portuguese boys parading themselves in front of our patch of beach.

I don't know what to think. I have no responsibility for Kirsten and, given our age difference, no romantic or sexual interest. But as the cream of Portuguese boyhood is making its appearance mere inches from my newly-purchased beach towel, I realise what it must be like to be a father and how horrible that must be.

I am lying just 20 inches from a girl who, as far as the wide world is concerned, could very well be my offspring, and there are dozens of brazen young boys quite willing to do just about anything to snatch her away.

Thank God I've never had kids, I think but do not say.

On my final day in Cascais, Kirsten and I head out for lunch at a small, nearby fish restaurant suggested to us by the hostel owner.

Lunch is excellent and the bill comes on a plate with a receipt and business card. We split the tab and make our exit. As we do, the waiter approaches. “Here is the card from the restaurant," he says, handing Kirsten a piece of printed paper. She takes it, sticks it in her back pocket and we walk outside.

"You do know that his phone number is on that card," I say.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Check it out," I say.

And sure enough, just above the name of the restaurant are the words, written in blue biro, "Tony - 077 … … …"

"How did you know that?" Kirsten asks.

I can say "have you looked in a mirror lately?" or some such

thing, but I don't. I mumble some lame crap about "he seemed to like you" and we go on our way.

Thank Heaven for childlessness, I think to myself. How do real parents handle this kinda stuff?

*

Back in Lisbon I am relaxing on my hostel bed reading a selection of Paul Theroux's collected travel writings. He's good.

Jana returns from a day out with Martina. She comes by and tells me about her afternoon trip to a nearby market town and asks about my day and the progress of my writing.

"Do you have a plan for later?" she asks in her fractured English. "Would you like to have some wine? This time I will buy the wine."

"Sure. That sounds good," I say.

"I will take a shower," she says. "Maybe in one hour, we can go."

This is nice. She is a person. I am a person. Our different lives, in a small way, and for a short time, cross paths. It's good. I am not crazy and she is not scared.

We find a patio. Live music is being played in the square. Jana is worried.

"He has not called," she says. "Maybe he will not call."

"He will call," I say. "I guarantee it." I go through the myriad of reasons why he hasn't called. "It's early. Portuguese people don't even eat dinner until 8pm and don't start nightlife until midnight. And the football is on, Portugal v Germany. He will call later."

She's not convinced.

But she talks and talks and talks. And I listen and listen and listen. I listen for as long as it takes and then some. I know how to listen because, for most of the year, I have been talking and I know that it helps.

She is mad about her boy. She thinks about him every minute of every day. She talks about him constantly.

I know and understand exactly how she feels. And I know that, when you feel that way, the only way to get through it is to talk. So I try to reassure, but mostly I just try to listen with care. I try to be a help to her. But, as I do, I discover that the very act of listening to Jana is actually helping me.

If a pretty and bright girl with a wide smile and a tender personality can get a little wacky about someone, then perhaps a middle-aged man can do the same. Maybe that's how it works.

As I sit with Jana, I realise that my feelings for Sophie have given

me the ability to listen with empathy. I have grown a little. I have become someone who can understand and is able to listen and to be of some sort of comfort to a young person in love.

Falling for Sophie may not have done me any good. But it's not wasted.

We finish our drink and I take her to a nearby restaurant. I have fish soup and a beer. Jana has a small white wine. We talk some more. Her face is a picture of worry.

"He will call," I say. "I am sure of it."

We leave the restaurant and, as we walk down the hill, her phone rings. It is him. He's watching the sport, but will call later and arrange to meet. We are delirious with joy. He has called! We hug and I pick her up and swing her around. "I told you he would call," I say.

The Lisbon Festival is in full swing. Jana suggests we take in some music down by the waterfront. We walk down the hill. I buy a couple of small beers and we sit on the water's edge. The music starts and we dance. We dance to classic 1970s disco and Portuguese folk music and Jamaican reggae and cheesy euro-pop and pretty much whatever. No one else dances, but everyone watches the British man and the Slovak girl dance with not much skill but a heck of a lot of joy.

And as we dance I think. When you fall for someone who does not love you back, there are always feelings of sadness and longing. But when you are well into your late forties and the person you happen to fall for is not quite thirty, on top of all the sadness and longing, you do feel like a bit of a creep. And you feel like everyone in the world is looking at you and thinking "creep!".

Being friends with Jana reassures me that I am not a creep. Being friends with Jana reassures me that I am the sort of man that a pretty young girl feels comfortable to ask out for a glass or two of wine and to talk about her life and to share her feelings and to go down to the river and to dance a little and then to say goodnight and go out and meet her boy for a date.

I start to feel much better.

We walk back to the hostel and Jana peppers me with questions about her appearance. "What do you think about my dress? Do you like my shoes?”

"You'll look like a nice girl who has a date and has made an effort to look good, to show you care," I say. "You look pretty and attractive, but you haven't gone too far. He is a lucky boy to have a date with you."

She is not completely convinced, but I think she feels a little bit

better.

Back at the hostel, I leave her to get ready. On the way out she is, quite literally, shaking with nerves. “Should I wear my purse over my shoulder or carry it?" she asks.

I don't understand it. She is young and pretty and thoughtful and immensely likeable. What does she have to fear? What have we done to this world that makes a nice girl with a good heart fret about how to carry her purse? I don't get it. But it somehow gives me some small insight into Sophie.

Being a girl is a tough thing.

*

The bus ride to Lagos takes about four hours. As we move south, the sun gets brighter and brighter.

In Lagos, I check in to the backpackers hostel then head out to shop for food. I stop for a beer at the Three Monkeys bar. I know it well. It's a backpacker joint, the sort of place that makes its money selling three-for-the-price-of-two shooters to young travellers on a budget. But it's okay. It is what it is and I like it. The beer is cold and the small afternoon crowd is friendly.

A girl walks in. She is from Canada, is the girlfriend of Brooksie, one of the Aussie bar staff and is carrying a bird wrapped in a soft cloth. An actual bird. A seagull, so she tells me.

The bird is calm and happy and likes to be stroked behind the ears. Brooksie takes out his phone, shows me some pictures and a bit of video and tells me the story.

Something happened to the bird. It crashed, injured and hurt, onto the balcony of their nearby flat. It couldn't fly. It couldn't even move much. It was hurting in a big way.

"We've pretty much nursed it back to health," he says. "I reckon the little guy will be able to fly in a while."

"How did you do that?" I ask, having no idea how to nurse a bird back to health but knowing exactly how it feels to crash to Earth and hurt.

"Keep it warm and feed it."

"Feed it what?"

"Fish."

"Fish?"

"Yeah. From the market. Fish."

Seriously, I think to myself. You really could not make this stuff up.

*

It's a glorious day in the Algarve. The sun is cracking the flags. I have no destination or purpose. I just walk along the waterfront.

My body is beginning to look nicely tanned, but is a lot less healthy than it looks. I move slowly, almost at a sightseeing pace. The legs that once propelled me briskly over vast distances are straining. My once hearty lungs wheeze audibly. Sweat pours off my face and it's not all due to the heat.

I am not the man I was. But for the first time in nearly a year, I walk.

I walk and, tomorrow, I will walk again.

There is a caravel secured alongside the waterfront. I have to see it. I love all that exploring the world when the world was unknown stuff. James Cook is a personal hero. I can't get enough of it all.

The caravel is a replica of the sort of vessel that Portuguese explorers used to make their way down the coast of Africa and across the Cape of Good Hope.

Developed from sponsorship from Prince Henry the Navigator (a seriously cool dude who figures large around these parts and for good reason), the caravel helped develop the spice trade and make the country impossibly rich. It was in this sort of boat that Christopher Columbus accomplished all that he is famous for.

But it is a ridiculously tiny little thing. My mate back in London has a power boat that's not much smaller than a caravel and he never sleeps more than six people at a time. The caravel carried more than twenty crew plus a heck of a lot of cargo.

These days, no sensible person would travel from Dover to Calais in such a minor vessel. You'd be hard pressed to take it for a short cruise down the Thames. But five hundred years ago, men took off into the wide blue unknown in these things. There were no lifeboats, no personal flotation devices, no search and rescue helicopters or the RNLI or automatically deployable EPIRBs (go ahead, google it). There was nothing but a crappy little ship and a whole lotta ocean. And they went anyway.

It makes you realise just how tough our ancestors were and just how weak and Health & Safety oriented we have become.

Of course, back in the day, most of those sailors eventually died at sea from drowning or from injuries sustained while sailing or from scurvy or from poor health shortly after returning to home port. It wasn't exactly a secure career path. So maybe there is a bit of health

and a bit of safety to be had from all that Health & Safety.

Still. It's a cool little boat.

*

There is a thing called a tipping point. I tipped shortly before 6pm on a Sunday.

I was walking home. Sophie was on the opposite side of the street coming the other way. Seconds after spotting me she flung her head to one side so her hair would hide her face and affected to be looking in a shop window.

I wasn't fooled. The shop was empty. The only thing in it was a "To Let" sign.

I felt like I'd been kicked in the stomach. Even today, as I write this and remember that moment, my heart races and I am gutted.

What had I done? What had I become? How had I turned into someone that Sophie felt the need to hide from?

Not able to keep up the hair cover for long, she stopped and said hello.

"How are you?" I said, faking a casual banter. "What are you up to?"

"Nothing," she said. "Just going for a walk."

No way, I thought. Not in dressy shoes, a nice skirt and blouse and a coat for later when it gets chilly but now carried over her arm.

"Well, enjoy your walk," I said, feigning casualness all the while churning inside.

I'd only asked her what she was up to as a bit of conversation. I didn't need to know. I had no right to know. If she had simply said "just going into town" or "hanging out with friends", I would have left it there. But she did not. She had to pretend.

By the time I got home I was beside myself with hurt. This was a person I had sat next to for eight hours a day, five days a week for six months. We'd worked together. We'd seriously discussed getting jobs together as a creative team. I thought I was a friend.

I was not.

Not only was I not a friend, but I was someone to avoid and even hide from.

At home, I went upstairs to my room, lay down on my bed, and I cried.

And cried.

And cried.

I cried so much and so hard and for so long that I had to keep

flipping the pillowcases over and over because they had become soaked to dripping point.

And I drank. The vodka and orange juice went down even faster than usual and by nine o'clock I was absolutely polluted.

To this very day, I do not remember even a single word of the phone call. It doesn't matter. Calling Sophie late in the evening in a drunken sobbing stupor asking to know why she hadn't told me where she was going is wrong no matter what words you use.

*

"Boa tarde," I say.

"Boa tarde," the woman at the supermarket replies.

In the morning we would have exchanged "bom dia." When the sun goes down, "boa noite."

It's a real tongue twister this Portuguese. The words are easy, but getting them out is a tough go. I'm no linguist. I've never before even seriously tried to learn a second language, but I like this country so I am trying, though without much success.

English is pretty direct and straightforward. Any pronunciation will do. It works in any accent. So long as you use the right words, you're okay. Maybe that's why it's become the global language.

Spanish is fairly straightforward, too.

Italian and, to a lesser extent, French are florid languages. The words dance in the air. The cadences rise and fall like a feather in a summer breeze. And it is almost impossible to imagine anyone speaking either language without an endless flurry of hand gestures.

Portuguese is somewhere in the middle. It's almost a throwaway language. It's not so much spoken as tossed out in passing.

Parts of words are both pronounced and silent. Take "bom dia." The "m" is used and not used. It's not "bom" and it's not "bon" and it's not "bo." It's all three at once and none at all. The language website says the "m" is "swallowed" which is as good a description as I could come up with.

In "boa tarde" it's not "boa" (like the snake) nor "bow" (like the thing an arrow comes with) nor is it a simple "b". It's a sort of half-hearted "buh", more a gasp of air than an actual word.

The only equivalent I can come up with is urban, youthspeak. That way-too-cool-with-hip-to-spare, I-can't-be-bothered lingua so beloved of people who own dozens of pairs of brand-name trainers and wear their ball caps backward.

"'Sup?"

"Chillin'."
"Cool."
"Later."
"'Kay."
Of course, I'm well past the age of urban youthspeak, so Portuguese is proving a hard nut to crack.

*

According to research, the average age for a male mid-life crisis is 46. It is characterised by regrets about work, failed relationships, and concerns over health and physical appearance. Alcohol abuse often plays a part.
All that certainly sounded familiar.
On the other hand, there is other research suggesting that the entire thing is a myth. According to studies, only about one in ten men go through a so-called mid-life crisis. And when examined more closely, it often turns out that the cause of the crisis isn't age at all. Often it is simply a number of things, each of which, on its own, could be handled reasonably well, but when piled upon each other become unmanageable. This is called an "accumulation of stressors." That sounded pretty familiar, as well.
My job was becoming unbearable.
Even if I could put up with the job, it likely wasn't going to be around for long.
And I was closing in on fifty.
And I'd fallen in love with a girl nearly half my age.
And I was about to be booted out of my house.
And I was drinking like a fish.
Mid-life crisis or accumulation of stressors? I didn't know. But one thing was certain. It was time to get out.

*

Lagos is not my village.
It's a town I know well, a tourist town, but a nice one. It's low-rise with no huge mega resorts. Nearly all the businesses in town involve food, alcohol or souvenirs, but, except for the booze joints, they are mostly owned and staffed by locals.
Touristy, sure. But it's good about it.
It gets a little loud at night, but it's fun loud. It's party loud. There's none of the raw aggression that you get in the average English

high street. Even the normally violent binge-drinking Brits seem to leave their fangs and fists at home.

It's a nice place. But it is not my village.

The bus to Sagres is swift and comfy and, at less than eight euros return, a definite bargain.

The locals sit up front, surrounded by bags of shopping. They are older, wearing more clothes and get off the bus at one of the dozens of isolated little stops along the way.

The tourists and backpackers sit in the back surrounded by small day-packs and large bottles of water. They're young (or at least youngish), dressed in shorts or skirts and t-shirts or tank tops and have no idea where to get off the bus.

The driver stops the bus and opens the side door. "Sagres," he says, making hand signs indicating that we should get out. Except for a pair of Japanese girls, no one does. It can't be Sagres. It's just a street in the middle of nowhere. There are a good number of restaurants and cafes along the road, but it's not a town. It's not even a village.

A huge discussion ensues about what to do. A few people have maps, but don't know where on the map we are. Somebody read something once in the Lonely Planet, but can't quite remember what it was. There is a fair amount of googling on smartphones. Confusion reigns.

I wade in with logic and words of wisdom and the experience of years of travel. "Look, this is the Lagos - Sagres bus," I say. "So the end of the line has to be Sagres. I'm going to stay on the bus. And I'm not getting off at a bus stop. I'm getting off at a bus station."

This seems to make sense. Everybody buys it and we all sit back. The driver closes the door. He drives about a mile down the road to an even more isolated spot and pulls into a lay-by at the side of a car-mad concrete roundabout. He opens the door, turns off the engine, picks up his cigarettes, and walks down the bus towards the side exit.

"Finish," he says, pointing to the ground. "Sagres."

Once again, having Mark around is proving of benefit to all.

*

I went to see my boss, my creative director.

"I have fallen for Sophie," I said. "It's not right and it's not appropriate for the office and it's probably making her uncomfortable. We can work together, because we're both pros. But could you move

us physically apart, please?"

He agreed.

There were a couple of free desks in the department and I reckoned that some sort of back-to-back arrangement where we could be close enough to work on projects when required, but far enough apart for me to just hunker down and go my own way and for Sophie to do her own thing would be a good solution.

No.

A department reorganisation and major shuffling of desks was announced simply to disguise the fact that Mark had quietly asked to give Sophie some room.

Under the new plan, I was to sit at a desk facing inward to the side wall and Sophie was to sit against the side wall facing outward. We were to be almost face-to-face.

It was absurd.

I had been moved from a situation where, sitting side-by-side, I had to actively and noticeably turn to see Sophie to one where every time I raised my head from my laptop screen she was pretty much right there front and centre.

My attempt to make things right had been turned into something much, much worse.

*

Sagres is the furthest point in the country, the most south and the most west you can go without owning a boat or getting seriously wet. It is the Land's End of Portugal. I can see at once that it is not going to be my village.

I will discover later that the street in the middle of nowhere is about as close to a town centre as Sagres has. There are a few sights, a lighthouse, some good beaches and excellent surfing, but not a lot else. It's a fine place for fine reasons. But it is not a village and it is not what I'm looking for.

I'm not disappointed. I'm not upset. I trudge back to "town" and pick a small restaurant at random. I'll treat myself to a good meal. Later, with a little help from some locals (help is always freely on offer in Portugal) I'll work out how to get back, or to stay forever or whatever. I don't know. Right now I just want a plate of rice and fish and a large cold beer.

At the restaurant, I meet Abby, a pleasant and sensible Aussie. She's at the start of a six-month backpacking trip. She is travelling independently and staying at hostels. And she's just discovered that

she can't stand hostel life and doesn't like to be alone. So it's going to be a rough tour. We talk for a while, but I don't have much advice to offer.

After lunch and with a couple of hours until the bus back to Lagos (we know this thanks to the combined advice of half the population of Sagres who have turned out to help us) Abby suggests a walk along the coast, which we do.

This place has some seriously amazing views. And some even more seriously amazing cliffs. We try to get as close to the cliff's edge as we can before being overcome with fear. Abby manages about five feet before chickening out. I get a couple of feet closer, but only by doing it on my hands and knees. It's scary stuff, but good fun.

On the bus back, as the palm trees rush by, and with me well fortified with food, beer, good company and a bit of outdoor playfulness, I think to myself "this is not my village, but I like it and one day I will be back."

*

Everybody knew.

I brushed my teeth a dozen times a day. I kept huge packets of strong minty sweets in my middle drawer.

But everyone knew.

The over-enunciated sentences in meetings. The slightly swaying walk. The glassy-eyed watery stare. The boozy sweaty odour that oozes out your pores even when you're not drinking

It was obvious.

One day, I left the office a few minutes early. As I breezed past the operations team, I said "Leaving before 5:30. What do I have to do to get fired around here?" The company accountant, with whom I normally had little contact, muttered under her breath "maybe sit at your desk drunk all day?"

God, I thought! If even the book-keeper knows I'm an alki, what must my bosses and co-workers be thinking?

*

Back in Lagos, it's a 40 minute hike out to the shopping centre on the edge of town, but I need a new computer mouse. It's a beautiful sunny day and I'm slowly getting back into my walking so I don't mind.

Halfway there, I stop at a small outdoor stall for a glass of beer.

I've been walking for a half hour. I've earned it. I check my watch to see if it's before or after noon. Don't want to be bom dia-ing when I should be boa tard-ing, now would I.

Nursing my beer, I look around. I am smack in the middle of a concrete jungle, surrounded by charmless apartment blocks sold to British and European expats in better times.

Today is not better times. The entire area is covered in “For Sale" signs. At the store, half the customers are middle aged Brits comparing prices and searching for bargains. You can see the worry on their faces. You can smell the fear.

I walk past a partially-built block of flats. It's the middle of the working day and there isn't a construction worker in sight. The money has dried up and it's just been abandoned.

The whole scene is the European economic meltdown in three-dimensional white and pastel concrete.

Back in the day, the ex-pats figured they had it made. They'd done the calculations down to the last penny. The pound was worth a euro and a half. Selling the home in the UK had released enough equity to fund a flat in sunny Portugal. The pension plus a decent return on a small savings portfolio covered living expenses. The value of the flat was going up by double digits, so they could always cash out. Flights back home were cheap as chips.

They crunched the numbers. They could swing it. They could make it work. It was all do-able.

That was then and this is now. The pound has recovered a little, but not by much; it still doesn't make the numbers. Their lifetime savings are daily losing ground to inflation. Prices are soaring. Fuel taxes have driven up the cost of flying and driving. The flat on the Algarve is in negative equity. Even at knock-down prices, there are no buyers.

The happy-go-lucky suntanned ex-pats are now knee deep in bad money with no way out.

They are scared witless.

And they are everywhere.

*

On television some uber-fit young mountain climber was explaining to the camera a safety principle called three points of contact.

"You have two feet and two hands," he explained in that semi-German accent that uber-fit outdoor athletes always seem to have.

"These are your points of contact."

He went on to explain that, at all times, at least three of those points must be firmly attached to the rock face. Then, and only then, can you concentrate on moving the fourth point to a secure place.

"This is the only safe way to move upwards," he said. "Three points of contact. If not, you will fall."

As the camera panned dramatically downward to illustrate the deadly effects of falling, I picked up the remote and turned off the TV.

The so-called accumulation of stressors was turning me into a falling man.

I couldn't concentrate on the job because my mind was distracted by the need to find a new place to live. I couldn't look for a new place to live because I didn't know how long the job would last. I couldn't get into a rational feeling about Sophie because I was worried about work. I couldn't focus on work because my mind was on Sophie. I couldn't deal with getting old because I was drinking. I couldn't stop drinking because of, well … everything.

Never mind three points of contact. I didn't even have one.

*

The bus pulls in to Aljezur. We're about 30km north of Lagos, along the west coast of the Algarve. Melissa from the hostel has recommended it. She can't stand Lagos. She hates the tourism and the non-stop drinking and the crappy overpriced bars and restaurants and the fat middle-aged English people who come all the way down to the Algarve and expect to find a cup of tea, football on the wide screen telly and fish and chips on the menu. She's 27 and has a six-year-old son who is the absolute centre of her life. When she has a little time and a little money saved, Aljezur is the place where she goes.

I've come to check the place out. I don't know anything about it aside from the name. But I reckon I'll wander around, suss out the place a little and see what the accommodation situation is.

As I hop optimistically off the bus, I spot a building mere steps away, a hostel. It's worth knowing about in case I need a base while I look for a place. So I pop in to inquire about rates and availability and such. The manager fills me in on the details and I tell my story. "I am looking for a village."

There is a man nearby who takes an interest. He seems to know all about the area and is willing to share what he knows.

The manager turns out to be Carla, a Portuguese. The man is David, a German and her husband.

"I am visiting some friends," David says. "If you have time to come, we can see the area."

I'm up for that and we pile into his little Citroen. We wind along obscure little roads that lead from places I've never been to places I've never heard of. We stop at the house where David and Carla live with what seems like a hundred dogs of various ages plus a good few cats. It's a traditional country house in the middle of a few hectares of unspoiled countryside. Down the road, cows graze. There are chickens at the road entrance. Put this scene in Provence and Peter Mayle would get at least three books out of it.

David shows me his house. It's 120 years old and, to my eye, looks like it's got another twelve decades of life left in it. It is a traditional building made of soil. The soil is mashed and pounded into a sort of mulch then fashioned into shape and let to dry under the hot summer sun. It is thick and strong and will last longer than most of us.

David offers me a drink and tells me about his life. Living is cheap in Portugal, but it is hard to earn money. Carla makes something working at the hostel while David runs an online tourism-related business doing holiday house and apartment rentals, car hires, and such. It's busy in the season, but very quiet out of it.

I'm not sure what is going on. Am I being sold something? Is something going on? I, with my big city mentality, can't figure it out. What's the angle here?

We hop back in the car and drive a few miles down the road. I meet Matthew and Olivia, two British ex-pats who, after a lifetime in the pub and B&B trade, have set up a small but very upscale guesthouse. It all seems like an episode from one of those 'making a new life in the countryside' sort of television programmes that occupy much of the mid-afternoon schedules on TV channels with triple digit numbers, but it's actually real. David helps them with their website and blog and such. It's not really a job, more of a friend helping friends sort of thing.

I'm still wondering what's going on. I can't possibly be a customer for this guesthouse. I clearly don't have that kind of money.

Olivia makes us coffee and we talk. It's hard work running the place. There are always a thousand things to be done and just when you've fixed one thing another thing breaks down and it's a lot harder than it looks on those mid-afternoon television programmes. But it's good solid work and they are building something that will endure and even in these early days and bad economic times, customers are already starting to come in.

She shows me around and I meet the kids, a boy and a girl who I

will not name. They love it here. In a few years, they'll be all trendy and sophisticated and looking for nightlife and festivals and hot boys and fit girls and the coolest euro-DJs, like, ever! But for now they are happy with the warm sun and the clean air and the ducks in the small pond and the little pony who Mum and Dad rescued from abuse and now wanders contentedly about the fields.

David has checked the bus schedule. "We must go," your coach is coming.

We get back to town, with a good half hour to spare. I suggest a beer. We go to the hostel and I have a beer and David a cola (he's driving). Carla tells me the price of the beer and is genuinely surprised when I say to ring David's cola in with it.

We part company and plan to keep in touch. I offer to help as much as I can with the marketing of David's business. He says he'll look around for a place for me to rent.

I get on the bus and think: there was nothing to be sold, there was no angle. No gimmick.

Could I perhaps have made a friend?

*

Not long after handing in my notice, I was in my local supermarket. I didn't do a weekly shop. I just popped in daily. So I just had a few items: a bottle of plonk, some sharp cheddar and a baguette.

The woman behind me in the queue had much the same sort of thing: white wine, cheese and some type of bread.

Nice looking woman. Late thirties. Pretty hair. Dressed in attractive office casual. Good taste in shoes.

"Snap!" she said, looking at me and pointing to the products on the till.

"Huh?"

"We've got pretty much the same shop," she said. "It's snap."

"Oh. I see. Yes."

"That sure is a funny coincidence," she said.

"Mmmm. Yeah. Okay."

I paid my bill, muttered something like "enjoy your food" and left the store shaking my head. "What the hell was that all about?" I thought as I walked from the shop.

I was halfway home before it dawned. That pleasant, attractive woman was flirting with me!

I didn't know what she wanted, whether to make a date or just

have a little flirt. But she was chatting me up. She could have just stood her turn in the queue. She could have said nothing. But she didn't. She saw me. She saw a conversation opener and she chose to take it.

As I walked home I started to feel better. I thought: I'll never be a babe magnet or George Clooney, but maybe I wasn't so lost after all.

Maybe I could get back to being the sort of guy that a nice woman about my own age would see and think "he looks like a nice fella; I'll have a little chat."

*

David messages me about an apartment. I take a bus the next day and check it out. Jorges and Fatima show me around. David is with us.

It's 400 euros, not much at all. And it's huge! There's a massive bedroom, large lounge and a kitchen the size of which would meet with Gordon Ramsay's immediate approval. The view from the balcony (yes, there is a balcony) is unspoiled. Not a building in sight. I haven't lived in a place this swanky since … well, ever!

It's brilliant. And right away, I want it.

David translates. We agree. I ask about a deposit.

"No, it's okay," David says. "They want you to pay for July and August when you move in, because it's high season and they want to ensure they make their money. But no deposit. Pay when you come."

In London this sort of thing would involve reams and reams of paperwork, dozens of signatures and all sorts of "please sign on this line and initial here" and, at the end of it, I'd still wonder what was going on and be fully prepared to be ripped off. Here I say "It's good. I like it" they say "See you soon." And I feel fine about it.

It's going to be okay.

It`s moving day. David has to do some shopping in Lagos and offers to collect me and give me a ride to Aljezur. He drives me up to Aljezur and helps me get settled in. He translates between me and Fatima and, in a few minutes and a few euros, I have myself an apartment in a village in the rural hills of Portugal.

Everyone leaves and I am alone. I wander fore and aft again and again. I open the front windows and look out over the road and I hold my hands on the balcony rail and lean my head upward towards the sky like one of those country people who can predict the weather by

gazing at the clouds and try as much as I can to look like the sort of guy who has been here for yonks and is just glancing out his front door to see what's new in the village.

I walk to the back and do much the same thing. The view is different. There are cows in the fields behind my apartment.

Real, live cows. They wander around pretty slowly and stop now and then to munch on the grass. Aside from that, they don't do a lot. I don't know what cows are supposed to do with their time, but whatever it is, this crowd aren't doing a whole lot of it.

But I don't care. They wear cowbells.

I don't know what cowbells do. I don't know what purpose a cowbell serves. I can't imagine a situation where anyone would need a warning signal that a cow is approaching.

But as I stand on my balcony, I look out over the landscape and I hear the "tinkle … tinkle" of the cowbells and it is the most beautiful sound in all the world.

*

Portugal is really a bad choice if you are an alcoholic. You can drink here for next to nothing.

At the supermarket, I buy a one litre box of rough wine for 95 euro cents. It's wine-lake wine, the sort of stuff produced at hundreds of industrial vineyards all over Europe in order to attract EU agricultural subsidies then blended together and sold for next to nothing. It's the same kind of stuff I've been buying in huge boxes from the corner store and mixing with orange juice just to get it down. It's the sort of thing that probably keeps Jancis Robinson up at night.

The red, which we natural Portuguese speakers call "vinho tinto", is a bit rough and I mostly leave it alone.

But the white "vinho branco" is a delight. It's smooth and sweet and if you were over for dinner and didn't know it came out of a cardboard box you would be quite impressed with my subtle palate and masterful wizardry in food and beverage pairing.

If I ever get invited onto Saturday Kitchen, I am definitely bringing a box of this stuff.

I buy a glass tea cup. It says on the bottom "Made in Portugal." I have a really nice kitchen knife that sharpens easily and holds an edge perfectly and is "Made in Portugal". My bed sheets are "Made in Portugal." The apartment comes with a good set of really nice pots and pans that are "Made in Portugal."

This is all new to me.

I lived most of my life in Canada. In all that time, almost nothing I bought or owned was ever "Made in Canada." I've lived for the past seven years in the UK and never seem to come across anything carrying the words "Made in England."

Now here I am in a country that all the world's economic geniuses describe as being economically backward. But it's the only place that I've ever lived where they actually seem to make stuff.

As well as the teacup, I buy fish. I choose it at random, having no idea what it is. But it's the right size for a meal for one with some left over for another day and I can sort of figure out that it was probably caught in Portuguese waters.

Later I'll avoid supermarket fish. Once my language skills improve I'll surely be down at the local fishmonger's bantering and slinging it around with the local fishwives. I'll be the guy who rolls his eyes and tosses up his hands and, in tones of false but beautifully acted incredulity exclaims in perfect Portuguese "I just want to buy the fish, not the whole boat!"

But for now, I go to the supermarket and buy carapau, a type of mackerel.

"Carapau," I say. "Quatro."

She comes around with a plastic bag and stands next to me while I point out my choices. In this part of the world you don't just order up a weight or a number. You select your fish one-by-one.

"Um, dois, tres, quatro," I say, pointing. I only count to demonstrate my minimal language skills. From my accent, I am clearly a foreigner so she switches to English. But I have a certain credibility because I am buying carapau. It's cheap stuff. Mackerel is a rough-and-ready fish. Carapau is a rough-and-ready sort of mackerel.

Portugal is a nation of fish eaters. The Portuguese eat more fish than any other people in Europe mostly because it is and has always been a poor country and, until recently, fish was cheap food. For hundreds of years they've fished from dawn to dusk, sold the fancy bits of the day's catch and brought the cheap stuff home for dinner.

Today, foreigners buy salmon and tuna and other fish that are easy to eat but cost a fortune and taste like nothing. Portuguese like fish that tastes like fish and doesn't cost much. My four good-sized carapau cost just under three euros.

"Carapau," she says. "I like it also."

"It's good," I say. "Carapau. Cavala. Sardinhas. I like that type of fish. There's a lot of meat and flavour. I don't mind taking bones from

my teeth."

She smiles. She knows what I'm talking about.

"This," I say pointing to a tray of farmed salmon lying on ice. "It's boring."

She curls up her nose and shakes her head. Even if it wasn't eight euros a kilo, she wouldn't eat it. It is the white bread of seafood.

She pulls out a knife to gut and clean the fish. "Do you want the heads?"

"Sim, por favor," I say. "There is good meat in the head."

She laughs knowingly. Again, she knows what I'm talking about. She's eaten the meat from the fish head. I reckon, also like me, she's eaten the eyes, as well.

"When you are finished with the heads and the bones, boil them" she says. "You can make a good soup."

"Soup?"

"Yes. Boil for maybe one hour. Then take out the bones and you will have a good soup."

"Don't freeze this," she says, holding up my bag of fish. Today is Monday. This is yesterday's fish. It's good today, but don't freeze it."

I am gobsmacked. I am in a large supermarket run by a huge and impersonal profit-driven corporation and the girl at the counter who would have a tough time getting another job if she lost this one is telling a total stranger that the fish he is buying is not as absolutely fresh as it could be. This would never happen in the UK.

But here in Portugal, fish is important.

Later I cook it up, three minutes on each side with some olive oil and a bit of garlic, and serve with a hefty dollop of vegetables and some rice neither of which I eat, but which look good on the plate.

It's delicious. It's nutritious. It's good stuff.

My feelings for Sophie may be killing me, but this rice and fish thing is going to make me strong.

*

My job, which had started out looking like the perfect role, was a bust. Within a six month period, my supposedly interesting and rewarding new career had turned out to be rubbish.

I'd been hired to take a troublesome account, bring the creative side of things up to scratch and keep the client from dumping us. It had seemed like a challenge and I'd expected a certain amount of responsibility and respect. Instead, I'd been treated as little more than

a typist, churning out mundane lines of boring copy to be dropped into crushingly dull artwork that, most of the time, I never even got to see.

I'd worked as a senior writer on some of the UK's best-known brands at some of London's most creative advertising agencies and here I was working on a rubbishy little account at a rinky-dink little agency and being told what to do by a junior and not very talented designer who, just a year before, had been a lifeguard at the local swimming pool.

By mid-year and with a good bit of kicking and screaming I'd managed to change enough of the processes such that the formerly unhappy client was now sending unsolicited messages of praise about our new, high standard of creative work. We were even getting measurable sales results, something that almost never happens in advertising.

So I was awfully surprised, shocked even, when my boss came in on his day off to tell me that account management had complained that I wasn't doing what I was told. I wasn't following instructions. I wasn't taking direction.

I wish I had resigned right then and there. As it was, it only took a few days to make the decision.

*

I spend half the morning with my Portuguese phrase book.

After a good bit of effort, I am able to say my address. I can tell people that I live at "Rua Vinte e Cinco de Abril, sessenta sete, Aljezur."

Wonderful!

Sadly, though, people here don't make a habit of asking my address. It doesn't come up much in daily life, so I have little chance to practice.

Perhaps I ought to start a fire, dial 112, and call the bombeiros. A waste of public resources, yes. But it would give me a chance to practice saying my address.

Plus, I actually know how to pronounce "bombeiros."

Later, I am in the CTT (post office) just a few steps down the road from my apartment. David has loaned me a wireless dongle and I am here to top up my internet access. The office is closed on weekends so, if I'm not to lose my connection, I need to top it up now.

The queue is huge and slow. It moves at about half the speed of glacial ice. Nobody complains that there is only one person working a

single counter. On the other hand, nobody complains when a man walks in with a dog who runs loose sniffing everyone.

I get into the groove. I relax. I go with the flow. I didn't come to Portugal for ruthless efficiency.

Soon I find myself chatting with a boy and a girl next to me. They are brother and sister. She is 25, he is 15 and they are here for a short holiday from their nearby town. We talk about the language. They tell me how every Portuguese needs to speak English. I talk about how hard it is to practise the language because everyone here speaks mine.

The postal worker overhears our conversation.

"Hola. Boa tarde," I say when my turn at the counter finally arrives. "Vinte euros," I say, passing across two tenners and my TMN mobile card.

I actually only want 10 euros worth, but 10 is "dez" and I don't know how to pronounce that. Twenty is "vinte" which is a word I can say, so I buy double.

The young woman at the counter processes my request and prints me a receipt. As I get set to leave, she smiles and, in excellently enunciated BBC1 English says "Your Portuguese is absolutely perfect. Have a good day."

I am never gonna learn this language!

*

I tried to hate her.

There's a song by The Pretenders called "Thin Line Between Love and Hate". I reckoned if I could just cross that line, I might be okay.

So I tried as hard as I could to turn love into hate. I focussed hard on every last little thing that I could possibly hate about Sophie.

There wasn't much.

There was one incident I fixated upon. Back before we moved apart, when we sat side-by-side, she used to look over from time-to-time and smile. It made me quiver.

One day, Sophie looked over and smiled. I quivered.

"Grin on demand," she said, knowingly. "You like that." A few words of honesty from the most reserved girl I'd ever met.

I should have listened. I should have understood. I should have got it. I should have known that in the same way that the handsome fella flexes his muscles and the funny guy cracks a joke and the youngster looks all keen and the old person tries to sound wise and everybody else does whatever it takes with whatever they've got to

smooth things over, Sophie breaks a smile.

It was only a smile. It wasn't special. It wasn't just for me. It was just how she gets along.

And how can you fault anyone for that? We all do it. I smile and banter insincerely at clients and shopkeepers and the neighbours and the guy at the airport who x-rays my bags and the bin men and my boss and my co-workers and so on and so forth. It means nothing. So what right did I have to feel bad towards a girl who smiles insincerely at some middle-aged geezer she has to work with at the office?

No right whatsoever.

Needless to say, my "turn love into hate" strategy didn't do me much good at all.

*

The next day, around one-ish, David invites me out to his house. We do a bit of shopping then run out to their house. It is wonderful. The countryside is peaceful and quiet yet in full bloom. The dogs lie placid under the hot sun. We sip cold beer and chat about our lives.

David has a few inquiries from his website to take care of so I take the dogs for a walk. The pathway is deeply rutted from car tracks. The centre of the path is lined with fresh rosemary. Rosemary grows wild all over this part of the world and if you see anyone buying it at the supermarket, it's a sure sign they're a foreigner. Locals wouldn't think of paying good euros for the stuff.

Along the way, farmers grow oranges and lemons and lime and pears and all manner of fruit that they sell to eke out a living.

The dogs join me for the walk. They pay me little obvious attention, but somehow manage to travel along at roughly my walking pace. They cavort and play and huff and puff and occasionally run off into the bushes, but by and large they stay close by.

Suddenly, the dogs dash into the woods as a pack. In seconds a grey animal that David later tells me is probably a wild boar runs out of the woods followed in hot pursuit by the dog pack. I never imagined that a pig could move that fast and they don't catch it.

The pig makes its escape and the dogs sit around looking a little sheepish, like Olympic athletes who have given their all, but haven't quite made it to the podium.

We walk on to the end of the path, come to a gravel road and turn homeward. About halfway on the forty minute walk back, a man appears on a bicycle. The dogs, perhaps sensing a second chance at glory, let fly. They accelerate with the sort of speed that, should it be

packaged in a reasonably priced Italian sports car, would give Jeremy Clarkson a bit of a stiffy.

The man appears calm, but I am worried witless. I shout at the dogs and address the man.

"Hola. Boa tarde," I say with a smile as I approach. "Fala Inglese?"

He speaks no English so I do lot of miming and pointing and gesturing to get across that the dogs may look rough, but are actually harmless and friendly. He seems to get my point. We shake hands and he rides on.

I arrive back at the country house. Everything seems fine, but there is a small problem.

When I left the house, four dogs were with me. When I return, I have only three.

Carla is off work and they invite me to supper the next day, which I accept. David will come by the apartment and pick me up. I buy a bottle of guest-for-dinner wine, leave it chilling in the fridge and head out to explore a little of the town.

There is a castle here, an actual fifteenth century medieval castle that has been partially preserved for roughly five centuries and is currently on view to visitors at no charge at all.

It's high on a hill overlooking the village.

You can see it from anywhere in the valley and I have been using it as a navigational beacon. When I walk and get lost, which I do deliberately and often, I just look up and head in the direction of the castle. It always works. It gets me home. But, in all my time here, I've never actually visited the place.

I check the tourist information map which provides plenty of useful information such as that it is a castle and that "castle" in Portuguese is "castelo" and in four other languages is, well, ... you get the idea. Not a lot of info.

I log on to my ridiculously expensive internet connection and spend roughly half my monthly rent reading about it before deciding to spare you, my gentle reader, from a long and involved history lesson.

But I decide to go see it and set off on foot. Using my brilliant directional strategy that worked so well on the hill outside my house, I just keep looking up and walking towards the summit.

I pass the municipal museum, but I long ago made a personal decision never again in my life to set foot in a museum, so I walk on by and begin the hike upwards.

It's a tough climb. It's steep and hard and I strain. But I've been

here for a good while now and my legs have regained some of their muscle structure and, thanks to the rice and fish, my body is slowly growing strong and, to my immense happiness, I can now tackle a physical challenge that, before coming here, might have killed me.

I pass a cyclist. She struggles. She is young and fit and riding a bicycle. I am old and tired and walking on foot and yet I am passing her. How strong am I?

The castle (or castelo, castillo, chateau, or burg - thank you, tourist map) is really nothing to write home about. There's not much here. In England we would probably refer to such a thing as "a brick wall."

But the view is magnificent. I look over my small village of white clad, terracotta roofed homes nestled in a pleasant valley surrounded by rolling hills and lush green trees and fertile crops all basking in the sunshine and if you think I'm over-writing here you should make the climb yourself.

*

Settling into Aljezur is easy. Maybe too easy.

David is a nice man and Carla is a nice woman. They are genuine and kind and have made moving to my village as easy as possible. But this is not why I am here.

I am here for things to be difficult.

I am here to get lost and to get confused and to get into problems and not speak the language and to lose the keys and not be able to open the windows and not be able to lock the front door and have troubles with the water heater and to be unable to work the shower and go to the shop and ask for lettuce when I really want butter and greet people with what I think means "good morning" but actually means "please remove your goat from the road".

I am here to have my mind distracted by being lost and by being confused and by having a constant stream of problems all of which I have to solve.

Confusion and problems will take my mind off Sophie. They will give me a focus, something else to think about. Something immediate. But without all that distraction, and with everything so easy, I have plenty of time to dwell. Time that I do not want.

In a strange and ironic twist, by being a genuinely nice and kind and helpful person with the best of friendly intentions, David is actually making it harder for my heart to heal.

I will have dinner tonight and, in the company of some genuinely

lovely people, I will enjoy it. And we will remain friends.

But, starting tomorrow, I have to start doing things for myself.

*

I cleared out of the house and left behind enough food to feed a small army.

I left a fridge full of veggies and about four pints of milk and a good few boxes of juice and a freezer packed with chicken legs and two cupboard shelves loaded to the gunwales with pasta and tinned tomatoes and soup and instant noodles and loads and loads of canned veg.

No one in that house would need to do a shop for weeks.

When you drink, you stop eating. But when you go to the supermarket, you can't just wander in and pick up a bottle. You need to disguise. So you fill your basket with other things.

It doesn't matter what they are. You're never going to eat them. So you grab a broccoli if it's on offer and a banana and something or other in a tin and maybe a small packet of spaghetti and (by the way, just casually, as if as an afterthought) 750ml of vodka and some orange juice.

You try your hardest to look like a normal guy doing a normal shop.

It doesn't fool anybody. You did it yesterday and you will do it tomorrow and you will do it the day after that and everybody knows.

But you do it anyway because you just don't know what else to do.

*

Supper at David and Carla's is a delight. As well as them and me, there are Carla's two boys Nino and Thomas, her niece Phillipa and husband Paulo.

David has cooked up two huge platters of chicken, veggies and sweet potato. Simple stuff, but delicious and I clear most of my plate. The wine flows, but not too much.

The banter around the table flashes from English to Portuguese and Portuguese to English and right back again, but it's always lively. Even when I have no idea what is being said, I find myself laughing and smiling and nodding along with the group. I tell a few stories of my own and I suspect some of the non English speakers do a little unknowing laughing and smiling of their own.

I am in a farmhouse, in the Portuguese countryside, outside a small village, sharing a hearty meal with a group of genuinely nice people. The dogs are sleeping. The air is crisp and clear. There is even a full moon.

It's all good.

*

It's morning. I awake, wash and dress. Today, I have decided to find the beach. I am determined do it all on my own.

I pass the hostel to drop off my spare set of keys (Carla has offered to keep them for me in case I lose the other set). David and Carla repeat the directions to the beach and I set off on foot. I walk for about a half hour.

Later, I hear a tap on a car horn and a familiar silver Citroen pulls by. "You're going the wrong way," David says. "Hop in. We'll go to the beach."

It's a long and winding road, much longer than I expected, so the ride is welcomed. We have a beachside beer and a bit of a chat.

"I have to return to town," David says after a while. "Do you want a ride."

"Cheers, mate," I say. It is just too tempting.

I really need to start figuring this stuff out for myself.

*

I drop by the local bar on a Saturday night. It's the only nightspot in the village. The crowd is half young locals, a handful of older couples trying to blend in with the kids plus a few backpackers staying at the nearby hostel and some surfers who will spend the night sleeping in a van.

A few of the bar staff are slowly starting to get to know me and me to know them. We don't yet know each other's names, but we're getting there. We're on a "hey-I know-your-face-and-I-might-remember-what-you-drink" and an "I-know-you-work-the-bar-in-the-high-season-but-do-the-surf-school-thing-in-the-off-months" basis.

The bartender shakes my hand and smiles like we're good old buddies from way back, which we're not but the backpackers down from the local youth hostel are clearly impressed.

The pretty barmaid who is from Albufeira in the south, but comes up here for the season and will, in late September, travel further north to Lisbon where she studies law, smiles warmly at me because she's

seen me in here before or she's seen someone who looks a bit like me in here before or because she has no idea who I am but when you're a pretty barmaid smiling warmly is a big part of the job.

By midnight, the joint is sort of hopping - hopping for a village, anyway. The DJ spins some tunes and tries to look funky and wishes he was cool enough to mix tracks in Ibiza or at least Lisbon. He's mixin' his best and scratching the disks like a horny dog in heat. He's boppin and hoppin and looking way too cool with hip to spare but, to be honest, he's no great whiz on the tables.

He rolls out of some sort of generic dancy euro-pop and into "Unbelievable" by EMF. The beats are wide out and it's a bad mix, but it gets us all into "Unbelievable" by EMF which is one of your better retro tracks so, 15 seconds in, nobody cares.

A bit more euro pop goes on and the space starts to clear, so he knocks out "Stayin Alive" by the Bee Gees. Every DJ in the world knows that "Stayin Alive" by the Bee Gees and "YMCA" by The Village People are the two best 100% guaranteed floor fillers in any club, so they keep them on hand for the quiet times.

I order a second beer which is served by a bartender I don't recognise and who pretty much ignores me. But I don't mind. I know how it is and I will be back. I will be back on the off-days, during the off-hours.

That's how you make friends in bars. You drink in the quiet times when the stools are empty and the tables are clear and the staff have wiped down the counter a dozen times and rearranged the shot glasses over and over again and tidied up the coasters and chopped enough slices of lime to make a million mojitos and enough lemon for a thousand G&Ts and, finally, after doing all they can to look busy, have nothing else to do but chat to the lonely man at the end of the bar nursing a fast-warming pint.

This is what I will do. By summer's end, I'll be a regular. I'll be the guy who gets served first, the guy who gets a free shot when the bar staff are downing one for themselves.

I know how it works. I know how it's done.

I am not an alki for nothing.

*

Every morning I made Sophie's coffee.

It was nothing to her, but everything to me.

I came in to the office a little early and took great care. I timed it perfectly. She came to work a little late, just past nine. If I got to the

office at ten to, I could have everything in place for Sophie. And that's what I did.

She liked it milky so I heated a third of a cup of milk in the microwave. I carefully warmed the cup, just enough to keep the drink hot, but not so much as to burn her fingers. Once done, I added coffee and hot water and stirred up the milk to make it look like the sort of thing you might get from a coffee shop (albeit a coffee shop that relied entirely on Nescafe). I placed a small carefully folded napkin next to the cup with a slab of chocolate perched in an artful, not-quite-centred way. I varied the chocolate. I kept dark and milk and minty chocolate in my desk and would switch it around daily to give her some variety. I did everything I could to make sure it looked good and tasted nice.

And I waited.

If she came in and said "thanks" or "Mmm, that's good" it was a great start to the day. But if she came to work, drank the coffee and said nothing, I was devastated.

*

The GNR (Guarda Nacional Republicana) come by in the morning at around nine o'clock for their morning coffee at the café next door.

They park their patrol car in the spot outside my front door and it sits there in all its blue-light-and-green-striped tactical glory for a good half hour and often longer.

I like it.

I don't know what the burglary rate is here in the village, but I reckon the cop car probably deters the local housebreakers.

And as I'm a bit of a dreamer, a sort of modern day Walter Mitty, I start to imagine myself as an important foreign visitor whose safety is of vital concern to the Portuguese federal authorities.

I'm not just a guy who eats rice and fish and goes for walks.

I'm a VIP. I've got my very own GNR personal protection squad.

*

"I suppose it's no secret that I have a certain amount of personal affection for you," I told her one day at work.

"In my defence," I said. "I defy anyone to sit for eight hours a day, five days a week for five months next to Sophie and not to fall in love."

There. I'd said it. "I love you." In a slightly backwards sort of way, but I had said it.

She knew. She'd known for months.

Of course, being the way I am and having downed a few pints at lunch, I couldn't leave it there. I had to make it even worse.

"You are the most wonderful person I could possibly know," I said. "Even the little things are wonderful. The way you pronounce 'coffee' in that funny voice. The odd way you hold your pencil when you draw."

And if all that weren't uncomfortable enough and definitely inappropriate for the office, I added: "Sometimes, when we're in the agency, I'll be talking about work. But all the while I panic and my mind is saying 'don't stroke her hair, don't stroke her hair, whatever you do don't stroke her hair'."

If you were deliberately trying to freak out a perfectly nice young woman, you really could not do better than that.

*

My rear balcony overlooks the back garden to which I do not have the key. But the view is pastoral and the scent of hanging fruit wafts daily through my apartment.

I rise with the sun and open the huge balcony windows. Below, in the garden, my landlady is tending to some small plants that I do not recognise.

She waves and smiles. She speaks little English and my Portuguese really hasn't improved. But she points to one of the small trees in the garden.

"Peach," she says. "Some for you. Your door. For you."

I smile. "Obrigado," I say, using up a full 30 percent of my incredibly impressive Portuguese vocabulary.

A bag filled with freshly picked peaches sits outside my front door. Like properly grown natural food, they are of all different sizes and shapes with none of that hideous conformity of supermarket food. I can smell the sweetness and flavour.

I have invited David and Carla to supper this week and fresh peaches over ice cream will make a perfect dessert.

Next day, there are five more ripe peaches, plus an equal number of pears sitting on the shelf outside my door. They are un-announced. Un-presented. Just sitting there for me. Ripening in the sun ready for a moment of sweet and succulent happiness.

My landlady, who would probably have difficulty pronouncing my name correctly, has left them for me.

I realise that I want to know these people. I want to have in my

life the sort of person who will pluck fruit fresh from a tree and leave it for me to enjoy.

I also realise that I'll have to get to know some other people to whom I can give the peaches.

Because I don't eat fruit.

*

Having become such a wizard at saying my address, I carry my phone everywhere.

I know that 112 is the emergency number. I know that it's "ambulancia" for medical problems, it's "policia" for issues of crime and personal security and it's the glorious word "bombeiros" for anything overly warm and somewhat flame-related.

I'm set. So, on my walk, I carry my phone.

Fully secure in the knowledge that, mobile in hand and with my ever-improving incredible language skills, the entire resources of the Portuguese national emergency response forces are at my immediate beck and call, I set off.

I walk.

My goodness, do I walk.

I walk briskly for an hour and a half to the beach. No ride today.

I walk along rural roads. I am wearing a blistering pair of cheap five-euro sandals that I bought yesterday from the Chinese shop.

Chinese shops are found in every city and every town and every village in Portugal. They stock everything from backpacks to bathroom plungers to fly paper to knock-off versions of popular fragrances to sandals to, ... well, pretty much everything.

And they are actually called "Chinese Shop." When I first heard of them, I assumed it was a shorthand, the way we in the UK refer to "the corner store" or "the offie." But no. The Chinese shop in my village is actually called, according to the words on the sign, "Chinese Shop."

None of this makes the sandals any more comfortable. They grind and chafe and rub. But I press on. I can feel my legs beginning to work. I can feel the strong Mark, not quite returning, but at least putting in an appearance. I am not myself, but I am starting to remember how I used to be.

At the beach I have two small beers, not much more than a pint, really. I sit for an hour watching the lithe and flexible young people run in and out of the crashing waves. I will never again be so young. But, in time, I will be lithe and flexible and, one day, I will cavort about the

beach in such a manner.

There are eight surf school students dressed in matching red shirts are doing their very best to make up with enthusiasm what they lack in skill. Their instructor, a tall, lanky wetsuit-clad fellow with a BMI index of zero and a body made entirely of rubber, stands at water's edge firing off a string of gesticulations all of which, to my untrained eye, seem to say the same thing: "Go on. Surf."

The rest of the beach is, if not deserted, at least very quiet. Aside from the surfers, there are a couple of families and a small group of very well behaved young people clustered together against the rock wall. I am mid-beach with yards of sand all to myself lying on my towel next to a small, flat-topped protruding rock that makes a fine bedside table.

I eat a small salad for my lunch. I walk across the beach to the recycling bin, dispose of the Ziploc bag and walk back. Halfway, I realise that I'm not wearing my shirt and a moment of panic sets in. But there's nothing I can do so I press on.

I pass the families and the well-behaved young people and a couple of surfers crossing the sand. Nobody pays me any mind. Nobody looks. No heads are turned. But no heads are turned away either and I feel good about that.

Back on the water at the surf school there is a girl. She is tall and lean and wears her dark hair in a functional pony tail that's both cute and says "don't mess with me" at the same time.

She is focused and determined. When she paddles out she never, unlike the others, stops for a bit of a cruise. She paddles in a strong, efficient, unrelenting manner, every stroke precisely like the one before.

Riding in she, like all of them, mostly falls down. But as she falls, she's already turning her body away from the beach and getting set for another paddle out.

Finally she catches a wave and moves up into some sort of a half-way kneeling position. Some of the others have managed this and they mostly stay that way probably figuring that a bit of a ride on your knees makes a nice break from falling down all the time. Not her. She does some sort of semi-jumping thing and she's up.

She's surfing. She crests a small wave and rides it down to a series of ripples moving towards shore. She's not smooth. She has

none of the effortless grace of the experienced surfer. Her eyes scan the water nervously; her legs never stop moving. A little bit here. A little bit there. She reminds me of those modern fighter jets that are designed to be deliberately unstable and need a constantly adjusting computer system to keep them straight and level. She's not exactly in control, but she's not out of control either and she rides the water right onto the beach.

The instructor is beside himself, hopping about and clapping wildly. She ignores him. She doesn't even look. She doesn't do that two handed pushing-my-hair-out-of-my-face-while-checking-to-see-who's-looking thing that most surfers do.

She hops off the board, twists it around, walks out of the shallows and starts paddling.

And I finish my beer and walk back to the village.

Only when I arrive home do I realise that I've been carrying my English mobile.

My Portuguese phone is sitting on the dining room table running out of charge.

*

Portugal, as everyone knows these days, is in the middle of a terrible economic mess. Like most of the supposedly weaker members of the eurozone it struggles with debt, unemployment and an inability to compete with the northern parts of the European Union.

In the north we speak of "the recession" "the economic slowdown" "the credit crunch" and so on. Here is always just "The Crisis" and it is everywhere. I don't speak the language, but I put the morning TV news on and even I can figure out from the subtitles that half the middle-aged men in suits being interviewed have something or other to do with the economic and financial parts of the government or the business community or that all-important yet vague and sinister and basically useless but somehow powerful thing called "the market".

Even at the street level, it is everywhere. The small café next to my apartment advertises a little set dish of sausage, chips and a small salad for just under four euros. It is called the "Menu Crise" (Crisis Menu).

Thanks to The Crisis, the northerners are the bosses now. Every now and then, they dribble down little bits and bobs of bailout money, all accompanied by lots of clever advice and earnest lectures and

instructions about austerity and cutbacks and raising productivity and so on.

But having lived here, even for a short while, I'm not sure that they have that right.

Northern Europeans come down here in droves every summer. They come mainly for the sun, but what keeps them coming back is the relaxed lifestyle. They come from a part of the world where lunch is hurriedly scarfed down while hunched over a desk checking email and where being competitive is the name of the game and efficiency is valued above all. And it works. It produces speedy reliable motorcars at reasonable prices and trains that run quietly and on time and accurate watches and airplanes that rarely crash and ever more complicated financial services that nobody really wants or even understands.

From an economic perspective, it's a good system. But it's a grind. It's a hard life and it wears them down.

So, whenever they get the chance, the northerners come down here because it is a place where friends will gather for a three-hour lunch over plenty of laughter and conversation. It's a place where neighbours are always welcome unannounced at the door and the wine and food flows freely. It's a place where a cup of coffee is something you sit down and relax with and enjoy, not something you grab to go in a takeaway cup and wait until it's tepid then pour down your throat during the first meeting of the day to keep yourself awake while some tiresome corporate drone spends all morning showing you some rubbish he's made with Powerpoint.

This is what they come for and there's nothing wrong with that. But I'm starting to think it's a little unfair for the north to enjoy the southern lifestyle then go home and expect the southerners to turn into hyper-efficient economic productivity machines. It's not what they're about. It's a different world.

You can't have it both ways.

I know which way I want it.

There is a waitress at a small restaurant in the village. From what I can observe, she seems to work about a ten-hour shift most days. She's not terribly attractive (in fact, not attractive at all) so she doesn't hold down her job on the basis of good looks and flirting. She makes her living on genuinely good service and working hard and knowing her job and being a pro.

I don't know her, but I admire her.

When customers sit down she brings out menus and spends a

good fifteen minutes or more telling them what is on offer.

I don't know exactly what she's saying because it's Portuguese. But from her tone of voice and body language she seems to be explaining exactly what is on the menu today, where and when it was caught (it's mostly fish), precisely how it will be cooked and seasoned, what best accompanies the dish, and whatever other information is relevant to the dining experience. The customers ask pertinent questions and she answers with obvious knowledge and a genuine desire to help them make a selection they will enjoy. She gives them her undivided attention.

In the UK or the north of Europe, a briskly efficient server would drop off menus, rattle quickly through the specials, then turn up ten minutes later with a notepad and a pen in hand to ask severely "are you ready to order?"

They do things differently here. They take the time it takes. It's not efficient or productive, but it makes life better and I like it.

And that's why when my beer takes fifteen minutes to arrive, I don't mind at all.

*

I walk outside of the village. I am going nowhere in particular. I walk along a small road through a hilly landscape of trees and bush and every so often a piece of farmland where cows stand in the fields wearing cowbells. I still haven't figured cowbells out and reckon they must be something from days gone by or from Sound of Music type films. Why they are in use in Portugal today is still a mystery, but I do like the sound.

As I walk back towards the village an old man appears. He is grey and weathered and crinkled and wrinkled, yet surprisingly healthy. He has a bounce in his walk and looks like a good man. I will wish him a greeting.

I practise my greeting.

"Boa tarde," I say as we cross paths.

He responds. "Bah-arde," he says. It's a sort of rural accent. A bit of a slur. Country talk. Slang. I like it.

Back in town, I stop for a beer. I decide to try the rural slang. I stand at the counter. Under my breath, I practise "Bah-arde … bah-arde … bah-arde."

She approaches.

"Bah-arde," I say.

"Bah-arde," she answers.

I ask for a beer and, in doing so, betray myself as a foreigner. But for a single moment I have spoken just one word like a local.

This is a small victory and I am happy.

Bah-arde is, sadly, one of the rare successes in my struggle to learn the language. I'm okay with basic greetings and saying thank you, but that's about as far as it goes.

Trouble is, it's awfully difficult to practice. In the bars and coffee shops, you only ever need the same few words, and most of them are simply brand names (Sagres, Super Bock) or words that everyone in the trade knows (beer, coffee, toilet; usually in that order).

On top of that, everyone here seems to speak English, which they do without prompting. And when someone can serve me quickly and efficiently in my language, I feel bad wasting their time practising theirs. They're working hard and, in this country, for not much money. They're not being paid to give me language lessons.

So I have two conflicting emotions. On the one hand, I don't speak Portuguese. And on the other, I feel like it's a bit of an insult and shows a lack of respect for the people and culture of Portugal to just breeze in and babble away in English like a lazy tourist, without so much as a by-your-leave (which a heck of a lot of the English do and it makes me really angry).

So I develop a sort of halfway language that is actually the worst of both worlds. It's a sort of baby-talk English with a couple of Portuguese words thrown in plus a series of delightful hand gestures that demonstrate (in an expressive and convincing manner that would make Tom Hanks seriously worried about his Oscar chances) exactly what my left hand does when drinking a beer or a coffee or eating a bowl of soup.

A typical conversation:

"Hola. Boa tarde"

"Boa tarde."

"Ahhh … um cerveja beer big one please grande Sagres por favor obrigado thanks.

"Certainly sir. I'll be back in a moment. Will that be all?"

Still with a good bit of walk in me, I find myself on the Lisbon road. It's the least interesting route, but when you only have four roads leading out of your village, sometimes you go for variety over glamour and scenery.

I pass the bombeiros, the firemen.

In this part of the country they are all unpaid volunteers. I can understand that. When you're a young man and somebody from the

government comes along and offers you a smashing red truck loaded with blazing lights and screaming sirens and lets you swagger around in a cool blue uniform with dozens of velcro pockets and loads of nifty reflecto striping and everybody calls you a "bombeiro" (which I think we'll all agree is pretty much the coolest job title ever in the world) you'd do it for free.

Heck, given half a chance, I'll sign up myself.

I slip off the main road onto a rough path. I don't know if it's private or public land. It looks well tended, but there is no one about. I walk along. I'm careful not to harm any of the crops, and if someone comes to complain, I'll trust my foreign accent and natural ability to look lost and clueless to get me out of any trouble.

Along the path, I go past huge bales of hay. For some reason that I can not explain rationally but probably has something to do with the fact that, pretty often, I just get it into my head to do dumb things, I try to shift one of them. Just roll it over or something.

Well let me tell you, the stuff is like a rock. It doesn't move an inch. Not only can I not move it, I can't even sway it from side to side.

I've always thought that bales of hay were fairly light.

Whenever I see them in old black-and-white movies, handsome shirtless farmhands or lusty blue-eyed farm girls with golden hair are always picking them up effortlessly and tossing them into a horse drawn carriage (often while singing popular selections from The Sound of Music).

In reality, the stuff weighs a ton!

And then I get to thinking, what is it with hay, anyway? What's it for?

I've never bought any product of any type in any place where one of the ingredients was hay. I've never heard anyone say "I'm just going to run into town for some hay." I've never been in a restaurant and been told that the Michelin-starred chef is today proudly serving his signature dish of hay. There are no airplanes or trains or buses made of hay. You never pick up the newspaper and read that the government is seriously concerned about the national supply of hay.

I haven't the foggiest idea what the stuff is for.

But, around here, they sure do make a lot of it. I don't know what they do - feed it to the cows?

*

I talk to Carla about fish.

"The best place is the Mercado," she says. "It's the freshest and

the best price."

"I haven't seen any there," I say. "But I'll check next Saturday and see what they have."

"Not the farmers' market," she says, surprised. "The Mercado. Over the bridge."

"Huh?"

"That place you were taking your beer every," she says. "There is a market there."

"Oh, yeah," I say, raising cluelessness to an art form. That place with 'Mercado Municipal de Aljezur' written on two sides in huge blue letters that has somehow escaped my notice. "I'll check it out."

The market is divided in two - fish on the left, veggies to the right. The vegetables are too perfect and the selection too broad to be local so I skip them which is a good thing as I later discover that the prices are out of this world.

The fish overwhelms me in the best possible way. There are two rows of tables each more than twenty feet long and about four feet deep and packed to the edges with fish. That's forty feet of fish, about the length of a full-sized city bus, plus boxes more on shelves under the tables.

Add it all up and there's a trawlerful here. There are sardines, of course. There are espadas (swordfish) at €10 a kilo and sargo (bream) for €2 euros less than that. There's polvo (octopus) in all sizes and just six to ten euros a kilo depending on some seasonal pricing formula that eludes me. There's the aforementioned corvina which still has no English name and costs a full €12 and some little flat tasty looking things called safias which also defy my internet searches and online attempts at translation (though I do discover that there is a little girl from Johannesburg named Safia Fish who has her very own Facebook page and is friends with her Mum and Dad which I think is kind of nice).

And the smell! With all this fish on open display in a relatively small space, the smell is ….

There is no smell.

Experts say that if a fish smells even slightly fishy, it's past its prime. Fresh fish has no smell at all. By that measure, this stuff is not long off the boat.

I decide to play it safe and point at the sardines, but as the counterwoman readies the carry bag I spot a box of something at the far end of the table. It's called cavala and looks a lot like sardines but at just two euros a kilo it's half the price so, as I'm nothing if not cheap, I alter direction and ask for "um quilo por favor."

I have no idea how much um quilo is in fish. I do know that one kilogram is exactly the weight of one litre of fresh water which is a fascinating metric fact and the sort of thing that would win me many points on QI and perhaps a hearty "well done" from Stephen Fry but, as I am not actually carrying one litre of fresh water, does me little good here.

My um quilo turns out to be a huge bagful. For two euros I get sixteen beautiful specimens of what my online translator later tells me are mackerel. I have no idea what to do with so much fish but when she offers to put some back I turn her down. I also decline her offer to gut and clean all 16 fish on the concern that it may cost extra (it doesn't), fork over two small shiny coins and leave for home.

I talk to myself while I'm preparing the fish partly because I always talk to myself when I'm alone and no one is looking and partly because when you've got a tray full of fish in front of you and a sharpish knife in your hand it's kinda fun to pretend you're hosting a TV cooking program.

Eventually I perfect a sort of Jamie Oliver meets Rick Stein tone-of-voice and after a short introduction to the folks at home and a rather clever Keith Floyd-esque aside to my cameraman, I turn to the business of fish gutting.

There are all sorts of helpful videos on YouTube showing how to gut fish and I watch none of them. I reckon a "cut 'em open and haul out what looks yukky" approach ought to work and it does. I've put ten in the freezer so I have six to do. It doesn't take long. Chopping off the heads takes even less, though it's not something I'll be doing next time.

I pause a moment for a little joke.

"So Mr Cavala, how did you feel about being plucked from the ocean waters and turned against your will into Mark's lunch?"

"I was absolutely gutted."

Even my imaginary television audience doesn't find this funny and I quickly segue into a Stein-like piece-to-camera about the importance of letting the true flavour of top-quality ingredients shine through on the dish. After a light rubbing of olive oil and salt I go full-on Jamie and "give her a good old squeeze of the fresh lemon and a nice whack of the cracked black stuff and yer well sorted mate."

Every recipe I read gives a different cooking time, everything from a few minutes to nearly an hour. But Delia says 25 minutes and on my show we don't argue with Delia so that's the time that I dial into my professional divers' watch which is shockproof, waterproof to

200 metres, has never been anywhere near water and is only ever used to hold flowers and time the cooking.

Twenty five minutes is plenty of time to heat up some rice and stir fry a bell pepper and some spring onion. In just under half an hour I'm tucking into a plate of perfectly cooked cavala atop a bed of lemon-fragranced arroz branco.

Rice and fish.

*

It was my first day without Sophie.

I had left on the Friday. The weekend had gone by. But the following Monday was the first working day in nearly a year that I hadn't woken up in the morning and thought to myself "I am going to the office and see Sophie."

It was a tough day.

My mind raced like a steam engine. "Why did I quit?" I thought. "I should never have quit. If I hadn't quit, I'd be seeing Sophie right now. Maybe I can find a way to get that horrible job back so that I can see Sophie."

It went on like this for most of the day. But thanks to a little bit of time and a large bit of drinking, I got through it.

By the end of the day, I was feeling not quite good, but slowly approaching okay.

I took a walk down to the supermarket for some staples. By staples, of course, I meant a bottle of vodka.

I wandered around the shop that I will not name but where every little helps carefully covering the discount booze in my basket with all manner of fresh food that would eventually end up un-cooked and un-eaten and in the bin.

I walked around a counter looking for cheese and, while not looking carefully, bumped into - Sophie!

I kid you not.

In almost a year in a fairly small town, I had (except for that fateful Sunday) not once run into Sophie. She lived fifteen minutes from my house and worked in the same office, but I had never run into her at the supermarket or anywhere else, for that matter.

And now, on my first day without her, and on a day when I had spent every single minute of every single hour from morning to early evening doing nothing but working hard to try and become the sort of guy who can go a full working day without seeing Sophie and, after eight hours of hard graft had almost managed it, ended up crossing

tracks with her at the supermarket.

What was the universe doing to me?

I made every effort to be cool.

My heart was pounding and my head was racing. I desperately wanted to say "please come and have a coffee and sit down and let me pour out my feelings for hours and hours and hours and tell you over and over again how sorry I am and at the end of it all you'll be fine and we can be friends."

But I did not. I was casual.

"Sophie!"

"Hi Mark."

"How are you? How's work?"

"Okay. How are you?"

"Good. Slowly getting back to normal."

"That's good."

"Yeah," I said. "Good to see you. I've gotta run, though. Take care."

I smiled and waved casually and walked away towards a section of the supermarket that sold nothing I would ever want to buy and tried to breathe.

Whew! I thought. I had run into Sophie at the local supermarket and had a normal, well-adjusted conversation. It had killed me inside to do it, but I'd made it.

It was, perhaps, my first small victory.

*

There are foreigners here. There are surfers and tourists here for the nearby beaches and hostellers passing through and some retired people living out in the countryside.

I don't speak other languages, but I figure out how to spot the foreigner from the local. It's all about their attitude to the sun.

Foreign visitors arrange their days to get the most sun. Portuguese arrange their lives to avoid it.

Foreigners wake up early and are out and about in the early hours. They have lunch shortly after noon, eat dinner in the early evening when it's still bright and, if they feel like dancing, are at the local nightclub when it opens at ten.

The Portuguese start their day late. They eat lunch in the afternoon; dinner is supposedly served about half-eight, but doesn't really hit the table until about nine and, if they feel like dancing, wouldn't think of turning up at the local club before eleven at the

earliest.

If you go to a beer patio or café and listen closely, you can see it. The locals generally sit in the shade under the umbrellas while the tourists take the seats out in the sun.

The houses tell the same story.

Portuguese houses all come with shutters. They are on every window and scroll down like outdoor blinds and, to be honest, from the outside, can make even the prettiest home look like one of Her Majesty's more secure prisons. They are not attractive, but are a quick and practical way to turn a window into a wall.

They are also a perfect way to look at a home and tell if it's locally or foreigner occupied.

Portuguese people wake up in the morning and, before the sun gets hot, lower the window shades. They keep them down until evening when they raise them to let in the cool night air.

Foreigners do the opposite. First thing in the morning, they're cranking up the blinds. Mostly they don't bother; they just leave them up.

I'm a typical foreigner. In all the time I've been here, I've never lowered the blinds. For all I know, they may not even work.

When winter comes, which it does later, the difference is even more easy to see. The few tourists here walk about in shorts and tank tops and t-shirts. Meanwhile the Portuguese locals are bundled up in defence of the cold. They wear thick coats and hats and scarves. To look at them you would think some sort of arctic weather front had rolled in. In truth, it's twelve degrees under the sun though rain is forecast for the afternoon.

There is a young woman in the village. I don't know her, but I see her walking down my road in the morning and evening so I assume she has some sort of job in the village or nearby. In the winter she wears Ugg boots!

For those who don't know, Ugg boots are the sort of thing women in London or Paris or Montreal wear in the winter. They are calf length, soft leather and lined with faux fur. They are just the thing for trudging to the office through thick snow and cold. They are perfect for getting into work a bit before nine, hauling off, tossing under the desk and slipping into a nice pair of uncomfortable but stylish four-inch fuck-me pumps.

Why anyone would wear Ugg boots in Aljezur is beyond me. In the

deepest depths of winter the daytime temperature almost never drops into single digits. Snow has hardly ever been seen here. The worst the weather forecast has to offer is heavy rain.

Yet she wears Ugg boots?

Definitely Portuguese.

*

I am having my first ever dinner party in Aljezur. David and Carla and the boys Nino (who has just passed the first part of his driving test, so we'll all make a big hoopla about that) and Thomas are coming over.

I am as nervous as a teenaged schoolgirl on prom night.

I have bought in enough white wine to intoxicate a battalion of soldiers, plus the same amount again in red, and twelve bottles of beer just for good measure and some juice for the non-drinkers. I have bread and olives and olive oil and cheese as a welcoming snack. I have enough salad and tomatoes to satisfy an army of hungry rabbits. For the main course, I will, if I can figure out the online translator, buy chicken, plus some red and yellow bell peppers for colour. The fresh peaches from the back garden will do just fine for a sweet if chopped up, baked and tossed over ice cream.

I think I have everything I need. I hope it will go okay.

But I am still nervous.

I don't even know how to start the oven.

The translator works reasonably well and at the supermarket, I buy six pieces of chicken.

In Portugal, very little meat is sold in pre-packaged boxes. You go to the counter where a butcher (a real butcher, not a minimum wage store clerk in a fake white coat, but a man or a woman who knows their business and can actually do some serious damage with a cleaver) serves you.

I point at something I vaguely recognise and hold up six fingers and do a bit of miming even though he, as everyone here does, speaks perfect English. But I am buying six pieces of chicken so I reckon I've earned a little language lesson.

"In Portuguese?" I ask. "Perna frango?"

"Perna frango," he says. "Chicken leg."

"And six?" I ask. "Seis?"

"Seis," he replies; it sounds like 'sayshh'.

"So 'Seis perna frango, por favor?'"

"Yes. Good," he says.

I take my chicken. "Obrigado."

For the rest of my shop, I wander around the supermarket repeating, over and over again "seis perna frango, por favor."

Not the most efficient use of my time and my personal muttering generates a few odd looks from fellow shoppers. But if I ever again need six chicken legs, I am absolutely good to go.

*

Over time, I developed an unusual talent. I became able to vomit on demand. There was no tongue-pushing bother needed. I could simply walk into the bathroom, decide to throw up and do it right away.

It wasn't exactly an entertaining party trick and it certainly wouldn't get me a thumbs up from the judges panel.

But, more and more often, with the effects of the previous night working their damage, in the mornings before going to work and often at the office itself, it was a very useful talent to have.

*

I climb.

From my apartment, the village is built upwards on a huge hill. White painted buildings cluster the hill. I have no idea what is up there but I intend to find out.

I take a bottle of water and set off. The cobblestoned streets wind this way and that way and back and forth and who knows where, but as long as I head in a generally upward direction, I reckon I'll eventually reach the top.

My legs are ever stronger and my body begins to work. Even if the summit holds nothing of interest, the exercise is doing me good.

There is all sorts up here. There are ancient-old clapped-out cars parked side-by-side with sleek modern, turbo-charged Audis. There are collapsed abandoned buildings sitting next to beautifully cared-for family homes. There are manky looking dogs running in the road next to the healthiest cats I've ever seen. It's a mixed bag and I climb through it all.

After a time, I reach the summit (forgive me if I sound like an Everest climber, but, for me, this is a challenge). From the peak, I look down over the village and the surrounding hills. The view is

magnificent and made more so by the knowledge that I have come here under my own power. I take a few photos and turn around.

Getting back is more of a problem. At every turn there are different ways to go. My apartment, which was, even from the top, clearly in view, has now disappeared. The entire village seems to have vanished.

I have now realised that, while a hill has just one peak, it has a heck of a lot of foothill. Which means that by descending in a generally downward direction, I could end up anywhere.

Fortunately, there is a hippy. I refer to him as a hippy because, for me, as a middle-aged, white collar, office worker, anyone with long hair, sandals and a mid-70s Volkswagen camper-van is a hippy.

Hippy or not, he points me in the right direction. He takes twenty minutes to do it and he calls me "brother" and "dude" rather a lot and, before I leave, we have a hug which is not something I normally do with guys, but what the heck I don't mind and is, truth be told, actually rather nice, and eventually he points me in the right direction and (with a few wrong turns along the way) I make it home.

I have climbed the hill and, with a little help and some luck, have returned safely.

Another small victory for me.

*

The doctor's office had called. As part of a routine check-up, they had done a liver test. I didn't know what it was, some gamma-something-or-other, but I was told that the acceptable healthy range is between 8 and 61.

I had scored 217.

My liver, according to another test, should have been between 10 and 44 of something I didn't really comprehend.

Whatever it was, I was at 115.

I don't understand medical stuff. But I knew this was bad.

*

I am walking home. A wildflower is growing at the side of the road. Flowers grow wild everywhere here.

I pluck a small flower and slide it into my watchband.

It looks pretty and I like it.

I decide to find a flower each and every day. I resolve always to have a bright glorious flower in my watchband around my wrist.

I will be someone who, no matter what is going on in his mind, can always take a moment just to look at a pretty flower.

It's a nice idea. But, being me with my full-on personality, I can't leave it there. I, as always, have to go right over the top.

By the end of the week, I've gone totally mad with the flowers. I've got dozens of them stuck in my watchband. I obsess about them. I've got stuff in my wrist with harsh prickles that cut into my skin and make me bleed, but I don't care.

I spend forever choosing a base colour (usually something green, but a bright sort of green as I'm not so keen on the dark colours) then building on it in contrasting tones and shades (yellow seems to go well with blue and red and white are always a good call, though white flowers are hard to find).

I have entire floral arrangements wrapped around my left wrist. They are ever more beautiful and complex. Making them has become a full-time job but I am getting better and better at it.

It's an obsession and it's probably not terribly healthy, but if you were getting married, you would be very happy to have my left wrist front and centre at your bridal table.

*

In Portugal there is a second national financial crisis.

It is not The Crisis.

It's not the serious crisis that makes the nightly news and causes all manner of concern to the nicely suited and perfectly coiffed functionaires at the European Union and the financial geniuses over at the International Monetary Fund and the always glamorous Christine Lagarde and all the other brilliant Nobel Prize winners of tomorrow who are currently spending a great deal of time and effort not solving the worldwide economic meltdown.

It is a different crisis. It is crisis that has escaped the notice of the world's press.

Portugal is suffering from a serious lack of change.

Buy a beer, toss in a fiver and they'll inquire if you perhaps have a one euro coin. Hand over a four-fifty purchase and a tenner and you'll be asked if you might happen to have a five euro note.

In the UK and most western places, change is something I try to get rid of. I go to the supermarket self-serve and feed in all manner of coins just to get rid of them. At the pub, when my pocket gets overly full of coins, I pay for my pint slowly and with lots of "sorry mate, hope it's okay, gotta get rid of all this silver" apologies.

I can walk into a British shop, pick up a 90 pence chocolate bar, hand over a tenner or a twenty pound note and nobody bats an eye.

Not here.

Here you can empty your pocket and, whether you're at a small local shop or the huge local supermarket, you can dump a load of assorted coinage into your hand and the clerk will happily spend however long it takes to pick out your payment starting from the lowest denominations and working upwards.

You can be buying four pieces of chicken and two bottles of wine and some laundry powder and a non-stick saucepan and a low-mileage well-maintained second-hand Volkswagen Golf and they will be delighted to accept payment in one cent and ten cent and one euro coins. But offer a twenty euro note and they go nuts.

Nobody in Portugal has any change.

*

As I walk about and get to know my new home I realise something profound.

Nothing happens here.

I've read hundreds of travel books, and things always happen. The writer always gets robbed by armed rebels or kidnapped by space aliens or visits Paris and spends his evenings sitting on the banks of the Seine eating baguette and cheese and drinking rough local wine with Catherine Deneuve or meets the Dalai Lama or falls in love with an exotic stranger with a dangerous past. Something always happens.

Not here.

In my village, nothing happens. And that is why I am here.

I came here because too much was happening to me. I came here because so much was happening that I couldn't think. I couldn't get any air around my head. I came here to find a place where nothing would happen.

In my village I have space to think. When I walk (which I do for hours and hours every day) I don't wear a music player. I think. And most of the time, I talk to myself. Out loud. I hold entire conversations. I work things out in my head.

As I walk, the occasional car runs past and now and again a person passes by. When they do, I stop my personal mumbling and issue a greeting. "Bom dia.," I say in the morning, or "Boa tarde." after noon hour (as you can tell, my Portuguese is coming along just fine).

I am reminded of that scene in the film Crocodile Dundee where he ends up in New York and walks down the street saying hello to

absolutely everyone and people think he's mad.

I am becoming the sort of person who does that. But around here, it's fine.

In a city, I'd be a crazy nutter. Out here, once out of town, there is no one around and I am left alone to talk to myself and to wave my arms about a little bit and sometimes to scream and sometimes to shout but mostly just to walk down the road alone with my thoughts.

*

Once again out in the Portuguese countryside, I walk two hours in search of a place I do not find. Then I walk two hours back from the place I have not found to the place I started from.

I am well outside the village. The road is pretty much deserted and, save for a few barking dogs chained up in what appear to be abandoned farmhouses but in this part of the world probably support entire families, I have everything to myself.

I feel good. The sun shines. There is a cooling breeze coming inland off the Atlantic coast. My legs have begun to regain a little bit of their former power. My lungs don't wheeze quite so much. My heart does not pound quite so badly. I am an hour's walk from the nearest source of alcohol and I almost don't care.

Up ahead a young couple are on either side of the road. He sits. She stands with a cardboard sign and an outstretched thumb.

"Having any luck," I say to the boy, guessing he probably has some English.

They are from Germany, trying to get a lift to Arrifana. I can't help, but I wish them good luck.

"By the way," I say before setting off. "I like your strategy - hide the boy and put the girl on the road."

They chuckle. We share a laugh and I walk on.

Half an hour later a beaten up Peugeot 204 in faded red paint with dodgy tyres and a slightly peeling left-hand door strip roars by. From the back seat, they wave and smile. I wave back and grin hugely.

After three hours of walking I have, by any reasonable measure, earned myself a beer. At the local café, I sit on the patio nursing a small cold bottle of Sagres.

A young woman walks by dragging one of those wheelie suitcases that, even amongst young people, seem to be replacing backpacks. She walks up and down the parking lot and into the café and out of the café and back to the parking lot. She looks left and right and up and down and pretty much everywhere.

I finish my beer and leave for home. On the way, I cross her path.

"Fala Inglese?" I ask. "Do you speak English?"

She answers in some sort of generic and unidentifiable North American accent.

"You look a little bit lost," I say. "Can I be of some help?"

"I'm supposed to meet a tour group," she says. "They said to meet at the bus station near the youth hostel."

"You are in the right place," I say. "The buses stop here. The hostel is just up the road. And if you want to relax while you wait, beer is only one euro at the café."

She smiles and thanks me and I wish her well and set off for home.

I haven't actually given her any useful help. She was in the right place all the time and doing perfectly well without my assistance.

But my exciting new role as Friendly Foreign Person With Impressive Local Knowledge is coming along just fine.

*

People often ask "what exactly did you want from Sophie?" "Did you want to sleep with her?" "Did you want to date her?"

And, even though no one ever seemed to believe me, the answer, truthfully and with all the honesty I can summon, was no.

Sophie is cute in a way, but no hottie. Late twenties. Pretty smile. Long legs. But if you walked into a room full of women, you wouldn't spot her out.

Besides, I'm pretty much immune to hottiness. I work in advertising. I'm surrounded by fit young women most of whom dress to impress and are masters at the art of flattering middle-aged guys like me. If I was going to get all hot and bothered about some twenty-something girl, I'd have done it a long time ago.

Plus, I've never really gone for younger girls. I'm a guy who likes women pretty much my own age. When I was in my twenties, I went with 20-year-olds. In my thirties, with thirty-somethings.

That's what I'm about. I like women my own age. Send me a 28 year old girl and I've got no idea what to do with her.

If, for some odd and unexplainable reason, Sophie had turned up at my house in the middle of the night all flushed and flustered, the absolute most she would have got out of me would have been a cup of tea, a blanket and a quiet place to crash downstairs on the couch. That's all I had to offer.

I'm a man. I like women. Girls scare the shit out of me.

*

My sister, brother-in-law and mother come from Canada for a visit.

They come to the apartment, we have a good old catch-up and I pontificate wildly and pointlessly about local attractions and directions and people I know and things I've done.

I am looking pretty cool. I've got them a map from the tourist office and offer directions to the place in the country they are staying even though there are excellent directions on the guesthouse website and, even if there weren't, my sister's rental car has the sort of satellite navigation system that could probably guide astronauts to the moon and return them safely to Earth.

I don't know anything of real usefulness, but I do the local-motion and enjoy it.

We slip next door to the café for some lunch. I try hard to look like a neighbourhood guy who everybody knows. But, as I've only been there about five times and then only for a coffee or a beer, it doesn't quite come off.

We order plates of seafood and they're surprisingly good, though my octopus is a bit chewy, but I don't mind because I realise that I have now become the sort of guy who can make intelligent comments about the preparation of octopus.

I discover, to my horror, that my sister doesn't like sardines, something which, in Portugal, is going to make feeding my family rather difficult.

The bill comes and because I am serving a chicken dinner tonight, my sister picks up the bill.

I am serving chicken because I know how to say chicken in Portuguese. If I knew how to say beef, we would be having beef. If I knew how to say "locally sourced free range lamb shanks with a tangy mint sauce" we would be having locally sourced free range lamb shanks with a tangy mint sauce. But I don't, so we are having chicken and for that reason my sister and husband grab the tab for lunch.

They pull notes and coins out of their wallets and there are lots of questions about tipping to which I respond "yes, but just a small one" which are ignored.

As my sister assembles the payment (and a huge tip because, let's face it, I live here and you've just arrived, so don't listen to me), she checks the total. The notes are clear, but euro coins all look pretty much the same so she shows me her coinage.

"Okay, so this is fifty cents, and this is a twenty cent and this is a one," she says. "And this is five euros."

Huh?

"There's no such thing as a five euro coin," I say, rather nervously.

I've spent the past two hours doing the I-know-the-local-scene-so-stick-with-me-and-how-cool-is-it-for-your-older-brother-to-be-so-clued-in-to-a-totally-foreign-country thing and then all of a sudden she produces a basic piece of currency that, apparently, I have never seen before.

It's not exactly a winning performance from Friendly Family Member With Impressive Local Knowledge.

I drag out my glasses and take a good look at the coin. I can't figure it out. I've never seen such a thing.

Finally after a long hard look, I see some engraved words around the edge: "Estados Unitados de Mexico."

It's a Mexican coin!

"Oh yes," my sister says, to my immense relief. "We went there on holiday."

*

Now and then, when I found a sympathetic ear, I would talk. I would bare my drinking soul. And the response was always the same.

"You should get some help."

Everyone said the same thing. Always in a hushed voice with a caring look: "you should get some help."

But there is no help.

Famous and wealthy actors and celebrities can go into expensive re-hab clinics and "get some help." But for the rest of us, there is none.

On the council website there was information about a weekly meeting for people trying to deal with drink. It was Wednesday afternoon and I wangled time off work and appeared at the appointed time.

There was no meeting.

The private profit-making company that administered the meeting had been replaced by another private profit-making company that offered the service for slightly less money. The new private profit-making company had not yet established a weekly schedule so, for now, the meetings were off.

I went to my doctor and asked for help. He typed out a referral

and a week later I received a call from a woman at some organisation whose name I did not recognise.

I travelled by train to the next town and poured out my heart. She took notes and gave me a chart to record my drinking for next week's meeting.

Over the next seven days, I worked hard to cut my drinking. I wanted to show her. I wanted to do well.

We met and talked and she gave me advice. Useless advice. "Avoid situations where you drink," she said. "Keep away from people who encourage your drinking."

She didn't get it. She didn't understand at all.

I don't drink because I am in drinking situations. I put myself into drinking situations because I drink.

I don't drink because my friends are drinkers. I make friends with drinkers because I drink.

She told me about HALT. Don't let yourself become Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired.

Really! I drink because I am always Hungry Angry Lonely and Tired.

It was no help at all.

There is no help.

*

Mother is staying with me, but my sister and husband are staying at a small guesthouse in the country. They've booked it online thinking it's just a few kilometres out of town. In truth it's way out in the hills.

They invite Mum and me out to the guesthouse for "pizza night" and turn up to collect us in their rental car. The ride out petrifies my sister. We wind through and back and up and down and over tiny windy twisty roads cut clumsily out of the side of hills. There are sheer drops on one side and sometimes on the other side and sometimes in front. My sister is so scared she has to cover her eyes with her sun hat and talk about everything and anything at all just to keep her mind off things.

I'm a little scared myself, but not too much. My brother-in-law is at the wheel and he has that don't-worry-it's-all-fine-and-even-if-it's-not-I'll-get-us-all-through-safely calm demeanour that you used to see in airline captains and always helped reassure nervous passengers during heavy turbulence.

I'm expecting the guesthouse to be some sort of rural motel with a slightly rustic theme and for pizza night to be one of those pay-this-

much-buy-a-ticket-and-collect-your-slices-over-there kind of affair.

In truth, it's a neighbourhood party in a hippy commune.

The guesthouses are, in the words of my sister who can really turn a phrase and really ought to be writing this book, "Gaudi meets The Flintstones."

It's a sensible arrangement. Everything is curvy and wavy which is far more attractive and useful than the sharp corners of the western world. The walls are many feet thick to retain the night-time coolness and keep out the daytime sun. The windows are re-used glass bottles set deep into the walls. Above the houses, discarded car tyres are embedded into the steep hill as a water break.

I get talking to Chris, a Welshman who is a dead ringer for the minor American actor Fisher Stevens but isn't, and owns and runs the place along with his estranged wife Annie who used to live here and bore his child but now lives "over the hill".

He's working to make a sustainable guesthouse that, as much as possible, becomes an integral part of the environment rather than a blight imposed upon it.

It seems to be working.

At pizza night, there are only four paying guests (my sister, her hubby and a nice Australian woman and her daughter). But there are dozens of people here all of whom are locals and all seem to be, when I ask, from “across the ridge" or "over the hill" or "just off to the side of the next valley."

It's a party in the hills.

The pizza is the best I have tasted in my entire life. The wood fired oven is actually a part of the lounge. It's not an oven, really. It's built into and is an integral part of the wall.

The wall, as are all the walls here, made of earth. Actual earth. It's the same construction used in David's house and Chris takes me outside and shows me how it works. They dig out a bunch of soil then take a sort of flat spade and chop it and mash it and mix it and, on a far larger scale, do pretty much what we do when making mashed potatoes. Then it's shaped and sculpted and left for weeks to dry out in the summer sun. It gets strong, can be used to build anything and, once done, becomes ever firmer year on year. It makes a strong and sustainable wall or building and one hell of a pizza oven.

And the pizza just keeps on coming. The crust is just thin enough to be right without having that horrible look-at-how-thin-I-am feeling that you get at pizza places whose entire purpose in life is not to be Dominos. The toppings are many and varied and full of flavour and mostly the local produce of Greg and Isa who live on the property and

tend the gardens in return for food and lodging.

I am sitting down with a glass of wine and a slice of pizza that I'm too full to eat but I will anyway because it tastes so good.

Chris comes by and we get to chatting and I ask about his business. He doesn't like the global money economy and wishes for a sort of share-and-share-alike world but knows that isn't likely to happen anytime soon. So he's trying to work out a compromise between the way the world is and the way he would like it to be. He knows that he can't offer rooms for free, but he wants people to feel that, by staying for a short time, they aren't just renting a holiday spot. He hopes for them to feel they are contributing to something and keeping a good thing going.

A pretty little girl with a big happy smile and blue eyes and a mass of straight naturally blond hair runs up and gives Chris a huge hug. She is Megan and she is four years old and she is his daughter.

She has no idea that eating pizza in a purpose-built-but-environmentally-concerned cave with a bunch of people who live in the Portuguese hills is special.

For her it's just life.

*

"I thought maybe we could have a look at the castle," I say to my mum. "It's a bit of a slog, but if you're up for it?"

You can see the castle from my front windows and Mum knows it's a steep climb and a challenge for a 70-year-old woman with bad eyesight, but she likes the idea of giving it a try.

I reassure her that we can stop anytime and, if it's too much of a strain, we can easily turn back. She's okay and we set off.

It's a good push and, even for me with my new-found health and strength, it's no walk in the park. For my mother, it's a mammoth challenge. But she presses on.

From time-to-time she asks to take a break and we do. And every now and then, when it looks like she needs a little rest, I suggest that we stop to "look at the beautiful view" or "get the camera out and take a picture" or some other excuse for a short time-out.

Mum takes the odd break, but generally trudges on with determination. It's not the fastest summit of the hill ever made, but we're not in a competition and, in pretty good time and good health and a lot less wheezing and straining than I had when I arrived here, my mum has made it to the top.

We have a good look around and Friendly Family Member With

Impressive Local Knowledge passes along to his mother such useful and fascinating facts as "it's a castle" and we set off back down.

For the rest of the day, wherever we are, my mum looks up at the castle on the hill.

"That's really high up," she says.

"It sure is," I say. "And you did it. Most people drive up, but you walked it. That's cool."

It's not the Matterhorn. It's not a famous mountain. But it's a bloody steep climb and a woman well past retirement age with dodgy vision just got herself to the top.

I know how she feels.

I know a small victory when I see one.

*

My mother is leaving the next day. When I lived back in Canada, I would visit my mum about once a week and we would cook together. We would alternate between being head chef and commis chef. Whoever brought the food was master of the kitchen. The other did the cutting and prepping. Next time we would swap places. It was great fun, we both enjoyed it and most of the time the food wasn't half bad.

I think it would be a nice thing for Mum to have the chance to do the same at my house in the Algarve. She makes a pretty decent meatloaf and I suggest that we team up and cook that for her last night with me.

"You be lead cook and I'll do the chopping and slicing," I say. "Tomorrow, after our walk, we'll stop by the supermarket and get what we need."

I'm looking forward to Mum's meatloaf, but I have set myself a challenge. I get out my phrase book and log on to the internet translator to learn how to order the meat.

Mum reckons a kilogram of ground meat will do the job, but I'm not having that.

"Um quilo is too easy," I say. "We'll get three-quarters. What we lose in food, we'll make up in language skills."

I practice and practice. It takes me hours and hours of hard grind, but I do it. No person has ever spent this much of a morning repeating "setecentos e cinquenta gramas de carne moida."

But I press on. I have to get to the point where I can say it without looking at the notepaper. I reckon the secret is to think about it as actual words rather than just memorising it as a rote. "Sete" is

seven. "Centos" is a hundred. "E cinquenta" is and fifty. And so on.

My sister and brother-in-law drive us out to the beach at Arrifana and I spend half the time not being able to body surf and the other half repeating "750 grams of ground beef, please" over and over again.

Walking along the beach, a voice calls out "Mark! Hi!"

"Nino!" I say. Carla's son.

We shake hands and do the slight shoulder tap guy semi-hug thing.

"You are always at the beach," I say.

I introduce my mum, sister and brother-in-law and have a quick chat.

"Must be nice having the car," I say. "And how is the job? You're still living out on the road on top of the restaurant?"

I lay it on thick like we're best mates. I only know that he has a job at and lives over the restaurant because Carla told me. I've never actually been there. I only know he's just got his driving license because he came to my place for dinner with his mum. Aside from that, our entire social relationship occurred one time when I ran across him at the local nightclub and I bought him a small beer and he got me in on the joint being passed around.

I make some general noise about "better go, gotta find a quiet spot" with a knowing head nod in the direction of the others and in the manner of one who'll "defo catch you later, dude, and if I didn't have the family crew around would like, totally, be hangin'" set off.

As we walk along the beach looking for a quiet spot (the quiet spot is actually at Praia da Amoreira, a much better beach), I feign the casual.

"It'll be quieter up there," I say, pointing to an area of beach that may contain lions and tigers and dragons for all I know. I've only ever been here for the festival. I've never actually been on this beach.

But I know what my family are thinking. "Wow! Mark is the kind of guy who hangs out with the cool kids on the beach."

At least, I hope that's what they're thinking.

There is a photograph from my first days in Portugal. There are four of us on the beach at Cascais, just a short four euro train ride from Lisbon. There are two young Aussie boys in board shorts and a Canadian girl in a bikini. And there is me in a large white t-shirt. We spent the entire afternoon on that hot sunny beach and that t-shirt never left my body.

At the Arrifana beach, my brother-in-law lends me a surf shirt. It's

one of those highly technical things made entirely of space-age miracle fabric and probably cost more than my monthly rent.

It's skin-tight and a bit of a body sculptor. It subtly moves things around and puts bits in the right places and adds a slight element of buffness to pretty much anybody. But, still, it's a tight shirt and I wear it and I feel okay.

I'm a man who used to hide his mirrors in the closet and now I walk all the way down the beach to buy a beer and some bottled water at the little café and I do it all in a skin-tight surf shirt.

I am definitely counting this one as a small victory.

Back in town at the supermarket, I swagger up to the butcher. Luckily for me, it's the same nice man who's been so impressed with my skill at ordering "seis perna frango".

"Carne moida," I say, even though there is a huge tray of ground beef right in front of me and I could just point and even though it's more usually called "carne picada."

He smiles and points and I say "sim" which means yes and is a word I know so I'm really on a roll now. He rips down a plastic bag and I pause and look away as if I'm wondering how much I need and, once decided, will pull the exact order from my vast and fluent knowledge of Portuguese weights and measures.

"Setecentos e cinquenta gramas, por favor," I say, somewhat haltingly.

He nods and smiles in a nice way and starts to fill the plastic bag. But just to be sure, he leans forward and looks side-to-side and in an almost conspiratorial whisper says in perfect English to me "you want 750 grams of the ground beef?"

"Sim, por favor. Yes please."

He packages the meat up and slaps on the price sticker and we swap obrigados and toss a couple of tchaus back and forth and I've done it. It's another small victory for me and I am beside myself with joy.

But none of my family hears me. They're at the other end of the counter talking about pork.

Mum falls ass over teakettle for Portugal. She loves the place. The weather helps, of course. Everybody loves the sunshine. But she likes how it's beautiful, but not too beautiful. It's a real place so there are lovely views about, but there is some pretty ugly stuff, too. It's pretty, but it's not a theme park.

She finds it quaint and olde worlde, but it's not backward and she

feels safe and comfortable but relaxed at the same time.

She sees that the people are nice, but not too nice. They are nice in a real way, not in a professional way.

At the supermarket, I pay with my debit card and ask the girl at the till if they do a cashback.

"No," she says.

Not "I'm terribly sorry sir, but unfortunately that particular service isn't currently available at this time" or some other corporate-speak rubbish.

Just "no."

But as I leave, she smiles warmly and tells me that there is a bank machine off to the left just near the elevator.

Mum gets it.

It's all about the balance.

At the Mercado where the buses arrive and depart I grab a couple of beers. Mum wanders about the patio somewhat aimlessly, but she has a good attitude to travel and to meeting new people and by the time I arrive with a couple of chilled bottles of Sagres she is deep into chatting with a Canadian tourist.

Her name is Maria. She is in her late-thirties and has signed up for a surf school and, while she waits for the bus to pick her up, we talk.

Mum and Maria talk. I just listen. I listen because I am interested. But mostly I listen because I like the fact that my 70-year-old mum can stand around a small village market and say hello to a visitor and strike up a conversation and be invited to sit down and by the time I return with beers be deep into a chat.

Mum introduces me to Maria and I learn that she has recently lost her job and has come here to think and to figure out what to do with the rest of her life. She wants to make a major change, but hasn't yet figured out in what direction to go.

I can see the intelligence in her eyes and know that all she really needs to grow is a little time and some space. I get it.

I can't tell her what to do. We've just met and I don't know her well enough for that. But in my time here, I have learned something.

"Look at your finances and expenses," I say. "And work out when you need to have a job and how much time you need to find one. Then backtrack until you have a date when you have to start looking."

"Okay," she says, curious, but not really knowing where I'm going with this.

"Then, from now until that date," I say, "don't think about it.

Don't think about getting a job or updating your CV or the mortgage or the car payments or anything else about the routine of ordinary life. Don't worry about any of that stuff. Whatever that period of time is, from now until that date, it is yours. It may be a short time, it may be a long time, but it's your time. It's your time to be free in your mind and just to feel and to think."

She understands and clearly feels a little better.

And, once again, I realise that none of all this is wasted.

*

Later that night, after a long family dinner at my place and with the cheap Portuguese wine flowing, the conversation turns to Sophie. Everyone at the table knows the story. They've been hearing about it for months.

But the language at the table starts to hurt. I am continually referred to as a "semi-stalker" or the "creepy guy at the next desk." I am told over and over again and in excruciating detail what I did wrong and why.

I can't bear it. I am blinking my eyelids to wipe away the oncoming tears.

I try to explain. I plead. But no one hears me.

"I'm not a creep," I say. "I just fell in love. I didn't want to, but I couldn't help it and I did. And when you fall in love, you sometimes get stupid."

Nobody understands.

I am a person who fell for another person. But my person happened to be a middle aged man and the other person happened to be a young woman.

But no. I am just called a creep over and over again and I am slowly but surely starting to lose it. I try as hard as I can to stay at the table. But all I want to do is run into my room and wrap my blanket around me and be on my own with my tears.

Then my brother-in-law who has sat there mostly silent all night and who generally says little but listens well and, on the few occasions when he does talk, has useful and wise things to say, wades into the discussion. He's sensible and intelligent and thoughtful and, if the heavens above gave you all the powers in the world to find the perfect person to care for your sister and to be kind to your mother, he is the man you would choose.

"Everybody does that," he says, quietly. "You can't stop it. You do crazy stuff when you're in love. We all have. I've done it myself."

I wipe my eyes and feel a thousand times better.

*

So if I wasn't after sex and I wasn't looking for a trophy girlfriend, what did I want? What was I hoping for?

In short, I wanted a relationship. Not quite a romantic one, but not too far from it. What I wanted was to meet a 40 year old Sophie. Or better still, to be 30 years old and meet Sophie. Of course, neither of those options were going to happen. So I looked for something else.

It has to be explained that in the advertising business, the relationship between copywriter and art director is a close one. There's a lot of personal stuff. There's drama. There are arguments and make-ups and most of the things you see in marriages but without the sex, the kids, the mortgage and the school run.

There is a term in the business called "work wife." I wanted a work wife.

I was lonely. I wanted a relationship and if I didn't have it in real life, I figured I could find it at the office.

I could not have been more wrong.

*

Behind my house someone is growing sunflowers.

There is all sorts growing behind my house. Land is not wasted here. There are peaches and plums and bales of hay and acres of corn and plenty of other stuff that I do not recognise.

But, in the distance, I see sunflowers. And I want one.

Getting there is difficult. A stream runs past my house. To pass it I need to walk to the bridge, but not cross, just walk along the bank of the stream until I find a point where the flow is slow enough that, with the aid of a few conveniently placed stones, I can hop across.

Once in the fields, the going is no easier. I am wearing my cheap sandals which do me no good at all. But I push on.

Brambles and thorns tear at my lower legs, but I don't care. I ignore the sharp pain and the cuts and scratches and give no thought to the bleeding.

Eventually, I reach the sunflowers. Unlike most things, which look better from afar, they are even more beautiful close up. I almost don't want to pick them.

But I do. I pick two. A large one and a small one.

I walk back to my home scrambling through the same mess of

nasty vegetation that attacked me on the way in.

At the parking area near the bridge, a family is packing their car. A little girl stands waiting for the journey to begin. She sees my flowers and smiles. I give her a thumbs up which she returns.

I walk over. Mother and father are busy. I say nothing. I don't even know what language she speaks, but I hand her the small sunflower.

I say nothing and walk away. She waves and smiles.

*

I have developed a habit of going to the supermarket and buying things even when I can't read the labels.

I buy a packet of something I do not recognise. But they only cost 75 euro cents and I figure if they are in the store then somebody must be eating them.

The online Portuguese-to-English web translator tells me that they are chicken necks.

This is not the sort of thing I would have picked up back in the UK. I'm not even sure that my local supermarket even stocked chicken necks. And no one in the UK or Canada has ever said to me "come on over for dinner, we're having chicken necks."

Still, what the heck. I'm here to discover new things so I give 'em a go and make chicken neck soup.

It's not bad.

At the cash, a group of three young Australian tourists are buying some peaches and trying to say "thank you" in the local language. One of them has heard that it's "obrig-something-or-other."

"It's obrigado," I say. "Or obrigada for a female."

There is a young man at the till. She points to him. "So it's obrigado."

"No," I tell her. "It depends on who is speaking, not who you are speaking to. You are a girl, so you say obrigada. Your male friend or me would say obrigado."

They all give it a go. The poor young fella who is just trying to ring up one-and-a-half euros worth of fruit is subjected to a massive barrage of poorly pronounced thank yous - two obrigadas and an obrigado all coming at him at once.

The Aussies wish me goodbye and leave happy. I feel good.

I may be shaking and wobbly on my feet, but I can still score another small victory for Friendly Foreign Person With Impressive Local

Knowledge.

*

My body was under attack and not exactly putting up a robust defence.

The alcohol was taking its toll as alcohol eventually does. But the side effects of heavy drinking were, if possible, even worse.

I'd stopped any real form of exercise. I've never been a gym bunny, but for most of my life I have been an avid walker. Seriously avid. I used to think nothing of walking the entire 10-mile perimeter of Richmond Park if it was a nice day. I would walk daily to my job in Hammersmith, a brisk five miles and well over an hour. I once walked from Richmond to Oxford Circus, just to get an on-the-ground feel for the sprawl and variety that is London.

That was no more. Aside from a 15-minute slog into the office and a short walk to the supermarket for booze, I hadn't walked seriously all year.

I'm not the handsomest guy in the world, but I used to have a pretty decent set of calves. I've actually had women in pubs and even in the street turn to me and say "nice legs." Not any more. Now I had sticks.

About the time I stopped walking, I stopped eating, too. My lifetime habit of cooking loads of fresh vegetables along with a little bit of meat and a few carbs had turned into a diet of cheap ready meals from that place in the high street where every little helps.

Sometimes, not even that. It's very common for alcoholics to get so many of their calories from booze that they actually suffer from malnutrition. I certainly was.

I could feel it. I could even see it. I'd cut my thumb, just under the nail. It scabbed over. And it stayed that way. In a full year it never got better.

My body had lost the ability to heal.

*

At the Arrifana Sunset Festival, I am definitely on the inside track.

Carla drives us to the beachside venue. I am in the car along with her 15-year-old son Thomas who is very much a teenager, but a good one and will be a fine man later in life and a lovely Polish/German girl named Natalia who works with Carla at the hostel and sits next to me in the car and charms me all to death by speaking in that delightful

way that northern Europeans who speak fluent English but have no colloquialisms do.

You can pay 15 euros to get into the festival. We don't.

At the gate Carla air-kisses some people and hugs others and chats with some and catches up with old friends and eventually we pass in un-charged.

It's a small festival. They keep it to down to 500 people which, including the clever ones who slipped in under the wire and the various friends who get in for free (like us) means there are actually about 600 or so. Still, it's compact and, unlike those mammoth fests common these days, you don't get lost and if someone in your group wanders off, you know you will find them later.

At the festival, Carla knows everyone. Absolutely everyone. And when I say knows, I mean genuinely knows. Not knows in the London "used to work together, friends on Facebook, connected on LinkedIn, let's do lunch" kind of way. She knows them to the ground.

She knows the festival organisers. The main guy, Tiago, runs the surf shop outside the beach and is her nephew (which is why she has a pocket full of bar tickets that she distributes freely within our little group).

The rest of the family is in the thick of it. David is working the event. Her boy Nino has a long hard shift behind the main bar.

Carla is only slightly acquainted with the first performer, an attractive blonde girl with a pleasant voice and a sort of folk-singer-meets-pop-star style. But she's good friends with her sister.

She has known every member of the headline act Off The Lip for years. They are mates of her boys and used to come over to the house to practice. She remembers when they were just kids. Today the kids have grown up a bit and put on some serious stage presence and perfected a bopping and hopping sound that manages to be serious, quality music, but at the same time makes you want to dance, which I do with huge enthusiasm even though I'm terrible at it, but what the hell, I'm a middle-aged white man and nobody is watching me anyway and it feels good to dance, so I do.

Carla spends all night kissing and hugging and doing the Portuguese equivalent of "Oh my god! It's been so long! How are you!"

And there's always a story. It's never, "meet Charlie, my neighbour."

It's never so simple.

I spend the entire night meeting people, telling them my name, being told theirs and immediately forgetting it, then having Carla fill me in on the relationship. "Oh, this is Tina," she, for example, says.

"She used to date the partner of the former girlfriend of the ex-wife of the cousin of the woman my nephew used to live with".

It is terribly complicated and I can't follow it at all.

But I love it hugely.

*

I rise at seven. A half-filled glass of wine sits on the table and would normally be my first port of call. But I resolve not to touch it until noon hour.

Except for the shaky incident with the office friend and her CV, I can't remember the last time I did that. I can't remember any five waking hours without a drink.

I drink juice. It tastes odd. It tastes like juice. I can't quite remember that either.

Over the morning, my skin starts to itch in a way that I don't recognise. It's not a surface itch. It comes up out of my bones and sits just under my skin.

Parts of my body quiver. It's mostly in my hands and it's not a huge quiver, but it's there and eventually makes typing and using a mouse impossible and I have to shut the computer down.

For the last hour, I sit at the table. My watch sits near the glass and my eyes flick, pretty much constantly, between the two.

On the stroke of noon I pick up the glass and it's a good thing it's only half filled. I take an average mouthful, put the glass down, run into the bathroom and throw the wine and all the juice up.

Back in the kitchen, I need to dilute. I hold the cartons with both hands to reduce the shake, but there's still a lot of sloshing and spilling and my counter is going to need a scrub. A weak half-and-half mixture (my normal is about 90/10) if drunk slowly manages to stay down.

It's a full hour before I can use my computer again and even longer before I can risk a shower, but I've done it.

I stick with my don't-drink-in-the-morning plan for the next few days, but it isn't really working so I go online in search of something better. It's important to get off alcohol at a safe rate. Unlike other drugs, with alcohol, cold turkey can kill you.

Alcohol is a depressant; it suppresses your neurotransmitters. It pushes them down, which is why, for most people, a drink or two helps them relax. But if you are continually pushing them down, eventually they adapt. Then, if you suddenly deprive them of alcohol they shoot up to normal levels and well beyond.

Imagine you are in a room and someone pushes on your door. You don't like them so you push back. They push, you push. Eventually you're both pushing like mad, but you reach an equilibrium and the door stays pretty much in place. Now imagine if you suddenly jump away. That person is going to fly across your room.

Alcohol works that way.

Online I find a safe reducing plan from an addiction research foundation. Essentially, you reduce at a quick rate, but one that will keep you alive.

Beer is the only drink allowed as the others make it too easy to exceed. The first step is to convert your usual daily intake into beers. This is your baseline starting point. On the first day, you drink this. From there a chart tells you how much to reduce each day.

Simple enough, I think. I open the calculator on my PC and start adding ABVs and millilitres and such. Finally, I have baseline starting point.

Twenty beers.

I go to the supermarket and buy twenty beers.

They weigh a ton. They almost kill me. If there was ever an incentive to quit or cut down, this is it. Which, as I struggle along, gets me to laughing and thinking I might have something here.

Some sort of simple cessation plan like a fad diet. The sort of thing celebrities are always going for. I distract myself from the pain by dreaming up an imaginary conversation at some overpriced LA restaurant where nobody actually eats any food.

"Charlotte!"

"Chardonnay!"

"How's the, you know, little problem?"

"I'm okay. I'm on the *Mark Hill: Drink All You Want If You Carry It Yourself* plan.

"I've heard about that one. They say it's good."

"It's like, brill!"

"Ciao!"

"Ciao!"

Over the next few days, twenty beers quickly drops to a dozen, which for me is hardly anything. Alcohol deprived, I sleep poorly, which is to say I barely sleep at all.

I lie in bed drenched from head to foot in perspiration. But I am huddled tight because I am freezing. I am shivering. I always thought a cold sweat was a figure of speech. But it's not and I've got it.

Then, without warning, my body heats to near-boiling and I toss the duvet aside.

This alternates every few minutes for most of the night.

My skin itches and tingles wildly and I scratch and scratch to no avail.

I have periodic hallucinations. These are not nightmares; they come to you when you are wide-awake and are far more realistic and frightening. There are all sorts and they prey on your deepest fears. Snakes are common with me because I'm scared of them; there are no spiders because I'm not.

There is one character who comes to me. I can't describe him well. He's sort of shiny green and balloon-like with big eyes and a huge scary grin and sharp teeth like children carve into pumpkins.

He floats in the room as if he owns the place. He likes corners but when I look at him he slips to one side and laughs so I re-target him again and he slips somewhere else.

I don't like him. He is evil and I am frightened.

A few more days into the aggressive alcohol reduction plan and I wake up with the sun and can't get out of bed.

My legs are spasming, bouncing uncontrollably up and down and side to side. I can't get them over the side. Eventually I manage some sort of body twist manoeuvre leaving me in a position that, should I decide to make prayer a part of my life, would be just perfect.

I have no idea where to go or what to do when I get there, but I push myself up and move towards the door. I look like one of those gangly new-born lambs you see on country life programs but, unlike them I am either cute nor endearing. Halfway along, I collapse to the floor. I lie on the cold faux marble floor for, I don't know how long. It seems like hours but is probably only a few minutes.

The spasming subsides into mere shakiness and by grabbing the edge of the bed and hauling, I find a way to stand up. For some unexplainable reason, I decide to take a shower.

Getting over the high tub wall is tricky. There is no grab rail and, with the disorientating effect of the water flow, my balance is destroyed and I end up sitting down like a little baby in a bath. But I'm not a baby and running a bath at this point is out of the question. The water, which I can not re-aim because I can't stand up, crashes directly into my face.

Washing is difficult when you can't stand up and your shaking hands can't keep hold of the soap for long, but I manage it after a fashion. I flop around like a beached whale in a clumsy attempt to

rinse off then turn off the tap.

Getting out is even harder. Soapy water on porcelain is almost friction-free. There is no grip. I work out an embarrassing one leg over then a twist and the other leg over then a bold push for the door handle. I grip the handle with my right hand and push against the door jamb with my left. It leaves me leaning forward, but it's a solid combination and if I shuffle slowly forward eventually become fully vertical with both feet flat on the ground.

I'm done. I look like an idiot and I'm probably not terribly clean.

But I'm done.

Things eventually calm down a little so I dress and decide to walk. Partly because it might help and partly because I don't know where I am on the withdrawal danger spectrum; are these the shakes or is there a heart attack or a stroke on the way? And if there is something potentially fatal coming, a second floor apartment with two steel security doors is not the place to be.

My flat is on the second floor, but you enter through a back door on the first floor. To reach the apartment I have a steep staircase, all sharp edges and hard marble. A fall is, at the very least, a cracked head. When my mother was here we joked that it was The Marble Stairway of Death. But it's no joke. I wouldn't let her anywhere near it without me in front. Now I am worried about it for myself.

I make it out into the street and walk. I walk, ironically, with a swaying gate that makes me look drunk. I don’t care where I go, I need somewhere open enough that it might give me a bit of room to move, but busy enough that if I collapse or scream for help will alert someone to call the medics.

I unlock my mobile phone, dial in 112 ready for a one-press call and, because we're living in a right man's world and even though I'm a lefty I am actually more dextrous on the starboard side, slide it into the other pocket.

I stop at the corner store and clumsily buy three beers which I will carry as a sort of emergency first aid if things go wrong.

When the semi-busy road runs out I stick to the residential roads where bashing on a door and screaming "ambulancia" has a good chance of producing a helpful local who has a phone and, more importantly, knows where I am.

The walk helps and if I walk in a straight line, I'm okay.

The sun sets and the sky darkens and I'm ready to call it a night when I realise with a start that I haven't had a thing to drink all day.

I call my mother. She's proud and excited and audibly overjoyed. I am simply bemused.

This was not supposed to happen. I was supposed to gradually reduce my drink count in a safe and orderly fashion over a period of days from the high to the mid teens, from the high single numbers to the low and finally make the drop to zero.

Still confused, I climb into bed. I sleep well. I don't sweat. I don't shiver. I don't shake. There are no snakes. The scary green character is nowhere to be seen.

In the morning, I awake with the sun and make myself a cup of tea. On my kitchen counter there are 26 bottles of Sagres beer.

I have no idea what to do with them.

*

Days pass and the withdrawal symptoms gradually diminish and, eventually, fade out almost entirely. I've lost control of my left pinky and ring fingers and my index finger is operating on half strength, but aside from that, I'm okay. I have massive cravings for drink, but no actual withdrawal symptoms.

For the first time that I can recall, I eat three meals in a single day.

In the morning I chop a tomato over some chick peas resting on a bed of mixed salad greens and add a glug of olive oil and a generous sprinkling of grated cheese. I spend the morning at my keyboard then have a small bowl of potato and bean soup with vegetables, garlic and a pinch of dried herbs. Then, in the early evening, I do a mixed bake of courgette, some carrot and onion and a little finely sliced potato all drenched in olive oil with a small dash of Portuguese piri piri sauce to give it a bit of a kick.

It's just three simple dishes, but for me, this is a big thing. It has been almost a year since I have eaten even two proper meals in a single day. And I can not remember the last time I had three.

I also seem to have a little bit of energy so I decide on a day-trip to the nearby small village of Odeceixe.

Next day, I drop into the tourist information office to pick up a bus schedule. Immediately I feel I've stepped into some sketch show. I've never felt more like Ronnie Corbett in my life.

"May I have a bus schedule for Odeceixe?"

Wordlessly, she hands me a small piece of paper.

"Do you have any information about Odeceixe?" I ask.

"No."

"What is good to see there?"

"I don't know."

I look at the schedule, notice there are no fares, and ask "What is the price for the bus?"

"Maybe one euro," she says "or two euro."

Or three euro, or four euro, or ... I think to myself as I thank for her help.

It's goodnight from me. And it's goodnight from him.

The bus (which costs two euro forty, by-the way) slips smoothly out of Aljezur outbound for Odeceixe.

Onboard, I've got everything I need: camera, extra batteries, a bottle of water, my mobile, a map and a can of what I've taken to calling "emergency beer", something to chug if I suddenly find my body ordering another round.

There's a detour through the new town and, not for the first time I find myself admiring the skill of these guys at the wheel (sexist, yes, but in this part of the world, they're guys). This is not a little runabout; this is a full-sized, mid- to long-distance coach and he guides it easily about the tiny, twisty backstreets with their tight curves and sharp corners. There's no backing and forthing, no tyre scraping or curb climbing, nothing, just a smooth ride. Calmly competent, these guys are the airline pilots of the bus world.

We slip into Odeceixe and high on a hill is the old village mill. It's a windmill and I want to see it. I like windmills for the same reason I like bridges. I like things that do something, that serve a purpose. They may look pretty which is all very nice. But at the end of the day, there's bread on some family's table.

I've got a map but, as my head-upwards-towards-the-pointy-bit approach worked so well at the castle, I decide to give it a go. I scout out a bit of upward moving roadway and set off. In minutes, I am lost.

I am completely lost. I can't see the windmill. None of the street names appear on my map. I press on and eventually arrive ... somewhere. It turns out to be the main plaza. There is the post office, the local GNR outpost, various small shops and the municipal market. There is a small snack bar at the mercado.

"Cafe, por favor," I say to the apron-clad woman behind the counter. "And um bifana."

Bifana is a traditional food. It's just a pork steak stuffed into a sliced bun with a good dollop of mustard. It's nothing fancy and you can buy it pretty much everywhere for a couple of euros.

But when I order one, she immediately breaks out laughing and I

am hit with a torrent of hilariously incomprehensible Portuguese. Still laughing her head off, she turns to the other fellow at the counter and he joins in.

"Bifana?" she asks, once she's got her funny bone partially under control.

There is no malice in any of this but I am flummoxed. I just nod and take a table. The coffee comes quickly, the bifana a little longer.

"Bifana," she says, pointing. "Por trabalhar."

It sounds a bit like the French "travail" so I figure it has something to do with work.

She mimes some digging, then some hammering, then a brow being wiped. It's a good miming effort.

"Ah!" I say. "Lunch?"

"Sim (yes) lunch," she says. "This time. Cafe. Sandwich."

As I dig into my bifana which does turn out to be far too large and heavy for this time of day, all sorts of people are coming and going. Banter floats all around the room and there's plenty of giggling and more than a few "Noooo? Really?" type of expressions. It's a local snack bar, not a tourist spot, so it's all in Portuguese and I can't follow any of it, but the words "Inglese" and "bifana" seem to pop up an awful lot.

They're having a laugh at my expense, but it's a good-hearted laugh and I like being a part of it. I can't join in so I throw in a few sheepish expressions and a bit of shoulder shrugging to keep the ball rolling.

"Next time," I say pointing to myself while waiting for my change. "Cafe. Sandwich. No bifana."

She gives me a thumbs up and a smile.

Thoroughly fortified and feeling quite chipper, I set off once again in my quest for the elusive windmill.

According to my map, which I grudgingly decide to use, it's somewhere in the vicinity of Rua 25 de Abril (told you there was one in every village). Unfortunately, as the rua runs the entire length of the village, this is less than useful.

In search of the road I come across the Igreja Matriz which is a fancy sounding name but is actually just Portuguese for main church.

I'm not a big fan of churches but I take a walk around the pathway that encircles the church until I come across an open gate which I find irresistible (who can resist an open gate?) so I enter. I am in the village cemetery.

The village is built on a hill so they've cut deep into the slope and

cleared it to make two levels of flatland, rather like massive steps.

The graves vary from simple plots with homemade crosses to small family mausoleums. But one stands out. It's just a rectangular hole piled with loose earth. I've read that cemetery keepers often dig a grave in preparation, then toss the loose earth back in until it comes time for the actual burial.

It's not a beautiful place, but it's interesting. And it's not scary, though I wouldn't want to be there at night. So, before anyone closes the gate and locks me in, I set off in search of the windmill.

I'm on the right road, but it is nowhere in sight. I walk along past rows of carefully tended houses in the traditional white concrete trimmed in the popular favourite yellow and runner-up blue. Until ten to fifteen years ago, all buildings were entirely white. Purists complain about it, but I like a splash of colour and think it looks pretty.

Suddenly I'm out in the country. I know I've gone too far, but I walk on. It's nice out here and my Chinese Shop sandals have broken in so I'm comfortable. Actually, with Chinese Shop sandals, it's really your feet that get broken in, but the effect is the same.

Eventually though, I admit defeat and turn back. I trudge and trudge over my former trail and just about resign myself to never seeing the windmill when, right in front of me, down a gently sloping hill, there it is in plain view.

It's a massive white thing with huge blades sitting on a cleared circle of high ground and I managed to walk right past it.

It's not a pretty thing. It was built to do a job in an age before tourism so function not only comes before form, it completely dominates it. The blades are interesting. They are actually sails which can be furled when not in use and unfurled when there is serious grinding to do.

I take a few pictures and make my way back to the village. My exertions have earned me a beverage so I stop at a small cafe for a coffee and a glass of orange juice. The juice is fresh squeezed and delicious. I would never pour vodka in this stuff (though I wouldn't mind a few shots on the side). I can feel the goodness as it goes down my throat.

As I pay and tell the owner how much I enjoyed it he explains that all the oranges they use are grown in the Algarve.

"We try to eat the food we grow," he says.

What a beautiful thing to say, I think. Sometimes when a person is speaking a second language they come out with something much more evocative than the native speaker.

I have listened to so many pretentious, overpaid celebrity chefs

on TV prattle on about "locally sourced ingredients" and "seasonality" and other trendy buzzwords that reek of insincerity and overpricing. But "we try to eat the food we grow" has the sweet sound of truth and I like it.

The juice is divine and the windmill interesting and I'm glad I came but, truth be told, Odeceixe really doesn't have a full day in it and I'm ready to go. Sadly, the next bus is two hours away so I head down to the main road the name of which is not marked on my map but which forms the northernmost point of the village and houses the bus stop.

It's well-tended and quiet and has fountains and park benches and is the perfect place to sit alone with my thoughts. Behind me there are cows in a field with the same sort of bells as the cows behind my apartment.

When I was a boy, my grandmother used to tell me that if the cows are standing up it will be sunny. But if they are lying down, expect rain. As she hailed from the poverty stricken council estates of Liverpool and probably knew little about cows and as she also used to tell me not to run around after drinking milk because it would turn to cheese in my stomach, I didn't quite believe her.

I sit watching the cows and listening to the bells. As I do, the sky begins to darken and the cows slowly sit. Not all of them and not in some all-together-now coordinated movement, but there is a definite trend towards a bit of a lie-down.

Cows have a funny way of lying down. They are the exact opposite of a dog. A cow collapses its front legs so its head, neck and upper body are on the grass. Then it lowers its rear legs until fully prone. It's both clumsy and cute at the same time.

It doesn't rain and the sky clears up, but I never get to see if they all stood up once the sun came out. My bus is here to whisk me safely back to Aljezur.

Once home, I unpack my bag, put my camera away, put the batteries in the charger, slip my mobile in my pocket and drop my map on the desk for later reference.

Finally, I toss my "emergency beer" back in the fridge and pour myself a glass of orange juice.

Melissa messages me to see how I enjoyed Odeceixe. I go through all the sights I saw and tell her about missing the windmill and the funny little story at the snack bar and she's quite amused.

"And how did you like the beach?" she asks.

"There's a beach!"

*

In time, I graduate from sardines and mackerel, which are easy to cook, to salt cod, which is actually a more traditional dish. In fact, for most Portuguese, "bacalhau" is their fish of choice. Sardines are popular, but bacalhau is tops with the locals.

It's dried salted cod. Drying and salting fish was a normal method of preservation in the days before refrigeration and, in this part of the world, it lives on to this day. It serves no useful purpose, freezing is easier and cheaper, but folks still go for it because this is a place where people do what they have always done because they've always done it that way and that's the way they like to do it.

They say in Portugal that there are 365 ways of cooking cod, one for every day of the year. I'm a bit short. Quite a bit short. I have two ways; I can give it a quick fry in olive oil or a slow bake in the oven. In my kitchen, the other 363 days have to fend for themselves.

The first time I cook cod, I don't even know that it's salted. I buy it frozen in a bag, thaw out a few pieces, fry it up with a splash of olive oil, two-and-a-half minutes on each side and a nice squeeze of fresh lemon and a hefty dash of ground black pepper and served up with a good helping of rice and a few chunks of tomato and cucumber as a rough-and-ready simple side salad and it looks lovely on the plate and I can't wait to tuck in and when I do it tastes a hundred times more salty than Atlantic seawater and I almost throw it up.

I've actually swallowed Atlantic seawater and I would sooner take in a mouthful of beach juice than eat this stuff. Try as I might, I just can't get it down and it goes straight into the bin.

Later, after spending five times the actual cost of the fish on internet access time, I discover that salted cod needs to be soaked in continually refreshed water for at least 24 hours.

I'm not bothered. I throw four euros worth of fish in the bin and I don't care. I didn't come here for everything to be easy. I came here for stuff to be weird and for me to screw up and do stupid things and to stumble about and to look a bit dumb but to eventually figure some things out and by some sort of trial-and-error-with-a-little-bit-of-help-from-kind-local-people to learn.

And I learn that you have to soak salt cod.

Plus, the frozen supermarket pizza that eventually becomes my supper tastes pretty good.

*

I think about the word "fond."

It's a word that seems to have fallen by the wayside. It's hardly used anymore. I think we need to bring it back.

"Love" and "like" are words that are still going strong.

We say "I like you," which just means that you're okay to get along with, you always get your round in down the pub and if I'm in your neighbourhood at three in the morning I can come by and crash on your sofa.

We say "I love you" which means there's some romantic interest, I wouldn't mind a shag, and would you consider spending the rest of your life with me and being the mother of my children.

Both words are useful. But they are extremes.

But "fond" occupies a sweet and comfortable middle ground. It's about having feelings for another. Feelings that go beyond mere respect or friendship. But feelings that don't stray over into the romantic or sexual. Fond is less about loving and more about caring.

I think it's a nice thing to be fond of someone. And a nice thing to be thought of with fondness.

I am fond of Sophie.

*

Alcohol takes a lot from you. It slowly and carefully sneaks up and gradually takes everything you have.

It takes your health. It takes your energy. It takes your spirit and your joy in life. It can take your job and your reputation and your personal relationships. It takes your looks.

It also takes your balance. Your physical balance.

By the end, I couldn't even stand on one foot.

In the shower, if I tried to wash my feet in the normal way of picking up one and giving it a scrub then doing the same with the other, I would probably have fallen over. I couldn't chance it.

I developed a technique of washing my feet by dropping the soap bar on the floor and rubbing my feet over it then sliding the foot forward for a rinse.

I had long since passed the point of putting on my trousers normally. Most men step into one leg, then into another. Not me.

I would sit on the edge of the bed, rock my body back and pull both legs up. Then I would scrunch the legs up until clear of the ankles. Once done, I would stand up on both legs, draw the trousers up and fasten.

After a while, I didn't think anything of it.
It was my normal.

*

My landlady leaves me fruit.

Every few days she slips in quietly in the early hours of the morning when I am sleeping to tend the trees in the back garden.

From time-to-time she leaves me peaches and pears.

I don't know how to thank her. But eventually I hit upon a plan. I leave her some grapefruit.

I didn't grow them myself. I bought them at the big supermarket just past the only roundabout in the village. They're probably not even local. They probably come from some massive and horrible industrial farming complex in Spain. But she has given me peaches and pears and will later give me oranges and now I will give her grapefruit.

I go on the online web translator and find that "Thank you for the lovely peaches and pears. Here is a little fruit for you." comes out as "Obrigado pelas lindas pêssegos e pêras. Aqui é um pouco de frutas para você." which sounds just fine to me (as you know, my Portuguese is pretty much fluent by now).

I copy it out laboriously on to a piece of paper, being sure to get all the accents correct and in place because I don't know how important they are but am seriously worried about writing down what I think means "peaches" or "pears" or "fruit" but possibly, in the absence of accents, comes out to mean "moon rocket" or "dead whale" or some such thing.

I put the grapefruit where she normally leaves the peaches and pears and shove the notepaper under one of them.

It's a funny thing, though. I love the gesture and the silent relationship. It's sweet and I now have a huge bunch of pears sitting on my balcony table. If I ate fruit, it would be lovely.

*

Once again, I stop in to top up my internet time at the post office up the road.

In this village, pretty much everything is either up the road or down the road. There really is only one road that matters. Sometimes, things are actually across the road, which lends an added element of excitement and interest. But, for the most part, it's all on the road. The road, by the way, is my road, the Rua Vinte e Cinco de Abril, in

case I haven't mentioned that a hundred times already.

The young clerk who seems to spend all day dealing with routine postal transactions but always does so in a friendly and open and kind way and who speaks perfect English and recognises me and knows that I know that he speaks perfect English, but is patient and gives me a short free language lesson, tells me that "ten" is "dez" which is pronounced "daysh".

So I slide across my TMN internet card and ask for "dez euros, por favor."

I feel good. And, unlike last time, it doesn't cost me an extra tenner.

And, being the wizard Portuguese speaker that I am, I wrap up the transaction with a relaxed "obrigado" and breeze out of the post office with a wave and a casual "ate logo."

The German speakers in the queue behind me are impressed. They know I'm not from here. But I blend. I so blend.

Friendly Foreign Person With Impressive Local Knowledge is definitely back in town.

*

When you drink alcoholically, you do nothing.

You don't have hobbies or interests. You don't go to plays or films or concerts or festivals. You don't date. You don't see friends. Aside from a never-ending quest to find drinking companions, you have no social life.

On a Friday people, as they do, would ask "any plans for the weekend?"

"No," I would say. "Not really." And they would respond with some sort of "oh, just chilling, then" comment, implying that no plans was not the norm.

On the following Monday, the same people would ask "how was your weekend" to which I would respond with some sort of "fine, pretty quiet" answer.

This went on weekend after weekend, a pretence that, like everyone else, on most Saturdays and Sundays I was up to all sorts of exciting and interesting things, but this weekend just so happened to be a quiet one.

The truth is I did nothing on any weekend. I just drank.

That's what you do.

You do nothing else. You just drink.

*

David and I drive through the countryside. As we do, I see trees stripped of bark. They are stripped for cork. And the stripping, while it looks awful, is what actually protects the trees and sustains the forests.

Cork is, basically, tree bark. Once every nine years, you can strip the bark off a tree, chop it up into the correct size, and sell it as a wine cork. And for hundreds of years, the Portuguese have been doing exactly that.

As a result, there are huge tracts of land in this country where trees grow and nature abounds and the builders and developers and the concrete merchants are kept out. And it's all because of cork.

According to The New York Times, a single tree can produce enough cork to stop up to 4,000 wine bottles.

This is a seriously efficient product.

And it is a sustainable business that preserves the environment. It has done so for centuries.

But cork is under attack.

The so-called "new world" winemakers are terribly busy promoting the idea that screw caps or those ghastly plastic fake-corks are better for preserving wine. They make a great effort to spread the notion that huge amounts of wine go off because of poor cork. They suggest that the making of cork hurts trees. They spread lies.

In truth, the very best way to put a stopper in a bottle of wine is with a bit of cork. It's cheap. It's sustainable. It does the job. And, unlike the screw caps and plastic fakes, when you toss it in the rubbish, it quickly bio-degrades and melts into the organic landscape.

In Portugal, even the cheapest wine, is stoppered with cork.

Knowing what I know, I wouldn't buy anything else.

*

At the supermarket I was at the self-serve till ringing in my usual shop of a bunch of stuff I would never eat plus a bottle of vodka and some orange juice. The young clerk came over to punch in the codes to approve my purchase.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I can't serve you."

"Why?" I was genuinely confused.

"I smell alcohol on your breath," he said. "I can't serve you."

I couldn't figure it out. It was past six and the last drink I'd had was a single pint of real ale with my lunch. I was as far from drunk as

I ever was. And I'd brushed my teeth about three times since then.

I called a manager, queried the cut-off and was allowed my purchase.

But as I left the supermarket I realised that I had become the sort of person who, even when he's not drunk, looks and sounds and smells like he is.

*

The grand master strategy of leaving grapefruit for my landlady as a thank you for the peaches and pears works and backfires at the same time.

She takes the grapefruit. She takes the note.

But she leaves me fourteen pears!

I don't know what to do with fourteen pears. I've taken to slicing them up and baking them in the oven along with some meat and veg. And, even as someone who, absolutely, never eats fruit, I do find that, when baked, they add a nice and unexpected sweetness to my main meal.

But I struggle to get through them all. I'm just one guy. I would have to have an entire family of fruit loving maniacs to get through fourteen pears.

I don't know what to do.

*

I meet some hippies.

Actual hippies. And actual Portuguese hippies, which is even cooler.

The woman sits on the outdoor patio at the now closed café (it's a Sunday; everything is closed here on a Sunday) next to my apartment. She is dressed in some sort of tie-dyed sun dress and has a baby on her lap.

"May I ask you a question?" she asks in perfect English as I go past on my way home from my walk.

She points to my wrist. "I have seen you before," she says. "You always have flowers on your arm."

I tell her that I have taken to plucking them during my walks. She smiles. The baby looks at me with that fixed stare that babies give you which is kind of cute but sort of scary at the same time.

The woman tells me about her life. There is her, her husband who is a few steps away filling water bottles, and the child, and I think to myself "just add three wise men and a manger and you've got a real story here" but I don't say anything.

They are from Porto in the north. I have been there and we talk about the glorious Dom Luis bridge over the River Douro (I have a thing about bridges).

They have a beat-up little Renault or Citroen or some other low-spec basic eurocar and a tent. They travel about and seek out places at night to set up and sleep. Most of the time, if they are polite and quiet, the police do not bother them. They eat bread and cheese and stuff out of tins that doesn't require a cooker.

I invite them inside for a glass of wine, but they have to be off for Sagres because they want to walk along the cliffs and feel the wind so we say goodbye.

It's a small moment, but I like it a lot. I have my flowers. They smell nice. They look pretty. They feel good.

And I get to meet hippies!

*

My morning shower suddenly runs cold. I am out of gas.

In this part of the world, hot water and cooker flames come from tanks of propane sold at the local shops. When you run out, you take

the empty tank down the road, pay 25 euros and swap it for a full one.

I go downstairs to the cupboard where the tanks sit. Huge red warning signs all about fires and flames and other natural and awfully hot disasters plaster the cupboard doors. Fortunately, I do not smoke and I don't make a habit of walking around with naked flames in my hand. So I reckon I'm probably okay.

The tank is hugely confusing and, with all the instructions clearly written in Portuguese and my language ability still not yet moving past the "bom dia" and "obrigado" phase, it's really not a lot of help.

I need to figure this out. Either figure it out or take cold showers pretty much forever (and, to be honest, my hot and bothered days of needing cold showers are fairly well behind me).

There is some sort of a twisty tap. I reckon that if the tap is one way while the gas is running, then turning it the other way will probably turn it off. So I do that. Then, with a lot of clumsy twisting and turning, I manage to disconnect the pipe from the tank. So far so good.

I pick the tank up and start hauling it down the road to the corner shop a good half-kilometre from my apartment. It weighs a million pounds and I haven't done this much exercise in years, but my walking has given me strength and I use it to the full.

Halfway down the street, I sling the tank over my right shoulder. It's no lighter or any easier to carry that way, but it gives me a jaunty, lusty, just-off-the-boat stevedore look that the passing tourists seem to find impressive.

At the little shop, I swap it for a fresh tank. I pay the bill and do my usual thing about pretending to speak Portuguese and the girl from the shop does her usual thing about pretending to understand me.

As I leave, she follows me out. From a rack at the outside wall of the shop, she takes down a purpose-made wheeled trolley and slips the tank neatly into it.

"Take this," she says in perfect English. "Then bring it back."

A trolley! My arms are fifteen feet longer than normal thanks to hauling this tank halfway through the main street of Aljezur and, all the while, they have a freely available trolley that I could have borrowed at no cost.

I really need to figure out how things work here. If I keep up this silliness I am in grave danger of losing my all-important position as Friendly Foreign Person With Impressive Local Knowledge.

Back at home, I repeat my clumsy removal procedure in reverse and, after a lot of huffing and puffing, the tank appears to be in place. The gas seems to work. I check the oven and it lights and the shower

is warm and I am generally pleased with all that.

Perhaps I have achieved another small victory.

Of course, I could also be filling the entire apartment with propane gas and setting myself up for a major fire. Which would be sort of a bad thing.

On the other hand, it would be an excellent opportunity to call the bombeiros and show off my incredible ability to say "Rua Vinte e Cinco de Abril, sessenta sete, Aljezur."

I may burn to death. But if I do, I will burn to death in Portuguese.

*

I am coming back from an evening walk. A car pulls up.

"Boa tarde," the woman says, slightly uncomfortably and in an odd accent.

"Boa tarde," I reply in my jaunty natural Portuguese swagger, though the sun is starting to set and I wonder if we've possibly moved into "boa noite" time. But being the amazing linguist that I am, I leave it alone.

We quickly establish that we all speak English.

They are looking for a pizzeria. As a Briton, my first reaction is to be a bit sarky. "This is Portugal, we eat fish here" I think silently to myself. "If you want pizza, Italy is not very far away."

But I say no such thing. I point them in the right direction along the road and mention that there is a pizzeria off to the right at the bottom of the hill just before the filling station.

I also suggest that they might want to return to the roundabout, head back into the village and turn left onto my street where there is also a pizza place.

It's just a suggestion. I've never eaten there. I don't know if it's any good. But it gives me an opportunity to say "Rua Vinte e Cinco de Abril" in a natural, I-speak-this-way-all-the-time manner, so I grab it.

They drive off happy and Friendly Foreign Person With Impressive Local Knowledge continues his walk home.

*

I go to the supermarket trying to buy bleach. I'm set for a major cleaning. My landlady is coming over tomorrow to collect next month's rent and, as the apartment was absolutely spotless and gleaming when I moved in, I want to reassure her that I am keeping the place up to

standard.

I find a white bottle of something with a blue label in an area of the shop that seems to concentrate on cleaning products. It looks somewhat bleachy, but I'm not absolutely certain and I worry about making the wrong choice and ending up washing my entire apartment in olive oil or skimmed milk or a hair conditioner guaranteed to repair split ends or a light cabernet sauvignon with a smoky aftertaste and a delicate fruity finish.

Two women in supermarket uniforms are at the nearby fish counter chatting away in rapid Portuguese. I approach slowly and tentatively and, at a short break in the banter, show the girl behind the counter my bottle and ask "Por favor. Is it bleach? In English, is it bleach?"

She points to the other woman who turns to me and, in an unidentifiable but broad and strong regional English accent, says "what sort of bleach are you looking for?"

Huh?

She takes me over to the shelves and, in her obviously native English, explains that I have bleach, but I have the type used for cleaning clothes and what I need is the sort for washing floors.

Apparently, for maximum sterility and freshness, my apartment requires "limpeza de superficies da casa cozinha e sanitarios" which she rattles off at perfectly pronounced high speed Portuguese.

I am completely knocked out. I am pleased that I've got this far and picked nearly the right thing without help. I am also totally in awe of a young English woman who speaks this complex language like a local.

She's friendly, so I ask. "How does an English girl end up working at the supermarket in Aljezur and speaking fluent Portuguese?"

"I came down here a few years ago and I didn't want to leave," she says. "And, you know, 'needs must'."

I thank her for her help and say goodbye. As I walk away, I have two thoughts rattling about my head.

Firstly, as a guy who struggles daily with "boa tarde" and "bom dia", I really need to get myself some of that "needs must."

And, on second thought, I've been living on this planet for forty nine years, and I've only just learned that there are actually different types of bleach!

*

They opened a brand new Morrisons in town, just around the

corner from my office on my route home. I was overjoyed. No one in the history of retail grocery had ever been so happy to see a new Morrisons.

I didn't care less about the bright open new-design floor plan. I wasn't fussed about the wide selection of fresh meat, the on-site bakery or the real Italian-style deli counter.

To me, a new Morrisons meant just one thing: there were now two supermarkets in town selling cheap own-label vodka. By alternating between the two I could, in the judgemental eyes of the store staff, effectively halve my visible alcohol consumption.

As far as everyone was concerned, I was no longer that glassy-eyed alki who downs a bottle every day. I was simply a regular customer who dropped in now and again to pick up a few groceries and stock up the liquor cabinet.

Now, I thought to myself, if we could only get a Sainsbury's and an Asda, I'd be doing just fine.

*

It's not a quiet place.

By now, I may have given a slightly wrong impression of the village. By now it may sound like a bucolic little place where the wind sometimes whistles through the trees and, now and again, a cock crows in the morning or a bird chirps and perhaps, from week to week, Inspector Barnaby wanders around softly and gently and quietly solving crime for the benefit of ITV.

In truth, it's a screaming madhouse!

Cars whiz by with windows open and euro-pop blazing. Huge trucks hauling heaven-knows-what to heaven-knows-where roll into town with no end of clumsy downshifting and gear-grinding upshifting and plenty of diesel revving. There is a constant parade of those cheap little motorcycles with their familiar two-stroke mosquito-like "dhzz! dhzz! dhzz!" noise. Car horns blare every time Portugal wins anything at all in any sports event anywhere in the world. Dogs bark whenever there is another dog in the area and, this being Portugal, there is always another dog in the area. And if all that weren't enough, the GNR (national federal police) come by at high speed at least once a day demonstrating a lusty and vigorous use of the siren that would put the NYPD to shame.

I've lived for seven years in central or near-central London and, until moving to a small Portuguese town, have never heard this much noise.

*

I do it!

I'm back at the CTT topping up my internet card. Normally I struggle to get my Portuguese out in tiny little bits.

Normally I say "hola" and while I'm waiting for the nice young man who works at the post office to say "hola" back, I rehearse "boa tarde" in my mind. Then, while I wait for him to return my "boa tarde", I practise my next sentence, and so it goes.

But today I am smooth. One quick sentence. "Hola. Boa tarde. Vinte euros, por favour," I say, sliding across my card so he knows what I want for my money because, let's face it, at a push I can say hello and a few numbers but "TMN network wireless broadband internet access top-up" is well beyond my Portuguese language skills.

He punches some keys on some sort of machine. All the while I am thinking "Please don't say anything in English! I know you speak my language fluently. I know that you know I'm a foreigner. But, please don't say anything in English."

He does not. He returns my card with a smile and passes me a receipt. He says something which I don't understand but which probably means “here is your receipt for the TMN network wireless broadband internet access top-up” or some such thing so I nod and smile and fake it a little.

"Obrigado!" I say, being very careful to chop the 'o' off the end because we're in the countryside here and that's the way we roll.

"Ate logo!"

"Tchau," he says as I leave and I casually bounce a "tchau" of my own right back.

An entire transaction in Portuguese.

And another small victory for me.

*

I am, once again, struggling hard with my phrase book. I need to find a nice way to tell people that I don't speak the language.

I find that "I'm sorry, I don't speak Portuguese" is "Lamento, eu nao falo Portuguese."

I discover that the word for "sorry" is "lamento".

Lamento. I lament.

Is there, in any language anywhere in the world, a more beautiful way to say I'm sorry?

*

I'm in the local nightclub. It's early for this part of the world. It's not even midnight so the place is pretty much empty.

A young fella at the bar is nursing a small beer. Beer is always small here. I'm no fan of English imperialism, but there are a few British things the world could adopt and, I think, the pint is one of them.

The young fella is obviously from here. I've heard him chat in Portuguese with the pretty barmaid and do that fisty-fisty yo-dude-whassup thing with the other bartender. He's a local.

He sees the elaborate floral arrangement on my wrist. Today, as well as flowers, I have a sprig of lovely red berries. The flowers have pretty much died by now, but the berries are still going strong.

"They are pretty," he says, pointing at my wrist.

"Thank you," I say. "I go for walks and pick flowers."

"But the fruit," he says, "It is poison."

"What!"

"It is good on your arm," he says. "But if you eat it, it will kill you."

I leave the local nightclub. It's about twelve-thirty in the morning which is early in Portuguese time but late enough for me. My days of staying out until 4am are well behind me and by half-twelve I'm looking forward to a crisp set of clean sheets, a light blanket and a cool night breeze wafting over the backyard pear trees and through the balcony windows.

I walk out to the park that sits between the nightclub and my apartment expecting the usual small group of young locals in the courtyard sharing a few beers, a bit of conversation, some harmless flirting and the odd joint.

Tonight is very different.

Tonight, in the courtyard, there is the Portuguese army.

A dozen soldiers in two groups are standing about looking ready for anything but somehow casual at the same time. They have the reassuring look of soldiers who will fight hard if they have to, but would rather not.

I've had a couple of beers so am relaxed and, as striking up random conversations with complete strangers is one of my major character flaws, I approach one group.

There are four huge young men in camouflage uniforms and

combat boots and berets with impressive silver badges plus a tiny young woman in the same outfit carrying a standard-issue Espingarda m/961 main battle rifle that only serves to make her look even smaller.

I swing into some pretty slick "Hola. Boa noite. Lamento nao falo Portuguese. Fala Inglese" and am pointed to one soldier who makes the universal fingers-close-together movement that says "I speak a little English."

They are here for the fires. The hills of the Algarve are ablaze. Entire families have been made homeless. All possible resources have been drawn in to help fight them. Canadair water bombing airplanes on loan from Spain are flying daily sorties. The bombeiros are doing serious and dangerous work. And the army has been called out to assist.

It's reassuring to know that the armed forces of the republic are here to help. But I can't figure out the rifles.

I'm no expert, but to the best of my knowledge, bullets are not an effective way to fight fires.

*

In the evening, I hear music coming from the other side of the creek so I set off on foot and follow the sound. It turns out that there is a small music show at the local youth club.

There's a live band fronted by a woman who isn't actually attractive but wears a colourful floral dress and can really belt out a tune so you find yourself drawn to her anyway and a back-up trio that could play any gig, anywhere, any time.

The crowd is a real mix. There are little children prancing about playfully and pretty young girls dancing with each other because the boys are too afraid or too cool to ask and gray haired old men dancing closely with their gray haired old wives.

There is a father tossing his little girl into the air while his wife looks on half with joy at the family moment and half with fear that he might drop her.

The music is all Portuguese and, as the crowd all sings along and seems to know the words, I reckon the tunes must be popular favourites or traditional songs.

It's good music and I sway a little and tap my feet now and again and move my arms about a bit and do about as much as you can when you're a single man all alone at a music fair.

And I think to myself: I would like to have someone special in my life.

Because I would really like to dance.

At the music show, there is a counter where they serve food and drink. It's one of those arrangements where you buy a ticket from one person then another person serves you. I walk up.

"What do you have?" I ask.

"Chicken."

I'm pretty excited because, as you know, I have bought ten pieces of chicken on two previous occasions and I know the Portuguese word for it.

So I swagger over to the ticket counter. "Frango, por favor," I say in my most natural, this-language-is-all-second-nature-to-me manner.

"Seis euros," he says.

It sounds a bit steep. But not knowing the Portuguese for "six euros is a hell of a lot for a midnight snack at a small music gig in a little village" I fork over my cash, take the ticket and return to the food counter.

I get loads of bread and some olive oil, a large green salad with plenty of tomatoes, four hefty chunks of chicken and a small packet of crisps.

It's half past midnight at a music show and I've just bought myself a full-course sit-down dinner.

I really do have to learn this language.

*

I can't figure out the pears.

My landlady leaves them for me and when they turn up they are as hard as rocks. You could fire them out of cannons and sink battleships with these things.

So I leave them in the sun to ripen and they rot to bits. As soon as they're soft enough to bite into, they're black with decay. As near as I can figure, a Portuguese pear has about a four minute window of edible opportunity.

I have to go online, do some searching and figure this out. It will take a while. I will have to spend an amount of money in internet access time that would buy me all the pears I would ever want forever just to figure out how to ripen the things.

It's a bit inefficient since, as I mentioned before, I don't eat fruit.

*

I go on one of my walks. It's a bit late in the afternoon this time due to my sleeping late after the music fest.

As I walk along I discover a small concrete bridge that turns out to be a convenient way to cross the stream and head towards the sunflowers. I don't pick one, though. By now, I know it won't last.

This climate is a bit of a double-edged sword. Thanks to the heat and sun, everything grows everywhere. But once you pick anything, that same heat and sun kills it in hours.

The leaves and flowers that I stuff in my wrist at early afternoon are usually dead by dinner time (though I keep them anyway because, I reckon, dead flowers are better than no flowers at all). Anything I pluck for the supper table is lifeless and limping by bedtime.

I cross the bridge and trudge through acres and acres of chopped hay (again, I ask myself, what is this stuff for?).

Eventually, I arrive at a road and walk. I have no idea where I am, but I don't care. The castle is visible on the hill and should I need directions I am well armed with my amazing ability to say "Rua Vinte Cinco de Abril" so, one way or another, I can find my way back and am not worried.

I reach a path and walk past carefully cultivated hectares of verdant leafy things that, in a more carefully researched book, would be mentioned exactly by name but are here merely referred to as verdant leafy things, but wouldn't you rather enjoy the lovely word "verdant" twice in a single paragraph than wade through a lesson in Portuguese agriculture?

Eventually, after a long curving and quiet and pleasant walk, I reach a road. And it's a road I recognise! I've been here before and I actually know where I am. I feel like such a local.

The sun is still out and blazing and I feel strong and want to walk further, so I don't head back to town. I cross the road to a fork in two rough paths. The left path is hugely steep and intimidating, not quite the north face of the Eiger, but really darned steep. The right is a gently sloping easy stroll.

I go left.

After a hard climb and with my now recovering leg muscles throbbing but getting the job done, I am at the top. There are all manner of things here.

There is a lovely white-clad bungalow with carefully tended flowers outside and a small windmill that, unlike the massive industrial monsters elsewhere, looks rather pretty and twirls around from side to side as the wind changes and gives off a nice soft little "whooshy whooshy" sound that I very much enjoy.

There is an old English double-decker bus stuck in the middle of nowhere that, clearly, was once a hippy caravan but is now abandoned and rotting.

There is a 60-foot steel container, the type of thing you see stacked up on ocean-going cargo ships, and how it got all the way up here is a complete mystery to me.

I have a quick look around, turn backward, and walk down the hill. At the bottom, I turn left and head for home. I haven't seen much of note, but I have learned something.

I have discovered that, after years of decay, I have now returned to being a man who, when he sees a fork in the road with a hard or soft option says to himself "Bring it on, I can take it, I'll tough it out."

I'm a steep hill climbing kinda guy!

As I'm walking back a car pulls up. There is a couple. They're not from around here.

We do the standard euro thing where I say a bit in your language and you say a bit in mine, then we all figure out that this is a big waste of time and everybody switches to English.

They are looking for the beach.

"Continue along this road," I say, pointing in a knowledgeable way in one of the only two possible directions a car could go. "When you reach the end and see many other cars, park your car and walk down to the beach."

They nod and smile and thank me in really bad Portuguese and drive off.

No useful information has been provided. "Go straight to the end and park," are hardly wise words of wisdom.

But Friendly Foreign Person With Impressive Local Knowledge walks off with a smile on his face and a little bit of a spring in his step.

*

I lose weight. It's not a lot and not quickly, but I definitely lose weight.

I do laundry in the morning, so I wrap in a towel. As I walk into my bedroom, I catch sight of myself in the mirror. It's not the most beautiful sight in the world and it certainly wouldn't set Cameron Diaz all a-quiver, but it's not that bad for a forty-nine-year-old man.

There's not quite a six-pack, but there is a certain amount of definition and you can see where a six-pack would go and you can well imagine that there might be one there some day soon.

I am not looking at a magazine cover model. But I am at least able to look at myself without tossing the mirror into the back closet.

I have a pair of jeans that I have left with a mate in London. I bought them years ago and wore them for a while. They're nothing special, just jeans.

When I left, I could just about squeeze into them, but I couldn't do up the zip and buttoning them up was completely out of the question. My goal is to someday return, slip on my jeans, fasten them up and look okay.

I'm not there yet. I'm not even that close. But I'm on the way. I'm moving in the right direction.

This is progress.

*

I actually couldn't breathe.

The introduction to this book is not a gimmick or a metaphor. It is the truth.

At times, I would see Sophie, not doing anything special, just going about her work, but I would see her and I simply could not breathe. My chest would grow heavy and my lungs would collapse.

There was a parking lot just down the hill from our office and sometimes I would go there. It was quiet and nobody was ever about, so I would go outside and take a few minutes to breathe again.

As an excuse to leave, I would pretend to have a phone call. I'd pick up my mobile, say hello and walk out the door to the parking lot. After a while, I suspect that people began to think that I was looking for another job or engaged in an illicit affair or more than likely nipping out for a quick slug of booze.

In truth, I was just going down the hill to breathe.

*

I recall my early days of learning how to say goodbye.

I know that "goodbye" is "adeus" which sounds like "adeyush" and "bye" is "tchau" which sounds a bit like the Italian "ciao" but starts with a bit more of a sshh than a chu.

I haven't practiced in a long while, but I decide that, as a chilled out and relaxed guy about the village, the casual "bye" is more my style. Plus, as I am already a master of "ate logo" ("see you later" as you may recall), I can put the two together and make a real Portuguese sentence.

I practice. "Tchau. Ate logo" (Tshouw. Atta logg) over and over again.

After a good half-hour of hard grind, I get it sort of right. Now I just need to go out there and say it.

Trouble is, my internet is topped up so I don't need the post office, my fridge is full and my cupboards well stocked so I don't need the little shop, my freezer is packed full of fish so the market is out of the question and my propane tank exercise seems to have worked fairly well so I have no need of the bombeiros.

I am in a bit of a dilemma.

I need to find somewhere that I can go, so that I can leave and say goodbye.

*

I wake in the night. It's three in the morning according to my computer and half-two according to my mobile phone so I average it out and call it 2:45.

My tendency to do dumb things kicks in strongly and I want to go to the beach. I want to sleep on the beach and wake up with the sun. The beach is not just around the corner. It is a full hour-and-a-half of brisk walking. But I set off determined.

The walk through town is easy. There are orange glowing streetlamps lining the road which helps as my torch is broken.

I turn onto the road towards Praia da Amoreira. The streetlamps disappear and it is pitch black. I walk anyway and, eventually, my vision partially acclimatises.

I know the road. I know there are drops at either side that, should you go over the edge, will kill you, so I stick to the centre. I hope it's the centre. I can't really tell and could quite easily be walking off a cliff.

Fortunately, it's a beaten up rural road and covered in potholes all of which have been filled in with some sort of white clay-like substance. Whatever substance it is, it slightly reflects the moonlight and I reckon that if I follow the potholes for an hour-and-a-half, I should be all right.

I trudge on. Every so often there is a pothole-free stretch and I have to haul out my camera and take a few un-needed flash pictures just to see where I'm going.

Now and again there is a farmhouse with one of those orange streetlights blazing. In the town, they are helpful. Out here they just destroy my acquired night vision so I develop an odd technique of

figuring out the general direction of the road and walking along with my eyes closed.

Cowbells tinkle off to my left. I can't see the cows, of course. But I do like the sound.

There are stars. With no urban light pollution here, there are hundreds of stars and when I'm not looking down at potholes, I look up at them.

I walk and walk and walk for a period of time that, had I been wearing a watch, I could have measured. I know I'm getting close when I see the lights of Monte Clerigo up on the hill. And I know I'm pretty much there when I hear the sound of the surf.

At the beach, I feel my way down the wooden path. The waves crash repeatedly. They're not big waves, really, but in the darkness they make a good sound.

I am the only person on the beach. I am the only person for miles around. I could scream and shout and laugh and cry and no one would hear me, but I don't. I lay down my towel, spend a few minutes gazing up at the stars, then go to sleep.

In the morning the sun comes up and I awake. I awake partly because the sun comes up and partly because it's bloody cold on an Atlantic beach and I am shivering.

I wrap my towel around me for warmth and walk home.

*

I steal some food.

The area around me is pretty much all cultivated. It's divided up into patches and when you walk about aimlessly, as I do every day, you see old people working the fields often in the presence of small horses towing wooden wagons.

I'm not quite sure how the growing is all organised (actually, I don't have the foggiest idea). It's not exactly a farmers' field. The patches are not that big. But they're larger than an English style allotment. It's something in the middle, I reckon.

However it works, it means that, on my daily walks, I pass all sorts of crops. There is lots of corn and some courgettes and aubergine (which, I've always thought looks lovely and purple but, even after years and years of watching Saturday Kitchen and Masterchef, I've never really figured out how to cook), and surprisingly, quite a lot of watermelon.

There are sunflowers which, I've been told by locals who know, are often grown to hide cannabis plants from the authorities, though

when I pick through them stealthily looking for a bit of a free smoke, I find nothing.

There are tomatoes which I like a lot, though who in the world does not like tomatoes?

I have resolved not to nick anything. Even the flowers I stuff daily into my wristband are all wild. I don't pluck cultivated flowers.

But I can't resist the tomatoes and I steal two of them. They are green and will take time to ripen, but I reckon they'll be good.

I am now The Vegetable Bandit of Aljezur.

*

Sophie had a coat. It was jet-black, half-length, cinched with a belt at the waist and, though clearly a woman's coat, evoked the classic look and feel of an old-style navy pea jacket.

She would come into the office in the morning wearing her coat and I would have only one thought: Audrey Hepburn. Sophie didn't look a bit like Audrey Hepburn. Not even close. But, in her coat, I understood my attraction.

Audrey Hepburn was a small, elf-like, dark-and-short-haired girl and was a huge star back in an age when most stars were curvy, booby blonde babes who male cinemagoers would see on screen and think "Phwoah! Wouldn't mind some of that."

Then there was Audrey Hepburn. She was pretty, to be sure. But there wasn't a "phwoah" about her.

Audrey Hepburn was different. She had an intelligence that the "wouldn't mind some of that" stars just didn't possess. You looked at her and thought: This is not a mere babe. This is an attractive woman who thinks. This is a strong woman who will see right through you.

It's a quality that you don't often see.

It's a quality that made Audrey a star and made me a fool.

*

On Facebook, all sorts of people are sending best wishes to Jana on her "meniny". I don't know what this is so I message her and she tells me it's her "name day."

I've never heard of such a thing, so I go online and discover that it's a custom in certain eastern European countries. Every name is associated with a date. There is a calendar matching dates with names. Name days are often celebrated more than birthdays. Traditionally, and sometimes even today, parents would name their

children after their name day.

I like this and, after a little online searching, find a list of Slovak name days. I think it will be fun to send Jana a message with mine.

I look at the chart and discover that my name day is the 25th of April!

I am gobsmacked.

The 25th of April is the most important day of the year in this country. It is the date Portugal threw out its dictatorship and became a democracy. It is, to a Portuguese, what the fourth of July is to an American or Bastille Day is to the French. My apartment in the village is, as I've said, along the Rua 25 de Abril. There is a Rua 25 de Abril in every town and city in the country, often more than one.

The universe is sending me signs. It is telling me that I am in the right place.

*

Once again, I am back at the post office topping up my internet.

I have no idea if I need to be here. The system menu on my computer is entirely in Portuguese which I can't read. So I have no idea how much time I have. I could be cut off in minutes or I could have years of online time on my account. I haven't a clue so I just keep topping it up and topping it up and if the TMN corporation reports a particularly profitable third quarter you'll know why.

Which is why I’m at the post office. That and the fact that I have a mission. I will learn how to say "eight".

Eight is "oito" but my not-terribly-good phrasebook doesn't have a pronunciation key, so I go online and find an audio clip. According to the translator, oito is pronounced sort of like "ought to" as in "you 'ought to' call the office" or some such thing.

I practise like a fiend and breeze into the post office.

"Ought to euros, por favor," I say.

He looks at me with confusion.

"Ought to," I try again.

He shakes his head so I hold up eight fingers and repeat "ought to."

"Eight," he says. "That is 'oyt'"

Oyt. That's nothing at all! I've spent most of lunchtime practising the wrong thing when, in truth, it's just like eight. It's the easiest word ever.

"Oyt euros, por favor," I say.

He punches some keys on the machine and isn't sure if it will even

accept an eight euro purchase. People buy five and ten and twenty. No one has ever bought eight euros of internet time before.

Eventually it works and I take my receipt, we exchange tchaus and I leave. It hasn't been my most successful visit, but I am undaunted.

Next week, when I top up, I will buy twelve euros.

*

I used to joke about it.

We had a small account, a Spanish sparkling wine called a "cava." It was explained to me that, as it did not come from the region, it could not be called champagne. So it needed another name.

"I have another name of my own for champagne," I said. "Breakfast."

Ha ha. Chuckle.

The company finance director came by handing out payslips.

"Here you are, Mark."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll try not to drink it all in one place."

And on it went. The jokes were never funny, but that wasn't the point.

When someone has a problem, they try to hide it. They never succeed, but they try anyway.

I was doing the opposite. I was putting it out there. I was telling the world that I didn't have anything to hide.

And if I didn't have anything to hide, I didn't have a problem.

*

The Vegetable Bandit of Aljezur is back in action.

I walk out of town in the direction of the beach, but at the turn-off I go right instead of left. Later I see a bit of a footpath so I take that. There is a small flowing stream, but there are some rocks and with a bit of hopping that a semi-healthy, rice and fish eating guy like me can now manage, I am across.

There are bushes with two types of wild pink flowers (a dark and a light shade that go really well together) so I pick perhaps my most elaborate collection yet. My left wrist graduates from "young girl on her prom night" mode right the way up to "foreign princess at her royal wedding" but it looks nice and if anybody looks at me funny when I get back to town I don't care what they think because I don't like people who don't like flowers.

The fields on either side of the footpath are well cultivated with, well … stuff. I have no idea what any of it is and, until I learn how to say "twelve" in Portuguese, I don't have enough internet time to find out.

As I walk in the field, I see peppers. They are an index finger long and a rich dark red, but not that fake red that you see in supermarket peppers.

I'm excited. I love hot peppers and now that I am actually eating food again, I can use them to add tang to any dish.

I have resolved not to take cultivated vegetables or flowers because I reckon someone has spent their own time and hard effort to grow them and, for the most part, I stick to it. But, I think, a single pepper can't hurt. It won't make a difference.

I cast my eyes about in a sly manner to make sure there is no one about to catch me. I walk past the peppers then do a sort of oh-my-goodness-I've-forgotten-something move so I can turn around and pass them again. All the while I scan the scene like a shoplifter looking out for the store detectives.

I move swiftly. I drop down the slope to the small ditch, then up again almost as quickly. In the field, I snag a single pepper, stuff it in my pocket and beat a hasty retreat before anyone raises the alarm and calls out a heavily armed strategic response unit of the GNR.

Peppers vary widely so, at home, I snip a tiny sliver off the end and touch it to my tongue. There is nothing, not even the slightest bit of heat. I try a larger piece, but still nothing. I chop the pepper lengthways. Small spherical things fall out. It's not a pepper at all.

The Bandit has gone through all that to net himself a grand total of five beans.

*

I give in. I write to Sophie.

I start to think that my plan of going away and leaving Sophie alone might be seen as some sort of petulant "if you don't love me, I'll never talk to you again" sort of thing. I worry that, by trying to make things right, I may actually be being rude.

I'm as confused as can be and spend a small fortune in internet access time talking to Jana about it beforehand. Jana convinces me to drop Sophie a line but to keep it casual. She advises some sort of "how are things, how ya doin', how's the office?" sort of thing.

I spend half a day "dashing off" a breezy quick message. I agonise over every line looking for just the right casual tone. I've

spent less time working on major national advertising campaigns than on this simple online chat message, but major national advertising campaigns don't matter much and this message does so I work hard on every word.

I write:

"My young friend Jana says I should drop you a quick line to say hi. I hope you are well. I see from Facebook that you were 'tagged' on holiday. Not sure if this is the trip you took when I was at the agency or a new one, but a holiday is always nice. Must be a bit complicated at work these days with all the changes. But, at the end of the day, talent wins out and you have that in spades. I'm sure England is dull and grey right now and, sadly, Facebook doesn't have an app that lets me send a big dollop of Portuguese sunshine, but I would if I could. Best to you. Mark."

I hit SEND and hope like hell.

Three days later I am blocked on Facebook.

*

I become obsessed with octopus. It is making a good play to replace cavala as my favorite fish.

Octopus isn't technically a fish (it's a cephalopod which is … well, you can look it up on Wikipedia; this is not a fact-based book) it's pretty darned oceanic and I gradually become obsessed with it. It's not cheap. I pay eight euros for a small one that, by all accounts, will be even smaller when cooked. But I don't care.

I decide that I will not leave Portugal until I have figured out how to cook and serve a decent plate of octopus. I want to be the sort of guy who can look at an eight-legged sea critter and casually announce to the assembled company "leave it with me, I lived for a year in a Portuguese village, I know what to do with this."

I vaguely recall a long-gone episode of Saturday Kitchen where some celebrity chef with a book or a restaurant to plug said something about cooking seafood either very very slowly or very very quickly so I, being a lazy fella, opt for the latter.

I chop my octopus into chunks which is not easy. If you don't have an octopus to hand but want to know what it feels like, take your spare tyre from your car and slice it up with a kitchen knife. It's a tough go.

I drizzle a bit of olive oil into a flat pan. I think for a bit and it doesn't feel right. Drizzling is what northern people do with olive oil. Here in the south, we glug. So I glug.

I toss the chunks in the pan and revel in the splattering and hissing that looks really cheffy but, I know, will be a bugger to clean.

Minutes later I toss my octopus on a plate next to some rice I cooked earlier. The rice is fine, but the octo is horrid. It's hard and black and charred to death on the outside and rubbery in the middle and I don't like it at all.

I would have done better with that spare tyre.

*

My days of post office language lessons come to an end and, if you followed my previous advice and invested heavily in the TMN company, now is the time to sell out and take your profits.

I discover that the wireless signal from the nearby cafe reaches my apartment. One visit and one coffee later and I have got the codes. Free internet is mine.

In the spirit of fairness, I resolve to start taking regular coffee at the cafe. In truth, there's actually more in that for me. As with a bar, patronising a cafe repeatedly over time establishes you as a regular with the staff and other regular customers. As the season draws to an end and the tourists leave, this is even more likely.

It's something I should have been doing since I got here. But, like so many other things, my mooning over Sophie has been standing in the way.

But no more. I am over the mooning. I resolve to visit the cafe at least a few times a week. I will take my coffee and do some work. I will become a familiar face.

I may even, if all goes well, make a friend.

*

I have a superpower. I am not a superhero. You won't find me in the comic books. I can't fly or make myself invisible or spin spider webs. But I have a superpower.

I have the ability to look like I belong here.

I don't have that pasty white skin that marks the recently arrived tourist. And I don't have that superficial bronzage of someone who has spent the past week lying on the beach for hours drenched in expensive SPF50.

I have the sort of deep rich, natural looking brown that's all over and comes from months of just going about your daily business in a world where the sun always shines. It's rich and even and goes right to

the bone and I look like a native.

I have The Suntan of Credibility.

I walk along the north road out of town roughly following the small river keeping the castle high on the hill to my left.

As I do, a small car with five young people packed inside pulls up. The young driver smiles and rattles off something incomprehensible.

"Fala Inglese?" I say. "Do you speak English?"

They are surprised. They need help and think I'm a local. The Suntan of Credibility is wielding its superpowers.

They are looking for Praia de Arrifana. I point them in the right direction. Take the Lagos road and just out of town look for the signs at the turnoff.

"Where are you from," I ask.

"We are Portuguese. But we are from the north," he says. "We are looking for nightlife at Arrifana."

I tell him that, aside from the festival, nightlife at Arrifana is pretty much a hit-or-miss affair. They are here for six days, so I point out the Pont a Pe bar. The entire car is looking and nodding and smiling and hanging on my every word.

"It's the only nightclub in town, just here, to your left," I say. "It looks like a café, but if you go down the stairs about midnight there is a club with a DJ."

They nod in that "we'll definitely remember that" sort of way.

"But not tonight," I say. "It is closed on Sunday. If you want to dance tonight, you must dance with each other."

They laugh and I wave and walk off. They drive away in the general direction of Arrifana.

Yet another small victory. Friendly Foreign Person With Impressive Local Knowledge has actually impressed the Portuguese!

My GNR VIP Personal Protection Squad is back.

This time they don't just park the car. This time a young officer in a garrison cap and carefully pressed light blue short-sleeved shirt and polished combat boots actually stands guard outside my door.

Okay, he's smoking a cigarette while waiting for the other officers to finish their coffee. But he's still outside my door and, should my individual safety be in peril, he is available for rapid tactical response.

I am definitely enjoying the privileges of close quarters police protection.

My landlady leaves me three apples from the small field behind

my apartment. It seems that peaches and pears are no longer in season, but apples have come in.

I'm not a fruit eater, but I have discovered that, if cooked in the oven with meat, it can actually be rather nice. It adds a certain sweetness to the meat and, if you bake the hell out of it, the fruit itself is actually edible.

I have sausages which are not merely tasty but also add an element of fun to my Sunday shopping. Sausages are "salsichas" which lends itself to a good bit of "He sells salsichas at the grocery store. The salsichas that he sells are salsichas for sure." all of which sounds like mindless muttering to the other supermarket customers but which amuses me to no end.

I take the apples from the downstairs wall where she leaves them for me, chop them into big chunks and dump them into an oven-proof tray along with four thick sausages. It's Sunday so the café next door is closed and nobody is about so I steal a couple of sprigs of rosemary from the huge bush that lines the patio and wrap them around the sausages and drench the whole thing in olive oil, toss in a bit of pepper and a good shake of salt and bung it in the oven along with a few sliced carrots. By the time the whole thing is baked the fruit turns into a thick and tasty applesauce the likes of which have never been sold in a jar or tin.

It's a simple, uncomplicated meal and if I were a celebrity chef on some silly cooking show I would be bandying about the word "rustic", but I don't. It's just dinner.

It makes two servings and I think that I would like to have someone to share my table but I do not, so I eat one serving and save the other for later.

*

There is a summer festival.

A huge billboard outside the mercado where I take my afternoon beer announces "noite a" which, as an advertising man, strikes me as very clever. "Noite a" means "in the night." But they've incorporated the logo of the municipal council which just happens to be a stylised lower-case letter "a" so it also reads "Night in Aljezur."

Somewhere, I think to myself, some Portuguese copywriter and art director are adding that one to their portfolio.

The billboard is all in Portuguese so I drop into the tourist office, though not expecting much. Except when it is closed (usually during weekends, public holidays, lunch hour and other times when tourists

tend to be about) the Aljezur tourist office stands ready and willing to give you … a map.

And directions to the castle - the big one on the top of the hill that you can see from pretty much anywhere.

There is a clothing shop in the village that has cleverly copied the sign but has swapped "Tourist Information" for "T-shirt Information." I don't put it to the test, but I suspect you would get more useful information there.

"I've just seen the sign outside the mercado," I say. "Do you have any information about the festival?"

She hands me a piece of paper. It's an A4-sized, black-and-white exact reproduction of the billboard I've just been looking at for the past half-hour. I press on. There is something with the word "culinaria" in it that looks interesting.

"What is this?"

"It is at the mercado."

"Is it a cooking class?," I ask. "Or a demonstration? Or …?"

"I don't know."

"I see that Off The Lip, are playing. That should be fun."

"Yes. Near the castle."

"Do you like Off The Lip?"

"I don't know them."

I pass on what I know, partly to move Friendly Foreign Person With Impressive Local Knowledge into a self-appointed quasi-official consultative capacity with an important department of the regional government and partly because I have this wacky idea that if you work in a tourist office and there is a festival and someone comes in and tells you that the headline act is a local band who sing original songs about the joys of living and surfing in the Algarve and who recently wowed the crowd at the Arrifana Sunset Festival and that the lead singer is an English guy named Jack who was born in Devon but grew up here and actually speaks fluent Portuguese and when he's not fronting the band works as a lifeguard at Praia da Amoreira, you would perhaps soak up that information so you could pass it on to the next person who asked about the festival.

Wacky idea.

She can not be less interested.

Later that night, I'm up near the castle where Off The Lip is playing. It’s not my favorite name but it’s becoming one of my favorite bands and pretty soon I'm swaying and tapping and doing my sort-of not quite dancing thing and feeling both deliriously happy and horribly

lonely.

They wrap up their set. I say hi to frontman Jack who doesn't know me, but I drop Carla's name for some serious local cred and wander down the hill. Halfway down, a young woman is singing fado and I stop.

Fado is traditional Portuguese music. It's an odd sort of music and it's not something that you take to right away. It's a bit of an acquired taste and I didn't care for it at first. But after a time it grows on you and it has slowly grown on me.

Fado manages to be both melancholy and upbeat. It is cheerfully mournful. It's the sort of music that has you weeping with sadness and tapping your feet at the same time which is pretty much the way I usually feel.

The singer is young and pretty, but not too pretty, and has a big, wide genuine smile and wears a simple white dress with a lovely floral print bouncing up above the hemline and really knows how to work the crowd and in any other part of the world would be ringing up vote after vote on one of those horrid TV talent shows and would definitely be "advancing to the next round". But here she just sings.

From time to time she holds out the microphone and the locals, who know all the words, chime in.

I don't know the words so I can't sing along, but there are times when the crowd simply claps along in time to the music and I join in with that and feel, in a small way, that I am part of this place.

*

I walk down the street and turn right at the curve just before the bridge where the little shop sits with locally grown sweet potatoes stacked up in boxes outside and the propane trolley hung on the brick wall that I will definitely use next time my shower runs cold.

I pass the mercado on the left where, after my walk, I usually nurse my afternoon beer.

I reach the roundabout and take the road towards Lisbon, passing the huge supermarket on my right where the butcher lets me practice my horrible language skills.

A few steps later, I saunter casually by the massive white-clad blockhouse where the Bombeiros Voluntarious de Aljezur are standing by in case the foreign gentleman at number 67 does something foolishly fire-related and requires their immediate assistance.

I come to the decrepit looking municipal swimming pool and think to myself, as I always do when I'm here, that if it looks like that on the

outside there's no way I am ever going to swim in it.

Along the road, I become tired of looking at high-tech, high-speed, high-spec Volvos and Audis so I jump the road and head into the fields.

There is a trail and I take it. It's more than a footpath but nothing like a road. It looks like the route where whoever is growing whatever they are growing in the adjacent land probably drives his tractor.

The trail winds and twists and I have no idea where it leads and I have long since lost the reassuring sight of the castle on the hill, but I walk on regardless. I think I'm going in the general direction of the village, but I'm not sure and, in truth, I don't really care.

I come to a stream. Someone has placed four bricks and a rock in some sort of a rough order and I spend a good ten minutes deciding whether to chance it. Eventually I look at the bank on the other side and decide that, while my growing ability to be lithe and to cavort in a youthful way will probably get me across, if it turns out that I'm not going in the right direction there is no way my litheness and cavortability will get me back, so, with my personal safety in mind, I turn around.

Thinking safety, I tap my left pocket for reassurance. My mobile is there, it's got a full charge, I know the emergency number and, if I practise carefully beforehand, I can say "Rua Vinte e Cinco de Abril, sessenta sete" pretty much fluently.

As I do, it hits me that I'm not *actually at* Rua Vinte e Cinco de Abril, sessenta sete.

I don't know where I am and nor does anyone else.

You could ask every last person on the planet "where is Mark?" and you'd not get an answer. There are all sorts of people who know my address or can contact me on email or find me on Facebook or hold my banking details or my passport number or have bookmarked my website or keep my CV on file.

But there is not a single soul anywhere in the world who actually knows where I am.

I lose most track of time. I have a vague idea, but precise timekeeping leaves my life.

My computer has a clock but, given my dodgy internet access, I'm not sure if it's accurate.

My watch loses or gains minutes and has little use as a timepiece though it still does a bang-up job holding the flowers.

I genuinely don't know what time it is. Often I don't quite know what day it is. I know it's a Sunday if the café next door is closed and I

like that because there's no one around and I can steal sprigs of rosemary from the massive bushes that line the patio. I know it's a weekend if the post office is closed (or maybe it's lunch time, because they close then, too).

I sleep like a dog. When I'm tired, I lie down and sleep. When I wake up, I get up. When I'm hungry, I cook food.

But I don't really know what time it is and I don't care.

*

I go to the fish market daily at what I estimate to be about 10am.

If I go earlier, they are setting out the fish and writing the prices on coloured pieces of plastic. They are setting up and are busy and I am in the way. If I go later, half the village has picked over the good stuff and beaten me to the best fish.

But if I go at ten, I get what I want.

I buy the cheap stuff. Mackerel, of course. Sardines, if they’re not too expensive. Two euros a kilo is my cut-off point. Anything pricier is for the rich people.

My cheapness gives me credibility. I am clearly a guy who likes fish. I’m a guy who likes oily, inexpensive, sustainable fish.

So when I ask for four or five small fish, she guts and cleans and bags them and charges me somewhere between 70 and 90 cents which is not much at all.

*

I walk out of town, towards the Lisbon road. At the roundabout there are five officers of the Guarda Nacional Republicana standing next to a standard green-striped off-road blue-lit GNR vehicle.

My inability to not talk to people kicks in and, as they’ve been guarding my apartment carefully for months now and it’s about time I said hello, I approach. I drop out the usual "boa tarde" and such and pretty soon we're chatting.

"I am curious," I say. "Is there something that you are looking for?"

"No. Nothing."

"Any particular illegal activity?"

"No."

"So you are looking for …?"

"Nothing."

I tell them where I live. I tell them I'm next door to the Café

Primavera where the officers take their coffee and they know it well. I tell them that my mother has just been for a visit.

"In the morning, when your vehicle is parked outside my apartment," I say. "I tell my mother that I have my very own personal GNR protection."

They laugh.

"This town," I say. "Is there much crime?"

"Yes," the English speaking officer says with a knowing look and a bit of tongue in cheek and a hint of a wink. "Be careful."

And I get it. They're in a country where jobs are hard to come by.

They've got into the GNR which is probably a tough thing to do but, once you're in, is about a solid a job as you can get in this part of the world. They've been posted to an isolated town where not much happens. So they swan around looking buff and tactical and ready to spring into immediate action.

It's not actually necessary, but their jobs depend upon it.

*

My octopus obsession continues.

I wake up in the morning determined. I have found a video recipe on the internet. New York Times writer Mark Bittman has posted what looks like an easy way to cook and serve polvo with potatoes. I reckon this, plus a simple salad, will make a good meal.

At the fish market I scan the seafood on offer. It's not high season, but even so, the selection is good and the stuff is fresh and clear and clean.

According to the label, octopus is just six euros a kilo which is a bargain. I point to a small piece, just enough for a dinner for two.

The fisherwoman who, like the kindly butcher at the ugly supermarket, speaks perfect English but indulges my attempts at Portuguese.

"Would you like it trimmed and cleaned?" she asks in perfect English.

"Sim. Por favor. Obrigado," I answer in terrible Portuguese.

She cuts and slices and trims and rinses out enough black ink to write the complete works of Shakespeare at least a couple of times. When she is done, I take out my camera and switch to English.

"Please put it on the counter," I say. "I want to take a picture to show my mother what octopus looks like."

I have learned that people all over the world are much more likely to let you take a picture if you say it's for your mother and I exploit

this to the full.

The fisherwoman drops the fish on the board, lays it out in an attractive manner and says "This is not an octopus. It is cuttlefish."

I am stunned, but she reassures me.

"It is very similar," she says. "Cook it the same way."

"One hour boiling," I say. "Then put in potato and one more half hour boiling?"

"That is good. Delicious."

"Okay. Obrigardo. Tchau."

It's not octopus. But it's close enough. I think of it as practice octopus. I will practice and get it right then do it for real.

I will get it right. Because if I don't, I will be here forever.

*

I am sitting on the patio at the Mercado enjoying my afternoon beer and reading a good book about a hard living celebrity chef whose name I won't mention but whose initials are Anthony Bourdain.

There are a group of German tourists at the next table, plus the usual mix of grizzled locals all of whom have known each other for years and spend most of the afternoon nursing a small coffee at the shady end of the bar and gossiping about who knows what.

A man steps out of what is obviously a rental car and approaches.

"Excuse," he says, tentatively. "The tourist office?"

"It's not far," I say in my beautifully modulated mid-Atlantic accent and he is obviously relieved that I speak it so well (my English is slightly better than my Portuguese) and I am clearly delighted that The Suntan of Credibility has, once again, wielded its incredible powers.

"Cross the bridge," I say. "At the end, turn left. It's on your right. Blue sign. They are quite useless, but they will give you a free map."

"And is there a beach?"

"If you keep going past the tourist office on that road, there are signs to Arrifana."

He looks happy and I pause for dramatic effect.

"But there is a better beach," I say. "Praia da Amoreira. It's quieter and nicer. Turn around from the tourist office. Drive up the hill and keep going to the right. At the end of the road, there is a statue. Turn left and follow the road to the end."

He thanks me profusely and I turn back to my book with a forced "I-dish-out-this-sort-of-info-all-the-time" casualness. But I can tell: I've surprised the Germans and even made a few points with the

grizzled locals.

For Friendly Foreign Person With Impressive Local Knowledge, it is a fine performance.

*

I want to thank my landlady for the apples.

I go to the supermarket and buy four grapefruit, three to leave for her and one to practise on. I will write a "thank you" message on one of them. It will be cute. We have a fruit-based relationship.

I go on the online translator to learn the Portuguese for "Thank you for the apples. Baked in the oven with chicken. Delicious!"

At home, I discover that my ball-point pens don't work on citrus fruit and if you're reading this and happen to work at the Bic corporation you might consider fruit inscribing as a functionality worth adding to your otherwise excellent line of reasonably priced writing instruments.

I head off to the Chinese shop down the road in search of a felt-tip marker. The young boy who works there speaks Mandarin and Portuguese but no English and does his best to help me while his brother stares at a laptop screen showing a level of customer disinterest rarely seen in a retail store, so I do a great deal of miming.

Miming isn't my greatest skill and I am shown a lovely collection of paint brushes in assorted shapes and sizes and a nice set of water colours for just two euros which would be a definite bargain if this were the early 1800s and I was John Constable and a tape measure which, even with my terrible mime act, really makes no sense at all.

Eventually we come to a packet of two white-board markers. They're the wipe-off erasable type and I can't see where the demand is for this kind of thing. White boards are a feature of business life, the sort of item that corporate drones with no ideas but nice shoes use to show a boardroom full of people pretending not to be bored just how devoid of thought they actually are. It's not something I would expect to be needed in Aljezur, but they're the closest thing to real marker pens so I buy them anyway.

At home I carefully transcribe "Obrigado por as maçãs. Cozido com frango. Delicioso!" I get it right on the first practise so, I leave her both.

Between the cost of the grapefruit and the marker pens and the internet access time, I spend about five times the cost of three apples thanking my landlady for three apples.

I don't care.

*

The two ceiling lights in my living/dining room are burned out. The front one never worked and the other one blows. For a spotlessly clean, beautifully kept modern apartment, the lighting situation is rubbish.

The ceilings are high and there is a small stepladder and I would have changed them, but with my alcohol reduced balance skills wouldn't manage to get above the second step.

I bring a small bedside light and set it up on the kitchen cabinet. It works for a couple of evenings then the bulb blows out. I bring the other one and find that the bulb has long since expired.

My entire lighting is now coming from the stovetop fan over the burner. It has two lamps and one of them works. I am seriously considering opening the fridge door, but that has its own problems.

It's a bit after eight and I hope like hell the Chinese Shop down the road is open. I look down the road and see the owner locking up and crossing the road to his apartment, which I know is his apartment because his little boy who helped me buy marker pens is at the window.

I call out, pull a burned bulb out of my pocket and do a lot of pointing. He does a lot of pointing at his front door which he soon disappears inside.

I'm at a loss and stand there looking up and down the road hoping the previously un-noticed All Night Electrical Supply Superstore will come into view, when he comes back out and crosses the road.

He lights up and gets the till out of night-time security mode and into operation, fits me out with two bulbs, rings it in and does the whole lockdown process for the second time.

It's a heck of an effort at the end what for him is a long hard day. Maybe he is that desperate for a six euro sale, but I prefer to think he had a change of heart or a kindly wife to say "get back out there and help the man."

On the other hand, I realise, as I walk home, that I am wearing a pair of Chinese Shop sandals.

I’m a local.

*

The Vegetable Bandit of Aljezur is again on the prowl.

I walk up the hill and down the hill and past the turnoff for the

castle and in the general direction of the road to the beach.

On the way, I spot a field of some sort of squash. I'm not sure what they are. They're much bigger than courgettes but slightly smaller than pumpkins. Whatever they are, I reckon they will taste great if chopped into cubes, drenched in olive oil and baked long and slow in the oven along with piece of fish or a nice chunk of "perna frango" which, as we all know by now, I can not only cook, but can actually say.

There is an easy walkway into the field, but it is guarded by a locked gate. But there is a steep slope into the field populated by all manner of nasty vegetation probably planted with the expressed purpose of deterring unwanted visitors.

I am not deterred. I am The Vegetable Bandit of Aljezur. I have plenty of fish, a piece of chicken, a decent oven and loads of olive oil. One of those squash will be mine.

I drop down. Shards of harsh brambles and sharp thorns slice deep into my legs and arms. Vegetation cuts me to pieces. Those prickly burrs that apparently inspired the invention of Velcro scrape my skin and stick to my shoes. Yet I press on.

In the field, I spot a small squash about the size of a football and yank it out of the ground. I think it will be tough to harvest, but it is surprisingly easy to pluck. I pick it up and make my retreat.

The steep slope out of the field turns out to be far harder to climb up than to drop down and I am actually worried that I won't be able to get out of here. Having a heavy squash in hand doesn't make the climb any easier. I drop it a few times and have to thrust my arm deep into the mass of sharp thorns to retrieve it.

By the time I get to the top, I am huffing and puffing. My legs and arms are cut and slashed well beyond immediate repair. Blood runs down my legs. The flowers clasped to my watch are cut to bits. All this for a vegetable I could probably buy at the supermarket for about a euro.

But I don't care.

I don't quite know what I've nicked. I don't quite know how to cook it. I don't worry that my legs and arm have been cut to shreds and are, by all reasonable measure, bleeding me to death.

I don't care.

I am the Bandit and it's mission accomplished.

*

I need a belt and I am ecstatic with joy!

My shorts are uncomfortably loose. I grab the belt loops and twist the waistband from side-to-side. I shove a fist down between my shorts and my body which is not something you really want to do in a public place when people are around, but it's nice to know that you can do it if you want to.

My shorts are not actually in danger of falling down, but they feel like they might. They used to be held up by my stomach. Now the only thing holding them up are my bony hips.

Bony hips! I haven't had bony hips in years.

So I need a belt.

I'm not sure where to get one. There are tourist shops with all manner of fancy leather belts with ornate buckles, but they're all closed now and, anyway, I'm more of a simple belt sort of guy. So it might take a while to find one.

But it's been a long time since I needed a belt and I am happy.

*

At the Saturday morning Aljezur Farmers' Market I am struggling to come up with new and interesting ways to prepare tomatoes.

I pick up a handful, about enough for a small pot of my red bean chilli, and put them on the scale.

The old man at the table and his ever so slightly younger friend babble something in Portuguese. The friend motions for me to add to the pile.

Okay, I think. I'll take another one. Always good for a garnish.

The motioning continues at an ever increasing pace as does the torrent of incomprehensible Portuguese so I add four more. I'll make a soup.

Apparently, it's still not enough. I don't know what he wants. Am I supposed to buy the entire box?

Finally, he picks up the price sticker, 50cents/kilo, and points to the scale where the pointer hasn't budged at all. It dawns on me; I have to buy a kilo. I'm a single guy, what will I do with a kilo of tomatoes?

I've already got chilli, a garnish, and some soup but I continue adding morning fry up with eggs and sausage (two tomatoes), spaghetti bolognaise (three), spicy salsa (two more) and so on until, mercifully the scale lifts and settles. I hand over a euro, collect my fifty cents change and am off.

All told, I come out of the market with my kilo of tomatoes, a huge bunch of summer greens, two huge and lovely onions and a

small cabbage for a grand total of one euro and seventy cents.

At these prices, I reckon it's time for The Vegetable Bandit of Aljezur to find himself a new line of work.

My huge pile of locally grown tomatoes are softening fast, getting set to rot. I like that.

Back in the UK, I buy tomatoes of such uniformity of size and appearance that the total weight of six items is actually pre-printed on the packet. They're grown heaven only knows where, are perfectly spherical and just the right shade of pinky red. They're easy to slice, deliver a satisfying crunch when bitten and they last pretty much forever.

And they taste like nothing. They may as well be film props for all the flavour they deliver.

The only uniformity amongst my farmers' market produce is that they are all actually tomatoes. But that's where it stops. It's a higgledy piggledy mess. I've got big, small and something in between. I've got round, spherical and one in an odd shape rather like a party balloon that has been twisted a few times by the street performer and will eventually resemble a dog or a duck but is not quite there yet.

I cut a couple of the firmer ones up into chunks, sprinkle with salt and drizzle with olive oil and a splash of red wine vinegar.

I've never in my life tasted such a thing. I had no idea a tomato could taste like this. I can't control myself and with every bite produce a range of satisfied moans and groans that waft out my front windows and onto the street and probably don't do my local reputation much good at all.

*

I walk in the hills. I head in a direction that, while not entirely unknown to me, is not one of my usual routes. Along the way, I spot a dirt road that I've never seen before, so I pounce on it like a dog on a fresh bone. I have no idea where it leads but, as usual, don't care.

Eating fresh food seems to give me a good bit of energy (apparently there's vitamins and all sorts in that stuff) so I motor along at a good clip and eventually come to what I recognise as the EN 120, the Lisbon road.

Across the road I see the turnoff for my sister's guesthouse but

it's a long walk and I doubt it's pizza night, so I turn left and walk back towards town.

To add a bit of mileage to my walk, I make a right at the bottom of the hill then a left towards the plaza in the middle of the new town where, on the patios, locals sit under umbrellas sipping coffee or small beers and visitors sit in the sun drinking bottled water.

I walk past the main church of Nossa Senhora da Alva (Our Lady of the Dawn), the patron Saint of Aljezur. As usual, the bells peal out and shock me to jumping. But I don't mind. It's a beautiful bright white building and in both size and design is a complement to, rather than a blight upon, its surrounding community. I think to myself, as I always do when I'm in this part of town, that should I ever manage to overcome my complete lack of interest in churches, I really ought to have a look inside.

Down a side street in the middle distance I spot groups of people milling about what look like some sort of covered stalls. It's a small street market. Nothing fancy and certainly not touristy. It's very much a local affair. There's everything on offer from practical shoes to cooking pots and spoons and a range of simple clothing. It's as if someone picked up the Chinese Shop and tipped it out over the street.

There's some fresh fruit and veg so, now that I'm actually eating such things, I decide to stock up. I choose three oranges, three pears, two bananas and a cucumber. After a great deal of weighing and calculator punching, the young lad manning the stall under the strict gaze of a semi-toothless woman I assume to be his mother writes down a figure: 2 euros 40 cents. I can hardly believe it. This healthy living is almost as good for my wallet as it is for my body.

As I go to pay, the Portuguese Change Crisis rears its ugly head. Over the past months, I have adopted a system. If the bank machine gives me 20 euro notes, I set them aside to pay my rent. I spend 10 euro notes at the supermarket and usually get back a five and some coins. I spend the fivers at the coffee shop and keep the one euro and 50 cent coins for the local market traders. In this way, everyone contributes a little change to help the next business down the line, but no one is swamped by overly large amounts of money. It seems to work.

Not this time. Not expecting to find a market, I've left my stack of ones and fifties at home. All I have are a pile of notes and a few small denomination coins. I do my best and hand over a fiver and two 20 cent coins.

If I had tried to pay in zero-coupon asset-backed corporate debentures or Polish zlotys I could not have caused the poor boy more

trouble.

He tips over the cheap plastic container that serves as a cash box. He takes a deep worried breath and from the small pile of coins he pulls out what he needs. When he's done, there's very little left. He walks around and carefully counts my change into my hand.

I feel awful and leave with a bag of fruit, a fifty cent piece, a bunch of twenties, quite a few 10 cent coins and a firm resolution to never again leave the house without a decent pocketful of change.

*

David and I drive out to see what he calls his "house beach." It's actually Praia da Vale dos Homens, near the small village of Rogil roughly halfway between Aljezur and Oedceixe.

It is a magnificent beach, wide and deep and surrounded by huge jagged, weather-beaten cliffs. Small waves crash against the shore making the sort of powerful, yet soothing sound that city dwelling new-agers buy on compact disks. David and Carla have no need of CDs. On a quiet night the sound travels as far as their country house, wafts through the open windows on the back of a cool night breeze and softly lulls them to sleep.

We have the place pretty much to ourselves. An inconvenient location, lack of publicity, absence from most maps and the time of year keep away the tourists. Rocks in the water dissuade surfers.

David points out various features of the beach, but my eye is continually drawn off the sand and out to the horizon.
In the 15th and 16th centuries, when England, Holland and France were still pretty much figuring out how to keep the sails up, Portuguese sailors (along with their Spanish rivals) were exploring the unknown world. Vasco da Gama is the best known, but there were hundreds of others. They charted most of the Atlantic Ocean, explored parts of Africa, rounded the ferocious Cape of Good Hope in their tiny little caravels, discovered Brazil, found a sea route to India and explored that ocean. Some of them even reached China and Japan and there is one credible theory that the Portuguese discovered Australia long before James Cook.

They were a tough crowd and standing on an exposed bluff looking out over David's favourite beach, I understand why they did it.

There's something about the heavy wind, the crashing sound of

the surf, the curve of the horizon, the grey-blue tint of the water and the misty fogginess that grows thicker the further out you look that makes you want to get out there and see what's what.

If you were a young man in the 15th century standing at the edge of a cliff looking out over the coast, the urge to go check it out would be too much to resist.

It still is. I'm a middle aged man in the early 21st century. I know what's out there. I've flown over it dozens of times. I've spent most of my life on the other side. I've lived and loved and worked over there. I've been to school there and learned to ride a bike and been arrested three times and had my heart broken more than once and cheated a little on my taxes. There are no surprises across that water.

But I am standing at the edge of a cliff looking out over the coast and I want to go.

*

Craving a little bit of hustle and bustle, I take a day trip to Lagos. It's a town I know quite well. I used to like it.

I don't any more.

After more than half a year in Aljezur, I see Lagos for what it is, a tourist trap. To be fair, as tourist traps go, it's not a bad one. It's fairly low-rise and not too over-developed and the people aren't all that mercenary and the prices aren't inflated by all that much. Compared to nearby Praia da Luz or any of Spain‘s purpose-built resort areas, the town comes off rather well.

But coming from the Western Algarve, I am left cold.

The place is full of pasty tourists hauling their tired bodies up and down the main drag taking photographs of nothing much at all, shopping for tatty overpriced souvenirs and doing whatever it takes to stave off the boredom until lunchtime.

Of course, the Western Algarve gets its fair share of tourists during the season but, for the most part, they are of a far superior sort. Sure, they do a bit of shopping and lie on the beach now and again, but that's not *all* they do.

Many of them surf, an activity that is, well ... active. It keeps them fit and healthy and supple and sends them home with a spring in their step and a reserve of personal energy that takes months to burn

off. Even the newbies who come down for two weeks of falling off a board leave with a clear-eyed, ruby-cheeked look of rude health that's a hundred times more attractive than any tan.

Many visitors hike in the rolling hills and deep valleys that make up this beautiful part of the world and it's hard to say which looks better, the lush and green scenery or the healthy, happy people moving through it.

Others cycle, often huge distances, on rough-and-ready rented bikes or highly-technical semi-pro wheels brought from home. Some ride in large groups with their gear loaded into a tour company chase vehicle. Some pack everything they need into all manner of racks and panniers. But however they do it, they're all moving under their own steam.

I don't see a single bicycle in Lagos, though as I pass through the main square on the way to the beach, I note that the fellow renting out motorised Segways seems to be doing rather well.

The main beach which, on previous visits suited me just fine, holds no appeal. It's packed with strange white-skinned creatures stuffed into unfortunate swimming costumes, coated head-to-foot with expensively useless bottled grease and lying motionless on the sand slowly baking to a perfect shade of lobster.

And there's no surf. I don't do the board thing myself, but I like the sight and sound of waves rolling powerfully inward and crashing against the shore. There's none of that here. Lagos has a nice statue of Prince Henry the Navigator framed beautifully by a delightful, yet tastefully minimalist, water fountain. But no amount of photogenic monumentation can make up for the fact that you could stand on a Lagos beach from now until the end of time and never feel the slightest urge to get in a small boat and go see what's out there.

I skip the beach and find myself a small cafe slightly off the beaten path. Since I've stopped drinking I've discovered that a two-pronged attack of strong coffee with orange juice provides a powerful restorative pick-me-up that almost makes up for the absence of an ice-cold beer.

"Cafe, por favor," I say. "Cafe Americano. E ... sumo de laranja?"

She nods.

I don't know the Portuguese for 'fresh' so I say it in English and mime the drawing down action of the huge stainless steel juicers found

in most decent cafes.

She brings me black coffee which is not a surprise as 'Café Americano' is not a known beverage but I use it anyway because the correct term 'coffee with milk' usually produces a ghastly 50/50 mix that the Portuguese love but no foreigner can stomach. I know that the word for milk is 'leite' and is pronounced 'lay-eet' so I ask for some which she brings and pours until I say "Esta bem (that's fine), obrigado."

All-in-all, it's a good little run of café Portuguese and I rather enjoy it.

The coffee is good as coffee always is in this country, but I can't say the same for the juice. I can just about confirm that it has been freshly squeezed, but that's as far as it goes and I am disappointed. In my part of this country orange juice tastes like somebody yanked it off a tree, slashed it in two, jammed in a straw and brought it directly to your table.

I drink up and, with no idea what to do with the next two hours, check the bus schedule and discover to my delight that there is an earlier bus leaving for Aljezur in just 20 minutes.

I can't wait to get back.

*

At the cafe down the road I am enjoying a coffee with a pleasant, yet determined woman who lives just up the road from me. Her name is Susana and the local municipal council has just passed an order to shut down her father's community grocery shop.

It's called the Bridge Grocery. It has been in business for a half century. There are old black-and-white photos showing a time and place where housewives would come by every day to stock up the family larder. Susana's family has run the shop for the past 12 years and it has become a village institution. But the municipal council has decided to close the shop and knock the building down.

The small business is a central part of what makes Aljezur Aljezur and Susana is leading the fight to save it. She is intense. She is focussed. She has set up an online citizen's petition and has been in contact with the municipal ruling party and has developed good relationships with the local media. When I hear her story I am moved to help though what I can do is limited and, once again, I feel like a person who is useless in life.

We talk over a second coffee. She is forty so she tells me, though

I don't believe her; she looks a full decade younger. She is petite, which makes her fight against the council more visually compelling and I tell her this and suggest that she get on television and make her case and become the face of the fight and she smiles and sips her small coffee and laughs and shakes her head and doesn't get it because she is a clever serious Portuguese woman who fights life on the issues and I am just a silly superficial English advertising man who goes for the cheap emotional angle. But I am right unfortunately and she is unfortunately wrong because we live in a media age and dumb things like this actually do make a real difference.

I know the shop. It is down the road from my apartment. It is the place to which I dragged my empty propane tank on my tired shoulders when the gas ran out and my shower ran cold. It's the place that sells the cheap boxed wine that tasted okay when I was drinking so long as I mixed it with fruit juice (though they do sell good stuff but when you're an alcoholic you learn to buy cheap over good).

As a shop, it's nothing much to look at but, as I learn from an afternoon over a couple of coffees with Susana, it is a critical part of this community and a small part of what makes this village special.

Nine people work in the shop. Susana's father Antonio who is the owner, her mum and younger brother, plus six other full-time staffers. On top of that, there are local suppliers. There are two bakers for whom the shop is pretty much their only market and two others who depend on it for a good chunk of their annual business. There are old people from the village who tend small farmholdings and sell their produce to Antonio who puts it on his shelves and sells it on. There are peanut farmers who make a delicious butter spread the likes of which you would not find at a large supermarket. There are people who tend the land nearby growing sweet potatoes. There are beekeepers who make honey which Antonio sells.

There is the old lady who calls from time to time and tells Anka (who has worked at the shop for nearly nine years) that "I have to make soup" and Anka puts a careful selection of seasonal root vegetables into a shopping bag and phones the old lady back and tells her how to make her soup then arranges for a taxi to deliver the produce because the lady can't walk the few metres to the store.

There are the retired people who gather daily to chat and converse and gain some minimal form of human contact. There used to be a small community centre near the municipal market, but the council tore that down. Now, aside from the shop, they have nowhere to meet and are reduced to sitting on cold hard benches under the concrete bus shelter.

The village depends on this shop and that is important and I will do whatever I can to help.

*

The weather turns awful.

For weeks and weeks it rains. Not just ordinary rain. Not that light British style drizzle that is really more of a nice refreshing skin moisturiser than an actual rainfall. And not the heavy Canadian style torrent that makes a whole lot of crackle and noise and is all terribly showy and self-important but is pretty much over by the time you've had a second cup of coffee.

This stuff pours. For hours. It is positively tropical. It blasts downwards in hard unrelenting chunks that don't like you at all. There are times when I seriously consider moving back to England just to dry out and that is saying something.

I post online pretty pictures of quiet beaches and lovely flowers set off against a background of blue skies and it all makes friends back home a little bit jealous, but the truth is that I am grabbing short moments of warmth between the downpours. The sunny days are gone.

In the beginning I miss those times and it saddens me. I came here for the heat and the sun and a deep bronze tan because I am a vain man and as I am well past the age of looking buff and pretty I hope I can at least be lush and brown.

But time passes and the sadness fades and I embrace the rain. I begin to understand that bad weather is what keeps Portugal real. There are places in the world with constant sun and they are all fake. They are false and dull and boring people go there.

But this is a real country.

Real people live here and live real lives. Yes, there is 'the season' and people do what they can to cash in and make a few easy euros off the sloppy Brits who will pay anything for chips but won't eat octopus and the German tourists in their upscale rental cars. But the season is short and life is long and it keeps the place real.

And that is why I am here.

*

For weeks, I look forward to the Aljezur Sweet Potato Festival. I am like a child in the days before Christmas, giddy with anticipation.

I learn how to say "Festival da Batata-doce de Aljezur." I learn how to say it quickly and naturally as if I'm the sort of guy who's been going for years. I learn how to slur and slush my words together like a real knarly rural Portuguese farmer and not one of those prissy Lisboeta who pronounce every syllable clearly but couldn't cook a sweet potato if their life depended on it.

The festival arrives and I am crushed with disappointment.

I have been dreaming of a small village fest in a leafy park or a small field somewhere in the old town. I picture local folks hunched over open fires or burning coals doing all sorts of clever things with their home-grown sweet potato. I expect a bit of acoustic music and maybe even a fado singer.

No.

The "festival" is more like a trade show. It all takes place in a ghastly building up in the crummy part of the new town called the "Aljezur Multipurpose Facility" which is just a huge grey box made of some sort of low-budget corrugated aluminium. It is as cheaply made as a structure can be. If you hired a team of architects and paid them good money to take £5 out of the cost of building the place they would not be able to do it without collapsing the thing entirely.

The local camara (municipal council) do seem to love ghastly architecture.

Some years ago, the camara knocked down a charming tourist office at the bus station and replaced it with two wooden park benches and a horrid concrete statue that looks like nothing at all.

They shut down the old town hall and built a new one that, with its crumbling white-tiled porcelein exterior, looks like an unclean pub toilet turned inside out and left to rot.

They allowed the mega-supermarket to build the largest eyesore for miles around. If you walk up to the castle and cast your eyes over the town all you see are traditional Portuguese structures in bright white stucco topped with occasional yellow accents and undulating terracotta roofs in a beautiful shade of ochre. Then, as you focus on the centre of the new town, right in the middle is a ghastly grey concrete supermarket that looks much like a pimple on the nose of a supermodel. It has no place in the village and looks like a horrid piece of rubbish imported without care or thought from a huge and impersonal profit-driven French conglomerate, which is exactly what it

is.

They are, as discussed previously, in the process of destroying the Bridge Grocery and planning to replace it with some sort of generic touristic showpiece that could have come from anywhere and probably will.

The camara seem to be committed to replacing traditional Portuguese architecture with cheap modern junk that looks like it all came out of a flat-pack box and assembled with an allen key. Locals I speak to say they are corrupt and in the pocket of devious construction developers. I reckon they're just tacky and stupid.

I meet up with David, Carla and Thomas for supper. Nino is working as a server and I order lombinhos com batata doce e espinafres not because I know what those words mean but because that is what David is having and it's easier to point at his plate and then at me than to figure out how to say lombinhos com batata doce e espinafres.

I end up with a tender but otherwise uninspiring chunk of pork, a few tasty slabs of local sweet potato which I know is local because I often meet Pedro the restaurant owner buying it at the Bridge Grocery and a good portion of spinach in a very nice cream sauce which is actually the very best part of the dish but is a little disappointing because I know it's from frozen spinach because I've also seen Pedro buying bags of it from the mega-supermarket. All-in-all it's a nice supper though, I think, rather pricey for a village fest. Still, I enjoy it and, with appetite satisfied, the idea of walking about the festival in the company of friends begins to hold some appeal.

Nino stays at work and Thomas disappears to hang out with other young people who talk in text messages and David, Carla and I set out for a wander about.

We move at a glacial pace. There are no turtles in the Aljezur Multipurpose Facility, but if there were they would be rapidly overtaking us in the right-hand passing lane. No three people have ever moved so slowly.

We have a woman in the group which means we have to stop at every second booth to examine all manner of crafty pieces of jewellery and bracelets made of twisty bits of copper wire and every manner of earrings on which dangle all kinds of shiny but not precious stones. It's

the sort of stuff that women seem to love and men just don't understand so David and I hang back and chat about work and travel and how to build websites until Carla points out something she likes. When she does, because David is her lover and I am her friend and she is clearly having a good time, we nod and smile and act like we can tell the difference between that and the other fifty seemingly identical items on the rack. We then move on to the next booth and repeat the process all over again. It is surprisingly pleasant.

Once again, as at the Sunset Festival, it is clear that Carla knows everyone. The crafty booths aren't what really slow us up. It is the endless procession of Carla's friends that keeps our pace sub-turtle.

Every few feet, she and someone else light up simultaneously. Smiles are wide. Arms are flung out. Rapid fire Portuguese fills the air which I do not understand but can figure out that it's something along the "Oh my God! It's been so long! How are You!" line.

All manner of people embrace Carla. There are old women and middle aged men delighted to see her. A pack of teenage schoolgirls who would normally be way-too-cool-with-hip-to-spare give her big hugs. They know her kids and sometimes come over to the house.

The mayor is wandering around pressing the flesh and, as near as we can tell, downing a good bit of drink. He spots Carla and trots over with a wide smile. Carla knows him. She knows him from before he got into local politics and was a teacher at the local school. He was a bit of a twat back then and still is but she knows his wife pretty well and she's okay.

Carla knows everyone and thinks nothing of it.

I am introduced to them all and as always, in every case, there is a huge back story. This person is "the neighbour of the boy who used to feed our chickens and lived next to my friend's house". Someone else is "the former boyfriend of a girl who married a friend of mine." It is hugely complicated but I love it.

And I learn how to kiss.

We stop at some sort of crafty booth. As I recall, they are selling some blouses or t-shirts. But I don't take notes and they could have been selling car tyres for all I remember.

A young woman jumps up and hugs and kisses Carla. There is the usual babble of high-speed Portuguese. The girl is perhaps in her early

thirties. She is not especially pretty, but she has a vibrancy and energy and she bounces on the balls of her feet and you get the feeling that she could take on the world if she wanted to and I realise that sort of thing is becoming more attractive to me than some young twit with a hot body.

Carla introduces me and, because this is Europe, we kiss. This is south Europe so that awful French three-kiss thing has not arrived and I hope never will. It's two cheeks only. But being a reserved British/Canadian, I do the kisses into the air. I avoid the cheek and make do with that "mwah mwah" that makes sense on an episode of *Sex And The City* but just doesn't cut it in a Portuguese village.

"You don't kiss," she says, not upset but curious.

"Ahh," I say. "When you are young and I am not, it is maybe more appropriate?"

"It's just a kiss," she says.

So I give her a kiss. A peck on the cheek. Nothing, really. But a real kiss.

And for the rest of the evening I kiss properly.

*

I don't like the word "relapse." And I care even less for mealy-mouthed euphemisms like "falling off the wagon."

So I don't relapse or fall off the wagon. I drink again. Not as much as before and not nearly so early in the day, but I drink. And, as I do, all the old bad things return.

My balance fades. I can still get my trousers on without sitting on the bed and when I'm in the shower I don't quite fall back on the soap-on-the-floor procedure, but when it comes time to scrub my feet I do find myself leaning on the wall for support.

When I'm on the road and want to look behind me I turn my entire body, not just my head, because that way I don't lose my focus.

I stop walking. I take no exercise. I don't eat. The supermarket and corner store make more money off me than ever before, but vegetables rot in the fridge and a half-dozen oranges shrivel and dry and have to be binned and a bunch of tomatoes grow too rotten for anything except for soup which I do not make because I will not eat.

I stay in bed for hours. I wake up and lie in bed swilling back

whatever booze happens to be on hand. Sometimes it is well into late afternoon before I leave the bed so I just skip the shower and pull on a pair of shorts. So long as I'm fresh enough so the corner store will serve me alcohol, I'm happy enough.

The apartment, which I have been keeping obsessively clean becomes a dump. Dirty laundry piles up on the floor. Dishes become something stored wet in the sink, not dry in a drawer. The bedding is something about which I will spare you, gentle reader, an exact description. The state of the bathroom is something else best not spoken about. All this, plus the fact that I rarely bother to open the windows for a bit of air gives the place a fetid closeness like an old house that's become infected with damp.

It's an indefinable air. It doesn't smell especially bad nor is it like anything you can put your finger on. But as you walk in it is clear: someone unhealthy lives here.

The return of the drink brings back my obsession with Sophie. I find myself thinking about her every single minute of every single day. I go online and write to people in the UK who know her. I go onto her Facebook page which I have been blocked from and now contains nothing but a standard website error message but I bring it up on my computer screen and stare at it over and over again and often refresh the page in the vain hope that something will change but it never does.

And as I think about Sophie and try but fail not to think about Sophie, I realise how alcohol works. Alcohol is a can of petrol; the tiniest flame becomes an inferno. Alcohol takes everything you have in your life, whether good or bad, and amplifies it until it becomes a catastrophe.

I had a good thing with Sophie.

I liked her. I was a middle-aged man in the office and she was a youngish woman. But I liked her. I wasn't chasing after her in the way that old men chase young women. I liked her truly. I liked her as a person. If she had been twenty or thirty or a hundred and five, I would have liked her just the same. To this day, I do not know exactly why, but I did. And that would have been okay. She would have known that I liked her and I would have known that she knew I liked her and everyone in the office would have known and she would have figured

out that a bit of a smile would get her a cup of tea and everybody else would say to each other "Well, Mark's a bit sweet on Sophie" but they would say it in a kind and gentle sort of way and it would have been okay because that sort of thing is normal and fine and sometimes good.

But when you take that and pour a can of alcohol on it, it becomes a raging blaze. It goes out of control. It takes a good fondness and turns it into a young woman sitting in an office boardroom listening to a man almost old enough to be her father telling her that he's in love with her.

It takes a nice young person and scares her half to death.

*

David drives me out into the countryside. Everywhere we look, there are wind power generators.

Wind power is a huge industry in Portugal and these things are everywhere. The country, situated on the Atlantic and subject to pretty much constant airflow, is a world leader in wind electricity. Farmers and landowners receive a one-time cash payment of 10,000 euros for each machine planted on their property and they snap it up as fast as the power firms can dish it out. It seems like a good deal all around.

From a distance, and arranged in clusters over the landscape, the things are quite pretty. They are too modern to call "windmills", more of a "wind generation power source". But they are tall and white and they move slowly in an Earth-friendly, hey maybe we can all be sustainable sort of way.

At first, I quite like them.

David pulls the car into a gravel drive. We leave the vehicle. A wind thingy is nearby and I walk up.

It is massive. It throbs. It makes a constant, slow and steady and unrelenting "whup, whup, whup, whup" noise that never varies and never stops and makes me sweat with fear.

These things look nice from a distance. From the horizon, they are rather pretty.

Up close, they scare the hell out of me.

*

I'm on an internet voice call with my mother back in Canada. I am wracked with self-doubt.

"I think I made a big mistake coming here, Mum," I say. "I've been here so long and I've done nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"My plans are nothing," I say. "I was going to learn Portuguese. I was going to sober up and get back to health. I was going to do all sorts."

"You are."

"No I'm not. I can say "boa tarde" and I've switched from vodka to white wine. What's that all worth?"

"Luv," Mum says. "You can only do one thing at a time."

"But I've been doing *nothing*."

"You've been getting past Sophie."

"Well ..."

"Well nothing. Did you really think you could get over the sort of feelings you had and get sober and learn Portuguese at the same time? Or start a fitness program?"

"I guess not."

"You went to Portugal because everything was happening at one time. That was your whole point. So stop trying to solve everything at one time."

*

At David and Carla's, I am drunk.

I am not falling down drunk. I don't do anything embarrassing or inappropriate, but I am drunk. I talk just a little bit too much and just a little bit too loudly and I laugh just a little bit too much. I tell the same stories over and over again and make silly jokes they've all heard many times before.

I am drunk and nobody minds but they know I am drunk and the they know that I am always this way.

I don't like it.

I don't want to be drunk all the time.

I wake up late in the morning and down a glug of what's left of last night's cheap wine. It's not nearly enough so I wrap a towel around my waist and sway and lurch into the kitchen for more. I blink my eyes and see that the familiar wandering black spots are back.

In the bathroom, I look at myself in the mirror then glance around

the apartment and I know that this must end. It must end now.

The shaking is back as well so I return to the old two-handed pour and, once again, the kitchen counter gets a good dousing and will need a wipe down later, but not now because I have a more pressing concern.

Halfway through the glass another demon returns and I am in the bathroom putting on a fine performance of my old party trick. I look at the toilet and recall that the Portuguese for red wine is "vinho tinto" which is a good reflection on my language skills but a poor reflection on everything else in my life.

I awake early the next day and, within hours, the withdrawal symptoms return. Not as bad as the first time, but they are back.

The shower is again a problem. I don't collapse in the tub. I don't become trapped under the water. But staying upright on a slippery surface is a problem and I'm not the cleanest I've ever been.

My left hand which, upon withdrawal tends to curl up inside itself, becomes virtually useless. The two outside fingers gradually wrap up into my palm. I can't straighten them nor bring them together. The rest of my hand has no strength. I can't use a pen. I can't control my nail clipper. I eat by pressing the fork into my clasping palm and eating like a caveman.

It's not as severe as before, but it is a rough time and is steadily getting worse. Well before noon hour, I am in a serious situation. Half a litre of emergency beer and the symptoms subside. But two hours later I can feel them starting right back up again.

I talk to my mother and she is worried. So am I. Last time I had a good few close calls. What about this time. I have read that second attempts at quitting can often be even worse than the first. It's a process known as "kindling" and it says a lot about my life that I even know that.

In the village, calling emergency services and knowing how to say Rua Vinte e Cinco de Abril, sessenta sete sometimes isn't enough. Sometimes you have to tell them how to get there. What if I had to do that? What if I had to tell them to stop at the backpackers hostel to pick up my spare keys? What if Carla wasn't there? I doubt if the location of Mark's keys are an essential part of staff training.

I talk to my mother some more and we agree I should call David

and ask him to be ready to take a call from me and then call emergency.

"No, we'll keep it simple," he answers, saying what I secretly hoped he would. "You stay at the house."

I get to talk and they listen. They're not shocked or judgemental. Surrounded by friends and knowing that help is available seems to help.

I shake constantly like a shivering man and walk like a very old one. But the violent spasms do not appear and I don't fall down. I actually feel like a bit of a fraud.

I still need some beer now and again, but it's very little. They don't mind when I reach for it, but being there motivates me to keep the sips small and as infrequent as possible. By bedtime, just one small bottle is gone.

David sets me up in the adjoining and thankfully not currently rented holiday house. Cans of emergency beer sit by my bed as does my mobile phone set up for one-press dialling of David's number.

I don't sleep until a couple of hours before morning and then not very well. And the cold sweats put in a half-hearted appearance. But that's about it. The green flying goblin is nowhere to be seen. There's no lithe cavorting, but I can get up and walk to the bathroom. In the morning I can take a shower. Fortunately it's a step-in stall arrangement, but I know that if I were back at the apartment I could safely manage the tub.

In the morning, I'm a little shaky, otherwise not too bad. David raises chickens and I have never before eaten eggs laid 50 yards from my table. They are rather good and I scarf down two on toast.

Later we head out in the car for some supplies. On our return, David hauls out the huge bag of chicken feed and carries it to the coop. I reach into the back seat, lift out the propane tank, carry it a bit and place it off the drive. I am now hauling gas tanks around.

This has to be good.

Back at the apartment, I take a blistering hot shower and stand for a long time under the steaming water and if it means I'll soon have to drag that heavy green propane tank down the road and back then so be it. I shave, another thing that I have mostly allowed to fall out of

my life.

I dress in proper clean clothes and go to the kitchen. There is a lettuce with some life left in it and a couple of tomatoes and a tin of sardines and some olives in a jar (and olives really don't ever go off). It's not much but on a plate with a drizzle of olive oil and a shake of salt it's a proper meal and I eat almost all of it.

And then I clean. I clean like no man has ever cleaned before.

I rip the sheets off the bed and toss them along with a stinky pile of t-shirts into the washer and put it on the extra-hot setting which I don't normally use because electricity is so expensive here.

I hang the duvet over the back balcony for a much-needed airing.

I open every window in the apartment even though it's really not warm enough and let the chilly air waft through the flat.

I go outside and sweep the leaves and discarded cigarette packets and various bits of paper off the patio and place them carefully in a bin liner.

I have no household cleaner in the house so I mix a bucket of hot water with some dish liquid and a shake of laundry detergent and loads of bleach. I pour in more bleach because it stinks of antiseptic. The whole thing is a witches' brew of caustic chemicals which is exactly what I want.

I scrub down the counters. I ferociously attack every corner of the kitchen and bathroom until they gleam. I mix up another bucket of brew and mop the entire apartment again and again. I even mop the balcony and, let's face it, who ever mops a balcony?

By the time I am done my entire apartment smells like a hospital ward or a chemical warfare factory. My eyes actually water, but I like it hugely. I look around at the shining spare cleanliness of the place and understand that this is what I want to be.

Because I know that I have not been cleaning the apartment. I have been cleaning me.

I eat. I eat like I have not eaten in years. And I eat well. I am surrounded by good, healthy Portuguese food and I devour it like a man who's been starving for years (which, in a way, I have).

My sister writes "I've found that the best thing you can do for yourself is to eat properly. It makes up for lot of other not-so-great choices." She is so right.

I make a delicious vegetarian chilli with red beans and locally

grown tomato and onion served over flaky rice.

I put my incredible ability to say "perna frango" to good use and cook chicken dozens of different ways, but always alongside a colourful mix of vegetables from the village farmers' market.

I learn how to say "salsichas" and to stop muttering silly tongue twisters in the supermarket and to cook them in the oven with chunks of apples left for me by my landlady or, when apples are not in abundance, quince which I pinch from trees along the roadside near the roundabout.

I cook sweet potato, a speciality of the region. Pedro, the chef and owner at the restaurant down the road where Nino works part-time in the summer, tips me off that they're much easier to peel if you par-boil them first. They're good served in chunks, but I prefer them mashed with chopped kale, a sort of Portuguese version of the Irish dish colcannon.

I eat fruit. I never used to eat fruit, but I can't get enough of it. I start the day with peaches or pears, but mostly Algarve oranges. They are oranges like no other. They literally melt in my mouth. I take a chunk, put it on my tongue and it simply dissolves into sweet heaven. If my moaning and groaning over tomatoes arouses the interest of the neighbours, my passionate sounds over oranges are likely to actually wake them up.

And I eat fish. More than anything else, I eat fish. Loads of fish. I go every morning to the Mercado. I look and poke and prod and sniff and make my choice.

I buy a fish, take it home and cook it in oil. After a time, the women at the mercado begin to remember me. They know what I like. They leave me alone while I walk around and do my sniffing and prodding. And when I make my choice they gut and clean. It's not a big purchase, but they know that I will be back tomorrow and the next day and the day after that.

I eat fish I don't recognise and can't pronounce and don't really know how to cook properly but which always seems to turn out all right. If it's cheap and fishy, I buy it and eat it.

Cavala is my choice. Big, fat meaty mackerel that needs little more than a pinch of salt and pepper, a generous squeeze of lemon, a quick oven bake and a soft bed of rice to lie on.

I eat it with rice. Rice and fish.

And it all slowly starts to work.

My left knee, which for the past twelve months I could not bend without pain, now feels fine. My legs return a little bit of their shape and definition and actually don't look half-bad and, now and again

walking about or shopping in the village, I sometimes get the odd glance and I feel good.

In the shower, I find myself picking up each foot in turn and washing. Without really thinking about it, all that drop-the-soap-and-swish-around business has been set aside.

If I think about it beforehand and prepare ahead, I can stand on one foot and put on my shorts leg-by-leg pretty much like a normal person.

And that cut under my thumbnail, my simple visible guide to health, shrinks day-by-day. It heals slowly, but it's definitely on the mend. It's a small thing, a tiny cut under a thumbnail. But if there's one thing I learn here, it's that there is meaning in the small things.

*

And once again, I walk. I am a walking machine.

According to the beautifully produced and lavishly photographed tourist brochure, the Rota Vicentina comprises "340 km of wild coastline and 75 thousand hectares of protected area, … bathed by the Atlantic and pampered by over 300 days of sunshine per year."

My 18 kilometre bit from Aljezur to Oedceixe via Rogil has clearly had enough of sunshiney pampering and is now working on the other 65 days. It's absolutely pouring. It is positively tropical.

If I were relaxing on the balcony of a guest house in rural Kenya, it would be wonderful. But I am not in a Kenyan guest house. I am out of doors sheltering in a tiny alcove below a closed shop on the main road through Aljezur. The rain beats down, massive teardrops attack me from above, huge chunks of water bounce off the cobblestoned road. The whole thing coalesces into small streams of yukky brown sludge that comes towards me in wavering streams from down the hill and, when I'm not looking, slithers at me from side to side and attacks my cheap Chinese Shop sandals and makes me feel sad and cold and old and tired.

It is testing me. I have spent the past months getting over the girl and wrestling with my demons and fighting the booze and slowly becoming fit and healthy and strong and now, after all that, I am set to prove to the world (and, more importantly, to myself) that I am the kind of guy who can set out over 11 miles of raw land and make it to Oedceixe unhurt and unbowed.

It is a test.

And what a test it is. Steps into my journey, the sky blackens and

the heavens open up and the clouds douse me to death and all work together to send me a message that says in no uncertain terms: "Go home."

Going home is the easy option. My apartment is mere steps away. My water bottles are not yet opened. My lunch will keep another day or two in the fridge. My camera batteries are fully charged and will work just fine later in the week. In minutes I can be back in my apartment, dry, unpacked and tucked up under the duvet with a steaming cup of tea and a good book. Life can be easy.

But, tempting though it is, I don't give up. I press on. I wrap my camera in a piece of dry cloth, snug my coat tight around my body, tuck my waist pack under my jacket and set off into the downpour.

I don't care about the rain. I don't care if it rains all day. I don't care if it rains non-stop from now until the end of time and soaks me to my very bones. Wet or not, I will walk to Oedceixe. I will get there if it kills me and it may kill me but I don't care. This is a test and I will endure.

The trail out of Aljezur starts with a near-vertical climb up a huge and rocky hill. The yukky brown sludge takes pride of place and when I'm not pushing hard against the steep crumbling ground I am hopping from side to side avoiding the nasty rivulets of horrible greasy muck whose sole purpose seems to be to attack my sandals and soak my tired feet.

The trail towards Rogil continues in this manner. It isn't the most attractive part of Portugal and I approach it more as a physical challenge than a scenic opportunity. My camera gets little use, though my calf muscles get a serious workout, my heart beats briskly, my lungs pump in a healthy fashion and, in an odd way, I feel good.

To my left I spot a hillside community. I recognise this place. I am nearing Praia da Amoreira, my favourite beach. The rain eases off and I drop the hood on my jacket and realise that what I thought was the reverberating noise from my coat hood is, in fact, the sound of waves crashing in from the sea.

I am walking through the countryside and above the peace and quiet of this rural land I can hear the crash and roar of the Atlantic ocean. I like that.

Amoreira passes and I make it to Rogil. At the only cafe in town, a friendly local farmer with a few useful words of English translates for me and I end up with a cup of coffee and a toasted cheese and ham sandwich that is far too big for my lunch but I eat it anyway and, once again, I am thankful for the kindliness of the ordinary Portuguese.

We get to talking. He has a smallholding, as near as I can make out less than a farm but more than an allotment.

"Next month," he says. "I have batatas doce."

"Sweet potatoes?"

"Yes. Sweet potatoes. I take from the ground."

"Harvest?"

"Yes, harvest. With sweet potatoes, I will make some money."

Make some money is what people do here. You don't ask folks in these parts "what is your job?" or "where do you work?". It's not like that. People do what they do and, if it goes well, they make some money.

I hit the trail out of town and things pick up. The sun shines and the scenery improves. The route from Rogil to Oedceixe roughly follows a series of irrigation canals that do wonders for local agriculture and even more for my camera. The canal is as wide as I am tall which is not very much for a person but plenty for a canal. It twists and winds through the countryside in a seemingly random fashion punctuated only by the occasional concrete bridge.

There are huge drainage taps next to the fields that open and close the flow of water from the canal to the adjoining land. My natural tendency to do stupid things comes in to play and I am tempted to give them a twirl just to see what happens but I'm concerned that my small moment of fun may fatally douse an entire crop and ruin a family's yearly livelihood so, in a rare moment of sense over sensibility, I give them a miss.

As the afternoon comes on, the sun turns out and dries me off somewhat. The solar heat is just warm enough for comfort, but not so much as to be too harsh. I realise that I wouldn't want to make this hike under the blazing sun of mid summer and as I walk along it occurs to me that there are a lot of things in this part of the world that are better experienced in the off season and this is certainly one of them.

I pass miles and miles of sweet potato. The stuff seems to grow like weeds. They are everywhere, but they're not, in any way, weeds. If weeds tasted half as good as sweet potato ,everyone in the world would eat weeds every single day with every single meal.

In some fields, the sweet potato is piled high in bunches ready for collection. My sometime role as The Vegetable Bandit of Aljezur kicks in and I am tempted to drop off the trail and nick myself a couple of dinners worth of veg, but I don't. I have a long way to walk and nothing to carry my booty in and even though the fields appear abandoned I am not so sure who is possibly peering out of the

windows of the small white-clad homesteads that dot the landscape and may be well poised to call up a rapid response tactical unit of the otherwise unoccupied GNR, so I pass on the taters and walk on.

I feel bad, though. I am supposed to be the Vegetable Bandit of Aljezur and I suspect that am letting the side down. But I console myself with the thought that the Bandit isn't in Aljezur any more. He is in or near or passing by or somewhat in the vicinity of or not even close to Rogil. So perhaps there is a Vegetable Bandit of Rogil and this is his patch and as a responsible bandit I am best to leave him alone and confine my banditry to my own town. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense really, but it allows me to continue down the trail guilt-free.

The trail grows harsh. It hasn't been open long and I am clearly one of the first to walk this part of the route. At times, the pathway falls into disrepair and it is only by spotting the path of barely trampled grassland that I know, with not much certainty but with enough certainty to keep on walking, that I'm probably on the right track. I rather like it though. I like the fact that I can see the trail. It makes me feel like one of those wise Indian trackers from those 1950s movies that, for some reason that has always escaped me, always seemed to be filmed in Technicolor and starred Rock Hudson.

The harshness of the trail grows worse. The track diminishes and is replaced by metre-thick spiky thorns that tear deep gashes into the leading edge of my lower legs. The spikes scrape and slash harshly against my flesh causing rivulets of blood that don't look terribly nice but do make me appear a lot like a real outdoor adventurer so I ignore the pain and go for the look which is a good look but hurts like hell.

But the thorns don't stop there. As each blade pushes and scrapes against my forward leg, it becomes taut and well sprung. Then, as my now bloody foreleg passes on, each spike is let go and snaps hard against my rear leg digging in with every spike. It could not be more painful and I could not care less.

Bloody, but unbowed, I make Oedceixe and walk towards the village centre. In the town there is a man building a set of stairs out of concrete. He is well past retirement age and from his music box comes the sound of Rod Stewart's hit "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy." It's an odd choice for such an old man but I think to myself, "if Rod likes it, who am I to judge."

*

At the supermarket till, I swing into my fake fluency act. It's actually rather clever. I catch the cashier's "boa tarde" and fire one back, careful to sling it sideways out of my mouth with a slight puff of air and mush it into a sort of "bard" just like a real local. She rings in my goods and, before she can ask me, I casually request "um sac, por favor" which sounds pretty skilful but, let's face it, everybody in the world knows the word for "please" and "sac" is not a great stretch from bag. She rattles off some long sentence which is the local equivalent of "do you have a Clubcard?" I have no idea what she is saying, but I shake my head and say "nao" as if I understand every word. As I pack she tells me the total in words while I cast a surreptitious eye over the numbers on the small screen at the end of the counter. I hand over some cash, collect my change, do a quick obrigada/obrigado swap (she's a girl and I'm a boy, hence the difference) and, with a breezy "tschau" make my exit. It's a totally fake performance but I have seen other foreigners in the line visibly befuddled at how someone with my accent can have mastered such a complex language so easily and fluently and I get a quiet thrill out of messing with their heads.

Unpacking my shopping I glance out my front window I see an old man struggling down the steep cobbled hill from the village above. Old people are the norm in the village. The young mostly hop buses and get out of town and become cool and good-looking in Lisbon. The old stay and are everywhere here.

Even for here, he is old and frail. Like most of the elderly he wears a cap and thick, heavy clothing that clearly was, time ago, well made of high-quality fabric and has endured years of careful cleaning and occasional mending and, like the wearer, looks good for its age, but age is catching up.

I think nothing about him until sometime later when, from my back balcony I see him trudging across the field where the cows normally graze. He has made his way up the road and across the small concrete footbridge that spans the river behind my house and is now determinedly headed towards a small holding where corn and other things are grown.

He carries a large walking stick in his right hand. It's not one of those fancy, telescopic walking sticks made of space-age material and

adorned with flashy logos that super-fit tourists carry about to say "hey everyone, look at me, I'm a trail walker." It's a stout piece of wood that clearly came off part of a tree and he uses it with every step. He hobbles. I have never seen anyone hobble before, but he does. Even from a distance I can see that, without the stick, he would fall over.

He has another smaller lighter stick held over his left shoulder. A bucket hangs on it.

He slips under the rope into the farm holding. I am immediately impressed. I am The Vegetable Bandit of Aljezur. But when I creep into the fields to steal vegetables, I do it in remote places at night when nobody is around. But this old man looks to be brazenly doing it in daylight and in full view.

My silly habit of living most of my life in a sort of inner-mind fantasy world kicks in and I start to imagine him as the wise old sensei Vegetable Bandit and me as the novice bandit. I imagine him putting his hands together and speaking in riddles and calling me "grasshopper" a lot. It is the "Karate Kid" of veg theft and it keeps me entertained as he enters the field.

But I am wrong. He is not a bandit.

From the bucket he takes out what appear to be potatoes. He tosses them one at a time over a patch of ground. He hobbles from spot to spot and, as near as I can tell from the distance, uses his large stick to plant them. He places the stick in the ground, holds it with two hands and rocks his body fore and aft. He seems to be digging a hole. He uses the stick to tip the potato into the hole, then slowly stands up almost straight and pushes the soil to cover it in.

He works hard and it is obviously not fun. This is not someone who has a good job or a lavish pension and just likes to mess around in an allotment as a hobby. He is very much a man for whom planting and growing are things that must be done because life is like that.

I go for a short walk, perhaps an hour. When I return along the road that borders the field I look left and see that he is still there working the land.

*

I am suddenly and instantly and without any prior warning, over

Sophie.

I am not expecting it. It comes out of nowhere for no particular reason that I can discern. But on an otherwise unremarkable evening sitting in my apartment doing nothing much of any importance besides cooking a fish then curling up under my duvet with a good book, it hits me that, at long last, I am well and truly over her.

At first I don't believe it. I sleep on it and leave it alone and give it time, but I finally realise that it is true and not a mere passing thought. It is real.

But I can not remember a time when I did not love Sophie and I am confused. I ask myself "Why now? Why, out of the blue, on a Monday evening of no significance? Why?"

I have no answer.

It is as if someone has come along and flicked a switch from "on" to "off." It is that sudden and I don't understand it.

At the beginning of this journey, I thought I would go away to Portugal and, gradually with time, my feelings would slowly subside. But they did not. Every day I have woken up and thought about Sophie. Then I have thought about her constantly all day. The feelings I brought to Portugal have been as strong and powerful as the day I flew away from Britain. In emails and chats and online voice calls and face-to-face conversations I have bored much of Europe, a great deal of England, parts of Canada and bits of Australia with the same Sophie stories over and over and over again.

But now, in a blink of an eye, in literally a split-second, all of that vanishes. I have no idea how or why or where it all goes. I didn't plan it. I didn't think about it. It was not a conscious effort. But it finally all goes away. Puff-of-smoke is the sort of tired cliché that no one pretending to be a real writer should ever use, but that's actually how it is.

At first, I think it must be an illusion. I tell myself this can't be right. I have come here to get over her and I should be happy, but, in fact, I am almost angry. I have invested so much of my life and thoughts and emotions in being in love with Sophie and now someone or something or some power has taken all that from me.

For a while, I fight back. I look at her picture for hours, but I feel nothing. I actually try to force myself to generate the old feelings. I remind myself of the odd but likeable way she held her pen when she would draw and the quirky way she pronounced "coffee" in a voice just like Audrey Hepburn and her smile and how all that used to make me quiver. But now it does nothing. I push myself to feel what I used to feel and I fail every time. I simply can not summon the emotions that I

have lived with for almost as long as I can remember.

At first, I am at a loss. Being in love with Sophie is what defines me. It is who I am. I am not Mark. I have not been Mark for a long time. For as long as I can remember, I have been MarkWhoLovesSophie.

But I just don't care any more. I don't need her to love me or like me or forgive me or write to me or even think about me. I don't care if she blocks me on Facebook and never reads my emails and deletes my number from her mobile phone (all of which I am sure she has done long ago).

I do not feel cruel or nasty towards her. I don't dislike her, by no means. I hope she has a good and happy life and I will always think of her with great fondness and affection. But, now in my life, Sophie is not the centre.

My life and my future immediately become more important than something and someone from my past. I am far more concerned about my prospects upon return to the UK than I am about what Sophie thinks and does.

Because I truly am no longer in love.

It is over. It is finished.

I don't even want to stroke her hair anymore.

*

At the house in the country, David is raising chickens.

I am fascinated. I have been reading Michael Pollan's account of how a well-run farm can buck the industrial trend and produce quality food in a way that is sustainable and treats the natural world as an ally rather than a beast to be tamed. And here at a pleasant house in the Portuguese countryside, I see how it works.

David has built a small coop from off-cuts of wood and, using wooden posts and some light chicken wire, fenced in an area about the size of my bedroom. The fencing keeps the chickens in and, more importantly, the dogs out.

David's dogs are cute and friendly and warm and when I come to visit they greet me as a friend and nuzzle my arm and love it when I rub them behind the ears. They are sweet and loveable, but they are serious dogs and if they get a chance at a chicken they will break its neck with one quick hard snap of their powerful jaws, devour its raw flesh in seconds and leave behind little more than a bone or two and

some feathers.

There is a single rooster. Roosters don't produce anything, but in a coop act like a sort of village policeman keeping order. A coop without a rooster is anarchy. With one, it's a community.

It's a small scale operation. David has about a dozen chickens, producing between four and eight eggs a day. It's as far away from a factory farm as you can get. But it's perfect for a family who know the difference between good food and bad food and like eggs.

And they are eggs like no other. For breakfast David cooks me two, soft-boiled and served with toast. The shells are like body armour. My gentle tap that normally cracks a supermarket egg wide open makes hardly a dent and I need a couple more hard bashes against the side of my plate to get them open. Inside, the yolks are huge and the sort of deep shade of yellow more often seen on school buses than eggs.

Once cracked open and running into my toast, I dig in. I'm halfway through my second egg and revelling in the rich flavour before it occurs to me that I'm eating them entirely un-garnished. No salt. No pepper. No hefty drizzle of piri piri sauce. I'm just eating eggs on their own and they are delicious.

As we sit there, tucking into our eggs and morning coffee at the dining table just a literal stone's throw from the place where the eggs were laid, David explains how it all works.

Once you've bought a few chickens, the entire operation pretty much sustains itself. You need a small amount of feed, but it's as cheap as chips. David and I drive into the nearby village of Rogil where a huge bag of chicken feed that will last for well over a month costs just twelve euros. There is a good reason why "chicken feed" has become a euphemism for something that costs next to nothing. Chicken feed costs chicken feed.

Aside from the feed and some water, the chickens pretty much do everything for themselves. Chickens love grass and will devour it. Within a week or two of being fenced in, the chickens eat all the grass. They peck every last blade until the entire area is topsoil. Once the grass is gone, they eat feed which eventually comes out as waste and fertilises the soil.

They reproduce. Leave a few eggs in the coop and in short order

some broody hen will hatch them and you'll have even more chickens.

They even eat eggshells. After breakfast, David crushes our shells and tosses them into the coop. Within seconds they are pecked and devoured and well on their way, via chicken, to the topsoil.

Within a month or so, the soil inside the coop has been picked clean of grass, turned over and well fertilised. It's about as good as good soil gets and David plans to move his chickens a few yards away and use the area to grow tomatoes. By moving the chickens across the land, bit by bit, he can, in a completely natural way and at no cost, transform great swathes of raw grassland into fertile soil fit for growing all manner of vegetables.

In all, with the exception of a small amount of feed, it is a completely integrated natural ecosystem. The chickens live a long and happy life. The family enjoy a regular supply of delicious and healthful eggs plus whatever produce they choose to grow. The land around the house grows ever stronger and more fertile.

It works.

There are no industrial pesticides and synthetic nitrogen fertilisers and chemical runoffs into the groundwater and topsoil depletion and "RoundUp Ready weed management systems" from global agribusiness corporations and maybe it's the fresh air and the setting sun and the happy dogs cavorting about the field but I can't help thinking that we really should all be living our lives this way.

I get a taste of such living when David asks me to mind the house. Carla has to be in Lisbon for medical concerns that are her business and I won't write about here. He has to take her.

I agree right away. David has been such a friend to me in my time in the village and aside from a few simple marketing tips and some writing help with his business, I have, so far, found no way to pay him back. So when he asks for my help I jump at the chance. I want to be useful. I want to give something.

I am useless. The house pretty much runs itself and seems to require no assistance from me. I have no idea why I am here.

The chickens are fed and watered when I arrive. David takes me into their coop and I see an actual chicken laying an actual egg which he hands to me and it is naturally warm and I will have it for my breakfast. The rooster who keeps order in the coop sees me as a

threat and attacks my sandal-clad feet, but I don't mind. It's a wonderful experience, but the chickens do not need me.

The boys, Nino and Thomas, come home from school and I make a huge production of preparing supper which, in truth, the boys could pretty much do themselves. Nino gets the oven going, tosses some chicken pieces into a dish and tells me how long to cook it. Thomas measures out the rice and reminds me that the chicken could probably use a little garlic.

I do my best. I make a salad by dumping a few tomatoes on top of a pre-washed, pre-chopped, pre-mixed, pre-everything bag of greens. I clear and set the table. I do what I can but it is clear to any objective observer that these two teenaged boys are perfectly capable of taking care of themselves. I am, as people used to say, 'surplus to requirements'.

I press on. The dogs need feeding. This is a complicated process which involves scooping a load of kibble out of a bag and dumping it in a dish. It is a task that you could train a monkey to do, but I manage to make the whole affair slightly more complicated than a final episode of Masterchef. I change their drinking bowl again and again. No dogs in the entire world enjoy fresher water.

I trek in my cheap sandals through the high grass to the orange trees that grow wild at the edge of the property. I pick slightly less than a dozen and, having neglected to bring a bag, have to pull off my t-shirt and fashion an impromptu carrier. As I walk back, I look down and enjoy the lack of my English flab but commit to losing more weight. But I have oranges and I resolve to set my alarm to get up early to make fresh juice for the boys. I don't know if they like juice, but I will make it anyway and force it down their throats if I have to because it's all I can think of to do and I want to be useful.

In the evening, so Thomas tells me, the dogs have to be let out for a pee break then brought inside for the night. It's a simple task that this intelligent young man could quite easily handle on his own in less time than it takes to tell me what to do, but I step up and spring into action.

Letting them out is easy. It involves little more than opening the door which is something even I can figure out. Getting them back is another thing altogether.

I walk out to the front of the house. I clap and click my fingers

and call out words in English to five dogs who have only ever been spoken to in Portuguese or German. They do not appear and I am seriously worried.

I am in the Portuguese countryside. It is pitch black. There are sounds of barking and growling coming from everywhere and I can't distinguish my dogs from every other animal that, as near as I can figure, is either killing something or chasing something or being killed or being chased.

I worry. I fret. I have no idea what to say to David. "I hope everything went well in Lisbon. I fed the boys. Oh, and by the way, I've lost all your dogs."

Eventually, of course, they return. They know where is home, they know what to do and, like the boys, they don't need me.

*

My landlady Fatima and husband Jorge invite me to lunch along with David, Carla most of the family and few of their friends. There are at least a dozen of us around the table.

The food is simple, but glorious. There is bread. Bread is bread, or so I thought. This is bread baked by angels. There is fish stew. It is simple food. A massive pot, boiled, then fish and potatoes added. Uncomplicated stuff, but the fish is fresh as it can be and tastes as if it just came out of the sea, which it probably did.

I dig in and everyone enjoys the sight of the Englishman digging into Portuguese food. The conversation banters back and forth between excitable and florid Portuguese and serious English and I, once again, resolve to learn some of this language so I can be excitable and florid and much less serious.

Ana sits next to me and translates. She is close to my age and the good friend of one of Fatima's daughters. I am terribly attracted to her. She has a sweet smile and deep eyes and she is honest and true and I like her. She is very Portuguese. She is not head-snappingly incredibly hot. You would not see her and nudge your best mate and say "check this one out!". She is not a "wow! wouldn't mind a bit of that" sort of girl. But she is pretty, in an honest sort of way and I like her.

Nothing happens. But for the first time in many months, I think about a woman other than Sophie.

*

Mostly drink-free, I become obsessed with my body.

Before I came to Portugal, I could not look at myself in the mirror. I could not look at my own body without becoming physically upset. Now I look at it constantly. Every day I examine my body in excruciating detail over and over again. I do it in the morning and at night and often in the afternoon.

I seek visible signs of change. I want to return to England tanned and slim and fit. I want people to see me and think "he's really turned things around." I want word to get back to Sophie and for her to think "he's not the same guy, maybe I oughta give him a break."

Because of my constant walking, I look frequently at my legs. I look at my legs again and again and from every possible angle. I learn to stand up on the balls of my feet which makes my calves look taut and muscular and shapely and I like that. I follow the line of the veins that run down my calf muscles and resolve to work hard to make them more prominent but they are never prominent enough.

I examine my legs every morning and each day decide that they are not thin enough or not muscular enough or have not enough definition so I must go on a long walk to burn fat and build muscle.

So I walk and walk and walk until my muscles burn with pain and when I return I look once more at my legs and decide that the walk has done me good but more must be done.

I do press-ups every morning and most nights and carefully scrutinise my chest for signs of muscularity which are not ever enough.

I look at my collarbones and shoulder blades and enjoy the fact that the bones stick out prominently and are well defined. I love my collarbones. I spend forever in the morning looking in the mirror at my collarbones when I ought to be taking a shower.

I take off my shirt and scrutinise my stomach and understand that I am of the age where no amount of careful dieting will give me a trim midriff but I try anyway.

I wear the light cargo pants that, when I came here, were uncomfortably tight about my waist but are now nicely loose and floppy. I fasten the waist button every morning then push them down

over my hips and feel good because I am now a man who can slide his trousers off without unbuttoning the fly. I repeat the words "bony hips" over and over again because I like the sound of the words and I actually have bony hips and how many fifty-year-old men can say that.

But I am still not satisfied.

*

On the land behind my house, a farmer grazes his cattle. He has about two dozen cows and I know them well. On summer nights when I sleep with the windows open, their bells are my alarm clock.

The land is mostly fallow now and with our weather alternating between days and days of hot sun punctuated by occasional bouts of torrential rain, the grass is lush and plentiful and the cows are happy.

Two dogs, scrappy little Terrier-type things, wander around apparently with nothing much to do.

One of the cows starts to wander off. The scrappy Terrier-type things cock a casual eye in his direction. It seems that a little wandering is permitted, but when the cow crosses some sort of invisible line, the dogs figure it's time they earned their money.

They accelerate like a pair of greyhounds out of the stocks and quickly fall into a sort of wide arc that both puts distance between them and the herd and sets them up for an approach. It's a clever deception; they look like they're attacking but they are actually moving away.

Once in place, they split. They go wide then, at some unseen signal, swing back inward in a pincer movement. As they do, the fast silent running gives way to loud barking and some serious baring of fangs.

There is more deception. They somehow manage to be attacking the cow without really getting near him. It's a sort of canine version of Michael Jackson's moonwalk. They're apparently moving in fast, but they never actually reach the cow. It works and, faced with an attack on two fronts, the cow moves in the only direction possible, back to the herd. The scrappy Terrier-type things go back to their wandering.

The whole affair takes no more than two minutes. The farmer doesn't even look up.

*

As I walk in the sun, I think hard about love.

I realise that there are different types of love. I love my mother. I love my sister. I have nephews and nieces and I love them all.

And I loved Sophie.

And I get to wondering. I wonder if you've loved somebody and that person did not love you back, was your love of no use?

I write to my sister that I have become over Sophie and she replies "Good. No more wasted time." But, I ask myself, was my love a waste of time?

Eventually, and after a heck of a lot of walking in the sunlight, I think, no. In fact, I think, that if you have loved someone, you have created love. It may not be returned and you may never see it again, but you have created love. And by creating love, there is more love in the world. Maybe not for you. But there is more for everyone to share.

Love, I think, sometimes goes off in its own direction and you can not always control it, but it's not ever wasted.

None of this is true, of course. It makes no logical sense and much of it sounds like it came off the inside of a cheap Valentine card.

But I force myself to believe it.

*

Once again I attempt to cook octopus.

I visit the municipal market. It is seven euros a kilo which is a lot, but money isn't really the point here.

"Polvo?" I say. The cuttlefish was tasty, but I know what I want and what I want is octopus.

I choose a medium-sized piece and hand over a tenner from which I receive little change.

She guts and cleans and bags it and I take it home and toss it in the freezer.

The Bittman recipe calls for heavily salted water but, as an aside, he suggests that seawater would be even better. So, in search of authenticity, I walk to the beach. It is a one-and-a-half-hour walk to Praia da Amoreira and I love every minute of it. My legs are fit and strong and my lungs pump air in and out in the way they are designed and the local farm dogs bark at me and I don't care because I've been this way many times before and I know what they're all about and they don't scare me at all.

I am carrying a plastic bottle that once contained 1.5 litres of a

ghastly product called Don Simon sangria that is sold all over Europe and tastes like someone took crummy wine and cheap fruit juice and watered it down and added a dollup of sugar and perhaps even had a small wee into the bottle. It is awful stuff and, unless you're an alcoholic, best avoided.

At the beach I wade out into the sand and clamber about the rocks. The waves crash in and out and I look for a calm spot which I do not find, but I do my best.

As the water rolls in, I drop my plastic bottle and soak up what I can. It's an inefficient process and it takes me three waves to gather a bottleful. Eventually, I have what I came for and leave.

At home, the salt water boils and I drop my frozen octy into the pot.

I chop potatoes into huge chunks and add them to the cauldron. I know I should be using local sweet potato (batata doce) but I really can't be bothered with all that peeling so I opt for normal spuds instead (though they are all local and bought from the Saturday farmers' market).

Ninety minutes later I scoop my sieve spoon into the pot and retrieve my octopus. I lift out chunks of potato and drop them on the plate. I chop the octopus into chunks, drop them into a hot saute pan for a couple of minutes then lay them across the spuds. I push the whole lot to one side of the plate and, on the other side, build a small salad of local cucumber and tomato, grated carrot and local radish all covered in a dash of olive oil and pepper with a handful of grated cheddar for good measure.

It is glorious. It tastes like the sea. It tastes of love and complication and trying and failing and trying again and sort of getting it but giving it another go to get it absolutely right or at least pretty damned close.

I have cooked an octopus!

I don't speak the language. I don't know the history. I don't have a job. I don't pay taxes. I don't understand the culture.

But I don't care.

Because I can cook an octopus.

*

I am at the coffee shop next door to my apartment. I go there most days because I am surreptitiously stealing their wireless internet

connection and I feel a need to pay it back in trade.

The woman who owns and runs the café knows me by now. She is typically Portuguese, so there are no florid greetings and false pretence that we are old friends. But she remembers what I like and occasionally smiles a little.

I sit down. She sees me and, without being asked, prepares me an 'abatanado' which is Portuguese for large coffee but is not a word I get to practice here because she already knows what I want and brings it without being asked. I like this. I like it when tourists are there and they see that I am the kind of guy who doesn't need to order anything. It's the Aljezur equivalent of walking into your local and saying "the usual" and getting your favourite pint. It makes me feel that I belong. I am part of the landscape.

A woman sits at a table nearby. She is crying into her mobile phone and I am annoyed. I am trying to read and she is wailing loudly. I glance at the café owner and she glances back at me and we are both expressionless but she knows that I am annoyed. She knows that I normally spend a half to three-quarters of an hour at the café with my book reader. Today, I drink up and am ready to leave in ten minutes.

As I pay for my coffee the owner looks at the woman and looks back at me. "Mother has died," she explains in her halting English and I immediately feel like the cruellest man in the world.

I pay for my coffee and, as I walk by her table, stop.

"Lamento," I say, as softly as I can. She looks up in tears and smiles.

Lamento. Sorry. I only know it because I learned how to say "Sorry. I don't speak Portuguese." But I know the word and I can use it.

And as I leave, I stop congratulating myself and thinking myself clever for knowing how to ask for salsichas or perna frango and knowing when to say bom dia and knowing how to slur my boa tarde into a rustic boa-arde. But, at the same time, I stop feeling self-critical for not knowing how to speak the language.

I know a word. I know how to say sorry.

And I like to think that, for a woman sitting alone in a coffee shop and hearing the news that her mother has just died, for the only other patron in the café to say "sorry" might be of some comfort.

*

I drop by the local big ugly supermarket for some necessary supplies. At the fish counter, there are salmon heads at just 99c a kilo and I ask for two.

The woman working the counter speaks pretty good English and we chat. I explain. I buy the fish heads and boil them for soup. I boil with vegetables for about an hour, then strain the fish and veg out and eat the soup.

The soup is delicious.

She likes it, but suggests a different way.

“Take the head,” she says. “Cut it in one half and open. Cook on one side then on the other side. Some oil. Not too long. It’s very good.”

I do it. I do it exactly as instructed, but with a little piri piri sauce and some local baby spinach that I have bought in from the weekly farmers’ market.

It‘s not great. There is little meat and not a lot of flavour and plenty of bones.

My soup is better. And I like that.

I like the fact that, after all my time here, local people can tell me about fish and I can listen to them and try out what they say but, when the proof is sitting on the plate, sometimes I am right and they are not and my food is better.

*

David and Carla are back up at the hospital in Lisbon which means I am back at the house in the country. This time it is different.

The blazing sun cascading over the placid rolling hills is gone. The gentle, cooling summer breeze with its touch of citrus and hint of rosemary is also gone. In fact, all the travel writing clichés have completely vanished. There is absolutely nothing left to be sold to the Sunday supplements.

What we have is rain and wind. Mostly wind. It comes in off the Atlantic and rakes the countryside. It has power. It goes where it wants, when it wants and as it does I, once again, understand why the Portuguese were such intrepid explorers. You simply can not stand before such a wind and not think "Ya know. If we put some sails up, I

bet this stuff would get us around the world."

I would love to describe it as "fierce and unrelenting" but it denies me even this tired travel cliché. Most of the time it merely breezes by. Just enough to bend the grass and rustle the trees a little more than usual. Just enough to make it clear that this is not normal wind. Just enough to say "I'm here. I'm around. I'm taking it easy at the moment, but if I wanna crank it up you are gonna know about it."

And when it decides to crank it up, I sure know about it. I trade my sandals for David's wellington boots and trudge out to check on the chickens. They are in terrible shape.

The healthy chickens are closed up next to the two coops desperately seeking some form of shelter from the storm. The normally aggressive rooster leaves me alone. He has better things to do, staying alive being one of them.

I pad out and about.

Eventually I crash into my bed and sleep.

Mid-night comes and I awake and slip into David's wellies and look out at the chicks.

For the most part, they are okay.

But the brooding hen worries me.

Her nest has been blown away in the storm. She sits shivering over a dozen eggs. She is wet and cold and windswept yet she protects the eggs.

I work hard.

I re-build the top of the coop. I do it as gently and quietly as I can. I lift little pieces of roofing onto the coop top. I gently move slabs of old wood and a bit of an old door and some sort of corrugated stuff all on top of the coop. I gather little bits and pieces of rock and stone and terracotta roofing tile and pile them gently on the roof hoping against hope that they will endure against the storm.

The storm lashes me. I am wet and cold and soaked to the skin but I press on.

When I'm not tending to the chickens, I watch the dogs. They are a pack of five and, after hours of observing their behaviour, I finally figure out what they are.

They are Battle of Britain Spitfire fighter pilots.

Most of the time, they laze about in the sun. They don't actually

wear wedge caps and pilot's wings and pick idly at a pipe and wish they were Douglas Bader, but they do the doggy equivalent. Now and again they have a bite to eat or a slurp of water, but not too much and mostly, it seems, more out of boredom than actual hunger or thirst. They play the odd silly rumpus game, but their heart isn't really in it. Mostly, they just laze.

But it's an alert laze. They laze with one ear or eye or (as they are dogs) nose always primed. They are deceptively relaxed but ready for anything.

Let a person or an animal or a car or a strange scent or anything even the slightest bit out of the ordinary come by and they are off like a rocket ship. How they get the signal is beyond my knowledge. I have yet to hear the words "Inbound bogeys. Squadron scramble!" coming out of a tannoy, but there is some canine version of that going on. They all get the message at once. Their powerful Merlin engines fire into immediate action and they are off in formation.

They accelerate out of the house in a way that makes Top Gear's Stig look like a slowpoke. This is a battle group on the move and they move fast. Outside, where there is plenty of ground, they form up. They widen out. Close enough for support. Far enough apart to manoeuvre.

In place they move as a group. As dogs do (and trust me, when you live in Portugal you learn what dogs do) they track in on an oblique angle. They range out. They form a line.

Barking is minimal. They've only got nine yards of .303 and aren't going to waste it. But the message is clear. There is a border here. And it is a border that you do not cross.

And then, when the message has been sent and the threat disappears, they saunter lazily to the house, lie down and go back to sleep.

*

I sit at my front window reading a book under an intermittent sun. A wasp or a bee or some other type of stingy flying thing comes by. For a moment, I worry. I think about the fly swatter. Where is it? Should I get it? Should I whack it with my kindle?

And then I think: Just let the guy fly around. He probably means

no harm. Leave him be.

He flutters about for a minute or two then goes on his way.

*

I travel to Lisbon to see Jana.

I catch a ride with Carla's boys Nino and Thomas. Nino drives. He is 18 years old and has recently got his driving license. He drives like an 18-year-old who has recently got his driving license.

Rap music blares. From the tinny cheap Citroen's speakers there is a non-stop succession of cool wannabe gangstas rapping on about "getting down with my ho bitches in the hood" or some such thing. As the faux-gangbangers prattle on to a never-ending backbeat, Nino races along potholed country roads at 100 kilometres an hour with an extra boost on the gas pedal whenever a particularly tight curve comes up. As a concession to safety, he slows down slightly when sending text messages.

I am scared witless.

We arrive. We are alive, which I think is a nice touch.

I call Jana. We will meet at the Praca do Comercio. I am nervous as hell. Jana and I converse online all the time and have shared many of our personal thoughts. But we have only been in each other's actual company for four days. And that was nearly a year ago. So I am in the car and I am shaking with nerves.

I don't know what to do when we meet after all this time. Do I say hi? Do I shake hands. Do we do the euro kiss thing? I don't know.

We both have Portuguese mobile phones and at the Praca we end up in that typical "where are you I'm next to that thing by the place near to the whatnot" but eventually I see her walking towards me. And, in an instant, my fear vanishes. We hug in a nice way and I feel good.

Right away, we fall back into our chatter. We walk and talk. We pay little attention to where we are going.

We take a patio seat at a restaurant that in the season does a roaring trade but, at this time of year, struggles to survive. As we used to do all those months ago, we order a bottle of wine and sit out in the sun sharing our stories.

It's good. She still has feelings for the boy. I still have feelings for the girl. But we have both moved on. We have not lost the feelings, but we are no longer obsessive. And both of us share the same

thought: how could I have wasted so much time and emotion?

We walk and talk some more with occasional stops for coffee or a snack. In the evening we walk to the Bairro Alto and find a fish restaurant. There is fado which Jana does not care for but is growing on me, though I think music in a restaurant is like art in a restaurant - something everyone can do without.

Afterwards, we visit Santini's, famous in Lisbon for years serving "the best ice cream in the world." I'm not sure if it is, but, even as someone without much of a sweet tooth, I enjoy it. We banter with the young man serving. He knows Aljezur. His brother lives there and he visits when he can. We swap opinions about the relative merits of Praia da Arrifana versus Amoreira. He is entirely wrong in his preference as am I, but the banter is fun for both of us and he adds a little extra to our cups.

I take a vanilla and lemon. Jana goes for a mix of berries. We sit and talk about what and who we always talk about and take little tastes of each other's ice cream then talk some more.

As we move about the city, café and restaurant owners don't quite know how to take us. Maitre d's and proprietors, anywhere in the world, are pretty good at sizing up clientele. When they spot a family, they are warm and welcoming. When they spot a romantic couple, they lower their voice and gently suggest a quiet booth in the corner. Co-workers get the efficient "hello guys, what can we get ya" approach.

But no one can figure us out. We look different so are clearly not family. It's not father and daughter out for a meal. We are too close for that, but not too close. We laugh and smile and joke and share personal things. But there is no physical intimacy. We don't touch or gaze or do any of the other things that mark a couple. We are complicated.

Nobody can figure us out. It's kind of fun.

At the restaurant where we eat fish that is okay but not nearly as good as the fresh stuff I get from the Aljezur mercado, there is a couple next to us. As Jana and I swap stories and talk about our lives and hopes and plans and dreams for the future and as we listen and laugh, the woman of the couple looks often over at us. I can see in her face that she is confused. She looks at us: Romantic - no. Family - no. Acquaintances - no. She can't figure it out.

And I really want to lean over and explain.

We are friends.

*

There are two dogs in the garden behind my apartment. I decide to kill them.

They bark constantly from sun-up to sun-down and beyond. They are horrid little things.

I like dogs. I like Portuguese dogs. David's dogs. Lean, muscular dogs with a set of jaws that will snap your neck in two and an attitude to match.

The dogs behind my house are crummy little things, more poodles than real dogs. They are the sort of awful things that shirtless gay men in cities carry on leashes while rollerblading down bicycle paths. How two of them have ended up in this village is a mystery to me.

I try everything to quiet them. I scream abuse from my back balcony. This produces a full three minutes of silence. I bang on the garden door and am rewarded with another three minutes. I move them into a small space where I can close a gate. They are quiet but I can't live with being the sort of man who locks up dogs so I free them and they get back to their barking.

One afternoon the barking rises to a fever pitch. It's louder than ever by a factor too much to measure.

I walk downstairs to investigate. Someone has tethered another dog to my front door. It's a big brute, a proper Portuguese dog, the kind I like. But it is driving the scrappy little poodles absolutely mad.

I take the leash and walk to the café next door but nobody owns the dog. I walk about the street, but no one recognises it. My GNR Personal Protection Detachment are not about so I can't turn it into the police.

There is nothing I can do. I can't release the mutt; who knows where it will end up. But the poodle barking is driving me nuts.

And then, in an instant, my mind shifts. "Mark. You are in Portugal. You are not in an aggressive place. Don't attack. Embrace. Kindness works."

I go upstairs and fill a plastic bowl with water. I take it downstairs and put it out in a shady spot for the crappy poodles.

Minutes later all is quiet.

*

Somebody once said to me "I don't trust non-drinkers. The only people who don't drink are alcoholics."

So true.

I have never had much time for the professional recovering

alcoholic. The person who can't wait to tell you how wonderful he was to get off the drink. The person with a constantly running calendar in his head who, when asked how long he's been without alcohol, answers proudly "six years, nine months, three weeks, two days and four hours" or some such thing.

I don't want to be like that. Counting years and days and months and then adding them up is unhealthy and bores people. And it becomes a competition between drunks. The person who has been away from alcohol for three months feels he's accomplished something. Then along comes someone who hasn't touched a drop in twelve years and the first person feels small.

As well, when counting the days, one drink puts you back to zero. If your accomplishment is one month or six months or a year or whatever, then a single drink takes all that away and you are back to the start.

Better, I think, to work hard to become a person who is healthy, eats well, is active and, just by the way, doesn't happen to drink much, or at all. Aim to be that sort of person.

As a writer, I naturally see and relate to the world in language. I look for language that will express the person I strive to be. I think about the phrase "I don't drink" and I don't like it. It is dogmatic. It pushes the speaker's sobriety in the face of the listener, who may not want to hear it. It's like being a vegetarian. Telling people you are a vegetarian is not just about you. It is, in itself, a way of attacking people for eating meat.

There is the word "teetotaller" but it's an outdated word and sounds a bit like a cult.

I think for a while. I need a phrase that will become a goal. I need a phrase to describe myself. Not the myself of right now, but the myself I want to become.

Eventually, it comes to me.

"I'm really not much of a drinker."

That's my goal. I want to be out, maybe after work with the office crowd. Somebody stands up to get his round in. I ask for an orange juice. The questions, as they always do in our drinking culture, come fast. Are you driving? Don't you drink? Are you teetotal? On the wagon?

And my goal is to make no excuses, not to pretend, but to say, in all honesty, "I'm really not much of a drinker."

*

Criminals of Aljezur beware!

The Guarda Nacional Republicana returns. And they're not just here for coffee. This is serious paramilitary law enforcement.

Two highly trained officers sit, weapons at the ready, in a four-wheel-drive vehicle loaded (I imagine) with all manner of powerful specialised defensive weaponry.

They back into the space outside my apartment with the engine ticking over ready to go and the front end pointed at the roadway and are clearly poised and alert and set to rumble on a moments' notice.

Even on a Sunday, my GNR Tactical Security VIP Personal Protection Squad is on the job and ready for action.

*

Spring is coming.

It's not spring in that romantic birds-chirping, grass-growing, crops-sprouting sort of way. It's wet. It rains hard and often. The sky is dark.

But between it all, there are signs of better things. Temperatures rise. The nights are no longer cold. And from time to time, the sun darts and dodges between the black clouds, peeking out when it is able, giving us an intermittent sense of the heat and light that is to come.

"Give it a few weeks," it seems to say. "Once these black clouds are out of the way, it's gonna be nice."

On the paths in the hills, flowers slowly re-appear. Okay, they are probably weeds. But they are pretty and colourful and I like them.

My watch, which still loses minutes a day and is still mostly useless as a timepiece, gradually takes up its previous role as keeper of the flowers.

Summer is not yet here. But, like a welcome guest, it has called ahead to say "Sorry. Running late. Be there shortly."

*

My landlady leaves me nine oranges from the trees behind the apartment.

They are bright and ripe and a simple squeeze makes it clear that they are as juicy as an orange can be and they would be delicious except for the fact that I don't eat fruit.

I message David but he's got five orange trees behind the house and needs citrus fruit in much the same way that a fish needs a

bicycle.

I walk to the bus stop just next to the village market. Even in the off season there are often backpackers coming and going. On the bench there is a girl. She has a huge rucksack with the LIS tag still attached.

"Hola," I say. "Fala Inglese? Do you speak English?"

"Yes, I do," she says in the sort of accent that would meet with approval from BBC Radio.

"Are you American? Canadian?"

"I am from Germany," she says and I am once again amazed at these people.

I offer oranges. I explain.

She smiles. She is comfortable. She happily accepts two oranges and I go on my way.

I am happy. I think that if you are a German girl travelling in a small Portuguese village and somebody gives you two nice fruit and asks for nothing in return that is something you will remember. It won't be the highlight of your visit to Portugal, but it will be a good small moment. It will be a sort of "I was in this little town waiting for a bus and this man came up and gave me two oranges" sort of thing.

And for me, it is another chance to be normal. And I realise that, on this journey, this is what I have been searching for. With Jana and Martina and Elly and Abby and Maria at the Mercado and others, I have been seeking chances to be normal. Chances not to be a creep. Chances to have a friendly interaction with an attractive young woman and not to fall in love and not to be strange and not to call her up in the middle of the night. Chances to be normal.

I leave the remaining fruit at the local youth hostel and return happily to my apartment.

*

In nearby Rogil there is a soup festival. I know this because I have laboriously copied down the Portuguese words from the posters about the village then equally laboriously typed them into the online translator.

It is the first annual Soup Festival and there is no way I am going to miss it.

There is a bus, but I am now an authority on my little bit of the Rota Vicentina, so I walk it. It's not a particularly nice day and the Aljezur - Rogil leg isn't the most scenic part of the Rota, but it's not raining and with the sun behind the clouds it's nicely cool so I

approach the walk as a bit of a fresh-air exercise for me and my Chinese Shop sandals both of which are still going strong.

I ask the way and am guided in the right direction by what seems to be half the population of the little village and find my way to the Rogil Multipurpose Facility. Like the facility in Aljezur, it is entirely charmless and seemingly built to spite the local architecture.

Inside what looks to me like the crappiest high school gym in the world there is everyone. There are old people giving life to the word "spry" and middle aged people in country clothes chatting in a familiar way with other middle aged people in country clothes. There are little children in dresses and short pants running about and teenagers in jeans wishing their parents weren't here so they could go outside for a smoke but meanwhile (because they may be cool as all hell but are still Portuguese) are keeping one eye on Grandma in case she needs anything.

I buy a bowl for three euros which seems a lot for a bowl of soup. I wouldn't pay that much for the bowl itself.

Eventually, and by eventually I mean a good ten minutes of charades with a half dozen helpful locals who speak English in the same way that I speak Portuguese which is to say "not", I figure it out. You pay for the bowl and can go up as often as you like to any table you like.

I go nuts. I eat spinach soup. And butternut squash soup. And a smooth broccoli and garlic soup. And leek and sweet potato soup. And …, well, the list goes on.

I think, in a funny way, that I might be eating the farmers' market in convenient soup-like form. Then I realise, that is exactly what I am doing. There are about a dozen soups on offer here from local cooks. Each is different but all have one thing in common. They are all made with stuff grown within walking distance of the architecturally ghastly multipurpose facility.

I stuff my face with soup after soup. I gorge myself. I shovel bowl after glorious bowl into my greedy mouth. I get my three euros worth, then another three, then a bit more and then some. I could bankrupt this place. The locals sitting nearby laugh and smile in a nice way at the foreigner who can't stop eating soup.

Eventually the soup runs out and I am forced to stop. Some local celebrity or politician or master of ceremonies bounces out with a microphone and a forced smile and awards a prize for something or other to pretty much every soup-maker in the room. It's a bit like a high school sports day where even the dumb kid who ran the wrong

way and got lost in the woods gets a medal for "participation", but I don't care.

Give them all a prize, I think to myself.

It's bloody good soup.

*

As I open my front windows, a woman is hitchhiking. It's an odd place to do it and she seems to have no luck. Twenty minutes later, when I finish eating my breakfast (yes, I actually eat, rather than drink, breakfast) she is still there.

"Hola! Bom dia. Hello!" I call out. "Fala Inglese? Do you speak English?"

She nods and I do a bit of "I'll be right down" finger pointing.

She's got a huge suitcase and a hastily scrawled piece of paper with the word "Lisbon" written on it in blue pen and that nobody in a passing car could possibly read. Her English is sketchy, but she understands me.

"If you are going to Lisboa, this is not the best place to hitch," I say. "Cars come into the village on this road and go all different directions. So even if someone stops, they probably won't be going your way."

She nods and looks a little confused.

"If you walk down here," I say, pointing down the road. "Turn right, cross the bridge and go to the roundabout. Take the left turn where you see the big supermarket. It's not far. But that is the Lisbon road, the EN 120. All the cars on that road are headed for Lisboa and I think you will have more success there."

She thanks me and sets off and, for the first time ever, Friendly Foreign Person has actually provided some Impressive Local Knowledge.

*

For the last time, I walk David’s dogs.

The sun is out and they lie about lazily. Getting them up and active takes a heck of a lot of finger clicking and clapping and a good bit of poking and prodding.

But finally they join in the walk. The boy, Junior, can’t be bothered and stays home. But Kika, my favourite is up for a trot as is Jenna the other female. Even Bug, the old man who in his long life has fathered or grandfathered half the dogs in Aljezur, comes along and makes a

good effort to keep up with the group.

We push across the field, the grass scratching against my sandal-clad feet.

At the end of the field there is a route that leads to somewhere or other. It's more than a trail but not quite a road and I have no idea where it leads and I don't care.

The dogs do that clever doggy thing of prancing about looking like they're going their own way but somehow following my route and keeping my pace.

From time to time they stop and make a big show of sniffing the air and looking very alert to any danger and ready to spring into action if required, though it never is.

I play with them. I run and they hop and skip about. I walk slowly and they trot quietly alongside. I suddenly change direction and they do the same.

I am in the countryside with three healthy happy dogs. I am a healthy happy man.

*

I leave the village. It is my time to go.

It happens in a flash. Literally in an instant.

I sit on the balcony reading and taking in the sun. I think about nothing of any importance. It's just another day. I've been expecting to be here for a month, perhaps longer. I have given it no thought.

But in an instant, and out of nowhere, an emotion rushes into me: "I have to go."

I walk inside, open the computer and book a flight ten days hence.

The whole thing takes less than five minutes and it scares me witless. Will I find a job? A life? Even somewhere to live.

The drinking is coming under control. Will the progress continue? Or will I slide back into Hell?

I don't know and I am frightened.

But I know that it's time.

I love this country and I will be back. I will explore the north and the mainland. I will experience the culture of which I have merely scratched the surface. I will eat more rice and more fish and will learn new ways to cook octopus. I will figure out some of the language.

But, for now, my purpose here is done.

*

At the office, everyone knew how I was about Sophie.

Some knew more than others. But everybody to a greater or lesser extent knew.

Everyone had a different opinion about me. Some thought I was mad. Some thought I was a creep. Some just figured I was nuts.

But there was one thing that everyone understood.

Why?

Everyone got it.

Over time, people would express opinions. How could you do that? What is going through your mind? What's with you, you freak?

But nobody, not a single person, ever said "why Sophie?"

No matter what I did or what my behaviour or what people thought about any of that, nobody questioned my falling for Sophie.

Everybody understood.

You may be a creepy, inappropriate, scary fool and I hate or understand or don't get it. But you fell in love with Sophie.

There were many people who couldn't understand what I did.

But there was not a single person who didn't understand why I fell in love with Sophie.

*

I sleep at the castle for the last time.

I walk up the hill in the late evening with my blanket wrapped awkwardly about my shoulders. It's not warm, but it's not cold either. There is no one about so a middle-aged foreigner in cheap plastic sandals with a duvet slung over his back attracts no attention.

At the top, I lay the blanket out along the rock wall. I lie down on one half and pull the other above me.

It's not as comfortable as it sounds. The brick wall is hard and unfeeling as … well, a brick wall.

But it's quiet. The sky is clear and there are stars and a cool air breathes in from the ocean. There is no one here. But there is peace. I can talk to myself. I can cry. I can feel both sad that I am leaving this place and hopeful for my new life.

But mostly I just pull my blanket around me and sleep and learn how to be alone.

*

On my way out of Portugal, I stay a few days at the same Lisbon hostel where I began my journey. It is quieter out of the season, but there is still a bustle of young people coming and going.

In the morning I sit at the same table where, so long ago, I could barely drink my coffee. This time, my hands don't shake. The coffee stays in the cup. The walk up and down the staircase does not frighten me. I am normal.

At the long breakfast table there are boys and girls from all parts of the globe. They are friendly and we chat nicely and my deep suntan and long time in Portugal gives me a certain credibility and interest. But we are not of the same world. They are trim and slim and hard and taut and I look at them in their tight clothes and slack jeans with their easy flexibility that lets them twist their legs and arms in a convoluted way that I can never accomplish without serious pain. I compare my body to theirs and I know that no matter how hard I try I will never again be such a thing. They are young and I am not and I realise that is the point of all this.

And with that, and after so much time and loads of rice and plenty of fish and days and days of walking alone in the hills, I finally come to understand.

Sophie is my youth.

- end -

#

Epilogue

- The Bridge Grocery was quickly demolished. The business moved to a much smaller location in the Old Town where just three of the staff remain in work.
- David and Carla are happy, as are the boys. The dogs are healthy and the chickens produce more eggs than the family can eat.
- Jana met again with her boy. No relationship resulted, but there are other nice boys.

- Mark Hill returned to the UK. After a period of intense culture shock and a brief alcoholic relapse, he returned to sobriety and, as of this writing, does not drink.
- He has had no contact with Sophie and is still blocked on Facebook.

#

How To Cook An Octopus

- Start with a visit to the municipal market and buy a nice fat polvo (octopus).
- Then freeze it. This helps to break down the membranes and soften up the meat.
- Go to the Aljezur farmers' market on Saturday morning for a selection of fresh produce grown locally.
- Drop the frozen octopus in a pot of salty water (sea water is best if you happen to live near the ocean), bring to the boil and simmer for at least 90 minutes but likely closer to two hours.
- Olives and local peanuts make a nice snack when your friends come by. Bread and olive oil is another traditional offering.
- Make sure to invite David who is a much better cook than you and will help out in the kitchen. If you are lucky and are quite clever about faffing about the kitchen looking busy doing quite useless things with the potatoes, Peter will do the next steps for you.
- When the polvo is ready, take it out of the water.
- Slice the webbing between each tentacle upwards towards the body. Cut each tentacle away and slice into large, but bite-sized, chunks. The head is good eating, but some people don't find it appetising. Keep it for later or chop into strips.
- Sweat off some onions and garlic in a frying pan. Dump in a good glug of olive oil (don't believe all that stuff about olive oil having a low smoking temperature; that's all rubbish).
- Once the pan is ready, turn up the heat and flash fry the octopus for 3 or 4 minutes. It's already cooked, you're just browning it off.
- Serve with rice, vegetables and a light wine. Rose or vinho verde (young wine) are good choices.

Then dig in and enjoy. When the food is good and the company even better, lunch in Portugal can take all afternoon.

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To see photographs of the people and places mentioned in this book, visit www.sophiericeandfish.weebly.com.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For more about Mark, visit www.markhillonline.com.