

## Mark does Marseilles

A Mark the Spanner Story

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It was about two weeks after the Gene Hackman film had been on the telly – the French Connection – the one where he goes to Marseilles to sort out some Drug smugglers. That was where the idea of Marseilles came from, certainly not from any geography lessons, where Mark did not to pay much attention.

Mark was 14 years old. His elder brother had left home some time ago and his mum and dad weren't getting on. His dad wasn't around much anyway, he was doing a lot of overtime and then going to the pub after work. Looking back much later, Mark reckoned that his mum was probably under a lot of pressure, that's why she snapped. At the time it seemed grossly unfair – just because his school uniform had got a bit ripped, she went absolutely spare, shouting at him and locked him in his bedroom. For some reason he didn't know why, he really felt that it was the last straw. He felt a sense of burning injustice and outrage, and a growing conviction that he was NOT going to put up with being treated like a child anymore.

He decided then and there it was time to leave home. He also decided that not only was he going to leave home, but that he was going to go to Marseilles. It wasn't a clear plan, but it was a destination that promised a new life away from petty concerns like ripped uniforms. Mark had a clear vision that it was the right thing to do.

'...Doesn't know how luck she is. Lucky I even wore the grotty uniform at all – well I'm not going to be needing to wear any uniforms where I'm going now', he muttered to himself as he packed his duffle bag. His Post Office account book (£27 in credit), the passport he had from the school trip to France, and his denim jacket, that was everything. He climbed out of the window at about midnight, after he was sure his mum was asleep (no sign of his Dad), then went back into the house using the back door key from under the plant pot. Took £12 from his mum's purse, a loaf of bread and a jar of jam and a pack of biscuits, before setting off into the night.

His first stop was his friend's house. He threw gravel at the window. He knew that Andy would come with him, he was always up for it. All he said to Andy was 'Come on, we're going to Marseilles, you'll need your passport and as much money as you can get.' Andy didn't question the suggestion – was positively happy to go along with it – as if it was the most natural thing in the world to decide to leave home for France in the middle of the night.

Andy usually went along with Mark's ideas. He said that things at home got far too boring so it was good to do something different. He hardly ever saw his dad, who was involved in building power stations, and stayed far away on-site for months at a time. He said he'd forgotten what his dad looked like. His mum was completely taken up with looking after his two younger sisters and didn't have any time left over for Andy. In practice it seemed that Andy had more or less a free hand and could get away with whatever he wanted, his mum simply didn't have time to notice what was going on. Mark and Andy had been friends on and off since they first met at the age of four. They went to the same school but they were in different classes. Andy, maybe because he had time on his hands, maybe just because of his personality, tended to spend

more time reading books. Mark tended to spend most of his time pottering about making things.

They got the last bus into town. It was full of drunken miners with a dangerously celebratory edge, they were singing football songs and there was a smell of fighting in the air. They got off at the Motorway intersection and walked up to the south slipway to start hitching. It was a fine night. Not much traffic and deadly quiet after the noise of the bus. They stared up at the night sky, trying to make the stars out against the glare from the orange glare of the streetlights. Mark found an old piece of card in the litter at the side of the road and used his school biro to write 'Dover' as big as he could.

They waited patiently, thumbs at the ready. No traffic. A car went by about once every five minutes, but it was all local traffic, nothing venturing down the slipway onto the motorway at this hour. After about an hour they were getting cold and downcast. Andy was talking about trying it again tomorrow. Mark tried to argue him out of it, ('It's a long way home mate', and 'where's your sense of adventure?'), but he could see that Andy was pretty serious, so, reluctantly, he threw down his sign and started to trudge along the verge in the direction of home. A dirty looking transit van went by. Mark stuck out his thumb and waved it madly. At first they thought it had gone past, but then they heard it reversing back towards them. 'I'll drop you off at the services' said the driver. He was in dirty clothes and looked like he was probably a builder. Mark eagerly climbed in and Andy followed. 'Great' he said, that that was it, they were off on the journey south.

The Services was a strange oasis of night activity. They made their way to the transport café and got a plate of chips each, covering them in ketchup and greedily cramming them into their mouths. Mark went around the tables, talking to the sprinkling of lorry drivers there, asking them for rides south. Most of them were friendly, one of them bought each of them a coke, said he was going north, but to come to his cab while he put a call out on the CB radio for his mate to pick them up. Turned out his mate had already gone past the Services, and they found themselves out in the cold night again.

They sat on the verge of the slipway, and Mark tried to make another sign, but his biro broke and he gave up. It must have been about half three in the morning, they were really tired. Not much traffic, not much chance of a lift. Andy spotted a car that looked like it was abandoned in the corner of the car park. It was dirty and one of the front tyres was nearly flat. They tried the door and it opened. They made themselves as comfortable as they could inside and slept.

Mark woke with a sore hip and the gear stick hooked into the waistband of his Levis. Andy had got into the back and was sleeping like a baby. He struggled free, kicked his friend awake and they bought hot tea for breakfast, it was just getting light. They sat on the verge of the slipway and ate some of Mark's bread and jam, dipping hunks into the jar. Although it was early, there were several truckers taking breakfast in the café. Mark did the rounds again, asking at each table in turn, and found an enormously fat grey haired driver who agreed to take them to Dover.

It turned out to be a lucky ride. They got chatting to him – Doug. He was carrying 'engineering components' – transformer parts for export. He had a creased but kind face and chatted easily with them. They felt elated sitting so high up in the cab watching the white lines unroll before them, truly being kings of the road. They talked about fishing and football, then the trucker described getting divorced from

his wife, and how he missed seeing his kids. Doug took a shine to them, bought them both lunch and told them that he was going to Rouen in France, and that he was happy to take them both that far. At Dover they had to get off the lorry as foot passengers, and bought day-trip return tickets, then met Doug in the canteen on the ferry, where he insisted on buying them fish and chips and shared his half-bottle of red wine with them.

Mark and Andy had been on the ferry before (school trip to Calais, the previous year), but they were enjoying being on the road much more this time, a feeling of adulthood and freedom. Their energy and curiosity was livening up Doug's journey no end as they eagerly listened to his stories of lorry blockades and breakdowns. The crossing was calm and the time went quickly. Arriving in Calais, they made their way through the French customs without any problem. Mark and Andy had been nervous that they would be asked where their parents were, or asked to explain themselves, but no one gave them a second glance. As arranged, Doug picked them up in the lorry park, and they began their journey across France.

High up in the cab, Mark studied a Michelin map of France intently, tracing their steady progress along the roads towards Rouen, and interrogating Doug closely for information about Marseilles. Everything was a novelty, they passed some of the time looking at how different everything was in France – the traffic lights, the cars, the way people dressed and the look of the buildings.

Passing through Rouen in the early evening, Doug set them down at rather grim looking intersection, what they had agreed would be the best road junction for hitch hiking on to Marseilles. He gave each of them a bar of Cadbury's Fruit and Nut and a can of Coke and wished them luck. It wasn't until after the lorry had disappeared into the distance that they realised they didn't have any French money, and only the vaguest idea of a plan of action.

It was a windy afternoon, and they stood for two hours at the side of the road waving their thumbs around in the most appealing and energetic ways they could. Nothing stopped. They ate the chocolate and drank the Coke. Finished the bread. Hitched some more. Night came. Still no joy.

Eventually, as the wind began to blow large dark rain-clouds across the huge dark sky, Andy pointed to an isolated farmhouse and barn, down the hill, set back from the road. It looked grim and unfriendly, but it was the only sign of life apart from the road. 'Maybe we can kip in the barn for the night, things will be better in the morning' he muttered.

They trudged down the rough path and approached cautiously, fearful of the loud barking of two dogs. Knocked on the peeling paint door. After a rather long wait, a stern looking man opened up, a shotgun in the crook of his arm. He was obviously the farmer, he had a tanned face, silver hair and a big nose, and looked extremely suspicious of them. Mark didn't have much French and felt intimidated enough to find it difficult enough trying to talk to him in English. Andy remembered a few words from his French lessons, and pitched in with: 'Nous sommes Anglais. Nous cherchons un lit pour la nuit si'il vous plait'. He pointed at the barn across the courtyard.

As soon as Andy had spoken, it was as if the sun had come out, the farmer grinned broadly. 'Anglais', he repeated, beckoning them into the house. They found themselves in a large farmhouse kitchen, the man pointed for them to sit down at the

huge table and gestured for his wife to give them food. She set them each a bowl of soup and a hunk of crusty bread. The farmer put glass tumblers in front of them and poured in generous measures of red wine. He then disappeared whilst his wife watched them eat, she had folded arms and a severe expression on her face, the boys were not at all sure what to make of the situation.

The farmer returned to the kitchen carrying a small and old looking wooden box. He set it down and took out some faded black and white photos which he spread proudly on the table. The photos showed smiling soldiers on tanks, with peasants and bottles of wine. In some they were waving small Union Jack flags. The farmer pointed out a young dark haired boy of about six, then pointed to himself. Andy was exclaiming look mate, they're Sherman tanks, look, that's brilliant, he was in the war mate. 'Les Anglais – Liberation' the farmer was saying as he raised his glass and drank in celebration.

This went on for a while. Andy and Mark had finished their bread and soup, and their tumblers had been refilled with more of what was doubtlessly home made wine. They failed to understand any of what he was saying, and neither he, nor his wife could understand any of their attempts to communicate. After it was clear that no further progress could be made, the farmer left the room again, this time for quite a while, during which the farmer's wife sat glaring at the boys impassively and little else happened. After what seemed like an age, he returned with a young Frenchwoman, Clara. Turned out that she was the farmer's niece and that she lived in a cottage further down the road. She spoke some English and was able to translate.

The farmer explained that most of the locals around here hated the English, that he, Remy, was from Normandy, and was eternally grateful to the English for saving them from the Germans who had killed his dad and raped his mum. They thought that he must mean rape anyway, Clara was having a bit of a time trying to translate it all, and they were all getting rather drunk as the farmer kept filling their glasses and making more toasts.

After a while the farmer's wife seemed to get even more bad tempered and serious, and whispered in the farmer's ear and gave very stern looks. It was announced that it was time for him to take Clara home – saying goodbye involved kissing them both on both cheeks, and they both went bright red. The farmer's wife took them firmly each by the elbow and steered them to a damp-smelling upstairs room in which there were two narrow beds made up with thin blankets. The boys were pretty drunk and went straight to sleep.

It was very early in the morning when they were woken by the farmer's wife opening the curtains to let in the thin grey light of dawn. They both felt distinctly the worse for wear as they stumbled about trying to find their boots. Outside they could hear cocks crowing. She seemed as brusque as the previous night, pointing severely to the large jug and bowl in the corner of the room, jabbering away in French and waving the cake of soap at them before striding out and slamming the door shut. They washed their faces and hands as well as they could in the cold water. There was no towel to be seen, so they used their T shirts to dry themselves.

They found their way back down to the kitchen where there were small cups of coffee and a tiny piece of bread each set out on the table for them. The farmer was nowhere to be seen. They got the message. Downed the meagre breakfast as fast as they could and shouted goodbyes and thanks as they made for the door, retracing their steps back to the main road.

'I don't think she was from Normandy' remarked Andy. 'Nah, but I think Clara might have been' responded Mark.

It was drizzling with rain, and it wasn't long before they were distinctly wet and miserable. Standing shivering at the edge of the road with the sour taste of last night's wine in their mouths.

After what seemed like a very long time, a French lorry stopped. They ran to it calling out 'Marseilles' to the driver. He responded 'Non' wagging his finger in the negative, that was all they could understand of what he was saying. They got in the lorry anyway. The cab was thick with Gauloise smoke. Andy was coughing, but Mark thought that the smell was ok – a bit interesting. The driver tried to talk to them a couple of times but soon gave up and settled down to driving in silence when it became clear that there was no common language.

After a while Mark got out the Michelin Map that Doug had given them. The Frenchman glanced at it and traced a stubby finger along the N71. Mark and Andy peered at the map carefully. They pointed out the intersection where they wanted to be dropped, and the driver nodded in the affirmative. He made another attempt at conversation that ended in failure, the boys did not understand a word. The rest of the journey consisted of the boys tracing the route carefully on the map, and the driver chain smoking Gauloises.

He dropped them off as arranged, and they spent a refreshing time doing imitations of French speaking gorillas, amusing themselves greatly in the weak sunshine. They were feeling very hungry by now, but there were no signs of shops or a café, so no option but to continue with the journey. At least there was plenty of traffic, which made them feel optimistic. This time it did not take very long before a lorry stopped. The driver looked fairly young and had long blond hair. Turned out that he was German, and that he spoke a few words of English. Yes, he was going to Marseilles. He was going to the docks to drop off what he called 'Delicatessen', and then to pick up something from 'Maroc'. They couldn't make out exactly what it might be, Mark thought that it was probably oranges, but Andy disagreed.

They felt happy to be on their way. The German had bottles of water and small packages of smoked cheeses in the cab, which he generously shared with the boys. They hungrily devoured all they could. It was a long slow ride down to Marseilles. They stopped twice for comfort breaks at service stations. There didn't seem to be anywhere they could change money, so they were unable to buy anything, the German bought them each a milky coffee but seemed unwilling to buy anything more, and refused to accept any English money.

After a very long day, the sun sunk low to the horizon and evening fell, the lorry ground its way into Marseilles, grinding laboriously across the darkening city towards the 'Portuaria' – a district full of run-down looking warehouses and rail tracks. Eventually they reached a large gateway, the official entrance to the docks area, with uniformed men in kiosks checking all the comings and goings. The German signalled that it was time for them to get out, and they thanked him before leaping clear of the cab and watching as the lorry disappeared into the restricted zone.

They had arrived. Downtown Marseilles. Early evening, with more drizzle. Not a pretty sight. They were very hungry. The first job was to get some French Francs. After asking around they located a bureau de change on the edge of the port area.

Andy had a £5 note and Mark had £6 left in change from the money he had taken from his mother's purse. They changed it all into Francs and went food shopping.

Next door to the bureau de change kiosk was a small Supermarche. They bought bread, sausage, a piece of the cheapest cheese and a packet of what they hoped were chocolate biscuits.

They sat outside on a bench in the last of the evening light, eating and joking. 'What are we going to do now then?' Asked Andy, after they'd eaten their fill and tired of making impressions of French gorillas and German panzer drivers. Mark said that they needed to find the bar where all the villains hung out and have a drink there, and that if nothing happened, then they could go home. Andy agreed. Neither of them wanted to burst the bubble, they were happy enough acting out being Gene Hackman in the French Connection, with the blind faith that they would be able to survive and return home ok.

If anyone had asked, they would have both testified that they had had a brilliant time getting to Marseilles, the most fun of their life so far, and they would not regret a moment, even if they had been told them that they were stupid and irresponsible.

They wandered the streets of downtown Marseilles, looking for the definitive hangout. There was no shortage of bars to choose from. Starting from where they had been sitting, there were a couple of small bars at the edge of the port gate. Mark dismissed these at a quick glance 'Nah – those are no good, look, they're full of softies and Germans, those aren't villains, we'll know when we find the right one, c'mon'.

They wandered into the red light district, where women stood on street corners and in doorways with short skirts, fishnet tights and red lips. Most of the women ignored the boys. One spat at them, they all seemed to know that they were English. A couple of them were giving them the come-on 'I give you a nice time, only 20 Francs'. 'Sorry girl' responded Mark, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, they walked on past, giggling.

Later, when Mark looked back and told the story of his Marseilles trip, he explained: 'We were so keyed up and nervous, trying to be grown up, that if anyone had even asked us the time we would have tried to hit them.'

They trudged the streets for over an hour, evening slipped into night. After peering at what seemed like hundreds of bars, they were back near the docks. They looked at each other for confirmation when they came across a particularly seedy looking establishment, bordering a derelict warehouse on a grimly silent street of empty apartments. 'Yes Mark' said Andy. 'Yes mate' he replied. They agreed instantly that this was it – Marseilles most seedy hangout. The bar was seedy and run down with dirty windows. Inside burly men with dark frowns and stubble were clustered around tables, smoking and playing cards. Dangerous-looking men with tattoos and scars. Significantly rougher looking than any of the other bars they had seen.

They went in. Mark went over to the barman and, with a slight quaver in his voice, tried to sound as hard as he could as he ordered 'two beers mate', flashing a five franc note. The barman gave an almost imperceptible nod, poured yellow liquid into two small dirty glasses slapping the two beers onto the marble top with professional disregard, so that they slopped foam down the side, then taking the proffered note and dropping coins for change in a small plastic tray, which he slid to rest beside the beers.

The boys stood nervously at the bar, sipping the bitter yellow liquid through the thick white foam. They took furtive glances around talking quietly to each other, they kept their expressions serious.

No one took any notice. 'That's one of the ways that you can tell that the men are real villains' Mark was saying. Andy replied quietly, 'Don't look now, but those guys in the corner, the ones with the leather jackets, they're planning a bank job.' Mark responded 'Yeah, and see that other guy, one along from the barman, he's a hitman, you can tell from that bag that he's got, and the way he's paring his nails with a knife – that's what they do'.

They sipped their beer slowly. Continuing to mutter quietly to each other and trying not to smile. When they told their stories later, they explained that this was the high point of the whole trip. The reason why they had travelled all the way from England, and something that you would never be able to find anywhere else. 'The real thing mate'.

Eventually, when the slowly sipped glasses were getting towards empty, Andy struck a serious note: 'Look mate – what's next? I'm tired and I want to go home. I dunno where we're going to sleep tonight. I came along for the ride, but this was all your idea, what's happening now we've had our drink? – it's not like we've exactly got a lot of dosh for getting home.'

Andy had broken the code that required them to avoid ever talking about what was really happening. Mark looked stung and shamefaced, nursing his nearly empty glass a long time before he finally replied.

'OK Andy, you're right. I haven't exactly thought all this through. I needed to get away. I had this idea that if we could just get to the right place, something great would happen. I can see now that we're in a bit of a pickle. A long way from home with no money and nowhere to go. Sorry mate. It's all my fault. I've been stupid.'

This was big stuff coming from Mark. Normally no questions were to be answered without a heavy dose of irony and the most oblique treatment possible. Andy drained his glass and set it down carefully on the bar.

'Well, never mind mate. We've had a great trip. I can't wait to tell everyone about it. Really great. But let's go home now hey?' Mark looked through the window to the night streets of Marseilles outside, then up at the old clock above the toilet door – ten o'clock. 'Hmm. What do you think? It's not raining, we could make our way back to the docks and see if we could get a lorry tonight. Or we could try and find somewhere to doss down and go in the morning?'

'I vote for now' said Andy, picking up his duffle bag and heading slowly towards the door. Mark began to follow, turning back to nod a goodnight to the barman. 'Eh Anglais, you want somewhere to stay?' the barman called over. They both turned back. 'Err, you speak English?' Asked Mark in reply. The barman nodded. He had a broken nose and a piece of his finger was missing. He didn't look like the sort of person to argue with. He beckoned them closer, and as Mark leaned awkwardly over the bar, he muttered in a low voice rank with stale beer and cigarettes, in English, but with an accent so thick that Mark didn't understand the first time: 'I 'ave a room upstairs, you can use if you want, for one night' – he held up a single finger (not the

mutilated one). 'No money' He winked and tapped his nose, before pouring out two more beers and setting them down on the counter in front of the boys.

Mark and Andy looked at each other. Andy whispered 'I don't trust him'. Mark frowned hard and swallowed. 'Go on mate' he replied quietly. 'It's an adventure. There's two of us, we'll be ok'. Andy was shaking his head. Mark picked up one of the beers and passed it over to Andy. 'Come on, we'll stand a much better chance of getting a ride in the morning'.

'OK' he finally conceded. They clinked their glasses together in agreement and nodded a yes towards the barman, who flashed them a brief thumbs-up in reply, before moving up the bar to serve a gaunt and scarred looking man they'd dubbed 'streetfighter'.

The beer was starting to leave a warm glow in their stomachs and make them feel fuzzy-headed. Almost recklessly, Mark beckoned the barman over, pointed to the missing bit of his little finger and asked him: 'What happened?'

He laughed a deep guttural laugh, full of old cigarettes, and shouted something out loud in French to the rest of the bar, they couldn't catch whatever it was, and they both winced at what seemed like an error in attracting attention. A ripple of amusement spread around the room, and a couple of comments were shouted back. Then, to Mark's horror, five of the drinkers raised their hands to reveal the same wound – in each case, the top part of the little finger of the left hand was missing.

There was a loud chorus of 'Salu' and then something else, a brief chorus of some sort of song, could it have been the French national anthem? Neither of them knew, but the mood had changed, the room was filled with comments and laughter and it was clear that some mysterious bond was shared between the drinkers, who unaccountably all bore the same grotesque mutilation.

Before the noise had properly subsided, one of the meaner and older looking characters waved at the barman and shouted something about 'les Anglais'.

The barman set up two small shot glasses on the counter, and poured in measures of a light golden coloured liquid from a large dusty bottle on the shelf. 'He's buying us a drink mate' noted Andy to his friend. They each raised their small glass in salute to the man who had bought the drink, then, in the way that they had seen in countless cowboy movies, they said 'Here goes' to each other and downed the liquid in a gulp.

Both were convulsed with choking, as the liquid burned its way down their gullets. The room was filled with cheers and laughter. Mark and Andy leaned against the bar trying to recover. Both felt drunk and confused, and a bit frightened at becoming the centre of attention. After a while the noise dropped and the clientele gradually gave themselves back to quieter conversation and card games.

Mark had another go at talking to the barman. Pointing once more to his mutilated finger he asked: 'Why?' The barman winked, then mimed chopping off the finger with the flat edge of his other hand. The boys both winced. He leaned over the bar to explain further: 'We are the Dockers' He held up the little finger with its missing tip 'With this, Pension, for life, no work.'

'Oh'. They looked around the bar again as the truth began to dawn. 'Yeah' says Mark to Andy, 'That's it then. If you work in the docks and you get injured, they give you a

pension. Must have a strong trade union'. 'Yeah', replies Andy, 'And all these blokes here have the same injury'. They looked at each other and winced as they thought about all those fingers getting chopped.

'So' Mark began to the barman again, 'Why is it always the same finger?'  
'Theese is thee won we choose' replied the barman. 'Eet ees the least we can do to get the pension'.

'Yeah right' mutters Andy to Mark, their worst suspicions are confirmed. 'They're proud of it, that's why they sang the song.'

Shortly after this revelation, the firewater did its work, and Andy's condition started to deteriorate. Mark could see that his friend was definitely the worse for wear. He instinctively understood the greening of the gills and glazing of the eyes, and, grabbing Andy's arm, helped him over to the brown door in the corner marked 'toilet'. Inside it was extremely unsavoury. A very smelly hole in the ground that amazed Mark, who had never seen anything like it. 'Steady on mate' he held his friend's jacket firmly as Andy retched repeatedly into the hole, producing a generous mix of beer, sausage and bread.

After, they went to the small, dirty hand basin in the corner of the bar, where Mark helped Andy clean himself as best he could.

'Err, that room mate?' Mark looked as beseechingly as possible at the barman as he held his friend upright. The barman produced a large and medieval looking key: 'The blue door, but – make sure you...'

The meaning was clear – don't vomit in the room. 'OK mate' Mark responded, picking up the duffle bags and setting off towards the stairs that the barman has pointed out, with Andy leaning heavily on his shoulder.

'Easy does it mate.' He heard laughter from the bar below as he slowly negotiated the stairs. Andy was able to walk, but not much else, and Mark was starting to feel distinctly woozy himself. On the landing he saw that one of the doors did look like it may once have been blue. The other two were distinctly brown, and all bore the marks of heavy duty, dented, scratched and stained, they had not seen paint for a long time. The large key fitted the lock, but, in the semi-darkness, supporting his half-conscious comrade, it took three goes before the door finally yielded. Inside the atmosphere was fetid. There was a metal bed-frame with a thin mattress, an old blanket and a grubby, stained looking sheet. Apart from an old bolster, there were no other furnishings at all, just a single shade-less bulb overhead, and smells of damp, of urine, and cigarette ash. Under the bed was an ashtray full of spent Gauloise stubs, some stained red with lipstick.

Mark helped Andy over to the bed, then locked the door before unlacing Andy's boots and making him more or less comfortable. After that, he succumbed to his own increasing stupor, gratefully finding space next to Andy on the narrow bed.

He woke to loud knocking on the door. It was still night and he felt rough, he was half-blinded by the glare from the bulb that had been on all the time. Half asleep, half drunk, he dragged himself over to the door and unlocked it. It was the barman. Behind him on the landing Mark could just see light coming from one of the half-open brown doors.

‘Hey, come and drink’ orders the barman to him. ‘I have girl for you, she eez bootiful’ He makes the shape of breasts and hips with his hands and leers. Mark is pretty confused. The barman pressed a bottle of cold beer bottle into Mark’s hand and pulled him gently towards the brown door. ‘No mate’ Mark said and put his hand up to fend off the barman. The barman was big, strong and insistent, and his grip gradually tightened on Mark’s arm. Mark smelled the sour breath and felt the stale sweat of the barman’s hand. He felt his revulsion turning into a rising panic as suddenly, he understood that the barman desired him, and that the story about the girl was rubbish. He was going to be raped.

He was pushed through the brown door. Inside, the barman pulled the door shut, and held Mark’s arm firmly, a strange light in his eye as he licked his lips and stared at Mark’s face. The room was similar to the one he had slept in, nothing but a bed in the corner and a bad smell.

‘NO!’ Mark shouted at the top of his voice. ‘Andy, HELP!’ He had a sinking feeling that Andy was not going to wake up, and realised he would have to face this ordeal alone. He felt a rush of adrenaline coursing through his veins as he shouted, and everything started to slow down as the vestiges of alcohol in his blood vanished through the magical chemistry of his body. Suddenly he was sober, fully conscious and full of guile, his body had switched into survival mode with plans starting to form in his mind.

He relaxed his body, smiled and mirrored the barman, licking his own lips. He felt the weight of the beer bottle in his hand, lifted it slowly to his lips and took a generous gulp. He shifted his weight as he got ready to strike. The barman still had him by the left arm, but had softened his grip as Mark began to relax. The barman pulled him towards the bed, quietly whispering ‘Bootiful’ in a soothing voice.

Mark regretted having removed his boots earlier. He couldn’t kick so well with bare feet and it made him more vulnerable. He held the beer bottle to the side, out of sight and stealthily adjusted his grip so that it was ready to use as a weapon. The barman released Mark’s arm and raised his hand to caress Mark’s hair. Mark suppressed his desire to recoil, smiled and half closed his eyes, murmuring a quiet ‘mmm’ to extend the deception. He knew that this had to be the moment.

He spun round as hard and as fast as he could, bringing his knee up towards the groin of the barman and swinging the bottle at his head, making a wordless roar of aggression as he attacked. Beer cascaded over them both as the barman easily dodged the bottle. The barman again grasped Mark’s wrist with his hand, with a vice-like grip, and twisted his body so that Mark’s knee hit the thigh and not the groin.

The situation rapidly went from bad to worse as Mark felt himself being flipped onto the bed like a rag doll. He tried to wriggle free, but he was pinned down by the enormous weight of the barman lying full length on top of him. Both his wrists were immovable and hurting with the pressure of large hands bearing down on them, and the barman’s face was so close that he could see the blackheads and broken veins, and the stains on his teeth, he found himself gagging from the stench of stale breath.

He yelled again, with all his strength, ‘NOOOOOOO’ ‘HHHEEEELLLL’. The barman laughed. He felt the large fat belly rippling on top of him. He tried to kick, but he couldn’t move his legs against the weight that held them. He felt small sharp stabs of pain as the bristles of the barman’s chin scratched his skin, he was being kissed roughly on the mouth. He felt his stomach churn violently as it rejected the alcohol

and abuse. He was convulsed by a wave of vomit that surged up through his mouth then on into the open mouth of the barman. He could not have imagined a more unsavoury situation, but he understood that it had to be turned to his advantage.

With icy determination, he focused on the only part of his body free to move, and as he felt the barman recoiling from the vomit, he raised his head and kept his mouth connected to the barman's by locking his teeth as hard as he could onto the man's lip.

He had scored a hit. The big man screamed out in pain and released Mark's wrists, moving his hands to attack the source of the pain. Mark saw the fists forming and the punches approaching out of the corner of his eye. He was able to throw his body to the side so that the first punch only glanced onto his ear, pulling the barman's head to the side as he did, and inflicting more pain as his teeth dragged into the soft flesh of the man's lips. With his own hands now free, he brought his finger up and poked the barman hard in the eye, shouting for help again but coughing from the mixture of vomit and blood that was still pooling in his mouth.

The barman pinned him down again, Mark felt the flow of hot blood from the man's ripped lip as it spurted onto his face. Bleeding badly and with the eye half closed the barman groaned and paused in his attack. They both listened to the sound of heavy footsteps on the stairs and a guttural French voice enquiring at the door. Mark spat vomit and blood to clear his mouth so that he could shout again. 'Help – HELP – HELP' The barman suddenly capitulated, sitting up on the edge of the bed and taking his face in his hands, and making a low moaning sound.

The door opened and the man from the bar that they had dubbed 'street-fighter' entered, taking in the scene with a glance he kicked the barman on the leg hard and cuffed his arm. It was more in the manner of a stern reprimand than an actual attack. The barman was weeping quietly and hugging himself, clearly feeling shame. Street-fighter turned to Mark and pointed to the door – 'Allez!'

Mark did not need any encouragement. He was up off the bed and through the door as fast as he could, across and into the room with the blue door, where Andy was still dead to the world. He went over to the bed and shook him violently, 'C'm on mate, get up, we've got to go NOW!' he shouted repeatedly as he shook his friend more and more urgently. Andy came around slowly, very groggy until he saw the blood on Mark's face. 'Eh? What? What's happening? What's that blood about mate?' Mark threw Andy's boots into his lap and frantically set about lacing up his own as he explained 'Mate – the barman, went for me while you were asleep, it was horrible, but street-fighter stopped him, just in time mate'.

Mark wanted to go straight away. Andy stood up and got Mark to sit down and explain what had happened more slowly, helping to clean the blood and vomit from his friend with a spare T shirt. As the adrenaline subsided Mark started to react to the situation emotionally, taking in great gulps of air and sobbing convulsively, Andy soothed him as best he could.

There was a soft knock on the door. Street-fighter popped his head into the room, then half entered, pointing back across the landing, he mimed hitting his fist into his palm a couple of times, before saying 'OK', then putting his palms down flat in a gesture of calm. He left, shutting the door very quietly and gently.

'Let's take our time, mate.' Said Andy, as Mark's breathing began to return to normal. He held up his hand and it was shaking. 'C'mon, I need to leave NOW mate.' He

pleaded. He got up and found his duffle bag. It was quiet on the landing, and they both crept quietly down the stairs back to the bar. It still seemed open, but Street-fighter and his two friends were the only occupants, no barman to be seen.

They went out through the main door and into the Marseilles night. Mark strode towards the dock area, seeming to recover some of his poise as they settled into a brisk walking rhythm along the empty streets.

‘Blimey mate, I’ve never had to fight anyone that big before, God it was scary, I can’t believe you didn’t wake up, I was shouting as loud as I could. I thought he was going to kill me, but really it was going to be something even worse than that.’ Mark launched into a monologue about the experience, sniffing back snot intermittently and spitting it onto the pavement. ‘I bit him. I think I might have blinded him. I want to get out of here.’

He looked at his friend searchingly. Andy swore that he was asleep the whole time, would have definitely come to help if he had been conscious ‘On my mother’s grave, mate. I never heard anything. Must have been that grog we had, I didn’t know anything was happening until you were shaking me.’

Eventually they reached the docks. By this time they had started to laugh about it, holding up their hands with their little fingers bent down, in imitation of the dockers. ‘Filthy French dockers, mate, scum of the earth.’ Mark spat ‘Didn’t get me though did they?’ He grinned.

‘I’m starving, where’s that sausage and bread?’

They got out the remains of the food they’d bought earlier and, sitting on the verge, ate it all. After that they started hitching, as a few early lorries started grinding their way slowly off the docks. After about an hour they got a lift with a French truck heading for Paris. They were both asleep in the cab before it reached the motorway.

They woke to the hiss of air brakes as the lorry parked up. The driver spoke and pointed to the ‘Les Routiers’ sign of a high quality French roadside cafe: ‘Two hours’ he said in English, holding up his fingers for the avoidance of doubt. They climbed out of the cab blinking in the sunlight and looked at each other. ‘You look a right mess’ said Mark to Andy. ‘Not as bad as you do mate’ he replied, ‘and you stink of vomit’. ‘Not as much as you do mate.’ They spent a long while in the toilets, doing their best to clean up. Couldn’t really get rid of the smell of vomit, and didn’t make much of an impact on the bloodstains on Mark’s clothes, but he did look a bit better with his other T shirt on.

They counted their money, and decided to share a Croque Monsieur for now, and hold out for a shop where they could get better value for money for buying more food later.

Mark started to realise how close they have come to grief. For the first time he started to think about his mum and his dad, that they were probably getting worried about him. ‘Nah’, says Andy, ‘I don’t think my lot will even notice that I’m not there.’ ‘How long have we been away?’ ‘Dunno, seems like years, mate.’ ‘Yeah, a lifetime’.

They were sitting inside the Les Routiers café, passing the Croque Monsieur back and forth. They looked around to see their lorry driver, he was deep in conversation with another trucker type, both had large plates of steak in front of them and large glasses

of red wine. 'Looks like he's going to be at least two hours' said Andy 'At least he's got all his fingers' replied Mark.

It didn't take long to finish the sandwich, and they wandered out into the sunshine. 'Look', said Mark, pointing across the car park, 'It's a Triumph Herald, 'I love them'. Away from the lorries, the only car to be seen had its bonnet up, with a man and a woman bending over the engine. 'Come on, they might be English, and they might be in trouble' Mark jogged over. 'Alright, what's the trouble mate?' he greeted the couple cheerily, already seeming to be back to his old self. They both looked up and smiled back at him warmly – 'Oh hello. I think we've got a spot of overheating, probably be all back to normal in a tick', said the man. His accent was distinctly upper-class they both noted, with instant class awareness. 'Mind if I have a look?' asked Mark, 'My dad's a mechanic and I helped him rebuild one of these once, lovely machines'. 'Be my guest' said the bloke, 'I'm afraid that I'm not much of a mechanic myself. How do you do? I'm Dominic Pilkington and this is my wife Susie'.

'Hi, my name's Mark and this is Andy.' As a mechanic, Mark looked pretty professional for a fourteen year old. He checked the oil, took off the distributor cap and wiped it clean on his T shirt, then looked up to announce: 'Your fan-belt's on its way out, look at that wear, and you need to top up your oil for a start. If you've got a spanner, I'll check your plugs.'

'Good isn't he?' The woman said to Andy as they watched. 'The best, real class mechanic, in the blood.' He replied proudly. 'Where are you going?' She asked, 'And where are your parents?'

'We're on our way back home, been to Marseilles, our parents are at home' replied Andy matter of factly. 'Oh, then who are you with?' The woman interrogated further.

Mark was busy with Dominic, getting the tools out from under some suitcases. Sarah questioned Andy closely, and established that they were hitch hiking back to England, had little money and no clear plan, and had been away from their parents without contact for several days.

'Oh, you'd better come with us'. She tugged her husband's sleeve: 'Darling, we'll have to take these boys with us, they're stranded you know, poor little lost lambs.' 'Of course dear' came the reply from Dominic, as though it was the most natural thing in the world. Andy and Mark were both wondering if they like being 'little lost lambs' but they quickly exchanged glances, alert to the advantages of a lift direct back to Blighty.

'Looks like it could be handy to have a mechanic on board' added Dominic. Mark was in his element, cleaning the spark plugs and adjusting the timing. 'Yes, I must say that engine does sound a lot better now' Agreed Dominic, indulgently, as they revved it to test Mark's impromptu tune-up. Mark and Andy were squeezed into the small back seats of the open topped sports car, and before they could say au revoir to the French trucker, they were roaring up the motorway with the wind in their hair, and without out any sign of mechanical troubles.

They stopped after a few hours for another 'Les Routiers'. Susie ordered the boys steak and chips, and advised the waiter in fluent French how they should be cooked and what sort of salads should be served with the frites. She seemed to have well developed ideas about what should be happening. 'Mark, are you sure that you can't

get your hands any cleaner?’ she directed him back to the toilets with a nail brush she produced from her bag. ‘We really can’t have you eating your dinner with black nails’.

Her demands included insisting that the boys’ parents were contacted right away. Phoning Mark’s mum was a bit of a deal. ‘What did you say your name was – Peterson?’ ‘Ah yes, is that Mrs Butcher? I’m afraid that you don’t know me, my name is Mrs Pilkington. Susie Pilkington. It’s about your son. Yes he’s fine, I’ve got him here, we found him and his friend in France, coming back from Marseilles. He’s been very helpful, actually, but I am a bit concerned about him and Andy... Yes, he’s right here, of course you can have a word, let me put him on...’

‘Mum? Yeah I’m fine. No, sorry, I didn’t realise. Sorry. No mum... soon...’ Well, naturally Mark didn’t really understand how a worried parent might feel. He was just a bit concerned about the hiding he might get when he arrived home. Andy was lucky, they didn’t have a telephone at his house, so Susie had to leave a message with the neighbours (one of the kids ran round, but Andy’s mum was at the shops).

See, said Andy smugly, she won’t even know that I’ve been away. Mark figured that it might help a bit that his mum knew that they were ok... in terms of the sort of beating he might get.

Susie made sure that the boys had both eaten as much as they could, which was a considerable amount. Tarte au pommes with cream, then cheese and biscuits, then ‘le sandwich’ in case they got hungry later, and some rather nice French chocolate. They weren’t allowed any wine though.

After the dinner they helped put the soft top up on the car, then crammed themselves into the back again, and went to sleep to the sounds of Mozart on the cassette player. The car speeded north through the night, Susie and Dominic seemed to be sharing the driving. Mark and Andy woke in the early morning to see the signs ‘Calais 30Km’, Susie at the wheel and Dominic snoozing in the passenger seat, a bunched up tweed jacket pillowing his head against the side-window.

Soon they were on the ferry, glad to stretch their legs after the cramped confinement of the Triumph. Mark realised that the Pilkingtons had bought them ferry tickets. ‘Blimey mate, I think that we’ve accidentally got new parents’ he confided to his friend quietly. Susie comes back from the duty free shop with a pair of ‘I love Paris’ T shirts and some new towels. ‘I don’t want to be funny, but you two need a change of clothes, you’re filthy, what will your mums say?’

She got Dominic to arrange for the boys to take a shower in one of the spare cabins. They had no alternative but to put on the new T shirts, there was barely time to get dressed before they docked at Dover.

Both boys felt a rising excitement to be back in England. ‘Blightly mate, there’s nothing like it.’ ‘Yeah, mate, good to be back, that’s for sure.’ They were told off by Dominic for making disparaging remarks about the French. ‘Steady on chaps, I don’t think that the Frenchies would like to hear you saying that. They do make jolly good wine and you have to admit that the food is excellent.’

They stopped at a café for a full-English breakfast, before driving up to London. Susie and Dominic lived in west London, but Susie insisted that they must put the boys on a train home, so they drove straight to the main line station, where arrangements were rapidly made for the next stage of their journey home.

'Now boys, I don't want you doing any more of that hitch hiking just now dears. Your mums need you to get straight home without any dilly-dallying. Here are your tickets and some sandwiches for your lunch, I've phoned up and you will be met at the station.' By this time the boys are getting sheepish. Looking down at their boots, Mark says something about getting the Pilkingtons address so that they can send the money for the fares back. 'Nonsense, don't even think of it! We couldn't possibly take any money, we've only done what anyone would do, and anyway, we probably owe you for repairs to the car.' Dominic shook hands with them gravely and Susie kissed them both on the forehead and ruffled their hair as they were bundled onto the train and waved goodbye.

'Phew. Good old British Rail, mate.' said Andy as they sat watching the English fields go by through the window, munching their ham sandwiches. 'We were lucky mate.' They spent the journey going over each detail of the adventure, and laughing about it all. 'What about the Pilkingtons, were they posh or what?' 'She was a bit of alright posh totty.' 'Yeah, but she thought she was our mum.' 'Yeah, I fixed that car up alright though didn't I? It was going like a dream up that motorway to Calais.' 'What about those French sandwiches and that sausage?' 'Yeah, what about those small coffees we had in that farmhouse, how mean was that farmers wife?' 'Yeah, but it was so strong I almost choked.'

Finally they arrived at their home station. They could see their mums and dads on the platform, looking grey-faced. 'Here we go then.' said Mark, stepping down onto the platform.

'What on earth do you think you've been playing at?' 'We've been worried sick.' 'Thank God you're safe.' 'You could have been killed you're old enough to know better, you are in serious trouble young man'. There was an outburst of admonishments and greetings as the boys were hugged and cuffed, shouted at and kissed. Mark winked at Andy as they were drawn off in separate directions. 'Take it easy mate.'

'Blimey dad, you've got a Ford Granada.' The seats were covered in plastic bags. 'Careful, it's not mine, I've just got it for a service, this is a test drive you know.'

Luckily it all turned out fine, more or less. He was kept in for a few nights and his pocket money was stopped for a week. He did get shouted out, but it was all over pretty quickly, both his parents seemed pleased to see him, a lot more pleased than they usually seemed. He never did tell them the full story about what happened in Marseilles.

Mark had done a bit of growing up, and it had certainly stopped his parents taking him for granted. He was glad to be home, and they were glad to have him back. Mark did have nightmares for a while about the barman, but there didn't seem to be any permanent damage – they stopped after a while.

Andy's mum had noticed that he'd gone, but he didn't think that she was very worried about it. 'Thank God those nice people found you or who knows what would have happened to you.' Andy's dad had come back specially from the Power station where he had been working, so they were obviously taking it a bit seriously. He went back again the next day, Andy explained, yes, I did get told off, but I think me mum was pleased to see me dad really, and he seemed happy to have a day off.

They had a lot of stories to tell at school. Mark's fight with the barman from Marseilles became a sort of urban myth for a while.

## Mark does Marseilles

A Mark the Spanner Story

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