

THE PASSPORT PHOTOGRAPHS

“Do you know where we are going for our holiday this year?” said Gwladys sharply. Henry peered nervously over the top of the morning paper.

“I thought we could go back to South Shields,” he ventured, though with little confidence as he had already detected an edge in his wife’s tone which indicated she already had a destination very much in mind.

“South Shields?” she cried as if he had thrust a knife into her side after suggesting they spent the week at the newly opened incinerator. “South Shields?”

“I thought you liked South Shields,” he said sinking for cover behind the newsprint. “You liked it last time. Or we could try Scarborough again. I can’t imagine we’d pick up another tummy bug. Or how about Blackpool?”

“Enjoyed it? I didn’t enjoy it,” she affirmed. He nodded, out of her sight, not in agreement, but in acknowledgement. It was true. She hadn’t said at any point in that holiday that she was experiencing enjoyment, but it seemed to Henry that South Shields was the place about which his wife had complained the least. “You never take me anywhere exotic,” she added with a new note in her voice. “I can hardly hold my head up when I have my hair done.” Henry briefly toyed with the vision of her head rolling across the floor at Pandora’s and coming to rest at the feet of one of the girls.

“Margate?” he suggested timidly. “The Arkwrights went there a couple of years ago, though it’s a long way.

“Margate?” she snorted. “I can hardly admit to going to Margate, leave alone boasting about it. Who ever called Margate exotic?”

“Where then?” he asked, having nearly exhausted his brochure of holiday resorts.

“Majorie Jefferies was having her done yesterday and bragging about where they’d been so I said how strange it was but we were going there this year. I’d never heard of the place, but I had to say something. I wrote it down somewhere.” She rummaged in her handbag and produced a small receipt from Tesco’s. “Here!” she announced. “I wrote it on the back.” “Y-u-ca-tan,” she added, slowly.

“Where?” He dropped the paper. It already sounded expensive. “Is it in Spain?”

“Yucatan,” repeated Gwladys, sounding more confident. “Majorie said how we’d enjoy it as we are going. The skies are blue and the sea is crystal clear. She could hardly get Fred out of the water – he spent all day in the sea. She went on and on...”

“Perhaps she hoped he would drown,” he thought. “I didn’t know Fred could swim.”

“On and on so I then said again that we were going there. That shut her up and caused quite a minor flutter at Pandora’s, I don’t mind telling you.”

“But where is it, this place that you’ve told everyone we are going to?”

“I have already told you!” she snapped. “Yucatan. It’s somewhere in Mexico. And there’s lots of ruins there as well as the sky and the sea. And something Marjorie referred to as Mexican tummy, but that’s to be avoided, it seems.”

“There’s a castle in Scarborough if you want ruins,” he suggested, watching the clock the hands of which were edging towards the point at which he would have to kiss his spouse of twenty-four difficult years and head towards the tax office where the mountain of work appeared incommensurate with his modest position. He could see from his wife’s glare that Scarborough did not come within the scope of what she visualised when she mentioned ruins. “What about the cost?” he added, playing the only trump card he could find in his hand.

“We will use some of the legacy from Auntie Myrtle,” she answered.

“But...”

“I have said that we are going! And you had better go, too. I will go into Thomas Cooke’s this very morning and get some brochures.”

“This morning? That quickly?”

“Marjorie asked me where we were staying. I said, of course, I couldn’t remember the name of the hotel or the resort because you had told me it was to be a surprise.”

“I had?”

“You had. But I did say how nice it looked in the brochure you showed me. Fortunately she didn’t ask when we were going. I am bound to bump into her again so we need to get everything arranged as quickly as possible. You can leave it all to me, as usual.”

“Where’s Yucatan?” Henry asked his assistant clerical officer. Hendrix would know. He appeared to know everything, a talent that, at times, caused Henry almost as much discomfort as he suffered at home.

“The Yucatan?” mused Hendrix with a disconcerting air of confidence. “Aren’t you going to give me a choice of four answers? I reckon it’s a thousand pound question- no- not that much. Say, two hundred and fifty?” Henry felt even more uncomfortable.

“Yes, that’s it,” he said, trying to sound casual. “I need the answer for a crossword puzzle.”

“Have you got any of the letters?” teased Hendrix.

“It’s at home,” said Henry, lamely, waiting in dread for Hendrix to ask what the original question had been. “Country in which The Yucatan is located,” he thought and rehearsed.

“It’s a peninsula on the Gulf of Mexico. To the south of the country.”

“What country?” thought Henry. “Is it the place with all those ruins?” he said.

“That’s right!” said Hendrix with a great show of enthusiasm. “They’re Aztec, I think. Or perhaps Mayan.” Henry experienced a pleasant feeling of smugness. So Hendrix didn’t know everything! “I’m not quite sure which,” added the assistant, “but it is one of the places I would like to visit.”

Henry felt even smugger. If Hendrix with all his knowledge of the world wanted to go to The Yucatan, it was obviously a place to go.

“There was a programme on the television a few months ago about it. It did look attractive. Yes, I would like to go there one day, but it’s expensive.”

“Expensive? How expensive?”

“I don’t really know. I suppose you might be able to get one of those cheap package holidays out there, but I wouldn’t think they go to the really interesting places.”

The word “expensive” seemed to preoccupy Henry’s thoughts for the remainder of the day and was foremost in them when he returned home that evening. It was only as he was closing the front gate, conscious of the wrath that he would suffer if Gwladys saw it open, that inspiration came, he hoped, to his rescue. “Passports!” he announced triumphantly across the brightly coloured brochure that lay at his place on the table.

“Passports?” repeated his wife. “What about them?”

“It must be at least ten years since we got them – you remember, for the trip to Amsterdam that never was.” The trip in question had been aborted as soon as Gwladys had gauged the reaction of Marjorie Jefferies and her cronies to the proposed destination. “It’s a very bad place,” she had subsequently told Henry and Amsterdam was not mentioned again, until now. “They must be out of date and I’m not sure where they are.”

The passports were found after a short but frantic search during which the contents of Aunt Myrtle’s escritoire were distributed on the table. There were six weeks until their expiry. “I will pick up the renewal forms from the Post Office tomorrow,” Gwladys announced.

The forms were waiting for him when Henry, having learned some more about The Yucatan from Hendrix whom had made it his mission to be fully briefed now that the subject had been raised. But Gwladys was more out of humour than usual. “Look at the cost!” she spat. “And we are going to have to have new photographs. They won’t come cheap.”

“We are going on quite an expensive holiday,” submitted Henry. It would, it transpired, be the most expensive holiday they would ever take.

“All the more reason to watch the pennies.”

“There’s a photo-booth at the Post Office.”

“Out of action!” she snapped. “I’ve already looked. And the one at Boots has a notice on it. Marjorie says there are new regulations to do with the photographs and that’s the

reason. It's always the same – one regulation after another, building up the cost for honest working folk like us whilst the politicians who invent them get fat and rich. It's that bunch in Brussels."

"More likely it's the Americans."

"There's a section about it on the form. Look!" She waved one of the forms in front of him as if to prove her point concerning the bureaucracy. "We will have to go to a professional photographer."

"That could be two or three times as expensive," observed her husband.

"I know, but I'll find a cheap one. I'll see if there's a card in the newsagents."

The photographer's studio was at the end of a dark alley off the High Street. Both Henry and Gwladys had walked past the entrance to the alley hundreds, if not thousands, of times yet neither had noticed it before. "I'm Nicholas le Ficur," the photographer announced.

"Is that French?" asked Gwladys, with a note of disdain.

"Well, sort of. It's really Norman aristocracy, which actually makes it Danish," he replied to which Gwladys nodded her head in approval. "But just call me Nick. That's much easier. Shall we get started?"

They took it in turns to sit in the prescribed chair. "I'll take a couple," said the photographer, "just in case something goes amiss. It doesn't usually now that we are digital." It was all over in a few minutes. "They will be ready for collection on Friday," they were told.

"Would you like me to pay now?" asked Henry.

"Oh, no," said the photographer. "You can pay when you pick up the photographs. And I'll just give you my business card in case you want to recommend me to someone." Gwladys examined it and placed it in her handbag.

"Friday, then," she said.

"We've had to have new passport photographs taken," Henry informed Hendrix.

"Did you know that some primitive tribes believed that their souls were captured if they had their photographs taken? And then there was that film the other night. Did you see it?"

"Film?"

"On television. It was where these people had special powers and they traded photographs of other people because possession of the photographs gave them control over the people in the photographs." Henry thought he understood what Hendrix was telling him. "Then this guy who was supposed to take over from this older guy who has sort of taught him how to use his special powers traded the photograph of his girl friend and couldn't get it back. You didn't see it?"

Henry shook his head. He couldn't imagine anyone getting control over Gwladys with or without her photograph. "Was it good?" he asked.

"So-so," murmured Hendrix, and the subject was dropped.

Gwladys went to collect the photographs on the Friday morning. "Mr le Ficur?" she asked the skin-pierced, dark-eyed, girl whom sullenly greeted her.

"He's not here today," said the girl with a note of indignation.

"I've come for our passport photographs," Gwladys told her. "He said they would be ready today."

"Oh, yes," she girl replied from the magazine before her. "He left them for you ... here. Have you paid?"

"Yes," said Gwladys firmly, and took the photographs home.

"They are a bit light," said Henry when he saw the photographs.

"Light?" exclaimed his wife. "I'd say that they are far from flattering. I mean, do I really look like that?"

"The camera never lies," though Henry.

"I mean, he's made me look quite demented, like a criminal."

“And I mean that there’s not much contrast. They already look as if they’ve been exposed to a strong light and faded. I hope the passport office accepts them.”

“If they don’t I will take them straight back,” exclaimed Gwladys. “And I’ll find a better photographer.”

But, much to Henry’s relief, the new passports arrived within days of him posting the applications. And on the day of their departure his wife could not resist the temptation to make a rare use of her mobile phone to call Marjorie Jefferies. “We are on our way,” she announced, aware that the tidings would be spread far and wide within minutes of her finishing the call. “I’ll send you a postcard.” That was more than they’d received from the Jefferies whilst they were in The Yucatan.

The holiday passed off without any major incident or drama. Gwladys complained on the flight out, at the airport upon arrival, during the transfer to the hotel, and the hotel upon arrival and at regular intervals thereafter, on excursions, on the beach, at the hotel swimming pool, away from the hotel swimming pool, but Henry disregarded all of this and secretly harboured the thought that his wife was actually enjoying the holiday. She had even taken to keeping a small notebook at hand, “for things she had to tell Marjorie Jefferies when they arrived home.” Her complaints were largely ignored by Hernando da Silva who had met them at the hotel and introduced himself as the tour operator’s representative. He would endeavour to make the holiday run smoothly, he explained in faultless English and even with Gwladys to accommodate, Henry thought that he made a good job of it.

The holiday passed off smoothly for Henry. As he sat on the bed in their room for the last time, looking out over the red tiled roofs that stretched to the ocean, he reflected that for him it had been the holiday of a lifetime. The legacy had been well spent. “You can’t take it with you,” he assured himself. Gwladys was in the bathroom, complaining that the towels had not been changed that morning, and declaring that she wouldn’t be happy until they were back amongst their own kind, but Henry knew she only meant seeing Marjorie Jefferies. And he felt strangely empowered. He would be able to face both Hendrix and the Jefferies with confidence.

The holiday passed off smoothly, that is, until they presented their passports to the sullen-looking official at the airport. Their presentation appeared to cause enormous consternation amongst his colleagues who he had promptly consulted. They were gestured towards a row of seats and the official appeared to close his desk and disappeared from view. “I think it’s something to do with the photographs,” hissed Henry, feeling unusually animated and slightly alarmed. “I do believe that they’ve faded even more whilst we’ve been out here.”

Gwladys glared. “You will have to take it up with the photographer when we get back,” she said.

“Me?”

“Yes, you!”

“All right,” he said, and unaccustomedly relished the thought. Then Senor da Silva was there, first talking excitedly to the officials, then coming over and looking down at them.

“There appears to be some irregularity with the documentation,” he said. Henry could feel his wife bristling and reached out to calm her. His hand was pushed aside. “I will contact the British Consulate and get someone here to resolve it. However, I am afraid that you will miss your flight but all being well I should be able to get you on one tomorrow. In the meantime I am arranging for you and your luggage to be taken back to the hotel whilst matters are sorted out. I’m sorry, but you are going to have to spend another day in Mexico.”

For once Gwladys was speechless. Her mouth appeared to be moving, but no sound emanated. “What about the cost?” said Henry, boldly. Senor da Silva told them not to worry about the cost other than for extras that they might buy. Did they need any more currency? Had they taken out holiday insurance?

“You *will* have something to tell Marjorie Jefferies,” said Henry, later, as he relaxed by the pool thinking that this was the best thing to happen to him in his lifetime. He did not really want to go home, or to his dreary office. He would have been happy just to stay there, but that was not to be. A casually dressed young man from the Consulate appeared during the

afternoon and to Henry's dismay he explained that it appeared the problem had been caused by an inexplicable computer glitch. It was odd because it had affected only them.

"You will be able to travel back on the flight tomorrow," he said as he was leaving.

"That's a shame," said Henry. "I was just beginning to enjoy myself here."

"Most people do," said the young man.

This time there was no hitch at the airport. They passed through the controls and boarded the plane without incident. "I still think the problem was to do with the photographs," said Gwladys on more than one occasion. "Computer glitch indeed! That's a convenient excuse. You must get this sorted out when we get home."

"I will," promised Henry.

The flight landed on time at the airport, but once again they were stopped at passport control. Perhaps the official had noticed Henry peering closely at the photographs which were seemingly on the point of becoming invisible. "I'm sure they've faded further," he whispered to Gwladys. He caught her look. "All right," he added. "I will go to the photographers."

The official was looking closely at the passports, then at his computer screen. "Is there a problem?" asked Henry. "I know the photographs have faded somewhat but ..."

The official did not answer as another uniformed officer appeared and directed them into an ante-room where they were sat in front of a small desk. "It's the photographs, isn't it?" said Henry.

"The photographs are fine as far as they go," said the officer. "Who exactly are you?"

"Pardon?"

"I need to know your true identity," Henry told him.

"No," said the officer. "Those are the names on the passports. I want to know who you are."

"We are who we say we are!" said Gwladys with indignation. "I know that the photographs have faded. We had them taken especially for the passports and you can still see that it is us. You can call the photographer. I've got his card somewhere." She rummaged in her handbag and produced the card. "Here!" she said.

"That won't help," said the officer, resignedly. "I need to know who you are, your true identities."

"I am Henry Franklin," said Henry assertively, "and this is my wife, Gwladys."

"I am sorry," said the officer stubbornly, "but Mr & Mrs Franklin are shown as coming through passport control yesterday. You cannot be them because..."

"I know what's happened," interrupted Henry. "We had a similar problem at Merida airport yesterday and had to stay over a day whilst the Consulate sorted it out. If you contact them they can confirm this. That's why we are home a day late. Phone the Consulate in Merida." The officer frowned and studied Henry's face for a short while, then stood.

"Very well," he said. "I will contact them, but I will have to ask you to remain here whilst I do so. I will be back shortly."

"This is like a bad dream," said Henry once they were alone.

"This is all that photographer's fault," hissed Gwladys. "You will go and sort matters out with him once we are home?" Henry nodded his head. "I will."

Nearly half an hour passed before the officer returned and brought an end to Gwladys's diatribe concerning the discomfort of the seats, the absence of refreshments or access to the ladies room. "I have been able to resolve some of the issues here," he announced. "The Consulate confirmed that Mr & Mrs Franklin left Merida a day late, caught the same flight as you, and fit your description. However that leaves us with the problem of who were the Mr & Mrs Franklin who arrived here yesterday from Merida."

"They weren't us," exclaimed Gwladys.

"And I fully expect that the police will want to interview you, let alone the media."

"Why, for goodness sakes?"

"Well," said the officer, pushing a daily paper towards them, "the other Mr & Mrs Franklin died in a road traffic accident. Their car was involved in a collision with a petrol

tanker. It caused an enormous amount of congestion and made headline news as you can see. So I would expect that the police and immigration service will be anxious to establish exactly who they were as well as verifying your identity.”

“I do not know what to say,” said Gwladys, though Henry did not believe her. “Are we free to go?”

“Yes. Can I arrange for a taxi to take you home?”

“Actually we have our car here, in the long-term car park,” said Henry. “At least I hope that it is still there.”

“It was all very well for him to apologise,” snapped Gwladys as sat in the car. “It seems to me that they simply didn’t check thoroughly enough yesterday. Had we not had the problem over the photographs yesterday this would never have happened.”

“We don’t know that it was the photographs.”

“Of course it was the photographs! You only have to look at them to see that they are the root of the problem. I don’t know how I am ever going to live this down. How can I face everyone? Can you imagine it? We are announced as dead one day and turn up alive the next day. The humiliation! And no-one is going to want to listen to an account of the holiday now! What a waste of money! I bet it’s in all the local papers, too. I will never be able to hold my head up in public again. We will have to move.”

“Move?” said Henry, pulling out of the car park.

“Yes! Sell up and find somewhere new to live. I am not sure that I can face going home now!”

“What about my job?”

“You can always get a new job or a transfer. I cannot get a new reputation. I will never live this down. We will have to move, I tell you. This is just about the worst thing that has ever happened to me.”

“It sounds to me,” said Henry rebelliously, “that you would have preferred it had it actually been us in that accident yesterday.”

“At least we wouldn’t have had to face all this! And this is only the start! My life is absolutely ruined and you do not appear to take it seriously. We should never have gone to Mexico in the first place! I should never have let you talk me into it!”

“Me?” exclaimed Henry, negotiating a roundabout.

“And as for the photographer, we are going to ‘phone him right away. I will use my mobile.”

“Now? I can’t really stop here.”

“You can speak to him,” said Gwladys, not appearing to listen.

“But, I’m driving.”

“You can speak to him. I will dial the number for you.”

“But” Henry’s heart missed a beat as it felt as if a cold hand had been place on his shoulder.

“The number’s ringing,” his wife declared. “Here!” Henry turned to look at his wife. Her face had lost all of its colour, grey, drained of life as she held the telephone out towards him. “Here!” she repeated.

It was only as he turned back to look at the road ahead that he saw the petrol tanker and realised that he was already dead.

THE END