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The Water Babes

Written by Norman Whitney

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The Water Babes

Norman Whitney



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Matador
9 Priory Business Park,
Wistow Road, Kibworth Beauchamp,
Leicestershire. LE8 0RX
Tel: 0116 279 2299
Email: books@troubador.co.uk
Web: www.troubador.co.uk/matador
Twitter: @matadorbooks

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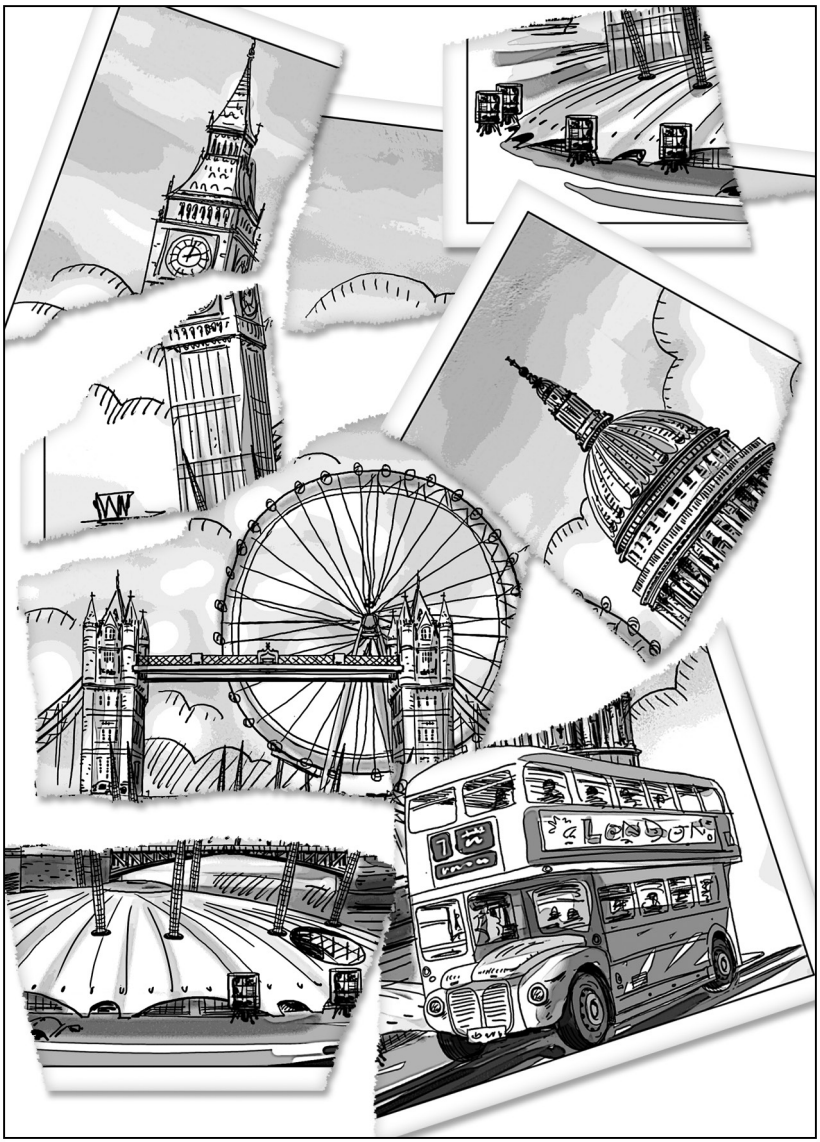


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For Nigel West,
simply the best!

Prologue



Diana

I arrived in London from Melbourne in 2004. That was six years ago. I was already twenty-eight by then. No husband, no partner, no children. Not good, at least as far as my parents were concerned.

My main ambition when I came to the UK was to try and get a reasonable job. I was naive about the bureaucracy that such ambition involved.

Also, I wanted to prove to myself – and to my parents – that I was as capable of leading as successful a life as my younger brother. I felt, or rather *knew*, that Mark was their favourite.

I'm of average intelligence. At school, I was only mildly successful at the academic subjects such as English, maths, the sciences, history, geography and the rest. But I was always very good at sport, especially swimming. I was destined to study for an 'easy' degree in sports administration, at a local college in Melbourne. Actually I did quite well. Better than expected, if I may say so.

My brother, Mark, on the other hand is highly intelligent. He was brilliant in every subject at school, though unlike me, not very sporty; OK, but nothing special. While I went to an unknown small college, he went to a posh, private university in Melbourne. Apparently it's known all over the world. Mark did spectacularly well. His degree was in politics and

economics. He was clearly destined for what our dad proudly called 'big things'.

Dad was dead right. In 2003, the year before I arrived in London, Mark got a job as an international representative for various Australian tourist boards. I never understood exactly what he did, but it was important, and well paid. His first posting was in London. He was only twenty-five, and on some fast-track programme or other. In other words, Mark was two years younger than me, but already making waves. I was just the swimmer in the family, splashing around.

My parents never believed that before Mark's posting I had already started thinking of coming to London myself. But it's quite true (I'm good at keeping secrets, but I don't tell lies!). Job adverts had just started appearing on the Internet. Before I knew it, I had applied for the post of assistant manager of a health club in London. It was ideal for me. They replied, saying that they would love to employ me, but had I checked about work permits, residence requirements and all that sort of stuff?

Of course I hadn't. But I knew a man who could. Mark! For me, the timing of his arrival in London was perfect because he knew all about permits, visas and so on. And he had friends in our diplomatic service here.

Despite both of us knowing that he was the favourite child, we have always got on well with each other. No problem. Well, perhaps a bit of rivalry now and then, but nothing too drastic. Anyway, he helped me with all the boring paperwork: visas, work permits and all that. Soon, it was all sorted. How I would have coped without Mark's help, I'm not sure. It turned out that the job I had originally applied for in London was mine, if I still wanted it. Did I ever!

Mark met me at Heathrow, and even found me a room in a shared flat. It was in Earls Court, where all young Aussies seem to congregate. In those first few days, Mark showed me

some of the sights, taught me how to use the underground, and generally looked after me brilliantly.

But I didn't like my room, or the flat. Or my flatmates. Their lives seemed to revolve around little more than beer and rugby (the boys), or beer and sex (the girls). I call them boys and girls, because although some were in the earlier twenties, they treated me almost as if I were from another planet. Not only did they begin to treat me as a sort of mother confessor, they also began to rely on me to wash the dishes, tidy up, and clean the place. Bugger that! So after about a month I told Mark that if he didn't mind, I'd rather live somewhere else. Eventually he found me a large but rather expensive bedsit in NW6, West Hampstead, not far from his place.

The first two years were fine. Before I came, I assumed that people in London might be rather formal and the city itself well ordered, tidy and clean. I was wrong on all counts. Everyone I met was informal, casual. People started calling me 'Di' rather than Diana. To be honest, I prefer Diana. And although the centre of London with all the famous buildings is well kept, large parts of it are a bit dirty and scruffy. Not like Melbourne, anyway.

I soon made one or two friends, largely through my job. I even met one or two through a singles' club. I did all the usual tourist things, especially the ones that were free. I also went to some shows and restaurants; but not many, because evenings out in London can be unbelievably expensive.

I found it increasingly difficult to establish and maintain any sort of social network here. I went to one or two of Mark's parties, but the people there were never really my type. Anyway, in 2007 he was posted to Thailand. As I've said, I preferred not to associate too much with the Australian crowd in London. Apart from the fact that they seemed to get younger and younger, they were constantly on the move, forever coming and going.

As for boyfriends, I began to think that all the good-looking, available men, especially English men, were either

married or gay, or in some cases, both. So no matter how hard I tried, Mr Right (or even Mr Not-Quite-Right-But-Would-Do-For-Now) never came along.

I even began to doubt that I was attractive. I know that at five-foot eleven, that's one-metre eighty in metric, I'm too tall for a lot of men. So I stopped wearing heels. But I've got good legs, am not overweight, and have a reasonable figure. I admit that my swimmer's shoulders are a bit broad. But my brown eyes and long auburn hair had often done the trick back home in Melbourne. But not here in London.

I think that most men here consider that Aussie women are just sporty, and not much else. They think of us as no more than fair game – loose even! Endless boring, dirty jokes about going 'down under' really get me down. Ha ha bloody ha. I've heard them all so many times before. Why do so many British men want to keep their relationships with women on a jokey, matey level, with no thought of any sort of commitment?

I suppose that in my more romantic moments, I secretly want something more. The problem is, I've never really known what 'something more' might mean. For me, I don't think that women's lib, or feminism, are particularly helpful. But good luck to those women who do think that. It's true that when I was in college, the idea of being liberated from men, I mean sexually, emotionally, even financially (especially the last), all sounded fine. In theory. But you try that in London. On a low wage like mine. It doesn't get you very far at all. No siree.

Two years ago, in 2008, my mind began to clear. It was on my thirty-second birthday. I was out with some friends, acquaintances really, and I suppose I got a little drunk. I found myself announcing what I really wanted. I told everyone that what I really needed from a man was first of all, a decent sex life. Well, in the early days anyway. Everyone applauded. But I told them that at the same time, what I *really* wanted from a man was financial security. And why not? This was met with

raucous sarcasm, mostly from the men, and howls of derision, mostly from the women. I didn't care what other people felt. It was simply the truth. At least as I saw it.

In my dreams. The reality was that most of the people I knew, male and female, had relatively ordinary jobs which were not well paid. We were all trying to make a living in a city where the cost of travel and accommodation is high, and where the cost of decent accommodation is beyond the reach of people like me. Flat sharing with other women and even men is all very well. But sharing with people who are practically strangers was never, and never will be, my first choice. I'm over thirty for God's sake.

In London, a lot of couples I know and meet get together and part not just for emotional reasons. Often, even couples sharing expenses simply cannot *afford* to live together! That's the plain unvarnished truth. That's what happened to my longest London relationship. We met in June last year, 2009. I really liked the guy. I thought we could make a go of it. But given that he was a freelance editor and proofreader, and an aspiring but unpublished novelist, I was well aware that he was not likely to come into any decent money any time soon. But together, we tried hard to survive, pooling our resources (I have to admit that he was great sex).

However, after ten months of living with me, he suddenly announced that his best option would be to return to Manchester and live with his parents, thus saving more of what little money he had. I had to accept that the relationship was going nowhere. I was beginning to panic. So much for my original ambition to prove to myself and to my parents that I could be like my brother!

Then earlier this year I met another bloke. On the rebound I suppose. He really was tall, dark and handsome. A bit younger than me (who isn't these days?) and gainfully employed, or so he said; apparently some sort of junior hospital doctor. That certainly explained his odd working hours.

I was so bloody stupid. I'm still so angry that I can hardly

bear to think about what happened. I got home one Friday after work, about two months ago, fully expecting to go out to dinner with him. But the bastard had gone! Just like that. Without warning. No texts, no phone calls, nothing. It was as if he'd never existed. His mobile was dead. The two local hospitals had never heard of him. I was devastated.

So devastated in fact that for three days I didn't realise that he had also stolen my credit card, some cash, and some diamond earrings my dad gave me for my eighteenth. They were not particularly valuable, but I loved those diamonds. Of course I reported everything to the police. But nothing much happened. I got a crime reference number from them, but never heard anything more.

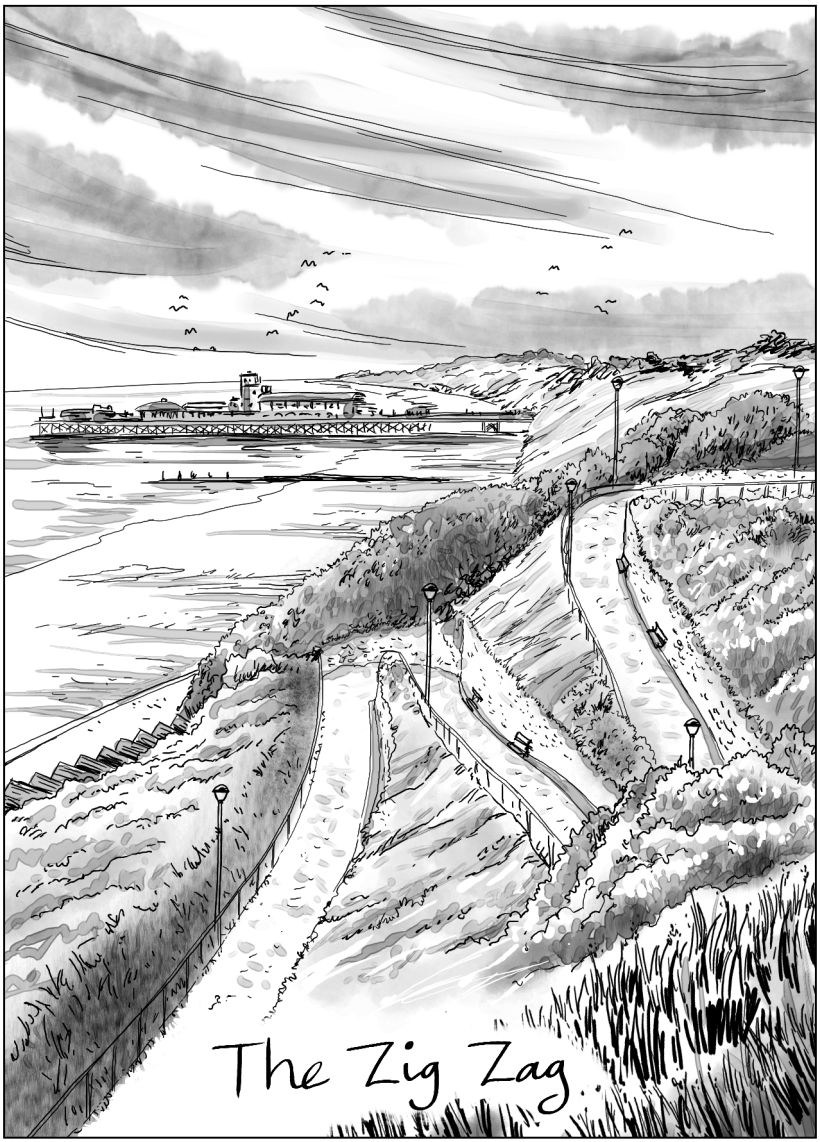
In the three months that we were together, Mr Tall-Dark-and-Handsome regularly went with me to the local cash machine. Using the excuse of wanting to protect me, he must have taken note of my pin number. The bank refunded me the five-hundred pounds he took from my account. But I was furious. Not simply with him, but also with myself. Apparently it's quite common for people to blame themselves for someone else's crime. I was embarrassed, ashamed, even though I had done nothing wrong; except to be so gullible, so incredibly *naive*. 'Well, Diana,' I said to myself, 'never again'.

After more or less marking time for five or six years in London, I had to do something fairly drastic. I was not completely broke, but nearly. I couldn't afford my own place, and didn't fancy sharing.

I'm already thirty-four. But I'm certainly not ready to go back to Melbourne just yet. They'll think I'm a failure. I couldn't bear that.

I never expected my luck to turn. But it did. Three weeks ago. I'll never forget it. It was the first day of June 2010. Someone told me about this job. It sounded just great. It had my name written all over it!

1. The day ahead



07:30
One Friday in May, 2014.

Diana, or Di as she is generally known, first saw the advert almost exactly four years ago. It was for a job at the Greenhill Community Sports Centre, in a resort on England's south coast. The post held three major attractions for her. First, it was out of London, which meant she could live more cheaply. Second, it involved promotion, which meant an increase in salary. And third – miracle of miracles – it came with a free flat, which meant she could save on rent! A wealthy benefactor had specified that the local authority could sell the flat at any time of its choosing, so long as any funds were for the benefit of community sports activities. Until that time, the flat was specifically to be used by a person 'devoted to encouraging sport in the local community'. It was not difficult for Di to persuade the interviewing committee that she was just the person they were looking for.

Her first impressions of the town were largely favourable. One area was said to contain the third or fourth most expensive real estate in the world. Di found that hard to believe, but apparently it was true. But her 'clients' as her employers insisted they be called, were not likely to come from there, where most residents presumably had their own private pools.

She knew that the town was renowned principally for its

large, relatively well off retired population. Hence the many expensive houses and impressive blocks of flats. Di learned that there was also a sizable Jewish community here, larger but not dissimilar from the one back home in Melbourne.

She also saw that there were lots of hotels, B&B places, and residential homes for the elderly. A university and several colleges helped give a bit of balance to the age profile of the citizens, as did the many English language schools for foreign students. When she arrived, the only crass note was a large concrete structure, a hugely unpopular building housing an IMAX cinema, which hardly anybody went to. It was a monstrosity, plonked down almost on the beach, in front of the pier. It completely blocked a great view of the sea.

Given the large student population, there was no shortage of clubs and bars, especially in the centre of the town. But, particularly on weekends, the town centre was no place for the faint-hearted. Not even for a confident woman who was more than capable of taking care of herself. Being rather older than most students, she felt somewhat out of place in the clubs.

This suited Di well. Especially because, in her new environment, she immediately decided to live in what she called a 'man-free zone'. No boyfriends. No time wasters. And definitely no money time wasters.

She was popular and sociable, though not exactly gregarious. She contented herself with a small circle of friends, with whom there had been the occasional dinner party, restaurant meal, excursion to local landmarks, beauty spots, and so on. There were no really close, intimate friends, but that was just fine.

Di's contract did not prevent her from giving private lessons. She was constantly surprised at how much money yummy mummies would pay for their daughters and sons to have private swimming lessons or tennis lessons. And she gave private keep -it lessons to men and women who were too shy

or embarrassed to attend public classes. So from the start, Di's financial situation improved dramatically.

She threw herself into her job. One of her first decisions was to appoint an assistant, Luke. They got on well, at least in the beginning. He was a great asset, and loved working with kids. She was well aware that he was gay, which he did not hide. But she had no fears: he was no pederast, certainly. As he explained, he had had more checks than the Bank of England, and more screenings and tests than Joan Crawford! He was co-operative and conscientious.

But Luke could be difficult sometimes. And he had a wicked tongue. He had been especially hard to handle in the last two or three months, after it became general knowledge that she intended to leave England. She imagined that Luke hoped to replace her. But everyone knew that her post had not been advertised. Privately, she also thought that he was not really qualified for the post.

Luke helped Di to start a mums and toddlers swimming group, hockey matches, girls' football teams, keep-fit for seniors, and in the last two years, courses in aquarobics. The latest aquarobics group called themselves 'The Water Babes'. When their course began, it included two men. But perhaps overwhelmed by the majority of females, the men soon stopped coming.

The women in the class were fun, but Di wished they would try harder. Di felt that they were not really interested in keeping fit. It was just a morning out for them. She sympathised: she knew many of the adults who attended the centre were lonely and isolated, and just needed a bit of company. But she began to yearn for the dedication and stamina that many Australians, of all shapes and sizes, brought to their exercise regimes.

It was about a year ago, in the middle of 2013, that Di began to feel bored with her job.

'I think I've done all I can here,' she confided in a friend.

'The dreaded cuts don't help. I used to have a reasonable budget, but not now. The endless routine of attempting to save money, scheduling, planning meetings, doing interviews, and filling out those awful time sheets is beginning to wear me down. Suppose all good things must end some time.'

Indeed, Di knew every nook and cranny of the centre. She had worked every committee time and time again. She had exhausted all the administrative twists and turns that sports management could throw up. She had savoured the little triumphs and survived the greatest disasters that the work could deliver.

'You've done a great job here Di. Perhaps it's time to move on?,' said her friend.

'Yes. And it isn't as if I want to live here forever!'

It was that thought that eventually nudged Di forward. There was nothing wrong with the town itself. But Di began to feel that the resort was an uncomfortable mixture of quite different communities. She rather liked the buzz that a genuinely multicultural population could create. But here, the population was by no means a mixture of equals.

Di was never an expert on social class, or injustice. But she was humane enough to realise that the town had a largely white community serviced by other, largely non-white communities. The hospitality and catering trades in particular had attracted small groups of ethnic minorities, mostly Chinese, Italian, Indian, Thai, Filipino, Greek, Vietnamese, Turkish, and recently, Polish.

But Di began to feel that other than providing a variety of exotic eating places, food shops, massage parlours, nail salons, hospital staff and the like, these service communities seemed hardly to exist as real people. Their purpose was clearly to feed and to sustain the town's main industries, leisure and tourism. And of course the National Health Service. No matter how hard Di might have tried, she could not attach herself to

any of these communities. And since there were hardly any Australians here, she began to feel that she was in a minority community of one.

She could admit that the town was better than most in the UK. Also – a real improvement – the IMAX horror on the seafront had been pulled down at last, only a few years after it was built. No one missed it. Di liked the new open space. There was a great sea view now. 'But don't be stupid Diana,' she said to herself. 'A sea view isn't enough to keep me here forever!'

She learned that like most places in the UK, the town had its underbelly. Beyond the train station, adjacent to the main resort, she was shocked to find so much visible deprivation, drunkenness and drug addiction. She hardly ever ventured there, and then only with friends, and always in the daylight hours.

Over the last few months, things began to fall into place, like a jigsaw putting itself together.

After Mark had spent some years travelling the world and being promoted several times, he was again posted to London. By now he had a beautiful Thai wife and two children whom everyone, including Di, adored. She knew that she might never have the career success or perhaps the offspring to compare with those of her younger brother. But, she consoled herself. You never know! Two months ago, a plan began to form in her mind.

She last emailed her best friend in Melbourne about six weeks ago. The original intention of her email was to tell her friend about a local scandal which affected Di's own job prospects. But even as she was writing the email, another large piece of the jigsaw – what she called her 'big decision' – suddenly dropped into place.

Dear B!

Have made the big decision! Have decided to come home. Pls don't say anything to Mum and Dad. I want it to be a surprise.

The last straw was the surf reef fiasco. I told you some time ago that the council was building an artificial reef here. Built, as it happens, by some outfit in NZ. The council's idea was to attract a younger crowd etc to the resort. Would have been an ideal opportunity for me to use my surfing experience, or even get a job managing a surf shop. I could even have started my own business of some kind. But it's all come to nothing. The reef is a big fat flop, and the firm that built it has gone bust I think. What a waste! Am really disappointed. Pissed off actually. So are a lot of other people here. What a bummer.

But my time here (4 years!) has not been wasted. Far from it. Have got some money together. Hooray. Have enjoyed the job, and gained a lot of experience. But can't see myself living here forever…no prospects. M'bourne is calling me!

Love, Diana x

PS. Guess what! The boyfriend situation has picked up! More later. When I see you?!?!

Her email was a little disingenuous. Diana had always been careful not to give away too many details about her private life. She usually kept most of the important details of her private life secret, even from her best friend B, who was a dreadful gossip. So she had only alluded to the most important factor in her decision to go home: the boyfriend. For the past few months, she had finally felt confident enough to relax her rule about living in a man-free zone. She had only known her new partner for about six months. But after she had established that he was not

after her savings (by now quite considerable), their affair had developed well.

At last, she felt she could return to Melbourne with a modest display of wealth. Her parents should be pleased, especially with the news about her new man. Yes, she was now ready to leave England. All she had to do now was to get through the day ahead, her final working day at the Greenhill Community Sports Centre.

07:45
A TUMBLE.

Although the flight home was only two days away, Di still had a fair amount of packing to do. At the moment, she was searching for her album of photos she had taken during her time in London. These days, all her photos were digital. But until four years ago she had carefully stuck earlier photos in the red album. She had looked everywhere for it. It was not at home, in the flat. It was here somewhere. She clearly remembered bringing the album to her office, to show her colleagues.

'Where the hell has it got to?' she said to herself. 'Perhaps up there, on the shelf above my filing cabinet?' The shelf was stuffed with boxes of files about old committee meetings, notes on job applications, endless time sheets and so on. She decided to take a look.

This was not as easy as it might sound. First, she had to position the rickety office stool carefully on her desk. Then she had to climb on to the desk. Finally, she mounted the stool. She steadied herself. She held on to the wall with her left hand, and began searching through the messily arranged dusty boxes and papers with her right hand. She could just