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Rifling Through My Drawers

Clarissa Dickson Wright

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Extract

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January

Snout's high, snow is nigh
Snout's low, there'll be snow

I have always thought surfing more exhausting than it was exhilarating. Not, bear in mind, because I spend my life riding the huge waves that break on Polynesian shores or in Hawaii. For me, the best I ever managed was to stand up on a board in Cornwall somewhere. However the last three months of 2007 reminded me of my few surfing experiences.

So it was with some relief that I got home for Christmas. I don't like Christmas, as any of you who've read my autobiography *Spilling the Beans* will know, largely because my father went out of his way to ruin it for us, so it holds nothing but unhappy memories. These days, however, with the community of my village and the friendship of the people around me, I have come to some sort of terms with it. I often go to midnight mass in the Catholic church in the village, which sadly these days seems to be held at half past nine, I don't understand why. When I was a child, and indeed a teenager, one of the highlights of Christmas was to go to midnight mass at a

convent in Holland Park, run by a Spanish order of nursing nuns. My sister Heather called them the Nunny-Buns because they were all rather tiny and I can still remember the golden glow of the baroque altar and the sweet, clear, high voices of the nuns singing the hymns in Latin. We would then go into the main convent room and stand around having little cakes and eats until finally a very small and select band of us were taken into a back room, where the nuns got out their guitars and sang and danced and we would totter home, replete with sherry and sweet cakes and halva, probably somewhere around half past two in the morning.

Today, if I go to my own church, it's all over by ten o'clock. The great advantage of going there, however, is that I'm taken by my friends Philip and Mary Contini, who own Valvona and Crolla, the brilliant delicatessen on Leith Walk in Edinburgh. Philip has the most magnificent voice and makes recordings of Italian and Neapolitan songs and sings in festivals, which are events I make sure I always attend. Sitting behind him in church, Mary, his wife, says to me, 'You can sing, Clarissa' – I have an appallingly bad voice and can't sing in tune – 'Philip will drown you out.' And indeed I

think this is probably the case.

Father McMullan, now a canon of St Mary's Cathedral in Edinburgh and splendid in a soutane with red buttons, conducts the service and gives us his Christmas message of thanks for the bottles of whisky and black socks that his parishioners give him. I used to be rather irritated by this but have now come to regard it as part of Christmas and would be sad if he failed to do it any longer.

The alternative, which I take some years, is to go to the church at the end of my village for the watch-night service which is at midnight and there are the usual hymns and carols and the rather welcome, hot, non-alcoholic drink. I walk down the village with my kith, who live in the big house, and then we walk back again, wishing each other a happy Christmas. But I was brought up as a Catholic and I really do prefer the Catholic service, despite its timing. The church in my village is magnificent. It's known as the visible church because you can see the spire of it for miles around and was originally built to attract the famous eighteenth-century preacher, Jupiter Carlisle. And he filled it week in, week out, for as long as he lived. Today, it's not quite so full and the Reverend Dick is driven to

entertain the children with glove puppets, something I don't think would ever have occurred to Jupiter Carlisle.

Christmas Day is, of course, about food and food is really what I do best. These last couple of years, we've decided on beef and we all get together, the big house and myself and any visitor I may have and I cook the beef because that's one of the things I cook best in all the world. Magnificent beef, hung for eight weeks from a carefully chosen beast. The carcass has to have a good covering of fat or else you can't hang it for so long because it will go off. But hanging the meat is essential as it tenderises it, gets rid of excess moisture and gives it a far better flavour.

My own dear butcher, Colin Peat in Haddington, and my friend Jan McCourt in Cold Overton in Leicestershire both hang their Christmas beef magnificently and the resultant flavour and tenderness can be achieved in no other way. Never buy your beef in supermarkets because, with the best will in the world, and given the bulk of their turnover, they simply cannot hang their beef how it should be hung.

When I was a child we always had turkey on Christmas Day and one year my mother, in

a rush, instead of measuring out the brandy for the brandy butter, thrust a bottle at our brilliant cook Louise as we all went rushing off to the hospital for my father to do the rounds and be home in time to carve the turkey. When we got back in time for a late Christmas lunch I went into the kitchen and there sitting beside an uncooked turkey was Louise, merrily waving the remains of a brandy bottle and singing Christmas carols and such songs as 'White Christmas' to the turkey. I don't remember what we had for lunch that day but if it was the turkey, we must have had to cut it up for ragout.

Anyway, at the end of the year I felt exhausted. Spilling the Beans had been published in September and I had said to Kerry Hood, the Pollyanna publicist with the steel spine who I was privileged to have from my publisher, 'Work me to death, kill me, it doesn't matter, just so long as it's a success.' Sadly she took me literally. Had I known the book was going to go straight to number one on the bestseller list, I would probably have stayed home by my fire and toasted my toes. As it was, I spent the rest of the year visiting various literary festivals over and above my usual workload of speaking engagements.

I have never been a fan of literary festivals,

which seem to me to be an exploitation of authors, since you sell a limited number of books and the main profit goes to the organisers, although it's enjoyable meeting the people who turn up. This wouldn't be so bad if the festivals were aimed at the sort of authors who really need the exposure and the publicity, but this is not the case because what every festival seeks are the big names that draw in the crowds. The only possible exception to this is Clare Throckmorton at the Throckmorton Literary Festival, who believes that even unknown authors should be given a chance.

Kate Adie threw a different perspective on literary festivals for me. She was one of the joys of this particular tour (Kate does a lot of literary festivals and I have often wondered why), and when I found myself on a platform with her at Cheltenham talking about political correctness she said that in this day and age when there were so few forums where people could meet and discuss issues, she felt that the literary festival provided one such. On consideration, there is actually quite a lot to say for that point of view.

So maybe Kate Adie is right, as she so often is. It was quite fascinating talking to her about the present system of news

coverage which rather prevents active journalists in the field going out to discover what is happening for themselves because they have to be back to appear in front of a television camera, every hour on the hour for twenty-four-hour news. I particularly love the reason why she always wears pearl earrings. Apparently when she was first a daring journalist going into dangerous places, the dreaded Roy Hattersley said that he hated to think of her hampering the troops and holding them up while she stopped to look for a pearl earring. At that point, as I understand it, she had never worn pearl earrings, but she has never failed to wear them since. That is the sort of humour I really enjoy. Roy Hattersley, you may remember, was the columnist who wrote in the Evening Standard when Two Fat Ladies started: 'These two women will never succeed.' Wrong again there, Roy! And a pity you couldn't control your dog to stop it killing geese in St James's Park.

Anyway, gentle readers, please don't misunderstand me. I greatly enjoyed meeting all of you who came to hear me at the various festivals and listening to your news and problems. I was particularly interested by the number of people who appeared from my past or indeed from my

family's past, whose existence I hadn't even known about. And undoubtedly one of the great highlights of those months was the number of people who either wrote to me, or came and spoke to me and told me that they had been helped by what I had written about my own alcoholism and that they had come into recovery or had joined Alcoholics Anonymous because of it. That was, I suppose, more important to me than anything else, and I delighted in it.

My final speech was in Ely and, rather wonderfully, the only place large enough for the number of tickets they'd sold was Ely Cathedral, so that I found myself giving my talk under the octagon of that beautiful, magnificent cathedral. Step five of AA says that you share your step four, your inventory, which I suppose is what Spilling the Beans was, with God and another human being and I certainly felt when I was sitting under the octagon that God was very much in the equation.

We have the great dichotomy in this country between Christmas, the birth of the Christ child, who brings hope and light to the world, and Yule, the ancient, pagan winter festival which, if anything, was an even greater act of faith, because halfway through the darkest part of the

year they ate a sizeable amount of their stored comestibles, which gave them the necessary adrenalin rush, sugar rush and mid-winter high to avoid depression. But it also endorsed their belief that the sun would return, that spring would come, that the crops would grow and that the animals would breed again. For a primitive and early people, I think that was a huge act of faith.

At home, what I like to do best at this time of year is sleep. And then, come the Epiphany, the feast of the three kings, I can pull myself together and start whatever work I have to do for the coming year. Three Kings Night, which we don't really celebrate here, is a huge occasion on the Continent. I always used to have a spiffin' Epiphany party and then everybody could help dismantle the Christmas tree and take down the Christmas cards with me. But the best Epiphany I remember was the first time we stayed with friends in the village of Weiler, in the Lurchental in Switzerland. During the war my parents had rented a cottage from the Greenwell family who owned large parts of West Sussex around Billingshurst. One of their sons, Eddie, had come to my father during the war, having lain around being a virtual invalid as a

youth, and said, 'Please could you give me a check-up because I want to join the air force?' and 'I rather lied to my doctor over the years to get out of school ...' and things like that. So my father checked him out and found that he was perfectly healthy.

Eddie went into the Fleet Air Arm and had a heroic war, and then became a fighter pilot for Hawker Siddley. Finally, when he came into his inheritance, he bought a large part of the village of Weiler, intending to turn it into a ski resort, but he liked it so much the way it was that he just put in a couple of ski lifts and kept it very small. It was terrifically good skiing and great fun.

Their Three Kings Night was an almost pagan festival. The dwarfs who accompanied the kings on horseback around the three villages in the valley wore these amazingly carved ferocious masks which really belonged in a museum, as did the costumes that the three kings wore. They stopped at every house and accepted a glass of wine and made a mark of the cross on the door jamb to show that they had been there. As they went higher up the valley and as the drink and cold air took effect, these priceless costumes fell into snowdrifts, were hauled out, dusted down, put back on the horse and off they went

again. It was all very jolly as we trooped along behind, and I loved it. We went on several occasions and if you ever find yourself in a Swiss mountain village where the locals play Spoof with viciousness worthy of a Swiss banker and can all sing 'Waltzing Matilda', even though they can speak only Schwitzerdütsch, you'll know that you're in the right place.

However, the early months of 2008 were not to give me any respite because dry rot struck. I live in a cottage built completely of stone except for the bathroom extension and it was in the bathroom wall that we found the dry rot just before New Year. I moved out. I had a book to write, the bath was going to have to come out, the wall was going to have to come down, the whole place was going to be sprayed with toxins in order to defeat the dry rot and a house with no bath and an unusable kitchen was no place for me to stay and write about comfort food.

Clarissa's Comfort Food should have been the easiest of books to write, made up of those tried and tested recipes that I had always enjoyed. I took myself off to the Cholmondeley Arms, my favourite pub in Cheshire, down near the Shropshire border, which is owned and run by my old

friend, Carolyn Ross-Lowe. She and her late husband Guy started the pub twenty years ago and it's everything a pub should be. It's in an old school, converted so that ex-pupils come back to take a drink where they once studied, and while it isn't a gastro-pub as such, it serves excellent food, such as delicious oxtail, kedgeree, marvellous steaks and always roasts on Sunday. It sources much of its food locally from the Cholmondeley Estate, which runs a hub for produce from its various farms. The pub has a great atmosphere and is full of entertaining and amusing locals, everything from a QC to Johnnie O'Shea who hunted the Cheshires for twenty-five years, and is a whippety man, with endless stories about his training as a boy in Ireland and about his time hunting. Ginger McCain, the trainer, is also a regular and comes in with his clients.

One reads that country pubs are failing at a rate of knots and why should I doubt what I read in the newspapers? I have been to a lot of pubs that I would be quite happy to see fail: a combination of Brake Brothers food and microwaves and very little effort to make the customer feel welcome is a sure-fire sign for failure even in the best of times. Cheshire is a

well-off county. Somebody once said that the occupants lived above their means in Cheshire as opposed to above their shops in Manchester and there is an element of truth in that, but basically it is a good rural farming community.

The strip of England that runs from Lancashire down to Somerset in the south is cheese and dairy country. Historically the cheese came about because there is a strain of salt that runs right through the grassland soil and the grass and flavours the milk, and perfectly complements the cheese; and there are salt mines all along that stretch which were used to help to preserve the cheese. It is a curious fact that Red Leicester cheese is now made entirely in Shropshire, because cheese-making in Leicestershire had died out and Shropshire took over the name. As a result there is a farmer in Leicestershire who by law was unable to call his delicious, genuine Red Leicester cheese by that name and had to call it Sparkenhoe. I recommend it to you. But of course the delicious cheeses of Cheshire and Cheddar and Lancashire all fall within this belt.

The biggest cheese fair in the world is held at Nantwich in Cheshire, just down the road from the Cholmondeley. If you win

at Nantwich, you win in the world. I went one year to judge and was astonished at the variety. There were cheeses from every part of the universe, including China: not very nice cheese from China, but cheeses all the same. And the Artisan section, which was the one I was most interested in, had some fantastic products, especially the ones from that strip of England. The artisan producer who won that year, a Mrs Appleby, produced hand-made Cheshire cheese the likes of which make you understand why Cheshire cheese is so astonishingly popular.

The decline in the dairy industry has not affected this part of the world so much as elsewhere, largely because of the cheese industry. There's also been slight salvation thanks to the growth of coffee bars selling lattes and skinny lattes, though why you would want a skinny latte, I'm not quite sure. The rich grasslands of the area have always encouraged the dairy industry and you get full herds of dairy cattle all around the county. You come across some very curious artefacts left over from the industry in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, including walking sticks made out of bull's pizzles or penises which have a rod down the middle and a strange texture as

you might imagine and are much prized among dairy farmers.

I digress. It was at the Cholmondeley that I was reunited with the motorbike and sidecar we used in Two Fat Ladies. This bike, which did not belong to either Jennifer or myself but was the property of the BBC, was sold for charity following Jennifer's death. The money, at my selection, went to the Butchers and Drovers Charitable Institution which is the charity for the Worshipful Company of Butchers of which I'm so proud to be a member. The bike was bought by a remarkable man called John Pointon who started his career driving a lorry for DeMolders and ended up by sheer force of hard work and determination owning the largest rendering plant in Europe. For those of you who don't know, all the bones and remnants of animals that have been butchered are burned at one or other of the country's rendering plants. This produces a great deal of power which is put back into the national grid and in the case of Pointons, they actually put water back into the River Trent, so clean is the water by the time it's been purified. John sadly died, worn out by his labours at a ridiculously young age, and his sons now run the business, so it was

Martin Pointon who drove the bike over for the Cholmondeley pantomime.

Guy Ross-Lowe always used to write the pantomime for the Cheshire Hunt – and very funny they were too. It was decided to hold a fundraiser this January for the local cancer hospital that had looked after him so well in his declining days, and to stage a reprise of various sketches from the pantomimes. Guy and Carolyn's daughter Bea has the most beautiful voice and indeed has started singing professionally, so she sang the majority of the songs.

The show was called The Wrong Pantomime and featured characters from the previous productions, who all discovered they were in the wrong pantomime. In the finale the baddies were fighting the goodies and the baddies were winning, as so often happens in this world, and the goodies were shouting, 'Help, help, who will save us? Who will save us?' On came the Dam Busters music, the lights went out and there were spotlights and smoke, and through the curtains, vroom vroom, came the motorbike and sidecar with me in my Biggles helmet and we got the biggest cheer of the night. It was a great occasion. In rehearsals the chap who was driving the bike said, 'It keeps

stalling!' I said, 'It's all right, it'll be all right on the night.' To which he responded, 'Clarissa, it's a motorbike, not a person.' And I said, 'Trust me, that bike is a person.' And lo and behold, I was right, it was fine on the night. It was the greatest joy to see the bike again. I do go and have a little play with it in Staffordshire whenever I'm in that part of the world. But I think it likes an audience first, that dear bike.

The year saw the twentieth anniversary of the Cholmondeley Arms and Dan Whitmore, their enthusiastic new young chef, and I cooked an anniversary dinner which took place later in the year, as you will understand since the menu was almost entirely game. The dinner sold out more or less immediately and we cooked for, I think, seventy people, which was as many as the pub would hold, all packed in. Hugo Thompson, the extremely handsome manager who brings in the young, had the idea and the event made the local papers and was a splendid celebration. I like getting into the kitchen and getting my hands dirty and watching chefs be pleasantly surprised that I'm actually able to cook. I don't know what they think I do, but there we are.

The flat lands of Cheshire around the

Cholmondeley also provide great hunting country. There is the Cheshire Hunt and the Wynnstay Hunt and the Cheshire Forest, all fairly close together. If you were driving up one of the roads, you'd come across a pub called the Blue Cap with a large hound as the pub sign. Blue Cap was the famous hound who ran a race at Epsom for some enormous amount of money, and was the great stud hound for the Cheshire Hunt. I'm not going to have my rant about hunting here; I'll talk to you about it later on.

January also saw, I think, one of the most wonderful occasions of my life, and this is a life, remember, that has been filled with pretty amazing things. The last fourteen years alone, since the start of Two Fat Ladies, have seen me in many remarkable places with nothing as dear to my heart as this. I had been at the Melton Mowbray Food Festival the previous autumn when a woman came up to me and asked if I would come and speak to her Women's Institute. I often give talks to the WI, since I'm an enormous fan of theirs and once described them as the SAS of cookery after they defeated Europe over the question of marmalade. Were it not for the WI, we would no longer have marmalade, we would no longer have kippers, and we

would not have a great many things.

I remember the first time I spoke to them was in Worcester and I was expecting, I don't know, forty, perhaps fifty people. When I arrived, the antis – those who campaign against hunting, animal research and all field sports – having been taken away by the police, I asked the president, 'And how many people am I speaking to?' She replied, 'Oh, we could only fit in 740.' I went in to do my talk and I looked at them, rank upon serried rank of women of all ages and I said, 'Do you know what I see? Raw power!' And they all cheered.

However, this WI was at Sandringham and they said, 'Our president will be there.' And it did not immediately strike me that the president of the Sandringham WI is Her Majesty the Queen. Now the Queen has been my Queen since I was not quite five years old and she's somebody whom I hold in the greatest respect and esteem; in a world where I have very few heroes, she is definitely one of them. When the day finally dawned, I was so excited that I was on the road from the A1 to Sandringham at half past nine in the morning. It only takes an hour and a bit at worst to get to Sandringham from there and so I spent a lot of time driving around, sitting reading

my book, looking at views, until it was time to present myself. I was taken to lunch, and then to the hall. I was dreadfully overexcited, like a small child. When you meet the Queen, and I have done so before, you are amazed at how good-looking she is, how vital she is. Her skin is wonderful and glows with health, she has great hair and an enthusiasm for life which you seldom find in people who occupy great estates for a long time. We had a lovely day. She was kind enough to laugh in all the right places when I spoke, and the WI performed the most hilarious Laurel and Hardy sketch, which had us all weeping with laughter. Then we had a very good tea – as you would expect.

I said to the Queen, of one lady who'd won the baking competition and was ninety-four, that she still lived on her own and got her own tea every day, and the Queen said, 'Good heavens, how would you have the energy?' I thought, Well, there's no doubt the Queen has the energy, but she probably doesn't get her own tea much. Though I gather she cooks a mean bacon and eggs. When I drove away, I was in a little golden bubble and rang up all my friends and told them I'd been speaking to the Queen, so I thought I might as well share it with

you too. And that really took me through January.

Meanwhile I could still not go home because the Scottish builders who had been employed to fix the dry rot were behaving like builders everywhere and failing to get the job done. Everybody said to me, 'Don't come home; the bath is still in the middle of the kitchen, the place smells of chemicals, so you couldn't have a bath, you couldn't cook, and you could barely get past the bath to go upstairs. Don't bother to come home.' But how I longed for my dear little home. January and February are usually the months I do spend at home, but not this year.

Salvation came in the form of a most remarkable man called Trevor Harding. Trevor is an ex-naval commander who, in his seventies, still swings from the roofs of Edinburgh, examining the tiles and all the things that go wrong with roofs on Georgian houses. He has put together a team of central European builders, mostly Polish, but the plumber is a charming young man from Latvia and he gets the job done. Sadly, by the time Trevor was found and put into my house to make right of wrong, it was too late for me, it was March and I had to get on with life.