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The Tent, The Bucket and Me

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Extract

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Chapter One

The Bucket

It's 1970. I'm three years old, I've got a pudding bowl of white-blonde hair and we're about to go on our first family holiday. Matters have been moving apace in our family unit and, having realised that Corby wasn't quite the green and pleasant land they'd been hoping for, my parents have upped sticks and moved to that bastion of New Town glory, Stevenage. We're living on an estate that's set around a square. It's all part of the brand-new world of modern urban thinking. In the middle of the square there's a scrub of roses where the boy next door, who my mother always whispers, 'has come from Tower Hamlets', likes to take regular shits. I have two very early memories of this house: one is of my mother banging on our front room window, shaking her fist and shouting, 'Stop shitting!' and the other is of a large blue bottle that used to sit in the corner of the dining room. I liked sticking my finger in it.

Our holiday destination was Solva, a small coastal village set in the St David's peninsula in West Wales. Not only would my paternal grandmother be coming with us, we would be travelling in a grey Wolseley, a powerful and cramped little motor whose only saving grace was that it had twin carburettors. Sadly, the twin carburettors were to have the same effect on my father's brain as the knowledge that the tent he had bought had come all the way from mainland Europe. Intoxicated by their very presence, my father, at point of

purchase, had failed to notice that the chrome writing on the boot was the same colour as the car: it had been resprayed and what lurked beneath the immediate sheen was a host of mechanical woes. By the time we came to our first family holiday, the car was on its last legs. Bits were falling off by degrees and every time a door was opened or shut, there would be a tinkling accompaniment of rust rattling its way loose. 'Are you sure this is going to make it to Wales?' my mother had asked, arms folded.

'Yeeeesssss!' my father had wailed, as if that was THE most obvious thing in the world.

My unplanned arrival had had a cataclysmic effect on my parents' summers. Rendered instantly impecunious, my mother could only sit back and stare as her single, childless chums jetted off to exotic Greek islands or, even better, as far as my mother was concerned, to the South of France, a place that mustered wafting, elysian daydreams. Not for her a fortnight in the baking sun or long cocktails into the night: with thoughts of what could have been crashing round like dodgems, my mother was a grumbling pool of resentment before the bags were even packed.

'WHY do we have to go to Wales?' asked my mother, sitting on the edge of her bed and throwing her arms in the air. 'You know what the weather's like. It'll be shit.' My father, who was busy ticking things off his checklist, was in no mood to listen.

'We've gone through this a thousand times,' he replied, on hands and knees, as he retrieved a large water carrier from the back of a cupboard in their bedroom. 'We've got to go. I need to see the family. And Mam needs a holiday.'

'Tony,' began my mother, her hazel eyes ablaze. 'Taking your seventy-year-old, diabetic mother camping is hardly going to be a holiday. She's got a heart condition. It's ridiculous!'

But the die was cast. We were going camping. And we were taking a recently bereaved pensioner with us. What could possibly go wrong?

The car was packed to bursting. Like a swollen corpse, it threatened to erupt at any moment. Dad had used a sheet of chicken wire as a makeshift roof rack with everything we possessed teetering into a precarious peak. My parents didn't have much but, like refugees, everything we did have was piled on top of the car. There was a tent, tent poles, a camping stove, a ground sheet, two saucepans, a kettle, a bag of cutlery, tea towels, proper towels, a washing-up bowl, a folding table, five folding chairs (one extra in case of breakages and/or an unexpected guest), a water carrier, a windbreak, Wellingtons, one battered brown leather suitcase bloated with a month's worth of clothes even though we were only going for a week, a green holdall filled with indiscriminate sundries and, on top of everything, like a malevolent fairy, one triumphant pink, plastic bucket (with lid). Being three, I was allowed two items, space permitting, and had chosen to take a one-eyed teddy called Timmy and a scrawny, chewed-up, man-like rodent in tartan trousers and velvet jacket: his name, Mr Mouse.

The Wolseley's interior was a trim façade. Like the respray, the attractive wooden fascia of the dashboard and plump grey seats belied the cancer that raged within. My father was particularly proud of the steering wheel that he had fitted with a black leather cover, the laced-on splendour adding a requisite splash of glamour to complement the twin carburettors. To prove he meant business, he also wore a pair of black leather driving gloves complete with string backs, whatever the weather. He had even managed to convince my mother, who didn't drive, that they were essential to road safety because they ensured a 'more complete grip of the wheel'. My mother, a nervous passenger at the best of times,

treated the driving gloves with the reverence of St Christopher. 'You're not wearing your driving gloves!' she would cry, however short the journey, as if their absence ensured a helter-skelter slide to Hell, and so on they would be pulled, imbuing our car with a talismanic glow. For years I thought that you weren't allowed to drive a car unless you were wearing gloves but then, as I crashed into my teenage years and realised that other people's parents were able to happily go from A to B without them, they formed a tiny part of the chisel that would chip away at my parents' omniscience.

In 1970, there were no such things as seat belts or child harnesses and I would spend hours standing on the back seat staring out the window, my mother alongside me holding on to the back of my pants. The world that flitted by was wondrous: cows in fields, a fort in the distance, a white horse carved into a hillside, everything was a bright, new experience, flashing and fleeting. I was fascinated with everything and never wanted to sleep for fear of missing any passing sensory treat: hedgerows were exhilarating, cobbled streets inconceivable and castles were straight from the books I was read at night. To my parents, the six-hour journey to Wales was as painful as a slow twist of the arm but for me, it was a fizzy treat.

There was no doubt about it; we were excited. Even my mother, who couldn't have hated the idea of camping in Wales with her mother-in-law more if she tried, couldn't contain the frisson that went hand in hand with our first family holiday. My dad, bursting with something primeval and masculine, clutched the steering wheel with the confidence of a hunter-gatherer and sang songs loudly, as if he was at a rugby match. I didn't know it yet, but every holiday we went on would be accompanied by that year's family song, a tune from the charts that we would all belt out with a sense

of gay abandon. This year it would be 'Wand'rin' Star' sung by Lee Marvin from the film *Paint Your Wagon*. For some indefinable reason, my father was convinced that he could do a brilliant cowboy accent. He couldn't. Instead, we were treated to a strange Welsh/American hybrid that was so peculiar it was almost chilling. But with no radio in the car we had to make our own entertainment. My mother, whose singing voice was like the sound of a cold recorder, took it upon herself to treat us to a marathon of Simon and Garfunkel songs. Listening to her howling rendition of 'Bridge Over Troubled Water' was the very definition of enthusiasm over talent. But it didn't matter that my parents sounded awful. There was a sense of adventure in the air and it smelled wonderful.

The motorway revolution that began in the 1960s had not yet been completed in 1970 and, due to my mother's insistence that we plan our routes according to the needs of her flimsy bladder, I must have travelled through every market town from East to West, accruing an impressive knowledge of local public amenities as we went. There was the pub in Cheltenham with a toilet with no door, the tea room in Gloucester where you had to buy a scone before you were allowed to wee, the second-hand book shop in Ross on Wye whose ladies' room smelled of burnt paper and the hotel in Stow on the Wold where, if you kept the concierge busy asking about this and also that, my mother could creep off and use the Arthurian-themed lavatories that held their toilet rolls on mini Excaliburs. For my mother, going on holiday was a travel round the great bowls of Britain. It was a mystery that such a tiny woman could generate such massive amounts of urine, but my abiding memory of my mother and everywhere we went was of someone who was forever busting: if she hadn't just been then she wanted to go, if she had just

been then she wanted to know where she could go next. She staked out her journeys in sheets of toilet paper, fluttering like flags to mark her way, and everywhere she stopped would get a full critical appraisal once she was done. 'Lovely soap!' she might say, or 'I was unable to sit on the seat because it was made of wood and everyone knows you can catch syphilis off those.' And then she would turn to me and say, 'Remember that, Emma! You must NEVER sit on a wooden toilet seat! NEVER!'

Five hours into our holiday and we'd reached Hirwaun, the village where you turn left to go up and then down into the Rhondda valley. We were all sung out for the time being and Mum had just had a urinary pit stop at a garage outside Cwmbran. It was the last chance she had to relieve herself before we got to my grandmother's house in Treherbert, and knowing that there was nowhere to go to the toilet between here and there was creating an electric tension in the car. The atmosphere was bristling. 'Are you sure this is the only way to get there?' asked my mother, anxiety rising. 'I mean, what if I need to go again?'

'Brenda,' explained my father for the third time. 'You've only just been. This is the only road into the Rhondda. There is no other way. If you want to go again, then you'll have to go in a bush.'

Travelling the road up from Hirwaun to the head of the valley was the most magical moment of my life to date. Coming from a council estate in a town carved from concrete where that little patch of roses was my only rub with nature, seeing what lay before me was a vast nirvana. The Neath valley sprawled away in a roll of green and there, my first glimpse of mountains, the Seven Sisters and the Brecon Beacons smouldered in the distance. The vast expanse of countryside that slipped away to the horizon was inconceivable. It was my first

experience of the possibilities of space and all I could do was stand, hands on the back of the seat in front of me, and gawp with my mouth open. This sudden, undulating landscape was so fundamental and different from anything I had previously experienced that I found myself startled. I could not believe that such places were possible. 'Those are mountains, Emma,' explained my mother, pointing. 'Tony! Let's stop a while so Emma can see the view properly.'

Pulling into the designated car parking area had seemed such a pleasant idea. Perhaps it was the slow climb to the top of the valley, as the road nipped and tucked its way round the sheer granite walls? Perhaps it was the constant gear changing as my father, grinding up or grinding down, negotiated the blind twists and turns? Perhaps it was my mother screaming with fear, certain that we were only one bend away from certain oblivion? Who knows. Whatever it was, as we pulled into the scenic parking spot, the Wolseley, shattered and broken from the stuttering ascent, let out a strangled rattle and shuddered to a halt. Something below us fell off. 'What was that?' asked my mother, cocking her head to one side. 'I can smell petrol.'

My father, sensing that a wet blanket had just been thrown over our holiday, made an optimistic twist of the ignition key. The Wolseley let out a pained and juddering grind, like a wind-up toy that's been thrown into a blender, and then, as if to tell us that enough was enough, emitted a thin whine that petered out to a perfect, dead stop. Silence.

'Mountains!' I said, pointing and smiling because, even if we were now stuck in the middle of nowhere, at least the view was impressive. My father turned the key again. Nothing. My mother, sensing that this might be her fault for making us stop, did what most women do in similar circumstances: she blamed my father.

'Tony!' she yelled, giving his shoulder a poke with a finger. 'Why didn't you take the car to the garage before we left? Why didn't you do that? What are we going to do now?'

My father said nothing. A dread quiet had come over him. With my mother whipping herself into a proud peak of hysteria in the back, Tony, still in silence, opened up his door. Tinkle, tinkle, went the rust, flicking him the Vs. Treading slowly, as if he was approaching an undetonated bomb, my dad walked to the back of the car, veering away from it in an attempt to put this whole sorry mess into some sort of perspective. It didn't look good. The exhaust was hanging off but that didn't explain the smell of petrol. Backtracking to the front of the car, Tony unhooked the bonnet and lifted it so that he was out of view.

'Mountains!' I said again to my mother, smiling. Her head was slumped into the palm of her hand. I was only three, but even I knew that probably meant trouble.

'OK,' said my father, appearing suddenly at the side window. 'I know what the problem is. The petrol feed pipe has come loose. I need to screw it back on to the carburettor. And the exhaust is hanging off. But I think I can hold that back in place with one of the luggage hooks.' My mother looked up at him with the slow menace of someone who wished they weren't right all the time, but there it was.

'Shouldn't we try and call someone?' she said, frowning. 'Are you sure you know what you're doing?'

'But I'd have to walk back to Hirwaun,' said my father, gesturing back down the valley. 'I'd be gone for hours. Don't worry about it. I'll have this fixed. In fact, it won't take that long.'

'But, what if ...' began my mother.

'Brenda,' said my father, his hand out. 'I can do this. Let me get on with it.'

Solemn and nervous moments come to us all, and as Tony trudged to the boot to retrieve his toolbox, he had a small, explosive epiphany. If he did not manage to tie up the exhaust and screw back the petrol feed pipe then his matrimonial life was as good as over. Patching the car up and limping it to Solva was all that was required. Professional assistance could be arranged later but for now, it was make-do and mend. We were half an hour from Treherbert and then it would be two hours on to Solva. If he didn't turn the engine off outside his mother's house and reneged on an earlier promise to eat his sister-in-law's Welsh cakes then he might just get away with this. Tony was breaking into the sweat of possibilities. All, he reasoned with himself, would be fine.

Having taken one of the less necessary elastic hooks from the luggage rack, my dad made a loop around the exhaust and pulled it flush against the undercarriage. He attached the hooks to either side of the car, stood back and looked at it. The exhaust was off the floor, which was an improvement. Whether it was tight enough was debatable but to my mother's untrained eye, the arrangement would appear convincing.

'Exhaust's done,' said my dad, tapping on the window and giving us a thumbs up. My mother said nothing.

Even though my experience of the mystery of mothers was a short one, something primeval told me that a mother who's gone silent is as dangerous as a coiled snake. In the same way that dogs can sense danger in the wind, I too was aware that all was not as it might be. I waved Mr Mouse in her direction. She turned and looked at me. 'Come on,' said my mother with a sigh. 'Let's have a walk about. Don't worry. We'll all be fine. Let's go and have a look at the mountains. And we can have a wee while we're at it. Do you need a wee?' I shook my head. 'Well let's try and go anyway,' she

added, as if clinging to what she knew would somehow sprinkle our predicament with certainty.

As we got out, my mother fixed Tony with one of her special stares. 'We are going for a walk,' she said, with a defiant toss of her dark brown hair.

'Well don't go too far,' said my dad, head still under the bonnet. 'This won't take long.'

There's something wonderful about holding your mother's hand in times of trouble. It's a panacea for all manner of ills and as we stumbled down the tufted hillside, my little fist wrapped in hers, nothing seemed to matter. 'Tread carefully,' warned Brenda, picking her route with precision. 'There are holes everywhere. And poo. We don't want that on our shoes, do we?'

'Who did the poo?' I asked, because this was fascinating.

'I think it's sheep's poo,' explained my mother. 'And rabbits. They look like currants, don't they? No! Don't pick it up. Put it down, please. No. Not in your pocket. On the floor.'

The coarse landscape was a toy box of opportunities: springy, chewed-down turf and a playground of lichen-covered rocks. I wanted to run about but my mother's hand had me good and tethered. We had climbed down far enough to be out of sight of the car and as I gazed about at the crumbled slate and rough-housed hillocks, I was saturated with wildness. Down to our left there was a larger rock, deposited who knows how, adding to the strewn complexion of the hillside. I tugged at my mother's hand. 'Let's go there,' I said, pointing.

'Actually, that's not a bad idea,' said my mother, giving a quick 360-degree sweep. 'We can have a wee behind that. Come on then. Don't run.'

But I was longing to run on. Twisting my hand away from hers, I careered towards the rock with joyful abandon.

The boulder was massive to my three-year-old eyes and I quickly decided that the first thing I was going to do was run round it, very fast, at least three times. As I crashed towards it, I could hear my mother behind me shouting 'Emma! Be careful!' But I was oblivious to her concern. I was on a steep, sloping hill and the momentum was electric. As the rock loomed up before me, I knew I wanted to negotiate its first corner but gravity had taken over and my legs were rushing away from me. The rock was sitting on a hidden ledge, and as I bounced uncontrollably towards it, I realised that rather than making a neat turn to begin my carousel-like run, I was heading for a drop. 'Emma!' screamed my mother behind me. But it was too late. And over I went.

The fall was something of a startle. It wasn't the height of the drop because, luckily, that was nothing more than superficial, but it was what was waiting for me as I came to rest that was to cause the distress. As most children do, I had bounced a bit, and in the jumble of the fall I was momentarily disorientated. Finding myself at a stop and lying on my tummy, I put my hands out in front of me and pushed myself up, bottom first, until I was standing. And then I saw it. Lying, splayed before me, a rancid, stinking and maggot-infested sheep. 'Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!' I screamed, frozen to the spot. The sheep's tongue was hanging out and its belly had burst open. 'Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!' I screamed, again, staring at the exposed ribs, the legs pointing skywards, flies in the eye sockets. Brain overflowing with horror, I was trapped in a tractor beam of death.

'Emma!' I heard my mother shout above me. 'Oh thank God! Oh! OH! Get away from that! Oh! That's awful! Come to me! Come to me! Oh! No! Don't look at it! Oh!'

I reached up to take my mother's hands, still staring over my shoulder at the decomposing carcass, my mother's wails

ringing in my ears. Dragging me up to the rim of the ledge, my mother clasped me to her. 'Oh,' she said, relief pouring out of her. 'I thought you'd fallen off a cliff. Are you all right?'

'Sheep,' I said in a whisper, pointing down.

'I know,' nodded my mother quickly. 'Let's not look at that any more. It's just come here to die. That's all. Naughty sheep. You didn't touch it, did you?' I shook my head.

'Come on,' said my mother, picking me up. 'Let's go back and see Daddy. Come to Wales, he said. It'll be lovely, he said. We can break down and it'll be full of dead sheep. What more do you want in a holiday?'

'Did you have a wee?' asked Tony, closing the bonnet, the bottom of his flares flapping in the wind.

'No,' said my mother in a firm tone. 'We did not have a wee. Emma almost fell off the cliff and we saw a rotting sheep.'

'Well, I think I've fixed the fuel pipe,' said my dad, choosing to ignore anything my mother might want to tell him. 'Get back in the car and I'll give it a go.'

We slumped ourselves into the back seat. Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle, went the rust. 'OK,' said my father, pulling on his driving gloves. 'Let's go!'

The key twisted in the ignition but there was nothing, not even the whirr of something giving it its best shot. I caught my father's eyes in the rear view mirror. He had the look of someone startled by an unexpected slap. He turned the key frantically, each time with more ferocity, but still nothing. Another silence descended. My father's brain was in overdrive. How could this be? He had reattached the fuel pipe. But why was the engine not turning over? And then it came to him. 'Starter motor!' he declared, leaping out of his seat. 'Quick!' he added, turning to face my mother. 'Pass me the hammer under the back seat!'

My mother held his gaze for a dangerous length of time, the sort of time in which worlds are created and destroyed. Saying nothing, she reached down and found the hammer. Snatching it from her, my father got down on his hands and knees and, with one furvent blow, gave the starter motor an almighty thwack. Jumping back into the car, he turned the ignition once more. *Phuur*, *phuuuuurr*, *phurrrr*, wailed the engine.

'COME ON!' shouted my dad, bouncing up and down.

Phuurr, *phuttt*, *phuurrr*, *phurrrr*, *phurrrrrrrrrrrrrrr*, it moaned and suddenly, as if the breath of God Himself had wafted through its pistons, the car was up and running.

'I TOLD you I could do it!' shouted my father, in defiant triumph. 'Yes! YES!'

Thirty minutes later and we were pulling into Scott Street, the home of my grandmother. In order to prevent another breakdown, it was imperative that my dad kept the car moving. Bubbling over with nervous energy and looking a little wild-eyed, he threw a sharp look over his shoulder. 'Right, Brenda,' he began. 'We can't stop. I'll slow right down. You jump out. Go and get Mam. I'll drive round the block. Then you'll both get in.'

My mother blinked. 'You want me to ask your seventy-year-old mother to jump into a moving car?' she asked.

'It'll be a crawl. At best! Come on!'

'This is ridiculous,' muttered my mother, opening her door on to the moving road beneath her.

'Put both your feet out before you jump!' advised my father, shouting. 'Both feet!' Brenda, checking that there was nothing coming in either direction, hooked her feet on to the edge of the frame and, with a few deep breaths, launched herself out of the side door with the urgency of a parachute

jumper. I stood up on the back seat and watched as she bobbed away and skidded to a halt, clutching herself on the chest with relief. Realising that her passenger door was now wide open and I was only inches from it, my mother burst into a frantic sprint, caught up with the car and slammed the door at a stretch. I watched as she grew smaller in the back window, her panting frame heaving its way towards my grandmother's house.

'All right Tony!' I heard a voice shouting from behind me. It was a man in coal-stained overalls standing on the pavement and waving.

'All right Dai!' shouted my father, winding down his window. 'I can't stop! Starter motor's playing up! How's your mother?'

'Oh, she died!' Dai shouted back, with a nod.

'Sorry to hear it!' yelled back my dad.

'Don't worry!' yelled Dai, fading away as we turned the corner. 'It was nothing serious.' My father shrugged a little and gave a sigh.

There was a heavy and sweet smell of baking in the air in Treherbert and I would have given anything to stop and search out the source. The terraced houses were a maddening jigsaw of similarities: women in aprons, arms folded, standing in doorways shouting gossip across the street, children of my age sitting at their feet, sucking on scones. And behind them, a mountain, bearing down on everything, so close it felt as if the wind could blow it down and swallow the streets. This wasn't like where I lived: there was no one shitting in the bushes. It was a strange sensation to be creeping past everyday valley life – the scrubbing of doorsteps, the kicking of a ball, a group of young lads flicking marbles against a wall – all of it seemed familiar yet a million years away from the disparate, suspicious New Town living I was used to. A woman was beating a carpet

over a washing line, another man stood chatting with three fish on a hook hanging over his shoulder and everyone, without exception, was saying hello as we trickled past. A car in the valley, even if it was one on the verge of breaking down, was still, it would seem, a major event.

We completed our slow tour around the block and were coming back to where we needed to be. Dad adjusted the car to as slow a creep as he dared. Ahead of us I could see my mum, holding a suitcase, and my grandmother, who was trying to pull on a coat. My dad leant over to the passenger door opposite him and flicked it open. 'Throw in the suitcase!' he shouted. My mother, who was wearing a scowl so intense it could have turned any living thing to stone, was happy to oblige. Any chance she had to throw something heavy in the direction of my father, she was going to take it. 'Careful!' he shouted, as the suitcase clattered on to his knees. 'Now get Mam in! Get Mam in!'

A small crowd of neighbours had dripped out of their houses, intrigued that the 'bride in black' was back and this time she was trying to get a seventy-year-old widow to leap into a moving vehicle. This wasn't how they did things in the valleys, that was for sure. 'Mam!' yelled Tony, gesturing wildly with his hand. 'Get in! You can do it!'

My grandmother, who wasn't fast at the best of times, was skip-walking next to the open door but clearly couldn't quite muster up the courage to commit to a jump, so my mother, who was hard on her heels, took matters into her own hands and gave her a shove. 'Oooh!' screamed a neighbour, holding her head in her hands.

My grandmother, falling into the car, was now flailing face down and was in grave danger of being impaled on the gear stick. My mother, thinking quickly, ran alongside the car, lifted up my grandmother's legs, swung them inside and

then, realising that her charge had been dispatched, however uncomfortably, slammed the front door with a flourish. She then ran round to the other side of the car, opened the door and leapt in whilst fixing the onlookers with a strained smile and giving what can only be described as a sarcastic wave. 'Just drive,' she hissed as she threw herself into the back seat.

And for once, Dad did what he was told.

'Did I tell you about Ann?' said my grandmother. We had been driving for almost an hour and as far as I could tell, she was yet to pause for breath. She didn't need a reply. 'Well,' she continued, sucking her cheeks. 'You know she's been helping out with the district nurse? So they go down to Jones the butcher. And he lives with his mam. Anyway, they've gone in and he says, "I think there's something wrong with her. I haven't had a peep out of her since last Tuesday." So Ann goes in to have a look at her. And there she is, sitting in a chair, stone cold dead. So Ann turns to Jones the butcher and says, "I'm sorry to have to tell you that your mother's dead and what's more, she's covered in ants." And do you know what he said to that? He looked at her and said, "Oh, we get them this time of year!" Can you imagine that? "We get them this time of year!" Not bothered that his mother's dead in a chair and covered in ants! Just "We get them this time of year." I mean. That's not normal is it?'

'Solva!' suddenly screamed my mother, pointing wildly at a road sign. 'Oh we're here! We're here! Oh thank God!'

As we passed the boundary into Solva, a fat, juicy drop of rain exploded on to the windscreen. Dark clouds had been gathering and, although it was only five o'clock in the afternoon, a dread gloom had descended. A wind, sweeping in from the Irish Sea, was prowling over the cliff tops and as we drove, one windscreen wiper valiantly clearing bucketfuls of

water with every sweep, my mother slumped her forehead against the window. 'Is there any chance,' she mumbled, 'that a passing ambulance might pick me up and take me somewhere for a lie down?'

'Weather's terrible,' announced my grandmother, stating the obvious. 'How are you going to get a tent up in this, Tony?'

The campsite where we were staying was little more than a field sloping off towards a cliff edge. On one side, there were a few caravans on bricks, permanent fixtures, ever hopeful that someone might want to breathe life into their damp, musty frames.

'Where's everyone else?' asked my grandmother, noticing the startling lack of holidaymakers. 'Are we the only people here?' The rain was now lashing down in sheets. My dad, who had left the engine running for obvious reasons, had made a dash for a wooden hut that looked as if it might have someone in it. It didn't. It was locked. Leaping over already forming puddles, he ran over to the caravans and peered in. Looking back towards the car, he threw us all a shrug.

'Great,' muttered my mother. 'No one's here. That's all we need.' Dad jumped back into the car, rain dripping down his face.

'I can't find anyone,' he said, wiping the wet from his eyes. 'I guess we should just pick a spot and get the tent up. If the owner comes down I can sort things out with him then.'

'Where are you going to put it up?' asked my mother, staring down the field towards the sea. 'We're very exposed. Can we try and pitch near the caravans? At least they'll give us a bit of protection.'

'Oh you can't do that,' chipped in my grandmother. 'You're not allowed to put tents with caravans. Gwennie told me.'

'But no one's here,' complained my mother. 'Who's going to be bothered?'

'Best not,' said Dad, agreeing with Mam. 'The owner could come back and tell us to move. I don't want to have to put it up and then take it down again.' My mother bit her bottom lip, closed her eyes and threw her head to the back of her seat. I stood up and stared at her and understood that this is what you look like when you wish you were in Greece but instead you're on holiday in damp circumstances with your mother-in-law.

The car bounced and slurred its way across the field. 'Over there!' Mam yelled, pointing. 'Go over there by that fence. We can tie the tent to it so we won't get blown away!' My grandmother, thinking she had been hilarious, laughed uproariously. 'Blown away!' she repeated and shook her head because the very idea was ludicrous.

'I'm going to turn the engine off now,' said Tony, with the solemnity of a family member agreeing to switch off a life-support machine. The Wolseley gasped into the abyss. Whether it would live again was anyone's guess. The rain clattered in our ears, pounding on the roof with such intensity it was as if we were being beaten into the ground.

'This is terrible,' said my dad, craning to look up at the sky through the windscreen. 'I don't know whether to wait or just get on with it.'

'Just get on with it,' ordered my mother in a heartbeat. 'I've been sitting in this car for eight hours.'

'Hmm,' nodded Tony. 'I think you're right. At least then we'll be able to set everything up. Get some tea on. Right. Well. Wish me luck.'

Putting a tent up is complicated at the best of times, and watching my father battle with poles, pegs and flapping canvas whilst being hosed down by the onslaught of rain was a bit like watching an episode of 'It's a Knockout' where contestants are blown over by water cannons. My grandmother,

deciding that we all needed our minds taken off the fact that this was our holiday, kept us going with sorry wartime tales.

'Then there was the time,' she said, tapping a finger on her knee, 'when the Germans bombed the munitions factories in Cardiff. And one of the bombers went off course, saw a spark or a light or something, and dropped his bombs on the valley. Twelve people killed. Terrible, it was. And because everyone was so sad with it, they decided to have the funerals all on the same day. Now, the only vehicle available to carry all twelve coffins was the Corona pop lorry. All stacked up, they were, in the back. But the thing was, when the pop van brought the coffins up the valley, people didn't know whether to laugh or cry. You know why?'

Silence.

'Because the slogan for Corona pop, which was written in massive letters on the tailboards, was "Cheaper by the Dozen"! Terrible. Cheaper by the Dozen. Just terrible. Because there was twelve of them, see. Which is a dozen. Imagine not noticing a thing like that?'

'I saw a dead sheep today, Grandma,' I said out of the blue.

'You never did?' said my grandmother, with alarming urgency. 'Ooooh that's not good. They say it's bad luck to see a dead sheep on a day of travel. Not good. Not good at all.'

As my grandmother, who was prone to the supernatural, tutted on about how a dead sheep portends nothing but doom I began to believe that the storm might be my fault. Had my random encounter with a rotting carcass precipitated our family into a spiral of disaster? Were the Holiday Gods throwing down their first thorn? I clung to my mother, who had assumed the limp, lifeless form of someone who, at that moment, would be more than happy to pass into spirit. 'Let's not talk about the dead sheep any more,' she mumbled, clutching her forehead. 'It was just a dead sheep.'

Meanwhile, against all the odds, Dad had got the tent up. As feats go, it was up there with scaling Everest. His face, dripping with rain, appeared at the window. My mother, sensing his presence, rubbed a hole in the condensation so we could get a better look at him. Nothing, not even seaweed, could have looked wetter. 'Come on then!' he shouted through the wind. 'Let's get in.'

The dash to the tent felt dangerous, even though it was no more than a few feet. The rain was whipping down and each drop landed with a sting. 'This is like when it snowed in 1947!' shouted Mam, running towards the tent. 'Snowed right up to the bedroom windows. Although that was snow. Not rain.'

'Jesus!' exclaimed my mother, shaking the water off. 'It's torrential. Are you sure we're safe?' My dad looked out through the tent door at the screaming weather.

'It can't stay like this for long,' he said, with a hopeful nod. 'It'll be blue skies in half an hour if we just wait for a bit. And then when it stops I can get the stove up and get the tea on. And then we can go for a nice walk. Maybe go down to the beach?' He turned and looked at us with a smile.

'You must be mad,' said Mam, all matter of fact. Then, throwing me a look, 'This'll last for days. She saw a dead sheep.' Everyone turned and stared at me and somewhere, in the distance, there was a low rumble of thunder.

Storm or no storm, this was an occasion for me to savour. It was my first time inside a tent, a tent that was going to shape my foreseeable summers. Everything was already damp or completely wet. I was standing in a small puddle of water and a metallic smell of rain permeated the interior. The walls were a bright, synthetic orange and the door, which was undone and tied to one side, was a plastic, crayon-coloured blue. There was a bedroom compartment, accessed through

a fat zip, with a flimsy cotton divide giving the illusion of not one, but two sleeping quarters. To me, it was exciting and exotic and the war-like drumming of the rain on every inch of canvas made the experience all the more intense.

'I need a wee,' said my mother, with a sigh, 'and a cup of tea.'

'Can't put the stove up in this,' said Dad, with a shake of his head. 'Wouldn't get it lit for starters. I suppose if you're desperate I could get it going in here. Might be all right if it's near the door.'

'But what about the fumes, Tony? The fumes?' wailed my mother, throwing an arm around to simulate gaseous emissions. 'Or do you want to poison us all on top of everything else? And what if the tent catches fire? What will we do then?'

'Oh diawl,' chipped in Mam, 'wouldn't worry about that. Rain would put it out. This rain could extinguish the fires of Hell!' She was standing staring down towards the cliff edge, clutching on to her handbag. 'And the wind's picking up. Look at that tree. It's practically bent over on itself. This is bad, Tony. Very, very baaaaad.'

'Here you are,' said my dad, handing my mother the pink, plastic bucket.

'What's this?' said Brenda, staring at it.

'Toilet,' muttered Dad, who then unfolded four chairs and placed them in a line.

'You want me to piss in this whilst you all sit there and watch?' asked Brenda. 'What am I? The evening's entertainment?'

'Well we'll all go and stand in the bedroom compartment and look the other way. That's what we'll do. Come on, Mam, Em, let's go. We'll let Mummy have a wee. Come on.'

'I need to go as well,' announced Mam, as we trooped off to the other side of the tent.

'Right,' said Dad, 'then you can go second. And I may as well, so I'll go third. Do you want to have a go?' He looked down at me, with eyes like plugholes. I nodded. 'Good,' he declared, as if this was going very well. 'Well that's that sorted.'

I was quite determined to take my turn on my own so when my mother asked me if I could manage, I was adamant that I could. The pink bucket, now sloshing with three layers of urine, was perched in the darkest corner of the tent. I had made sure that everyone was not only in the bedroom compartment but zipped in as well. This was a solo flight and I would complete my ablutions unassisted. My parents sensing, in the absence of any other sort of holiday-based fun, that this was an opportunity to humour me, were happy to play along. 'Don't LOOK Daddy!' I shouted, as I negotiated my path towards the bucket.

'We've all got our eyes closed!' he shouted back. 'Haven't we? No one's looking!'

'No one's looking!' piped up my mum.

I'd never pissed in a bucket before, so as I took down my tights and pants I had a quick, negotiating peek. Clearly I could just sit on it, like a toilet. So I did. But my three-year-old body was smaller than the bucket's circumference and the next thing I knew, I was concertinaed, knees thrown up and squashed against my chest and I was sinking, slowly, towards two generations of excretions. I let out a small yelp, the sort of yelp that cubs stuck down wells might make. 'Oh Christ!' I heard my mother yell. I was still clinging to the idea that this was something I could deal with. So as I heard the compartment zip being frantically ripped upwards, I made a surge using both my arms and legs. It was a terrible error. The bucket, teetering on uneven ground, rode with my body

weight and tipped itself over to one side. Warm liquid flooded up under my cardigan and gushed down my arm.

I was literally covered in piss.

'Oh God, Emma, no!' yelled my father as he yanked me out of the bucket. My mother, incredulous that this day could get any worse, just stood and stared with a hand over her mouth.

'Don't worry,' announced my grandmother. 'Urine is an antiseptic!' As if that would sweeten the pill. 'Or is that just your own?'

'What are we going to do?' wailed my father. 'We've got no water to wash her!' My mother, thinking quickly, came to an obvious conclusion.

'We'll have to use the rain. She'll have to go out and stand in the rain. That's all we can do. Take her clothes off. Emma, you're going to have to run round the car as quickly as you can. And the rain will wash you clean. And I want you to rub yourself as hard as you can as you're going. Yes? And then you'll run back here and we'll get you dry. Have we got a towel? Tony! Have we got a towel?'

My father, who was undressing me as I stood, my arms out and stiff with horror, nodded towards a green bag. 'In there. There's some clothes as well. Get those out.'

'There's pee all over the floor,' Mam proffered, pointing. 'All under there. And over there.'

'Right,' said Brenda, taking hold of my hand and walking me towards the tent door. 'Let's pretend that the rain is a great, big bath. And you're going to run into it and then you're going to run right back. Do you understand?'

I was cold and naked. I looked out into the sheet of freezing wet. The Wolseley was so battered with rain that it was disappearing into its own halo of spray, grass was turning to mud and brooks of water were bubbling down and away. The

last thing I wanted to do was run out into it, but whatever this short, sharp shock was going to offer, it was still better than being covered with the sticky by-products of my family's kidneys. So out I dashed.

The rain was like ice. With a slap of cold, my breath caught in the back of my throat. Slimy mud was squeezing up through my toes and fat, thrashing raindrops were washing salt into my eyes. I slid round the front of the Wolseley, putting my hand out to stop myself from slipping away. Over the waterfall of noise and wind I could hear my mother shouting at me to scrub myself. So as I ran, mud exploding up my legs, I clung on to myself and rubbed. Emerging from behind the car, I dashed for the open door of the tent. My dad was holding a large towel like a safety net, and as I ran in, he caught me and scooped me up. The combined instant warmth of the towel and being held close to my father was a blessing.

'Well,' said my Welsh grandmother, as she pulled a jumper over my head and my mother rubbed my legs. 'It could have been worse. I could have had a poo.'

Three hours later and the weather still raged. It had turned dark and the wind was so ferocious that the tent frame was complaining with the strain. The canvas sides were buffeting back and forth and my grandmother, who still hadn't let go of her handbag, was terrified. With only the light of one small torch to comfort us, we took it in turns to eat pickled onions out of a jar, the only food we could eat without cooking. 'This is the grimmest meal I've ever had,' said my mother, chewing.

'I'm not being funny,' began Mam, 'but this isn't just a storm. It's something more evil. I can feel it.'

'And why is no one here, Tony?' complained Brenda. 'Why? It's like everyone knows something except us. You

don't think everyone's been warned away or something? What are we going to do?'

My father, who up till now had managed to put a brave face on things, had to concede that things were not as they should be. 'I know,' he said with a quiet nod. 'That's been bothering me. Look, I've been thinking. What about if I try and break into one of the caravans? I don't know about you, but I'll feel a bit safer.'

'Can you do that?' asked Brenda, eyes widening with hope. 'What if you damage it?'

'Blow that,' said my grandmother, standing up. 'I'm eating pickled onions, the tent's about to tip over and I'm sitting in a pool of piss. Let's get the Hell out.'

Unzipping the tent door, the storm hit us straight on. The wind was now so fierce that it was almost impossible to walk. Picking me up, my mother held me close, folding me into the crook of her shoulder. I looked back and watched the tent, now open to the elements, billow out as the wind raged through it, delivering body blows. I gasped as it swayed violently to the left, then right, putting up one last fight before crumpling to the floor. It was as if the wind had assumed a monstrous form, strode into our camp and torn the tent at the neck. Mam was immediately behind us. Handbag flapping in the air and holding on to her hat, she was unable to move forward. Instead she spread her legs and dug in, waiting for the gusts to pass. The ground beneath her was now so sodden and precarious that she seemed to be sinking into it. I looked forward to see my father jimmying open the large back window of one of the caravans. Pushing himself up with his arms, he slid inside and disappeared from view, only to reappear moments later at the caravan door. He was shouting and gesturing for us to come but the wind was now so strong that he was completely inaudible. I again

looked back at my grandmother, and watched in horror as she tried to pull one of her legs out of the swallowing mud. She took one brave step forward but lost her footing, fell over and then slid, at some speed, towards the cliff edge, screaming as she went. I looked back at my father, who had now leapt from the caravan and was running to my grandmother. But he fell over as well and slid on his stomach, scrabbling at the grass. Whether divine intervention or the presence of my father's driving gloves was to thank, there was no way of knowing. But somehow, against all the odds, they managed to collide, cling on to each other and come to a dreadful, muddy stop. My mother, meanwhile, had done nothing but scream without stopping from the tent door to the caravan. Unaware of the slippery chain of events unfolding behind us, she threw me into the caravan, jumped in after me and shouted, 'Where's your father?' I ran to the back window and pointed out. Through the murk we could just make them out, two blackened figures sliding and falling back up towards us. The door of the caravan flung open. Mam's startled, mud-covered face appeared from behind it.

'*Yffach wyllt!*' she panted. 'Remind me never to come on holiday again!'

In anyone's book this was a bad state of affairs. We were drenched, frozen and hungry. The caravan, which we had hoped would be an oasis of calm, was instead a stinking hole. There was mould on the walls, a strange, troubling yet indefinable smell, like bad eggs spliced with fish guts, and worst of all, wind was piping up through the kitchen sink plughole with a haunting, devil-made screech. The pipe-based wailing was the final straw for my grandmother, who, as well as looking like she'd just been dragged up from the bottom of a lake, was now slumped, like a Guy tossed on to a bonfire, on a

bench seat next to the window. 'This,' she declared, raising a finger into the air, 'this is more than an act of God! Someone has brought this upon us!'

'Well,' said my mother, walking towards the tiny toilet in the centre of the caravan. 'It's got nothing to do with ME!'

'Here, Mam,' said Tony, wiping mud off his face with a tea towel. 'You didn't bring any of that ouija board nonsense with you, did you?'

'There is seaweed in the toilet!' screamed my mother, reappearing. 'Seaweed! That's it! The sea has risen over the cliff! Oh God, Tony! We're going to be swept away! Swept away!' Bursting into tears, she threw herself across a brown plastic work surface and wailed into her inside elbow.

'Of course the sea hasn't come over the cliff,' soothed my father. 'Don't be daft! It'll just be a bit of seaweed. In the toilet. Maybe it isn't even seaweed. Maybe it's spinach.'

My mother's sobs racked on.

'Well check it!' she wailed. 'Check and see if it *is* spinach!'

My dad, with a sigh, poked his head into the caravan toilet. 'Oh,' he said, as if it was properly interesting. 'It *is* seaweed.'

And off my mother went again.

'But that doesn't mean it's come up from the sea!' encouraged Tony, giving my mother a pat on the back. 'Come on, now. There's no way the sea can rise over the cliff. Is there, Mam?'

'Well, it can if it's a tidal wave,' she mumbled from under her hat.

'But it's NOT a tidal wave, is it?' battled on my dad. 'Anyway, it looks like very old, dry seaweed. That's not fresh seaweed.'

'Do you promise?' cried my mother, looking up at him.

'Yes. It's definitely not just been put there by the sea. I can promise you that. We are perfectly safe.'

And as he said those fateful words, the back window, which he had climbed through to give us shelter, blew in.

'Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!' we all screamed, because there hadn't been enough screaming on this holiday, not by a long chalk.

Wind howled through the caravan, punching everything in its path. My mother, who had been bent over by the sink, was now clinging on to its edge, hair streaming back from her face. Mam was on her knees on the floor, and Tony was grabbing a foam bench seat and fighting to get to the window, which was now hanging on by a single hinge. I was pinned against the toilet door, splayed by the weather. Everyone's voices had been swallowed up by the wind and although I could see that everyone was shouting, nothing could be heard above the jet-engine din. Tony, drenched and desperate, battled with the window, but the wind had the better of him. Brenda, realising that this might be an all-hands-to-the-pump situation, careered forwards, just as Mam, throwing down her handbag because it was that serious, surged to grab at the window. The force of three adults clattering to one end of the caravan was catastrophic: everything lurched forwards and, with a tree-cracking shudder, the front end of the caravan came off its bricks. Everyone was thrown to the floor.

'Get out!' Tony cried, pushing Mam up to a standing position. 'Get out! Everyone get out!'

Grabbing hold of my arm, Brenda hooked her free hand around a cupboard unit and hauled me towards the door. The caravan was creaking with such menace that blind terror took hold. There was no doubt in any of our minds: get out of the caravan or die.

Pulling me hard behind her, Mum shoved at the caravan door. 'Hold on to me tight!' she yelled, looping an arm around my waist. The caravan was now at such a severe angle

that the drop looked terrifying. We leapt into the rain, rolling on to the floor as we landed. Dad jumped out after us, turned and held out his hands towards Mam, poised in the door-frame and gripping either side to stop the inevitable slide back to the front of the caravan.

'Jump, Mam! Jump!' yelled my father, gesturing wildly. And with one heaving leap, Mam launched herself into the air and towards my father, who had his arms out and was ready to catch her.

The caravan groaned; a deep crunch shattered out from its underbelly. With one terrifying yaw, the rear creaked up to the vertical, flipped over and then rolled, end over end, crashing down the field, metallic smashes punching through the howling wind. Then with one sliding finale, the caravan fell off the edge of the cliff.

'We're in Hell!' wailed Mam, as she watched it go. 'Hell!'

By now, everyone was in tears. I don't know how much families are supposed to endure in a lifetime but we'd managed to condense most of our allotted misery into twenty-four hours. We were back in the car, tent collapsed to the right of us, caravan destroyed to the left. We weren't to know it, but we were in the eye of a force-ten gale, whipped up out over the Irish Sea and sent smashing into the Welsh coast without a single thought for life, property or holidays. The reason no one was at the campsite was because everyone else knew it was coming. They'd packed up and battened down the hatches. But not us. We had driven straight into it and set up deckchairs. And no, the Wolseley didn't make it back. We drove home the next day in the back of an AA lorry.

My grandmother never came on holiday with us again.

The Holiday Gods had thrown me their first curveball. Game on.