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Prologue

The night the earthquake struck in Dudley, my four-year-old son had a fever. He was in bed with me, so that I could keep a close eye on him. Some time around midnight, he'd awoken, coughing and sweating. His eyes were glazed, probably because he was still half asleep, but I couldn't be sure. Fevers and small children are a volatile mix – all the literature said so. They can take a downward turn alarmingly quickly. You had to look for 'signs' – rashes, shortness of breath, delirium. I was barely awake myself, and not at all sure I was up to the job.

I tried to get him to drink some water, but he pushed the cup away, looked at me and said 'Who are you?'

This wasn't good.

It was dark in the room – could it just be that?

Perhaps my work–life balance had been so out of whack that week that he genuinely couldn't place me.

Or was it – something worse?

My mind began racing through a montage of disaster scenarios: an ambulance being called; a doctor berating me for

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not bringing my child in sooner, shouting ‘He asked you who you were and it didn’t ring alarm bells?’ and me whimpering, ‘you don’t understand, I appear in niche comedy shows, I’m used to not being recognised.’

My son was still drowsily coughing in my arms, so I asked him ‘Do you know who *you* are?’ trying to keep the rising panic out of my voice. He didn’t answer – but then it was quite a metaphysical question for a four-year-old.

‘What’s your name?’ I offered as a simpler alternative.

He looked at me with a faint smile, and said, ‘I’m Gary the Snail.’

I ran into the spare room to where Phil had been relegated. ‘We need to get him to hospital,’ I said.

‘He’s got a cough, Bec.’

‘He thinks he’s a snail.’

Phil followed me into the darkened bedroom and stroked our son’s face to wake him up again.

‘You OK, mate?’ he whispered.

‘Yup.’

‘Do you want some water?’

‘Yup.’

He seemed to be reserving the delirium for me.

‘Who’s Gary the Snail?’ I asked.

‘SpongeBob’s pet,’ he said with a grin. Then he sipped some water and went back to sleep. *SpongeBob SquarePants* – his favourite show. He wasn’t hallucinating, he was trying to make me laugh.

‘OK, I may have overreacted,’ I whispered to Phil, but he just looked at me blankly, rubbed his eyes and wandered back to the spare bed.

Prologue

I lay down next to my sleeping boy and dozed off myself. Something woke me – it felt like only moments later – and I thought he must have fallen off the bed. But he was still there, in exactly the same position, quietly snoring.

As I became more conscious, I realised that what I'd heard hadn't been a bang or a thud – in fact I didn't quite know what it was. Nothing had fallen from any of the shelves, the pictures were still on the walls. I couldn't fathom it at all.

Sometimes things are much more ordinary than you think, like my son's 'hallucination' being nothing more than a little boy's idea of funny. And sometimes they're a whole lot odder than you can possibly imagine, like the fact that an earthquake had struck the West Midlands. As soon as I saw it on the news, I knew that's what I'd heard. It wasn't even really a sound at all. It was a shifting, a sensation, an awareness that something wasn't right.

Both events – the sick child and the tremor – were simultaneously normal and abnormal, natural and unnatural, perfectly all right and worryingly wrong. And that's the spectrum we exist on, that's everyday life: part seismic activity, part misplaced joke.

The stories that follow are about such curiosities – the awkwardness of human interaction, the unshakeability of fear, the randomness of memories. Being curious was my starting point, in both the active sense – being interested in people and things; and the passive – being, as we all are, a bit odd.

All of them are true, though perhaps a little bent out of shape in the telling. They are about the strangeness that fascinates me in myself, in others and (if you'll forgive the assumption) in you. There are character studies and



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observations, memories and digressions; singular events dealt with in a matter-of-fact fashion, and quotidian events never really dealt with at all.

If you recognise something of yourself in here, then great. If, on the other hand, it just confirms that yours is the only sane voice in an otherwise bonkers world, then that's fine too. You might want to get a little expert help with that, but it's fine nonetheless.

This is a book of curiosities; and if you're curious enough to read on – I thank you, and hope it reminds you of curiosities of your own.



The tiger who came to tea

Shortly before my brother's bar mitzvah, a stranger took over our home. We didn't exactly invite him; we didn't exactly block his way. He just quietly invaded, conquered us by stealth, and his greatest weapon was our own stupid politeness.

My dad had an uncle called Merv. There were uncles and cousins scattered all over the place, most of whom were just names to us, but Merv, who lived in Miami, had visited London several years earlier and made quite an impression. Many of Dad's relatives reminded me faintly of American stars. Even though both parents came from immigrant stock, Mum's family were somehow terribly English, rather shy and eager to blend in, while Dad's were all larger-than-life. There was an aunt who was a bit like Ethel Merman married to an uncle who had a touch of Eddie Cantor. Merv, when he visited, was somewhere between Lou Costello and Ernest Borgnine, and looked like such a quintessential American tourist that we felt like we'd known him all our lives, whereas in fact we'd just seen characters like him on TV. He was loud and funny and peppered the conversation with phrases like 'honest to god'

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and ‘you gotta be kidding.’ Like my dad’s father, Merv owned a barber shop, so he was full of gags and banter and made conversation as easily as breathing. By the time he went back to Miami, he’d already become a favourite.

Transatlantic phone calls in those days were expensive and often afflicted with time delays and inaudibility. The upside to this was that when Merv and Dad had their occasional catch-ups, both had to shout to be heard, and Jeremy and I could sit on the stairs and listen to them shooting the breeze.

And that was how we first heard about Bob.

‘Listen, Charlie,’ Merv was yelling across four thousand miles of airspace, ‘This fella walked into my shop the other day, nice guy, a photographer. So I’m cutting his hair, not that anyone wants much off these days ... everyone’s a hippy like you, but I says to him, funny thing, I got a nephew who’s an artist in London.’

‘I’m not a hippy, Merv. But now I don’t have to work in an office, why do I need a short back and sides?’

‘You look how you wanna look, Charlie,’ Merv yelled, indulgently, *‘gesundheit.’* As long as you got your strength. Anyway, so this fella, the photographer, his name is Bob Lerman. And I says to him you should look my nephew up, I think you’d get along.’

‘He’s coming to London?’ asked Dad.

‘Sure, he’s going to *Europe*. The whole of *Europe*. He’s gonna take photographs, maybe get a little work. I’ve given him your number.’

From my vantage point on the top landing, I could see Dad tensing a little. It wasn’t that he and Mum were inhospitable, just that unlike Merv they didn’t become firm friends with



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people on first meeting. They liked to build up to it gradually, keep a little distance, take it one step at a time. But if Merv had given our phone number to this totally unknown hippy photographer, they would have to be welcoming – take him out for a drink, maybe buy him dinner. In a moment of breezy camaraderie, Merv had landed Dad with a new ‘friend’ on the flimsy premise that they both had collar-length hair.

‘Now as a matter of fact, Charlie,’ Merv continued, ‘Bob thinks you could do him a little favour. He’s gotta have some paperwork signed ... I dunno, some kind of permit ... and he needs a UK resident to sign it. Like a sponsorship thing ... whatever.’

By now my mum had come out into the hallway and was mouthing: ‘Don’t sign ANYTHING.’

‘Right ...’ said Dad, uncertainly.

‘I mean it’s just a form, you know? Not like a contract or anything legal. Just to say you know this guy ...’

‘Well ... I *don’t*, of course,’ protested Dad, trying to keep a smile in his voice, while mouthing back at my mother ‘I’m not STUPID, Sheila.’

‘Listen, you’ll meet him, you’ll love him. Then all you gotta say is ... he’s legit ... he won’t outstay his welcome. You’re OK with that, right?’

‘Well, you know ... we’ll see how it goes,’ said Dad, and gestured to my mother triumphantly as if to say ‘there, I haven’t committed us to anything.’ But she just glared at him and went back into the living room. She knew he was about to be bulldozed.

‘Terrific, I already told him you’d do it,’ said Merv.



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'OK.' sighed Dad. And even though I couldn't see her, I knew Mum was sitting, pursed-lipped and fuming, waiting for him to get off the phone.

For some weeks, we heard nothing. The whole household was absorbed in Jeremy's forthcoming bar mitzvah – a bit like planning for a wedding but without the element of anyone actually looking forward to it. Jeremy was nervously rehearsing his parsha – the long passage of Hebrew he would have to recite in front of the entire congregation. Mum and Dad were up to their eyes in table plans and speeches and conversations with the caterer about vol au vents. Because the whole thing, modest though it was, was inevitably going to cost more money than they could comfortably afford, they'd tried to mitigate the expense by having the kiddush – the little drinks celebration straight after the service and before the dinner/dance – at our house. But in saving the cost of hiring the synagogue hall, they'd landed themselves with a whole lot of additional work. Both house and garden, though they looked fine to me, apparently needed radical work to make them presentable, and without the luxury of a cleaner or gardener, we had to do it all ourselves.

So it was that Dad and I were out in the front garden one Saturday afternoon, trying somewhat ineptly to wrestle the holly bush into topiary form, when Mum came to the front door and announced there was someone called Bob on the phone. Dad disappeared for a few moments, and Mum came out to be with me. I was nine and very sensible, but she could always see the danger lurking in apparently harmless scenarios,



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so leaving me alone with a pair of shears was never going to happen. Unfortunately, in avoiding this remote risk, she had overlooked the greater one of leaving my dad unattended on the phone. When he returned, he looked a little sheepish.

'I'm going to pick him up,' he said flatly, as though he'd just been sideswiped by a large, unseen vehicle.

'Who?'

'Bob Lerman.'

'Who's Bob Lerman?'

'Uncle Merv's friend,' I explained, to speed things along a bit.

'You're going to pick him up? Where from?'

'Heathrow,' said Dad.

'You don't even know him,' said Mum. She'd gone a bit shrill. I took the shears off her.

'He said he'll be wearing a fishing hat.'

'I'm not worried about how you're going to recognise him. I'm worried about why you're schlepping right across London to pick up a guy you've never met, just because he once had a trim at your uncle's barber shop. And where are you taking him?'

Apparently Bob had had the foresight to check himself into a hotel in Kensington, but not to figure out how to get there on public transport. Or in a taxi. Even at the age of nine, I wondered how he was going to make it round the whole of Europe. Dad had known, the instant he'd got off the phone, that *he* and not Bob was the one being taken for a ride, but a promise is a promise, so off he went. As he drove away, Mum called after him: 'Don't bring him here. And DON'T SIGN ANYTHING.'

It was no surprise to any of us that when Dad returned a few hours later, the passenger seat was occupied by a guy in



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a fishing hat. Mum uttered a few *sotto voce* expletives, then framed her face into a welcoming smile and opened the front door.

Bob got out of the car first, and walked towards Mum with an outstretched hand:

‘You must be Sheila. Bob. Bob Lerman.’

Mum went to take his hand and instead found herself locked in a bear hug. This went on just long enough for her entire torso to stiffen with embarrassment, at which point Bob released her, then instantly gripped her anew by both shoulders, stared into her face and said ‘Thank you for welcoming me into your home, Sheila.’ Mum nodded, accidentally implying assent, and Bob pushed past her into the house.

‘Why is he here?’ she asked Dad in a whisper, furious but too polite to let Bob know it.

‘I honestly don’t know, Sheila. I took him to the hotel and they ... there was some mix-up ... and he’s got all this camera equipment ... it’s worth thousands of dollars, so he couldn’t go to a youth hostel ... and he asked me to take care of the stuff and suddenly I’d agreed to bring him here.’ And as if to prove how bewildered he was, Dad had by now carried all Bob’s luggage into the hall himself, without Bob even offering to help.

Mum made tea and Bob waited for her to sit down with hers before saying he’d rather have coffee. Then we all sat around in the front room trying to get the measure of this strange arrival. He’d taken off the fishing hat now, but was still dressed in head-to-toe khaki as if ready for combat. He was tall and thin, a little feeble looking, but with alert, beady eyes. His hair was long and straggly and he had a wispy, insubstantial



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beard. He wasn't, it had to be said, a great advertisement for Merv's barbering skills. His skin was pale and covered in angry eczematous blotches. Everything about him both screamed that he needed looking after, and made you not want to be the one to do it.

Jeremy and I usually enjoyed it when people came round – it broke up the everydayness of family life, and made us all behave like heightened versions of ourselves. Dad would be jokier than usual, Mum more charming. There were endless offerings of food and drink and small talk. All of this happened now, but Bob seemed impervious to it. He wasn't actually rude or impolite, but he saw no need to pretend that this was anything other than a straightforward parasitic coupling. His presence among us was functional – he needed shelter, we could provide it. We were the hosts he was going to feed off.

It may have been an unintended consequence of this aloofness – though nonetheless a useful one for him – that the less *he* tried, the more *we* did. The rules of polite society are so deeply ingrained in us that even if a guest is unwelcome, you somehow have to make them feel at home. The more you wish someone wasn't there, the more you feel the need to make them stay. When the last guest at a dinner party finally yawns, stretches and apologises for keeping you up so late, good manners dictate that you pretend not to have noticed the time and offer them a final nightcap. Don't you? Well, that's what my family always did, and Bob must have known pretty quickly that if he'd wanted people to take advantage of, he'd come to the right place.

'So we can't offer you luxury, I'm afraid,' Dad explained, pausing momentarily in case Bob chose to tell us we had



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a lovely home. He didn't, so Dad carried on. 'We haven't even got a spare room, but you're welcome to sleep on the settee tonight, and in the morning we'll get you checked into a hotel.'

'OK,' said Bob in earnest acknowledgement that he understood, but with no suggestion of gratitude.

'We're vegetarian, by the way,' Mum apologised, implying that if Bob had a problem with this, we might be persuaded to reconsider. He didn't object; but as Mum stood up to head for the kitchen he threw an unexpected curveball.

'I have a condition, kind of a blood glucose thing. I have to eat every three hours, day and night. Otherwise, I may slip into a coma.'

'Gosh. How awful. Day and night? Well, yes ... of course ... we'll make sure you have plenty of snacks.'

'And I have to sleep for at least ten hours. Uninterrupted.'

Had we been more mathematically minded, we might have wondered how a man could sleep uninterrupted for ten hours while still eating something every three. But instead we just sat there wrestling with the simpler equation that a stranger sleeping in your living room equalled no telly.

'Plus sometimes I just need time alone.'

This was bluntness on an unprecedented scale.

'In addition to the ten hours when you'll be sleeping?' asked Dad.

'Oh yeah. Waking solitude is vital. We all need it. All of us. We gotta have time to "be".'

Mum decided it was now time to 'be' in a room that wasn't full of Bob Lerman, and went to make a start on the first of the many meals she would be preparing that night.



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When we got up the next morning, Bob was still asleep. At least the front room door was closed, but he could have just been indulging in a little ‘waking solitude’. Either way, since the dining room – which had anyway become Dad’s studio years earlier – had been temporarily filled with Bob’s ludicrous amount of luggage, we all had to eat breakfast standing up in our little kitchen. Holding our toast and whispering, for fear of interrupting Bob’s all-important ‘be-time’, it felt like we were guests at a particularly disappointing party. Jeremy and I had to go off to Sunday morning Hebrew classes, but we were assured by Mum and Dad that when we got home, Bob would have gone, and we’d have our telly, our eating space and our normal lives back.

But no. He was still there at lunchtime, and dinnertime too. Apparently, there’d been a mix-up over the money he’d allocated for his hotel expenses. I didn’t fully understand, but the upshot was that if he could stay just one more night with us, then he’d be able to move in with a friend for a few days. We all assumed that ‘friend’ was Bob-speak for ‘gullible stranger’, but frankly we didn’t care. Sunday night passed, as Saturday had, with no TV and nowhere to sit comfortably. On Monday morning, after another upright, crowded-into-the-kitchen, buffet breakfast, Jeremy and I went off to school, shouting goodbye to Bob through the closed front room door for what we hoped would be the last time.

He was still there that evening too. He’d had a migraine, apparently worse than any migraine previously known to medical science, and being unable to speak or hear, he naturally couldn’t contact his ‘friend’. Thus, he had missed the one-day-only opportunity of a cheap place to stay.





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And so it went on, day after day after day. There was always another reason why he couldn't leave, always an answer to my parents' objections – he was ill or he was broke; he was scared of something or someone, or he had to wait until a complex set of circumstances came into play. Mum and Dad were simply at a loss as to how to handle him. They'd talk to friends and among themselves and resolve that tomorrow they were going to tell him 'definitely this' or 'no option but that', but he could negotiate his way out of everything; he was utterly impervious to hints, jokes and even outright criticism. He was thick-skinned, smart and ruthless, and my parents slowly (*too slowly*) discovered that what they'd always assumed to be their greatest asset was in fact their fatal flaw – they were just too damned nice.

And there was another reason that they couldn't get tough with him. My mum, a highly intelligent woman, was nonetheless terribly superstitious. She claimed this was as a result of being half-Jewish and half-Welsh, and certainly both my Jewish grandmother and my Welsh one were endlessly skirting round ladders and pretending to spit into 'the evil eye'. To this day my mother sometimes recalls, in an awed tone, how when she was pregnant with me a woman had come to the door selling lucky heather and offering to tell Mum's fortune. Fearful of bringing some curse upon the household, Mum paid her an amount which might reasonably have purchased an entire moorland of traditional, non-lucky heather, whereupon the woman prophesied that she would have a little girl who would grow up to be a dancer. Well she did have a little girl – there was a fifty per cent chance that would come true. But even by the most generous assessment, the dancer part was crazily wide of the mark. And yet every time I passed a tap exam or





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appeared in a musical, Mum would nod sagely and say there were more things in heaven and earth etc. Perhaps, like all good con-men, Bob had picked up on this, or perhaps he'd just taken a lucky punt, but one day, over one of his three-hourly meals, he casually dropped a bombshell.

'My wife, by the way, wanted me to thank you personally for the way you've taken care of me.'

Mum, still clinging to her rock of politeness, refrained from saying 'Your *wife*? You have a *wife*?' and plumped instead for 'Oh ... we didn't realise you were married.'

'Oh yes,' said Bob, 'to Morgan. We're very much in love.'

Dad, suddenly realising that Bob, on top of everything else, had probably been making transatlantic calls without asking, chanced his arm with a 'surely you must be missing her, wouldn't you like to go home?' jibe, but it rolled off Bob's back without a trace.

'She's in college. Completing her studies,' he continued.

'Into what?' Dad asked.

'Witchcraft,' said Bob earnestly, and Mum swallowed hard and pushed away the rest of her sandwich.

From that moment on, all Dad's suggestions for how to get Bob out of the house were met with a quivering rebuttal from Mum on the basis that if we messed with Bob, Morgan might wreak some long-distance occult revenge.

'We could change the locks ...'

'His wife's a witch.'

'We could take out a loan and buy him a plane ticket ...'

'His wife's a witch.'

'We could stop feeding him for a few hours and let the hospital deal with him ...'



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'I don't happen to find that kind of remark funny, Charlie. And what if she knows what we're saying?'

'That's just mad.'

'I'll tell you what's mad: you inviting a crazy guy into our home with stinking feet, a permanently empty stomach, and a wife back home with a sodding cauldron.'

And so, for several weeks, things settled into a peculiar kind of normal: Jeremy still had a bar mitzvah coming up, I still went to school, Mum went to work and looked after the parts of the house she could get into, and Dad tried to carry on painting in the little bit of studio that Bob hadn't commandeered for his equipment. It was as if they'd given up fighting him. Nothing had worked, so they'd adjusted to this new reality as helplessly if it were a dream. It's a hard thing to understand now, but it made sense at the time.

When, many years later, my own children were at primary school there were frequent outbreaks of head lice. Every time it happened, I'd diligently treat them with whatever seemed effective and send them back in nit-free. But because not everyone was quite as scrupulous, they'd come back home with another infestation, and we'd do the whole routine again. And after a while, I can remember thinking: what if I don't bother? Why spend another miserable evening scraping their scalps with combs and dousing them in aesthetically re-packaged sheep dip, when I know that ultimately the nits will crawl back in? Maybe we should just accept that they've won; after all, I get the whole child, the nits only get the scalp. Maybe we should just give them their little bit of conquered land. I never did give up, of course. I went on fighting and dousing and combing until the little sods finally caved in and we won.



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But that feeling of resignation and exhaustion must have been what had overtaken Mum and Dad; he's won, the front room's his. Just let him have it and we can all get on with our lives.

It was almost a month before the final showdown came. Dad and Jeremy were out, Mum and I were in the kitchen and Bob wandered in looking for yet more food.

'Hey, Sheila,' he remarked, looking at Mum with his head to one side, as if she were a scientific specimen, 'are you OK? You seem a little tense.'

Mum stared at him blankly for a moment, and I honestly thought she was going to say 'are you kidding me? YES I'm tense. You've taken over my house.' But she didn't. She just rubbed her eyes and said:

'Well, I've got a lot on my mind.'

'Like what?' asked Bob, sounding almost like someone who gave a shit.

'Well ... you know ... the bar mitzvah, and ... work,' she said, and then gingerly added, 'And you.'

Bob moved towards her and placed his hand on her forehead.

'I'm going to put my karma into you ...' he began. But before he could put *anything* into her, Mum had grabbed me by the hand and picked up her bag and we'd gone. We walked very fast round to Auntie Deena's house, where Mum drank some brandy and Deena told her what she already knew: Bob had to go.

Later that afternoon, while Bob was taking time to 'be' in our front room, Dad quietly and determinedly loaded the thousands of dollars' worth of camera equipment and the many, mysterious bags into the car boot. Then he walked into Bob's room, our living room as it had once been, and stood there, beady eyed and barely containing his rage.



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'Time to go, Bob.'

'Uh, well, Charlie, that friend of mine, the one with the room? He's going to be back in London from tomorrow, so if I could just stay here one more ...'

'Time to go. Now. Come on. Enough is enough. You're scaring my wife, you're upsetting my kids. It's time to go.'

'Listen, Charlie. I dunno why it has to be like this. I mean, you're a cool guy, I respect you, and ...'

'Now. Get in the car please.'

And slowly, reluctantly, and with an elaborate dumb show of bafflement, Bob gathered his few remaining belongings and followed Dad out of the house.

Mum threw open the windows to clear the stench, both literal and metaphorical, that he'd left behind. And then we waited. None of us quite believed that Dad would return alone.

But he did. He'd driven Bob to a small, cheap, commercial hotel just far enough away for him not to be able to find his way back. Bob had protested the whole way that Dad was being unreasonable, inhospitable; that he didn't know what his problem was. He'd even complained that he hadn't signed his form – the one vouching that he was a nice guy who wouldn't outstay his welcome. You had to give him full marks for chutzpah.

When they arrived, Dad checked with the receptionist that they definitely had a room, and took the endless bags into the foyer. Bob, finally defeated, followed him in.

Then Dad said 'Goodbye Bob,' got back in the car, and drove all the way home grinning from ear to ear.

That night, we sat in *our* front room, eating *our* dinner in front of *our* telly. Just the four of us, taking time to 'be',



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enjoying our waking solitude. Bob was right; it suddenly felt really important.

A month or so later, Merv rang for a chat.

'Listen, Merv,' called my dad across the Atlantic, 'do me a favour. Don't send me any more of your clients.'

Merv had no recollection of giving Bob our phone number. At first, he had no recollection of Bob. The whole encounter had been so casual for him and so momentous for us. Finally, after much prompting, it came back to him.

'Oh *Bob*. The photographer guy. Yeah. Nice fella. Haven't seen him in a while. I think he went to Europe.'

'He came here. To London. He stayed in our house for a month.'

'A month? Boy, you two must have really hit it off.'

Dad laughed bitterly. 'No Merv. We really didn't. He's a taker, a con-man. We couldn't get him to leave.'

Merv hooted with disbelief.

'Whaddya mean, you couldn't get him to leave? Why didn't you just tell him where to get off? Kick his ass outta there? Give the guy hell?'

Dad was momentarily lost for words. From my vantage point on the top stair, I could see him considering all of these suggestions. They sounded so simple, and it suddenly dawned on him that he could have done that right from the start. Why had he let this stranger take over his home, upset his family, eat his food, take him for a ride? Why hadn't he, when it sounded so simple, told him where to get off?

'Because ...,' he began trying to articulate, 'well ... because ...'





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Why had it been so difficult? He was waving one arm at the unseen Merv, trying to reach for a plausible explanation, trying to understand it himself. Finally, there it was – the simple truth.

‘Because I’m English.’