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Guilty

by Marina Davies

Retirement was not quite how Derek had envisioned it. Yes, they were travelling in the motorhome, experiencing the sights of Europe, but ever since Sheila had read the article on-line about becoming an Instagram sensation, it had, in his words, ‘frankly taken over our life.’

Most evenings she had been trawling through people’s stories, particularly Eileen’s from bowls. Eileen had already amassed a decent following, posting selfies of various European locations, usually holding a local delicacy.

Sheila was hatching a plan, to deliver something ‘more subtle, a bit cryptic’ for her future more intellectual followers.

Currently they were in the spectacular Gorge du Verdon, slowly navigating their way along vertigo inducing hairpin bends. There was no denying the scenery was quite breath taking. Sheila’s beady eyes scanned the landscape for the most impressive selfie opportunity.

‘Stop the van! That’s where I need to stand. It will knock the spots off the Eiffel Tower, you know that’s what Eileen used for her latest Instagram poster thing. Apparently Trevor...’

‘Who’s Trevor? And it’s Instagram not gran.’ responded Derek in a weary voice.

‘Whatever, you don’t even have a phone. Trevor; you know from bowls, wears the immaculate trousers, he uses a Corby Press, always smart.’

Derek looked guiltily down at his crumpled shorts splattered with a small coffee stain.

‘Well, he said she is trying to take a selfie in as many different countries as possible. I think it’s a bit predictable, you know, her using the Eiffel Tower for France...but the Gorge du Verdon would be much more sophisticated!

Apparently Trevor’s seen her photos and he said she always holds national food in her selfies...France was a rather limp croissant. ‘

Derek carefully pulled off the road, and parallel parked in a layby. In the brilliant cloudless sky two vultures circled on the thermals.

‘She, look at those birds, are they eagles or vultures, their wingspan is huge?’

Sheila didn’t answer she was already plotting her first posting,

‘I think I will wear the national colours of each country’s flag in the photo, so you know red, white and blue for France. God, but I would have to avoid Germany; yellow always looked awful on me. Derek? Derek are you listening, have you got your hearing aids in?’

‘Yes I have She, look at those birds! I was thinking I must ring Alice tonight.’

‘Alice? We spoke to her three days ago, you have got to let her try and work things out for herself. Right are you coming?’

‘I am worried about her, she’s exhausted,’ his daughter’s tired face haunted his thoughts.

‘She will have to start sorting herself out. You do too much for her Derek,’

They stepped out into the warm June sun as it slid behind the massive gorge, and huge shadows reached across the road.

‘Sun’s too low, Derek. Right it will have to be tomorrow. I told you you were taking an age with that coffee in Castellane.’

‘She, that coffee cost 8 Euros. Look be careful, it’s a hell of a long way down, it’s just a sheer drop,’

Sheila flicked at a flat rock with her plimsolled foot. ‘Derek, will you stop fussing, I’m not as wobbly as you, it’s the Pilates, I have the balance of a 20 year old. This is it, this is the exact rock. Right I will rendezvous with you my stony friend first thing tomorrow. Derek, we can stay in that layby for the night, no one is going to move us on, and then we can be on our way.’

Later that evening Derek felt the desire to be out under the night sky, the walls of the ‘cramper van’ as he often referred to it, were closing in on him.

‘Where are you off to Derek?’ Sheila held up some clothes, ‘I was thinking about these white shorts and this navy t shirt, I will just need some red.’

Derek didn’t respond, he was sapped of all his enthusiasm for Sheila’s new obsession.

‘She, it’s beautiful out here, come and look...there are just so many stars!’

Sheila made no attempt to join him ‘Shut the door Derek, the mozzies will be in.’

Outside the air was warm and still, Derek sighed and peered upwards. A hurtling star ripped a crisp white tear in the night. Derek smiled sadly to himself, ‘She...’, ‘ he started to say and stopped ‘Why not make a wish, you sappy sod?’ he thought to himself.

Early next morning, Sheila stood perilously close to the edge, on the chosen flat stone; phone aloft, the setting was indeed sublime, no one would disagree. Derek walked stiffly towards her,

‘God, be careful, Sheila, I don’t want you near that edge, get off that rock, at least let me take the photo, you need to look where you are standing. Please Sheila.’ Derek’s concerned face stared at where Sheila was stood.

‘Oh for God’s sake Derek, it’s a selfie, I need to take it now, before anyone arrives, I’m not moving.’ She defiantly repositioned her phone and stepped back.

Derek returned to the motorhome, and pulled out his ‘Canal Boat’ magazine.

‘Norfolk looks lovely...Alice would love it...it would give her the peace she needs. Must cut my nails, look at the state of them’ Derek thought as he peered at his scuffed fingertips.

‘Right, can’t stay here looking at that this, best get in the road and flag someone down,’ Derek guiltily thought.

It was many hours later when mountain rescue finally winched up Sheila’s crumpled corpse. It had taken a while to alert them without a phone; luckily a helpful if not rather shocked Belgian couple who drove by later that morning assisted him. Their comprehension of English was wonderful as Derek blurted out,

‘I asked her to listen to me, I had literally begged her not to stand on that rock, Instagram’s not worth it... I know it sounds silly but I even wished on a shooting star that just for once she would actually listen to me. She just wouldn’t and then ... gone.’

‘You must not feel guilty, there was nothing you could do,’ They sympathetically replied.

Derek thought hard, yes, but had he remembered to tell her he had moved the rock last night, he was only trying to make it flatter, it had ruined his nails, no perhaps it had slipped his mind...age; you start to forget lots of things.

No, Derek felt no guilt. Sheila now had a healthy smattering of red, to complete her French look. He had warned her about the rock, and as usual she had chosen not to listen.