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First you Borrow then you Beg

by Rosalyn Hurst

There comes a time in your life when you hit a T junction. Going forward is impossible, turn right or turn left? That decision will determine the rest of your life.

I did not anticipate the approach to the T junction, perhaps it was like a window that birds fly into, thinking they are heading for the far horizon only to crash into the glass, stunned and confused.

On June 20 2018 I was called into a meeting with my head of section. As a senior civil servant I had been confident of a long if unimaginative career in the service of Her Majesty. But while Her Majesty might be a generous woman, her government was not, and in particular the current minister, anxious to prove he could make more stringent and pointless cuts to further his political career. So the conversation was kindly but firmly directed to my departure. But I am wily and I negotiated an excellent good departure ticket.

“Aren’t you lucky.” some colleagues said, mildly jealous of the package and perhaps more so when I said I was considering moving put of London, and considerably more jealous when I said, that having met the Regional Director of the World Bank, had secured a lucrative consultancy.

I was at that time of life when I thought that if I did not make a change I never would. I had for the first time not only paid off the mortgage, a massive borrowing commitment at the time, on a simple London two bedroomed house,(bought in 2008 fo £79k,) but I had the pay off from the ministry. My house was valued at 790K, what luck! I had hit the height of the London property boom. My god an end to borrowing, juggling credit cards, mortgages. What bliss. And so I decided to head for the country.

Housing development in Sussex was booming. Large 4 or 5 bedroomed houses, were by London standards a snitch. I thought I would get one of the new houses, in a rural area, a garden, but not too large manageable, beautiful views and such peace I thought. A new life beckoned.

My friends from London eventually came for the house warming. To be honest you would think London people needed a visa to leave the city. But I did not care I would find a new life. But they said I was so lucky to find a house of such a size, and with lots of spare cash too.

I am keen on keeping a green and safe environment, but I had not reckoned a life without public transport. No buses came down the lane to our little estate of four houses which had been built on a derelict farm yard. It was a month before I came to terms that the so called village shop was over 2 miles away, the nearest supermarket 5 miles away, the doctor's surgery, 6 miles away.

Getting to London was possible if you woke before dawn, fought your way through the traffic, paid a fortune to park and more for the luxury of standing for one hour ten minutes getting more squashed before being spat out of the train exhausted smelly and tired at Victoria to face presenting reports written in the silence and loneliness of my new found life.

The "rural estate" had four houses. Two were second homes, we rarely saw anyone, which was sad considering all the homeless people in London. So it was just me and the nice couple next door.

But used to 24/7 in London the first shock is when you run out of something essential. First it was milk, then sugar, salt so I used to pop around to borrow very simple items. I would love to give them something, but they never seemed to need anything. And looking back on it, they never initiated any meeting, never started a conversation, never borrowed anything and seemed rather surprised when I returned not a bit of milk but a half pint, not a half cup of sugar but a whole package.

They were so nice. Their house, though I was never invited in, was beautifully kept, the front garden was immaculate. I did find out their names, Tanya and Ivan Smirnoff, and for a time I wondered if they had a stash of vodka! She did sometimes look rather lonely, though I noticed they would always go out at very regular times twice a week. I did not like to pry but I once saw they were looking at me as I was on my phone when they left.

It was last week when I was in London that a spook contacted me. God I know these people, always so suspicious. Personally I don't think they have enough to do. But he asked me a fair bit about the Smirnoffs, and so of course when I went home, I did look a little longer at their house. Surely MI5 was being paranoid.

The next evening I was so depressed. I was lonely, everything was dark, the bloody owls would not shut up and what I thought at first, was mass murder, was the foxes screaming. I knocked on the door, surely they would be kind.

She came out.

"Listen Tanya," I said conspiratorily. "I have had a day of utter hell in London. Could I just borrow some vodka, actually anything with a bit of alcohol, not that I have a problem you understand. I am completely out of booze, I am to be frank desperate."

"My dear friend" she said, "Ivan," she called, "Our lovely neighbour has had a day of hell, I think people have been giving her a hard time. Can we lend her just a sip of our special vodka perhaps?"

Ivan said, laughing, "but she will find difficult to return," He handed me a large glass, "Take it home, drink it slowly, enjoy the moment."

Mind you I did think then that there must be an end to my constant borrowing, and so it was. An hour later I realised I was not well. I looked out the window, my neighbours were packing up their car, were they leaving?

I came out of my house, I went up to them, I , pleaded for help, I said I was really, really sick. They looked at me dispassionately.

"You have about another two hours to live," said Ivan.

"Am I poisoned, why why?" I screamed.

"You are nothing but a spy we watched you watching us." Ivan snarled

As they got in their car, I begged for an antidote , there must be one, please. I stood swaying in the dark entrance to old farm, the cold new alien houses looking on, my luck was drawing from me like the life force.

Tanya was getting in the car, she looked at me, holding my stomach , beginning to wretch. She turned, her back to Ivan as she saw him putting the final bags in the car,

With some distain she said very quietly, "Personally I think Ivan is wrong, you are too stupid to be a spy, take this now, keep quiet or your very famous luck will soon run out" And she handed me a vial. "We keep it in case that we should drink it by mistake,".

And so it is I realise drifting in and out of a coma in the local hospital (twenty miles from my house) that first you borrow then you beg,