

Opening extract from
Tell a Good Tale

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Published by
Matador

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DON'T ROCK THE BOAT

Phil had the dream again that night. Whichever way it started, it always ended with the sight of Ken, his dark, handsome face contorted with terror, sitting trapped in an aircraft out of control and plunging towards the sea.

'Ken,' he shrieked. 'Ken! I did tell you to eject, didn't I? I did wait for you, didn't I? Didn't I?'

He woke himself with his screams and found Sylvia sitting up with the light on.

Recovering but covered with sweat, he asked, 'Oh, you awake?'

'I am now.' She got up and came back with a coffee. She said quietly, 'Phil, I don't know if I can stand much more of this. I've had ten years of it. You're going to have to see someone about this guilty obsession of yours. If it's not driving you mad, it is me. Some holiday this is, eh?'

He looked at her standing there, her figure full but shapely, her fair hair becoming flecked with grey but still very lovely. He knew he was hurting her but how could he stop hurting her until he stopped hurting himself? The only way, he felt sure, was to find Ken – alive.

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The next day in Jerez, Phil suddenly turned away from Sylvia and made his way hurriedly along the narrow Spanish street, his path impeded by perspiring tourists.

‘Ken!’ He caught up with the man and tugged his arm desperately.

‘Senor?’ The face expressed no recognition at all.

‘Ken, don’t you...’ he began, but Sylvia had arrived. She’d seen it all before.

‘Phil, do come on! You know how cross you get when people are late back at the coach and I’m not going to rush in this heat.’

‘But it is Ken!’

‘Phil, give it up and let’s get back for Heaven’s sake!’ Dragging him away, she gave the man a look which seemed to express an apology and the hope that he realised her husband was otherwise harmless.

After dinner at the hotel, Phil looked moodily out of their room into the square white courtyard, festooned with hanging baskets of cascading red, yellow and white flowers. He drew no pleasure from the sight.

‘It was Ken – I know it was.’

‘Oh Phil, do drop it!’ Sylvia said irritably. ‘Ten years and you’re still finding Ken Randalls.’

‘But this time it was him and...’

‘Like it was all the other times? And why should he turn up in a small Spanish town?’

He turned to face her earnestly. ‘Don’t you see? This is just where he would be – in Southern Spain not far from the sea.’

She put her head into her hands and groaned. ‘Oh my God! I do see one thing now. That’s why you picked this holiday, wasn’t it? I’ve never known you so positive about a place before.’ She looked at him with a mixture of sympathy and exasperation. ‘Phil, you really are going to have to see a doctor about this obsession of yours.’

He made no reply but, just before the holiday ended, he

announced, 'Look, Sylvia, I'm going to come back to Spain in the car and on my own.'

'What?' She stared at him.

'I've got some holiday left – I must try. Even if it wasn't him in Jerez, that's where he'd be if he's alive.'

Sylvia opened her mouth incredulously. 'Phil, Ken IS DEAD and it's not your fault. Why don't you accept that? The Board of Inquiry cleared you of all blame. What good is all this...'

'I'm sorry, really sorry, dear but I must have one last try. If I'm unsuccessful...'

'If!' she exclaimed.

'Well, I promise I'll give it up. I can't make any guarantees about the nightmares but...'

'No!' She stood up and put her hand out. 'No, Phil, you listen to me. I'll agree to this on one condition – that you go to see a doctor when you get back. Ten years of it and you're getting worse instead of better, especially lately.' She paused and said quietly. 'If you don't get treatment, I shall leave you. I'm sorry but it's as simple as that. You're a good man and I love you but I can't put up with any more of this. We've a good marriage. Don't rock the boat.'

Phil nodded sadly. But what he'd not told her, nor anyone else, nor hardly himself was that he was not one hundred per cent sure that, in the smoke, noise and turmoil of abandoning the aircraft, he'd made it clear to Ken that he should eject. If not, he'd murdered his navigator.

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When he returned to Spain, he realised how desperate his mission was. He spoke no Spanish and he had nothing substantial enough to attract the help of the local British consul.

His only idea was to stroll around the town, and neighbouring towns, where he'd seen the man two weeks before and hope to be lucky again, though even he wasn't sure now that it was Ken.

After several days of fruitless perambulation through dry hot streets, he made up his mind to give up and go home the next day. Then, to keep his promise to Sylvia, a visit to the trick cyclist – what a prospect! At the end of an exhausting day, he collapsed into a bar and sat down at a bare table in a large, sparsely furnished but spotless room. What he really would have liked was a pint of real ale but he settled for the *Vino* and drank rather a lot.

Into the bar came two Englishmen, whom he knew. Oh no, he thought, meeting them is the last thing I need – I should have realised how close we are to Gibraltar and its Royal Air Force base.

The two were Parr, whose first name he never used, and Ron, whose surname he'd forgotten. They'd been navigators on his squadron at the time of Ken's disappearance. Parr had always disliked Phil but he could, on occasion, be good company. At the moment, they were pretty drunk but they brought a warmth and ambient fellowship which reminded him of his Service days. They were still in the Royal Air Force and told him they'd arrived from Gibraltar by a circuitous route. It appeared to have taken in every bar in Spain.

The goodwill didn't last. 'Yes, Phil,' Parr was soon declaiming, 'you're a good pilot.' He nodded his head as if considering the matter. 'A very good pilot. But, when the going gets tough, you flap. Flap, yes. That'sh why old Ken died. You ejected and never gave him a chance.'

'Now, just a minute,' Phil began.

'No, don't shtart to argue.' Parr said. 'Ken'd be alive now otherwise. You didn't mean him to die,' he added generously.

‘But that’sh what happened and that’sh how it happened.’

This wasn’t what Phil had come to Spain to hear. ‘The Board of Inquiry didn’t think so, did it?’ he grunted.

‘The Board? Oh yesh, the Board. Yeah, well it wouldn’t, would it? What, Philip bloody Prentish, pilot, public school and Cranwell? The old boys’ club sticks together, doesn’t it?’ He took another swig of the wine which was clearly beyond his present requirements or capacity and let out a loud belch.

Phil looked at him coolly. ‘You’re still a loathsome, uncouth lout, aren’t you, Parr?’

Parr cocked his head to one side and said with a sneer, ‘Yeah, well maybe. Maybe. But I’ll tell you what I’m not, shall I? I’ll tell you. I don’t flap, I’m not a coward and I’m not a murderer.’ He dug Ron, who showed signs of dropping off, in the ribs. ‘Shall we sing him his shong, Ron?’ They began to wail drunkenly a parody of the old rock hit – “See you later, alligator”. ‘See you later, navigator’ they bawled.

Fortunately, he didn’t get any more from them. They had to visit the toilet and then left the premises, no doubt to proceed to another hostelry. It wasn’t just teen-aged lager louts who gave Britain a bad name abroad, Phil reflected.

Nasty as the interlude was, Phil felt strangely relieved as a result. It seemed to justify his concern over the years and made his present quest, however hopeless, worth attempting. In vino veritas, how true. Not that he was in much better shape himself at the moment. For instance, he hadn’t noticed that guy behind the Spanish newspaper at the end of the long, plain wooden table. How long had he been there? He’d not seen him arrive. Phil started to go to the bar for one last glass when the newspaper was lowered and the man spoke to him in English. For an excited moment, Phil thought it was Ken but no such luck.

‘Senor, your friends are not very kind.’

Phil looked at him in surprise.

‘Forgive me,’ said the man, a smartly-dressed Spaniard, probably in his early forties. ‘I could not help hearing your discussion and I understand English well. I worked in Gibraltar for several years. I hear that your aircraft crashed, you were saved and your colleague is missing. Yes?’

We must have been louder and more indiscreet than I thought, Phil considered. He nodded. ‘More or less. That was ten years ago but I thought I saw him recently in Jerez. That’s why I’m looking for him.’

‘Ah,’ the man said, ‘you wish to take him back to England to rejoin the RAF?’

‘No,’ Phil laughed. ‘I don’t represent anybody except myself. I just wanted to make sure he is alive. No luck, though. Never mind, I had to try.’

The Spaniard nodded. ‘I understand, *Senor*. It is, of course, very important to you. I heard your friends – you must be feeling very bad.’

That alone was worth coming to Spain to hear. ‘You can’t begin to know how much,’ he said sadly.

They talked and drank together and the man introduced himself as Manuel. ‘No jokes about Fawlty Towers,’ he laughed and continued. ‘Philip. I can try to help you.’

Phil put his glass down on the table and looked at him in astonishment. ‘Why, what can you do?’

Manuel shrugged. ‘Perhaps nothing but I can try – I have some spare time. An Englishman coming out of the sky or the sea – even ten years ago – must be remembered if it happened. I have many contacts and I can ask in Spanish! Isn’t it better than working on your own?’

Phil nodded. That was certainly true – he’d got nowhere on his own. He thought for a little and said quietly, ‘I was going

back tomorrow but, of course, I'd stay a day or two more if there was any chance...'

The Spaniard shouted for more wine. 'Of course.'

'Thanks,' said Phil, picking up his glass. 'But,' he added diffidently, 'obviously you'll want paying. I'd gladly pay to be certain Ken's alive but I'm not a millionaire and...'

Manuel laughed. 'For myself, I ask for no payment but I may need expenses and other people may have to be paid.' He and Phil drank together. 'Look, give me nothing now and we set a limit, yes?'

They fixed a sum, shook hands and agreed to meet at the same bar in three days.

* * * * *

There was a monumental hangover and a difficult phone call to Sylvia. 'You're staying an extra three days because you've been drinking with some Spaniard in a bar and you're maybe going to pay him a large sum of money? Philip, have you gone quite mad?'

Otherwise, the next few days passed pleasantly for Phil. It wasn't that he expected a successful outcome but he felt immense relief that he was no longer alone. Manuel, with whom he seemed to have some rapport, actually understood his anxiety and supported his quest. He'd never before, for all Sylvia's patience, had anything but opposition.

He still looked around for Ken, but with interest rather than desperation. He ate well and found time to be a tourist. Even so, as the time for the meeting with Manuel approached, pessimism had set in. He wished he'd brought his mobile and wished still more that he had some Spanish. Manuel had given him a contact number but he never seemed to answer it. At last, he got through.