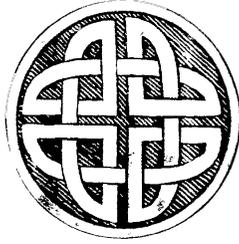


# One

## Taking the Plunge



Shortly after arriving in the States and more particularly in Michigan, I decided that I must pay a visit to sunny Florida. After a severely cold winter it was time to get away and head south for some sun and relaxation. A good friend advised me of a beachside motel on Longboat Key just outside the beautiful city of Sarasota and so I booked a week there on his recommendation. Having packed up our car with all our luggage, the previous night, my teenage children and I set off before the break of dawn so that we could get a jump on the southbound traffic. The usually busy I75 Highway runs directly south to the Sunshine State and after passing by Toledo, Bowling Green, Findlay, Lima and Dayton by breakfast time we were approaching the north side of Cincinnati, Ohio and we were now ready to eat. My children had napped for most of the six hour journey but the pangs of hunger were now gnawing at the stomachs. The roadside billboards were advertising the upcoming eating spots and our group decision was to stop at a family favorite restaurant called Bill Knapp's. It was now around 10:00 AM on Sunday morning and we were as hungry as a pack of half-starved hyenas.

We excitedly entered the eatery and after a short wait we were happily seated and eagerly eyed the breakfast menu.

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Our waitress was soon taking our orders and hustled away to the kitchen and, in no time, she returned with a tray full of piping hot edibles. As we ravenously tucked into our meals my thirteen year old son, Richard, announced that his orange juice had not been delivered. I beckoned to our waitress who, now realizing her mistake, again hurried away to the kitchen and promised to be right back with the elusive drink. A good fifteen minutes passed by before she returned bearing a tumbler full of the orange nectar at which point she profusely apologized for the delay by explaining that they had no prepared juice and so she had to painstakingly squeeze it herself. As quick as a flash I replied that it was fortuitous for all concerned that my son had not have ordered milk. Richard, who by this time was avidly gulping down the drink, immediately blew orange juice out of his nose and all over the table as he could not retain his glee at what he had just heard. The red-faced young waitress scurried away to remove herself from the roars of laughter that were now emanating from us and the customers at the surrounding tables. It took a good five minutes to restore the Sunday morning crowd to a dignified manner and it took a further ten minutes before our embarrassed waitress could pluck up enough courage to bring me the bill. I ensured that she was amply tipped for her role in the comedic sequence of events and my children did not stop laughing until we were another four hundred miles south and entering the state of Georgia.

Richard is now around forty years of age and from time to time he will still roll out this old chestnut of a story and to this day new people still get a good laugh from it. I often wonder what happened to that pretty young waitress and hope that the trauma, of this event, did not impinge too deeply upon her innocence for years to come. I would hate to think that she was mentally scarred by this chance encounter with a slightly twisted Celtic sense of humor Who knows, this sequence of events might have propelled her into leaving her sleepy rural town and heading off for the bright lights

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of Hollywood, Las Vegas or Broadway. On the other hand it might have had the opposite affect and sent her running to join one of those Ohio Amish sects with their strict religious lifestyle. Whichever the outcome I feel that her delicate upbringing would never be quite the same again. How bizarre is all that for a thirty minute stop over.

When living in Westland, at the Woodcrest Villa Apartments on Wayne Road, I invited an old school pal from Wales to come and visit with me. David Roberts and I had known each other since our mothers used to wheel us around Pontypool Park in strollers when we were babies. We also attended George Street Primary school and Abersychan Technical school together up until the age of sixteen when we each took a different career paths. At this time I moved to Cheshire and he moved to London to attend the famous RADAR acting school which he attended in the same class year as the soon to be famous Glenda Jackson whose portrayal of Elizabeth II is still, in my humble opinion, the best. However, we always kept in touch and visited each other throughout the years, no matter where we were living. At this particular time we had not seen each other for about five years, therefore a meeting seemed to be about due particularly since he had been ill of late and was in need of a complete break. I had visited David at his two homes in Abergavenny and in his two homes in Ross-on-Wye but this was to be David's first venture across The Pond and so, for me, this was to be unique.

I took David on several trips, to local places of note in Michigan but on a particular day we decided to visit the famous Greek Town section of Detroit. This area was renowned for its Greek restaurants and their exotic foods and so I took him to my particular favorite, called *Pegasus*. Because I was familiar with the menu I suggested that we start with an order of saganaki. This is basically feta cheese which is soaked in uzo served on a platter which is then set alight at your tableside. Obviously I knew what was to happen but I forgot to prepare

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David as to what was about to occur. David was sitting with his back to the kitchen as I saw the waiter enter and approach our table. He stopped about three feet from David's back and with a loud shout of "Oopah" he lit the uzo which erupted like a volcano and singed the back of his neck. David was so shocked by this happening that he literally jumped up onto the table and knocked all the plates and eating utensils to the floor. It was such a funny sight that I was crying with laughter and had tears streaming down my face. It took three or four minutes for David to compose himself but every time he heard the kitchen door open behind him, he would instinctively spin around to ensure that he was not to be surprised again by that swine waiter. We enjoyed the house speciality so much that we decided to order a second portion. David, in typical English style, hailed the waiter and trying to remain calm he asked the waiter for another order of "That Nagasaki." This sent me, once more, into raptures of laughter because of his confusing the Greek dish for the second Japanese city, which was reduced to rubble by an atomic bomb, seemed hilariously funny to me. It was quite a while before I was finally able to explain to David what his Freudian Slip had, unintentionally, produced. I think that the extreme heat and the complete surprise must have crossed wired his thought pattern and rendered him with some kind of post-traumatic dyslexia for him to come up with this amusing faux pas. It was a classic school boy howler.

This whole incident reminded me of another odd encounter when a question that I asked, of a stranger, was answered in a way that left me absolutely dumbfounded. I was in an area where I needed to get to a nearby place unknown to me. I pull my car over to the curb and asked a passerby what was the best way to get to my unknown destination. He thought diligently for a few minutes and then as serious as could be he said "Your driving there, yes? Then that's the best way." With that he walked away leaving me sitting there scratching my head and wondering what the hell had just

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happened. Living in a fool's paradise can sometimes be too simple to contemplate.

While selling to the automotive manufacturing industry, based in Detroit, I met and worked with a guy named Nick Mondella who was without a doubt one of the most unusual, yet likable, people that I have ever met. He was outrageous to such an extent that he would get down on his knees, in a customer's office, to beg for an order. This proved to be so funny that the buyer would roar with laughter and beg him to stop. The outcome, of all this buffoonery, was that he always got his order and although his antics were unconventional it always worked for him. He was one of the most successful and well known characters in that particular sector of business.

Nick was in the Pacific arena during World War II and was standing on the deck of a ship after the war was officially over. As he stood there, looking out to sea, he saw two torpedoes, heading right for him, from a Japanese submarine that had not yet been notified that the war had finished. Luckily for him the torpedoes missed his ship which goes to show just what a charmed life he lived. I have entertained customers at dinner with him and no matter who was sitting next to him, before the night was over, he would be eating from their plate. If we entertained customers at a musical show he would be flirting with any lady sitting next to him whether they were in our company or not. He was very engaging and would stop and talk to anyone, whether he knew them or not, and pretty soon they would be chatting away like long lost buddies. He was truly one of life's real characters with his devil may care attitude.

When the weather was wet or cold Nick wore one of those old beat up raincoats which resembled the type worn by Peter Falk on his hit series *Colombo*. It was so crumpled and creased that it looked as if it had been trampled on by a herd of elephants. He took a business trip to Chicago and flew from Detroit to O'Hare Airport. It was a nasty day in the

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Windy City and Nick was standing outside, on the sidewalk, cupping his hands around a piping hot cup of coffee while he waited for his lift to pick him up. He was wearing his signature raincoat and the cold wind had made his hair disheveled, his eyes watery and his nose red. Just then a limousine pulled up right along side him and out stepped a well healed gentleman and, seeing Nick standing there, he strolled over and dropped a hand full of change into Nick's still half full cup of coffee. "Good luck my good man," said the well heeled chap as he patted Nick on the shoulder and obviously thinking that he was a vagrant. Nick was so flabbergasted that for once, in his life, he was speechless and just stood there, mouth agape, as he watched his benefactor walk away. Thank you lone stranger!

Now you would think that after such a dramatic demonstration, of just how bad that raincoat made him look, that he would discard it. Yet in spite of appearing like a hobo, Nick continued to wear that shabby garment for some years to follow. For quite sometime after, if ever he was wearing his Colombo look, I would toss a couple of coins into his coffee cup when he was off guard, just to make a point. He was a good sport and would often laugh at himself. Nick and I were working a Engineering Exposition when a gang of us arranged to go out for dinner that night. I was able to pick up a pile of Nick's business cards, which were lying around, at our booth. At the end of the meal I suggested that we each put our business cards in a hat and whoever's card was drawn would have to pay for the dinner. Of course we all put Nick's card into the hat knowing well that he would be the unlucky donor. Some weeks later word got out about the ruse and, typical of Nick, he took it in stride and even thought that it was funny. Now that I have lived in Florida, for the passed ten years, I have lost touch with Nick but I often wonder what crazy tricks he is up to now. This zany guy was a joy to be around and will not be replicated.

As a member of the Dearborn branch of the Royal Cana-

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dian Legion, someone or other had a weekend party which was an open invitation style and I religiously attended them. They were riotous affairs with music, booze and a great deal of frolic and fun. One Thanksgiving weekend the party was at the house of Elwyn and Rosalyn Price who, as their names suggest, were and still are extremely Welsh. Their house was on Notre Dame Street and we all tumbled into the basement where it was nice and warm with wall to wall people. Elwyn was employed at the Ford Motor Company and had a good friend Fred Jolly who also worked there and was known for his sharp wit and one liner jokes At one point Fred and I were deep in conversation when down the stairs, into the basement, came another of his work colleagues and his wife. Elwyn greeted them and then began a round of introductions to one and all assembled there. They eventually reached us and we exchanged some pleasantries and made some small talk, as people who have never met before usually do, then they moved on to the next group of revelers.

The wife was a tall woman with an extremely harsh countenance. She had a receding chin, larger than normal eyes and a wide mouth with teeth like tombstones. All this was accentuated by a long hangdog face. I was pondering on this set of unfortunate circumstances when I came back to earth with a bump. As soon as she was out of earshot Fred turned to me and, with that dead pan expression of his, he said "Have you ever seen lipstick on a donkey?" He didn't have to explain to whom he was referring as the looks of our mutual friends wife could not have been summed up more accurately. This comment, coming out of left field as it did, evoked such amusement that I just cracked up and to prevent laughing out loud, I had to stifle my glee by covering my mouth.

While on this subject, my grandmother's next door neighbor, on Edward Street, was similarly endowed with man like features. She was a tall, big boned Irish woman who did not have a single feminine attribute. She always wore

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a pinafore and a hairnet from breakfast to supper time and never ever any make-up. Her ruddy complexion made her even more masculine and a faint chin stubble suggested the use of an occasional razor. She was not in the least bit dainty and when walking she ambled along with a manly gait and a Woodbine cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth. She somewhat reminded me of the 1950's film character Old Mother Riley and that role was played by a man.

I called her the Prophet of Doom because she would burst into my grandmother's house and blurt out "Guess who's dead Mr. Herbert?" Back then, in the early 1950's, people were dropping like flies and so it was almost impossible to even hazard a guess as to who had died on that particular day. She never rushed in to announce anything happy, like births and marriages, just deaths. I do believe that she loved to wear black and that funerals were her only source of socializing. Our Creator has played some cruel tricks, what with women looking like men and men looking like women but I must categorically state that these two women are the most severe cases of gender misrepresentations that I have personally witnessed. I mean, even an old barn needs a coat of paint once in a while.