



## THE PATRON SAINT OF BOILED EGGS Ged Backland

I'd always regarded my life as a trip. Mostly it was as a hitcher relying on other people's goodwill to make my way. But not this time, on this trip I was a proper, up in the air, fare-paying passenger. Not in cattle class either, where I'd normally be shoehorned into a fabric seat juggling the free roasted peanuts and tiny can of coke. Oh no, this trip thanks to BT, I was travelling in style. So big-ups to them with their grey vans and lovely call centres.

I was off on an exotic holiday with six strangers. A taxi driver, a woman from the council tax office, a shaven-headed Italian from the pizza parlour, the manager of HMV, the spotty little oik from Curry's and the bastard who stole my girlfriend. All because I'd won one of their competitions, which I'd been entered into just by using their friends and family scheme.

'Congratulations Mr. Ferguson, you've won our friends and family exotic holiday competition. You can go anywhere in the world

with the six people you called the most in August.'

'Great', I said, after she'd convinced me there was no catch and no window salesman would call. 'Let's go to Tonga, that'll be a laugh.'

I only said it because I'd been watching a documentary narrated by someone with a serious voice about a tree frog from Tonga. You know the sort, little fluorescent coloured buggers with the bulging eyes of an amphibious Deirdre Barlow. I got the nice lady from BT with the Arthur-Scargill-on-HRT voice to inform the 'surprised and lucky' winners, and was not shocked when without another phone-call, as if by some Alistair Crowley type meddlings, my council tax refund came through, I got free garlic bread and a tub of chilli with every pizza order, a job came up in the easy listening music section of HMV, Curry's finally decided to replace my microwave that heated Heinz soup to the temperature of nuclear fuel and the bastard who I rang at three in the morning as he lay arsecheek to arsecheek with my ex-love answered the phone 'Hello friend!'

It surprised me how well such a mish-mash group of people got on. Like old mates they were, old inmates — from some Victorian Bedlam. The shaven-headed pizza bloke found a drinking partner who shared his viewpoint on Shania Twain (pub singer with a nice bottom) in the Egyptian Taxi driver. The woman from the council tax office got on a little too well with the spotty little oik from Curry's (pus, hormones and older women on heat are a lethal mix). The bloke from HMV talked long into the night about 12" promotional singles with the bloke who stole the affections of the only woman who'd ever looked happy to see me naked.

We eventually got to Tonga, 'The Friendly Islands' in the South West Pacific, just east of Fiji. As soon as we arrived we all played host to a mist of thirsty mosquitoes, me in particular. The woman from the

council tax office said it was because I take six sugars in my tea. 'Sweet blood,' she said as she ran back to her room with another couple of chilled coconuts overflowing with rum and passion fruit. Not that I've had much tea since I've been here. It's foreign muck that tastes like someone's poured some perfume in it.

When we arrived Guy and the film crew took some footage, but I don't think they'll put me on the telly. 'A good face for radio,' was how Guy's strikingly pretty (for a boy) assistant described me to the fella who was in charge of the sound. He thought I wasn't listening, he also thought I wouldn't punch him; unfortunately for little boy band chops, he was wrong on both counts.

I don't think the others are ideal PR material either. The fella from HMV has been bitten by a spider; they're not sure what species yet but it looks as if he's wearing a long black and purple football sock. I caught him giving me an it's-all-your-fault stare. Cheek. Didn't see him complaining when he was knocking back the free Moet on the flight over, oh no, then he was giving me a you're-my-best-pal grin.

It wasn't him the PR people for BT got really upset about, his prognosis was good. It was Arif the taxi driver, last seen through a nervous PR woman's tired eyes being carried off by a gaggle of villagers, no doubt on his way to be promptly tied to an altar, smeared in chicken's blood and the ashes of a roasted goat. Never mind, at least it was a break from driving that bloody awful Ford Sierra with the seats that made passengers feel like they were attending an appointment with a wiry-fingered proctologist. Still, he couldn't complain; he'd only been off the road and on the call desk for a month when he won a free exotic holiday.

After three days I wanted home. I had set my mind to do three things. Firstly, to stop pretending to the people at work that I like

them. Especially Julie, the 16-year-old trainee with the crocheted tank top and the blue training bra. She was a bit old for a training bra, I mean don't they have them when they're eleven and twelve? What's she training 'em for anyway? The Olympics? Mastermind? Gladiators? I didn't like the way she looked at me. OK, at 36 I'm no Boyzone heartthrob but sometimes I can see the revulsion and disgust in her eyes. Once, when I'd only pulled the leg of my slacks up to show how well my leg ulcer was healing, she looked at me like I was Jack the Ripper. I like my grey slacks. When I put them on first thing, it's like being hugged by an old polyester friend.

The second thing I'd planned to do was to join a night class and study something worthwhile. The last couple of courses I did were religion and cookery. I had to pack it in as towards the middle of the course the only ingredients I could afford were eggs. Whilst the others rustled up a filet mignon in a rich truffle sauce, I was on with another bloody omelette. Another problem was that cookery was straight after religion, so I used to bring my ingredients in with me, and the others in the class began to call me the Patron Saint Of Boiled Eggs. I thought such mockery was pretty unkind of a theology group.

Thirdly, I would write to the Holiday programme and tell that leather-faced wots her name to come and prance around Tonga in her yellow shorts and bright white dentures. I'm sure she'd be another for the altar and the chicken's blood.

There was a barbecue on the beach the night before we all left. I watched all the local lads bring wood and bits of Polynesian arts and crafts to sell to the drunken partygoers at two in the morning. The swine that robbed me bird ended up paying forty quid for a copper bracelet to some old fella who claims his daughter married Kenny Ball's brother-in-law. I'm glad he bought it, 'cos I know Alison (the ex)

has an allergic reaction to anything other than gold. Her earlobes enlarged to the point of bursting when I once tried to pass off a pair of 'fools gold' sleepers as real 18-carat. Her lugs looked like a couple of reddened mangoes, and she had to wear a bandage on her head for nine weeks. Serves him right. I would have made nuisance calls to his hotel room while we were here, but I reckon he'd have known it was me.

The BT rep thought I had a whale of a time. I didn't even have a large goldfish of a time to tell you the truth. It was the worst two weeks I'd ever spent, apart from the nine days I spent in a coma in 1987 after being knocked off my bike by a gang who held up the local post office. Their stolen Cortina nudged me into a privet, where I was found a day later by two kids looking for birds nests. They called the police and told them they'd found a tramp with a cut on his head asleep in the privets. Cheeky buggers. It took me another week to remember who I was.

When I did, I was really disappointed. I'd sort of half convinced myself that I was a semi professional cabaret singer. I sang the first line of 'It's not unusual' for the doctor but couldn't remember the rest of the words. He made a comment that my delusions were 'Not unusual', to which I leapt up and gave it 'to be loved by anyone', and threw in a Tom Jones swivel of the hips. He didn't respond, he looked straight at me, the nurse smiled and I sat down somewhat deflated.

I might not have been very good, but I was better than the cabaret we had to sit through on the last night. Polynesian Elvis Presley has definitely left the building, with a stain on his white jumpsuit left by the mango thrown in a fit of pique by the Council Tax woman. He was giving it full belt and he got confused and amalgamated the words of Love Me Tender with Heartbreak Hotel.

One line went 'Oh my darling I love you and I've found a new place to dwell'. He got booed off.

Sheila, the rep from BT, tried to restore calm with her weak rendition of 'I will survive'. We all clapped but that was to stop the poor girl having a nervous breakdown. After a week with us, she'd gone from a bundle of energy in heels and blue power suit to a chainsmoking wretch in an un-ironed cheesecloth dress and a pair of borrowed Dr Scholl's. There was some good news for Sheila, though: Arif the taxi driver turned up, alive! She was relieved, she'd spent a couple of long, sleepless nights fretting on how to tell her boss that one of the party had been sacrificed to a goat god on the first night. He strolled onto the beach at midnight, as if nothing had happened, clutching the hand of a woman twice his age. He says they're in love, but I put it down to a holiday romance. He'll promise to write but before he's halfway through duty free, she'll be kissing the next tourist she meets.

The woman from the council tax office fell out with the oik from Curry's. I heard them last night through the petal thin walls, arguing about the reliability of washing machines. It got a bit nasty. She shouted something like 'We all know how well things from Curry's perform after a while don't we?' He stormed out and headed for the bar where he gulped down a whole jug of punch and ended up, legless, challenging the fourteen-year old waiter to a bare-chested fistfight on the small patch of ryegrass at the front of the hotel. He was stood like a warrior with his top off, his three chest hairs flapping in the Tongan breeze. But it all went tits up for the young white goods retail assistant: the chambermaid whose unfortunate son it was flattened him with a swift and surprisingly adept right hook, and broke his nose. At breakfast the next morning he was a broken lad. Flattened by

a woman. He borrowed a pair off sunglasses off Mr HMV but they were too big and he looked like a wasp with greasy hair.

There were a few uncomfortable moments on the tarmac at Leeds Bradford international airport. We looked like Kelly's Heroes when we stepped off that plane. I'm sure this little trip has cost BT a fortune, and I certainly won't ring any of these people ever again. It's hardly been a great PR exercise. They asked me for a soundbite before I got in the taxi home. They said to be honest so I was.

'It's been lovely,' I said, 'but I think I'll scream now.'

First published by Pulp Net (<http://www.pulp.net>)  
<http://www.pulp.net/fiction/stories/11/the-patron-saint-of-boiled-eggs.html>

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