

## THE LAST HOLIDAY

by

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This was twenty five years ago. It should have faded into my memory by now. I can't remember in detail what else I was doing around that time. I can't really recall much about other holidays we had. I've lost touch with most of the friends I had then. Not deliberately. We've mostly just drifted apart. Apart from Martyn, of course. He chose his own route.

But I should start at the beginning. The beginning for the five of us, at least. The real beginning was decades before that, presumably, but I've never discovered the full truth about that. I could find out more, but I've no desire to do so. I still have nightmares based on nothing more than what happened that night. The reality might be less awful than my imaginings, but I doubt it.

Anyway, the beginning. It would be easy now to claim I'd felt something from the moment we entered the house. But that wouldn't be true, or at least I've no recollection of it. I recall only a mild sense of disappointment. Booking an unfamiliar holiday house is always a lottery. The photographs – in the printed brochure in those largely pre-internet days – are always flattering. The descriptions may be factually accurate, but underplay any shortcomings. You simply hope the house will be good enough, or will have other compensations.

This place was, well, a just a little underwhelming. In fairness, the setting was as impressive as the brochure had suggested – a hillside location, with spectacular views out over the adjacent valley and surrounding countryside. But the brochure had exaggerated the size of the swimming pool, and the house itself was dark and poky. I recall looking around the tiny kitchen and living room, wondering how five of us were going to rub along in the limited space. But the weather forecast was good, and we'd no doubt spend much of our time out of doors. That was true enough, as it turned out, though not for the reasons we'd expected.

That's all I remember about my own reaction to the house. But it was clear Martyn felt something different. He'd stopped outside the front door, gazing up at the ivy-covered walls as if reluctant to enter. He stood for a moment, his expression one of mild bewilderment, before walking over to stand by the pool.

One of us asked if he was okay. Martyn nodded, claiming he was just tired after the journey. 'You go and get settled in. I join you in a few minutes.'

He came inside eventually, of course. He didn't really have any choice, unless he was prepared to sit out all night. Watching him lug his bag up to the first floor, I had the impression he might have preferred that.

There were five of us. As well as Martyn, there was me and Maura, as I've said, and our friends, Penny and Jack. We'd all been friends since university and grown accustomed to spending time in each other's company. That summer must have been the fourth or fifth time we'd been on holiday together. Although previously, there'd been Victoria, of course.

We'd all had concerns about what it would be like for Martyn without Victoria. Maura had even suggested I try to talk him out of coming. But there was no way to do that without looking as if we wanted to exclude him. He was keen to come, and none of us wanted to be the one to point out that it might not be a good idea.

We knew we'd have to cut him some slack, and I guess none of us was surprised by his initial reaction to the house. Perhaps that was the moment when the reality had really hit him.

It was still only late morning. Jack had been able to get only a limited amount of leave from work, so we'd made the most of the time by taking a late-evening ferry and driving down overnight, the five of us packed into Jack's sizeable company car. It hadn't been too arduous. We'd shared the driving between the five of us, the others sleeping or resting, and we'd had a couple of breaks in the journey. We were tired but not unpleasantly so.

It was a glorious day. Jack and Penny went out to try the pool, while Maura and I prepared lunch from the provisions we'd picked up at the local Carrefour on our way past. We were intending to do a full shop the following day, but we had the essentials, including copious quantities of wine and beer. We were planning a more ambitious dinner later, but for now contented ourselves with a couple of baguettes and a selection of cheese and cold meats. We were still finding our way around the kitchen, bemused as ever both by the absence of standard utensils and the presence of several apparently inexplicable items. Eventually we rooted out sufficient plates and cutlery, along with a motley selection of wine glasses, and carried them out to the table by the pool.

Penny was swimming energetic lengths, while Jack stood towelling himself dry. Maura poured everyone a glass of the cheap fizz she'd bought to celebrate the start of the holiday. 'Where's Martyn?'

'He went up to unpack,' I said.

'Is he okay? He seemed a bit odd earlier.'

'You know Martyn. He's always a bit odd. I'll tell him there's food ready.' I pulled myself to my feet and went back into the house.

It was at that point, when I re-entered the kitchen, that I first felt it. I'd sensed nothing before. But then, as I stepped out of the sunlight, something felt wrong.

What do I mean by that? I've thought about it a lot in the intervening years. The sense of a presence, I suppose. Something in the house. Something that felt – well, what exactly? Threatening? Dangerous? Afterwards, I concluded that evil might not be too strong a word. I think now that there was something else, too. The smell of abject terror.

I couldn't have expressed it like that at the time. But the moment I stepped through the door, it hit me with the force of a blow. The house was silent, but I felt as if someone or something was screaming soundlessly in my ears. I stopped, unable to move, wondering what the hell was happening.

And then, quite suddenly, it passed. I was standing in a tiny, slightly dated kitchen in an unimpressive *gîte*, unable even to recall the emotions I'd felt just moments before. The atmosphere had returned to normal. I could hear a fly buzzing gently in the window, the voices of the others chatting outside. I looked around, baffled. No doubt we were all more tired than we realised.

I made my way up the wooden flight of stairs to the first floor. There were four rooms up there – three bedrooms and a shared bathroom. Martyn's single room was to the right, at the front of the house, with a view over the valley. I walked across the landing and knocked. 'Martyn? There's food downstairs.'

There was no immediate response. I knocked again, more loudly, assuming he must have fallen asleep. After a moment, the door opened and Martyn peered out.

He looked terrible. His eyes were bloodshot, his face ashen and gaunt. It was almost as if his body had shrivelled in the short time he'd been upstairs. He stared at me uncomprehendingly, as if he had no idea who I was.

'Are you all right?'

He took a step back, allowing the door to swing open. His eyes seemed to clear, as seeing me for the first time. 'I'm sorry, Geoff. Must have fallen asleep.' He looked back over his shoulder, as if sensing something behind him. 'Had some sort of weird dream.'

He was already looking more his usual self. Not that his usual self didn't have its own quirks, as I'd said to Maura. There was something about him that always seemed out-of-place. It wasn't exactly that he was uncomfortable in his own skin, as the cliché has it. It was more that he was uncomfortable in the world, as if he always wanted to be

somewhere else. It gave him a vulnerability, a sensitivity, which I guess was one of the reasons we all liked him. It was why we'd been glad he'd met Victoria. She'd grounded him, drawn him back into the world. Since she'd gone he seemed more semi-detached than ever.

'We've got food downstairs,' I repeated. 'Maura's opened a bottle of bubbly.'

He blinked at me again. 'I'll be down in a minute. Thanks.'

I went back down to join the others. Martyn reappeared a few minutes later and accepted a glass of wine from Maura. I didn't quite know now why I'd thought he'd looked so ill a few minutes before. He looked pale, but not noticeably more so than usual. I was beginning to suspect it was my own judgement affected by tiredness.

Little of note happened during that first day. We swam in the pool, sat reading in the sunshine, and allowed ourselves to relax. We'd all been through our different stresses - Maura and I moving house, Jack at work, Penny with her mother, and Martyn of course with Victoria. We needed a break, though none of us was going to get it.

It had grown increasingly humid all afternoon, clouds gathering on the horizon. Storms had been forecast overnight, although the first rain wasn't expected until around midnight. We were able to eat outdoors – an enjoyable *boeuf bourguignon* prepared by Penny and Jack – and we sat in the warm evening drinking more wine and picking at a selection of cheeses. The conversation had been animated earlier, but as the evening wore on we were all growing tired.

'I'm going to have to turn in,' Jack said finally. 'Can barely keep my eyes open.'

'We could all do with some sleep,' Maura said. 'Supposed to be a fine day tomorrow once the storm passes, so we could explore the village.'

We all helped clear the table, carrying the leftover cheese and wine back into the kitchen. Only Martyn seemed reluctant to bring the evening to an end. He brought the remaining plates and glasses inside, then said, 'I'm not quite ready for sleep yet. I'll sit out here for a while.' There was something in his tone I couldn't interpret, as if he was holding something back.

I wanted to ask, yet again, if he was all right, but instead I said, 'Don't think you'll have long. You can taste the rain in the air.' There was a wind blowing up, too, a strong breeze along the valley.

'You always can.' I didn't know what he meant, but I was too tired to ask. I wished him goodnight and followed the others back into the house.

Once in bed, I fell asleep almost immediately. Maura told me afterwards I'd seemed restless, but I've no recollection of anything till I was suddenly woken by what at first I thought was some kind of explosion.

It took me another moment to realise the sound must have been simply thunder, very close overhead. I saw a flash of lightning, followed almost immediately by another loud. The heavy rain was drumming on the roof above our heads.

Then I heard something else. It sounded like a human scream, but also like nothing I'd ever heard before. 'What the hell was that?'

Maura was awake beside me. 'Some kind of animal? A fox?'

'It sounded like it was inside the house.'

'It can't be. It must be coming from the window—'

Then we heard it again, and this time I was in no doubt. It was in the house, somewhere close by. The scream of something, someone, in absolute terror.

'I ought to go and look.'

It was the last thing I wanted to do. Maura, who was never a fanciful woman, was clinging on to me. 'You don't have to.'

We might have stayed like that, clinging to each other in the warmth of the bed. But then I heard Jack's voice on the landing. 'Geoff? What the hell's going on?'

I dragged on my dressing gown, and opened the door. Jack was on the landing, holding a small pocket torch.

'Did you hear—?'

'Of course I bloody heard,' Jack said. 'It must be Martyn. What the hell's he up to?'

I stepped out on to the landing, and then I felt it again. The same sensation I'd experienced in the kitchen earlier – that same sense of threat, of evil, the same stench of terror.

Before I could stop him, Jack had pushed open the door of Martyn's room. There was another flash of lightning, unexpectedly illuminating the interior.

I don't know how to describe what I saw. There was blood everywhere. On the bed, on the floor, on the walls. On Martyn's body as he writhed screaming on the bed, his limbs jerking repeatedly as if having some kind of fit. I could see the blood oozing from wounds on his chest, as he tried vainly to escape whatever was gripping him.

Then the room was plunged back into darkness and, as suddenly as before, it all stopped. There was silence, other than Martyn's ragged breathing. Jack reached out and turned on the light.

There was nothing. No blood on the bed, on the floor, on the walls. Nothing on Martyn's body as he lay, sleeping fitfully. I looked at Jack but he avoided my eye. I knew then that he'd seen the same as I had. I knew also he'd never talk about it, to me or to anyone else.

We turned our attention to Martyn. He was on his back, his eyes wide-open but seemingly still sightless. He was breathing as if he'd just completed some arduous exercise, his body still occasionally spasming.

I took his hand. 'Martyn?'

His eyes moved in my direction, but I couldn't be sure what he was seeing. 'I don't know how I got here,' he said, as if that were the most important question.

'We drove down here last night, Martyn. What do you mean?'

It was as if he was looking through me. 'I don't know how I got here.' His voice was hoarse. 'I don't know who was responsible.' He stopped speaking, and his eyes suddenly seemed to focus. 'Geoff?'

There's not much more to tell after that. We helped Martyn down to the kitchen, and we all sat up with him for the rest of the night. Martyn didn't want to stay in the house, but the rain was still teeming down outside, so there was nowhere else to go. We opened the kitchen door and Martyn sat in the entrance, staring out into the darkness. He seemed incapable of speaking more than a few words of acknowledgement as we offered him coffee.

It was only as dawn was arriving, the sky reddening to the east, that the rain finally passed over. As soon as he was able, Martyn walked out into the darkness and sat at the rain-drenched table by the pool.

He never re-entered the house. He refused to continue the holiday, and in the end we packed for him and drove him to Bordeaux Airport, where he managed to book himself a flight back to the UK. None of us grumbled about it. We all knew that, one way or another, the holiday was over. We tried to stay on but managed only another couple of days, spending our time outdoors, reluctantly entering the house only when we had to and at night. No-one said anything, but none of us wanted to be in there alone. I recall waking in the small hours, wanting to use the lavatory along the landing, but unable to leave Maura's side.

There's not much else to tell. I have thought about researching the history of that house. I'd read somewhere that, during the war, a number of Resistance fighters had been tortured and killed in the region, but I don't know anything specific about the village or the house. I've no desire to discover more.

In any case, we all drifted apart a long time ago. Maura and I split up just a few months after our return to the UK. There was no real reason, as far as I can recall. It just happened. We'd already lost touch with Jack and Penny, though I'd heard they'd also split. The last time we saw each other was at Martyn's funeral, and by then we were just four individuals. There weren't many of us there – the four of us, a handful of people from Martyn's workplace, his elderly father. I offered condolences to Martyn's father and wanted to say more, but couldn't think of the words. The four of us hardly spoke, and we left as soon as we could.

And that's it. That's the story. There's not a lot to it, I suppose. It was just one night, a long time ago. It should have faded from my memory by now.