

I stoop and retrieve my laptop. Philly and his mum step back. They're still holding hands.

"Our regards to Mr Quarmby-Jones."

"Right." I wind my window up.

Philly's mum taps on it. I wind it down again.

"And Erika."

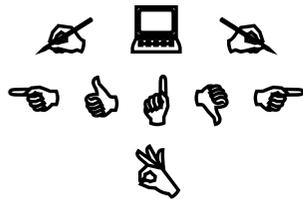
Success

I've just got in - very late. I've plugged in my laptop and switched it on.

Ab...

It seems to be working now, doesn't it? Fingers cro

David Norris



St Bartholomew's, Dinard



The Newsletter Supplement

Christmas, 2012

'A True Story, Virtually'

A short story
by
David Norris

In this second short story written by David Norris and printed in our Newsletter Supplement, the theme of a journey to resolve a problem is explored, how appropriate as we approach the season of the Epiphany when God was made manifest in the appearance of a star and wise men journeyed from the East to find him. They did. To discover whether our unnamed hero manages to find his way and solve his problem you must first read on.

Enjoy.

GJR

“Or - ”

“OK.”

Tweet.

A Miracle Could Be Taking Place

Gently the three of us lay my laptop inside the circle of stones. Then Philly’s mum goes inside the house to turn off the inside light, to save electricity.

In the pitch darkness we stare down towards the centre, holding hands.

Philly’s mum coughs.

Philly looks at his watch.

I feel hungry.

“I could turn on my car headlights.”

“Are you going ?”

“I think so.”

“On your way back you’ll pass the rabbit abattoir. Anyway, an abattoir building. Look, turn left at the bottom of that road. It’s the quick way. Then carry on to Champigny. When you’re there, there’s should be a bridge. If there is, go over it and bear left. Bear right then left. Then...”

Philly and Philly's mum do it

"I'll have to go before it's dark."

"Faw iss dak ! Faw iss dak !"

Tweet.

Philly's concentrating, reading a thick manual full of passwords.

"I could override this."

Tweet.

Philly's mum has just explained to me that she believes that beyond what we see there is reality. That is her philosophy. The pieces of pot, for example.

"Or - "

"Override it."

Tweet.

"Or you could fit this to the back."

Philly hands me a plastic box.

"Shall I do it ?" says Philly's mum. *"I'm a psychiatric nurse."*

"Yes. Please. Try it."

But Philly's mum's looking through the window again.
Looking out.

A True Story, Virtually

Someone helps

"Don't try to contact them."

I didn't know their name.

"If you need to contact them, contact me - "

Or his name.

" - Or Erika."

Or Erika's – till now.

"They're not on the phone. All the time."

"E-mail ?"

"Obviously not."

"No... Nor me, of course. That's the problem. I crashed."

"Philly'll see you right."

Philly.

"Philly's a wizard."

Philly rings me

"Hello."

“Oh, bello.”

“Hello. Who’s that ?”

“I was asked to get in touch with you.”

“Ah.”

Philly ?

Am I talking to a child ? A young woman ? A shy boy
chorister ?

“I’ll put you on to my mum.”

“Ah yes.”

“She’ll tell you how to get here.”

“I’ll get a pen.”

“Is yours working ?”

“My pen ?? I think so.”

“Our car’s not working.”

“I’ll find you.”

“I’ll put mum on.”

I tried my pen.

The coffee arrives

“Sorry the cup and saucer don’t match.”

“Marvellous.”

“No sugar. Sorry. Do you have sugar ?”

“No. Marvellous. Thank you.”

“I didn’t ask you about milk.”

“No. I like it black.”

“It’s tea. Sorry.”

The USB port

“OK.”

“OK ?”

“Except the USB port. Isn’t working.”

“Would that affect the modem ?”

“Why ?”

“I don’t know. Just that I haven’t had my own e-mail since last week.”

“Could be.”

“Marvellous.”

“Or tea.”

Philly’s mum brings in some pot

She holds her hand out. In her palm is a small piece of terracotta.

“The other one’s bigger.”

“Oh yes.”

“That’s white. This one’s terracotta.”

“It’s old.”

Philly looks up.

“We’ve got a metal detector somewhere.”

“Where is it?”

“Philly looks down.”

“It’s somewhere.”

“We’re between houses here.”

Philly unplugs something and gets a sound out of my laptop that is repeated on the television I’m perched on, which lights up.

“Are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll put mum on.”

“Hello.”

Philly’s mum? Rather a deep voice.

“Hello.”

“Do you know where we are?”

“Somewhere near -?”

“No. We’re not near anywhere, really.”

“I’ll find you.”

“Did Mr Quarmby-Jones tell you about us?”

Mr Quarmby-Jones?

“Mr Quarmby-Jones and Erika.”

“They just said you might be able to help.”

“Philly might.”

“Yes. Philly.”

“Shall I tell you how to get here?”

“OK.”

“Sorry, but our car’s not working.”

“Oh, that’s all right. I mean -”

“What do you call those things that stop your car?”

“Police?”

“No. Underneath.”

“Brakes?”

“They broke.”

“Don’t worry – ”

“And so are we. So – ”

“If you tell me how to get to you – ”

“Got a pen?”

“OK.”

“Is Philly going to be able to help you?”

“I hope so. I haven’t told him the problem, though.”

“He’s gone outside.”

“Oh.”

In the corner of Philly’s room, hanging from the ceiling, there’s a small cage with two (or more) chirpy budgies, and a bell and a mirror. They’re noisy.

“They could repeat anything you say.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.”

I feel faintly discouraged.

The budgies fall silent.

Philly begins his work.

Silence.

Through the window

Philly’s mum is outside. In the garden.

There’s no garden, just tangles of bushes and trees and scrubby patches of dried-up grass and uneven gravel a few yards from the window but entirely surrounding the house.

She’s pulling at lengths of tough, sinewy leaves and snipping at them with a very small pair of scissors.

She comes to the window and presses her face almost up against it, moving her lips and holding up her scissors.

“Mum says do you want a cup of coffee.”

In fact he's a young man - probably (but how old ?) with a fluffy black Beatle-cut, sitting behind rows of monitors, stacked-up computers, tangles of thick connecting cables and series of panels of little flashing lights. All the time I'm with him he never arises from his seat at the centre.

"There's no land-line here." He's faintly feminine, and lisps and his voice has yet to break. *"But I've got something that thinks it's a phone. If I talk to it nicely."*

Philly seems cheerful and technical.

"I've been without my own e-mail since last week..." I start.

"Yes. Mr Quarmby-Jones contacted us."

"I was wondering if it was the modem..."

Philly simply looks at me with wide eyes.

"Yes," he says. *"But unlikely."*

In his room (his bedroom) – and in any other room I entered – there's no room at all. Every room is packed to the walls and the ceiling, with piled-high wads of clothes, taped-up cardboard boxes, furniture stacked on end, heaps of bedding, games, jigsaw puzzles, dictionaries and manuals...

I can't sit on Philly's bed because it's swathed in mosquito nets. Instead I sit on an old television, which is dark and silent but switched on and vibrates and is connected to everything else. It's acting as some sort of transmitter.

"Mr Quarmby-Jones's probably told him."

"Yes. Probably."

"I don't think so, though."

"Well –"

"Anyway, you've got a pen now, OK?"

"Yes."

"It'll take about an hour."

"I'd better get extra paper."

"Maybe more. Where are you, actually?"

"I'm here."

"Can you write this down?"

"Just a minute..."

The Directions and the Journey

I found Champ Fleury quite easily, though it's such a small place that it's hard to see it on the map. It took about three-quarters of an hour, rather than thirty minutes.

St. Médard looked to be further down the same road, where it was supposed to be. But there was a deviation. As a result I missed St. Aubin d'Aubigné and drove back till I found the D106 again.

Chasné was twenty minutes – not an hour - along the D106 but such a small hamlet that I was through it before I could find the road to Liffré where I was due to turn right onto the D528 for a short spell.

I stopped at a place called Chevré (unmarked) and realized that my instructions and the map did not quite tally again. I worked out for myself how to get onto the D528. It meant more-or-less returning to the start.

As I drove towards the D528, I saw a sign for La Bouëxière, which I should have reached via the D106.

I made for La Bouëxière and when I finally got there I turned onto the D95 as Philly's mum had told me to do. After that I should have taken the left fork, apparently. Not the right. I realized that rather later.

Eventually I reached Chateaubourg where I crossed the dual carriageway. There was no other road. But I shouldn't have done that. Though I didn't realize it until found myself in somewhere other than Domagné, which should have been next. Or next but one, according to the instructions. In fact I was on the D34 and in L'Epigne.

I drove back to the D95 and tried to read what I'd scribbled down from Philly's mum's detailed instructions. I couldn't see "*a not too hospital*". Or "*a semi-vandalized bus stop*". I couldn't see the sign for Louvigné-des-Bains. I couldn't feel "*two bumps one after the other or one before the other*" in the road. I didn't see "*the scarecrow-in-a-field-that-I-couldn't-possibly miss*". Perhaps I'd missed it. I didn't go through "*two or three sets of lights*". I must have missed them, too.

Instead I was close to a large stretch of water and so, for no reason, I just drove on, along the D95.

Backing out I must have somehow reversed the way I was facing. Which meant I should have turned right – which was why I didn't come across a field of pigs – or "*where pigs are kept*", as my instructions (Philly's mum's instructions) said I would.

But it only meant turning round and driving back: a few more minutes and I'd be there. I drove on, along "*a very long road, maybe a couple of miles, maybe more, maybe not quite...*" Then I'd find a very big and very run-down farm called Le Champ, with a pond – or where there had been a pond. I couldn't miss it.

After something more than four or five miles (at least) I came up to a big tumbledown house. No pond and I couldn't find a name on the door. I couldn't see any door at all.

What I could see was a small circle of various-sized stones and in the middle a woman with very long, red hair (henna), standing in the centre.

"You found us."

"No problem."

"The motorway's direct. But we never use it."

Philly solves it, almost

Philly could be a girl, could be a boy.

Could be fourteen, could be twenty... one... two... Not more.

To be honest I couldn't find the piles of sand so I went back to the barn that was falling down and parked my car next to it. Then I walked back up the second hill to the nearest house and knocked on the door. No one answered.

As I was walking back down the hill, I heard someone shouting. I turned round and walked back up the hill. It was an old man who was laughing heartily. He'd probably just finished lunch. (It was Sunday and by now half past three in the afternoon.)

I asked him if he'd heard of La Terrière. He laughed and said he hadn't. I thanked him and trudged down the hill, leaving him laughing more heartily.

When I'd gone half way down the hill, I heard the old man calling out again. I walked back up the hill.

He asked me if I meant La Terrière, which I thought I'd said. I tried to remember Philly's mum's instructions, back in the car.

Possibly, I said.

Well, in that case....

He told me to look out for a barn that was being pulled down and then turn left. But don't turn left at the barn that's *falling* down, he said, still laughing. If you do, that's the wrong way.

I returned to my car. As I got back in I noticed a pile, flattened down, of something like sand, under the front wheel.

I backed out of the yard and turned left.

Through Bais, where I saw a shop (closed) and where I circled the church several times, unnecessarily.

Through Nuillé, where there was nothing to correspond with the sign saying it was Nuillé. If it was.

I should have driven through Carcaron after this, if I'd been on the D95. Now I couldn't even find Carcaron on the map. Or the D95.

But by opening a gate and driving slowly through a field (then walking back and closing the gate), I reached a narrow road beyond which looked to be a largish village with a biggish church and a sort of cluster of houses, possibly a small town even. I wanted it to be La Guerche de Bretagne. Philly's mum said it would be. Or ought to be.

I drove down the track but obviously in the wrong direction because after a mile or two the road was narrowing down to nothing and the town-ish in the distance was getting even smaller. I did a three... four... five-point turn and went back the way I'd come. Or meant to.

It took me about half an hour to reach the church I'd seen across the fields. It wasn't in La Guerche de Bretagne. That was back a few miles, or so the sign on the church said, though I had to turn it round to read it. Perhaps others had before me.

Once in La Guerche de Bretagne I had to find the D178 and make for Rannée. By now it was dark and I hadn't eaten since breakfast, when I'd set out. I calculated that I ought to be half-way there. In fact I'd turned one page in my instructions.

In La Guerche – as I was now calling it – I found a hotel and booked in for the night. Regrettably they couldn't offer any food and there was no other restaurant open as it was so late.

Next morning I had breakfast: everything offered. Two cups of coffee, both rolls - and all the little pats of butter – both of them.

I left the hotel as early as I could. After Rannée – about twenty-five minutes down the road I was advised – I had to take the route through the Forest of Guerche and I was warned that it would take a time. It took almost an hour before I saw the sign for Rannée and another ten minutes before the sign to the Forest of Guerche.

Another hour and three-quarters and I was through the Forest of Guerche – without seeing another sign or even another car.

When I did see a sign it should have read Chelun. It didn't. It said nothing except that I was on the D241. I should have been on the D95. I asked someone if I was near Chelun. He hadn't heard of it. He pointed back the way I'd come, and then at his head.

I drove on, following my map. But it was difficult to see exactly where I was supposed to be going because the map was creased and torn just where I was looking. After a few minutes I drove back to the sign that should have read Chelun.

It was at a crossroads. I could go back the way I'd come. No, that was the Forest. I could go forward. No, that was where the man who didn't know Chelun had come from. So I could turn right. Or left.

I turned right.

After five or six miles I knew – somehow – that I should have turned left. I returned to the crossroads. For some reason, I thought the man who hadn't helped me might be there. Perhaps he wouldn't be able to help me again. In the event, he wasn't there.

It was lunchtime now and nobody was about. I'd drawn in to the side of the road and tried to make sense of the map – and Philly's mum's instructions. But I couldn't be sure which direction I'd come from in the first place, before I'd seen the sign that should have said Chelun, and then driven on and driven back.

I decided to drive towards the sun, which had come out briefly. For some reason I thought this must be west (it was now nearly two o'clock). I should have been going south but south was possibly the road I'd just mistakenly taken. Or even the road before that.

As it happened, I was wrong. It took me about fifteen minutes to realize this and by then the sun had gone in and nobody had yet come out. I returned to the crossroads and took a road that I didn't think I'd tried before.

Within the hour and only after looking into a bus shelter (in the middle of nowhere) hoping it might say where it was, or at least be semi-vandalized, I reached Chelun.

Now came the difficult part.

According to Philly's mum, I was to go down a hill, then up a hill and on the way down the next hill I was to look for a barn. A barn that was being pulled down. Or could have been pulled down already, she didn't know. I was to avoid a similar barn that was *falling down* and go on a bit and look for some piles of sand in a yard, indicating that the barn (the one I was looking for) was being *pulled down*. After that, it was *downhill all the way*, she said.