

Barcelona Plates

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Extract

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BARCELONA PLATES

Barnaby's girlfriend thought the funniest thing in the world was people being killed while they were on holiday. She didn't mean the ordinary sad dull stuff: stabbed for a camera, strangled by a British squaddie, gassed by a water heater. Rather it was the ludicrous, the silly, the pointless death that she found hilarious. A German holiday-maker trampled to death by an elephant in the middle of the opening shindig for a new supermarket in Phuket, Thailand was a particular favourite. The elephant, part of the grand opening ceremony for the supermarket, was spooked by an over-enthusiastic clown. The German had only stepped into the supermarket to buy some diarrhoea medicine. That kept her chuckling for weeks. She once told Barnaby's parents about her favourite dead-on-holiday story while they were having Sunday lunch in a bad strange Italian restaurant in South Wimbledon. There she was cackling and dribbling her food over a story about some French couple who'd drifted out to sea on Lilos

from their Club Med beach in Corfu and reached the (then but no longer) Communist Albania's territorial waters where they were machine-gunned by a Coastguard boat and died. She could hardly talk for laughing.

She was right though, his girlfriend. There is something sad and touching and vulnerable and pathetic about going on holiday, a triumph of hope over common sense. You imagine just because you've gone to Egypt that you're going to somehow have a great time. But look around you idiot, look at the other idiots being herded on and off buses to go look at old stones. Nobody is having a great time, certainly not the Egyptians and they're in Egypt all the time. If you manage to get killed in some odd and ignominious way and become the stuff of anecdote-telling in bad restaurants in strange suburbs that just about serves you right.

Barnaby knew he'd made a terrible mistake coming on holiday as soon as he read the Comments book in the villa. He'd come on holiday after he'd split up with his girlfriend. He'd split up with his girlfriend after she had accidentally taped a hundred and twenty minutes of their life. They had lived together for five years and had both thought without ever actually discussing it that they would marry at some point. She was an English teacher in one of those inner London further education colleges that mostly seem to exist so black boys can smoke dope in the foyer and pick their girlfriends up after or in the middle of class in old Ford Escorts with black-tinted windows so they can't see where they're going even if they weren't stoned in the first place.

Barnaby's girlfriend wanted to tape a play off the radio which was a two-hour monologue concerning the travails of a girl who was a sexually abused sickle cell anaemia sufferer to discuss with her class at a later date. So she'd dragged out their old Sony portable stereo, plugged it in, tuned the radio to Radio 4, found a C120 tape, started it when the play started and turned it over fastidiously after sixty minutes. But instead of pressing the button that would have taped the play she pressed the button that activated the built-in microphone and recorded a hundred and twenty minutes of hers and Barnaby's home life, which aurally consisted of, 'Want a cup of tea?' 'No thanks.' And a muffled fart while she was out of the room. That was it. That was all. They thought they were happy but the tape told a different story, the tape proved them wrong. No one who lived through a hundred and twenty minutes of such torpidity could be happy. Theirs was a life of grinding tedium. Two weeks later, Barnaby's girlfriend began an affair with a fireman who specialised in dangerous chemical spills. They thought they'd got over that after writing to Zelda West Meads, the advice columnist of the *Mail On Sunday* who is a trained counsellor. But the advice didn't stick. Barnaby's girlfriend was still full of dissatisfaction. 'I want to change the world!' she shouted in Pizza Hut, 'I want to make a difference.' They knew she'd have to do it without Barnaby because they both agreed that he would never make a difference.

Now Barnaby, feeling that he could do with a holiday, was in this bloody villa. He'd found it on the internet 'A

charming small village house, in the hamlet of Chite, nestling in the valley of Lecrin. 25 minutes from the ancient city of Granada.' He'd flown into Malaga on a charter flight and picked up a hire car from a cheap Spanish firm. The car he had rented was a class B car, Volkswagen Golf, Renault Clio or similar; his was a white Fiat Uno Turbo. The only odd thing about this car was that although it came from Malaga airport it carried Barcelona number plates. Barnaby noticed stuff like that, that a Madrid car's registration would start with an 'M', a Seville car's would start with a 'Se' a Valencia registered car a 'Va' and so on. Barnaby's car's started with a 'B' for Barcelona. Most of the cars round the villa's way were 'Gra' for Granada but Barnaby thought that 'Cra' for craphole would have been better.

The house had been advertised as having three bedrooms which there were – they were just on top of each other, a pile of shoeboxes stretching up a precipitous staircase. There was also what the people who rented it called a plunge pool, a fetid tiled washing-up bowl and mosquito motel laid into the tiny patio at the rear. Not that if he had wanted to sit up to his waist in green algae could Barnaby have done so because, although it was boiling hot everywhere in the house, the patio was in the shade and somehow managed to be sub zero so that the pool was freezing.

It was the Comments book that really did it though. The villa had a folder in which visitors were invited to record their comments and they did, not letting a lack of insight, talent or intelligence get in their way. Most either had had or

pretended to have had a wonderful time. Several had written what they thought were poems.

SPANISH THOUGHTS FROM HOME

I am in England now, and home
And see familiar faces once again
And face the journey of the daily train
Yet even so, my heart is still in Spain.

Little children there are playing in the dust
And grapes are hanging thickly on the vine
And lemon trees are growing in the lane.
God give that I were back with them, in Spain.

Still I can hear the laughter, see the smiles
That brighten up each brown and friendly face
White shining teeth and fiery flashing eyes
And nut brown skin of children, slim and lithe.

Yes I will pack and hie me to the plane
To get away from cold and cloud and mist
Back to the land the golden sun has kissed
To find my heart, which lingers still, in Spain.

Only Americans were frank in writing of their disappointments: 'The town of Niguelas is dirty and dusty, with a cinema. The bars are OK if you don't mind being

intimidated by the whacked out locals,' wrote one. Another had obviously had the worst time of his life:

This is our first trip to Europe from the US and we've really enjoyed staying here. We've had some trouble adjusting to the time difference and this has resulted in our not taking advantage of all the things available. For example, our first day here we wanted to go to the Alhambra so we set out for Granada at 10.30 a.m. Once we got in the car I realised that my watch read 4 p.m. (I had been looking at it upside down). Holy week is a tough time to try to see the Alhambra. We spent a few days just walking around Granada and that was a lot of fun. We haven't adjusted to the food too well. Our first night here we ate at Bar Garvi and we recommend avoiding it at all costs. The food was terrible and even though we were starving we couldn't eat more than half of it. In order not to seem rude we asked the barman to wrap the uneaten portion of the food to go. He literally dumped all the food into a plastic bag (we couldn't stop laughing). Eating at home and at McDonalds in Granada were the culinary high-points of the week.

The processions during Holy week are all pretty much the same so, once you've seen one, you've really seen them all. Some guys that look like refugees from a Klu Klux Klan meeting lead the way, they are followed by a statue of Jesus, a marching band and a statue of the Virgin Mary. The band plays something that sounds like the theme to the movie *The Godfather* and it's over. I think that the best part of this trip was the fact that I was able to spend some time with my wife and daughter, without any interruptions from

the telephone or television. So don't feel bad if you don't get to see and do everything you planned on doing and just enjoy the time you are able to spend with each other.

Those puppies wouldn't be leaving the good old US again anytime soon.

One of the things that shocked and depressed Barnaby about himself was how much he missed the telly. Back at home, time had been a strong, hard-sided box into which it was impossible to fit all the busy things in his life: home in time for Channel 4 News, out again to the pub or the pictures or the Hampstead Theatre Club, not forgetting to tape *Frasier*, *Red Dwarf* or the footie to see him to bedtime fuzzed from the drink or buzzed from the play. Then Sky News or *The Big Breakfast* waiting to greet him in the morning with its merry chatter. Now time was like a big blue expanding travel bag bought from an airport shop, that could be unzipped and unclipped to reveal a labyrinth of extra pockets and secret compartments . . . there was just no filling the bastard. He now knew what despair was. He now realised it was also a mistake to bring Denmark's answer to *A Brief History Of Time* as his only reading. He also missed eating with other people. Now Barnaby didn't have a problem with eating alone, he quite liked it in fact; when his firm sent him to Manchester or Leeds he was dead happy sitting in a hotel restaurant with a book in front of him, an international man of mystery in his own mind. What he did mind was being the only person in the

entire echoing restaurant, always. The Spanish ate so late at night, possibly 2 or 3 a.m. (he had seen a poster advertising a kiddie's puppet show that started at 1.30 a.m.), that there was only ever him and some yawning waiters in there. He got the consumption of a three course meal with wine down to twenty-three minutes.

So what did he do to pass the time? He drove. It filled the day. Day two of his holiday he got in the Fiat and went 200 kilometres to Jerez, stopping only for some fuel and a plate of blood sausage. Barnaby soon figured out from the looks he got from other drivers on the narrow roads around Chite that the southern Spaniards of Almeria province ('Al' plate) didn't like Catalans from Barcelona in their crappy Fiat Unos who thought of themselves more as hard-working North Europeans rather than feckless Latin Southerners.

As soon as Barnaby became aware of this tribal tension he took great pleasure in driving as badly as he could (and it took some effort to drive badly enough to stand out), knowing that each enraged driver, terrified pedestrian or frightened child that he passed was thinking 'Catalan cunt' as he hurtled past them in a cloud of exhaust fumes.

Day three he got to the Northern industrial city of Valladolid before grabbing a plate of tripe and heading back, a round trip of fourteen hours. On day four he got to the capital Madrid in under five hours. Just north he stopped for fuel. In the café attached to the gas station there was a shop section where Barnaby decided to buy a picnic: rough paté, fresh bread and big tomatoes, then it occurred

to him that a nice knife would go well with the picnic, so he could sit in some field chopping at his food like a real peasant bloke. Luckily, all motorway cafés in Spain have a large display-case featuring a grand selection of evil-looking blades in a variety of styles and colours. Indeed Barnaby could swear he'd seen a knife-vending machine in one twenty-four hour bar near Guadix. He chose a traditional locking knife made in Albacete, the handle curving inward in a vaguely Moorish way to disguise the true length of the enormous chromed blade that snicked in and out with a truly satisfying 'kerchick'. He took the E90 north-east of Madrid and at the seven hour mark hit Zaragoza. At this point on days one, two and three he would normally have turned back but the thought of another evening sitting in a silent restaurant, indulging in a solo fast-eating contest, pressed him further on. Turning eastwards onto the A2 he hit the Catalan coast just above Tarragona and turned due north. Now he was amongst his own Catalan people, every car here carried Barcelona plates. He stopped at a restaurant called Via Venetosomewhere in the centre of town. He wanted to try the most complicated dish on the menu having already sickened of the plain mountain food of the south. He finally settled on 'aspequenos calabacines en flor en salsa de higado de oca', which is tiny flowering zucchini in a goose liver sauce. He sat happily smiling at his fellow Catalans (for they eat earlier in Barcelona) and then tottered out to the Fiat. He didn't know what to do next – it was too late to head back to Andalucia, so he said to himself 'press on'. North again he

drove and the French border soon came up at La Jonquera. He filled up at a Shell station on the edge of the town; there was something familiar about the place. He remembered what it was. When he was in his early twenties and pretty poor he took a package holiday with his then girlfriend to Spain. Two weeks half board in the Hotel Relax on the Costa Brava, travel overnight by coach and all for sixty-five pounds. Not being able to afford the price of meals at the café stops along the way, they had made themselves several huge packed meals. They knew from bitter experience that they needed a lot of food because when they'd been on coach trips before they'd eaten all their sandwiches before the coach pulled out of Victoria bus station. In fact, sometimes just the sight of a bus would send them rushing home to build huge doorstoppers which they would gobble as they made them. So after a tiring overnight ride they had changed coaches at La Jonquera and astonishingly they still had some grub left. Slightly fuddled from lack of sleep Barnaby had sat down on a wall to finish his last tin of pâté and clumsily knocked the tin, a metal plate and his penknife off the other side of the wall, where they landed twelve feet down in a tangle of scrub and cactus – there was no way he could retrieve them, so sadly they were left there.

Now he was back at that same service station, could the knife, the plate and the pâté possibly still be there? With surprising trepidation he approached the wall and looked down: sure enough at the foot of the wall still lying amongst the cactus, rusted now and pitted but indomitably still there,

was the pâté, the knife and the plate. He felt somehow soothed and moved. He felt for a moment that he was standing at the still point in a turning world. He went back to the Fiat and got his camera then leant as far over the wall as possible and shot off a whole roll of film, the flash constantly ripping round the petrol station. The people at his local Snappy Snaps place would be perplexed to see that his holiday photos consisted solely of a load of pictures of some rusty garbage at the foot of a wall. Barnaby also resolved to tell a few friends about his pâté. He was sure many of them would like to make regular trips to say hello to his plate, pâté and knife – after all, that's all people wanted out of a holiday – somewhere to go and something to look at when they got there. Barnaby paid for his petrol and also bought a large straw donkey wearing a sombrero which he stuck on the back seat.

Barnaby travelled through France during the night, stopping only for fuel and a few hours' sleep in a car park outside Lyon – by then he knew where he was going and he wanted to get there as soon as possible. Calais at dawn, Le Shuttle bip bip bip, M20, A20 and he was back home in London by the evening. It was the most extraordinary sensation. He felt light, free, bobbing about like a helium party balloon. Everybody thought he was in Spain for another three days and of course the car he was driving had Barcelona plates and he looked sort of Spanish. He had never felt so liberated. As Arnold says in *Total Recall*, 'Wherever you go on holiday it's still you there on holiday,' though maybe it wasn't

Arnold but some bloke talking to Arnold who Arnold later shot in the head and those may not have been the exact words. Barnaby wasn't Barnaby though, he was some Spanish bloke with a Fiat Uno Turbo. He'd thought for a long time about where he was going to stay as he whizzed through France and in the end there was only one place it could be. He would stay at the Garth Hotel. If you have driven North up the M1 or the A1 from London over the past twenty years or so you will know the Garth Hotel. Even if you don't know you know it – you know it. It is something that has grown with more organic persistence than the sorry trees and bushes that occasionally sprout along the roadside. Hendon Way, between the Finchley Road and the North Circular, feeds six lanes of traffic to and from the M1, it is lined with 1930s houses, many with neat front gardens and nasty modern double glazing. Barnaby had moved down to London in 1970 in a white Simca 1100 van driven by his friend Harry: he might have noticed the Garth for the first time then when it occupied one house on a block of maybe ten houses between Garth Road and Cloister Road. The next time was maybe going back to Hull on the National Express coach in the mid 1970s, he glanced out of the window and saw that the Garth had now taken over a couple more houses on the block, it was growing. So it went on. Stuck in a jam in his company Rover 800 because the IRA had blown up Staples Corner he saw it was six houses. And now it has eaten every building it can unless it starts moving backwards down Cloister Road, which it may do one day. There it sits on the

Hendon Way, a large hotel incorporating the Tivoli Italian Restaurant and the Meridian Conference Suite, but which is still very obviously built out of ten little family houses.

It was round about lunchtime when Barnaby arrived at the Garth Hotel. He was vaguely hoping when he parked his car on the shabby forecourt, amongst many with Dutch, German and French plates, that inside the hotel there would still be the remains of the ten houses as they used to be, that the hotel reception would be in the living room of one, complete with a three piece suite and TV in the corner, that the bar and restaurant would be formed from the dining rooms of a couple of the houses, the guests seated at MFI dining tables, drinks served from a trolley, and that the bedrooms would be just as they were left by the previous tenants, complete with fading Human League posters on the walls and Airfix model planes hanging from the ceilings. It wasn't like that at all: there was a marble floor, a proper reception, lifts, though it didn't feel English, perhaps Jordanian or Slovakian instead.

Barnaby checked in and went up to his room. He didn't have any luggage. He collapsed on the bed, switched on the TV and gorged himself on six hours of Sky News, the Discovery Channel and UK Gold. He watched the same episode of *The Bill*, three times. Then he was ready to go out.

Barnaby was aware that he only had this one night in London, he would have to depart some time the next day if he was to get the car back to the rental place in Malaga

in time to catch his flight back to London where of course he already was. No time to lose then and only one thing to do . . . drive.

As he headed into central London Barnaby was aware of a delicious sense of a particular freedom, a freedom from care. Usually he cared when a car shot through the lights, when a driver tossed a fag packet out of the window, when he noticed the crazy leaning angles of the rainforest of traffic lights that clustered at every corner. It came to him that all these years Barnaby had carried an imaginary foreign tourist round in his head and every time he noted some shameful sign of the dirty and ugly life that he and his fellow Britons led then he cringed at what this tourist must think. But now he was that tourist and frankly he didn't give a fuck – sure it was all different to his own Barcelona but he saw it all now, clear and fresh as if for the first time: ragged and spikey, not dirty and grim; funky not fucked up; clued up, not clammy.

Camden Market – look at the drug dealers by the station, that's so cool, you'd have to be a life-denying drip not to find it cool. Barnaby thought he might buy some drugs. The black man took him down an alley handed over the drugs and then he and a friend tried to rob Barnaby but Barnaby pulled out the knife he'd bought at the motorway place outside Madrid and cut them both across the face with two quick strokes, forehand and backhand, swick, swick.

He took the drugs, they were very good, Barnaby could see why people liked them.

Earl's Court, the Fiat parked skewed on the pavement half blocking the Warwick Road, causing such a jam that it got mentioned on London News Talk Radio. In the gay pub a nice-looking Chinese boy caught Barnaby's eye, they went into the cemetery and the young man fucked him quite violently. He could see why people liked that as well. Barnaby shot away in the Uno five seconds ahead of the police tow truck, he didn't give a fuck. Soho, no not good enough at all, clerks in raincoats clutching beer bottles by the neck, standing outside bars looking desperately up and down the street as if good times were about to arrive in a mini cab. Not good enough at all. The Walworth Road, better. The blue steel glint of gunbarrels in the light brown public bar. Pint after pint of chemical-tasting lager. It does the job, nothing to be ashamed of there, why should some snobby foreigner sneer at it, he'd get his fucking face pushed in if he did, even with that knife in his belt.

Hanway Street, Little Spain, 3 a.m., the shebeens where the finished-duty Spanish waiters are always glad to greet a fellow countryman. The Garth Hotel 6 a.m. Back on the road at check-out time and in reverse: A20, M20, the Shuttle, the N3 through northern France; he got confused on the *périphérique* and found himself heading through central Paris, pushing it now and heading south almost by smell. His girlfriend had told him he would never change the world but he had gone one better and changed himself. Hitting 120 kph on the Champs-Élysées, skidding on the cobbles round the carousel and down the avenue Franklin D Roosevelt. As he

hit the place du Canada and swerved on to the cours Albert Ier, a black Mercedes 280 with four people aboard swooped past him doing about 150 kph. Underpowered for such a big fat car. The light little Fiat caught the limousine as they dove side by side into the underpass under the place d'Alma. Driving like the insouciant Catalan he was, the straw donkey rocking about on the back seat, Barnaby pulled ahead of the Merc, then with a flick of the steering wheel changed lanes without warning, clipping the front bumper of the bigger car. Its lethargic balance upset, the Mercedes wobbled then ploughed into the thirteenth stanchion of the underpass and span round losing speed and bits and pieces of itself, as Barnaby tore up the other side and out into the Paris night. He didn't give a fuck.