

## **A visitation?**

I was standing out by our front gate the other day, contemplating the rot in our gateposts with a gloomy sense of satisfaction, when I heard a vehicle of some sort coming slowly up the hill. Our lane is extremely long, extremely narrow, continuously bendy, and quite steep in places, with grass growing in the middle, high stone walls on each side and several unmarked narrower drives and side turnings. A delivery man's nightmare.

I heard a cautious hoot, a changing down of gears and then the vehicle sounded as if it had stopped. I could imagine the occupants discussing the probability that they had taken a wrong tuning and were now in a cul-de-sac with no way of turning round. I lingered by the gate full of gleeful curiosity. The vehicle was moving again. A long long sleek bonnet appeared round the bend, mirror-black. I now understood why the car was approaching very slowly - it was so long that it really needed the ability to flex in the middle to get round our bends, and it was so wide that it was brushing the verges on both sides. It crept on up the hill until it was level with me. The windows were so heavily tinted that even from a distance of two feet, I couldn't tell if there was anyone inside. Any other driver would have stopped to ask the way, but the car just ground on up the hill. Perhaps there was no-one inside.

I turned to go back to the house - my curiosity was not going to be satisfied. I heard the car stop again, the engine noise became louder. It must be reversing back down the hill. The long long boot passed the gateway - or rather the trunk, for this must be an American stretched limo. The car stopped when the centre section was level with our drive and the front door slowly opened. A heavily built black man, dressed in a black suit, black chauffeur's hat and black sunglasses unfolded himself from the driver's seat, then closed the door with a hushed clunk. He walked up the drive towards me and raised his hat deferentially.

"Excuse me ma'm", in a slow southern drawl, "the President has instructed me to ask you why you were standing out by your gate. Were you expecting him?"

I managed to stop my jaw dropping just sufficiently to allow me to reply.

"The President? President Reagan?"

"That is correct ma'm".

"What on earth is he doing in St Briavels? No, I certainly wasn't expecting him. I didn't even know he was in Britain. I was just out by the gate looking at the view and inspecting the gateposts - they're really rotten, we'll need to replace them soon", I gabbled.

There was a short pause.

"The President arrived in London to attend the G6 conference, but...er...hmm...he found the meeting unsatisfactory, so decided to occupy his time here with an unofficial tour of Britain."

A large grin transformed the stiff formality, his teeth gleamed in the black face. "Ah managed to elude the minders and we jus' took off", he said proudly.

"But why should he think I was expecting him?"

"Ah well ma'm you see the President is kinda used to people waiting around to see if he needs anything. Ah guess it jus' didn't occur to him that you wouldn't know he'd be passing by today.

The President has jus' developed an interest in castles ma'm. We stopped by the castle in Chepstow jus' now and heard about the one at St Briavels, but I guess we may have taken a wrong turning back there...."

"No, no, you can get through on this road, just go on up the hill for about a mile and a half".

"Why that's great, thank you ma'm. Now the other matter is this. The President is mighty fond of visiting people in their homes, an' if you could see your way to inviting him in for a cup of tea, why he'd be happy as a kid in a MacDonalds, believe me ma'm."

"Well, yes, of course, he'd be welcome", I said, mentally reviewing the tidiness/cleanliness quotient of our cottage. John was working, so there'd be papers and books spread all over the living room. Tomorrow was my day for the weekly vacuuming and I knew there were swathes of white cat fluff all over the carpets.

"Now don't you worry about tidyin' things. The President jus' loves a lived-in house - he finds the White House very difficult. Now do you have any cake ma'm? The President is mighty fond of cake."

"Yes, yes, I do", I replied thankfully, remembering the batch of lemon cakes I'd put in the freezer last week - they'd thaw in five minutes.

"Well then ma'm, I'll go ask the President to step out of the car. Now I won't be able to get the limo round into your drive but I'm sure we won't be staying long, so I'll have to leave it in the lane. It'll be safe there won't it?"

"Oh, I'm sure it'll be safe", I said, visualising lines of cars, post vans, milk tankers, delivery vans and tractors accumulating above and below the limo. It was also the day the dustbins were emptied.

There wasn't time to go back to the house to warn John about the visitation, the President was already getting out of the car. He was tall, taller than you would imagine from watching him on television, and dressed in a dark navy blue suit with a subtle sheen and a pale cream cravat - conference clothes. His hair was too perfectly black and the smile well practised.

"Good afternoon Mr President. I'm delighted to invite you to our cottage for a cup of tea". Surprisingly I was coherent and not really nervous.

"It's mighty kind of you ma'm. All this travelling's made me real thirsty". He held out his hand and shook mine vigorously.

We walked side by side up the drive. Me and the President of the United States! The chauffeur followed a few steps behind.

He exclaimed at the view, was delighted by the garden and fascinated by our cottage - awed when I said parts of it were two hundred years old.

"Now Mr President", I said, "do come inside, I'll just explain to my husband that you're here. I'm sure he'll show you round while I make the tea".

The President stepped into the hall - his head was nearly brushing the ceiling. I slid into the living room and shut the door behind me. John looked up and slowly brought his eyes to focus on me, but his mind was still engaged with his writing.

"It's President Reagan, he's come for tea," I hissed, pointing at the door.

"Tea? Is it tea-time already? Yes, I'd like some please", he said distractedly, and looked again at the clipboard on his knee.

"I lurched forward and shook him.

"Whaaat?" he shouted.

"Shhhhh. President Reagan's come to tea. You've got to talk to him while I put the kettle on. He wants cake as well. I've got to get some out the freezer. Show him around. Show him the loo".

There was a murmur of voices in the hall. John looked at me in a I-don't-believe-a-word-you're-saying kind of way. He strode the door and threw it open.

There was a pause of a few seconds then, "Mr President, what a pleasant surprise. We haven't met before. My name's....."

I bolted to the kitchen.

An hour later the three of us were still sitting in the living room surrounded by empty cups, crumby plates and books and papers. The President, with two of our cats on his lap covering his beautiful suit with white fluff, was in full swing.

"....And on our ranch in California, Nancy and I have eleven horse. My favourite's a tall lean bay....."

There was a knock at the door. The chauffeur, who'd insisted on drinking his tea in the kitchen, appeared.

"Mr President. If we're to take in this castle and get back to London tonight, we really need to leave right now".

"Oh, yes, Tom. You're in charge of this trip". He turned his famous smile on us, "Well, I have enjoyed myself. I just love your home, but I have to go".

The four of us walked back along the drive. The limo was still there. I hadn't heard any hooting or cars reversing, but our cottage walls are thick and the drive quite long. As the President climbed into the back seat, I peered up and down the lane. Nothing. The car drove off slowly. It didn't seem to go round the bend, but rather to dissolve into a black streak on the tarmac, which slowly faded. The silence was broken by a distant mooing.

John and I stood looking at each other. We both ran back to the cottage. Someone had washed up the best cups and saucers and plates in our brief absence, and put them back in the cupboard. I looked in the freezer. There were still eighteen lemon cakes in the tin. And yet I'm sure I had a lingering taste of lemon in my mouth.

"Would you like a cup of tea?, I asked weakly.

Two days later we had a delivery. Two stone pillars, each with a beautifully carved eagle standing haughtily on the top. We shall certainly have to buy another gate now to match the grandeur of our new gate posts.