**Holidays**

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To my daughter Carole

I hate holidays!

This notion was brought after the industrial revolution for people who didn’t stop working 10 hours a day OK! But it was only a fortnight during the month of august - & then back to work!

Afterwards, holidays began to take a growing importance in our lives, especially the French.

It started to mass popularize in the fifties with *André Trigano* who invented holiday camps.

Ever since, the French took it as a duty to colonize Normandy, the Côte d’Azur, Brittany, Vendée, Charente maritime & many other places throughout the decades from 1936 on (the beginning in France of the 1st “conges payés”).

I remember going on holiday to St Jean de Monts in Vendée with my parents. My sister & I would sleep on the backseat of the familial *Peugeot 203*. My parents would sleep under a Canadian tent & my mother cooked under a beach tent. We were in the middle of a coastal pine forest & used to spend one month there – as my father was a school master - playing among the pine trees with my cousins whose fathers were also schoolmasters.

When I went back there some 20 years later to visit one of my cousins who had bought an apartment on the sea-front - as she was a great nostalgic of the times afore mentioned - I could hardly recognize the place for it had been completely transformed by the upsurge of 10-storeyed holiday-makers residences. Only the beach hadn’t changed; miles of sand – sometimes invaded by huge jellyfish - a tourists’ paradise!

In all logic, I was influenced by this way of thinking & living &, when I got married, I wanted to offer my daughter the same holidays as the ones I had benefited from.

So, my wife & I decided – my first daughter was around 2 years old – to go to Gruissan, on the *Lion Gulf*, in Languedoc. It was a nice place but a bit windy at times. We had a great time with our daughter there! She was nearly only a toddler & starting to speak. As every parent, we wondered at her cuteness & repeated her speaking mistakes which made us burst out in laughters. Still nowadays, we can’t resist the impulse of reminding her some of the expressions she used – that’ll remain printed forever in our memories - but this only seems to amuse her husband now; she pulls a wry face at the reminiscence… I wonder why? (lol)

Then, it was time to go back – on a Saturday morning as the renting time stopped at 12:00. After an inspection of the flat we had stayed at for a fortnight, the supervisor of the holiday resort ordered us to clean the bathroom (probably because the flat was rented just after & he wouldn’t have to do it).

Grudgingly, we complied & probably lost a few precious minutes as the Paris-bound traffic from the south of France is really incredible during our 2-month summer holidays.

As early as we started, there was a first “slowdown” of the traffic due to an accident on the M6 motorway. We were driving so slowly that it took us some 6 hours to reach the *Villefranche* toll station between Lyon & Mâcon. We had started early (around 8:00 am instead of 7:00 am as we had planned to do).

The sun was stifling & the pace was sluggish just before reaching the toll. As we finally got to a resting area, we decided to halt to refresh ourselves, maybe find a few attractions for our little girl - for she was beginning to get bored of all that. Everyone knows children want to have reached the destination after a few hours - drive. So, as we were fed up with hearing every 5 mn “*when do we* *arrive home*?”… (obviously, we weren’t ready to) we halted.

My wife & I had decided to stop smoking on a common agreement before the birth of our daughter, as she was pregnant. But I had resumed smoking after the birth while she hadn’t. So, exhausted & helpless as I felt, I lit up a cigarette (*Benson & Hedges*) under the reproachful glance of my beloved & started to puff (a little challenging apparently but inwardly regretful). After 2 or 3 puffs - my eyes averting my wife’s – I wanted to say something capital (to this time I don’t remember what) & made a downward move of my right arm, taking my cigarette from my lips. I had so much forgotten everything surrounding me as I was feeling unstressed for the first time in 6 hours that I had quite forgotten the presence of my daughter. Ending that swerving downwards gesture of my right hand – that probably meant discouragement at the traffic conditions that day! – I unwillingly darted my cigarette right into the left eye of my daughter (as she was standing next to me & just at the right height to get hurt).

One can imagine how silly I felt & the reproaches from my wife who had advised me so many times to stop smoking as I had reached a 20 cigarettes-per-day peak!... We tried to find a doctor on the resting area but there was none. We were beginning to panic as the little girl complained. The temperature was getting around 40° C & it was high time to make a go & try to find a hospital on the way, after leaving the highway at the first exit byway.

We got back into our car with - this time - not only the sluggish pace & high temperature, but another pang: our daughter complaining about her eye burn. I was crushed under the weight of responsibility & foolishness. But still, I had to drive & bear the heavy weight of fatherhood & responsibility.

It took us one hour to reach the toll. After that, the pace started to increase & we found the first exit byway. It was around 7:00 pm when we got to the hospital of a little town near Lyon. Happily, there was an emergency service & a kind doctor examined the eye of our little girl. I remember I could not understand why she was so smiling as we were so anxious about the verdict - but we were probably not the first ones… Doctors know the human nature & seeing anxious parents must be a comfort for them as they must witness lots of child abuse & even worse!...

 After practicing a thorough examination of the retina, the kind doctor declared that there was nothing wrong, I really felt relieved & could have embraced her (actually, I had self-deprecated myself to the status of a criminal for the previous 4 hours). Then, after thanking this kind doctor & stopping at a chemist’s who, perchance, was still open on that late Saturday evening to get some eye cleaner for our little girl, we got back to the motorway.

Life seemed to be worth living again. That’s life: highs & lows. *“After the rain comes the sunshine*”, “*every cloud has a silver lining”* & all that sort of things… But it was already 9:00 pm & I was so tired from my driving day - & we wanted so much to forget all that – that we decided to stop at a motel on the highway.

We spent a wonderful night but it cost us an awful lot as we had a superb dinner – in the Lyon region! – but we needed it &, after all, our holiday hadn’t yet come to an end! That’s true, we had a little gone beyond our pecuniary means (I was a teacher at the beginning of his career & my wife was an assistant in a clothes shop). But life is made of that stuff & that is how you keep in mind ineffable memories.

In addition, I really stopped smoking that day. I tried to puff ever since that time but it makes me sick! What great lessons one can draw from life! Never mind about anything in life; all is written above! I was bound to stop smoking!...

 

The year after, we went on a winter holiday in Abondance, a ski resort in Savoy.

A friend of mine – an old fart from university in Reims – who has made his way from that time on to head teacher – had invited us to share a chalet in the Alps whom he had been lent by a friend of his. They had a boy, Alexandre, the same age as my daughter & we were very much looking forward to meet them over there for we had already had a few brunches together as I had kept contact with this good friend of mine. We used to evoke our boisterous student’s past around many bottles of various vintages (we were not sectarian on that point!).

His wife used to be in education too. At the time, they were at the beginning of their career & we used to be in the same high school as we were students, watching over the pupils. So, we knew each other well. We – I mean myself & the other *surveillants* of the school – had always found strange his marrying her for they were together but always quarelling – but they invited us all for their wedding!

When we arrived at the chalet, we were warmly welcomed & we had a great night partying together – drinking that so tongue-tickling, nearly sparkling white Savoy wine. We went to bed in high spirits after kissing each other goodnight. Only Alexandre, their son, didn’t seem to have appreciated the evening & hadn’t made friends with my daughter as he was very selfish & didn’t like to lend his toys. He didn’t kiss anyone & went to bed pulling a wry face. To be true, his parents had already told us that their son was brought up in a special way as a nanny came everyday to their flat (they were accommodated by the school for both of them were members of the administration).

On the day after, we got up with a light hangover from the previous evening & had breakfast together. Around the toasts, made of smelling floury traditional mountain bread, & croissants (so much appreciated by my British friends when they came over to see me), we decided – while sipping down our “café au lait” (goat milk in this region) – to go to a ski rental & rent there for one week all the necessary equipment for everyone of us. Almost… for my friend’s wife wouldn’t hear about cross country skiing (that’s we had intended to practice on the previous night!).

Nevertheless, we drove through the frozen snow-coated roads to the ski-rental, as our chalet was quite isolated. We arrived there & rented all the necessary equipment for everyone (except one of us). She didn’t seem to appreciate skiing & had stayed at home to prepare lunch.

After renting, we left the ski-rental & went back to the chalet. Snow was slightly falling but, with the midday sun, it was melting.

There was a snow storm in the afternoon & we decided, my wife & me to take our daughter out in the snow & initiate her to cross-country skiing (she was very cute with her pink ski-suit, trying to comprehend the indications I gave her). The main thing when you go to winter-skiing is not the way you ski but the way you profit from the icy healthy weather before driving back down to “ground 0” where the atmosphere is cold, damp & unhealthy to spend the rest of winter avoiding getting gastroenteritis, flue, mumps measles, arthritis, consumption… (I don’t actually believe in the last 2!)

Uncomprehendingly, my friend declined the invitation (probably influenced by his wife!) So, Alexandre – who seemed more or less to get accustomed to my daughter - was cut short from getting acquainted with a girl his age. His mother declared to us that, Alexandre having lost a glove on the day before (I had foolishly put the pair of gloves on the roof of my car with many other things when we had rented & started off without checking if we had put every item in the boot!) was forbidden to go skiing ( what an education… from professionals!)

The 3 of us, spent a great afternoon. I tugged my daughter (& sometimes my wife) through the snow-covered fields. We often had to clamber over barbed-wire enclosed pastures but it was such great fun! We spent a wonderful afternoon in a snow storm – there are such moments in life that will remain in your memory for ever.

We were in high spirits when we came back to the chalet, snow-*powdered,* wet, cold *& hungry*. As we entered, my friend’s wife let us know that the 3 of them had had a very bad day as we had gone away from them & Alexandre had got a cold! (it wasn’t our fault!) We were extremely surprised as they all seemed to be very well in the morning. My friend seemed to be a little disturbed by all that.

To put it in a nutshell, we went skiing freely for one week, my daughter, my wife & me – while my friend’s family were playing scrabble inside the chalet with their awful son who was very demanding – as the nanny must have yielded to all his whims.

There were more & more wry faces all over the week but we didn’t mind as we didn’t see them during the day. We just had to pass the breakfast & dinner ordeal (we had a sandwich for lunch in *Abondance* - seems a nice place to have a sandwich, isn’t it?). My friend talked to me as if there was nothing wrong while his wife talked to mine as if she had been ordered to & Alexandre glared at my daughter & even hit her when she tried to play with his toys!

Then, D-Day (like Departure Day) came. My friend & his wife were in such a hurry to leave the place that they entrusted us with the keys of the chalet (he must really have trusted me as we were colleagues once).They were packing up very quickly as a snow storm had been forecast (but they didn’t tell us anything). They were in such a hurry to depart from us that Alexandre threw a preserve of myrtleberry jam from the mezzanine to his father (probably in a panic), but the latter failed to catch it & his mother had to clean the floor! Retrospectively, I‘ll never forget that moment!..(.but that definitely added to his mother’s angry mood)

Then, my poor friend had to put all their belongings into the boot of the car & he was so disoriented & worried about his wife & son that he banged his head into an enormous terreau-filled cauldron hanging from the roof of the wooden-terraced-floored chalet. He seemed to be quite stunned by the bang. But he answered to my inquiring if he was OK – I really cared about my ftiend & feared aftermaths for his mental health after all he had undergone all that week! - *“I’ ll manage* *allright!”* (it seemed to me I could still hear his head tolling like a bell from the stroke of his head against the cauldron). These chalet-dwellers are really mad sometimes… what’s the use of hanging cast-iron cauldrons from wooden ceilings from wooden plank balconies? It must be very nice in the summer – though you need to fix it solidly & the ceiling has to be very resistant – but it constitutes a real danger in winter as you can’t see the flowers growing inside! (lol)

Then, they departed & we were sorry to part from them.

We slept quite soundly that night for there was no noise. For sure, the traffic had been interrupted by heavy snow falls (one meter in one night added to the already existing one-meter high layer!). Such things quite frequently happen in Savoy! We hadn’t paid any heed to our friends’ wise - though hurried - departure & we were trapped!

I woke up at 4:00 am & could only notice the layer of snow that had equalized every asperity, every hill & hollow in the countryside - a real Paradise in white, Eternity, pure Bliss! - But I had little time to get into an ecstasy over that as the snow was falling down as it looked it would never stop falling down! The garage was below ground level! I immediately got dressed &, using the big snow-snoop which any Savoy-dweller keeps in his basement, I started removing the fresh snow which didn’t - & didn’t seem - to be expected to stop.

After a thorough 2-hour snow-plough job - around 8:00 am - we could, in extremis, leave the chalet. I was sweating all over after the 4-hour effort! - but no time to have a shower! It was an emergency rescue! As we were driving down to *Thonon-les-Bains*, we heard on the car radio that a one-meter-coat had already fallen on the *Abondance* region & there were avalanches to be feared.

In that very anxious state of mind, we arrived at Thonon-les-Bains to tank up. Lots of cars were already queuing up & it took us almost 30 mn to get to the petrol pump. As we were starting from the petrol station, we heard on the radio that the High Savoy trade-unions had voted on a strike that day & only a minimum service would be available (it was on a Sunday). We thought in ourselves that they could have waited for a better opportunity to go on strike, but as I was a member of a teachers’ trade-union myself!...

As I was young & pretty irresponsible, I decided not to pay attention to all that stuff! &, actually, we followed a snow-plough (the minimum service) for 4 hours between a double 2-meter high bank of snow. It must have been an original procession from helicopter, a fantastic Hitchcockian bird’s eye view in black & white!

Down below, in our car (a 15-year old 2-door Navy blue Ford Fiesta), I feared an unexpected breakdown, my little girl (wearing her pink ski outfit) to die of cold… all those chimeras that come to your mind when you are in dire straits (& so we were!) We tried not to look stressed & cracked jokes, sang nursery rimes. It’s fantastic to notice how much stuff you can mobilize on such occasions, you revisit yourself & all that you learnt before: it might be the true meaning of what we call “culture”.

Eventually, after a 40 km 4-hour drive through French Savoy, the slugs procession reached the Swiss border. I remember the Swiss customs-officers cracking jokes at us (Swiss humour is indeesd reputed all over the world!).

Alas! Snow & weather disturbances in general ignore borders & the people in Geneva were having a great time skiing in the city as the traffic was reduced to a few irresponsible tourists like us & it was a Sunday! We accessed to the frozen-snow covered highway from Geneva to Les Rousses in France & hoped to be able to take off the tires chains but no way!... We had to drive some 50 miles with an additional tractor noise (that’s what happens when you drive at 30 mph with chains!) *Clank!* *Clank! Clank*!... our ears couldn’t bear that noise!!!... The more I accelerated, the louder!...

We were on the verge of agony when we arrived at the end of the Swiss motorway & I had to drive through the *Col de la Faucille*, a 20 km uphill patch between Switzerland & France. I was quite knacked but I had to hold on – in such circumstances you reveal to yourself & find unexpected resources. I drove up the *Col de la Faucille* with heavy snow falling down & not a snow plough to clear the way in sight! No one was driving there except us. Eventually, we got to the top of the *Sickle* (er… *Faucille*), Today, I’m proud to have accomplished that!

I did it for you Carole because I didn’t want you to die of cold! (lol)

After a 2-hour drive, we arrived at Les Rousses. Night was falling when we reached *the Col de la* *Faucille* & it was pitch dark when we arrived at *Les Rousses*, a ski resort in Jura (not the Scottish whisky-producing island!)

To our great surprise, the snow must have only been falling on the eastern slope of the Vosges (*Schwarzwald* auf Deutsch) for, on the other side (the western side) the snow had waned to a mere Breton drizzle.

That’s only then that I started to relax & consider myself out of danger. My courage & perseverance had vanquished the untamed elements (lol). In the morning, we were crossing *the Valley of Death* & then we were in Brittany.

We were marveling at the countryside (though it was pitch dark but we had excuses as we had had so many avatars!) When we drove past an inn in the village of *Poligny* in Savoy, I was so exhausted that I felt irresistibly attracted by the need of having a rest in an inn that seemed so appealing to my wearied senses.

We parked on the almost deserted parking lot & knocked - with a Templar hand-shaped knocker- at the gate of the inn. After a 5 mn wait (but we were not in a hurry after all we had undergone) a white-jacket black-trousered necktied butler came to open. At our request of spending a night at his palace, he simply answered “*It’s a complete no no*” (meaning “*this palace is not for the* *populace”*)

As a teacher, I know the human nature & how to convince people (lol) (3rd time). I don’t quite remember what I told him – probably the same stuff as I’m used to using with my pupils - & it worked on him (probably a retarded pupil in his school time!)

We were served like Royals, though the butler (after all, he might have been a simple servant) always suspiciously kept on eyeing on us. We ate a royal dish (& it cost us a lot of money + the suite we had rented as there seemed to be no other solution: My eye! There were only 3 cars on the parking lot!)

The only thing I regretted that night is my daughter’s asking to go to the restroom! It’s true she had to refrain herself all day long - in very stressing circumstances! – but she should have seen the wry face the butler pulled on when she left the dining-room with her mother - in which we were the only ones to dine that night! - My wife asked him in which part of the mansion the toilet was located & he condescended to mime her where it was (for my part, I was feeling more & more ill-at-ease as the smell from my daughter was worse & worse!).

Eventually, my wife took the little girl to the toilet (but it was too late!). When they reappeared, I had already drunk half the bottle of *Côtes du Jura* (not he Scottish Island) as I needed it badly.

Then, we went to bed in a tapestry wall-covered 3-roomed suite & slept like Royals.

We had a royal tariff-including breakfast in the morning as we departed. Life was still worth living after all! “*a new day a new life!...”* (Seal) & said goodbye to the butler. He suspiciously eyed upon our means of payment (a plebeian *Visa credit* card), but he eventually accepted it as I had let some hints the night before that was a teacher & had a regular income…

I started our old Ford Fiesta – an offence among the BMWs & Mercedeses - & we resumed our way home in the direction of Dijon. We felt quite light-hearted (except the fact that I had to work in the afternoon but no problems, I could do it!)

Just before arriving at Dijon, I couldn’t gear in (nor out) & had to stop on the hard shoulder just before the crossroads roundabout to the A 26 motorway. Perchance, there was a mechanist’s there, just at the crossroads! I left my family in the old Ford Fiesta & walked across the road. I told the chief mechanics what was the problem with my car & he said downrightly (for he knew his trade) “*it’s the* *clutch fork!*”

I didn’t know exactly what a clutch-fork was – though I already had had lots of problems with cars as I mainly have been used to driving second-hand cars – but that sort of breakdown had never occurred to me in the past.

To be true, I had geared in & out so many times the previous night – especially during the Faucille crossing – that an overworked geared system like my old Ford Fiesta’s had not been able to stand all that!

So we had to spend the day in Dijon. The wind was icy & we didn’t know the city. We didn’t stay very far from the mechanic’s for all I expected was a phone call telling me my car was repaired. I got the phone call around 5:00 pm. Meanwhile, I had phoned the school I taught at, saying that I would be missing for the beginning of the half-term.

As we live at 200 km from Dijon, we got back home around 7:00 pm. When we entered our house, it was very cold & I couldn’t hear any noise from the fuel oil heating regenerating system. So I checked the level of fuel oil in the tank & there was no fuel oil left in it!

I left my daughter & wife shivering in the house while preparing dinner (a gas cooker) & drove to my brother-in-law’s who had the same fuel oil heating system as us with a canteen in the boot of my car. He gave me around 20 liters of fuel oil just to restart the heater.

I feared a little that the fuel-oil heater wouldn’t start as it hadn’t been running for I didn’t know for how long exactly. Eventually, it resumed its perpetual outbursts & stops & the noise we used to hate. It was continuous & sleep-preventing at night but they began, from that time on, to become friendly & homely noises that we soon included into our night sleep, forgetting everything about it; but remembering all had happened to us.

Home sweet home!

 