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6<sup>th</sup> December 1988

### Tales from an Itinerant Jobber letter 8

Dear Reader,

I was so pleased to receive your letter that I phoned you immediately only to find that you were in Lansing or some such place. I tried your home later too but of course you were not home yet. I think we are six hours apart so at 10-30 pm it would only be 4-30 pm. Stupid of me to even try but then your letters have that effect on me. I go all weak at the knees and lose my mind completely – well temporarily at least particularly when you say you are thinking of me. Nevertheless we are neither of us having much luck. You should have tried Airton that Sunday as I took a long weekend back in England, departing Holland Thursday afternoon and returning Monday evening. I don't think I'll attempt these trips too often as the driving is much too hectic over such a short duration. I did a round trip total of 1100 miles with a stopover in Windsor Thursday night at Julie's then leaving early Friday morning for Airton. Speedy and Raiko (Speedy's Japanese girl friend) came over Saturday evening, stayed overnight and after a late breakfast Sunday I took them to Janet's Foss, Gordale Scar and over the top of Malham Cove. Fortunately we had a beautiful day and they were quite thrilled with the scenery. When they left for Cambridge about 2-30 pm to visit his mother I tidied the flat and headed for the Midlands to spend Sunday night at Sue's so I was able to break the journey to Dover and of course it afforded me the opportunity to see my grandchildren. Scott never ceases to amaze me he is only just four and he can read anything you put before him without hesitation, even words like "imagination" and know the meaning of them too. He recognizes and knows the names of more wild animals than most grown-ups and when it comes to prehistoric creatures he certainly has me beaten. When he goes to play school he makes a beeline for the library and spends his day there absorbing more knowledge. It's frightening like a Stephen King novel. I don't know what is going to happen when he goes to school! Of course he makes Greg appear such a dummy by comparison while in reality Greg is just a normal child and quite cute.

Travelling as I do and it's the festive season I've noted all the different customs that other countries observe and adopt over Christmas. In Scandinavia they celebrate on the 24<sup>th</sup> and Christmas day is rather dull, porridge seems to be a traditional dish over there, in Finland they have such things as minced liver with swedes (the vegetable not the people) and ham rather than turkey and the highlight of the evening (and everyone participates) is they get little ladles and melt lumps of lead and then pour it into a bucket of cold water and from the shape that ensues they tell your fortune! Of course Santa Claus comes from Remenini, a town in northern Finland round the Arctic Circle where he is there all year round with his little helpers making wooden toys and answering letters and you can even go for reindeer rides. In Michigan too there is that pseudo-German village Frankenmuth and "Bronners" where it's forever Christmas and you can buy Christmas decorations and gifts on any day of the year. In Australia and New Zealand they have the strange custom of spending Christmas on the beach in the middle of Summer but it's here in Holland that I've seen the strangest thing. Presents and gifts are given on the 5<sup>th</sup> December, St Nicholas' day even though it's just a normal day. All that week leading up to the 5<sup>th</sup> all the shops stay open late. It's not Santa Claus but St Nicholas that brings the presents. He is a bishop from Spain who rides a white

horse in full regalia including a mitre (bishop's hat). His helpers are black called "Black Petes" and they distribute the toys. I was in town last week and had the good fortune to see the arrival of St Nicholas and "Zwarte Pieters" in their colourful velvet suits. If you've been a good child you get a present but if you've misbehaved the "Black Petes" put you in their sacks and take you back to Spain, curious isn't it? Perhaps a "Black Pete will put you in a sack and bring you to me, what a present that would be!

Let me now tell you of my reunion. After 43 years how was I to recognise anyone? Like you we all wore name-tags too with different colours to represent different camps. Yangchow (C camp) was a tag with our name next to a pink circle. But first things first so I'll start with my departure from Finland on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October. I caught the evening departure from Turku, spent a night on the boat arriving in Stockholm the early morning of the 19<sup>th</sup> then overland to Gotenburg a distance of some 300+ miles and a journey of over five hours. I had already arranged to meet Geoff Davidson who is working in Gotenburg presently so I stayed the night of the 19<sup>th</sup> with him. We had a meal and met up with mutual friends and crawled around a few pubs. I must say Gotenburg has changed somewhat from the early '80's when I was last there. There are one or two quite swish pubs now full of yuppies and the in place to be seen. Well naturally ..... it made for quite an enjoyable harmless evening and on the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup> I rose early enough even though the boat was not due to sail until 2pm. After breakfast with Geoff he went off to work and I busied myself walking around the immediate vicinity, an area called the "Haga" a notorious red light district once but now being redeveloped. I think there isn't anyone more aware of the environment than the Swedes. They seem to know how to create living conditions that are at once pleasing to the eye and practical, modern yet in tune with their natural surroundings with lots of green patches, trees and rocks and designed play areas for children. I had still time to kill so I went on to Gotenburg's harbour which was at its second stage of development. Here they have created a maritime museum with some old tugs and fishing vessels and an obsolete gunboat with the first sea to air missile.

Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> December

I am determined to devote this day to completing this letter. It's a dull day and Pierre has gone to Paris for the weekend so I'll be undisturbed. I really love this house and shall be truly sorry to leave it. I've taken some interior photos, if they are any good I'll send you some prints. Do you remember Mick Hall? Well, he has come over to spend the weekend with Speedy so last night we all went out for dinner. Speedy knew of this out of the way restaurant serving Dutch food. It was really good too with good ambience and the food was delicious.

I had wild rabbit (I bet he was furious when he found himself in the pot !). It came in a separate pot while the plate contained a baked chicory, a large croquette potato, chestnuts covered in a rich sauce (these were really nice) and baked cauliflower and a side dish of glazed apples, prunes and apricots and a big bowl of french fries for all of us. What a meal! And I even followed this with ice cream and stem ginger in syrup. The Dutch sure do you proud – as you've experienced.

Well back to my return. It was straight off to the DFDS ferry after the Maritime Museum and an uneventful journey to Harwich in England, except that I met two very charming ladies who transformed a usually boring voyage into an interesting one. One was *the wife of the British Military Attaché* in Oslo returning home for a holiday and the other was in the diplomatic service at the British Embassy in Oslo.

We docked at Harwich about noon with another long drive to Epsom to stay with Deborah but when I got there, much to my chagrin there was no-one to greet the prodigal father – no fatted calf, not a sausage. All the doors were locked, what was I to do? It was about 3:30 and I had all my stuff and gear in the car so I locked the car in her drive and wandered back down into the village. Not far from Deb's house there is an old manor house with beautiful gardens which has been taken over by the local council and converted into a public library. It was to

there that I repaired. I strode around the grounds (not very large) and then I went into the library. There was a minor exhibition of pottery and then I just sat in the library reading magazines and newspapers and generally collecting my thoughts. After an hour or so I decided to phone Deb at work only to find she had already left so I gave it another hour and returned to the house and all was well.

The following day dawned bright and clear, a beautiful day for the reunion – so I put on my best bib and tucker and Deborah drove me to the reception at Oakland Park Hotel. A very large and impressive place full of history but when I walked through the entrance I guess I must have still been travel weary because the first thought that occurred to me was 'What the hell am I doing here'. It was sheer pandemonium. The hall was full of old people shouting and greeting each other trying to outdo one another above the hubbub and it wasn't until I began to recognize one or two people myself that I was able to join in the melée. However even by the end of the day I wasn't over enthusiastic about the whole idea. I think 43 years is too late to hold your first reunion. I mean what could you learn about all these people in a few short hours? One needed to have kept in touch throughout the 43 years to make it worthwhile but I was amazed to see how the youngsters I had known at camp now resembled their parents to such an extent. Take for instance the enclosed newspaper copy, here we have a robust teenager and an attractive young woman and the little picture is how they appear today, someone's charming grandmother and an old man I could pass in the street without even a hint of recognition. If I would dimly remember them it would be as they were. The picture portrays one shift or team working in the kitchen usually led by the head cook shown here standing in the far left. His name was Dusty Miller and the others comprise the girls who used to peel the vegetables but they were usually more than just two – after all we had 600 mouths to feed! Then there were the stokers who fed the fire under huge cauldrons where we usually cooked SOS (same old stew) and in the foreground the dishwashers. I worked under Dusty myself and then I was promoted to head cook. The youngest head cook in camp and had the honour of cooking our last Christmas dinner.

By the time lunch came round I met most of the people from our camp, about forty odd. Many brought husbands and wives which added to the confusion and of course there were all the other people from other camps. Eight camps in all and about 360 souls. It was fun remembering the past but we each had our present locked within us. I do keep in touch with one person all these years. She is one of my two girlfriends from camp, she lives in New Zealand and we correspond about once a year about Christmas. Her son is an intern at Guy's Hospital in London and has used my flat for a weekend break. My other girlfriend I was hoping to meet at the reunion but she wasn't there and on further enquiry I was shocked to learn she had MS and was confined to a wheelchair so I gained her address and paid her a visit the following day. Fortunately she didn't live too far from Epsom, about half an hour's drive. It was so sad to see that person I'd remembered as a beautiful young girl of about fifteen or so, full of life and mischief – she was quite a tomboy and we used to cheat like anything at cards – and here she was all hunched up in a wheelchair but you know she still had an indomitable spirit and we chatted the evening away as though we'd been friends for life. I was able to show her my album on America and other photos and the painting I had had done in Finland as I still had everything in the car. I even gave her a box of chocolates that I had brought back from Finland (I can't resist chocolates and I often buy a few boxes on the ferry). Her husband must be a dedicated guy because it can't be too easy going to work and coming home to look after an invalid. She never once complained and tried to be as independent as possible. I shall try to keep in touch with her from now on.

I haven't done a great deal in Holland yet, mostly I've spent the evenings writing letters and cards – it's always a busy time so close to Christmas. I've done a little Christmas shopping but fortunately Anne is doing the major presents, all I have to do is share the cost. I'm returning to England on the 21<sup>st</sup> but I'm not returning to Airton until the 16<sup>th</sup> and I'll be back

on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January and then that's another year gone. I can't say that this has been a particularly good year for me and financially a bit of a disaster – what with the stock market crash and not recovering as I had hoped. How about you, what sort of year has it been?

If I can remember I'll try and look up those photos on Portugal and send you prints of anything that's going but you'll have to phone and remind me. I've got such a shocking memory these days.

So far I've had two memorable weekends. One was my visit to Kröller Müller Museum near Arnhem and situated in a national park. It was late Autumn and it was nice driving through woods to get to the museum which housed more van Gogh's than I've ever seen. It was a veritable feast for me as you know he is one of my favourite artists and of course there also were some impressionist painting as well as modern and lots of sculptures some rather large and planted outdoors amongst the woods.

The other was my visit to Maastricht though here we were a little disappointed as the visit was on a Sunday and most places were closed. Still I was surprised to see so many ancient monuments and what a large town it must have been in mediaeval days. I've enclosed a few prints of Maastricht just to give you an impression.

Well dear reader, I'd best end this letter now otherwise you won't receive it before Christmas and you might think I've forgotten you but on the contrary you are constantly in my thoughts. Well have yourself a very merry Christmas and we must keep in touch more often.