

The March to the Scaffold

Roddy Phillips

There was a woman with a dog standing in the middle of the lane. It was one of those Border Collies that looked so quizzical and alert that it might have been operated by puppeteers.

“Aw what a gorgeous dog,” drooled our son Adam from the backseat.

“I don’t think she’s going to move,” said my wife, more interested in the dog’s owner, “maybe she hasn’t heard us.”

Normally in Lake District lanes it takes walkers a few moments to remember cars exist before they grudgingly give way. This has been further complicated by the invention of electric and hybrid cars which should come with a ‘silent but deadly’ health warning.

It’s bad enough slinking through supermarket car parks behind unsuspecting shoppers but sneaking up and down steep country lanes behind apparently deaf hikers requires nerves of steel or a Pre-Collision System, which our car has.

Consequently my favourite mantra is, “Don’t worry we won’t hit anyone, the car won’t let us,” and “How do you know that if we haven’t tried it?” has become my wife’s.

“Maybe she’s deaf and blind,” I said as we drove slowly towards the stationary woman. The dog obviously wasn’t because it started barking loudly.

“I think it’s trying to warn us about something,” said Adam our resident dog expert.

Right on cue the woman started frantically waving an arm. She was standing on the edge of a bend that if I remembered correctly swooped down a steep gully.

“I think they’re both trying to warn us about something,” said my wife.

In fact she didn’t have to say anything. As we drew nearer the road behind the woman vanished and not just round the bend but under many feet of grey water.

If she hadn’t been there we would have ploughed happily onward into deep murky flood water until we came to a standstill like the silver Range Rover up ahead that was half submerged.

It had been an unusually wet month in the Lake District to such a degree that we had renamed it the Rain District and ‘the emergency ponchos’ were now called simply ‘the ponchos’.

It had in fact rained non-stop for five days, prior to that it had rained non-stop for twelve days, with an hour of weak sunshine in between and yet we were still surprised that the road was flooded. Entire parks and fields had been transformed into new lakes populated by geese and ducks. Eventually of course the flood water would be filtered through ditches and fields and along chortling streams until it drained off into Windermere where it would merge with its pals so we could point at it lovingly.

“How long will that take?” asked my wife.

“Probably not before lunchtime,” I said.

Actually because it continued tipping it down at all hours the road was still unpassable long after we left and probably still is.

For a few minutes we were gripped by a horrible claustrophobic feeling of hopelessness. We were just minutes from our holiday home and its posh electric gates and suddenly we were trapped. The compulsion to flee our car and wade screaming into the flood was seriously considered.

After being struck down by Norovirus we were still feeling on the wobbly side of fragile so it's possible we were over reacting. But it had been building from the moment we arrived five days previously in the pitch dark rain and couldn't find the secret button that opened the big electric gates.

“You don't see people in films getting out of their cars to open their electric gates,” observed Adam dryly from the backseat.

I made a note to pass this on to the holiday letting company and went back out for another sortie. Fortunately I found the button on the pillar disguised as part of the pillar completely by accident when I stumbled in a deep puddle and put my hand out to stop myself face planting into a wall of slate.

Suddenly there was a tired reluctant groan of ancient metal, like chains being drawn and the ornate gothic gates slowly opened. There was something grand and slightly sinister about it, like entering the driveway to Dracula's castle and for a moment I hesitated. Curiously it was a process I never tired of even in the rain. I also never tired of leaving the grounds through the opening gates.

There were always walkers with their dogs and children on the other side and they would gawp at us as we drove slowly through the great gates like as Adam put it, “posh gits.”

We did however tire of the scaffolding which covered our entire building and obscured our potentially splendid views of the fells from the impossibly high Victorian windows and stopped us from gaining access to the patio.

Not that it mattered because the broody rain clouds obscured the view long before it reached us. At least we had the painters and decorators for company who were local so genetically waterproof. They were a cheery lot. Waking us promptly at 7.30 every morning with their chirpy whistling and singing and ever colourful accounts of their carousing from the previous night. Fortunately the weary Victorian glass allowed us to hear every moment of beer fuelled action in eye watering detail. By around 9.30 the belly laughing had given way to the belching and burping competition and during the Norovirus days it was a comfort to know that life was continuing as normal beyond the toilet bowl, even if we were behind our scaffold cage.

After my wife and then Adam fell under the Norovirus' evil spell I knew I was a dead man walking so at 4am on the Wednesday morning when I woke up in a cold sweat from a nightmare about a wild rollercoaster ride I knew the routine. With the element of surprise withdrawn I just went about my business with mute resignation.

Mute maybe isn't the right word since Norovirus is a noisy affair. A bit like a cannon going off and then backfiring moments later.

There's not much you can do about it, but once you get the hang of thinking you're going to imminently die and then you don't it gets quite boring. Consequently I camped in the ensuite bathroom with a book until the cheery painters arrived.

For the next few days we plodded through the vast airy rooms like zombies from *The Walking Dead*. Just for the complete masochistic effect we watched Gordon Ramsay's *Kitchen Nightmares* on the huge 4K high resolution TV. A lot of the horrible food looked vaguely familiar, particularly the chicken that was so off it was actually fizzing.

One afternoon when I opened the patio door a foot or so until it clanged into a scaffold pole one of the painters got a fright, took one look at me and stepped warily back. He was holding a hammer and I could see him weighing it up in his hand wondering how much it would take to stop me in my tracks.

"Sorry," I croaked, "I just needed some air."

"Good idea," he said staring at me as he walked backwards and disappeared.

And now we were trapped, held hostage behind a flooded road, with a long wet march back to the scaffold. It's funny but when we talk about it now with it all safely behind us we all agree that we enjoyed the trip, I just can't quite my finger on which parts.