

A piece of string

“DO you recognize me?” said the elderly lady in November 2005, my first visitor, through the soundproof prison glass, awkwardly clutching the phone in one crippled hand. I did not, and then I did.

“It’s Brigitte –,” she volunteered.

“– Müller?” I gasped; she smiled appreciatively, and added her new name. Forty years had passed since I saw her.

One summer Pilar had taken our four children to Asturias and I stayed writing in London for a month. Finally I closed up Duke Street and rejoined the family by train.

I looked forward to that two-day train journey – a dawdle to the Channel, then from Boulogne to Paris, and then on from the Gare d’Austerlitz to the Spanish frontier for a change of trains and train-gauges and an all-day trundle doglegging across Spain to Gijón. Plane journeys are never quite the same.

Between Boulogne and the Gare du Nord, a pretty blond Austrian had slipped into the seat facing me, traveling home to Klagenfurt. She must have been twenty. I put my papers aside and

we chatted until Paris and, since we both had three hours to kill, we shared a hamburger meal in the Champs d'Elysée until the hour approached for our onward trains. Addresses were swapped; I saw only that her name was Brigitte, Brigitte Müller. I never wrote, but some months later she did, to Duke Street, a seven-page handwritten letter in German. I tucked it into a pocket, meaning to decipher it over coffee at Duke's when I had time.

The sentence which this misdemeanor would customarily earn would be this: "I was looking through your pockets this morning and I found this." The actual sentence used, as Pilar flashed on the bedroom light at midday – I had been writing all that winter until three a.m. – was "Who is Brigitte Müller?"

My normally befuddled pre-reveille brain dissected the dangerous situation in a series of Woosterish leaps. I recalled the blonde instantly. But the letter was in German, which Pilar could not read: nothing untoward, either then or since: solution, play ball with straight bat. All the above was computed in approximately one-tenth of a second.

"I told you," I said confidently (Ploy 1). "Train to Paris. Chatted. Nothing to it."

"How do you explain the last sentence then?" (The words should be in *large* print, to suggest the wall-shattering volume at which they were delivered.)

Just before my mental gearbox crashed, I remember it reasoning plaintively with itself: in German – the letter was in *German*.

I didn't even have time to repeat her question (Ploy 2). Brigitte had helpfully phrased her final sentence in English: "This Christmas I am ski instructor in Tyrol. Why you not come and I teach you a thing or two?" They were words not easily forgotten.

Through the prison glass I repeated the words, clearly remembered now, forty (••) years later, with all the trouble they had caused. I don't know what else Brigitte's letter said, it was immediately shredded and flushed away unread.

Twenty years after that first meeting, in November 1989 when I next visited Klagenfurt to speak, I glanced idly into the phone book of the Carinthian capital. The B. Müllers filled several columns.

The globe spun six thousand times on its terrestrial axis. I was now a prisoner in an Austrian jail – where in fact I am writing these words – in 2005, imprisoned for a lecture I had delivered in Vienna in 1989 only two days after Klagenfurt.

The world's newspapers had just reported my circumstances, and this visitor had been announced, my first since the green prison cattle truck, the *Krokodil*, had brought me up to Vienna.

This little old lady had been ushered in to the visiting zone. She hobbled very slowly past the gangster's molls at the windows on either side, frail and shriveled, her hair an iron gray. Her right arm crooked in the awkward angle dictated by paralysis, she wedged herself into the prison chair. There had been a bad car crash, she apologized; it had smashed her spine. [*Wirbelsäulelähmung*].

She had heard I was to speak in Klagenfurt in 1989, and had come to the place, but Marxist rioters had forced its cancellation.

We chatted for thirty minutes – the guards were unusually kind to her. She had married and raised three grown-up children since we met. Her son was with the Berlin Philharmonic. The orchestra was touring China, and the Chinese newspapers – what irony – had reported Austria's imprisonment of a British writer for expressing an illegal opinion sixteen years before, on that 1989 tour. That was how she had found out where I was now.

The train journey up from Klagenfurt had taken five hours this morning, she added proudly, writing down my new London address with her wrong hand on a scrap of paper; and now she would be going straight back. A ten-hour journey, all told.

"I wrote you afterwards" she said, meaning back in (•• 1969?). It was a question, not a statement.

"Yes," I said, "I got it. Seven pages." I quoted the last sentence again, and she beamed. I didn't say I had read it all; that would have been a lie.

Since 1968 my family had been living in a large apartment off Grosvenor Square. We had a cook-housemaid, Norah Villarroel, stolen from the Bolivian embassy in Madrid, and a very fine gazpacho she

made too. We had four beautiful daughters kitted out in identical powder-blue Harris Tweed overcoats bought from Harrods, and all going to private schools. I doted on these children. They were God's precious little gifts, each one different in her own way.

At first they all slept in bunks in one large bedroom, and in the evening I invented for them extended bedtime stories in nightly episodes, like the Giant of the Guadarrama Tunnel – he had built the tunnel that we drove through at the end of each summer, I said, and once a father of four small children – just like them, but boys – had forgotten to pay the toll, an' The Giant had punished him by twisting the tunnel round inside the mountain so that it never emerged again: the father had gone off for help, an' it was a pretty horrific story. There were squeals of horror as I ended each episode of the boys' troglodyte adventures, "Just as The Giant –, " but that would be telling, wouldn't it?

Sometimes I staged little goodnight vocabulary tests, as all four were at the Lycée and learning four languages. I had to grade the questions by age, of course, which resulted in protests when I lobbed a really easy one at Beatrice, the youngest, like asking her the Spanish for aspirin or milk. Once I asked Paloma, the next oldest, the French for honey, and she used her brains and scored half a point for offering *'oney*, dropping the "h", by way of answer.

On our annual drives from London down to Madrid I organised the usual competitions to stock up their pocket money for Spain – one peseta for each Paris sign, then Bordeaux, and then Madrid (there were more of each than one would have thought possible); then twenty-five pesetas for the first child to spot the Gothic spires of the cathedral at Burgos, and ten for every black bull, the El Toro advertising sign that tops many a hill in the peninsula. Little Pilar, a blonde with a dazzling smile that matched her hair, complained that she was handicapped, as she was shortsighted and couldn't wear glasses all the time. So every now and then I gave her a timely nudge as an early warning, until her sisters found out.

Driving east on Goya, the street in Madrid where stood the cathedral in which we had tied the knot years earlier, I offered a prize for the first to tell me what dreadful disaster had happened

in that building, and Josephine, God bless her soul, won by several lengths, replying with mock weariness and to peals of laughter: “You and mummy got married there.”

We were such a happy family all those years.

Yes, great contentment, if not monetary wealth, was ours. I remember consciously thinking, as I lay awake one night, that I was so devoted to Pilar that if, to take a melodramatic scenario, we should find ourselves trapped on top of a burning building and she was unwilling to jump into the net spread out below, then I would stay up there and die with her.

On a more practical note, when we took the North Sea ferry to Holland and Germany – at first we could not afford to fly and had no car – I quietly packed a six-foot length of twine in my hand luggage in case the ferry sank for whatever reason: then I could tie our lifejackets together and we would not drift apart in the darkness. I rather fancy she might have taken a pair of scissors in her hand baggage if she ever knew of this.

True, I can plead that I was writing the book on Convoy PQ.17 at the time; but my gloomy fantasy became all too true twenty-five years later with the Zeebrugge ferry disaster on October 8, 1987, in which 193 passengers drowned just a hundred yards from shore after the *Herald of Free Enterprise* capsized; I have often thought since then of that long-forgotten length of string.

By the time of Zeebrugge, I was single again. When the marriage finally collapsed after exactly twenty years and three days, it was for tangential reasons – perhaps all the usual ones, bored readers might well surmise, now that divorce has become, in England, such a dreadful commonplace. No infidelities were alleged or involved on either side, and I would remain unattached for ten years after that.

I am occasionally asked why I still wear the wedding ring I put on forty-five years ago. It has never come off. I fought for twenty years to hold the family together and eventually to protect it – not from Pilar of course, because she was innocent of the ways of the

world, but from the shoals of greedy London law firms to whom each troubled family offers the prospect of, not just the matrimonial litigation, but of two or even three sets of fat conveyancing fees, as one family home is dissolved and two smaller ones have to be acquired. I may seem incorrigible, but that is the way I view the whole distasteful procedure of these profane pettifoggers, *et arceo*: I hold myself aloof.

A tenacious London solicitor, Patricia Lissner, had somehow ensnared Pilar, and she actively thwarted every possible chance of reconciliation. Admittedly Lissner was under severe provocation: whenever she wrote me over those years, I goaded her by spelling her name with the German character β , with which my typewriters were even then equipped; a flourishing side-correspondence developed on this issue, the spelling of her name.

Since my own lawyers, still Rubinstein's, were inclined to turn the proceedings into a second El Alamein, urging me to swear affidavits of the most monstrous kind, I let them go and acted in person against Lissner. Toward the end I had the pleasure of hearing the Court order that she herself pay all the costs, personally, including mine, because her legal follies had wasted so much time. Her face that day was a picture to be treasured.

I will not speculate here on this unhappy spinster's motives. Lissner made seven separate applications to have me committed; Pilar confessed to me later that she had no idea what this word meant. The Lissner woman doggedly continued to apply for my committal to prison for the next fifteen years, in fact until 1994, on one pretext or another; and each time the courts told her to shut up and go away.

I may mention here only two of her grosser absurdities.

In the first, she asked for an Order that I leave Duke Street forthwith. The Court refused to make the Order, since No. 81 was my business premises, but then quite unaccountably ruled that my New York publisher Tom Congdon, who was staying as our friend and guest, be ordered out into a hotel.

He took this insult in better part, I must say, than did my personal assistant Carla Venchiarutti, an Italian girl who worked

with me in London and around much of the northern hemisphere in various archives. One day at this time, curiosity got the better of Carla: against my seasoned advice she unsealed a long foolscap envelope which had lain around my desk for weeks, and read the latest affidavit which these odious solicitors had drafted and which Pilar had signed, evidently unread. We shortly heard a shriek from my study – “*I am named in this!*” Pilar and I hurried in to see.

Red-faced and angry, Carla had thrown the document to the floor in a blaze of Latin fury, the kind that only a hot-blooded, and one hundred percent virtuous Catholic girl knows. I smugly pointed out that I had warned her not to unseal that envelope. Recalling Hochhuth’s advice of fifteen years before, I myself had left it unopened for many months with no perceptible ill effects.

From those and other episodes at that time involving Lissner, which are too nasty for me ever to set down in writing, there emerged an abiding hatred of certain kinds of lawyer.

I had read years before in Adolf Hitler’s *Table Talk* that he had developed a similar contempt. “In future,” he said over one meal, “I will allow duelling only between the gentlemen of the clergy and the legal profession.”

The Lissner woman had even persuaded Pilar, I found, to destroy all our recent happy-family photos and their negatives in case they undermined her lawyerly arguments. (The films survived.)

Pilar stayed on in London for twenty more years, living in apartments which I bought for her, and never remarried.* At the beginning of the new millennium she returned to her native Madrid, where she lives with two of our daughters and their children. We are almost as good friends now as ever we were before.

* The divorce took effect from Feb 3, 1982, three days over twenty years after the Jan 31, 1962 wedding in Madrid.