

EL PARADISO

It is not *quite* paradise: The palm trees are sun-scorched on their lower fronds; the street is dusty, uneven and stained, the buildings off-white, like the feral cats which slink and snooze, fat yet never fed, ignored by the locals and ignoring them, and, of course, ignoring the tongue-clucking, crouching tourists. There is only a faint smell of drains mixed with something stronger - tired cooking oil. Supermarkets, bars and trinket shops are empty; sleeved-up parasols, fishing nets and lilos are fetched out early on and will be taken back in, last thing.

But, behold, the sky is dark blue and the sun silver and unglanceable above a slumbering sea. And here, half-way up the hill which leads from the esplanade, stands the brown-pink Hotel Paradise. Come through. The lady here on reception is blonde, confident, square-shouldered and straight, and she hates her job as much as the British angels to whom she is extravagantly polite. She smiles like a serrated knife. To the right, in the foyer, four high leather chairs surround a table, and that pattern repeats itself twenty fold around six marble pillars. Beyond them, a young man smiles and polishes glasses, bored, behind a bar. To his right is the screened-off dining room where a notice warns about being inappropriately dressed - and which will be tested by many of the younger, bolder angels.

A large television screen on the wall is showing an old episode of *Dinner Ladies*. There is a lift to the four floors and an adjacent staircase for the fitter cherubs. Next to a telephone kiosk, redundant now in the age of the mobile, is an internet machine which charges an exorbitant two euros for twenty minutes (most of which elapse as the mocking little halo turns.) There are angels in the foyer of course, but leave them also frozen for a moment.

Outside, opposite the bar, is the pool area with many sun-beds though not enough parasols - some of the paler angels will burn. The water shimmers in the sunlight, and parasols shimmer in the breeze. There are puddles and wet footprints which vanish in seconds. ABBA are invading ears, willing and unwilling. It is cool and quiet in the bar. The blonde lady marches, heels clicking, across the white tiles, notices me looking and switches on, then off a smile.

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It is evening. On the soft sofas around the huge screen we are watching the Queen's golden coach process along The Mall, followed by cheering throngs of her loyal subjects. The man who was wearing the Republican tee shirt and straw boater at the airport is standing behind me, sipping a mineral water. The bull-necked tattooed man seated to my right has spotted him, as he was intended to do. Glass of lager in tight fist, he keeps glancing up at him. The legend on the tee shirt reads THIS IS WHAT A REPUBLICAN LOOKS LIKE. Unfortunately for the Cause, he sports an untidy beard and a smug grin, has prominent eyeballs, and looks a bit of a prat.

"How can he wear that on Lizzie's jubilee? Worse than F-C-U-K," growls my neighbour to his wife, whose chins are resting on her huge bosom. "Asking for trouble."

"Tain't her I mind" replies she "But the hangers-on."

The man on the left cannot stop a smile creeping across his hairy face. This is his chance to make his anti-royal proclamation.

"The Monarchy is all about hanging on...hanging on to privilege and stolen wealth. It's the hangers-on in the Armed Forces, imperialist dreamers...Afghanistan, derring-do, subduing the natives, the old-boy-network, the super-rich, the bankers...all branches of a huge tree in a tiny garden, sucking the life-blood out of it. Why are our towns, schools and hospitals so derelict? They're all deprived of sustenance."

The five or six angels thus addressed say nothing, as if amazed or forced to reconsider their whole belief-system. The tattooed man goes to speak but shakes his head. Close-up on the Queen....

“I bet.....she can’t wait.....to take her shoes off,” says his wife.

A man at the end of the sofa gets up and totters past the Republican.

“Wasting your time, Old Son,” I think I hear him croak. “Thatcher and Scargill ruined this country.”

But this country is Spain.

*

I happen to be listening in when Geraldine, the rep, a substantial blonde from somewhere near Leeds is giving her speech to the rapt audience of newcomers the next morning. They are all enjoying a glass of sangria and she is enjoying the limelight. Her round face is artificially pink and she has meaty legs. I heard her tell someone that she has a degree in Travel and Tourism, and it shows. I give a summary of the highlights.

“Welcome to El Paradiso - which, if you didn’t know, is Spanish for Paradise. If you’ve already ventured outside, you’ve noticed the hotel is situated on a hill. If you walk UP the hill...hold on...THAT way.... You will be walking away from the beach. If you fancy a paddle, you go THAT way, down the hill. Right.....so if you want the shops and bars, you go down the road to the beach, and you will find most things you need there. There are shoe shops if you’ve forgotten your flip-flops and there’s a pharmaceh. The gift shop owners welcome you browsing, so don’t worreh about just going in....and browsing.....OKAY!”

And

“On Thursday you just cannot afford to miss the Hippeh Market, which, opposite to what I’ve told you about shoppin’ is UP the hill...THAT way. Yes. There you will find shoes, clothes, ornaments, trinkets, antiques....all at rock-bottom prices. If you enjoy car boot sales, the Hippeh Market is definitely for you.”

And

“If you’re a sun-worshipper, we do recommend that you apply plenteh of high-factor sun lotion as the sun here can be ver-eh hot as the ozone layer is quite thin...er.....here.”

And (the main reason for the meeting)

“Now should you wish to book one or more of the excursions we organize, than you need to stay behind at the end. The highlight, might I be so bold as to suggest, is the bbq on the beach when the reps will entertain you and you can eat and drink as much as you like for the incredible price of twenteh-five Euros - about twenteh-one pound. You *will* see excursions advertised in resort for less, but please be aware that we offer full insurance and that you will be picked up and dropped off at the hotel.”

Geraldine of the silver tongue is surrounded as the meeting breaks up by enthusiastic day-trippers wielding notes and credit cards.

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The Paradiso is a couples-only hotel - which partly explains its name. Many guests are over sixty and many are obese. The ozone layer being so thin, they will have to apply plenty of lotion. A surprising number have tattoos. Apart from the occasional Mail and Express, the red tops

dominate around the pool and lounge. Amongst the guests several have caught my eye. Although the fat people outweigh the thin people by a considerable margin, it is not entirely straightforward. Surprisingly, many normal men have grossly obese women - but rarely vice-versa. One man is tall and knotty with a face like a sharp hatchet. He wears a red NF tee shirt - Nottingham Forest. He might be a plumber or an electrician. His wife is so large she can barely walk. There is ample scope for tattoos, and the bird she has chosen looks quite lonely in her vast back.

Andrew Marvel, the poet of Coy Mistress fame, would have been at a total loss where to start on her with the limited time at his disposal. The sun-bed she lies on is a groaning coach of sweat-stained grey fabric; along her leg snakes a blue rivulet of varicose vein to a swollen ankle. There are blue bruises on her body. Her condition has tattooed her and the bluebird flies superfluously towards a red shoulder blade. She might be hailed a modern Britannia.

There is a couple whose round faces never smile. They never speak. He is first down with his towels in the morning to reserve sun-beds and he does not seem to be a man who would welcome debate over his ignoring the notice forbidding such a teutonic practice.

There is a man with a permanent toothy smile and several people, thinking him a very friendly man, have returned it. But alas, it is an illusion - his dentures do not quite fit, hence the smile. Out of that friendly face none too friendly sentiments have already emerged, for example when the Republican displayed his latest tee shirt slogan - I'VE STOPPED HAVING SEX - THE GOVERNMENT FCUKS ME EVERY DAY. This was not what Mr Smiley wanted to see in the precincts of Paradise.

It must have dawned on the Republican by now that he has not done his research too well and has not landed up in an asylum full of middle-class radicals seeking relief from Jubilee week. He had not reckoned with the telly.

Breakfast is an entertainment. In separate heated compartments, slowly sizzle and simmer whole tomatoes, suspiciously orange sausages, streaky bacon, mushrooms, fried potatoes and even beefburgers - all aliens to the Spanish staff whose eyes survey them without betraying horror and contempt, as they stir and stir. Fried eggs - staring with yellow eyes at the guests - float in grease and slip and slide away in mockery from lunging implements as they are sworn at *sotto voce*.

Token pastries and croissants remain untouched. There is a great urn with massive handles - an FA Cup full of baked beans. There seems to be a competition as to who can stagger back to their table with the most heaped plate. The largest angel devours a platter of four eggs, six rashers and all the trimmings. His wife, no Thin-so herself, fetches it for him. He sits, shirt ballooning over a colossal belly and shorts, and shovels it in without a word.

Other couples have begun to strike up friendships. Women speak to their new friends, in passing or leaning across tables, and laugh. Some even just say Good Morning and laugh. What is funny? By the scrambled eggs, I overhear the Republican tell the man from the sofa he did not wish to belittle and denigrate anybody.

“But haven't so many belittled and benighted themselves via the magazines and pap they read and the adverts and programmes they watch, the narrow company they keep, the food they eat and the music they listen to? In a new age of enlightenment they have chosen to sit in the dark. They are the kind of electorate politicians love. Murdoch addled their brains and McDonalds their bodies. They are as heavy as the price to be paid one day.”

Had he perfected this speech in front of a mirror?

“Addled be buggered!” exclaims his dubious ally, scooping up about seven eggs scrambled. “I told yer before, me duck. It were that Scargill and Thatcher.”

*

“But I can’t stand this...*excuse* for music!” exclaims the Republican at reception.

“But, Sir, there are other guests to consider,” replies Blondie quite calmly with a malignant smile.

“But surely you can turn it down! A little! For those who can’t stand it. We have rights. I have rights.”

“But it is normal to have music in El Paradiso.,” she says even more pleasantly.

“But the others can do without it. I can’t do *with* it! They have their gadgets to stick in their lugs. And it’s Abba. All the time. Or Barry Bloody Manilow.”

She pretends she has not quite understood and turns to attend to the next guest who is smiling as smugly as she. I pick up a low-down magazine and pretend to read about a girl claiming to have been raped by her uncle to whom she had donated a kidney - and hence a new lease of life and unfortunate vigour. Back comes the Republican, not having gone very far.

“But if *you* were having your holiday ruined by something, would you complain or remain silent?”

“I would complain, Sir.”

“Aha! Progress!”

“But, if I were told that others would suffer, should I have my wish granted, I would accept the majority view.”

“Ah! But *how* do you know that everyone around the pool wants your music - *your* taste - at this volume?”

“I do not know.But it is not my taste, Sir. I myself enjoy Rodrigo and Villa-Lobos. But only you complain - so I must assume that the other guests enjoy what they hear.”

“But - if you turn it down, and people complain, then you can, with my blessing, turn it back up again. Or I could go around and organize a vote on it.”

“Goodness, Sir. People have not come to vote but to relax. No, Sir. I offer to come outside with you and listen...”

“But it’s not whether *you* think it’s too loud. It’s whether *I* do!”

For a while, the music outside is quieter but later it is as noisy as before and even noisier. I put in my earplugs and continue with my diary.

*

The organized evening entertainment is nowhere near as good as the unintended. It leaves something to be desired - that quality so magical, so difficult to define, that factor X..... talent. But singers are occasionally neither sharp nor flat and comedians occasionally uncheesy. The applause is perfunctory and of short duration. Four couples brave a chilly evening watching a troupe of near-naked girls jig around - with the accent on individualistic interpretation - to music. The hotel walls conduct the entertainment to every room, making it as compulsory as the music around the pool.

A woman with bulbous eyes whose face is a permanent expression of disgust and indignation - it

must really have stayed like that after a lifetime of moaning - announces at breakfast that she has not slept a wink.

Wanting a holiday to come to an end slows time down, so part of one is grateful. Today I find myself singing along to a Bee Gees song - music I loathe even more than Abba - and put it down to the litre of beer I have consumed. The Republican should try it rather than mineral water but he must have beaten a sullen retreat to his room. I miss him. He is probably working on a razor-sharp contribution to Trip Advisor.

And then, there he is again in the dining room. But things are going from bad to worse. Abba are facing their Waterloo and making a bit of a fuss about it. And he is trying to explain in broken Spanish and English that *el vino tinto* he had had put to one side from the previous evening is undrinkable because it was warm - *no, tiene mucho calor*. Hot. The poor waitress has Blondie fetched. She feels the bottle and offers to have it put in the fridge for a time.

“That is very resourceful of you,” says he sarcastically “But I would have quite liked to have drunk wine with...my....dinner.....*now*.”

She looks at his plate and shakes her head. He has fish. Red wine and fish? Robert Shaw made the same mistake in *From Russia With Love*.

She smiles wickedly. She has the perfect solution. *If Sir ordered a fresh, chilled vino blanco now then he could enjoy the red tomorrow!*

His bulging eyes are threatening to pop out. “This - red wine - is - RUINED. Surely you, as a hotelier of obviously *very long* experience....can grasp that!”

She smiles. The insult has bounced off her.

“I would like half my money back for half a bottle of undrinkable wine! Six Euros please. And will you please turn down the mu- - the *noise*. Little Jimmy Osmond - for God’s sake!”

He sits fishing fish bones out of his mouth and finally gives up in disgust, happening to look my way as he plonks down knife and fork. *Earplugs* - I mime and mouth. He frowns, scrapes back his chair and struts out, followed by Blondie who smiles and greets other diners who are also taking private delight in his indignation.

*

Curiously, there is a very thin man with a very fat wife. The mismatch can be perhaps best explained by his virtual lack of chin. To make up for this, he has a whopping nose. She would be quite pretty if her balloon of a face could be deflated to normal. Maybe she prefers an ugly thin man to weight loss. She has upper arms the size of my thighs. The question, how on earth did she get herself into this state, is dwarfed by the question, how will she get herself out of it? Not by being in Paradise. After their huge breakfasts, not three hours later, they are having burgers and chips and bacon baguettes delivered to their poolside table.

Is she a new arrival, the woman with the youthful page-boy blonde hair? Is she a proper angel? But when she turns, her face is old, wrinkled and anxious. Is there any more scope there for the face-fiddler’s knife?

Later, she is on a sun-bed, turning red and orange with the rest. Are we a race of lemmings? What do doctors whisper amongst themselves in their councils of despair? *We tried to explain, but they would not listen.*

And then - sensationally - there doth appear a genuine angel! She is also blonde - and tall and slim. Golden bracelets chink on her golden arm as she registers. She speaks. Alas. She has a voice like a blender. She turns. Alas. She is tipsy. She *is* pretty but one eye looks dead like the eye of an old mackerel. Her multi-tattooed man is a wit - he has a penetrating laugh which annoys as much as Abba.

*

“Some commentators and analysts claim that GB is moving relentlessly towards a classless society.” says the Republican to somebody willing to listen in the lobby - or too polite to tell him to get lost. “Where have they been? We are more divided - middle class / low class (not working - many never have and never will) - than ever. What people read, watch, listen to, where and what they eat, think, wear, speak, decorate themselves with, how their skin tone is, their hair...how much they weigh, how they amuse themselves - and of course how well off they are - and where they spend their holidays - all these things and more are indicators for class. The two Britains eye each other suspiciously across a growing chasm - with disgust and incomprehension....and this Jubilee *rubbish* is got up as a pretence that we are one nation, one colony buzzing contentedly under a Queen Bee.”

There is silence - apart from Abba asking what the Name of the Game is.

“*Where they spend their ‘olidays??’*” someone quotes back at him. “Are yer saying we’re Chavvies cos we cum here?”

“No, no, no -”

“Yer bloody SNOB!”

*

The Republican has asked for his brekky to be served in his room so he misses the early morning fun. Mr Smiley of the ill-fitting teeth is there with his elderly father. Shuffling back from the table with overladen plate, he tips it, and bean juice dribbles onto the bluebird trying to escape from the fat lady’s back. Smiley rushes to wipe her with his serviette, telling his dad that he will fetch his breakfast from now on. The angel with the mackerel eye nearly chokes laughing on her fried bread. This morning she is more or less sober. Her husband titters. Through the long windows I watch guests furtively laying claim to sun-beds while Blondie looks the other way. Abba are thanking somebody for the music - an irony which would have not been lost on the Republican.

I pause in the lobby to hear the news on TV. In distant rooms, across tables laden with fruit and soft drinks, desperately calm men in dark suits are wrestling with an economic crisis which threatens Paradise and everyone in it. Will savings vanish from accounts like digits on a computer screen? Will money be as worthless as the paper it is printed on? Will the grey pound go up in smoke like all the other colours??

In the evening, a muscular, mediocre English football team, straining might and main, manage to hold a cleverer French side to a 1-1 draw. A voice declares how unlucky we were. Later, I lean on the balcony rail and look over to the bar opposite, an open air bar with a playground. The bucking bull unseats the tipsy, illustrated Knights of Saint George, one after another. Overhead, another plane from Blighty, lights winking, descends.

*

“How can you read that terrible muck, after all the dirty tricks it got up to? Have you no scruples?”

Has the Republican been drinking??

“What scruples? What the F has it got to do wiv you what paper I read? You SNOB. Om glad yer effing wine were warm, you hairy-faced traitor!”

The man who lived for breakfast died this morning, choking on black pudding. His face landed in his fried eggs and broke them.

“It was how he would have wanted to go,” explains his exhausted wife to Geraldine - who keeps her eye on the time because she has airport du-teh.

“At least he dint suffer, luv,” she says.

“At least he had four of his seven days.....do you think that Thrumptions will refund the other three?”

There is an old lady in the dining room with a space around her. Others have learnt to avoid her, as her *raison d’être* is the enumeration of her woes and illnesses. One of her great legs is swathed in a grey bandage secured by a safety pin. She sits pushing a black grape around her plate with her fork.

The angel with the dead mackerel eye runs sobbing to her room when her husband, tittering, picks up the Romanian waitress and jumps into the pool with her. She pretends it’s fun to be soaked while working. Blondie comes out, smiles an evil smile, and stalks back in.

Another breakfast. The food simmers on and on becoming less and less edible. The Republican is arguing again - this time with the miserable bacon-and-egg frier who never smiles, never looks up, but, swaying to the music, stirs and turns the food, his eyelids set in a permanent down position. He has clacked the bread tongs in a fit of pique at the Republican for picking up the slices - (is it scorched or fried bread?) - with his fingers.

“If I’m eating it,” he declares “If it’s going into *my mouth* , picked up by *my* fingers crawling with *my* bacteriaat *my* table then why should it matter to YOU or anybody else if I pick it up with *my* fingers?”

The cook shrugs in non-comprehension. This makes no difference to his antagonist who is warming even more to his subject and raising his voice so that everyone can hear - above Super Trouper.

“Notwithstanding that, the dirtiest, most germ-infested object on the bread platter are - by dint of being handled profusely by hands - including thine - which have doubtless just wiped bottoms, held and directed penises, picked noses and wiped mouths - ARE - by a long chalk - the bread tongs themselves, you stupid idiot!”

Blondie is hovering and smiling viciously. The Republican sits down in a rage tempered with triumph, looking round for nods of approval which are non-forthcoming. With growing despondency, he watches the queue for bread struggling and juggling it with the tongs. Then, there is a sudden commotion in another part of the room.

“Why don’t you bloody well leave us alone?” shrieks a fat woman in the direction of the

bandaged lady. "I'm not come all this bloody way to hear about your bunion! And at breakfast!"

*

"I've walked length of t' beachcan't find a pint o' John Smith's nowhere. Gotta purrup wi' this fizzy shite."

The Nottingham Forest fan commiserates with his new-found friend from the north.

"And that barbecue last night on t' beach were bloody rubbish! That Geraldine reckons she can sing? Meat were tough an' all."

Geraldine comes past and greets everyone poolside.

"Enjoy yourselves last night? Plenteh to eat and drink?"

"Oh aye, oh aye. Great time..."

She trots on and away.

"Well..... I dint want to upset the gel...."

Conversations follow a remarkably similar pattern. Wherever two or three English couples are gathered together on sun-beds there will be, sooner or later, queries and discussions on flight provenance, return dates and times, illnesses, medicines, tragedies, crime, good and bad marriages children have made and divorces.

People have flown from Leeds, Liverpool, Birmingham, Luton, Nottingham and Gatwick to impress and bore folk they could have met and bored at their local pub or club.

These high-back chairs are ideal for eavesdropping. There is a new guest in the hotel whom someone has already christened the Great White Hunter because of the wide, floppy white hat he wears to protect his nut. His face is smooth but his stoop and gait put him in over-sixty category. He has fallen in with the Republican.

Well," says the newcomer "In my haste to book a cheapie I forgot to look at Trip Advisor."

"Me, I never look. As soon as I see a misspelling or grammar error, I ignore it. I just had to get away to escape the hoo-ha at home."

The GWH offers to buy him a proper drink.

"How can you just drink mineral water?"

"I drink a little wine - if it's not too hot. Alcohol is bad for my hiatus hernia."

"I have one too. Take lanzoprosol - like me. One in the morning - drink all day and night."

"You an alcoholic?"

"Not yet. Not quite. Here, take one."

The conversation lapses for a while. A group nearby are talking so loud that no-one else stands a chance. It is the usual stuff - where they've been, where they're going next....In the mean time.

The GWH has his beer glass filled a couple of times. He used to be, he says quite loudly, a priest.

"Thoughts began to dominate my head as I was preparing sermons. Voices I couldn't silence.

How could a good, intelligent God produce such horrid, stupid people? Would they *really* go to heaven? I began to imagine absurd scenes of angels doing post-mortems on the Obese, looking for the Soul. Amongst the cellulite, the blubber and the tissue, where was it? Which facets of their bodies could be labelled with Intelligence....Spirituality? They've never read a Bible! Had the Glimmer which God had installed in the infant gone out, overwhelmed by all that mass and dross? Look at them. Listen to them....Is this really the subject-matter of Paradise? Shopping, bargains, Sharm and Dominican and all the other places they try to outdo each other with?"

He was drunk and his companion was trying to shush him.

“You can’t just despise people like that! You’re a man of God. They can’t help it if their minds have been taken over. They’re fodder. For the capitalist beast!”
I dare to look around as the conversation lapsed. The GWH is staring at the ceiling. The Republican is weeping.

*

On the sixth day the Republican is found floating in the pool. The area is closed off all morning. It is four o’clock before anyone fancies taking a dip.

I walk out and down to the beach. Clambering over rocks, I hit on the coastal path and keep going until the pop tunes, interwoven with each other from various sources, fade. I descend onto another beach - more secluded and exclusive - where I hear a mother telling her daughter that she has to make a decision.

“There is only one biscuit left, Poppy, darling. You have to decide whether you want to eat it now or leave it till later.”

I doubt that the tiny tots on the other beach would be exposed to such a cruel dilemma. On and on I go, past a German section where a man in the nude, hands on hips, stands proudly exposing his red teapot. *What d’you reckon to that then?*

I scramble over pink and dark blue rocks, until the path resumes and I find myself in the peace and solitude of pines. Only the soft cooing of shy doves can be heard. There are huge stands of fennel which give off a delicious aroma when rubbed, and pink mallows and thistles, and cacti of course, ugly and spiny, though some are in red flower. The sparse forest offers some respite from the sun. The path does not give out as it threatened to, for it is ancient, the only way the islanders moved from village to village before the coming of Paradise. I can almost sense them, behind the trees, ghosts watching the progress of the Intruder on their trail, worn away over centuries by their feet.

Now it leads me towards the sea and a cliff, and I have to take extra care. Leaning forward, holding fast to a branch, I spy a staircase of rocks leading down to a tiny cove.

Around the base of a great rock, the sea swells and hollows - over and over again - as if the general rule of time is suspended there. The beautifully ugly neck and head of a cormorant rises and falls, like a periscope, in comic complicity with the sea - and then, like that precious moment, disappears.