

## From Provence to Pontins

Jennifer swung her BMW into the parking bay at the Sunny Sands Caravan and Chalet Holiday Park in between two battered old cars – one, a faded red Corsa sporting a sign that read ‘Princess on Board,’ the other, a people carrier of indiscriminate age and origin, sporting more scuffs, dents and scratches than a well-used dart board. She winced as she imagined the occupants of the aforementioned vehicles, scuffing her shiny paintwork as they bundled doubtless hordes of snotty nosed, careless kids in and out of their less than respected means of transport.

Jennifer pulled up the hand break and sighed as she looked again at the park sign that promised ‘fun for all the family,’ feeling instantly guilty at her lack of enthusiasm as she caught sight of the expectant gaze of her eight year old passenger. Little Daisy sat beside her, raised up on her pink booster seat, smiling, and clearly quite excited to join the group of youngsters in the sand play park opposite the parking area. Oh the innocence of youth! Jennifer wondered when it was that life had ground her down to such an extent that she had acquired such cynicism and a complete lack of ability to ‘look on the bright side.’ The fact was; she couldn’t really see the ‘bright side’ of anything these days – more the murky shit-brown side!

Jennifer mentally gave herself a jolly good clip round the ear and told her bitter, and downright selfish self, to get a bloody grip! It wasn’t Daisy’s fault that her step grandfather had turned out to be a lying, cheating piece of dirt, and Jennifer owed it to her to make sure she had a nice time – albeit for the princely sum of thirty five quid and a bag of shopping from Aldi; this being just about all she could scrape together whilst Richard was ‘AWOL.’ She had tried to call him several times this morning but unsurprisingly, he hadn’t answered and she was buggered if she was going to give him the satisfaction of leaving him a message – uncertain as she was of her ability to hide the desperation and frustration that would inevitably show in her voice.

Up until yesterday, Jennifer had still been using their joint credit and debit cards; albeit still with a respect that Richard certainly didn’t deserve. Her friends had told her to ‘take him to the bloody cleaners,’ and encouraged her to ‘spend, spend, spend,’ before he managed to ferret away his cash. Jennifer had felt too bad to blatantly take the piss and, despite a couple of impulse purchases in H&M (hardly the shopping Mecca of WAGS the world over!), she had continued to use the account simply for essentials such as food and bills. It had come as a bit of a shock to her this morning when, just as she was due to leave the house to go and collect Daisy, she had

checked her bag and purse on a bit of a hunch and found both her debit and credit cards missing. At first, she questioned whether she hadn't inadvertently left her cards in a jacket pocket but, deep down, she knew exactly what had happened. That bastard had been through her bag and made sure she wasn't about to ride off into the sunset with his cash. He had known, the selfish bugger, that she wouldn't be able to do much about it before she left in the morning when he had 'popped in' yesterday tea time as he was prone to do – checking up on her; making sure she hadn't sold the family silver, letting himself into the home that he was so keen to leave not six months before. Never bothering to check if it was convenient; he waltzed in and out of her life, freely and without conscience. Even by Richard's standards this had been pretty low, and had given Jennifer the very uneasy feeling that he was definitely up to something – besides shagging his secretary of course.

Jennifer's phone interrupted her thoughts and she looked at the screen to see the name of her friend Trish seeking acknowledgement.

"Hi Trish, we've just arrived," she answered with forced brightness.

Richard had always thought it was 'common' to shorten people's names – but then perhaps that had something to do with the fact that the shortened version of Richard was 'Dick' - and that was probably closer to the truth than he would have liked!

Jennifer thought it was little uptight to get hysterical about a little affectionate name shortening here and there, but then Richard was uptight about a lot of things. She remembered working with a woman once who refused to speak to her for three weeks. Having asked a co-worker why the woman clearly had such a massive rod up her arse, she was informed that 'Deborah didn't like to be called Deb.' It seems that Jennifer had unwittingly committed this cardinal sin in the first few hours of her employment and, had consequently been given the silent treatment as a result.

The fact was that Trish had always been 'Trish' to Jennifer and it suited her a lot better than her full name of Patricia or, God forbid, the other alternative – Pat – which Trish said was a name used only by old ladies and Irish brick-layers!

"Hi Jen," said Trish, using the shortened version of Jennifer's name and which, truth be told, Jennifer liked a lot better. "Glad you're here, I'm just coming up to the car park to get the keys from reception. Fat Terry locked us out of our bloody room last night!"

"Is she staying with us?" asked Jennifer, trying hard to disguise the panic in her voice.

Fat Terry was Trish's ex sister-in-law, rather unkindly named as a result of the gastric band that she'd had fitted on the NHS which had basically rendered her skinny but miserable.... and massively bulimic. Fat Terry was one of life's free-loaders and Jennifer tolerated her only when she had to, which was usually only when she happened to be at Trish's house on one of her 'borrowing' sprees.

"Oh God No!" replied Trish. "She only came down for the night while I was waiting for you to arrive. She's getting the bus home in a minute. I'll meet you in the sandy play park opposite where the cars are parked. I warn you though Jen – the accommodation is fairly basic!"

"Oh goody," laughed Jennifer with more than a little irony.

Jennifer turned to Daisy who had now removed her seatbelt and was positively chomping at the bit to get out of the car; the way kids do when they've been on a journey any longer than about 20 minutes!

"Come on kiddo, let's do this thing!" said Jennifer smiling at the little girl and resolving to make the absolute best of things – if only for her sake.

Daisy jumped out of her seat and Jennifer smiled as she heard the door knock softly on the people carrier beside them. 'They certainly won't notice another little scratch,' she thought to herself, 'and besides it would irritate the crap out of Richard if he were here!'

Jennifer held onto the little girl's hand as they crossed the road to the play park which consisted of; a 'pirate ship' climbing frame with half the steps missing up to the 'crow's nest,' one of those weird swinging hammock things, and about two foot of sand on the floor sporting a whole load of debris such as crisp wrappers, empty cans and the odd fag butt. Jennifer refused to think about the hygiene implications of such a recreational facility and focus more on the fact that Daisy was already running around like a loony, up and down the broken steps and chasing after Trish's seven year old son Harvey who had just joined them, and who was also completely oblivious to the less than polished nature of their surroundings.

Jennifer sat down at one of the picnic tables next to the play park and watched the children's carefree play. A couple sat at the table next to her wearing football shirts and smoking roll ups, whilst a grubby looking toddler munched happily on an iced bun in a buggy beside them. They smiled at Jennifer,

"Great for the kids, ain't it? Our lot love it here."

At which point a couple of girls in leopard print tracksuits came bundling over to the table from the enormous arcade across the road, clutching armfuls of cheap soft toys.

"Look what we won Dad on them grab machines! Can we have some more money? Chantelle wants to win the purple one!"

"No you bloody can't," said the Dad, raising his eyebrows at Jennifer.

"Don't be such a tight arse!" yelled the daughter indignantly.

"Watch your bleeding language," replied the Dad without the merest hint of irony, "Now go on! Sod off and play!"

Once again the father attempted to engage Jennifer in an act of camaraderie by raising his eyebrows and proclaiming, "Kids eh?!"

Jennifer gave him a tight, wry smile and began to study her phone intently – anxious to avoid further unwanted interaction. She looked over to where Daisy and Harvey were playing and thanked God for their well-behaved, innocent, and *non-blasphemous* children.

Daisy was actually Jennifer's step grand-daughter. At 49, she was pretty young to be a Nan to an eight year old, but her son had married young, to a lovely girl a couple of years older than him and already a mother to Daisy. Truth be told, Richard was always less than impressed that his son and heir had deigned to take up with a 'single mother,' from the estate down the road from their smart 5 bed detached with en-suite and utility room. Jennifer thought it was rather priceless that Richard had such a dim view of single mothers when that's pretty much what she had been to their son throughout their married life. With the exception of their yearly 'family' holiday, Richard had played golf, 'net-worked,' lunched and generally shmoozed his way to corporate success throughout his son's childhood. Jennifer was certain that Richard loved Matthew, (well *almost* certain), it was just that, to Richard, children were a bit of an inconvenience. They were loud and messy, they demanded attention right in the middle of the final match at Wimbledon, they jumped on the bed early in the morning no matter how hungover you were from last night's charity gala.... all a bit inconvenient!

Jennifer couldn't be prouder of Matthew – or Matty as she affectionately called him – again much to Richard's disgust. She had loved every second of being a mother, had wanted more children, but that had never been a part of Richard's life plan. He was happy to have an heir, for Jennifer to have a child to keep her quiet and give her reason enough to stay home and tend

to his house, his laundry, and his ongoing demands to entertain his 'business acquaintances.' A noisy house full of kids around the dinner table, paintings stuck to the fridge and more than one parent's evening to reluctantly attend once a year were definitely *not* part of Richard's vision.

When Matty had married Holly a year earlier, Jennifer had felt that she would burst with pride and love for the young man who, unlike his father, treated his new bride with a respect and tenderness that belied his age. He had grown to love Daisy as his own; taught her to swim, to ride a bike, to eat her greens, to do her homework. He willingly attended parent's evenings, school plays and dance shows, much to the delight of his rugby mates, who good-naturedly took the mick at every available opportunity and consequently, he and Holly shared a deep and enviable bond.

Deep down Jennifer knew that she was responsible for the goodness in Matty. That the unconditional love and care she had shown him growing up had made him a loving and caring adult. Like her grandmother used to say – "It's not rocket science is it?!"

Richard had footed the bill for Matty's wedding, despite his barely concealed disapproval, but then that had been another perfect opportunity for him to show off. To show everyone how successful and generous he was. How cultured and sophisticated he was to serve foie gras and caviar at his son's wedding – the thought of exploding goose livers and salty fish eggs still made Jennifer's stomach turn at the very thought; load of pretentious crap!

Matty was philosophical about his father; he loved him, but he was definitely not blind to his faults. He knew that Richard was pretty much all about Richard and so, when Richard had announced to Jennifer that he felt they had 'outgrown each other,' Matty had been hugely supportive of his mum. He and Holly had offered that she come and stay with them in the tiny little cottage they rented, but Jennifer had refused. She in no way wanted to burden her son with her own life crap, nor did she want to become the troublesome mother in law to Holly. She loved her daughter in law dearly, and all the more for the fact that she took such good care of her beloved boy and therefore she didn't want to do anything that may have put that relationship under strain.

So she did what any self-respecting mother would do – she put a brave face on things and pretended that she was fine, even when she'd spent countless nights sobbing into her pillow whilst her husband committed the oldest cliché in the book – a mid-life crisis affair with his secretary.

It had been Trish's idea to get away for a few days and Jennifer had thought, if nothing else, it would give her and Daisy a chance to bond and

give Matty and Holly a break and the opportunity for a 'date night' or two. Jennifer knew she hadn't been the 'Nan' that she would really have liked to be, but again, Richard always made it difficult for her to invite Daisy to stay without some sort of drama that loosely veiled the fact that he just didn't fancy the inconvenience.

"I thought she'd never bloody leave," exclaimed Trish as she joined Jennifer at her table.

Jennifer looked up to see 'Fat Terry' disappearing in the direction of the main road and presumably the bus stop.

"She only wanted me to drive her all the bloody way home and then come back here again!" laughed Trish. "Bloody free-loader! So; How've you been Jen? You look like you're ready for a large Pinot and a night in the clubhouse – they've got Bingo at seven, kids club disco at 8 and 'Fake That' at 9!"

"Who the hell are 'Fake That?'" asked Jen.

"Take That tribute," laughed Trish, "They're bloody infamous at the Sunny Sands!"

Jen giggled – it felt good to laugh – "I can hardly wait!"

The kids played for over an hour, running round and round in circles, going nowhere and not caring either. Jen and Trish gossiped and giggled, chattering crap about this and that, catching up on who was sleeping with whom, who's kids had ended up in a youth detention unit and which of their former friends had succumbed to Botox. Jen could not even begin to imagine how it was that she was so close to being half a century old, but she refused to fill her face full of poison in a futile attempt to look younger. She was permanently amazed at the shit that women pumped into their faces and kidded themselves that it made them look younger, when in actual fact it just made them look a little bit shiny and puffy in all the wrong places.

Jen knew she looked her age first thing in the morning but, the truth was, with a bit of slap, some nifty work with a curling wand and a good pair of spandex knickers she scrubbed up alright. Currently however, her hair wasn't as coiffed as it usually was, her roots were in serious need of a touch up, and she was fast losing sight of the point where her split ends met her actual hair; but then that was what happened when your lying bastard husband left you, *and* your self-esteem, for a younger model!

"Can we have a drink please Jen? We're *well* thirsty!" puffed Daisy as she ran up to Jen and Trish's table.

Jennifer smiled at the little blonde angel, now sweaty and grubby from playing. She liked that Daisy had taken to calling her 'Jen' recently. Initially she had been 'Matty's Mum,' then Jennifer...now Jen. It was kind of their new 'thing' and she dared to hope that one day she might be 'Nanny.'

"Come on then little pirates, let's go get a drink and something to eat, I'm sure you're starving as well," laughed Trish. "Besides, it will give Jen a chance to unpack things from her car and move them into our bijou residence."

Jen rolled her eyes at Trish and steeled herself for the inevitable disappointment that their accommodation promised to deliver. They each grabbed a bag from the car – the children insisting they were 'plenty strong enough,' to help - and half carried, half dragged the bags to their rooms.

The rooms were arranged in 'blocks' around a central green – a two storey horseshoe of maisonette style chalets. Jen couldn't help noticing how much it looked like an open prison although, open entering their 'chalet,' she wasn't entirely convinced that an open prison may not have had slightly more luxurious facilities. The front door opened directly onto an open plan lounge and kitchen area. There were two single beds in an 'L-shape' which presumably doubled both as the sofa and extra sleeping area if, like many of the families here, you happened to have at least 6 kids. There were no throws on the beds, just a couple of dubious looking bare mattresses and some pillows without cases.

The kitchen boasted some stylish, yellow, Formica cupboards that were clearly installed circa 1975, and there was a small table and chairs in the corner which doubled as the breakfast bar, food preparation and dining area. There was a TV the size of a computer screen balanced precariously on an imitation Beech-wood shoe cabinet, and three doors off of the lounge area led to the bedrooms and bathroom. Each door, once opened, led to rooms in various stages of decay. The smell of damp hung in the air; condensation rolled down the windows mopped up only by the faded orange curtains, and a line of grime ran around the edge of each room in between the cracked skirting boards and the badly fitted lino.

"Well, it's hardly fucking Provence!" exclaimed Jen; upon which her and Trish laughed until they literally thought they would wet themselves.

The kids exchanged confused glances as they watched the two women's hysterical meltdown, before rolling their eyes and heading off to the kitchen area to get their own drink from the fridge that Trish had stocked when she arrived.

“What makes me die,” gulped Jen in between her laughter, “Is that they have actually hung a few stylish ‘beach’ pictures on the walls that they’ve clearly got from IKEA! .....as if that’s going to detract the eye from the obvious shit around them!”

Upon which she and Trish descended into more hysterical laughter.

Once they had calmed down enough to speak, the two women set about covering the mattresses with the bedding that Trish had thankfully warned Jen that she might like to bring. Jen only hoped that the Egyptian cotton sheets she had brought with her would serve as adequate protection from the creepy crawlies that she feared would be sharing her bed for the duration!

The kid’s bedroom was so damp that you could literally feel your skin moisten just by standing in the room and so, when Daisy asked if she and Harvey could ‘camp out’ on the sofa tonight, Jen cheerfully agreed. She would love to have seen Richard’s face if he had heard her agree to letting the children fall asleep on the sofa when they inevitably dropped later on – let alone what he would have thought of their ‘holiday home!’

Trish was someone else that Richard had never approved of. Predictably, he thought she was common. Trish and Jen had met at a mother and toddler baby group when Matty and Trish’s older two kids were little. Trish had pretty much lost her entire family to various incidents such as illness, prison and accidents and so, was a single mother, living on a council estate, trying to raise her two boys the best way she could. Years later she finally met and fell in love with a man, (hence her having 7 year old Harvey at the age of 49), who turned out to be a philanderer with a prolific gambling problem and basically stole everything from her; including the council house that she had managed to buy after years of scrimping and saving at various crap jobs that usually involved cleaning other people’s toilets or wiping the arses of the elderly and infirm.

Trish and Jen were definitely from two different sides of the track as it were, but she was a ‘sort of the Earth’ kind of girl, who loved a good laugh and who was able to conjure up an entire meal on a budget of around £1.27! She never seemed to let life grind her down, despite the crap that was invariably thrown her way, and it had to be said that her boys were a real credit to her and her dogged resolve to ‘carry on regardless.’

They didn’t see each other all that often but, when they did, Trish always somehow managed to get Jen to look on the bright side – although she was going to have her work cut out for her this week!



When they had finished 'settling in' (although Jen hoped she never felt 'settled' in this shit hole!) they made their plans for the evening. The water tank only held enough water for one bath-full, so it would have to be a 'care and share' kind of job! They took it in turns to use the cold, mouldy bathroom, before getting ready and applying their make up in the tiny mirror hanging on the kitchen wall. Jen marvelled at why someone had thought that the best place for a make-up mirror was next to the microwave in the kitchen and not above a dressing table in the bedroom!

Not for the first time, she wondered where she would end up when her house was inevitably sold from under her. Richard had mentioned that he didn't see the need for a 'messy divorce,' and he was sure that they could behave like civilised adults for the sake of their son! Jen was pretty sure that even a blind man couldn't fail to see the irony of a bloke who had been bonking his secretary for over a year (that she knew of), preaching about the sanctity of the family unit and civilised behaviour! She had also interpreted 'avoiding a messy divorce' as really meaning; 'avoiding expensive alimony.' She was also pretty sure that he wouldn't be happy to continue to pay for her to live in their large, marital home for much longer - civilised behaviour or not! No; she was fairly certain that he would somehow coerce her into taking a share much less than she was entitled to and, God forbid, she would probably end up in a small (cheap) maisonette similar to her current accommodation!

Jen noticed that she had mentally called it a house and not a home; but then it hadn't really been a home since Matty had left for university and then married life. Oh sure, it was beautiful. Lovely stripped oak flooring, tastefully arranged cushions and throws draped over luxurious leather sofas, and tasteful accessories that Jen had lovingly collected over the years. Jen had a real eye for design but it had always been about what Richard had liked; what would be the most impressive backdrop for his entertaining, what would be the appropriate status symbol to complete his 'image.'

Richard hadn't lived there for some months now – even Jen had told him to piss off when he suggested that she moved into rented while he 'sorted things out.' She had known exactly what *that* had meant – move your slapper into MY house, while I wallow in a rented crap hole and you stall like crazy over paying me even a fraction of what I am owed! She knew that if she stepped one foot out of the house she would be a lot easier to ignore. At least this way, she was an inconvenience. She was sure that deep down, he was desperate to sell the house now and enjoy his new life – guilt free – shagging his new slapper with the fake tits, fake lips and even faker morals!

After last night's events, she was increasingly worried that she would get only a fraction of what was fair and, more worryingly, would it even be enough to get her a roof over her head and the chance to regain a little of her fast disappearing dignity?

Finally, when Trish and Jen were ready and they had given up trying to persuade the children to dress in clean clothes for their 'night out,' they left their room, turning off the heater in the corner that was using up the electric on the meter faster than Blackpool illuminations! Jen was horrified that they had the cheek to charge you for electric on top of what was essentially an over-priced squat! Trish assured her that they would only put in three quid tomorrow and was certain that would be enough to last them for the two days they were there. Jen didn't actually know that you could pay for electric in one pound increments; having paid bills for 100 times that amount without a moment's hesitation in her past life.

They made their way to the club house, which was absolutely bloody massive! There was an arcade; loud, gaudy and glitzy with a million flashing lights and pop music thumping out from the speakers – Jen didn't want to be the one to feed the electric meter in this place! Swarms of kids ran round and round clutching little white pots of two pence pieces and shovelling them manically into machines that promised prizes of cheap plastic bracelets and yet *more* two pence pieces if the sliding mechanism managed to push them down into the chute at the bottom. Teenagers hung around trying to look cool, wearing their best Friday night clobber and chewing gum, whilst their mates shot laser guns at targets on a screen.

"Can we have a go Jen, pleeeeaase?!" said Daisy, clearly excited by the colourful chaos around her. Secretly Jen hated arcades, she found them crass and tacky and an exorbitant waste of money...but they were on holiday after all. It certainly wasn't the South of France but it was the only holiday she was likely to get this side of Christmas!

"Go on then," said Trish cheerfully, chipping in before Jen could answer. You can have £5 each tonight and if you're lucky £5 more from Jen tomorrow night; but once it's gone, it's gone."

She handed the two excited youngsters a £5 note each and they ran off towards the little change machine that would turn their money into hundreds of two pence pieces – it made their meagre budget seem like a fortune!

"See you in bit," Trish called out after them, "Me and Jen will be in the entertainment hall...and NO leaving the building!"

Jen made to protest, worried at the amount freedom they were giving their two precious charges.

"They'll be fine," said Trish, sensing Jen's reluctance. "They've got security on the door and Harvey knows this place like the back of his hand already. Come on, you can buy the wine! The Chardonnay's almost drinkable and it's on special at £10.95 for the bottle!"

Jen followed Trish through the double doors at the back of the arcade giving one last worried glance at the children who were shouting frantically at the shove penny machine, willing the pile of precariously placed coins to tumble off the edge and down through the chute to their waiting cups; where they would collect them up and repeat the whole pointless process! They clearly weren't worried about being 'left alone' in the slightest.

"They'll be fine, now come on!" urged an exasperated Trish, shoving Jen none too gently through the double doors.

The entertainment hall was everything that Jen had feared it might be. Jam-packed full of families, kids tearing up and down, skidding on their knees across the dance floor and over enthusiastic 'blue coats' urging all and sundry to, 'wave your hands in the air like you just don't care!' Jen cringed inwardly; trying desperately hard not to appear snobbish or contemptuous and failing spectacularly on both counts.

"You go to the bar and I'll grab us a table," shouted Trish above the din.

Jen pushed her way towards the bar and began a long and impatient wait to be served. Finally a bored looking barmaid, who looked all of about 13, asked her if she was waiting, having been blatantly aware that Jen was waiting the whole bloody time that she had been ignoring her; choosing instead to serve anything that was vaguely male and with a pulse!

"I'll have a bottle of Chardonnay and two glasses please," asked Jen as politely as she could muster.

"Chardonnay?" asked the girl. "Is that wine?"

Jen fought the urge to reply, "No it's fucking camel's piss," choosing instead to politely inform Sunny Sand's answer to a young Bet Lynch that it was indeed a dry, white wine.

"I prefer sweet myself," said the girl obliviously.

"You do surprise me," muttered Jen sarcastically, although thankfully the sarcasm was completely lost on her.

A man to Jen's right at the bar smiled at her. She was pretty sure he was about to speak but Jen was in no mood to be chatted up by someone who had just come back from day release and had clearly mistaken the accommodation at Sunny Sand's for that of Her Majesty's Pleasure!

She mumbled something under her breath about getting back, and almost dropped her wine in an attempt to get away. Christ! When had she become so uptight and offish? Oh yeh! That must have about the time she married an uptight, egocentric, arrogant, cheating bastard!

Jen finally managed to locate Trish who was happily engaged in conversation with a couple on the table next to theirs. Jen resolved to be sociable and a little less hostile. She also resolved to try and ignore the fact that the daughter of the couple was dressed like a hooker and wearing a bow the size of a small satellite dish in her hair!

A few minutes later, a blue coat appeared on the stage and hushed the room in anticipation of the Bingo. An admirable silence descended onto the room. Jen marvelled at the control he had over his rowdy audience who so dutifully obeyed his command.

Throughout the evening Jen made numerous checks on the children who remained oblivious to her concern. She took part in the Bingo – relishing in the small victory of the £4.27 prize she had shared with Brenda from Scunthorpe, as the first money she had actually earned all by herself in over 15 years. She grimaced through the kids entertainment, which felt like much longer than the hour it professed to be, and suffered the first hour of 'Fake That' – an unlikely collection of 'lads' who weren't much younger than her, looked nothing like the real thing, and sung slightly out of sync with a distinctly average backing track!

Having said all of that, she did have a bit of a laugh. The Chardonnay was, as Trish had said, vaguely drinkable, and there was nowhere in the world where people-watching would have been this entertaining! There was *almost* one unfortunate incident when some young lad of about 6 asked Trish, "What you fucking looking at?" upon which Trish had to sternly dissuade Jen from marching over to his mother and warning her to do something about her son's potty mouth.....

..."Are you bloody mad Jen? Keep your head down and your mouth shut! You do *not* want to fall out with a load of chavs about their shit parenting if you haven't got a bloke with tattoos and a Rottweiler waiting back at your room!"

"Fair point," grumbled Jen, "Although honestly, what is *wrong* with people?"

"Like you said Jen; Provence it ain't!" laughed Trish.

At that moment Harvey and Daisy came back into the hall, having spent their two penny pieces five times over, and clutching strips of tickets that they had 'won,' and that could be exchanged for prizes from the gift shop in the morning. (Although Trish informed Jen that the prizes were mainly lollipops that cost around 500 tickets each!)

The kids looked knackered. Daisy sat down on the chair next to Jen, barely stifling a yawn.

"Do you want to go back sweetie?" asked Jen enjoying the rare moment when Daisy allowed her to steal a kiss from the top of her head.

"I'm tired too," said Harvey, rubbing his eyes with grubby hands. "Can we sleep on the sofa and have hot milk and cookies?"

'Fake That' were on a break and Trish was anxious to see the second half – bless her, she really did enter into the spirit of everything that life chucked her way! Jen was really not bothered about watching the second half of their 'act' and told Trish to stay and enjoy herself. She really didn't mind taking the kids back; she quite fancied half an hour on her own to be honest, a bit of peace, and a sneaky glass of the Chablis that she had stolen from Richard's wine collection and put in the rusty old fridge when she had arrived.

"You sure babe?" asked Trish. "The kids won't mind hanging on a bit longer; it won't be that late."

"Honestly, it's fine," said Jen looking at the two tired little faces in front of her and noticing that it was 10.30pm already. They hadn't stopped running around since they had got here and Daisy was normally in bed by eight.

"Come on kids, let's have milk and cookies!"

The children pulled themselves to their feet and set off with Jen, relieved that they didn't have to wait another hour before bed time. It didn't escape Jen's notice that they had each chosen to hold one of her hands and the very feel of their little fingers in hers warmed her heart. She forced down the lump that had begun to form in her throat as she realised that, apart from the odd hug from her son when they met up in between his punishing work schedule, she hadn't felt love and affection in far too long.

They arrived back at apartment 135 (more like cell block H!) and the two children clambered wearily onto their makeshift beds for the night. Jen made them warm milk in the microwave and covered them over with the clean bedding she had brought with her. She turned on the little heater and prayed that the electric meter would hold out at least until morning. She sat

at the kitchen table, having poured herself a large glass of her errant husband's wine, and noticed that before she had even made herself comfortable, two little blonde heads had disappeared beneath the layers of covers and the sound of gentle snoring echoed in the quiet room.

Trish staggered into the room about 45 minutes later – a little the worse for wear from the club Chardonnay! Jen smiled as she watched her friend try to focus and not slur her words as she spoke. She had been just about to turn in herself having thoroughly enjoyed watching the children sleep peacefully whilst sipping at her wine. She knew that she would probably never be a true 'holiday camp' kind of girl but she also knew that the life she had been living for the last 20 years had been less honest and more empty than her experience in the last 24 hours.

Jen had resolved to truly think about what she wanted for a change; to decorate for her own taste and not the pleasure of others (if she ever actually managed to get a home), to speak to whomever she chose, to befriend her own choice of friends, and to stop making excuses where her beautiful step-grand-daughter was concerned. It was time to take control! Even throughout this painful mess that she found herself in with Richard, she had all too willingly 'rolled-over.' What right did he have to stop her access to an account that she still believed to be in *joint* names, while he spent goodness knows what on fancy meals and frilly knickers for his new squeeze? Deep down she supposed she had felt guilty for taking his money when she hadn't had a job in years – but then whose idea had that been? The truth was, Richard was all about control. He liked having her without the means to be fully independent, he liked having her as his beck and call girl; he had liked her to feel beholden. Well no more my friend – this worm was for turning!

"What you thinking about?" slurred Trish. "I've been waffling on for about 20 minutes and you haven't heard a word!"

"Oh nothing," smiled Jen, "Just planning my revenge on Richard that's all."

"Oooo Goodie!" said Trish. "It's about time old Dickie got his come-uppence!"

"I'll tell you all about it in the morning," laughed Jen. "But now, even that manky old bed is starting to look appealing, and we've got two little people who will *not* be up for a lie-in."

Trish and Jen shared the bed in one of the chalet's luxurious bedrooms, fully clothed in pyjamas, socks and sweatshirts – firstly to keep out the damp, and secondly to keep out the suspected bed bugs!

Despite her grotty surroundings, Jen slept more soundly than she had done in years and felt inexplicably as if a mist had cleared – which was more than could be said for the bedroom windows!

Jen was awoken by a God-awful din. She was not sure what time it was but it wasn't yet light, so she supposed it was the early hours of the morning. It took her a while to come to; to fully shake the disorientation of deep sleep.

Trish sat up bolt upright in the bed beside her. "What the fuck is that noise?" she snarled, rubbing her tired eyes.

"I think it's coming from upstairs," whispered Jen; although why she was whispering amongst such an awful racket she didn't know!

The women could hear footsteps running up and down the floor upstairs – footsteps that were more like a stampede threatening to burst through their bedroom ceiling. And then, the shouting...

"... Get in! ... Get the fuck in! Get him in! Tell him to fucking GET IN!"

The reply came from a voice that sounded like it belonged to a youngish boy...

"Fuck off! You can't make me! I ain't coming in!"

I shall bloody well *make* him come in," moaned Trish. "Noisy little shit!"

The banging, and shouting, and swearing went on and on. It seemed that two adults (possibly the parents of the errant youngster) were desperately trying to get the boy to come into their apartment. He was quite clearly reluctant and had climbed out onto the balcony where he was shouting obscenities and charging up and down like a caged rhino.

Lights started to go on around the camp and neighbours could be heard exiting their chalets and shouting at the cause of the disturbance. This only served to make the parents – and the boy – shout louder, now not only at each other, but also at the people demanding that they, "put a fucking sock in it."

"Mind your own sodding business!" came back one of the replies.

"I wish we bloody could," moaned Jen.

Trish swung the covers back and thrust her feet angrily into her trainers by the bed. Jen couldn't help her snigger as she observed her friend, in the dark,

hair like Worzel Gummidge, wearing pyjamas, bed socks and trainers, and now brandishing a can of hairspray!

“That’s enough!” she declared, “I’ve had enough of this shit!”

“What are you going to do?” laughed Jen. “You’re a *real* danger in your Jim-Jams; and what on Earth use is a can of flipping hairspray?”

“I’ll bloody throw it at ‘em if I have to, but if I don’t get some sleep and they wake our kids I will NOT be responsible!” said Trish.

With that, she crept out into the lounge, past the sleeping children and through the door in her best, ‘detective on a stake-out’ pose.

The evening’s events progressed with alarming ferocity – and volume! The swearing and shouting, from all participants, was colourful to say the least and Jen was mighty glad that both of the children appeared to be sleeping like Snow White after she pricked her finger!

The parents of the feral boy continued to ‘encourage’ him back indoors with varying threats, coercion, abuse and consequently by telling him to ‘suit his bleeding self,’ before disappearing back into their chalet, leaving him out on the balcony, still shouting at anyone who would, or wouldn’t, listen.

Jen stayed crouched behind the front door, peering around the edge, whilst Trish had stormed off in the direction of reception to find someone to; ‘sort these fuckers out!’

Jen saw Trish return across the dimly light communal grass area, dragging a ‘security guard’ behind her. In fairness to the security guard, who also appeared to be wearing pyjamas, he did take admirable control of the situation, ushering the baying crowds back into their rooms and telling the boy in no uncertain terms, that he was about to call the police if he didn’t get back inside his room immediately.

The boy’s parents seemed to miraculously hear the word ‘police,’ and a burly looking bloke in a vest stormed out onto the balcony and grabbed the boy by the arm over the top of the railing from which he was now hanging. He hoisted him over said railing and shoved him through the doorway back into the room, following this with a swift kick to his backside. He did all this whilst telling the boy to, “Get back in there you little bleeder,” and then hanging over the balcony to instruct the security man to; “Mind your own bloody business!”

With that, peace and harmony were once again restored. Jen ventured gingerly through the door to beckon Trish indoors, who was by now fluttering her eyelashes at the security man and thanking him for his help. Jen had no



idea why the man upstairs couldn't have dragged the little bugger in half a sodding hour ago, and saved them all the trouble... and earache!

The two women sat down at the kitchen table in their grotty little abode having put the kettle on for a much needed cuppa, although unfortunately half way through boiling, the bloody electric ran out and they were left, in the dark, with no tea, and knackered, but wide awake!

They felt their way cautiously towards the bedroom, Jen swearing softly as she stubbed her toe on the door frame. Jen lay in the bed for what seemed like hours before she finally managed to go back to sleep, and morning came all too soon. The bed was ridiculously uncomfortable - like sleeping on a ladder - the room was damp, and the faint smell of mustiness and neglect made Jen long for home. Having said that, it had definitely been an experience. She had made a few little decisions of her own about how life would be on her escape from 'Strangeways!'

The kids woke up with the predictable enthusiasm of those who have slept well and in total ignorance of the preceding night's events. They had bounced into Trish and Jen's room; Daisy wearing her pyjamas and swimming goggles and Harvey clutching a football asking if he could pleeeeaase play football on the lawn, despite still wearing *his* pyjama bottoms, wellies and the jumper he'd slept in! The two friends sighed at their joie-de-vivre, before dragging their aching bodies from the un-comfy bed and staggering to the kitchen where they quickly remembered the electric situation – that being, there bloody well wasn't any!

Half hour later after Trish had run to reception to put three quid on the electric key, they had at least managed a brew and persuaded the kids to eat a bowl of cereal before getting dressed in something other than night wear. Jen washed her face and grimaced as she caught sight of her reflection in the kitchen mirror. She wondered what Richard would think of her now, and then mentally gave herself a good slap round the face – who gave a toss what that lying, cheating, pompous git thought about anything?!

After two days, and two very uncomfortable nights, Jen bundled all of their belongings back into her shiny, and distinctly out of place, BMW. There was a rather attractive pile of sick next to the driver's door where some holiday maker had clearly over indulged in the club refreshments – although why they couldn't have directed it into the bush and not right next to her bloody car Jen wasn't sure!

Jen was pleased to be going home, but she was also pleased she had come. The kids had had a wonderful time; swimming, play-park,

amusements, some laser tag thing where they ran around shooting each other with pretend guns, trampolining and more amusements. They had exchanged the tickets they had won in the arcades for a light up tiara and a sword that glowed in the dark - and that had both broken exactly 5 minutes after purchase. They were exhausted, grubby round the edges, and very happy.

Jen hugged Trish goodbye, "It certainly wasn't Provence," she laughed. "But thank you."

"My pleasure," said Trish, hugging her back. "We must do it again sometimes."

"Hmmm!" laughed Jen. "We'll certainly do something again, but maybe not quite this!"

"You don't get a pile of sick next to your car in every resort," laughed Trish as she watched Jen grimace as she negotiated her way across the offending pile and into her car.

Jen noticed that Daisy was asleep before she had even left the park's gates and she was so grateful for the time they had spent together. She dropped her off at her son's house, apologising for the less than pristine state of his step daughter.

"Don't be daft Mum," laughed Matty, "I'm sure a bit of dirt won't do her any harm. Are you ok though; you're welcome to stay?"

"I'm fine darling," replied Jen, "In fact I would go so far as to say that I'm bloody marvellous!"

She hugged her boy and once again thanked the good Lord for the lovely young man he had become. She had lots to do and today was just the start....

Jen chuckled to herself as she heard Richard's key jiggling in the lock. She heard him muttering to himself before he tried, and re-tried, to open the door of the house that he had taken it upon himself to enter at regular and un-announced intervals throughout the six months since he had left Jen. She had known it was his little way of still exercising control over her - had known that it was his way of saying, "I still own this house, I can still check up on you if I choose to."

He tried his key in the lock for the 10<sup>th</sup> time before resorting to the doorbell. Jen ignored the first ring. She ignored his second ring. She ignored when he knocked on the letterbox. She really had to stifle a full blown belly laugh when she saw him peer through the letter box and call out to her.

“Jennifer! Jennifer! What the bloody hell’s going on. My key won’t work!!”

“Of course your key won’t work Richard, I changed the locks,” she said calmly, peering back at him through the opened letter box.

“What do you mean, you’ve changed the bloody locks? You can’t do that, this is still my bloody house!”

“Yes Richard, it is still *half* your bloody house, but you don’t live here anymore. Besides I didn’t feel safe here, living alone, knowing all and sundry had a key!” said Jen.

“All and sundry!” screamed Richard, “What do you mean all and sundry? I’m your bloody husband!”

Again Jen smiled as she thought about how much of a ‘husband’ Richard had been for the last 6 months... 6 years – who knew how long he had taken her for a fool? She had changed the locks the moment she had got home from her trip. She had told a few little white lies. She wasn’t entirely sure that she was allowed to change them, considering that Richard *did* indeed own half of the house, but she’d thought ‘sod it!’ She had told the locksmith that she had ‘locked herself out’ and couldn’t get back in. She had also told him that she wasn’t sure whether she had left her keys somewhere and was worried she may get burgled...or worse, attacked in her own home! All a bit dramatic but it had got her some shiny new locks on both the front and back doors; they’d even thrown in a new security bolt for the patio doors for good measure! So here she was, secure in her little fortress, ready to do battle!

“Yes Richard, unfortunately you are *still* my husband – although hopefully not for much longer!” she said, doing her very best to disguise the elation in her voice that she felt.

“Jennifer, have you gone bloody mad?” fumed Richard. “Open this bloody door!”

“I will not open the door Richard,” said Jennifer. “I will see you in the solicitor’s office at 10 o’clock tomorrow morning. If you choose not to attend, I will have no choice but to begin to list the contents of this house for sale on ebay as a means of being able to survive. I would recommend that you begin to think about a fair settlement and I would make it snappy!”

With that, Jen turned on her heel and made her way across the hall in the direction of the kitchen where she poured herself another LARGE glass of something cold from Richard’s wine collection, leaving Richard nigh on giving himself a coronary, screaming through the letter box!

Sure enough, the next morning, Richard's car was indeed outside the solicitor's office and Jen swallowed the mounting nerves inside her. She strolled into the office with a lot more confidence than she felt, but determined to see it through.

It was all pretty comical really; Richard's complete shock when he heard the solicitor outline the terms of Jen's proposed divorce agreement. She didn't want the house at all, but merely enough to buy a small place, of her own choosing, outright. He positively fumed when he saw the documents that Jen had produced from their safe, outlining the details of his pension and off shore investments. Did he really think that she wouldn't be able to work out the combination? And she literally thought he would explode when she produced screen shots of all his early text messages to his fancy bit, as proof of his affair – no matter how much he had protested; he had been rumbled.

Jen left the solicitor's office triumphant, yet undeniably sad that over 20 years of marriage had come to this. She had watched him lie, cheat and try to worm his way out of his responsibilities, without a moment's thought for her loyalty or support throughout his career and meteoric rise to corporate 'big shot.'

"Bollocks to him!" she said to herself as she climbed into her car. That was another thing that she was getting – a new car! She had never liked this shiny, great gas-guzzler anyway. Once again; Richards' choice.

One year later

Jen looked at Daisy as she happily munched on her crisps whilst watching her favourite TV show. She was propped up on Jen's striped couch with the plump cushions and colourful throws, draped stylishly over the arms. Richard would freak if he'd seen Daisy actually eating crisps on the sofa!

Jen looked around her lovely home. It was small, but stylish. A little cottage close to the beach, painted in soft, eggshell blues and turquoise greens. Jen's eclectic mix of nik-naks that she had found whilst browsing in the quaint little shops, and shells that she had collected from the beach, adorned the hand painted, up-cycled furniture.

The cottage was cosy but bright, and there was a large, scrubbed-pine table in the generous kitchen, around which her family often sat; laughing, joking, drinking and more importantly, relaxing. Jen hadn't felt happier in years. Always a good cook; Jen had begun to bake cakes for friends' occasions and parties. She had catered small buffets for events through word of mouth that had quickly spread. She now sold her homemade pies and cakes to the local deli, and life couldn't be sweeter – especially as the

rather handsome guy who owned the deli had taken her out on one or two very pleasant occasions!

Sure, reclaiming her identity and her independence hadn't been easy. She had struggled along the way. Struggled with the loss of her marriage, struggled with the unfamiliarity of having to do everything alone; had even wondered sometimes if things would ever be any easier.

Jen knew the real turning point for her had been when she had been booked to cater for a party in a nearby town. She had been given the booking through a friend of a friend, who had recommended her to another friend of a friend – the way these things often are.

As soon as Jen had arrived at the house, her heart had sunk. She instantly recognised the shiny BMW on the drive, although it now had a 'For Sale' sign in the window. (Probably due to the inability of the owner to rid the car of the pungent and shocking aroma coming from an unknown location – basically the kipper she had buried in the underside of the driver's seat. Not highly original she knew, and more than a little clichéd; but very satisfying!)

She had almost turned around on her heel as the realisation of just *who* had unwittingly booked her to cater their party had dawned on her. But she was very proud of the fact that she had thought 'Fuck it!' and carried on up to the front door.

The look on Richard's face had been worth the gut wrenching nerves that had threatened to eat away her insides moments before. She had inwardly smiled, as confusion had given way to horror when he realised his new girlfriend's faux pas. She had delighted when his girlfriend had told him that, 'they couldn't bloody well cancel at the last minute as they had 50 guests arriving in under an hour!' And watching him squirm and fidget his way through one of the most excruciating evenings of his entire life, while people gushed and congratulated Jen on her 'amazing' food, had been utterly priceless. (She had also been pretty proud of her ability to resist the temptation to drop an ex-lax or two into the pompous bastard's tiramisu!)

Jen knew then that she was entirely over Richard and everything he stood for. She could tell he had been fuming as he had handed over the 500 quid she had charged for his typically, 'designed to impress' buffet. He was pissed off that she had become successful without him, however small that success might have been. But the absolute icing on the cake had been as he had thanked her and shook her hand at the end of the evening, congratulating her on a wonderful job, keeping up his act in front of his posh friends – how he hadn't choked on his words she didn't know!

Jen drove away from that house, stronger and more settled than she had felt in far too long. She wasn't rich; but she was comfortable, and happy.

Jen gazed out of the window and smiled as she saw Mat and Holly's car pull into the gravel driveway alongside the pale pink Beetle that Richard had sneered at when she had bought it – she loved it!

She opened the front door as Matty and Holly piled in, pausing momentarily to kiss Daisy's head as she continued to keep her eyes fixed to the TV screen. They bundled into her kitchen and seated themselves at the table as Jen poured the wine.

"To family," she declared raising her glass.

"To family ... plus one more!" smiled Holly rubbing her tummy.

"Really?" squealed Jen.

Matty and Holly smiled at her obvious delight – yes 'to family' indeed, and life really couldn't be sweeter!