**Englishness**

It had taken me at least a year to plan the trip even though it wasn’t really that far. I drove to Cookham from Brighton and spent the afternoon in the Stanley Spencer gallery. It was marvellous. I love Spencer’s work, but I’d never been to Cookham before. Alongside his visionary paintings and portraits there were others that captured the essence of English village gardens caught in the dappled sunlight of a summer afternoon.

I usually stay in Youth Hostels when I go on these adventures and this trip was no exception. I like the uncertainty of it all, who will you meet, what will you talk about? Plus I like to do my own cooking.

When I arrived, the place was already occupied. Two men in the sitting area were chatting to each other – they had the look of regulars. Nowadays people use hostels as mid-week hotels when they work away from home. I guess it keeps the place open and these guys clearly knew each other well.

I unpacked my ingredients: a nice piece of fish, some rice and broccoli. I decided to wait a bit before making dinner, so I found a seat in the lounge and listened to the chat.

A large slightly balding man called Jim was holding court. ‘It’s outrageous’ he said, ‘these foreigners coming in and taking our jobs. Look at me, I have to travel all the way from Sunderland to get a decent income. Its not right. English jobs for English people, that’s what I say’.

Sam – (Sam’s Satellite Dishes.. that was written on the white van parked outside) nodded in agreement. ‘Sausages’ he said. ‘That’s what it’s about. The size of your sausage.’ Jim laughed. ‘All those politicians in Brussels, claiming expenses, and making up stupid rules about sausages. And then there is health and safety. It’s gone mad. And immigration, don’t get me started on that.’

An older man, who’d been sitting quietly the other side of the fireplace looked up. ‘No, Sam, *do not* get started on that’. Sam winked at me. ‘Don’t worry about him, he’s a leftie that’s been left behind.’ But the warning had an effect. Sam shrugged and went into the kitchen. I followed. Sam opened the fridge as if he owned it, pulled out a ready meal and put it in the microwave. I set to work sorting out my broccoli and rice.

It was only days before the referendum, and by my calculation the population was split. Sam and Jim on one side, the man by the fireplace and me on the other. I hadn’t bargained for an argument, and I didn’t relish the thought of one either. I’d come to visit the gallery and have a gentle evening with fellow travellers. But it would be cowardly to just let things be.

What if I could make a difference? Perhaps I could persuade Sam of the Satellites that he was in an international business, that he was a citizen of Europe and that his views harked back to an era of colonial supremacy? Jim looked like a harder nut to crack.

I took my dinner through to the lounge and sat down at the long trestle table. Sam had polished off his spaghetti carbonara and was scraping the last bits out of the plastic tray. ‘Sam, I saw your van outside. Where do you get those satellite dishes from?’. He kept on scraping. ‘Germany - they are really good quality. I’ve been fitting them for five years now, all over the South of England. The company I work for is based in Holland, but we have contracts everywhere.’

‘Oh really’ I said. Taking all this in. Sam continued. ‘We installed some over at your place didn’t we Frank?’. The older man – who was obviously called Frank – nodded. I took the bull by the horns. ‘I guess this Brexit business would be bad news for you then: German imports and a Dutch company, how are you going to manage?’

Sam peeled the lid off his crème brulee. He took a big spoonful. ‘We’ll always have a market, I’m sure of it. Europe doesn’t matter – we can do deals with anyone, anywhere. No red tape. I’m optimistic. Come next week when we win, you’ll see everyone celebrating.’

‘Not me’, I said. Frank glanced up, interested. I continued with my little speech. ‘It will be a tragedy if Britain leaves Europe – a tragedy for you and your business Sam, a disaster for the health service and for education, and for the reputation of the country. My own daughter doesn’t agree with me, but I am certain that such a decision will be regretted for generations to come.’

Jim spun round. ‘Not another one who pretends to know best – we are English, through and through, and that’s it chum, end of story’. ‘But Jim’, I said, ‘what about Sam and his future, and in fact the future for all of us. Ok, so there will be satellite dishes and someone will have to fix them, but it’s not going to be the easy trade that it is now.’

Sam responded: ‘That’s rubbish. I’ve been in the business all my life. I’ve done well. I’ve always looked after Number One.’ He pointed his pudgy finger towards his chest.

I paused and thought of Angie, my daughter. I missed her. She was 23 now and working in a jewellery shop in town. She hated school and left as soon as she could. I don’t see her as often as I’d like. Her current boyfriend is a powerful influence and as far as I can see she goes along with everything he says. These days it is impossible to have a serious conversation with either of them.

I decided to try a different angle. Sam was right, I couldn’t hold my ground on the economics of statellite dish installation. Nor was there any point in repeating what I’d read – Jim and Sam were immersed in a media bubble of sound bites and slogans and there was no way I could take them out of that. Angie was the same.

I’ve been retired a few years, but when I taught history I was always amazed by the patchwork of the past. Perhaps I could persuade Sam to take a long view?

‘You are proud to be English, Sam, but what does that really mean? A flag, a pint of beer, a spaghetti carbonara and a crème brulee? If the name on your van is anything to go by, you have a Viking ancestry: Sam Hobson. In the eleventh century my family came from Normandy in France...

Sam interrupted. ‘What difference does that make? None’..

‘But Sam, that’s my point, you are right, it doesn’t make any difference! – you are Viking and European and English and who knows what else. So am I and so is everyone else’

We were going round in circles again and I couldn’t see any way out.

It was then that Frank came to my aid. He spoke slowly. ‘I’ve been working in the health service for twenty-five years, the ‘national’ health service, that is, and I am proud to say that it is truly international. Our friend here has a point. I’ve said this before and I’ll say it again. If Brexit happens we’ll be the poorer for it in every way. Whatever you hear, this is no joke. Its not about sausages or pork pies or red tape. Whether you like it or not, we live in an international world. Sam knows that. Sam is part of that, and so are we all. If you think that England, or any other country can manage alone you are fooling yourselves.’

Frank picked up his paper and went off to the lower bunk bed in the corner of the dormitory that we shared.



Jim, who was already bored with the conversation, headed out to the verandah for a smoke. That left Sam and me.

Sam dumped his empty crème brulee pot in the recycling bin and returned with a mug of tea. ‘Viking’ he muttered to himself.. ‘maybe I am a Viking.’ It was true, Sam’s eyes were clear blue and his hair was blond.

The next morning, I had place to myself. Jim and Sam left around 6.30am and Frank not long after. I had slept well, but I was still disturbed by the conversation from the night before. Could I have done better? I went over it again in my mind. At the end of the day, I simply didn’t understand them, and they didn’t understand me. What did it mean to be English, or British or European? I waited for the kettle to boil. There was no common culture between us, no shared understanding of national interest and identity – nothing. We lived in such very different worlds. I found a coffee press under the bench, and a mug. I’d been a teacher for years, but had I ever had an impact? Was it even worth trying? I sat with my coffee and looked around the empty lounge. Well, at least I’d had a go.

Epilogue. The vote was held three days later. At the last minute, and in the privacy of the voting booth, Sam changed his mind and voted Remain. No one else knows, but Angie did the same. Their votes made no difference to the final outcome.