

## A POSTCARD FROM THE ALGARVE

Neil Shenton

There are times when I think I imagined all of this. Anyway, here goes.

The phone rang at 7 am and I knew it was him. He was in Russia. Moscow. Plus 3 hours from England. He would have waited until he knew I was awake. I'm an early riser. Well, to be honest, I hardly sleep at all these days. For him to ring so early meant bad news.

It was snowing hard, he said. Minus 15. Biting wind from the north. I waited, chewing a nail. The Russian contacts were proving to be very useful. Corrupt as hell, of course. He is a sales executive with a large perfume company and Russia is seen as the next 'big challenge.' I had suggested 'Gulag' as the name for their new line but he didn't laugh. He rarely laughs at my jokes. These days.

I still waited. Then he said there was a problem with making the trip to Portugal. I said, you're not going, are you? Pretty serious problem if you ask me. Not actually going at all. He told me not to get excited. He says that a lot, Usually when he lets me down. We will definitely go next month. Promise. Better weather in April anyway.

I made tea and toast and stared at the plane tickets on the table. A week in the Algarve to escape the cold and rain. He would play golf and I would look at the flowers and get a tan. I go brown easily. Sometimes I think one of my ancestors was black.

He isn't a bad man. He works very hard. Provides for us both very well. And he worries about me. Rings every day when he is away. Twice sometimes. That means he cares, doesn't it? I've not been too well. For quite a while really. I don't have 'enough interests'. I'm very quiet apparently though I hadn't noticed. Talk to myself all day.

I ought to love him but I don't. I feel stifled by his contentment. His certainty. I break things on purpose some times. I think he has another woman in Russia.

It rained all the next day. I stood in the garden and got soaked, just to know what it felt like. It was later, looking at the reflection of my white body, that I decided to go to Portugal on my own. Within an hour I had cancelled the papers and made arrangements for the cat. It was so easy. Too easy. A part of me wanted there to be a problem.

At Faro the warm air smelled of eucalyptus. I took a short taxi ride to the beach and sat on a low wall with my bags. Panic. What had seemed a wonderful adventure was now making me feel sick. I closed my eyes tight, listening to the sea, feeling the heat of the sun.

My handbag played the theme from Doctor Zhivago. A message on my mobile. Him. He

had rung home twice Was everything OK? I didn't reply and switched it off.

My room was basic but clean with a balcony. I watched the aircraft taking off over the fishermen in the estuary. For 3 days I simply sat in the sun, ate and drank. I was becoming dislocated from all that was before. It wasn't a conscious thing. I didn't wake up determined to forget or change. I sort of drifted. Slid into a state of unthinking,unwanting,unbeing. A personal year zero. There was only the sea and sun and the mild tightening sensation of my skin browning.

The beautiful young Portuguese men who hung around the beach soon gave up on me. By the fourth day they left me alone completely, even smiling and raising a hand in tacit understanding. I tried breakfast at a new restaurant and ate scrambled egg,smoked ham,fruit and bread. An elderly man, seated nearby, smiled and.raising his straw hat, asked if he could sit with me. He assumed I was English and he wanted to practice his language skills. I smiled in return. It didn't matter to me.

He told me his name. It sounded like Shzoowow. Call me John,he said. I said my name was Faith. It isn't and I don't know why I chose it. It just came into my head. He made a joke about my sisters, Hope and Charity. I didn't laugh. He had been visiting friends and was now about to return home. To Sagres. He looked at me and I shook my head. I had never heard of it.

The most south western point of Europe, he said. From where sailors had set out to find lands which most said didn't even exist. Beyond the known. When Portugal led the world. Vasco de Gama? Nothing. Christopher Columbus was there for a while. I said I'd heard of him. John could trace his own family back six hundred years. One of his ancestors discovered southern Africa and beyond. Such courage,he said,smiling. To make the very first maps.

I listened politely, paid my bill and got up to leave. It was hot again. Beach weather. He asked me if I would like to go to Sagres with him. Just for the day. See the fort, have dinner and get the last bus back. I asked him why he thought I would go off with a man I didn't know. He said he had noticed me on the beach. Alone. Staring into space. Maybe I could do with some map making myself? And Sagres is a wonderful place. We stared at each other as the waiter hovered.

We went there in his old Renault. I drove some of the way,my first time on the right. I went the wrong way round a roundabout and nearly killed us both. He just laughed and said it was better than dying in bed of some dreadful disease. I had never met anyone like him before.

The fort was enormous. A lot of the original lost in an earthquake but still big. Cannons peering into the shiny Atlantic. A giant navigation compass on the ground. John said it was a famous nautical school in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Training explorers. Like NASA. And a small church. Very old. I stood on the wall and looked at nothing but water. John said it was where they would have stood centuries ago. Full of bravado and fine clothes. Then

frightened. Quiet. Like me. He told me later that I stood there for over an hour but I don't remember.

Over dinner he asked me about my life in England . I talked through the pork and clams, the giant ice cream, the wine and the coffee and brandy. I told him things that had been buried so deep even I had only glimpsed them occasionally. On the bus I realised he had told me nothing of himself. Only his family history.

It was around midnight when I arrived back on Faro beach. The breeze was from the south, the night warm and clear. I stood at the edge of the sea and stared up at the Milky Way. This very same starlight had guided John's ancestors a mere 500 earth years before. I began to cry , big tears dropping into the waves around my legs.

I searched in my handbag for tissues and found my phone, deaf and dumb for 5 days. And then another hard thing. Heavy and rough. A stone from the fort, on which an arrow had been crudely carved. John must have slipped it into my bag. I held phone and stone in each hand, feeling the shape and texture. One smooth, one rough.

Each containing messages.

Neil Shenton  
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