

Passing 50 Without Breaking the Speed Limit - Peter Mayle

I have never paid any great attention to my birthdays, even those which marked the accomplishment of having tottered through another ten years of life. I was working on the day I turned thirty, I was working on the day I turned forty, and I was quite happy at the thought of working on my fiftieth birthday. But it was not to be - Madame my wife had different ideas.

'You're going to be half a hundred,' she said. 'Considering the amount of wine you drink, that is some kind of achievement. We should celebrate.'

There is no arguing with her when she had a certain set to her chin, and so we talked about how and where the deed should be done. I might have known that my wife had already arranged it; she was listening to my suggestions out of politeness. When I ran out of inspiration, she moved in. A picnic in the Luberon, she said, with a few close friends. I'd love it.

I couldn't imagine loving a picnic. My picnic experiences, limited as they had been to England, had left memories of rising damp creeping up the spine from permanently moist earth, of ants disputing with me over the food, of tepid white wine and of scuttling for shelter when the inevitable cloud arrived overhead and burst on top of us. I loathed picnics. Rather ungraciously, I said so.

This one, said my wife, would be different. She had it all worked out. In fact, she was in deep consultation with Maurice, and what she had in mind would be not only civilized by highly picturesque, an occasion to rival Glyndebourne on a dry day.

Maurice, the chef and owner of the Auberge de la Loube in Buoux and a serious horse-fancier, had over the years collected and restored two or three nineteenth-century open carriages. He was now offering his more adventurous clients the chance to trot to lunch. I would *love* it.

I recognize inevitability when it stares me in the face, and it was settled. We invited eight friends and kept our fingers crossed, less tightly than we would have done in England for fine weather. Although it had rained only once since early April, June in Provence is unpredictable and sometimes wet.

But when I woke and went out into the courtyard, the seven o'clock sky was a never-ending blue. The flagstones were warm under my bare feet, and our resident lizards had already taken up their sunbathing positions. Just to get up to a morning like this was enough of a birthday present.

Sitting on the terrace with a bowl of *café crème*, I didn't feel a day older than forty-nine, and looking down at ten brown toes I hoped I'd be doing exactly the same thing on my sixtieth birthday.

A little later, as warmth was turning into heat, the humbuzz of the bees was blotted out by the clatter of a diesel engine, and I watched as a venerable open-top Land Rover, painted camouflage green, panted up the drive and stopped in a cloud of dust. It was Bennett, looking like the reconnaissance scout from a Long Range Desert Group - shorts

and shirt of military cut, tank commander sunglasses, vehicle festooned with jerricans and kitbags, face deeply tanned. Only the headgear, a baseball cap, would have been out of place at El Alamein.

We rounded up our two houseguests and three dogs and packed them in the car for the drive up to Buoux, where we were meeting the others. We set off in convoy, the Land Rover and its chauffeur attracting considerable interest from the peasants, waist-deep in the vines on either side of the road.

After Bonnieux, the scenery became wilder and harsher, vines giving way to rock and scrub oak and purple-striped lavender fields. There were no cars and no houses. We could have been a hundred miles away from the chic villages of the Lubéron, and it pleased me to think that so much savage, empty country still existed. It would be a long time before there was a boutique or a real estate agent's office up here.

We turned down into a deep valley. The area round the Auberge resembled a casting session for a film which had not decided on plot, characters, wardrobe or period. There were shorts and espadrilles, scarves and bright shawls, hats of various colours and ages, on immaculately turned out baby, and leaping from his Land Rover to supervise kit inspection, our man from the desert.

Maurice appeared from the horses' parking area, smiling at us and the glorious weather. He was dressed in his Provençal Sunday best - white shirt and trousers, black bootlace tie, plum red waistcoat and an old flat straw hat. His friend, who was to drive the second carriage, was also in white, set off by thick crimson braces and a magnificent salt-and-pepper moustache, a dead ringer for Yves Montand in *Jean de Florette*.

'Venez!' said Maurice. 'Come and see the horses.'

He led us through the garden, asking about the state of our appetites. The advance party had just left by van to set up the picnic, and there was a feast on board, enough to feed the whole of Buoux. The horses were tethered in the shade, coats glossy, manes and tails coiffed.

We watched as Maurice and Yves Montand hitched them up to the open carriage, black trimmed with red, and the seven seater carriage, red trimmed with black. Maurice had spent all winter working on them and they were, as he said, '*impecc*'. The only modern addition was a vintage car horn the size and shape of a bugle, for use when overtaking less highly tuned carriages, and to *éclater* any chickens who were thinking of crossing the road.

'*Allez! Montez!*'

We climbed in and headed out to open country.

To travel in this way is to make you regret the invention of the car. There is a different view of everything, more commanding and somehow more interesting. There is a comfortable, swaying rhythm as the suspension adjusts to the gait of the horse and the changes of camber and surface. There is a pleasant background of old-fashioned noises as the harness creaks and the hooves clop and the steel rims of the wheels crunch the grit on the road. There is the *parfum* -a blend of warm horse, saddle soap, wood varnish and

the smells of the fields that come to the nose unobstructed by windows. And there is the speed, or lack of it, which allows you time to *look*. In a car you're in a fast room. You see a blur, an impression; you're insulated from the countryside. In a carriage, you're part of it.

A long scarlet field, dense with poppies, unrolled slowly in the valley below us, and in the sky a buzzard wheeled and dipped, wings outstretched and still, balancing on air. As I watched it, a cloud covered the sun for a few moments and I could see the rays coming out behind it in dark, almost black spokes.

We turned off the road and followed a narrow track that twisted through the trees, and the sound of the horse's hooves was muffled by ragged, fragrant carpets of wild thyme. The forest became thicker and the track narrower, barely wide enough for the carriage. Then we turned past an outcrop of rock, ducked through a tunnel of branches and there it was spread out before us. Lunch.

'*Volia!*' said Maurice. '*Le restaurant est ouvert.*'

At the end of a flat, grassy clearing, a table for ten had been set in the shade of a sprawling scrub oak - a table with a crisp white cloth, with ice buckets, with starched cotton napkins, with bowls of fresh flowers, with proper cutlery and proper chairs. Behind the table, a long stone had been turned into a rustic bar, and I heard the pop of corks and clink of glasses. All my misgivings about picnics vanished. This was as far away from a damp bottom and ant sandwiches as one could possibly imagine.

Maurice roped off an area of the clearing and unhitched the horses, who rolled on their backs in the grass. Maurice had thought of everything, from an abundance of ice to toothpicks and, as he had said, there was no danger of us going hungry. He called us to sit down and gave us a guided tour of the first course: melon, quails' eggs, creamy *brandade* of cod, game *paté*, stuffed tomatoes, marinated mushrooms - on and on it went, stretching from one end of the table to the other, looking, under the filtered sunlight, like an implausibly perfect still life from the pages of one of those art cookbooks that never sees the kitchen.

There was a short pause while I was presented with the heaviest and most accurate birthday card I had ever received - a round metal road sign, two feet in diameter, with a blunt reminder of the passing years in large black numerals. 50. *Bon anniversaire* and *bon appetit*.

We ate and drank like heroes, getting up in between courses, glasses in hand, to take recuperative strolls before coming back to the table for more. Lunch lasted nearly four hours, and by the time coffee and the birthday *gateau* were served we had reached that state of contented inertia where even conversation is conducted in slow motion. The world was a rosy place. Fifty was a wonderful age.

The horses must have notice the increased weight of their loads as they pulled out of the clearing towards the road that led back to Buoux, but they seemed more frisky than they had been in the morning, tossing their heads and testing the air through twitching nostrils. Sudden gusts of wind plucked at straw hats, and there was a growl of thunder.

Within minutes, the blue sky turned black.

We had just reached the road when the hail started - peaseized and painful, stinging the tops of our heads in the open carriage and bouncing off the broad wet back of the horse. She needed no encouragement from the whip. She was going full tilt, head down, body steaming. The brim of Maurice's straw hat had collapsed into bedraggled ears and his red waistcoat was bleeding onto his trousers. He laughed, and shouted to the wind, '*Oh la la, le pique-nique Anglais!*'

My wife had made a tent out of a travel blanket, and looked back to see how the carriage was dealing with the downpour. The top was obviously less weatherproof than it looked. Hands appeared from the side, tipping hatfuls of water overboard.

We came down into Buoux with Maurice braced, stiff-legged, hauling the reins tight against the headlong enthusiasm of the horse. She had scented home and food. To hell with humans and their picnics.

The sodden but cheerful storm victims gathered in the restaurant to be revived with tea and coffee and *marc*. Gone were the elegant picnickers of the morning, replaced by dripping, lank-haired figures. Clothes that had billowed now clung, and the straw hats looked like plates of congealed cornflakes. We each stood in our own private pools of water.

Madame and Marcel, the waiter, served an assortment of dry clothes along with the *marc*, and the restaurant was transformed into a changing room. Bennett, pensive under his baseball cap, wondered if he might borrow a pair of swimming trunks for the drive home because the Land Rover was awash, and the driver's seat a puddle. But at least, he said, looking out of the window, the storm was over.

If it was over in Buoux, it had never happened in Ménerbes. The drive up to the house was still dusty, the grass was still brown, the courtyard still hot. We watched the sun as it balanced for a moment in the notch of the twin peaks to the west of the house before disappearing beneath a flushed sky.

'Well,' said my wife, 'now do you like picnics?'

What a question. Of course I like picnics. I love picnics.

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