

MARK O'FLYNN

*The Isthmus*

Hector and I are on a touring holiday of the south. Since his retirement we have seen quite a lot of the country in our campervan, home away from home. Hector has a story for every place visited. He is a mine of information. Yesterday we saw the bottomless, blue lakes of Mt. Gambier, and now we have arrived at the famed Twelve Apostles, (although there are only eight), on Victoria's rugged south coast.

There, I might have written that on a postcard. Dear Grandchildren, the weather is a) sunny, b) overcast, c) wet, d) all of the above, ah must be in Victoria. Don't forget the date: Fifteenth of January, 1990. I would not write that, after all this time on the road, I am getting a bit fed up with Hector and his stories

The Twelve Apostles, all eight of them, as you sweep around the coastal cliff top road are certainly a majestic sight, or is that a magisterial one? Hector parks the van and I buy a postcard from the stand in the kiosk. A touring coach has just disgorged its cargo of bus-sick passengers, half of whom are lined up outside the ladies toilet.

"Shall we have our picnic?" Hector asks.

"I should go to the lav first."

"Look at that queue," he says. "Let's duck out this London Bridge, or whatever it's called, then have our sandwiches."

“Yes, I’d kill for a cup of tea.”

Hector’s Hawaiian shirt is a little garish for Victoria, so I ask him to put on his jacket

The London Bridge is a spectacular limestone archway that leans over the water to a pair of conjoined, rocky outcrops. Although they are not technically Apostles they do form a pretty distinctive feature of the cliffs and coastline. Actually it is what they call an isthmus, with a couple of giant cavities burrowing through it like a Swiss cheese where the waves crash through. I’ll take a photo after lunch.

It feels nice to stretch our legs. It should only take a few minutes to wander out there and back and then a lovely cup of Liptons. So we stroll across the road and down the gravel path and over the London Arch, as it is also called, and barely thirty seconds after we have crossed it the ground behind us gives a shudder and a bark, and with a tremendous crash, collapses into the sea.

“Jesus,” says Hector, alarmingly. Hector never swears. Suddenly he has his arm about my waist and is bustling me forward. Me who has not bustled for years.

“Quick sticks.”

Behind us, or rather beneath us, the sea is boiling orange and white.

“What happened?” I ask, suddenly alarmed.

“The bridge collapsed.”

It is an understatement for me to say, so I might as well: “Lucky we weren’t still standing on it.”

“Yes Caroline, that’s the understatement of the year.....Jesus.”

“No need to swear.”

Both of us are trembling with the close shave of it, staring stupidly at the water below. I can smell fresh rock.

“We’re trapped.”

Even I can see how obvious that is. We are now suddenly alone on what is evidently a newly created limestone pillar. An island, albeit a small one. We can still hear bits of the pinnacle, great slabs of rock calving off and falling into the sea. Hector nudges me to what he estimates is the geometrical centre of the island. It is only a matter of about twenty paces in any direction to the edge. It is so narrow I could throw a stone from one side to the other. And I’m not much of a shot. I can barely throw a ball of rolled up socks across the lounge room. Oh, I could if I was angry enough, but Hector hasn’t done enough to annoy me yet. Give him his due.

There is another, second archway linking our pinnacle to a smaller one further out to sea, but there is no way I am going to cross that. Hector is right; we are trapped. Exiled. Forty metres up in the air on a teetering limestone tower. Actually it is only the clouds scudding by that gives the impression of teetering. Over on the opposite cliff people are calling, waving. I can see tourist busses and our own little van in the car park. People stand back from the edge because I guess their side of the cliff is still crumbling too. They wave to us. We wave back. The welcome humanity of it. No man is an island, and no woman either, I suppose. There is a slight breeze from the south, which on a warm day, might be described as refreshing as the beads of condensation on a cold glass of chardonnay. Only it’s not a warm day. It appears no one knows what to do, either the people on the mainland, or us. We can make out the windswept squeak of their voices, but not what they are shouting. The isthmus is gone. We are stuck.

Gradually it comes to me that I still need to go to the toilet.

“Looks like we might be here for a while old girl.”

“Don’t call me old girl.”

“May as well pull up a pew.”

Hector sits, grunting, on the bare ground. I sit beside him, watching the figures on the far cliff watching us. There is nothing else to do.

“Wish we’d brought the picnic basket,” he says after a while.

“Hmph.”

“Pincher Martin ate seaweed on his rock. I guess we could eat – what is this stuff? – moss.”

“You can eat moss. I’m sitting here till we’re rescued.”

I can be stubborn when I want to be. No one seems to be doing anything. More busses arrive on the far escarpment. There seems to be lots of excitement over there. I guess we can already divide our ordeal, in the manner of the marooned, into the time before we sat down and the time after we sat down. It is, in my experience, an unprecedented situation.

It’s strange how ideas come into Hector’s head, because out of the blue he says:

“I wonder if this means there are now nine Apostles?”

“Oh shut up Hector. I’m cold.”

“Do you want my jacket?”

“And have you catch your death again!”

There is a modicum of warmth where our shoulders touch. Uncharacteristically he puts his arm around me and gently squeezes.

“Buck up old duck.”

“Don’t call me old duck.”

“Do you know these limestone stacks were formed during the Neogene period between five and twenty-three million years ago.”

“How do you know that?”

“I read a brochure last night.”

“Well that’s not going to help us get off.”

“The cliffs and stone stacks erode two centimeters a year. That figure must be an average because that bit -” he waves his arm “- just eroded about two hundred metres in one go.”

“That’s not reassuring.”

“No.”

He glances around to make sure we are quite in the middle.

“Hector?”

“Yes Caroline.”

“I need to go to the loo.”

“You should have gone before we came across.”

“You saw that queue. You were the one who said we’d just nip over and back.”

“Don’t get snappy with me. I didn’t know the blasted bridge was going to collapse.”

“Neither did I.”

Silence for a while. He looks east. I look west. A seagull lands on our island and glares at us as if to say *Where are your sandwiches?* A part of me wonders, in the

manner of the marooned, *if only I were a seagull*, but I am aware there is no profit to be had from this train of thought.

I shift uncomfortably on my bottom.

“Try to take your mind off it,” says Hector.

“All right for you to say.”

“Do you realize we are the first people ever to set foot on this island.”

“And the last. No one in their right mind would shimmy up forty metre cliffs to say ooh look there’s nothing here.”

“I’m trying to be helpful Caroline.”

“Well you’re not.”

Pause.

“Shall we play *I Spy*?”

“Shut up.”

“Don’t you have a post card? We could fill that in.”

“I don’t have a pen.”

“Just like Pincher Martin, ha ha.”

We watch the clouds for a while. One could get too used to that.

“Do you know that the Twelve Apostles used to be called the Sow and the Piglets.”

“Why did they change it?”

“Not grand enough. I don’t know. Why do they change anything?”

I am beginning to wonder what might happen if we have to spend the night here. That thought is too awful to contemplate. Surely someone on the mainland is telephoning for assistance.

“I guess we have naming rights,” I say, “What shall we call it, our island?”

“That’s the girl. Let’s put on our thinking caps.”

The sweet chardonnay breeze at our backs has turned into an Antarctic gale. It's freezing, all the way from the South Pole. Perhaps the Twelve (nine) Apostles are icebergs that looked back at Lot's wife?

"Thinking caps will blow off in this hurricane," I say.

"What about – The Windy Isle."

"The Island of Hector Moreau."

"Nice," says Hector. "The Sandwichless Island."

"Island With No Trees. Or toilets."

"Or banks. Or anything. We can create civilization anew."

"I was perfectly happy with civilization the way it was, and then you had to drag me off in a silly campervan."

Hector is not listening. He is getting into the swing of things. He waves his arm grandly about the new, treeless island.

"King and Queen of all they survey."

"Shut up Hector... I don't think I can hold on much longer."

"Steady on old girl. I think some of those people over there have telephoto lenses. We'll be on the front page of the local rag for sure."

Hector is laughing at me. His shoulders are quietly shaking. We could not be more estranged if we were on a desert isle in the middle of the Pacific with a lone palm tree between us. I wonder if I could push him off the edge and blame it on the wind, but there appear to be too many witnesses with telephoto lenses.

"What am I going to do? I'll get cystitis if I hang on any more."

The sound of the waves far below is an agony.

"You'll just have to hide behind me."

"Oh my Gawd."

There is nothing else for it. I slowly ease my way behind Hector so we are sitting, well – squatting, back to back. I would give a lot for a palm tree right now. Hector is a slight man so there is not a lot of him to hide behind. He spreads wide the wings of his jacket like a cormorant. I make adjustments to my dress and nether garments and the relief is immediate and profound.

Hector calls out: “Island of Pissing in the Wind.”

I jab my elbow backwards and make satisfying contact with his kidneys.

“Ouch.”

The edge is just there. So easy. The blue lake, yesterday, had been tempting.

At that moment we hear the chest thumping *whap whap whap* of a helicopter approaching from the Peterborough direction.

“Better hurry up old girl. Here comes the cavalry.”

“I am hurrying.”

I pray, please don’t let them have a TV crew. I smooth my dress down. Hector folds his wings. I guess the Antarctic gale is not quite as windy as I thought because the helicopter, with a sightseeing logo painted on the side, descends towards us. We have to shuffle away from the centre of the island to give it room. This is terrifying because the cliffs seem much bigger than they did when I first looked at them. Precipitous, I think is the word.

The helicopter does dance about in the wind a bit, but finally it touches down on the mossy rock. A search and rescue fellow, or maybe it is a fireman, jumps out and beckons us towards him. The tornado from the rotor blades plays havoc with my dress and my hair. I fear it will get caught in the propeller thingy and have me off, like a loaded Hills Hoist in a cyclone. It is a fair jump from the mossy rock up to the helicopter. I hang in the doorway. Hector and the fireman each get a shoulder underneath my ballast and heave. I tumble head first up and into the chopper, sprawling all over the floor. Then Hector is there beside me, clinging to my arm and the pilot turns to us with a grin and a thumbs up.

It is hard to believe how short that helicopter flight is. How short and how joyless. I wonder if I could tip Hector out the open door, blame the blustery conditions, but he already has a seat belt on. In a very brief interlude he learns that the reason the pilot took so long was that he was out surfing. My hair has barely settled by the time we touch down on the other side. The mainland. Civilization. I am still deeply flushed at the indignity of my rescue. There is an ambulance and the fellow gives us both the once over. They place blankets about our shoulders and ask a few questions, but there is not much to say, really, about being stuck on a limestone rock for a few hours with nothing on it but a seagull. Hector makes a joke about returning from exile, about eating moss. People are more interested in photographing the collapsed bridge. That is, its absence. Pretty soon they let us go, and I am more than happy to fade into the general background of the afternoon where the idea of the front page is nothing but a bad dream.

We wander, light-headedly, over to the campervan. When the doors close the snug fit encloses us like an embrace. It is very quiet. The wind muffled. We both breathe softly together. Another tourist coach arrives and spews out a load of happy photographers. The sea has returned to its normal colour. The approaching dusk is painting the Twelve Apostles a rusty orange. Endless rhythm of the waves.

“Only a little hurt pride, eh Caroline?”

“Only.”

“Something to tell the grandkids.”

I grunt. The isthmus between us. I am sure my hair must look a fright. Eventually Hector reaches into the back of the van and hoists the picnic basket onto his lap. He opens it. He hands me a tin mug. He pours. The tea is still warm.

“Thermos Island,” he says, and it’s just the two of us once more.