

Making the Break

(Excerpt)

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The entire season was a fascinating experiment in the vagaries of human nature. Psychoanalysts would have had a field day. More often than not it was the families who came separately who got on the best. Those that booked the whole chalet, filling it with their old college friends or their children's school friends, often had an extremely trying time as relationships exploded.

We had several weeks where lifelong friends were no longer talking to each other by midweek, and dinner was conducted as if in a Trappist monastery. Then Simon and I became very popular as the only people any of them could talk to, and a way to funnel essential messages to each other about picking children up from ski school, or the time of the transfer bus home. No one ever actually walked out before the end of the week, but sometimes we would have liked them to.

When we tried to explain to French friends in the village what we did, and how the chalet operated, they could not understand it at all.

"You mean all these people, who don't know each other, all eat together," they queried, aghast.

We nodded: "That's kind of the point. To go away and meet new people in a family atmosphere." But the very idea was anathema to the French, and they never did understand it, even if they could see the commercial sense, as we regularly sent four families a week into their shops and bars while other chalet companies were half empty, or worse, in the off-peak weeks.

Despite our tour brochure protestations that it was the perfect way to holiday, we, and, therefore our clients, too, witnessed all forms of selfishness, arrogance, bad manners, indifference and outright rudeness, not to mention bad parenting. While we were by no means model parents ourselves, as an outsider it was easy to spot the alienated, put-upon, and downright disturbed children.

At the same time we were privileged to spend time in the company of some delightful people, with stunningly well-behaved children who put ours to shame. I will always remember one man, who's four and five year-old sons had climbed the sheer wall next to the chalet and were just hanging there, asking them to get down firmly, but very politely, and always using the word 'please'. In the same situation I am sure I would have screamed like a fishwife.

We learned a lot in those first few months, both in terms of what to do as an effective parent, and what not to do; lessons we continue to apply to this day.

We also gained a thorough medical knowledge of human allergies.

The vegan, vegetarian, diabetic, milk-intolerant, celiac week was not to be repeated, but most weeks we had some form of food problem to be catered for.

Nut allergy was the one we were most careful of because, in the worst cases, it was a killer. We were fully insured in terms of third party liability, but it was an awful responsibility. My little sister had a nut allergy so I knew the dangers well, and in the first four weeks of the season we had already played host to two children with the condition. Elin and I had therefore been tutored twice in the use of an epi-pen. So when a fully-grown woman turned up that week and explained she was allergic to nuts we were well prepared.

"Don't worry at all," we assured her. "Nearly all our food is home cooked so it is

no problem at all to make sure you are not eating something you shouldn't."

That was another of the benefits of cooking almost everything from scratch, and keeping pre-packaged ready-meals to a minimum. However a lifetime of being careful was obviously a hard habit to break and this lady would regularly ask, as each plate of food was set in front of her: "Does this have nuts in?"

We would run through the checklist of ingredients in our head, just to reassure ourselves as much as her, and then tell her that it hadn't. By the third or fourth day though our patience was running a bit thin, especially as I had been carrying the load alone with Simon suffering from bronchitis, and Jack alternating between a temperature of 104 degrees and being absolutely fine. My ribs were also beginning to hurt like crazy as the broken bones began to heal. What a family we were!

One evening, I served a perfectly-browned rhubarb crumble, and I had not even got it to the table before she trilled: "Does it have nuts in?"

"No," I sighed. It was of course wrong of me to be exasperated with her given it could be a matter of life or death.

That evening I retired to bed with my ring-binder of menus to plan for the following week when we were expecting another group of vegetarians. Simon, beginning to feel a little brighter for the first time in days, had wandered off to the bar. The male clients had gone there too. The women said they would enjoy an early night.

As I leafed through the pages of the latest cookery magazine my eyes fell on the crumble recipe I had just served. The line "3 ounces of almonds" jumped out at me as if it was written in neon.

Oh my Lord!

Thinking back now, I distinctly remembered dipping my hand in the almond jar and sprinkling them over the crumble mixture. Why hadn't I remembered that, or even thought about it as I had done it? I had no excuse.

I leapt out of bed, scattering recipes all over the floor, and pulled on some clothes. What was I going to do? The woman might even be dead already.

I ran down to the guest bedrooms on the first floor. All the doors were shut and no sound came from the inside. I pressed my ear to the wood of her door. I am not sure what I expected to hear. The death rattle perhaps? I could hear nothing. I was now faced with the choice of knocking on her door and confessing my crime or slinking back up to bed and hoping no one would find out. Like a coward I chose the latter.

I lay in bed, willing Simon to come back from the bar. I needed his solid strength to calm me down. My imagination was running wild. Every five minutes I was sure I heard a vehicle come up our drive and slew to an urgent halt. I could have sworn I heard car doors bang and people entering the house. An ambulance crew perhaps, or the police! Twice I even went to the window to look out, convinced I would see her being taken away on a gurney. There was nothing out there of course.

Simon didn't come back until two o'clock in the morning. I pounced on him as he came through the door. Had he returned with the men? Yes. Had they all gone to bed already? Yes. Had he heard anything from the first floor? Talking, breathing, screaming? He insisted it was all as quiet as the grave. The color drained completely from my face.

I expected him to laugh at my paranoia, assure me that she would have choked and died immediately at the table, and tell me to go to sleep. But he didn't. Instead he too looked scared but said that there was nothing we could do until morning so we should go to bed. He promptly fell asleep. How do men do that?

I lay awake all night planning my defense. I would simply have to come clean and

tell the police that I had done it. I would tell them that I was tired, wound up, very stressed and didn't know what I was doing. People guilty of homicide can always claim diminished responsibility, can't they? By four o'clock in the morning, I had changed tack. I would just deny any knowledge of any nuts in the crumble. The guests had eaten every scrap and we had washed up the pan. There was no forensic evidence remaining. They would never know it was directly my fault. Satisfied I could pull it off I let my eyes drift close. They shot open seconds later.

The autopsy! They would find the almonds in an autopsy and might even be able to place the exact time she had eaten them. I was doomed. Would I be tried for homicide or manslaughter? Given she had warned me in advance, could my actions be deemed premeditated?

I was pacing the lounge by five o'clock, willing the guests to get up. I could handle the consequences now. Anything was better than this interminable situation of not knowing. No one appeared until just after eight o'clock, and then they all came piling up the stairs at once, but not the lady in question. I served tea and coffee with shaking hands. The woman's husband seemed bright and cheery enough and I took heart from that.

"Will your wife be coming up for breakfast?" I asked him finally, with as much indifference as I could muster.

"Oh I don't know. When the kids and I got up she was sleeping like the dead." My heart turned cartwheels.

Another hour passed. I was beginning to suffer palpitations. Her husband and children had already left for ski school and I was going to have to investigate. If she was dead we were all going to find out sooner or later. With leaden legs I moved towards the stairs, only to see her coming towards me. She was still in her nightgown and robe with her long hair splayed over her shoulders, but she WAS walking.

"Hi there", I said, hardly daring to believe what I was seeing. "You okay?"

"Absolutely," she beamed back at me. "Best sleep I have had all holiday. Nearly 12 hours straight."

"I thought you might be unwell," I said weakly.

"No, no." She brushed past me, heading for the breakfast table. "I've never felt better."

I went back into the kitchen, leaned against the cooker and felt my knees turn to jelly. I was so relieved I wanted to cry. Now there was no danger of Elin being deemed an accomplice to homicide, or manslaughter, I told her what had happened. In true Welsh spirit she laughed like a drain. It took a couple of months before I, myself, was able to laugh at the tale.

The piece de resistance came that same day during afternoon tea. I had cooked a cherry cake, deliberately omitting almonds from the recipe. As three of the mothers tucked into the cake, one mentioned that she knew this recipe, but she usually decorated her cake with almonds on the top.

"So do I usually," I explained. "But I left off the almonds because of your friend's nut allergy."

At this point the woman in question turned to me.

"Oh," she started. "I'm sorry Sarah, I forgot to tell you. I'm fine with almonds. They don't affect me at all. It's just other nuts I can't have. Isn't that funny?"

Funny was not the word I had in mind.