

WHAT'S THAT IN THE WATER, MUMMY?

“What’s that in the water, Mummy?” Sophie struggled to wake up from her sleep by the water’s edge as five-year-old Tammy shook her by the shoulder. “What is it?” she repeated in her shrill little voice.

Sophie looked at her daughter and then squinted across at her husband, who was busy reading his newspaper. Why was it that children always seemed to ask Mummy for something even when it was quite inconvenient, like when she was on the loo, for heaven’s sake?

Sophie was dead tired and badly needed some serious rest and relaxation so she was enjoying her rest here on the south coast: well, she was entitled to, wasn’t she, after all the trauma they had gone through with the trial. They had decided to come down here to the south coast for a short break to recharge their batteries. They had rented a delightful self-catering unit in an old part of town in a refurbished row of old fishermen’s cottages (well, the cottages were old, not necessarily the fishermen). The weather had proved to be beautiful and she loved getting up and walking along to the bakery to buy fresh rolls for breakfast, which they enjoyed with butter and jam, or continental-style with cheese and ham, while sitting on the small balcony outside the lounge window and above the small garden below.

She believed that they were safe here from retaliation from the gang that had hounded her husband but she was still wary and looked carefully up and down the street for any unexpected out-of-place people who might be pursuing them.

That was the trouble with doing the right thing. As the saying goes, ‘no good deed goes unpunished’ and she and David had had their basinful.

It had started when they were out for a walk in the Saturday market of the London suburb where they lived. That was their ritual at the weekend: the market in the morning, somewhere to take Sophie to play in the afternoon and then the evening down at the local pub, with Maisie their teenage neighbour coming in to babysit. That was a treat for Sophie too because Maisie was only too happy to play board games with her all evening if required and sometimes brought some of her own clothes so that she could play dressing up.

The trouble had all begun on one of these visits. It had been a special French-themed day, with stall holders from France coming over to entice the English with their baguettes, pastries and even hot boeuf

bourgignon that could be purchased to eat from polystyrene bowls as they walked round. Bunting in red, white and blue had been festooned in the section where they had been placed by the authorities and the stall-holders were wearing boater hats decorated with tricolour ribbon and sporting large white aprons tied round their waists.

The family had been strolling up and down the aisles before they became aware of a commotion going on in one of the neighbouring lanes. A group of youths was harassing a pretty young French woman setting things out on one of the stalls with the stallholder looking on in the background. “Eillo, ow are yoooo”, they mocked in faux-French accents.

She looked a bit doubtful at this cheekiness but tried to respond in kind.

“Marianne,” she replied hesitantly.

“Oh! Mari-anne, marry me,” said the leader of the group and they all giggled and jostled each other with high fives and fist bumps but the exchange moved on from supposed banter to one of the boys making physical contact, darting forward and kissing her on the cheek while patting her on the bottom.

“Oy, clear orf,” responded the ‘Frenchman’ as he noticed this enforced intimacy, indicating that they were either not necessarily all from across the Channel or that he had been to England before and picked up some of the vernacular.

“Oo are you to tell us orf” they mimicked in return and now a young man emerged from the van containing produce that was standing behind their stall. He was quite large and brawny and had obviously been hearing all that had been going on and decided that enough was enough.

“Go on, buzz off,” he added to the conversation, rolling up his sleeves. By now a crowd had gathered round and the youths, puffed up with their own importance, were ‘playing to the gallery’.

So now David stepped forward and intervened. “Come on, guys, leave the lady alone,” he said mildly. As a policeman he was used to dealing with situations like these and tried to defuse them.

By now, however, some of the guys’ other mates had gathered round the crowd, anxious to lend support to their pals, and soon a punch-up ensued with blows being exchanged. The brawny young man received a nasty punch to the nose and Marianne was in tears. People were crashing into the stall and croissants and gâteaux were falling and being trodden into the pavement. Many of the bystanders

hurried away, shepherding their families with them, but those who were left had now taken out their mobile 'phones and were either videoing the ruckus or calling 999. At this the boys started to scatter but David managed to catch hold of one and pin him to the ground with his arms behind his back and the Police were able to march him off.

A trial ensued, at which David was obliged to attend as a witness, and not only were the boys in the dock but the police's investigations had found that they were part of a much larger gang involving theft and knife crime. Those men were also found guilty and that was when the harassment of the family began. Somehow their address was learned by the gang and they were subjected to anonymous 'phone calls and malicious letters threatening all sorts of retribution and even death threats if David did not retract his statement, or water down the course of events, which obviously he had refused to do. It had been very stressful for all of them.

So now they had come down to this Sussex town to rest and get back to normality before David took up his constabulary duties once again the following Monday morning. Sophie and Tammy had loved the towns – the narrow lanes, going to the fish market in the morning to see the catch and walking along the shore before having an ice cream at either one of the stalls along the front or in the ice cream parlour in the town. The sea air had done them all good and at last they were relaxing from the continuing barrage of threats to which they had been subjected.

"Come on, Mummy, what is it?" repeated Tammy with increasing urgency, her insistent voice dragging Sophie reluctantly back into the here-and-now.

Sophie blinked through half-closed, filmy eyes at whatever it was floating in the sea that was gently lapping the edge of the shore that had caught Tammy's attention. She'd been pestered all afternoon with questions about this and that, while her husband dozed blissfully in his deckchair.

She sighed but reined in her impatience. "It looks a bit like a football, but apart from that I'm sorry, love: I haven't the faintest idea," she mumbled in reply. She smiled sweetly at her daughter and nodded her head towards David, who she could see from her peripheral vision was still lying in his deckchair, the newspaper he had been reading splayed over his chest. She prodded him in the side "Why don't you ask daddy, and we'll talk about it later" and thus having skilfully passed the buck she sank back in her own deckchair into the sweet oblivion of sleep, only vaguely conscious of the rising buzz of conversation around her and completely unaware of the unexploded WWII mine that was gently bobbing around on the incoming tide.