

Chapter 11 - Tuscany

(2003 to 2004)

Contents

All Shook Up.....	272
The American Recreational Vehicle, an RV.....	274
Life on the Road.....	275
Looking for a New Home.....	277
No. 1 Fontenado.....	278
Autumn in Tuscany.....	280
Winter Quarters.....	281
The Return to Blighty.....	285
A Home in Tuscany.....	288
Jenny's fit.....	290
Winter Sets In.....	291
Starting to Unravel.....	293
On the Move Again.....	295
Memory Litter Bin.....	297

(6th May 2014 – Penang)

All Shook Up

Returning from our latest fun trip to Tuscany to the monotony of our life at No. 19 was just a bit too much for me to bear. I came to the view that I had set up No. 19 to be far too comfortable and although I had thought though how things should be there for Jenny, I had not factored in my own needs. I had gone from a very active and creative period in my life to a full stop in a very short space of time. At No. 19 there wasn't the room to do any of my hobbies, even the Morgan sat in a pristine garage and she did not need my attention in the same way the older Morgans I had owned. I had tried to fill the void. I had taken to learning Italian but was clearly failing to make any headway at all in being able to speak the language. The Italian course I had found had offered great hope for me to actually realise a life's ambition to speak another tongue other than English. It promised to teach you the language via purely audio means without any bookwork. It was not working for me though. I also attempted to take up 1/24 scale dollhouse modelling, but there really was no room for a workshop in the bungalow and the small scale did not really appeal to me as much as the 1/12 scale. I had nothing to do. I decided it was time to make some changes to our lives.

I say changes but in reality, I completely dismantled the security I had created for Jenny at No. 19 and put in its place a roller coaster of a ride of uncertainty. In a matter of six weeks over that summer of 2003, I had sold No. 19, bought a retirement bungalow in West Bridgford, Nottingham and was heading south through France towards Tuscany in a 28-foot American Recreational Vehicle towing a utility van.

I suppose the catalyst for this seismic shift in our domestic arrangements came from Polly volunteering to come and help me to take care of her mum fulltime. There was no way that she could do that by her coming to live with us in No. 19., though. After looking at a few alternatives ways in which we could share in caring for Jenny, we decided that it would be best if I were to sell No. 19 and move over to live in Nottingham. Polly had been living in Nottingham for three years by this time and had set up a life for herself there, which included her new boyfriend, Karim. I, by way of contrast, had no life outside the four walls of the bungalow. Polly also decided to abandon her degree course at the university. She had become disenchanted with the photography degree curriculum there and opted to leave the university at the end of the summer term. This would at least mean she had something to show for her first two years work, a Diploma in Photography. The initial idea was that Polly and I would take turns looking after Jenny on a shift basis, each of us using Polly's rented flat in West Bridgford town centre as a place to stay when either of us was 'off duty'.

The sale of No. 19 took no time at all. I had engaged the services of a local estate agent to sell the property who recommended a £174,000 asking price for the bungalow, which came as a bit of a shock to say the least. I had bought the place for only £65,000 just 18 months

before and although I had spent over £50,000 doing the place up, still, to make a £60,000 profit was amazing. And more amazingly, the bungalow was sold even before the agent had gotten around to putting details of No. 19 in their properties-for-sale portfolio and this buyer agreed to pay the full asking price. The £60,000 cash windfall had me thinking that perhaps I could become a property developer myself, specialising in doing up dilapidated old bungalows such as No. 19 had been. I reasoned that there was likely to be an increasing demand for such properties in the near future as the baby boomers of my generation took to retirement and downsized from their family homes. Polly, Karim and I did look at the property market in the Nottingham area for suitable candidates but before we could really evaluate the property developer idea, I set off on a completely different tack and resurrected the idea of buying a property in Tuscany again. I really did come to feel that it was far better for both Jenny and I that we still had a bit of an edge to our lives. What was the point of Jenny spending the last few years of her life caged like an animal in the zoo? Why not take a risk, get out and back on the road?



The RV with the wheelchair van.

I was reminded of how impressed I had been with Mandy's RV the time we met up with her and the Cooper family in France a couple of years previously. If I could find an RV suitable to adapt to Jenny's care needs, that would be an ideal way to travel to and stay in Tuscany whilst we were looking for a house to buy. After a couple of visits to RV dealers in the Midlands, I did find such a vehicle and by chance, it was the same model that Mandy had had. Mandy's vehicle had been fitted with a

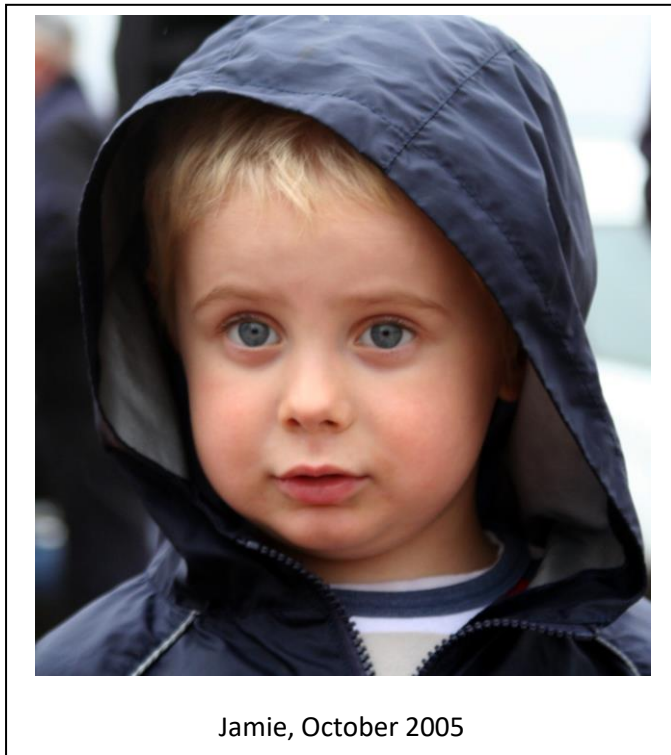
tow ball so that they could tow a small car behind the RV. I could do the same with this RV to tow the disability van that we now had. I had to sell the lovely Ford Puma after Jenny made a grab for the steering wheel as we were driving home from the supermarket in Stone one day. It came as a complete surprise and had us almost mounting the pavement. Thankfully, there was nobody walking past the car at the time and no damage was done but it shook me enough to decide to exchange the Puma for a utility vehicle which could accommodate Jenny sat in her wheelchair. The wheelchair vehicle I found was ex-National Health Service and was equipped with two rear seats in addition to the fittings to anchor the wheelchair to the floor. All a bit of a come down from the Puma but it had to be.

By the end of July, I exchanged contracts on 19 Stuarts Close North, bought 9 Beaver Green in West Bridgeford, moved 147 to Mandy's place in Hooke, Dorset for storage, bought and fitted out an RV..... a busy time. Instead of staying in the newly acquired bungalow at No. 9, I opted to stay in the RV on the Smeaton Lakes campsite near Newark, just to the north

east of Nottingham. This way we would at least get used to living in a 28-foot motor home for a few weeks before we set off south for Italy.

The American Recreational Vehicle, an RV

It might be worth telling here of the RV's many charms. An RV is effectively a small bungalow built on a lorry chassis. Our particular model had a bedroom at the rear of the van with twin beds arranged against the RV's sidewalls. Moving towards the front of the RV you passed a toilet on your left and a shower unit on your right before entering the galley fitted with a large American style fridge, and gas cooker, including an oven. Moving further forward you entered the living space with a dining table, which converted into a double bed for the night's sleep. This being an American built RV, the driver's seat was on the left of the vehicle with a captain's chair on the right for a passenger to sit. Both seats swivelled to face the living area once you had parked up for the night. For entertainment, there was a built in TV in the centre panel above the windscreen with a video player connected. For comfort,



the van was fitted with both a heater and an air conditioning unit, the latter would be much appreciated after a hot Tuscan day out in the sun. The van was powered by a large diesel engine which would deliver around 12 to 15 miles to the gallon, not exactly cheap to run. The comforts of the RV interior could be powered by either an LPG gas driven 220-volts generator located at the rear of the van or via a 220-volt plug-in socket to be used at camping site pitches where these were available. The fridge could run either directly by the LPG or by the 220-volt electricity supply. Clever guys these Americans. Wastewater was held in

a storage tank under the floor of the van to be emptied at septic tanks once we had pitched up for the night. As it turned out, once we hit the road with the fresh water, diesel and LPG tank fully charged and the wastewater tank empty, we were able to be self-sufficient for up to three full days before we needed to dump the waste water and refill our tanks.

There was an issue about getting Jenny into and out of the RV given that you had to climb up a number of steps to gain access to the living space. I at first solved the problem by using a couple of large up turned plastic plant pots to support wooden ramps up which I could push Jenny in her wheelchair between the van and the RV. As you can see from the

photograph, it was not a very elegant solution but as luck would have it a new hydraulic scissor lift had just come on the market which solved our little access problem very neatly.

Just before we set off for Tuscany, you Jamie, with your mum and Rick came to visit us at the campsite. You were all staying at No. 9 for the weekend having driven over from Leamington Spa where you were living at that time. You had just turned two.

Life on the Road

On the 21st August, Polly, Jenny and I said goodbye to the friends we had made during our months stay on the Smeaton Lakes campsite and set off for Dover to take the car ferry across the channel to Calais. But not before we had done our usual stopover in East London to say farewell to Ruth and Richard. We parked the RV at a Camping and Caravanning Club site in Abbey Woods, Bexley. I had joined the Camping Club as I knew they offered the best in terms of camping facilities with power points available on the pitches into which I would be able to plug the RV's electrics. The C. C. Club website also had recommendations for camping sites on mainland Europe that I made good use of in planning our trip south through France and Italy. During our stay in East London, we took the opportunity to drive the wheelchair van up into central London, using the disabled drivers certificate we had to get free access to the London central zone area. We visited the Tate Modern and crossed the Millennium Bridge, anticipating that this could be the last time we would in London for quite some time. Ruth and Richard came around for dinner on the eve of our departure on our new European adventure. I have to say that I was quite pleased with myself at being able to knock up a reasonable meal for the five of us in such a small, confined kitchen.



Coucy Castle

(7th May – Penang)

Once across the Channel and we were on the French E17 motorway heading yet again towards Reims. The RV was in its element, being now driven on a right-hand drive, open road of the type it had been designed for. It had come as a surprise to me that I could use my standard car-driving license to drive such a large vehicle. Furthermore, I could straight away drive it off the garage forecourt the day I parted

with my money without any requirement for training or even in a cursory run through of the do's and don'ts when behind the wheel of this monster. Taking the 28-foot long, 8-foot-wide RV onto the M5 followed by the M6 at rush hour for the drive home that day without even having had a test drive around the industrial estate roads was not just a little nerve jangling. Well, OK then, exciting. But now on the French motorway, using the cruise control feature and driving on the right side of the road for the left-hand drive RV, it felt brilliant.

For the first couple of nights after leaving England, we camped at a small site in Gauchy, on the outskirts of St. Quentin. I had a mind to revisit Coucy-le-Château-Auffrique just to the south of St. Quentin where I had been based on that UN International camp during my first university summer vacation thirty-six years ago. The chateau appeared to be just as I had remembered it, although a little tidier now than back in 1966. It is a UN site designated as "a memorial to barbarity", a reference to the retreating Germany army blowing up the castles medieval tower in March 1917. Next, we drove onto Reims to visit the cathedral and see the city sights. This was the second time we had used the wheelchair van on an outing whilst the RV stayed parked up at the campsite and it really did feel now like you had a 'home' to return to after a 'day's outing'.

Our second night's stop over was on the French side of the France/Swiss border. I had opted to cross into Italy via the Mount Blanc tunnel for this trip. The road leading up to the tunnel gives you quite spectacular views of the mountains and once onto the elevated roadway leading up to the tunnel's entrance, a fabulous view down the L'Arve river valley.



We were very lucky that day to have a crystal-clear atmosphere without a hint of a haze. At the tollbooth at the tunnel entrance, I was told that I would not be able to drive through the tunnel towing the wheelchair van and that it would have to be driven through separately. So, there we were stuck in the tollbooth's lane unable to go forward and unable to reverse. The only thing to be done was for us to unhitch the van from the RV there and then have Polly drive it through the tunnel on her own. I can just imagine the comments

from the drivers stuck in the queue we had created behind us whilst we did the unhitching and preparing the van to be driven, a process that seemed to take forever. But the guys at the toll booth were all jolly Italians and seemed very amused by the incident we had created, helping us to unhitch the van to get us underway again. Poor old Polly was, not surprisingly, a bit nervous about driving the wheelchair van through the tunnel. But we both made it safely through to the other side and into Italy where we pulled over into a lay-by at the tunnel's exit to re-couple the wheelchair van to the RV. I must say, our spirits lifted and to celebrate our arrival in Italy again and surviving the tunnel ordeal we brewed up and sat admiring the Aosta Glacier's moraine. Quite an impressive sight.

Our next stop was to be at a campsite at Iseo on the side of the lake with the same name, the fourth largest of the Northern Italian lakes and to my mind the prettiest. By the time we reached the town, dusk was gathering and after a wrong turn in the town centre we found ourselves driving along the waterfront passing shore-side cafes full of people having their

dinner. A bit of a surprise for them to see a 45-foot RV and towed van combo driving down the narrow esplanade. The campsite was tightly packed with tents and caravans, all very close to one another. The entrance to the site was off a narrow lakeside lane and our allotted pitch was quite a challenge for me to get the RV onto. A lot of shunting backwards and forwards to be done.



Northern Italy is renowned for its heavily industrialised towns but in between there are several stunning lakes. Lake Iseo remains one of outstanding natural beauty, with its lush green mountains surrounding the crystal-clear lake. Being surrounded by high mountains, the lake is subject to sudden squalls that can appear as if from out of nowhere. One evening as we were strolling along the campsite's waterfront, we noticed a line across the head of the lake, looking for all the world like a grey curtain. It suddenly dawned on us that this was an approaching squall and hotfooted it back to the RV to reel in the awning. We just about made it before the winds hit the campsite causing a bit of panic amongst the campers, catching many unaware as it did.

We stayed four nights in Iseo taking the opportunity to visit Verona, a first time for me and other sites of interest around the lake. From Iseo, we drove on down to Pisa where we were planning to set up a base to scour the Tuscany countryside for a suitable property to buy.

(8th May – Penang)

Looking for a New Home

The campsite I had found in Pisa was along the Via Pietrasantina only ten or so minutes' walk to the famous leaning tower. I say was because, sadly, the campsite is no more, with the land having been turned into one enormous coach park from which the visiting tourists are taken by those hideous little road trains to see the leaning tower. Terrible. After a week or so of seeing the sights in and around Pisa, we set about viewing properties that might be suitable for us to buy. I had come across a website-based estate agent, which specialised in holiday homes for Brits that was fronted by an English woman. I suspected that the outfit might be a bit dodgy, but if I was careful, they might be useful in finding us a place to buy.

As the agent was based in the northern part of Tuscany, in the Liguria region, we got to view quite a few properties there, but this was by no means the only area we searched. As before, the problem was again finding a place which was single storey or at least had a bathroom and bedroom on the ground floor and was accessible directly off the street. We became acquainted with most of the towns around Pisa, Luca and Pistoia to the north east, Carrara, and Massa up on the Ligurian coast. But all to no avail. Just as we were losing heart and thinking this house buying in Tuscany was a no go, the northern agent called us to say that she had found the ideal property for us in the mountains to the north of Aulla, in a village called Fontenado. She arranged a visit for us.



No. 1 Fontenado

The drive up through the forested mountain slopes to Fontenado from Aulla is quite something with several steep hairpin bends, not quite as bad as taking the jeep up Penang Hill, but interesting enough to have us thinking, “What is this lady taking us to see”. Particularly when we dropped off what was a reasonable metaled road down a steep slope onto a track into the trees. The house we were going to see was the first one

you come to as you leave the forest. A large, modern, single storey bungalow with an exceptional, uninterrupted view across the Magra Valley to the Apuane Mountain range. As soon as we passed through the front door of the bungalow, it was clear to both Polly and me that this was what we had been looking for, a large open plan arrangement for the living area with two small bedrooms and two larger rooms that could be adapted as additional bedrooms or sitting rooms. And as a bonus, we could move straight in without having to do any renovation work. We had found our Tuscany home.

No. 1 Fontenado

The current owners of the house, an elderly couple in their 60's, were looking to move to a flat in Lerici on the coast just south of La Spezia. The husband had heart problems and his wife felt they would be better off in a small apartment in a town rather than a large bungalow in the hills. The asking price for the property was within my budget, if a little on the top side of it, but I reasoned that since there being no work to be done on the place to make it suitable for Jenny's needs, it was a 'goer'. Polly and I drove back to Pisa that afternoon on cloud nine. After dreaming about a place in Tuscany for the last two years, it seemed that at last it was about to happen.

Buying a house in a foreign land puts you onto a very steep learning curve to understand the laws and customs governing the ownership of land and property there. We had only our estate agent to guide us through the buying process on the ground, but I did try to triangulate the advice she was giving us as we passed through the different phases of the transaction. I already had a bank account in the Monte Dei Paschi di Siena Banc's branch in Forcoli, just down the hill from Colleoli. The agent for the Colleoli property had helped me set it up two years ago. I had been that serious about buying the apartment there. Even the Italian banking system was quite different to the UK's, being very bureaucratic, it reminding me of how UK banks used to operate before the widespread introduction of computer networking had revolutionized their working methods. The equivalent of our UK solicitor in the Italian legal system is the Public Notary but a Notary does seem to have much more clout than his UK counterpart. Notaries are seen as pillars of the local community, and their plush offices testify to their earning power.

Once we had agreed on a price for the bungalow, the only thing left for us to do was to return to the campsite in Pisa and wait for the paperwork to be prepared by the Notary for the property transfer between the two parties. One curious aspect in passing over the money to buy the bungalow was that I was asked to break the law. I was asked to provide 20% of the funds for the house in an unrecorded cash payment, which would not show on the properties transfer document. This was a widespread tax fiddle whereby any property



The view towards the sea from Volterra

tax due from the sale of the bungalow would be reduced for the seller. This would mean that somehow, I had to get £20,000 in Euro dollars into the country unrecorded by the custom authorities. I was being asked to break the law twice, once by importing into Italy a large amount of undeclared cash and second by going along with an illegal tax fiddle. I did make a few enquires and apparently this form of tax fiddle was commonplace, and a blind eye was turned by the notaries when the day came to meet in his office to complete the transfer contract.

What to do to get the cash into the country? After a little thought, I came up with a cunning plan. I invited Ruth and Richard and later, Mark and Gail to come and visit us on our Pisa campsite. The cunning bit was that they would exchange £10,000 I would deposit into their English bank accounts into Euros and bring the money out with them to Pisa in their luggage as cash. This amount was below the maximum allowed without declaration on entry to Italy and so I was not asking them to do anything illegal, well not in the strictest sense illegal. And they agreed to do it. The Pisa campsite apart from the normal camping and caravan

pitches also had rentable chalets on the site, ideal for two people to stay. To sweeten the deal, I subbed them the accommodation and we would take them out-and-about on tours of Tuscany. Good deal, yes?

(10th May 2014)

Autumn in Tuscany

Jenny loved to be on the road. On the drive down to Pisa from the UK, she would sit in her captain's chair high above the road, quite contentedly watching the world go by for hour after hour without a murmur, invariably with a grin on her face. By way of contrast, once we had stopped for the night, she would become restless and walk endlessly up and down the RV until it was time to eat or to go to bed. By now, Jenny's condition had deteriorated to state where she no long spoke at all and we had to feed her meals. Alzheimer's takes a



The Piazza Anfiteatro and the Basilic di San Frediano in Lucca

person's faculties very slowly, step-by-step, and as a carer you accommodate each step by adapting to the new needs of the cared for which then becomes your new reality, your new normalcy. Looking back down Jenny's timeline, going from Head of Computer Research at Staffordshire University to being totally unable to do anything for herself in just four short years seems a steep, distressing decline. Only once in those four years did Jenny give any indication that she had any idea about what

was happening to her. She was sitting on the sofa in the rented holiday apartment in San Giniamo two years previously, when I noticed that she was weeping. When I asked her, what was the matter she asked me "Where has my career gone?" How to explain? You cannot. If Alzheimer's can ever be said to have a good side, it is that the sufferer, for the majority of the time at least, has no idea as to what is happening to them. As long as Jenny felt secure, she was contented. Not the case with all Alzheimer's sufferers, I know, but that was the way it was with Jenny.

The wheelchair van was ideal for taking our visitors on conducted tours around Tuscany, it being able to accommodate three passengers in addition to Jenny in her wheelchair, strapped to the van's floor behind. We took our visitors to our favourite places, Volterra, Lucca, the Cinque Terra and now to the northern area where we were going to live, close by La Spezia. Mark in particular came dressed for his part as a tourist, with colourful Bermuda shorts, calf length socks, baseball cap and his ever-ready video camera. We took Mark and Gail up to see the new bungalow and as we were walking up behind our prospective new property, we were spied by the current owners and invited in for a look around and have

light refreshments. This was only our second visit to the bungalow and thankfully, it still did float our boat. Both Polly and I felt reassured that this was definitely the place where the three of us could live.

We visited Lucca twice – first during Ruth’s visit and when Mark came with Gail. A very impressive defensive wall dating from the Renaissance era, some six hundred years ago, surrounds the old part of Lucca. I was reminded of Lucca as Gek and I walked along Xian city’s defensive wall in 2008. Xian’s wall, as you see it today, was also built in the 14th century. Amazing how two civilizations, half a world apart were engaged in the same activity at the same time, is it not?

Winter Quarters

After the distraction of our summer visitors, we three settled down to await the call from the estate agent to finalise the property transfer documents for No. 1, Fondenado. By the time our visitors had left, it was already mid-September and since the present incumbents of No. 1 had yet to find a flat in Lereci to buy, we could be in for a long wait. The Pisa campsite closed for the winter months at the end of September, which meant we would have to find an alternative pitch somewhere else in Tuscany or possibly take ourselves off on a little touring holiday, perhaps to Spain. I did find a camping site in Spain that looked



The Bocca di Magra park, great place for crêpes

ideal, being set up especially for motor homes such as ours but in the end, we decided to stick around the Liguria area and await the agents call. I could only find two sites in northern Tuscany that remained open thought the winter months, one at Ameglia in the Magra River valley not far from its estuary and the other in the hills above Sarzana. Access to the site above Sarzana seemed to me a little too steep for the RV and we opted to move to the Ameglia site at the end of

September.

This new campsite was nowhere near as nice as the Pisa site had been, a bit of a shambles really. And the shared facilities’, toilets and showers, were in a very poor state of repair and very dirty, dirty to the extent that I took to cleaning them myself to make them at all pleasant to use. More than a bit of a come down compared to the Pisa site. When we arrived to set up our pitch there, the only other campers were a family down on their luck, the father of the family having lost the family home in a bad day at the gambling tables. We only learnt of this family’s calamity a couple of weeks after we moved in when Polly befriended the son of the family. But we settled in and made the best of it. We had left it a

bit late in the day to up sticks and leg it to Spain. We could get the call to sign No.1's papers any day now. Well, as it turned out, we could have gone to Spain and back as the papers would not be ready for signing for the next five weeks or so. But our stay in Ameglia was anything but boring.

(11th May 2014)

The campsite was a small grassy field, about the size of a football pitch, with an avenue of large trees down the centre dividing the ground into two halves. With only the basic facilities available on we had to source a laundry and a food store, both of which we found



in the village. Important when contemplated a long-term camping stay, these basic needs to fulfil.

We soon established favourite places to visit in the area. In an evening, the Bocca di Magra Park at the mouth of the river for crêpes was always a real treat. We would sit in the park munching on the crêpes looking out down the coast towards Carrara and the Apuane Mountains behind, aglow with the setting sun's last rays.

Lerici, just south of La Spezia and not more than a twenty-minute drive from the campsite, was another favourite place. Now that the tourist season was over, the town was returned to the local inhabitants and the odd stray visitors like us. In July and August, the place is overrun with city dwellers escaping their concrete jungles but in so doing collectively destroying the solitude they were seeking. For ten months of the year Lerici is the quintessential Italy Mediterranean seaside town with the old and the young enjoying the quiet of the esplanade park after school is out. Under the castle you can see in the photograph there is a tunnel cut through the rock which takes you from the quayside through to a café nestled high up in the cliff on the other side of the headland. This is a brilliant, quiet place to sip a cup of coffee of an evening and watch the setting sun fall into the sea.

From the castle on the Lerici headland, you can walk along the coastal path passed the marinas right round the bay to the next small town, San Terenzo. San Terenzo was where Shelley and Byron, the early 19th century English poets, were staying when Shelley



(whose second wife Mary wrote Frankenstein by the way) had his boating accident. Many conspiracy theories arose out of the sinking of Shelley's sailing boat on the return trip it was making to Lerici from the port of Livorno in the south. Theories from having been caught in a bad squall, to being murdered by agents unknown, to Shelley's boat being rammed by a fisherman in his boat intent on robbery. Whichever and for whatever reason, the drowning of the 30-year old Shelley was a tragedy. San Terenzo has parts named in his honour.

A little further afield, on the north side of La Spezia is Portovenere, another favourite place to spend an afternoon walking the harbour side and visiting the odd cafe or two. Portovenere is also associated with Bryon having a cave named after him in the place where he purportedly drew inspiration and meditated for his literary works. The cave is located at the spur of rock below the church of St. Peter and the old defensive position.

(13th May 2014)

Not long after we had moved on to the Ameglia site, a group of 'travellers' arrived to keep us company. As they came every year to winter here, the women in the group had soon taken over the shared facilities and made themselves at home. Autumn in this part of the world, particularly on the coastal strip, are very mild and it is quite feasible to set up most of your home activities outside in the open air, even in late October. Although we had no common language, we did coexist happily together. The group's business was a travelling fair that they had set up in a town close by, to which the men disappeared in the late afternoon, returning home to the caravans in the late evening.

October passed quickly what with the local area to explore and a weekend visit by Karim. Sarzana, across the river, was another town we gotten to know quite well. We would park the wheelchair van at the castle end of the town and walk up the via Mazzini to the Piazza Giacomo Matteotti, to sit in our favour café and watch the world go by. La Spezia, the coastal city to the north, also became a place frequently graced by our presence. The city is the province's administrative centre and has a major Italian Naval base in the inner harbour. The waterfront is lined with English cannon dating from the 19th century pointing out into the Gulf, behind which is a very pleasant park to amble through. The other attractions of this very pretty city are its museums and the art gallery, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art being a definite must see if you ever visit La Spezia. We also paid a visit to the Naval Museum by the docks, which was all very interesting for me, given my boyhood obsession with all things naval, but for Polly, I'm not so



La Spezia waterfront

sure. It being autumn there was always a roast chestnut seller with his mobile charcoal burner on the Via del Pirone, the main pedestrianised walkway up through the city's center. At the top end of the Via del Pirone, passed the piazza Garibaldi, was a road leading to the railway station lined with orange trees. The fruits were scattered, squashed, all over the pavement. I wondered why nobody bothered to pick the ripe fruits off the trees and take them home for a supper's dessert. Very strange. When you see what others are not doing, you don't do it yourself. Was there a by-law forbidding the scrumping of these oranges? Who knows? I have just checked the photographs on Google Map and the trees are still there, loaded with fruit.

November in northern Tuscany can be very wet. In the previous year there had been torrential rain in the Apuane Mountains above and behind Carrara causing devastating landslides in both Massa and Carrara, resulting in three people losing their lives. This November seemed to be shaping up to be just as bad with our camping field accumulating standing water as the ground became more and more saturated as the rain continued to fall. I knew that the site would not be flooded as we were so close to where the Magra River emptied into the sea. Squelching across increasingly muddy ground was getting a bit tiresome and so I opted to move the RV to a place between the avenue of trees where the ground was a little higher and puddle free. Not long after this, a second group of travellers arrived on the site with four or five large caravans towed by vans and medium sized flatbed trucks. They set up camp on the spot I had just vacated. This group of travellers were Romanians and quite different in appearance from the first 'travellers' to arrive.

Our new neighbours did not stay long, a week at the most. One evening after the sun had set and the rain was still falling there was a knock on our RV door. The Romanians' leader had come to ask if we would mind moving the RV in order that they could get their caravan's away across the puddle free ground on which our RV was parked and thereby reduce the risk of getting their vehicles bogged down in the mud. This we duly did with Polly, and I sat watching them depart into the stormy night from the comfort of snug RV. True 'travellers' I thought, up and off at a moment's notice.

The incessant rain put pay to our jolly jaunts out and about in the Ligurian region. It was with some relief we got the much-anticipated phone call from our estate agent in the first week of December to say that the papers were ready for signing to make the bungalow in Fontenado ours. The Notary's office where the property transfer was to be completed was in a very imposing building on the piazza Roma, opposite the old railway station in Aulla. The office was indeed very plush, furnished with heavy leather upholstered chairs and several alabaster busts arranged around the room. Behind the important person's enormous desk were ranged brown leather-bound law reference books in a huge glass fronted bookcase. All designed to impress and intimidate I am sure. After the formal business for the exchange of ownership of No. 1 was transacted, for which I had to rely totally on the advice of my trusted English estate agent, the Notary made an excuse to leave the room. The under the

table payment of £20,000 in euro notes was then made, all quite casually done, as is the Italian way.

With the bungalow's key finally in our hands, Polly, Jenny and I motored straight way up the mountain to the place that was to be our new home. To say we were excited about finally getting a place in our beloved Tuscany is a gross understatement. We were ecstatic.

(15th May 2014)

The Return to Blighty

Whilst we were camped at Ameglia, Polly and I had discussed the pros and cons of how to make our move to Italy. One option was to find a place to store the RV whilst we made a trip back to the UK in the wheelchair van. Once things were sorted in UK, we would then return to No. 1 to set up home there, perhaps using the RV as our home whilst this was done. We did find such a place where their owners stored camper vans and caravans over the winter months and where the pitch charges were quite reasonable. The other option was to set up No. 1 with whatever furniture was needed for us to return to it after we had driven back to the UK for the Christmas and New Year period. In the UK, we could dispose of the RV and arrange for the furniture in the West Bridgford bungalow to be packed and transported to Fontenado. This option also included renting out the West Bridgford bungalow to supplement our income. With either option I would, sadly, have to sell the Morgan as there was nowhere for us to garage her, either in UK or Italy.

I opted for the second of these two options. I knew the RV would deteriorate if we left in her a field too long and added to this, since the cost of No. 1 had been on the top side of our budget, we would need the capital invested in the RV released to create an emergency fund to cope with any future unexpected expenditure. I am trying to think through the decision I made here, a fork in the road, as a cathartic process, to try to understand why, not five months hence, I 'lost my mind'.

When we opened the door of No. 1 for the first time, we found that we had inherited some furniture from the previous owners, a couple of sofas' and the dining table with chairs, and the kitchen still had a cooker. To make the bungalow liveable in, we add to this three beds and a fridge, which we sourced from shops in Aulla. The furniture we intended to ship from the UK would be more than sufficient to make up the rest of No. 1's furnishings.

With No. 1 set up for our return in the New Year, we set off back to the UK just before Christmas. The plan was to drive to Mandy's place at Hooke in Dorset to spend the festive season house sitting whilst the Cooper family was away in South Africa. Sometime earlier, Mandy had bought a flat in Cape Town and for health reasons would spend some of the UK winter months in South Africa's summer. Using Hooke as a base of operations, we could then 'sort out' the UK business we needed to do before coming back to Fontenado.

For the return journey to the UK, we opted to take the long way round as crossing the Alps in winter in an RV might not be such a good idea, apart from the fact that there didn't seem to be any campsites open in the Alps this late in the year. From Fontenado in Tuscany to Hooke in Dorset is some 1,200 miles and if you were to drive it in a car, the on-the-road time would be around thirty hours. As we were travelling in an RV towing a van in the shortened daylight days of the winter months, I opted to do the journey in five equal stages, planning to arrive at a campsite before 4pm each day.

The first stage took us from Ameglia to Aubagne just east of Marseille where our route to the UK left the Mediterranean coast and headed into the French heartland. From La Spezia to the French – Italian border, the E80 road hugs the Ligurian coastline, passing through tunnel after tunnel under headlands where the cliffs drop from hundreds of feet into the sea. There is very little in the way of an open coastal plain along this part of the coast, with even Genoa built mostly into a cliff face. I did get used to driving the tunnels, although I we did have a heart stopping moment when I inadvertently clipped the edge of a crash barrier at speed. Oooops. We really enjoyed the stopover in Aubagne, brief as it was, since we knew that this was going to be the last of the warm sun we would feel for at least another six weeks.

There are precious few campsites still open on the European continent during the winter months. We had done our homework for the journey and had pre-booked all four nights stopovers. We could have gone solo, I suppose, but I felt we needed the security of a campsite, especially at this time of year. As we drove further north the days and particularly the nights became ever colder to the extent that after the third night the wheelchair van's battery would not even turn the engine over and we had to push the van across a frozen field to position it behind the RV for the hook up. We were watched by the site managers from their warm office cabin, not a one coming out of their warmth to help us.

At the third campsite, we received a text from Mark to say that there were delays and cancellations on the ferries from Calais due to gales in the English Channel. So, it was with a little apprehension that we drove the fourth leg of our journey to Calais and the ferry across the channel. If there had have been a problem and we couldn't cross that night, then we were in the ideal vehicle to cope with the delay. In the event, by the time we reached the port the ferry services had been resumed and we made it across to Dover well before dusk. The C.C. Club site at Woodleas Farm in Kent where we stayed that night was to be our last night in the RV, as the next day we would be leaving it with a dealer for him to find a buyer for her. Mixed feelings, we had.

(20th May 2014)

Not long after pulling off the Woodleas camping site, we turned into a service station along the A20 to refill with diesel for the onward journey to Dorset. As per normal whenever we stopped to refuel, I went to inspect the wheelchair van, just to make sure there was no

problem with the tow. To my horror I saw that the front hubcaps were partially melted! The brakes on the van must have been binding and the heat generated by the brake pads had been enough to distort the plastic hubcaps. The tow bar connecting the RV to the wheelchair van had a sprung device to activate the van's brakes whenever I applied the brakes on the RV. Clearly, after descending the long hill just after we had left the campsite that morning, the spring mechanism had become stuck and had not released the van's brakes completely once we were on level road again. Strangely, I could not find anything wrong with the way the tow bar had been fitted and considering that we had been up and down the Alpine slopes in the recent past without a hitch, the reason for this brake binding as a bit of a mystery. The rest of the journey to the RV dealership just to the north of Southampton where I had arranged to leave the RV for them to sell for us was uneventful, although I did stop every now and then to check the brake binding had not reoccurred.

Once at the RV dealership, we transferred our essential luggage from the RV to the wheelchair van for the final leg of our journey to Hooke in Dorset. I was a little apprehensive about the state of the wheelchair van's brakes but after a few miles drive and nothing seemed untoward, I relaxed and was looking forward to spending our first night in a 'house' after our four months on the road in the RV. When we arrived at Hooke, Sarah had prepared a meal for us three wearily travellers which was very thoughtful of her. She and her family were setting off to join Mandy in South Africa the next day and so it really was at 'hello', 'goodbye' sort of meeting.

The next three weeks over the Christmas/New Year period was spent tidying up the UK side of our operations. I took a couple of trips up to Nottingham to arrange with a shipping agent for our furniture in No. 9 to be packed off to No. 1 and for an estate agent to rent out and manage No. 9, as we would no longer need to use it as a home base, now we had a permanent home in Italy. The hardest part of this tidying was having to sell my Morgan. I had had a Morgan for the past 40 years and it had never occurred to me that there would be time in my life when I would not own one. Because of the short time frame, we had to sort things out, the only real option was to sell 147 to a Morgan dealer. There was such a



Aulla, a panoramic view

dealer in Exeter and so it was that one sunny winter's day I drove a Morgan for probably the last time ever down to Exeter. On the train journey back to Hooke I was very sad but brightened up when I thought about Fondenado and the opportunities it offered to the Jenny, Polly and myself for an interesting life together.

Soon after the Cooper family returned to Hooke following their holiday in

South Africa, we three set off again for Italy, this time in the wheelchair van. As a precaution, I had the van serviced and asked the garage mechanic to specifically check the front brakes on the van as well as the front wheel bearings. I was concerned that the heat generated by the binding brakes had caused the grease in the bearings to liquefy and was no longer providing the necessary lubrication to the ball races. But he assured me that all was well. As per usual, we stayed the first night of our return journey in Greenwich, this time at the Holiday Inn Express Hotel opposite the Millennium Dome and as per usual Ruth and Richard joined us for dinner on the eve of our departure for the continent. For this meal, their son Toby joined us at the Chinese restaurant underneath the hotel proper. A good last night out in the UK.

The next day we crossed the channel on the ferry and headed back down the same road, the E17, we had come back to the UK on just three weeks before. As we were eating up the miles, I noticed that there was a strange noise coming from the front of the van and that it was particularly loud when I was turning a corner. Of course, I immediately knew what the problem was. No grease in the front wheel bearings, it all having been destroyed by the overheated brakes we had on the way home to the UK. We made it to our first hotel stopover by which time the noise from the front of the van was really quite loud. In the morning I took the van to the local Ford dealer and asked them to replace both the front wheel bearings and the constant velocity joints as I suspected that from the noise getting worse when the van was turning a corner, the constant velocity joints had been affected by the heat too. The upshot was that we stayed in the hotel for five nights whilst the garage sorted out our problem. Lucky for us the rooms that we had been allocated were in an annex on the ground floor and there was a corridor outside our rooms in which Jenny could take her daily exercise. As we had no vehicle to get about in and given Jenny's condition, we were stuck on the hotel premises for most of our five-day enforced stay. But eventually the van's problem was fixed, and we continued south only stopping once more for an overnigher at Valence.

I must say, I had a strange mixture of feelings as we drove up the hill from Aulla to our new home in Fontenado. From excitement at being back in Italy and to a feeling of, 'Oh my gaw'd, what have I done?', this being perhaps the craziest thing I had ever done in my life so far. But was it going to work for us all?

A Home in Tuscany

Fondenado is a small hamlet in the Maasa-Carrara district of Northern Tuscany, built on the very edge of a high cliff that forms the bank of a river running off the Ligurian Mountains and into the Magra river in its valley 1,000 feet below. Most of the original inhabitants had left Fontenado years ago and now all but two of the stone terraced houses were occupied with the rest slowly falling apart. Our bungalow was one of two new builds in the hamlet, the other being occupied by the brother of the lady we had bought our new place from.

This brother's family worked farmland further up the valley, concentrating mainly of husbandry. With no through road, the hamlet was very quiet with oft times the only sound to be heard being that of the river cascading over the rocks in the valley below. The view from our front windows across the Magra valley to the Apuane mountains was quite something.



After a couple of weeks, we were well settled into our new home. We scouted the area for places to get our food supply and even a DIY store to get the materials for any restoration work we might want to undertake on No. 1. Aulla was the closest town and the centre where we found most of these supplies. Aulla's main claim to fame is that it is the birthplace of Mussolini's mistress, Clara Petacci. After the surrender of Italy to the allies in the Second World War, Mussolini and his mistress escaped to northern Italy with the help of a German Special Forces unit and set up a government in exile based in Gargnano on Lake Garda. This, however, could only ever be a temporary standoff with allied forces pressing up from the south and in April 1945 Mussolini, disguised as a woman, and Clara tried to make it across the border into Switzerland in the back of a truck. But he was recognised by the partisans who by that time controlled of the border crossing and they were both detained to be later summarily executed and hung by their ankles from a lamp post in Milan for all to see, an ignominious end to a 21 year dictatorship and Nazi rule in Italy.

Aulla was almost completely destroyed towards the end of WWII when the partisans blew up a German munitions train as it stood in railway station, with the Americans bombing what was left standing to complete the job. This is the reason why there is none of medieval architecture in Aulla that you can see in other Tuscan towns, as most of the buildings in Aulla are post war builds. The town is a very small, sited where two rivers, the Taverone and the Aulella both of which run from the Apuane mountains to meet the Magra one to the north of the town and one to the south of it. The Magra, running from the mountains to the north, is itself already quite a wide river by the time it reaches Aulla. Consequently, Aulla is prone to floods, one of which in the autumn of 2011 piled cars on top of one another in the high street.

(22nd May 2014)



View from Penang Hill, 21st May 2014

Yesterday, Gek and I went up Penang Hill to have lunch with Chris and Ranu at the Bellevue Hotel, something we do quite regularly. On this particular day, the sky and the sea made an extraordinary sight to behold. The sea was a turquoise colour, streaked with white and looked for all the world like a cirrus sky but upside down. Above us was a large dark cloud, which was filtering the light illuminating Georgetown below us so that it looked almost a kin to a water colour painting. The sea colour reminded me of the Pacific Ocean we had seen along from Hualien a couple of months earlier, on the east coast of Taiwan. I was the only one of our party to find the scene remarkable. Breath taking in fact.

Jenny's fit

Not long after we had settled into No. 1, Jenny had an epileptic fit. This new development in Jenny's condition came like a bolt out of the blue. I had not read in any of the literature or been told by any of the many consultants that we had visited that epileptic fits were a possibility with AD sufferers. Jenny's fit happened as Polly was feeding her and as a consequence Jenny bite her tongue quite badly causing it to bleed profusely. This only added to our panic. We called the paramedics and the result was a dash to the hospital in Carrara, Polly going with Jenny in the ambulance with me trying to keep up in the wheelchair van. I soon gave that up as bad job having decided that there could only be one hospital in Carrara and that it should not be difficult to find. The emergency unit's duty doctor confirmed the paramedic's opinion that Jenny had indeed had an epileptic fit. He recommended Jenny be admitted to the hospital for observation and to determine what medication she could be given to mitigate, if not control, the fits. We did not want to leave Jenny alone in a strange place and so Polly and I arranged to stay 24 hours with Jenny once she was warded, taking a room at a small hotel in the town from which we took turns to stay with Jenny, one night on, one night off in a 'hot-bedding' arrangement. All a little traumatic - going from peacefully having your lunch to arranging a hospital bedside vigil in a matter of a couple of hours.

Jenny spent the better part of two weeks in the hospital during which time she suffered no further fits, whether due to the medication she was prescribed or not I am not sure but the

meds she was given certainly made Jenny seem very dopy. The days sitting by Jenny's bedside were long and the nights spent trying to sleep on two chairs next to her were even longer. There were five other women on the ward including a lady who had previously worked as an air hostess for Qantas Airlines, having at that time been stationed in Singapore. She spoke excellent English as a result of her time in the Far East and we became good friends whilst our paths crossed. Her linguistic skills also gave us common ground to pass the time reminiscing about our days in the Lion City. She and another lady on the ward, a young policewoman, taught me to play Canasta, a popular card game in Italy. After the first few games which I won by fluke and beginners' luck, I was always subsequently well beaten in most of the many games we three played together.

We got notice from the shipping agent that our furniture was about to be delivered whilst Jenny was still in the hospital. On the day it arrived in Aulla I drove back to the town to meet the removal van at the appointed time and was much relieved when the vehicle that turned up at our rendezvous was the size of a transit van and not a huge transcontinental lorry that no way would have gotten up to No. 1. Once up at the bungalow, our neighbour could see that the driver and we were struggling a bit to unload the van on our own and came up the road to give us a hand, for which we were very grateful. For fitting out the Walton bungalow, I had bought two 'designer' Cellini Italian sofa beds, the style and functionality of which I was much taken with. I had visited the Cellini shop in Chester, of all places, to source the sofa's and had to wait three months before they could be shipped from the Cellini factory in Milan. Now the two of them had come back to Italy. And very heavy they are too, hence the driver and me struggling to get them up the path and into the bungalow. It wasn't until Jenny was discharged from the hospital that we set about unpacking our precious things newly arrived from the UK, including the BOSE sound system, Polly's photographic equipment and my dollhouse. It was nice to be surrounded by familiar things again.

Winter Sets In

I took quite a time for Jenny to recover from the fit she had had and the time in the hospital seemed to have made her less aware of her surroundings. She could no longer be relied upon to wander around the bungalow on her own as she would invariably trip over something or simply bump into a doorjamb. But eventually she did stabilise, and we adjusted ourselves to the new situation to accommodate these changes.

The winter was really upon us by now with cool days and very cold nights. The bungalow did have a gas fired central heating system, but it was woefully inadequate for the size to the 12m by 24m bungalow. I must confess to not having done my homework on the northern Tuscany's yearly weather cycles, assuming as I did that it was never very cold in the country's around the Mediterranean Sea, with the winters being very mild compared to those of the UK. Well, this may have been true down on the coast, but up in these

mountains the winter was more akin to an English winter, all be it a shorter one. To supplement the inadequate central heating in the living room there was a large open grated log burning fire, for which we had logs a plenty stacked at the back of the house. This we lit every night and sometimes during the daytime too, to keep warm. Then one afternoon, much to our surprise it started to snow! This is Tuscany, it is not supposed to snow in Tuscany. The snow fell deep enough for us to have to clear the road out of the hamlet up on to the main road but the trees along most of our side road kept the snow from settling very deep there and it didn't create too much of a problem.

You are allowed, as an EU citizen, to remain in another EU country other than your own, for only three months before needing to obtain a document in your passport that shows you have Permanent Resident (PR) status in your new country of domicile. Fortunately for us, the immigration office to which we needed to apply for our PR documents was only 20 miles from Fontenado. But that is about the only convenience there was in getting the PR documents. First, Massa is a very, very busy place with practically no parking to be had at any time of day in the town centre. On every one of the four or five trips to the town that it took to get the PR's, we could never find a place to park the wheelchair van. On top of that, the immigration office was very small and always packed with visa applicants from countries outside the EU, notably North Africa and Eastern Europe. To make the experience even more arduous, you had to queue on an outside stairway, in all weathers, to reach the immigration officers counter. On every visit, I was asked to produce something else to support our applications, which I of course did not have with me at the time, requiring yet another return trip to Massa. I got the feeling that the whole design of the place was to put you off even thinking about applying to live in Italy. During one visit, some English people in front of me in the queue got so frustrated with their situation and the apparent filibustering of the immigration officials that they stormed out of the office loudly proclaiming their unhappiness at the way they were being treated. On our last attempt at getting our papers in order, the young woman dealing with me across the counter took pity on me and I was ushered into a back office, where the deed was promptly done and we could now legitimately stay in the country. What a faff that was.

By now, Easter was upon us. The villages and hamlets in this part of Northern Tuscany were, and probable still are, very traditional and steeped in the old ways. With the exception of Fontenado, most of the other places along our mountain road were still populated and the inhabitants, by all appearances seemed relatively prosperous. One tradition was the blessing on Good Friday of all the houses in the hamlet by the local Catholic priest. Our neighbours suggested to us that perhaps we might like to take advantage of this 'service' and they seemed so disappointed when we indicated that being non-religious, perhaps we would give the blessing a miss that in the end we agreed to a visit by the priest. On the day, he came into the bungalow in his priestly robes followed by a group of our neighbours and duly wafted his chained incense burner into each room,

including the room in which Jenny was taking an afternoon nap, all a bit surreal with us not understanding a word of what was said.

During the winter months, Polly and I had busied ourselves repainting the inside walls of the bungalow and doing the small repairs needed to this and that about the place. Polly had also set up her photography equipment in her bedroom in the basement, which doubled as a dark room. This basement room had access via a spiral staircase from the main living room and had French windows that opened out on to the properties lower garden. Polly was into black and white photography and she had all the gear necessary to develop and print her own photographs. She had the idea at this stage to perhaps produce and sell B & W photographs of the local area to tourists in Lierci but because of my increasing dysfunctionality, it sadly did not happen. Once spring had sprung, Polly found a job at an hotel in Pontremoli, some 5 miles up the Magra valley, cleaning the guest rooms. Whilst providing a social side to her life, this job also provided her with some addition income to supplement the spending money she was getting from her Mum's insurance pay-out.

(23rd May 2014)

Starting to Unravel

I think my spiral down into the black pit of despair began with the doctor's initial comments in the emergency room at the hospital in Carrara. He asked me what the heck was Jenny doing in Italy given her poor health or words to that effect. What he implied was that we were nuts to have taken her out of the health care system available to us in the UK. Well that is how I read his tone of voice. After that, I started to question myself and my motives for being in Italy with Jenny, but I still maintain that it was better than festering in a bungalow in Walton, even if it was quite a 'nice' bungalow, I had just set the whole thing up wrong.

The following three months I seemed to be faced by an endless stream of problems to solve, each on their own I would have volleyed before the problem created any issues. I have always met problems on their way, stepping out from the wicket to crack the ball before it hits the ground, to invoke a cricketing analogy. But there were too many of them coming in, one after the other and I didn't have answers or solutions for them. This, over time, caused me to lose confidence in my ability to control events, something I have always done in my life thus far. It is perhaps impossible to explain the feeling of a break down, that was what I was having, but read the next paragraph quickly and none stop. It is some of the remembered issues that I had racing round my head at the time. Imagine then, these churning through your mind none stop, day and night

The wheelchair van clutch started to slip: What if we had no transport, how would we get down the hill?: I couldn't insure a foreign vehicle in Italy: Was the British insurance covering us?: After three months I should register the wheelchair van with the Italian authorities to

get an Italian number plate or buy an utility van locally: There were no utility vans in Italy:: the septic tank would need emptying soon but how to do?: My income tax form needed filling in and returning to the UK: The lower garden retaining wall was near collapse and needed rebuilding: What did the future hold for Polly here in Italy?: The garage roof leaked: We ran out of wood to burn before the spring arrived: We lived in the kitchen because the rest of the bungalow was so cold: How was I going to get Jenny back to the UK: Where would we live in the UK?: How could I sell No. 1?; Do I need to get an Italian driving license?: How do I get one?:

Yes, I know all trivial problems but, in my head, I could not see a way forward with any of them. Everything was black, and I could not see a way out, all roads led to dead ends. I felt I had made a huge blunder by not keeping open an easy escape route back to the UK if things had gone wrong in Italy. Things had not gone wrong, but I was consumed by what ifs. What if this happened, what if that happened, what if, what if..... I got to not being able to sleep at night and spending the daytime lying on my bed. A bit of a wreck I was. Suicidal even.

Polly took me to see the local doctor, who prescribed me tranquillizers, but they did not really work and in desperation she telephoned Mark for help. Mark and Gail arrived post haste, Mark having had to cancel a business trip to come over. One of the first things Mark said to me was that I had to let go, I had to let someone else take control of events. Through my fogged-out brain that made some sense to me and so I let others map a way for us all to get us back to the UK. No. 1 was put on the market through a local estate agent and it was agreed that I would go back to the UK in a couple of weeks' time and stay with Mark whilst I looked for a suitable bungalow to rent in the Bridgend area where Mark and Gail lived.

Today, the 23rd May 2014, I am writing this piece of my story sitting in our condominium bedroom here in Penang. Ten years ago, in May 2004, I had lost my mind. I did live to tell the tale but what did I learn? I learnt that for my mental wellbeing I need the inherent stability of a three-legged stool. One leg draws support from human society, where you can interact with other human beings in a social setting, be it a club you join or in the place where you are employed. A second leg fulfils the need in you to be your own creative self, which needs no reference to anyone or anything less but your own sense of yourself. The third and most important leg is your family, the significant others who will stand by you no matter how crazy you get. What I had done in moving to Fontendado was recreate the Walton bungalow environment here in Italy, but at an unmanageable distance from my support network. I was still standing on one leg. With a vague plan in place, I did begin to feel a little better about things, as I could now see a glimmer of hope for all our futures. I do not know how Polly and Karim, who by this time had moved to join us in Fontenado, put up with me, always being supportive and tolerant of these, my black days. I was also given hope for a future by a young guy Polly had befriended. He had been badly bullied as

teenager at a boarding school on the Isle of Wight, to the extent that he became very depressed, a depression from which he took years to recover. I saw through his experiences as we talked, that situations and your attitudes towards them do not last forever and that change is an inevitability.

On the Move Again

Not long after Mark had left Fontenado for home, I followed him to the UK and spent three weeks scouting the Bridgend area for a suitable bungalow to rent for the four of us to return to. Given my fragile state of mind, Mark came to pick me up from Stanstead Airport late one the evening and we drove back to Bridgend through the early hours of the morning. Mark gave me the use of his car whilst he was at work each day so that I could motor around the area visiting potential places to rent. The best-suited bungalow I found and subsequently rented was in Porthcawl, a seaside town not far to the west of Bridgend. It had three bedrooms and a large living room, partially furnished. The owner was a police officer away on short-term secondment to Gambia in West Africa for a UN project there and he was therefore looking for a short-term let, which suited us just fine.

Not long after my return to Fontenado, Ruth and Richard came out to stay with us. The visit had been arranged a long time before and although I did forewarn them about my mental state, they were still willing to come visit us. I guess I was already beginning to feel a bit more human, as I had a pleasant time showing them around the area, going to some places that were new to me too.

The selling of No.1, I left Polly to handle. She was a tower of strength in contrast to my enfeebled state, dealing with the estate agent and the visits of potential buyers. It turned out that the estate agent we employed had been engaged to sell the property by the previous lady owner. She had not, however, told her husband about her intention to sell the bungalow and when the agent arrived at the front door on an inspection visit, he was confronted by the husband brandishing a pistol and telling him to 'F' off. No. 1, always a drama!!! It was not long before the bungalow was sold, to a lady from Milan. As soon as she walked in the door, I could see on her face the same reaction that Polly and I had had on our first visit to the No. 1. She was looking for a house in the countryside, as she was tired of what she called the 'fake' life she was living in Milan. She felt the city and its inhabitants far too pretentious and wanted a rural setting to escape her daily hassles. Well, Fontenado would meet that spec and in full. We were not that sure she was serious about the purchase, until one day a week or so later, we spied her in the roadway taking photographs of the bungalow. We invited her in for a cuppa, of course, and it transpired that she was taking the photos to show her daughter the place she was about to buy. This was music to my ears. Perhaps this was all going to work out after all.

And it did. Almost a year to the day, on the 19th August 2004, we locked the door of No. 1 for the last time and set off back to the UK. All the preparatory work for our exist was done

Granddad Stories.

by Polly and Karim with help from Polly's friend, who agreed to drive a hired van loaded with our furniture and stuff back to the UK for us and then drive all the way back to return the van to the hire company in La Spezia.

Memory Litter Bin.

1. **The Visit from the Police** - Whilst we were camped on the Ameglia site, we had a visit from the Carbinare, the State Police, checking papers on the camping site residents. I think they were a little surprised to find an English family camping amongst the travellers but our new young friend helped out by being our impromptu translator and although we had been in Italy for over the three months maximum stay allowed as a visitor under EU rules, they left us be.
2. **Group meeting on border issue in Fontenado village** – Being a foreigner living in a village unused to immigrant settlers, you can only become part of the physical environment and not the cultural environment, by which I mean that you will always be on the periphery of village life. This was brought home to me one day when we noticed the village residents gathered at the bottom of the road, having some confab. We had heard about a land border dispute between neighbours and this meeting had been organised by the local commune committee to try and resolve the issue. All very open and democratic I thought. In the UK the two parties in dispute would have met in court to have their issues resolved by a magistrate or judge.
3. **Polly working as cleaner for English couple** – For a time, Polly took a job as a cleaner for an English couple who let out their Italian property to holiday makers. Polly's job was to clean the place between the staying guests. On one occasion she returned home with a load of goodies the guests had left behind on leaving for home, so much food and household goods that we were set up for a week.

Notes