

A CHICKEN DINNER FOR MR. EXEC

AN ACCOUNT BY

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Origins

In the summer of 1972 I took the first of several sabatticals and hit the road on a small motorbike. That summer is still with me in many of the people I met. This account is of a salesman who camped out for the summer, and of his wife's battle with a dog.

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My working life revolves around contracts. During boom times we work long hours and sometimes six or seven days a week. Booms always come to an end then we have plenty of spare time. Some contractors, usually the married ones, spend their time on house improvements. Some attend courses to improve their prospects for the next wave of technology. Others hang around bars and pubs, pissing their boom-time money down the drain at every opportunity. When their money has gone they suddenly remember old friends in contracting and ask them for loans to 'tide them over until the contracts come back'. To continue their drinking is what they really mean. My response to lean times is to go travelling. I pack a tent and camping gear and spend a very long summer travelling around Europe.

Over the years I've found interesting places to lay over for a couple of weeks. Places in the country surrounded hills and mountains, and little villages with the touch of centuries on them.

One place I found in the 1970's was in the city of Carcassonne in south-west France. The ancient walled city was interesting enough, if admittedly a tourist centre. The attraction of the municipal campsite was the variety of people staying over. Some stayed for just a night, some stayed for weeks. It was a caravanserai for the times, for travellers on their way to or from Spain, and beyond that Morocco and North Africa.

There was a less romantic side to the campsite at Carcassonne, however. We'd be woken in the morning some days at 6 by the squealing of animals. We found that the building at the front of

the campsite was an abattoir (Americans know it as a meat-packing plant, I think.) Here I was, frying up pork chops on the campsite and its cousins were being executed at dawn just up the road. I didn't exactly give up bacon, but I did the decent thing and not have it on execution day.

Next to me on the Carcassone campsite in 1972 was a large bungalow tent, the first I had seen. An executive-size tent. The resident family were camping for the summer. Mr. Exec had been assigned to the region and had swapped his hotel allowance for a lump sum. He bought the tent and had brought his wife and toddler with him. Apart from the canvas walls it was just like home.

Every morning Mr. Exec would come out of the front door in his suit, white shirt, sober tie and shiny black leather shoes, clutching his Mr. Exec briefcase. Wife and kid would follow. He'd give his wife a happy Mr. Exec kiss. Then he'd fix his briefcase to the pillion of a miniature 50cc motorbike and ride off to work. It sounded like a chainsaw on wheels. I wondered if he ever had to take his clients out to lunch. They'd come out

of the office expecting to glide off in the Exec-mobile and instead have to straddle a mobile chainsaw.

Mr. Exec's family also had a put-upon dog that hardly ever got fed. I've never seen such a miserable looking dog in my life. Beats me why people have animals then treat them so grudgingly.

One day, Mrs. Exec brought home a chicken from the market. It was dead but you could buy live ones too. She set about doing all those disgusting things we had to do those days to get a chicken ready for the oven. The cleaned chicken was washed and placed on a table out in the open under a tree. Mrs. Exec went back into the tent.

The dog, which had watched the proceedings from under a nearby bush, rushed forward, leapt onto the table, grabbed the chicken and retreated back to the bushes. He might have got away with it but for the delighted shrieks of the kid. He got up and toddled off after the dog, expecting a really good game for a change.

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Mrs. Exec came out of the tent to find the cause of the excitement being dragged across the ground and into a dense thicket. Without a moment's hesitation she grabbed a flyswat and charged after the fast disappearing chicken. She leapt fearlessly into the thicket, slashing the undergrowth with her flyswat, and adding her own shrieks to the rising mayhem. But she had under-estimated the opposition. This was one very hungry dog. The kid was ecstatic and shrieked louder.

A couple of hungry hippies were watching from their tent. The same thought must have crossed their minds at the same time. They looked at each other briefly then joined the chase. Nothing moves faster than a hungry hippy when there's a liberated chicken on the loose.

When the first hippy got to the bushes Mrs. Exec turned and slammed him on the head with her flyswat. It's a pity this wasn't a drug-crazed hippy because he might have thought the sky had fallen on him and slunk off to contemplate patterns on the tent canvas.

No sir, this was a hungry hippy, and a hungry

hippy is meaner than a Rottweiler with toothache. He dived groundwards and crawled after the chicken. This was all too much for hippy#2. He went back to base and sat down muttering profound statements about the innate violence of social interactions.

The dog, like some canine Stearpike, knew the lay of this herbaceous Gormanghast. It had dragged Mr. Exec's dinner to a hidden lair, but hippy#1 was on the trail. Mrs. Exec saw the legs of a pair of elephant striders crawling through the thicket and must have figured out where her chicken lay. With the strength and fortitude known only to the truly desperate, she grabbed an overhanging branch and swung up and over the hippy crawling along on his belly. Just as the dog was sinking its teeth into a wing of the chicken, a screaming Amazon descended through the foliage and landed with greater accuracy than a camel lobbing a gob of spit at an infidel. Hands reached down and the chicken was saved for humanity.

Mrs. Exec pulled at the bird and hauled it up out of the thicket. It rose heavily through the foliage

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with a very hungry dog hanging on to a wing with grim determination. The kid was hysterical and motioned to Mummy to throw him the chicken so he could play too.

With both hands gripping the chicken, Mrs. Exec shook the bird up and down violently, trying to loosen the dog's hold on the prize. Then, suddenly, the chicken was free as the wing tore off and the dog fell back into the undergrowth. The abrupt loss of the dog's weight overbalanced Mrs. Exec and she fell backwards into the path of the hungry hippy. With a scream she leapt up and I swear she just floated over that thicket, landing at a run on the grass. Mrs. Exec, the kid, and the chicken went into the tent and didn't show themselves until Mr. Exec came floating home on his mobile chainsaw.

The family sat down to dinner under the trees at the side of their big bungalow tent. Mrs. Exec presented a steaming pan of coq-au-vin. It's a good job Mr. Exec wasn't that mean kind of person who sits down to a chicken dinner and counts the number of limbs. If he had been, he would have believed this story even less than you do.