



Treasure Island on the English Channel: Three Years After Brexit

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(June 24 marked the anniversary of Brexit. Patrick Dixon, managing editor for *Labor*, wittily remembers the moment, and wonders about the ongoing train-wreck.)

June 24, 2016.

"You look a bit mokey, this morning," Rachel says to me. "Everything alright?"

"Yeah...this Brexit thing," I say. "I'm pissed off."

"You didn't vote to stay?!" Helen chimes in, shaking her head disapprovingly. "Bad boy!" she says and gently slaps me on the wrist.

This is Bournemouth on the English south coast and I'm working on a contract cleaning team. We go to a holiday park twice a week and tidy up mobile homes that are let out to English tourists, mostly from the Midlands and the North. It's a cheap vacation and if you collect enough coupons in *The Sun*, the Murdoch-owned tabloid newspaper, you can earn a

discount. I worked in the grease-box of a fish 'n' chip shop when I was sixteen on sub-minimum wage, saving money for a car that lasted about eleven months before I wrecked it in a four-car accident. Tired of the returning home saturated with the smell of vegetable fat I had graduated to facilities cleaner, which required a walking tour of all the nightclub bathrooms where I would replace empty toilet tissues and wipe sinks and mirrors. There has been a fresh lick of paint and a change in ownership since the early-2000s but it's the same damned holiday park and it still feels like going back in time.

Upon learning that I was English, could drive, and had worked in cleaning services at that very location the contractor immediately offered me the position of supervisor, which involved driving the workers in the van from the town center to the park. It's not a bad ride. Purple and silver. It can go.

I knew the old town had changed since I'd moved away, studying for the past decade in the US, but I wanted to know just how, so I prepared a thin resume and put in for anything that was available that wasn't based in an office. I didn't have to lie, only omit. A 'teaching assistant' in England is someone who works in a school with students who experience learning difficulties, sits with them and makes sure they stay on track. That had been my recent work experience and for this reason it didn't raise any red flags.

The team changes from one week to the next but remains roughly one-third English, one-third Polish, and one-third a collection from the remainder of the European Union. Spain, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary. The occasional Czech. About eighty percent are women; the temp agencies tend to more often funnel men in the direction of parcel warehouses, of which there are many.

The contractor trusts the Polish ladies most though: they are the most experienced and receive the fewest call-backs from the holiday park staff for missing things. This matters. A lot. When a team - everyone works in pairs - has finished all of their units they can pick up additional cleans or sit back at the shop and relax. If you're the last team to return because you're being dragged back to vacuum floors then you're preventing everyone from going home and no-one is paid for the time in transit, only the number of homes cleaned.



The forgotten trinkets from a family holiday repurposed into a workplace display.

Realizing that the mainstay of the team was Polish I practice a few phrases, mostly ways of insulting Jimmy the manager without him understanding. Filthy kitchens and bathrooms. People getting drunk. The ‘stupid English.’ These are all popular themes. If there’s a problem I can’t fix I learn to tell them “*jestem tylko kierowca*” – I’m only the driver. We comment disapprovingly of one of the young Bulgarians and her obsequious entreaties to Jimmy. Then one day she declares loudly that she loves him, slaps him hard in the cheeks with both hands exclaiming “face massage” and we realize she had been trolling him the entire time. She has created an elaborate premise upon which to assault the manager, the fiction that they are rough lovers. Brilliant.

I learn everyone’s name and repeat it to them until I know that I’m not butchering it. Then when Jimmy refers to Daria as Daisy and Ljudmila as Lily, I correct him incessantly enough that he ultimately relents and pronounces it close to correctly. After a couple of months we have a pretty good team going. When the Bulgarian mothers need to pick up their kids from school we all take a detour on the way back to town; no one minds. The agency wouldn’t be happy so we fiddle the mileage. I crack a side mirror on a parked vehicle and I blame “a bald guy in a white van.” Everyone covers for me.

Then like Thor’s hammer falling from the sky Brexit crashes down, riving a giant crevasse not merely on the political landscape but within communities. The reckless gambit of a foolish prime minister, who had won at every venture to which he had ever turned his hand. A winner in life who had thrown a bone to the far right of his party in exchange for their

support for his domestic austerity and reform agenda.

And our team of holiday home cleaners is not untouched. So when Helen slaps me on the wrist I wave an arm in the direction of our Central and Eastern European co-workers. “Well what’s gonna happen to them now?” I ask in sadness.



Outside of the cleaning workshop with large cigarette pots and bags of dirty rags outside, 2016.

It’s not that the English on the team don’t relate to the Poles or the Bulgarians on any level. When one of the mainland European teams is assigned a pigsty of a holiday home they sympathize. When they experience grief from park management for smoking in an area where guests might see them this displeases them: everyone deserves a cigarette break when cleaning holiday homes. But it has its limits. Helen brings in a box of chocolates that she cracks out every afternoon. “I’m just going to share them between us,” she says quietly to me, one of the beneficiaries of her generosity. It is understood that “us” means the English. There’s a sense that at the bottom of the ladder there’s only so much to be shared around. “People can’t keep coming here forever.”

On this point some of the Poles, clearly stung by Brexit’s rebuke, nonetheless relate. “I’ve been here since 2005 and there’s enough people here already.” At a box factory where I take a shift everyone from fork-lift drivers to shift management is Polish or Czech. Not recent migrants, these are considered good Central European jobs that they intend to retain. The husband of one of the Bulgarian cleaners is an engineer and she feels secure. She tells me that she supports Brexit because continued EU membership could result in

Turkish accession and she warns that Turks are Muslims. Someone else expresses concerns about Serbian migrants.

Three years later Brexit threatens to break both major political parties; a Conservative Party still uncomprehending of the EU's unwillingness to accede to the wishes of a supposedly great country has destroyed its previous leader and auditions a coterie of eccentric men in search of a new premier; a Labour Party which until not long ago appeared resurgent remains paralyzed by the perceived division between, on the one hand young leftists and older liberals who wish to remain in the EU, and on the other hand industrial and post-industrial heartlands in England and Wales that voted to leave. Promises to end homelessness, however valiant they may be, won't save Jeremy Corbyn from his inability to lead a path away from Brexit.

Meanwhile as an economic disaster looms, political journalists continue to retrieve internet gems from a population at a complete loss.

"I think we should stick two fingers up to the EU," a man in a pub in Dover explains to BBC Radio 5 Live.

"We're Great Britain. We've got plenty of rabbits in the field. We can plant potatoes in the back garden. We've managed before."

Another 'man on the street' channels Nigel Farage. "We want to stop people coming into the country. We want to stop people treating it like Treasure Island," he observes.

Many others observe that it would be more sensible to remain but a political path by which to do so remains elusive.

Predictions, I have none. Three years on, what will be the fate of Europe's "Treasure Island" in the North Atlantic Ocean is anyone's guess.

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