

Author's Note

'Another Lost Weekend' is a story with a true story. A sad story, actually.

In the Summer of 1999 my family and I went to Leicestershire to stay with Tim Norwood, a beloved friend for twenty years. Amongst other things we discussed my 'new career' as a novelist.

The vice-less Tim sportingly wagered I could never include 'him' in a story. Not one to ignore a challenge I vowed to respond by typing a tale when I returned home. I recall my youngest daughter fell ill, and we were obliged to leave Tugby early. Upon my return to Bournemouth I duly composed and forwarded the draft of the below piece to win the bet. Tim, being Tim, was slightly bemused, thanked me for my efforts, and benignly corrected my errors concerning his work in NMR. Sadly we never met again. Tim died in an undeserved road traffic accident in November, just before the millennium, a loss to us all.

Consequently I pondered what to do with the tale for some time. Five years it has lain on file, but now I publish the polished draft here, on the Net, a sample of my work and a memorandum of Tim. Please read and enjoy this yarn and - wherever you live - feel free to make a contribution to the Air Ambulance Service, who made such an effort to keep Tim with us.

No portion of this item may be used without my consent – to request this mail me at mitchellsmith@tesco.net.

Gary Mitchell, Bournemouth, UK, Dec. 2004.

'Don't Fall In Love Too Quickly – Another Lost Weekend'

by Gary Mitchell

FRIDAY JANUARY 10th 1997

'Lizzie Bennet' flopped with relief into her airplane seat, shoulder-length blond hair hidden under a floppy raspberry beret. A pair of dark glasses, light duffle coat and jeans helped complete her inconspicuous ensemble.

She'd only just made it – the 747 began to taxi off the apron. Carefully 'Lizzie' looked around the cabin. So far so good, she hadn't been recognised. This was important because 'Lizzie' wasn't really 'Lizzie' at all. She was Abby Horowitz, singer with trans-Atlantic rock group Avon, a position she'd occupied since 1977, held through twenty years of success, disaster, broken marriage, affairs, drugs, drink, depression and revolution; basically the full gambit of rock and roll. And she was still only thirty-eight. Once she'd considered this old, not anymore.

08:00 AM. Safe and secure after take-off 'Lizzie' checked the people next to her for 'nutters'. The man on her left was reading a scientific journal, which she thought strange – he looked too young to be a boffin. On her right an elderly lady began to slumber as the flight attendant did the safety demonstration. Who were they trying to kid? If this baby came down over the Arctic, or in sea, all they'd have time to do was scrawl final messages on scraps of paper in the hope someone would find them and turn them into a documentary. So she ignored the lecture – she'd seen it hundreds of times – and so had the people around her. Instead she read her copy of *'Cosmo'*.

09:00 AM; eight miles high the Jumbo had climbed well over Canada. 'Lizzie' wished she had a pound for every time she'd flown US to UK – she'd be a millionaire – then realised she already was. She did a quick mental calculation. 'Frisco was eight hours behind London. The flight took eight hours. You had to add the two. She'd be land at 01:00 AM tomorrow morning. That meant her flat in Cavendish Street about 03:00, then sleep about 04:00 or stay up, Saturday and Sunday to recover. Yes, try and nap on the 'plane then stay up, experience long ago teaching the value of switching your lifestyle to the time zone you were in, ASAP.

'Lizzie' checked her flight bag – it was unmoving, still there. These days she travelled light because she could always *buy* what she needed. Inside was the precious cassette of ten new songs she'd demoed, prior to forthcoming recording sessions. That's why she'd been to 'Frisco. To 'get away from it all', to concentrate, to drop out for a while. Ok, so this wasn't Haight-Ashbury in the Sixties, but she'd stayed with relatives, borrowed her teenage cousin's acoustic guitar and fed off her enthusiastically youthful nihilism.

It had worked too. Her new compositions were good – her best in years. It would be interesting to see what the others had come up with, Avon could do with another 'big' album. With age forty approaching she hated the idea of being 'too old to rock', because as a woman there was double pressure.

If she ever got hold of the guy who wrote *'Keep Young And Beautiful'* she'd lop off his balls with a spoon.

X

'Lizzie' awoke to the sound of the flight attendant bringing around drinks. She realised her beret had slipped off, but no one seemed to have recognised her. Hastily replacing it she ordered a coffee, as did the old woman next to her, who was American. These days Abby considered herself a citizen of the world, and to prove it did charity work for UNESCO.

The enigma to her left ordered tea. His carefully modulated voice revealed him to be English, so Abby studied him carefully. Tall, thin, with neat dark hair and a Sgt. Pepper moustache he looked nothing like the stereotypical image she had of scientists – i.e. grey, wacky hair, eccentric – a cross between Albert Einstein and Sir Patrick Moore. Abby decided to talk to him. Ok, she knew she had a pre-disposition toward 'nice Englishmen' (to quote one of her songs) and it had gotten her into hot water before (Prince George and all that), so she tried to think better of it. She toyed with

the notion of spilling her coffee to start a conversation, but opted instead for a more adult approach.

“Excuse me, do you know what time it is now?”

“London or West Coast?” the guy gently smiled.

“London. *Please*”.

“Three-thirty PM”, the scientist accepted his drink and ordered his meal. Chicken. Abby opted for the same.

“Your magazine looks interesting”, she opened.

“*NMR Today*”? Yes, well, it’s for my job, actually. Quite dull to lay people, really”.

“Yeah? So what’s NMR?” she accelerated. “I’m no scientist myself”.

“Nuclear Magnetic Resonance”, he shot back. “It’s where you can tell what a substance is made of by the magnetic signature of the molecules that comprise it”.

Abby nodded thoughtfully – he’d lost her back at ‘nuclear’. Yet to admit that would make her appear stupid, the ‘airhead’ her detractors always claimed.

“Sounds fun?” she managed to reply.

“It can be. I’ve just been to a conference at Asilomer – near Carmel. Do you know it? It’s on the Monterey peninsula?”

“Sounds like you’re pretty big in this NMR thing?”

“Not really. I’ve just delivered a paper – the journal is simply to check they’ve printed it correctly”.

So, he wrote scientific papers, did he? He must be smart. “Can I see?”

“Certainly”.

Flattered he passed the offending article. Abby got lost at line one, but discovered from the by-line he was Dr Timothy Norwood, Lecturer in Physical Chemistry at the University of Leicester. She remembered playing the De Montfort Hall there in the early days...

“You’re very young to be a Professor?” she suggested.

“Not really”, he modestly smiled as the meals arrived. “It’s rather specialised. What about you, Ms, er..?”

He hadn’t recognised her - great – this could be *fun* – she could be herself rather than a public image.

“Bennet”, she lied. “Elizabeth Bennet”.

“And what do you do, Ms Bennet?” the Doctor tucked into his recycled chicken, his companion following suit.

“Miss”, Abby corrected, as she always did when playing her game. “I work for a record company. I’m a production secretary”, she opted for nebulous. “I’m couriering back some tapes from ‘Frisco’. God – it was even kinda true.

“For anyone famous?” he asked between bites of monosodium glutamate.

“No”, she lied. “Just a new singer. Undiscovered. Only nineteen. She’s called, er, Emma Woodhouse”.

“Strange”, Tim characteristically put his head to one side to think. “You and her having the same names as Jane Austen characters?”

Abby blushed – it had been foolish – she was sure her cover was blown – she hadn’t expected a scientist to know anything about literature. Well-read and well-travelled – wow!

“That’s why they sent me”, she half explained. “My Boss has a weird sense of humour”.

“More sensibility than sense”, Tim joked.

God – wit *too*! She wanted to take him home now; he reminded her of Rick, her first husband, the fact she was flirting on a ‘plane back from the States only heightening the *deja vu*.

The food arrived for the old woman next to her, who started to mumble. Abby decided to ignore her for the rest of the trip and concentrate on the groovy scientist.

“Do you live in Leicester?” she asked.

“Nearby”, he clarified. “A village called Tugby. I’ve just moved in. You?”

“I’ve got a flat in London”.

“Have you recorded anyone famous?”

“Er, we once did The Rolling Stones”, she fibbed. He seemed to believe her – he obviously didn’t know much about the music industry. “Oh, and I do a lot of work with Avon”, she chanced her own identity.

“Ah – I remember them. My students tell me they’re gone a bit dull recently”.

“Remember? *Dull*?” snapped indignantly, before able to correct.

“Sorry – working with them you must *like* them”.

“Yes”, she firmly stated. “I *do*”.

“I am merely repeating what they say. Sandra – by best student – seems to think they're reacting to middle-age, that the boys have become staid, the girls staving it off by being increasingly outrageous”.

“She's just jealous”, Abby retorted.

“To be honest I've no idea what she's talking about most of the time. She's a physicist by training, so her opinion has to be taken with a pinch of salt. I listen politely – as she does when I sound off about archaeology”.

Abby came down to Earth with a bump. He just *had* to have a boring hobby, didn't he? Just once in her life she'd wanted to meet someone who a), didn't know who she was, and b), did something exciting in their spare time.

The in-flight movie came to her rescue. “I've not seen this”, she excused herself, and fixing her headphones sat back to watch the latest Bruce Willis action epic, *'Die Hard In Iran'*.

“I've been to Iran”, the Doctor sniffed. “The people are very kind and family orientated. Not like this film at all”.

Abby reluctantly switched off. He was far too clever for her.

And the old lady on her right slumbered.

SATURDAY JANUARY 11th 1997

One of the disadvantages of travelling incognito is one has to brave the same passport formalities as the average passenger. Carefully 'Lizzie' fingered her US passport, her certificate of UK residency, and the British consulate letter explaining why her ticket had been issued under an alias. She'd done it several times before, but it was still a hassle. However, with no luggage to collect she *should* be able to make a quick getaway. Outside snow was falling on England's green and pleasant land. Abby felt pleased to be home. California was just too nice to be true.

A hand tapped her on her shoulder.

“Nice meeting you. Goodbye”, Dr Norwood wandered for the EU line.

“Bye”, she responded. He'd been a nice guy. She wondered if he'd have been so pleasant if he'd known who she really was? Probably, he was that sort of 'bloke'. The sort that rarely moved in her professional circles.

“Passport please Madam”, demanded the customs officer.

“Miss”, she corrected, handing over the documents. Did she *really* look that old? Maybe Dr Norwood’s student was right...

X

Abby exhaled in the back of the taxi and removed her dark glasses. Though reactive to light she realised she was ‘safe’ now and didn’t need them any more.

“Where to Love?” wondered the driver – who then did a double-take and chuckled. “Where to Miss Horowitz?”

“Cavendish Street”, she gave her home address.

The taxi started off and Abby opened her bag to slip her glasses inside – and froze like she’d just touched an angry scorpion. The contents weren’t at all familiar. Instead of her notepad, emergency underwear, ‘medication’ and priceless demo cassette was a mug, a pink slinky and some tee-shirts, together with unmistakably male toiletries.

“XXXX! XXXX! XXXX!” she swore.

“Problem Miss?” wondered the driver.

“Yes! Pull over – please!”

The taxi driver did so, his meter happily running at warp factor six. Abby clocked it, and realised she at least had plenty of cash.

“You got a torch?” she demanded.

The driver reached into his glove compartment, pulled something that could double as a truncheon, and passed it back. Abby grabbed it and scanned the bag’s contents. The mug was emblazoned with the motive, ‘NMR researchers do it remotely’, promoting a company called California Resonance. Inside the bag, carefully written in indelible ink, was the name and address of fellow passenger, Dr Timothy Norwood.

“I’ve got the wrong XXXXing flight bag”, she mumbled. “Change of destination”, she made a snap decision. “Take me to Leicestershire!”

“I don’t go that far norff of the river”, laughed the cockney cabbie.

“I’ll double whatever it says on the meter”, Abby reached into her jacket to flash real cash. Ok, her father’s ghost admonished her for throwing money at a problem, but she shook him off. “You know I’m good for it”, she insisted.

“Right”, the driver looked at the fifty notes, recalled an expensive Christmas, then pulled away, course set for the M1 motorway and darkest Leicestershire.

Abby slumped in the back of the cab, decidedly pissed-off. Somewhere out there was a mad scientist with her priceless demos.

And all she had was a bag full of tacky souvenirs and gibberish scientific abstracts.

XXXXX

Totally jet-lagged Abby fought it off - this experience would teach her to copy her demos – or at least to write down her lyrics and chords. If the tape was lost she'd never reconstruct her songs properly. Worse her band – ex-hubby Steve in particular – would endlessly extract the urine.

The snow was falling hard now. Luckily the M1 had been relatively free, but here off the motorway it was getting thick. It was 06:00 AM before the taxi reached Tugby, a small hamlet in the middle of nowhere, like where her cousins lived, Billesley near Stratford-Upon-Avon. She'd been travelling now for what... two days? Only the fear of losing her best work in years kept her pressing on.

“Wait – *please!*” she paid the driver. “This shouldn't take long”.

Only it did. After ten minutes stomping through the snow she was unable to locate the mysterious professor's laboratory. For some reason she imagined it high on a hill, like some Frankensteinian mansion, a real gothic horror. She bet he had a hideously deformed apprentice and a dark cellar where he mixed noxious potions of NMR, or whatever it was he did.

“Listen Love”, the angry driver got out of his taxi, “the snow's closing in and I'm up my hours. I got a family back in London, you know?”

“You've been *paid*”, the imperious Abigail snapped. “And tipped!”

“I get paid to take people places, Love, not hang about as your private chauffeur”.

“Go then!” she challenged, subconsciously expected her display of petulance to make him toe the line.

It didn't. He wasn't her employee. With alacrity he returned to his cab and sped off for the main road.

“XXXX”, Abby mumbled to herself. Startled, she realised she was getting cold, the snow exceeding her fashion coat's ability to resist molten water, that she was dressed for Winter on the American West Coast, not the English Midlands.

“XXXX!” she watched the snow cover the taxi tracks. Oops - she'd done it again – not for the first time she found herself stuck in the middle of England, miles from nowhere. Alone she recommenced her search for the mysterious professor's lair. If the worst came to the worst she could always call bandmate Sir Dave.

Wiltshire was just over the county line, wasn't it?

XXXXX

'Meadow Croft' was a converted Wesleyan Chapel, though Abby wouldn't have known this. It stood halfway up a slippery hill, surrounded by other houses, and next to the village church. Two small gargoyles guarded the building and its modest grounds, but let her pass, snow now covering everything.

She banged on the door but got no answer. She rang the bell, but still no response. She checked the address in the bag and saw it was correct. There were no lights on. She'd assumed the Doctor had gone straight home.

She'd obviously been wrong.

By now the cold was starting to bite her flesh. Abby decided to give up and ring for help – an excellent plan right until the second she remembered her cell-'phone was in her bag – the one the professor had absconded with. Had there been a 'phone box on the village green? Maybe.

Huddled in the doorway against the cold she decided to wait some more,. Half an hour passed, dawn showed no sign of breaking and she was frozen through. She realised she now had two choices – die of exposure or seek help. She imagined how the latter option would look in the papers, but realised there was no helping it now. She stood up and shook herself awake, resigned to telephoning the local constabulary from some kind peasant's cottage...

Then a car pulled up through the snow and parked outside. "Dr Norwood!" Abby screamed at the top of her lungs.

"Miss Bennet?" the amazed professor alighted in the dark.

"You've got my bag – I got yours!" she skated along the pathway to his gate.

"Have I?"

"Why else would I be here?" she shuddered in the cold.

"Let's get you inside", the Doctor worried what his new neighbours might think (the woman was clearly deranged).

"The tape's really important", she explained as he opened his front door.

"It can't be that important", he doubted. "I thought you said this singer was unknown".

"That's *why*", Abby shuddered relief.

Inside the old house was cool, but warmer than the sub-zero Leicestershire tundra. As the Doctor turned the heating beyond more than a tickover the residual snow melted into Abby, drenching her to the skin.

"You must be soaked", he observed. "Tea?"

“Please”, she shivered.

“I’ll get your bag from the car”, he considered. “Where’s your suitcase?”

“I don’t have one”, she stated for the record.

“But you’ll need a change of clothes?”

“Have you something I could borrow?”

“Probably”, he agreed this was becoming a bit of a crisis.

X

While Tim looked for something suitable for his uninvited guest Abby thankfully grabbed her bag, unzipped it, and checked the precious tape was still there. It was. She breathed a huge sigh of relief.

“I’m afraid these are the best I can do, Miss Bennet”, Doctor Norwood declared. Distracted Abby didn’t reply – she wasn’t called ‘Miss Bennet’. “Lizzie?” he insisted.

“Oh, sorry”, she remembered the alias. “Thanks”.

“The bathrooms at the back of the house if you’d like to change – I’ll make some more tea”.

“Can I ‘phone for a cab?”

“Certainly – but the snow’s very heavy”, he cautioned. Abby looked out the kitchen window. It was 07:45 AM, dawn, the snow lay round about, deep and crisp and even and blindingly white. She was exhausted, shivering with a combination of relief, fatigue, and hypothermia.

“Please don’t think me impertinent”, Tim suggested, “but you really need to get warmed up before you attempt to go anywhere”.

“Could I have a hot bath?” Abby agreed. “*Please?*”

“Of course. I wouldn’t send a dog out on a morning like this”, the Doctor was now highly suspicious...

XXXXX

Abby emerged from the bathroom wearing a pair of rolled-up jeans two feet too long, and a jumper that fitted reasonably well. By now the house was warm and pleasant, yet she still felt exhausted.

Tim was sitting in his living room. “You’ve got a lot of foreign art?” she noticed.

“The results of my travels”, he cocked his head to one side. “You know, I thought you looked familiar, so while you were in the bath I surfed the Net. Abigail Horowitz, I presume”, he handed her a print-out.

“Ok, secret out”, the accused laughed nervously as she sat down, relieved life just got a little simpler. “I often travel as Lizzie Bennet so I don't get hassled”.

“I thought the Austen connections implausible. I searched for your mythical singer, Miss Woodhouse, and came across an ‘Alias Abby’ site, run by a chap in Seattle. You should be careful”, his paternal streak was awoken. “He seemed pretty... *strange*. Pictures and so forth...”

“Well, you see now why the tape was so important”, Abby didn't feel her distant past anything to apologise for.

“I've put your clothes in the airing cupboard to dry”, he considered his guest. “I've tried calling you a cab but can't get one – you're welcome to try. The snow's too deep. I'd run you to the station myself but its too heavy for that. Local radio says the roads are blocked until later today”.

Abby located her bag and dug out her mobile. It worked. She spent fifteen minutes trying to hail a cab, but couldn't either. She didn't like the idea of being marooned on some mad scientist's island, however nice he seemed on the surface. She'd seen the movies, they were always like that at first, then it was ‘would you like to see my laboratory’? In her exhausted state she imagined waking up with an extra surrounded by angry villagers (he was rather near the churchyard).

“I seem to be trapped her for the next few hours”, she reluctantly admitted.

“I've a spare room if you'd like to rest?” her host offered. “If you'll excuse me *I* need to catch some sleep. When the snow clears I'll drive you into Leicester and you can catch a train for London”.

“Thank you”, she accepted an English gentleman's reaction to a humiliating situation.

If she woke up part of some hideous NMR experiment she was now too tired to care.

XXXXX

Abby awoke in Tim's spare room, still dressed in the clothes he'd lent her, and apparently without having been genetically modified. She lay on a double bed with an interesting ethnic coverlet. Masks from what looked like India, and dragons she recognised as Mexican, decorated the room.

She checked her watch and saw it was 03:00 PM – so much for getting back on UK time. It was light, but only just. It was time to be going.

Checking her cassette was safe (which it was) she took some of her ‘medication’ and made her way downstairs. The Doctor was nowhere to be seen, so she opened the

front door to find him surrounded on three sides by a mountain of snow, which he was trying to clear with little success.

“Hello”, he greeted. “The forecast is a thaw for tomorrow, but today... It’s snowed all day – only just stopped. Is there someone you could call to collect you? Someone with a snow plough?”

Perfidious as ever Abby kinda resented the fact he was trying to get rid of her (how different from the guy in Seattle, huh?) She *could* ring Sir Dave, but know she’d never hear the end of it. Ex-husband Steve would be cool, but he was still in New York. Besides Susan, her daughter, would be as bad as Dave...

“Not really”, she replied at length. “Today’s almost gone. Let’s try again tomorrow”.

“Er, you’re comfortable about that?” Tim now appeared alarmed.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” she challenged.

“The websites”, he rested on his spade, breath steaming in the chill. “They suggest all sorts of conclusions about when you, ‘disappear’?”

“They’re often *right*”, she smiled the upper hand. “I think *you’re* the one that’s worried – even though this is a genuine ‘lost weekend’. I’m betting you’ve a woman somewhere who might not understand a beautiful rock star in his home?”

“No currently”, he gave up the unequal struggle with snow clearance. “I’m simply concerned the longer this goes on the less my students are likely to believe I’ve even met you”.

“I’ll sign an affidavit, let you take photos”, she agreed. The tablet was kicking in – she felt better already.

“Let’s go in then”, the good Doctor resolved. “I, for one, am starving”.

X

Tim poured over his copy of Delia Smith, concocting his formula for dinner. Watching him carefully Abby tried to follow the plot of *The Archers*.

“I never knew they had soaps on the radio”, she remarked as it finished, then sneezed.

“The wireless is a neglected art form”, he sighed – and she sneezed again. “You’re coming down with a cold, being out in all that. Are you usually this impulsive?”

“Always”, she affirmed.

“I’m not”, he grinned. “I’m very methodical. It’s the scientific method for me. But you’re an artist. You have to work with random, impulse, emotion..?”

“Like Degas?” she replied. “I’ve seen your paintings”.

“The myth chemists have no artistic sensibilities is untrue”, he accepted implied compliment.

“You’ve collected a lot of art on your travels? I dig that Islamic stuff”.

“It’s Iranian – enamel on copper. Incredibly cheap by Western standards. Beautiful craftsmanship”.

“I’m banned there”, she said.

“Given the lies about you I saw on the Web, I’m not at all surprised”.

“They’re not all *lies*”, her devil protested.

“You like to have your cake and eat it?”

“It’s a woman’s prerogative”.

“I’m locking my door tonight”, he joked. “Er, by the stairs there’s a door. The cupboard’s my wine cellar. Would you care to pick a bottle to go with the meal..?”

“Sure”, Abby agreed, and sloped off to explore his dungeon...

X

The ‘wine cellar’ was stacked from floor to ceiling with a selection of fine whites and reds – but Abby ignored them. Her attention was instead captured by Tim’s vast collection of sci-fi videos – mainly ‘*Dr Who*’, ‘*Babylon 5*’ and ‘*Star Trek*’. She grabbed a bottle at random and waltzed out to the kitchen, where things were coming to the boil.

“Hey – are you a Trekkie then?”

“Guilty as charged”.

“Me too – ever since I was a kid in New York – first time around. With Kirk and Spock and that”.

“I remember then too – but only as repeats”.

“How old are you then?”

“Thirty-four”.

“I’m thirty-eight – but then you already know that”.

“I didn’t check”, he said gallantly.

“How come you’re single? You’re a great guy, great job, great house?”

“I haven't met the right girl”, he deflected.

“No, *she* hasn't met *you*. When she does she won't let you go. We're predatory like that. I bet all your female students are sweet on you – or isn't that allowed?”

“It most certainly is *not*. The rule is you wait until the course is finished and all relevant work marked”.

“Does it happen?”

“Sometimes”.

“To you?”

“Not to me. I don't believe people in a position of trust should abuse their powers, do you?”

“I guess not. But it happens all the time in rock”.

“To you?”

“Sometimes. In the music business any show of scruples is taken as a sign of weakness”.

“That doesn't fit the image of your colleague, Sir David Wilson?”

“Oh Dave's a one-off, hero of the Revolution, blahdy blah. There were times when we were starting out his moral code almost stopped us getting anywhere at all”.

“What about the others?”

“If Dave's like my big brother Steve – my ex-husband – we've always been too similar. We get on well now we're not married anymore. Colleen – our drummer – she's a *bona fide* Irish wild rover, which is cool. She's like me – does her own thing. I remember Mike – our original drummer – was always a wild rocker”.

“It sounds like you genuinely care for them?” Tim perceived.

“Oh, for sure, we get through it, and we're still friends, and I think that *matters*”.

“The web page says you rarely see your daughter?”

“Untrue. I don't see *much* of her – but then she lives with Steve. He's a good parent whereas, frankly, I'm hopeless. It's not easy living a ten year old who's more adult than you are”.

Nuff said on that, Abby decided to change the subject, Susan being a sore point. “You got any kids?”

“I've never been married”.

“So?”

“So children without commitment is irresponsible”.

“That's what my daughter says. Though from her it's emotional blackmail”.

Now Tim wanted to change the subject. “The Net says you're about to make a new album – is that what the tape is for?”

“Yeah, demos of my new songs. The best I've written in years – that's why I was so up-tight”.

“I'd hate it if I lost a paper I'd written”, the Doctor sympathised. “Did you pick a wine?”

“Yes”, Abby passed him the bottle, and realised he had kind eyes. She wasn't sure whether he was making the best of a bad job in her being here, or whether he was genuinely enjoying her company. She flattered herself he liked her as a *person* – he'd certainly been pleasant before discovering her true identity.

“Notice the cloud outside, and the wind”, Tim opened the bottle and poured two glasses of *vin rouge*. “The promised thaw is coming. Will you go back to London?”

“No need now – I'll go straight to Sir Dave's in Wiltshire. I live a gypsy life. He's got his own studio there. I'll do some proper demos before we start work”.

“Do you want to ring your colleagues? Won't they be worried about you?”

“No. I often disappear for weekends. I thought you'd read the websites?”

“*Scanned*”, he clarified. “Abby's lost weekends”.

“Most of the stories are made up. I never sue - it all helps build up a mystique. I like being famous – but only from a distance. Anon is best”.

“Aren't you running out of Austen characters?”

“I recycle them. What's dinner?”

“This, 'Miss Bennet', is stuffed peppers followed by pasta, followed by Queen of Puddings”.

“Sounds great”.

“I like cooking and keep a well-stocked freezer”.

“Usually I eat takeaway”.

“Not in tiny Tugby. Could you pass the salt, please”.

Abby reached for it and accidentally knocked her wine glass onto the floor, shattering it completely. “Oh God!” she stooped to pick up the pieces. “I’m so clumsy – it’ll stain your carpet!”

“Open a bottle of white and put some on”, Tim advised. “One advantage of being a chemist is you know how to deal with substances”.

Was that a drugs reference? No he was as clean as the driven snow now covering his garden. Abby went to fetch a bottle of white from the cellar.

“What shall I do with the rest?” she wondered, mopping the stain.

“Drink it?” Tim empirically suggested.

XXXXX

Abby hated washing up, anything domestic, but after such a great meal felt she owed it to Tim to offer. Full of food and wine she felt nicely relaxed; what had begun as an enforced stay was becoming a nice short break.

“Could I ask a favour?” Tim said.

“Sure”.

“Could you play me your songs? I’d like to have a story to tell”.

“As long as you promise not to copy and bootleg them – they’re only rough demos”.

“Agreed – I’ll buy the record when it comes out”.

Abby shook her hands dry and went to fetch her precious tape. Carefully checking the security knock-outs had been broken she placed the cassette in Tim’s kitchen player and they listened as she dried and he washed.

“Well?” she demanded praise at the end.

“Very good. Very Spartan arrangements. Is that the way they’ll be finished?”

“Maybe. Once the band gets hold of them we work on each others songs and improve them. That’s the whole point of being in a group, pooling ideas. You never know how they’ll end up”.

Finishing his drying Tim opened another bottle of red. “Have you seen any of the new series, *‘Excalibur’*? (*‘Star Trek – Excalibur’* was currently being premiered in the States).

“No. I kinda shut myself away over there – and we always get it late in England, don’t we?”

"I bought the pilot in Asilomer. My video plays US format tapes. Would you care to see it?"

"Would I ever", she bounced as she retrieved her cassette. "Reviews say it's pretty good".

"This way then", the scientist led the musician to the comfort of his living room...

XXXXX

In the year 2277 the Starship 'USS Excalibur' found itself in another tight spot. As the Federation's latest Dreadnought it was expected to hold its own against any enemy, but even Admiral Sir Brian Woodville was hard pressed against five Klingon battlecruisers. Shields down, Sick Bay full of casualties, the Bridge on fire, the crew faced certain death. Worse, only their battered ship stood between the five million colonists of Omicron Sigma VI and the harsh realities of Klingon rule. You see it all hinged on repairing the phaser captor – that's the gubbins that stores power for the ships weapons banks. A disrupter bolt had inconveniently taken it offline.

"Admiral – the only way to fix the captor is to go inside the compartment", indicated Vulcan science officer, Commander Sonak.

"The radiation in there will kill anyone!" protested Dr Rachel Hudson, the phlegmatic chief medical officer.

A huge explosion rocked 'Excalibur', sending crewpersons flying a pieces of superstructure falling onto sparking consoles. A security man put out the inferno.

"I'll go", the Admiral decided.

"Admiral!" declared Ensign Chang. "Phaser captor back online!"

That was a stroke of luck. "Fire – target the lead K'I'Tanga!" ordered Sir Brian. "Then bring us about – course – eight seven degrees, mark six!"

The crippled battleship responded as the first Klingon battlecruiser exploded in a sheet of flame.

"Direct hit!" cheered helmsman Ivanovitch.

Tim chortled at the crew's latest fortune. Abby looked at him and their eyes met in mutual appreciation, two minds melded by the intergalactic language of Trek.

A second Klingon battlecruiser erupted in flames – seemingly hit from out of nowhere.

"It's the 'Enterprise' Admiral!" exclaimed communications officer Mandela.

"Tell Jim Kirk I owe him a bottle of whisky", chortled Sir Brian. "Now we've got them!"

"Klingons retreating Admiral!" confirmed Chang.

"Phaser status?"

"The captor's offline again", someone reported. "Engineering's on it".

"Inform Captain Hamilton in Sick Bay", the Admiral ordered (early in the battle Emma had been taken below, critically injured).

"Let me guess who fixed the phaser captor", Abby sniggered.

She was right. As the episode reached its *denouement* it transpired Captain Hamilton had escaped from Sick Bay, unofficially returned to duty, and repaired the phaser captor in the nick of time.

But the drama was not over with the Klingons' rout.

"Why Emma – why?" the Admiral demanded.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time", the Captain lied. Woodville looked at Hudson, who sadly shook her head. "Besides", the expiring heroine attempted to sit up, "its my ship – not yours".

"This is just like 'The Wrath Of Khan'", Tim complained.

"Kirk and Spock weren't married", Abby retorted. "Sush!"

After a touching death scene Captain Hamilton was buried on the colony she died defending, an almost emotional Admiral Woodville delivering his spouses eulogy to the crew of 'Excalibur', the introductory episode ending with the appointment of a new skipper – Captain Madonna Di Caprio.

"So", Abby summarised whilst the credits rolled, "his wife – incidentally his flag captain – dies heroically in episode one. Then, just to make it more dramatic, her replacement is her best friend who's had the hots for him since Starfleet Academy... Please... I want more 'Trek' not 'Friends In Space'".

"It gets better", Tim reassured, turning off the video and yawning. "I saw an episode in the States. The pilots are always more informative than thought-provoking.

He yawned again. *"Jet-lagged?" Abby knew (thanks to her 'medication' she was still full of beans).*

"Tired, certainly".

"I'm waking up now. It's only 11:30".

“Not according to my body”, Tim parted the curtain to look out of the window. “They were right about the warm front. The rain’s melting the snow. Assuming there’s no floods we’ll have you back in civilisation tomorrow”.

“Back to life, back to reality”, Abby sang. “Thanks for putting me up – it’s been fun”.

“It’s been a pleasant visit”, he agreed. “Your good company. Do you wish me to keep your enforced stay a secret?”

“Why?” she was suddenly suspicious. “What you gonna say?”

“Only the truth, of course. I simply get the impression you value your privacy – that it’s always being violated. It seems so... unfair?”

“It is - the price you pay for fame and fortune. You’re a cool dude – I’m sure I can trust you not to *invent*”.

“Goodnight then”, the sleepy Tim withdrew with her trust. “You know where everything is?”

“I can find what I need”, she smiled back, determined to broaden her mind on his extensive bookcase.

SUNDAY JANUARY 12th 1997

The dripping rain Abby though she heard outside turned out to be melting snow. She realised they were on a hill, so wouldn’t drown.

She couldn’t sleep, her body clock stubbornly fixed on ‘Frisco time, still believing it was yesterday afternoon. On reflection she was amazed at Tim’s kindness to her, the fact he’d accepted the situation and got on with life without a flicker of anger, the fact his generosity expected nothing in return. Some people were like that.

It was a pity she didn’t get to meet many of them.

Unable to sleep she switched on the light and scanned another bookcase. No, not here, all technical. She recalled his collection of sci-fi novels were on the landing, so decided to help herself. Tip-toeing out of her room she noticed his light was on.

“Tim? Are you *awake*?” feeling like company she gingerly knocked.

“Yes”, he admitted. “Problem?”

“Me too”, she invited herself in.

He seemed surprised. “They don’t suit you”, he indicated the over-tight pyjamas he’d loaned.

“You’re taller and leaner than me”, she agreed.

Tim closed his codex: he was re-reading *'The Gallic War'*.

“What’s the book?” she wondered.

“Julius Caesar’s ego-trip”, he paraphrased.

Abby sat on his bed. “You reckon *'Excalibur's'* gonna be good?”

“I dare say there’ll be good and bad episodes”, he reasoned. “You?”

“The back storyline of the sexual tension between Woodville and Di Caprio will work, but once they actually have an affair... where do you go from there?”

“The next generation?” he joked.

“That’s the trouble”, she insisted. “Picard – right – very few affairs. Tries to avoid them. Kirk – so many it’s a cliché. I guess in Starfleet – like real life – it’s difficult to find a balance. It’s like what you were saying about lecturers and students”.

“In my business people move around a lot”, he considered. “You have to be very committed to make a relationship work”.

“In mine its ego first. Your career and ambition outweigh your personal requirements”.

“Sounds harsh?”

“It is. I’ve given up. These days I take my comfort as and when I can get it. It lasts as long as it lasts, then you move on”.

“‘Ships that pass in the night’?”

“Yeah, kinda”.

“That’s very sad”.

“You sound like my daughter”, she mused. “Look Tim, *thanks*”.

“Thanks?” (the word seemed somewhat *loaded*).

“Yeah, you were great to me – even before you sussed who I was”.

“I just behaved like any Christian gentleman”.

“I know – it’s kinda refreshing”, she steeled herself to say what she felt inside. “Look, I know you have your world, and I have mine, but we’re both Trekkies. It would be nice if we could stay *friends*, maybe meet up again, huh?”

“I see no reason why not”, he agreed. “We’ll swap e-mail addresses, how about that?”

“We sound like Di Caprio and Woodville”, she proffered. “Do you think he knows she’s got the hots for him?”

“Probably. I don’t suppose you get to be a Starfleet Admiral by being totally insensitive”.

“She’s game for it – but is he?”

“He’s a seasoned gentleman”, Tim smiled. “Scientists are trained to *observe* rather than take precipitive action. I think he’d have to be forced at phaser point”.

Abby grabbed a pen from his bedside and pointed it at him. “This biro is set to kill Admiral Woodville!” she bounced playfully on his bed. “Resistance is futile!”

“So I see”, Tim put his book to one side. “Like you I do so hate insomnia...”

XXXXX

“You’re quite *certain* you’ve got the right bag this time?” Dr Norwood jokingly wondered.

“Sure”, Abby checked again. “The tapes here – and thanks for lending me ‘*Excalibur*’. I’ll get someone to copy it and mail it back”.

“And I shall tell Sandra she’s wrong about you. I’ll wait until the photos are developed to support my assertions – she’s unlikely to believe I met you otherwise”.

“You do that”, Abby grinned.

Tim pulled up at the red stone edifice of Leicester station. Abby donned her dark glasses and raspberry beret, ready for her journey.

“Are you sure you’re clear on the route?”

“Train to Birmingham, the Bristol, then Salisbury”, she confirmed.

“Please do keep in touch”, the Doctor was quite genuine. “I’ve so few people to talk ‘*Star Trek*’ to. People aren’t obsessives, that is”.

“Likewise”, with no *paparazzi* in Leicester she made a point of kissing him goodbye. Hopping out of his car she dashed into the station with a final wave, another exciting adventure on the surface of the planet over for Commander Abby Horowitz.

One of her better ‘lost weekends’. Maybe the best ever.

Certainly not *wasted*.