

## **THE BURGERS OF CALAIS**

**GRAHAM MASTERTON**

I never cared for northern parts and I never much cared for eastern parts neither, because I hate the cold and I don't have any time for those bluff, ruddy-faced people who live there, with their rugged plaid coats and their Timberland boots and their way of whacking you on the back when you least expect it, like whacking you on the back is supposed to be some kind of friendly gesture or something.

I don't like what goes on there, neither. Everybody behaves so cheerful and folksy but believe me that folksiness hides some real grisly secrets that would turn your blood to iced gazpacho.

You can guess, then, that I was distinctly unamused when I was driving back home early last October from Presque Isle, Maine, and my beloved '71 Mercury Marquis dropped her entire engine on the highway like a cow giving birth.

The only reason I had driven all the way to Presque Isle, Maine, was to lay to rest my old Army buddy Dean Brunswick III (may God forgive him for what he did in Colonel Wrightman's cigar-box). I couldn't wait to get back south, but now I found myself stuck a half-mile away from Calais, Maine, population 4,003 and one of the most northernmost, easternmost, back-whackingest towns you could ever have waking nightmares about.

Calais is locally pronounced "CAL-us" and believe me a callous is exactly what it is – a hard, corny little spot on the right elbow of America. Especially when you have an engineless uninsured automobile and a maxed-out Visa card and only \$226 in your billfold and no friends or relations back home who can afford to send you more than a cheery hello.

I left my beloved Mercury tilted up on the leafy embankment by the side of US Route 1 South and walked into town. I never cared a whole lot for walking, mainly because my weight has kind of edged up a little since I left the Army in '86, due to a pathological lack of restraint when it comes to filé gumbo and Cajun spiced chicken with lots of crunchy bits and mustard-barbecued spare ribs and Key lime pies. My landlady Rita Personage says that when she first saw me she thought that Orson Welles had risen from the dead, and I must say I do have quite a line in flappy white double-breasted sport coats, not to

mention a few wide-brimmed white hats, though not all in prime condition since I lost my job with the Louisiana Restaurant Association which was a heinous political fix involving some of the shadier elements in the East Baton Rouge catering community and also possibly the fact that I was on the less balletic side of 289 pounds.

It was a piercing bright day. The sky was blue like ink and the trees were all turning gold and red and crispy brown. Calais is one of those neat New England towns with white clapboard houses and churches with spires and cheery people waving to each other as they drive up and down the streets at 2½ mph.

By the time I reached North and Main I was sweating like a cheese and severely in need of a beer. There was a *whip, whip, whoop* behind me and it was a police patrol car. I stopped and the officer put down his window. He had mirror sunglasses and a sandy moustache that looked as if he kept his nailbrush on his upper lip. And freckles. You know the type.

“Wasn’t speeding, was I, officer?”

He took off his sunglasses. He didn’t smile. He didn’t even blink. He said, “You look like a man with a problem, sir.”

“I know. I’ve been on Redu-Quick for over six months now and I haven’t lost a pound.”

That really cracked him up, not. “You in need of some assistance?” he asked me.

“Well, my car suffered a minor mechanical fault a ways back there and I was going into town to see if I could get anybody to fix it.”

“That your clapped-out saddle-bronze Marquis out on Route One?”

“That’s the one. Nothing that a few minutes in the crusher couldn’t solve.”

“Want to show me some ID?”

“Sure.” I handed him my driver’s license and my identity card from the restaurant association. He peered at them, and for some reason actually *sniffed* them.

“John Henry Dauphin, Choctaw Drive, East Baton Rouge. You’re a long way from home, Mr Dauphin.”

“I’ve just buried one of my old Army buddies up in Presque Isle.”

“And you *drove* all the way up here?”

“Sure, it’s only two thousand three hundred and seven miles. It’s a pretty fascinating drive, if you don’t have any drying paint that needs watching.”

“Louisiana Restaurant Association...that’s who you work for?”

“That’s right,” I lied. Well, he didn’t have to know that I was out of a job. “I’m a restaurant hygiene consultant. Hey -- bet you never guessed that I was in the food business.”

“Okay...the best thing you can do is call into Lyle’s Autos down at the other end of Main Street, get your vehicle towed off the highway as soon as possible. If you require a place to stay I can recommend the Calais Motor Inn.”

“Thank you. I may stay for a while. Looks like a nice town. Very...well-swept.”

“It is,” he said, as if he were warning me to make sure that it stayed that way. He handed back my ID and drove off at the mandatory snail’s pace.

Lyle’s Autos was actually run by a stocky man called Nils Guttormsen. He had a gray crewcut and a permanently surprised face like a chipmunk going through the sound barrier backward. He charged me a mere \$65 for towing my car into his workshop, which was only slightly more than a quarter of everything I had in the world, and he estimated that he could put the engine back into it for less than \$785, which was about \$784 more than it was actually worth.

“How long will it take, Nils?”

“Well, John, you need it urgent?”

“Not really, Nils...I thought I might stick around town for a while. So – you know – why don’t you take your own sweet time?”

“Okay, John. I have to get transmission parts from Bangor. I could have it ready, say Tuesday?”

“Good deal, Nils. Take longer if you want. Make it the Tuesday after next. Or even the Tuesday after that.”

“You’ll be wanting a car while I’m working on yours, John.”

“Will I, Nils? No, I don’t think so. I could use some exercise, believe me.”

“It’s entirely up to you, John. But I’ve got a couple of nifty Toyotas to rent if you change your mind. They look small but there’s plenty of room in them. Big enough to carry a sofa.”

“Thanks for the compliment, Nils.”

I hefted my battered old suitcase to the Calais Motor Inn, changing hands every few yards all the way down Main Street. Fortunately the desk accepted my Visa impression without even the hint of hysterical laughter. The Calais Motor Inn was a plain, comfortable motel, with plaid carpets and a shiny bar with tinkly music where I did justice to three bottles of chilled Molson’s and a ham-and-Swiss-cheese triple-decker sandwich on rye with coleslaw and straw fried potatoes, and two helpings of cookie crunch ice-cream to keep my energy levels up.

The waitress was a pretty snubby-nose woman with cropped blonde hair and a kind of a Swedish look about her.

“Had enough?” she asked me.

“Enough of what? Cookie crunch ice cream or Calais in general?”

“My name’s Velma,” she said.

“John,” I replied, and bobbed up from my leatherette seat to shake her hand.

“Just passing through, John?” she asked me.

“I don’t know, Velma...I was thinking of sticking around for a while. Where would somebody like me find themselves a job? And don’t say the circus.”

“Is that what you do, John?” she asked me.

“What do you mean, Velma?”

“Make jokes about yourself before anybody gets them in?”

“Of course not. Didn’t you know that all fat guys have to be funny by federal statute? No, I’m a realist. I know what my relationship is with food and I’ve learned to live with it.”

“You’re a good-looking guy, John, you know that?”

“You can’t fool me, Velma. All fat people look the same. If fat people could run faster, they’d all be bank robbers, because nobody can tell them apart.”

“Well, John, if you want a job you can try the want ads in the local paper, *The Quoddy Whirlpool*.”

“The what?”

“The bay here is called the Passamaquoddy, and out by Eastport we’ve got the Old Sow Whirlpool, which is the biggest whirlpool in the Western hemisphere.”

“I see. Thanks for the warning.”

“You should take a drive around the Quoddy Loop...it’s beautiful. Fishing quays, lighthouses, lakes. Some good restaurants, too.”

“My car’s in the shop right now, Velma. Nothing too serious. Engine fell out.”

“You’re welcome to borrow mine, John. It’s only a Volkswagen but I don’t hardly ever use it.”

I looked up at her and narrowed my eyes. Down in Baton Rouge the folks slide around on a snail’s trail of courtesy and Southern charm, but I can’t imagine any one of them offering a total stranger the use of their car, especially a total stranger who was liable to ruin the suspension just by sitting in the driver’s seat.

“That’s very gracious of you, Velma.”

I bought *The Quoddy Whirlpool*. If you were going into hospital for a heart bypass they could give you that paper instead of a general anesthetic. Under “Help Wanted” somebody was advertising for a “talented” screen-door repair person and somebody else needed an experienced leaf-blower mechanic and somebody else was looking for a twice-weekly dog-walker for their Presa Canario. Since I happened to know that Presa Canarios stand two feet tall and weigh almost as much as I do, and that two of them notoriously ripped an innocent woman in San Francisco into bloody shreds I was not wholly motivated to apply for the last of those positions.

In the end I went to the Maine Job Service on Beech Street. A bald guy in a green zip-up hand-knitted cardigan sat behind a desk with photographs of his toothy wife on it (presumably the perpetrator of the green zip-up hand-knitted cardigan) while I had to hold my hand up all the time to stop the sun from shining in my eyes.

“So...what is your field of expertise, Mr Dauphin?”

“Oh, please, call me John. I’m a restaurant hygienist. I have an FSIS qualification from Baton Rouge University and nine years’ experience working for the Louisiana Restaurant Association.”

“What brings you up to Calais, Maine, John?”

“I just felt it was time for a radical change of location.” I squinted at the nameplate on his desk. “Martin.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have anything available on quite your level of expertise, John. But I do have one or two catering opportunities.”

“What exactly kind of catering opportunities, Martin?”

“Vittles need a cleaner...that’s an excellent restaurant, Vittles, one of the premier eateries in town. It’s situated in the Calais Motor Inn.”

“Ah.” As a guest of the Calais Motor Inn, I couldn’t exactly see myself eating dinner in the restaurant and then carrying my own dishes into the kitchen and washing them up.

“Then Tony’s have an opportunity for a breakfast chef.”

“Tony’s?”

“Tony’s Gourmet Burgers on North Street.”

“I see. What do they pay?”

“They pay more than Burger King or McDonald’s. They have outlets all over Maine and New Brunswick, but they’re more of a family business. More of a *quality* restaurant, if you know what I mean. I always take my own family to eat there.”

“And is that all you have?”

“I have plenty of opportunities in fishing and associated trades. Do you have any expertise with drift nets?”

“Drift nets? Are you kidding? I spent my whole childhood trawling for pilchards off the coast of Greenland.”

Martin looked across his desk at me, sitting there with my hand raised like I needed to go to the bathroom. When he spoke his voice was very biscuity and dry. “Why don’t you call round at Tony’s, John? See if you like the look of it. I’ll give Mr Le Renges a call, tell him you’re on your way.”

“Thanks, Martin.”

Tony's Gourmet Burgers was one block away from Burger King and two blocks away from McDonald's, on a straight tree-lined street where the 4x4s rolled past at 2½ mph and everybody waved to each other and whacked each other on the back whenever they could get near enough and you felt like a hidden orchestra was going to strike up the theme to *Providence*.

All the same Tony's was quite a handsome-looking restaurant with a brick front and brass carriage-lamps outside with flickering artificial flames. A chalkboard proudly proclaimed that this was "the home of wholesome, hearty food, lovingly prepared in our own kitchens by people who really care." Inside it was fitted out with dark wood paneling and tables with green checkered cloths and gilt-framed engravings of whitetail deer, black bear and moose. It was crowded with cheery-looking families, and you certainly couldn't fault it for ambiance. Smart, but homely, with none of that wipe-clean feeling you get at McDonald's.

At the rear of the restaurant was a copper bar with an open grill, where a spotty young guy in a green apron and a tall green chef's hat was sizzling hamburgers and steaks.

A redheaded girl in a short green pleated skirt sashayed up to me and gave me a 500-watt smile, complete with teeth-braces. "You prefer a booth or a table, sir?"

"Actually, neither. I have an appointment to see Mr Le Renges."

"He's right in back...why don't you follow me? What name shall I say?"

"John."

Mr Le Renges was sitting in a blood-red leather chair with a reproduction antique table beside him, on which there was a fax-machine, a silver carriage-clock, and a glass of seltzer. He was a bony man of 45 or so with dyed-black collar-length hair which he had combed with something approaching genius to conceal his dead-white scalp. His nose was sharp and multi-faceted, and his eyes glittered under his overgrown eyebrows like blowflies. He wore a very white open-neck shirt with long 1970s collar-points and a tailored black three-piece suit. I had the feeling that he thought he bore more than a passing resemblance to Al Pacino.

On the paneled wall behind him hung an array of certificates from the Calais Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Maine Restaurant Guide and even one from Les Chevaliers de la Haute Cuisine Canadienne.

“Come in, John,” said Mr Le Renges, in a distinctly French-Canadian accent. “Sit down, please...the couch, perhaps? That chair’s a little --”

“A little *little*?”

“I was thinking only of your comfort, John. You see my policy is always to make the people who work for me feel happy and comfortable. I don’t have a desk, I never have. A desk is a statement which says that I am more important than you. I am *not* more important. Everybody who works here is of equal importance, and of equal value.”

“You’ve been reading the McDonald’s Bible. Always make your staff feel valued. Then you won’t have to pay them so much.”

I could tell that Mr Le Renges didn’t quite know if he liked that remark. It was the way he twitched his head, like Data in *Star Trek*. But I could also tell that he was the kind of guy who was anxious that nobody should leave him without fully comprehending what a wonderful human being he was.

He sipped some seltzer and eyed me over the rim of the glass. “You are perhaps a little *mature* to be seeking work as a burger chef.”

“Mature? I’m positively overripe. But I’ve been working in the upper echelons of the restaurant trade for so long, I thought it was time that I went back to basics. Got my hands dirty, so to speak.”

“At Tony’s Gourmet Burgers, John, our hygiene is second to none.”

“Of course. When I say getting my hands dirty -- that’s like a metaphor. Food hygiene, that’s my specialty. I know everything there is to know about proper cooking times and defrosting and never picking your nose while you’re making a Caesar salad.”

“What’s your cooking experience, John?”

“I was a cook in the Army. Three times winner of the Fort Polk prize for culinary excellence. It made me very good at home economics. I can make a pound-and-a-half of ground beef stretch between two platoons of infantry and a heavy armored assault force.”

“You’re a funny guy, John,” said Mr Le Renges, without the slightest indication that he was amused.

“I’m fat, Tony. Funny goes with the territory.”

“I don’t want you to make me laugh, John. I want you to cook burgers. And it’s ‘Mr Le Renges’ to you.”



He took me through to the kitchen, which was tiled in dark brown ceramic with stainless-steel counters. Two gawky young kids were using microwave ovens to thaw out frozen hamburger patties and frozen bacon and frozen fried chicken and frozen French fries. “This is Chip and this is Denzil.”

“How’s it going, Chip? Denzil?”

Chip and Denzil stared at me numbly and mumbled “okay I guess.”

“And this is Letitia.” A frowning dark-haired girl was painstakingly tearing up iceberg lettuce as if it were as difficult as lacemaking.

“Letitia’s one of our *challenged* crew members,” said Mr Le Renges, resting one of his hairy tarantula hands on her shoulder. “The state of Maine gives us special tax relief to employ the challenged, but even if they didn’t I’d still want to have her here. That’s the kind of guy I am, John. I’ve been called to do more than feed people. I’ve been called to enrich their lives.”

Letitia looked up at me with unfocused aquamarine eyes. She was pretty but she had the expression of a smalltown beauty queen who has just been hit on the head by half a brick. Some instinct told me that Tony Le Renges wasn’t only using her as an iceberg lettuce tearer.

“We take pride in the supreme quality of our food,” he said. Without any apparent sense of irony he opened a huge freezer at the back of the kitchen and showed me the frozen steaks and the frost-covered envelopes of pre-cooked chili, ready for boiling in the bag. He showed me the freeze-dried vegetables and the frozen corn bread and the dehydrated lobster chowder (just add hot water.) And this was in Maine, where you can practically find fresh lobsters waltzing down the street.

None of this made me weak with shock. Even the best restaurants use a considerable proportion of pre-cooked and pre-packaged food, and fast food outlets like McDonald’s and Burger King use nothing else. Even their scrambled eggs come dried and pre-scrambled in a packet.

What impressed me was how Mr Le Renges could sell this ordinary, industrialized stuff as “wholesome, hearty food, lovingly cooked in our own kitchens by people who really care” when most of it was grudgingly thrown together in giant factories by minimum-wage shift-workers who didn’t give a rat’s ass.

Mr Le Renges must have had an inkling about the way my mind was working.

“You know what our secret is?” he asked me.

“If I’m going to come and cook here, Mr Le Renges, I think it might be a good idea if you told me.”

“We have the best-tasting burgers anywhere, that’s our secret. McDonald’s and Burger King don’t even come *close*. Once you’ve tasted one of our burgers, you won’t want anything else. Here – Kevin – pass me a burger so that John here try it.”

“That’s okay,” I told him. “I’ll take your word for it. I had a sandwich already.”

“No, John, if you’re going to work here, I insist.”

“Listen, Mr Le Renges, I’m a professional food hygienist. I know what goes into burgers and that’s why I never eat them. Never.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“I’m not suggesting anything. It’s just that I know for a fact that a proportion of undesirable material makes its way into ground beef and I don’t particularly want to eat it.”

“Undesirable material? What do you mean?”

“Well, *waste products*, if you want me to be blunt about it. Cattle are slaughtered and disemboweled so fast that it makes it inevitable that a certain amount of excrement contaminates the meat.”

“Listen, John, how do you think I compete with McDonald’s and Burger King? I make my customers feel as if they’re a cut above people who eat at the big fast-food chains. I make them feel as if they’re discerning diners.”

“But you’re serving up pretty much the same type of food.”

“Of course we are. That’s our customers are used to, that’s what they like. But we make it just a little more expensive, and we serve it up like it’s something really special. We give them a proper restaurant experience, that’s why they come here for birthdays and special occasions.”

“But that must whack up your overheads.”

“What we lose on overheads we gain by sourcing our own foodstuffs.”

“You mean you can buy this stuff cheaper than McDonald’s? How do you do that? You don’t have a millionth of their buying power.”

“We use farmers’ and stockbreeders’ co-operatives. Little guys, that the big fast-food chains don’t want to do business with. That’s why our burgers taste better, and that’s why they don’t contain anything that you wouldn’t want to eat.”

Kevin came over from the grill with a well-charred burger patty on a plate. His spots were glowing angrily from the heat. Mr Le Renges handed me a fork and said, “There...try it.”

I cut a small piece off and peered at it suspiciously. “No shit?” I asked him.

“Nothing but one thousand percent protein, I promise you.”

I dry-swallowed, and then I put the morsel in my mouth. I chewed it slowly, trying not to think about the manure-splattered ramps of the slaughterhouses that I had visited around Baton Rouge. Mr Le Renges watched me with those glittering blowfly eyes of his and that didn’t make it any more appetizing, either.

But, surprisingly, the burger actually tasted pretty good. It was tender, with just the right amount of crunchiness on the outside, and it was well-seasoned with onion and salt and pepper and the tiniest touch of chili, and there was another flavor, too, that really lifted it.

“Cumin?” I asked Mr Le Renges.

“Aha. That would be telling. But you like it, don’t you?”

I cut off another piece. “Okay, I have to confess that I do.”

Mr Le Renges whacked me on the back so that I almost choked. “You see, John? Now you know what I was talking about when I told you that I was called to enrich people’s lives. I keep small farmers in business, and at the same time I give the people of Calais a very important community venue with the best food that I can economically serve up. Well, not only Calais. I have Tony’s Gourmet Burgers in Old Town and Millinocket and Waterville and I’ve just opened a new flagship restaurant in St Stephen, over the river in Canada.”

“Well, congratulations,” I coughed. “When do you want me to start?”

I dreamed that I was sitting by the window of Rocco’s restaurant on Drusilla Lane in Baton Rouge, eating a spicy catfish poboy with a cheese fry basket and a side of brown gravy. I had just ordered my bread pudding when the phone rang and the receptionist told me in a clogged-up voice that it was 5:15 in the morning.

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked her.

“You asked for an alarm call, sir. Five fifteen, and it’s five-fifteen.”

I heaved myself up in bed. Outside my window it was still totally dark. It was then that I remembered that I was now the *chef de petit dejeuner* at Tony’s, and I was supposed to be over on North Street at 6 AM sharp to open up the premises and start getting the bacon griddled and the eggs shirred and the coffee percolating.

I stared at myself in the mirror. “Why did you do this to yourself?” I asked me.

“Because you’re a nitpicking perfectionist who couldn’t turn a blind eye to three mouse droppings at the Cajun Queen Restaurant, that’s why. And they probably weren’t even mouse droppings at all. Just capers.”

“Capers schmapers.”

It was so cold outside that the deserted sidewalks shone like hammered glass. I walked to North Street where Chip had just opened up the restaurant.

“Morning, Chip.”

“Yeah.” He showed me how to switch off the alarm and switch on the lights. Then we went through to the kitchen and he showed me how to heat up the griddle and take out the frozen bacon and the frozen burgers and mix up the “fresh squeezed” orange juice (just add water.)

We had only been there ten minutes when a young mousy-haired girl with a pale face and dark circles under her eyes came through the door. “Hi,” she said. “I’m Anita. You must be John.”

“Hi, Anita,” I said, wiping my fingers on my green apron and shaking hands. “How about a cup of coffee before the hordes descend on us?”

“Okay, then,” she blinked. From the expression on her face I think she must have thought I said “whores.”

But they were hordes all right, and once they started coming through that door they didn’t stop. By a quarter after seven every booth and every table was crowded with businessmen and postal workers and truckers and even the sandy-haired cop who had first flagged me down as I walked into town. I couldn’t believe that these people got up so early. Not only that, they were all so *cheerful*, too, like they couldn’t wait to start another day’s drudgery. It was all, “Good morning, Sam! And how are you on this cold

and frosty morning!” “Good morning, Mrs Trent! See *you* wrapped up warm and toasty!”  
“Hi, Rick! Great day for the race – the human race!” I mean, please.

They not only looked hearty and talked hearty, they ate hearty, too. For two hours solid I was sizzling bacon and flipping burgers and frying eggs and browning corned-beef hash. Anita was dashing from table to table with juice and coffee and double orders of toast, and it wasn't until 8:00 that a sassy black girl called Oona came in to help her.

Gradually, however, the restaurant began to empty out, with more back-whacking and more cheery goodbyes, until we were left with nobody but two FedEx drivers and an old woman who looked as if she was going to take the next six months to chew her way through two slices of Canadian bacon.

It was then that one of the FedEx drivers put his hand over his mouth and spat into it. He frowned down at what he had found in his burger and showed it to his friend. Then he got up from the table and came over to the grill, his hand cupped over his mouth.

“Broken my darn tooth,” he said.

“How d’you do that?” I asked him.

“Bit into my burger and there was *this* in it.”

He held up a small black object between his finger and thumb.

I took it from him and turned it this way and that. There was no doubt about it, it was a bullet, slightly flattened by impact.

“I’m real sorry,” I said. “Look, this is my first day here. All I can do is report it to the management and you can have your breakfast on us.”

“I’m going to have to see a darn dentist,” he complained. “I can’t abide the darn dentist. And what if I’d swallowed it? I could of got lead poisoning.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll show it to the owner just as soon as he gets here.”

“This’ll cost plenty, I bet you. Do you want to take a look?” Before I could stop him he stretched open his mouth and showed me a chipped front incisor and a mouthful of mushed-up hamburger.

Mr Le Renges came in at 11:00 am. Outside it was starting to get windy and his hair had flapped over to one side like a crow’s wing. Before I could collar him he dived straight into his office and closed the door, presumably to spend some time rearranging his

wayward locks. He came out five minutes later, briskly chafing his hands together like a man eager to get down to business.

“Well, John, how did it go?”

“Pretty good, Mr Le Renges. Place was packed out.”

“Always is. People know a good deal when they see one.”

“Only one problem. A guy found this in his burger.”

I handed him the bullet. He inspected it closely, and then he shook his head.

“That didn’t come from one of our burgers, John.”

“I saw him spit it out myself. He broke one of his front teeth.”

“Oldest trick in the book. Guy needs dental work, he comes into a restaurant and pretends he broke his tooth on something he ate. Gets the restaurant to stump up for his dentist’s bill.”

“Well, it didn’t look that way to me.”

“That’s because you’re not as well-versed in the wiles of dishonest customers as I am. You didn’t apologize, I hope?”

“I didn’t charge him for his breakfast.”

“You shouldn’t have done that, John. That’s practically an admission of liability. Well, let’s hope the bastard doesn’t try to take it any further.”

“Aren’t you going to inform the health and safety people?”

“Of course not.”

“What about your suppliers?”

“You know as well as I do that all ground beef is magnetically screened for metal particles.”

“Sure. But this is a bullet and it’s made of lead and lead isn’t magnetic.”

“They don’t *shoot* cows, John.”

“Of course not. But anything could have happened. Maybe some kid took a potshot at it when it was standing in a field, and the bullet was lodged in its muscle.”

“John, every one of our burgers is very carefully sourced from people who are really *evangelical* when it comes to quality meat. There is no way that this bullet came from one of our burgers, and I hope you’re prepared to back me up and say that there was absolutely no sign of any bullet in that customer’s patty when you grilled it.”

“I didn’t actually *see* it, no. But --”

Mr Le Renges dropped the bullet into his wastebasket. “Attaboy, John. You’ll be back here bright and early tomorrow morning, then?”

“Early, yes. Bright? Well, maybe.”

All right, you can call me a hairsplitting go-by-the-book bureaucrat, but the way I see it any job has to be done properly or else it’s not worth getting out of bed in the morning to do it, especially if you have to get out of bed at 5:15. I walked back to the Calais Motor Inn looking for a bite of lunch, and I ordered a fried chicken salad with iceberg lettuce, tomato, bacon bits, cheddar and mozzarella and home-made croutons, with onion strings and fried pickles on the side. But as comforting as all of this was, I couldn’t stop thinking about that bullet and wondering where it had come from. I could understand why Mr Le Renges didn’t want to report it to the health and safety inspectors, but why didn’t he want to have a hard word with his own supplier?

Velma came up with another beer. “You’re looking serious today, John. I thought you had to be happy by law.”

“Got something on my mind, Velma, that’s all.”

She sat down beside me. “How did the job go?”

“It’s an existence. I grill, therefore I am. But something happened today...I don’t know. It’s made me feel kind of uncomfortable.”

“What do you mean, John?”

“It’s like having my shorts twisted only it’s inside my head. I keep trying to tug it this way and that way and it still feels not quite right.”

“Go on.”

I told her about the bullet and the way in which Mr Le Renges had insisted that he wasn’t going to report it.

“Well, that happens. You do get customers who bring in a dead fly and hide it in their salad so they won’t have to pay.”

“I know. But, I don’t know.”

After a double portion of chocolate ice-cream with vanilla-flavored wafers I walked back to Tony's where the lunchtime session was just finishing. "Mr Le Renges still here?" I asked Oona.

"He went over to St Stephen. He won't be back until six, thank God."

"You don't like him much, do you?"

"He gives me the heeby-jeebies, if you must know."

I went through to Mr Le Renges' office. Fortunately, he had left it unlocked. I looked in the wastebasket and the bullet was still there. I picked it out and dropped it into my pocket.

On my way back to the Calais Motor Inn a big blue pick-up truck tooted at me. It was Nils Guttormsen from Lyle's Autos, still looking surprised.

"They brought over your transmission parts from Bangor this morning, John. I should have her up and running in a couple of days."

"That's great news, Nils. No need to break your ass." Especially since I don't have any money to pay you yet.

I showed the bullet to Velma.

"That's truly weird, isn't it?" she said.

"You're right, Velma. It's weird, but it's not unusual for hamburger meat to be contaminated. In fact, it's more usual than unusual, which is why I never eat hamburgers."

"I don't know if I want to hear this, John."

"You should, Velma. See -- they used to have federal inspectors in every slaughterhouse, but the Reagan administration wanted to save money, so they allowed the meatpacking industry to take care of its own hygiene procedures. Streamlined Inspection System for Cattle, that's what they call it -- SIS-C."

"I never heard of that, John."

"Well, Velma, as an ordinary citizen you probably wouldn't have. But the upshot was that when they had no USDA inspectors breathing down their necks, most of the slaughterhouses doubled their line speed, and that meant there was much more risk of



contamination. I mean if you can imagine a dead cow hanging up by its heels and a guy cutting its stomach open, and then heaving out its intestines by hand, which they still do, that's a very skilled job, and if a gutter makes one mistake *floop!* everything goes everywhere, blood, guts, dirt, manure, and that happens to one in five cattle. Twenty percent."

"Oh, my God."

"Oh, it's worse than that, Velma. These days, with SIS-C, meatpackers can get away with processing far more diseased cattle. I've seen cows coming into the slaughterhouse with abscesses and tapeworms and measles. The beef scraps they ship out for hamburgers are all mixed up with manure, hair, insects, metal filings, urine and vomit."

"You're making me feel nauseous, John. I had a hamburger for supper last night."

"Make it your last, Velma. It's not just the contamination, it's the quality of the beef they use. Most of the cattle they slaughter for hamburgers are old dairy cattle, because they're cheap and their meat isn't too fatty. But they're full of antibiotics and they've often infected with *E. coli* and salmonella. You take just one hamburger, that's not the meat from a single animal, that's mixed-up meat from dozens or even hundreds of different cows, and it only takes one diseased cow to contaminate thirty-two thousand pounds of ground beef."

"That's like a horror story, John."

"You're too right, Velma."

"But this bullet, John. Where would this bullet come from?"

"That's what I want to know, Velma. I can't take it to the health people because then I'd lose my job and if I lose my job I can't pay for my automobile to be repaired and Nils Guttormsen is going to impound it and I'll never get back to Baton Rouge unless I fucking walk and it's two thousand three hundred and seven miles."

"That far, hunh?"

"That far."

"Why don't you show it to Eddie Bertilson?"

"What?"

"The bullet. Why don't you show it to Eddie Bertilson. Bertilson's Sporting Guns and Ammo, over on Orchard Street? He'll tell you where it came from."

“You think so?”

“I know so. He knows everything about guns and ammo. He used to be married to my cousin Patricia.”

“You’re a star, Velma. I’ll go do that. When I come back, maybe you and I could have some dinner together and then I’ll make wild energetic love to you.”

“No.”

“No?”

“I like you, John, but no.”

“Oh.”

Eddie Bertilson was one of those extreme pains-in-the-ass like people who note down the tailfin numbers of military aircraft in Turkey and get themselves arrested for espionage. But I have to admit that he knew everything possible about guns and ammo and when he took a look at that bullet he knew directly what it was.

He was small and bald with dark-tinted glasses and hair growing out of his ears, and a Grateful Dead T-shirt with greasy finger-wipes on it. He screwed this jeweler’s eyeglass into his socket and turned the bullet this way and that.

“Where’d you find this?” he wanted to know.

“Do I have to tell you?”

“No, you don’t, because I can tell *you* where you found it. You found it amongst the memorabilia of a Viet Nam vet.”

“Did I?” The gun store was small and poky and smelled of oil. There were all kinds of hunting rifles arranged in cabinets behind the counter, not to mention pictures of anything that a visitor to Calais may want to kill: woodcock, ruffed grouse, black duck, mallard, blue-wing and green-wing teal.

“This is a 7.92 Gewehr Patrone 98 slug which was the standard ammunition of the Maschinengewehr 34 machine-gun designed by Louis Stange for the German Army in 1934. After the Second World War it was used by the Czechs, the French, the Israelis and the Biafrans, and a few turned up in Viet Nam, stolen from the French.”

“It’s a machine-gun bullet?”

“That’s right,” said Eddie, dropping it back in the palm of my hand with great satisfaction at his own expertise.

“So you wouldn’t use this to kill, say, a cow?”

“No. Unlikely.”

The next morning Chip and I opened the restaurant as usual and by 8 am we were packed to the windows. Just before 9 a black panel van drew up outside and two guys in white caps and overalls climbed out. They came down the side alley to the kitchen door and knocked.

“Delivery from St Croix Meats,” said one of them. He was a stocky guy with a walrus moustache and a deep diagonal scar across his mouth, as if he had been told to shut up by somebody with a machete.

“Sure,” said Chip, and opened up the freezer for him. He and his pal brought in a dozen cardboard boxes labeled Hamburger Patties.

“Always get your hamburgers from the same company?” I asked Chip.

“St Croix, sure. Mr Le Renges is the owner.”

“Ah.” No wonder Mr Le Renges hadn’t wanted to talk to his supplier about the bullet: his supplier was him. I bent my head sideways so that I could read the address. US Route 1, Robbinstown.

It was a brilliantly sunny afternoon and the woods around Calais were all golden and crimson and rusty-colored. Velma drove us down US 1 with Frank and Nancy Sinatra singing *Something Stupid* on the radio.

“I don’t know why you’re doing this, John. I mean, who cares if somebody found a bullet in their hamburger?”

“I care, Velma. Do you think I’m going to be able to live out the rest of my life without finding out how an American cow got hit by a Viet Cong machine-gun?”

It took us almost an hour to find St Croix Meats because the building was way in back of an industrial park – a big gray rectangular place with six or seven black panel vans parked outside it and no signs outside. The only reason I knew that we had come to the right place was because I saw Mr Le Renges walking across the yard outside with the

biggest ugliest dog that I had ever seen in my life. I'm not a dog expert but I suddenly realized who had been advertising in *The Quoddy Whirlpool* for somebody to walk their Presa Canario.

"What are you going to do now?" Velma asked me. There was a security guard on the gate and there was no way that a 289-pound man in a flappy white raincoat was going to be able to tippy-toe his way in without being noticed.

Just then, however, I saw the guy with the scar who had delivered our hamburgers that morning. He climbed into one of the black vans, started it up, and maneuvered it out of the yard.

"Follow that van," I asked Velma.

"What for, John?"

"I want to see where it goes, that's all."

"This is not much of a date, John."

"I'll make it up to you, I promise."

"Dinner and wild energetic love?"

"We could skip the dinner if you're not hungry."

We followed the van for nearly two-and-a-half hours, until it began to grow dark. I was baffled by the route it took. First of all it stopped at a small medical center in Pembroke. Then it went to a veterinarian just outside of Mathias. It circled back toward Calais, visiting two small dairy farms, before calling last of all at the rear entrance of Calais Memorial Hospital, back in town.

It wasn't always possible for us to see what was happening, but at one of the dairy farms we saw the van drivers carrying cattle carcasses out of the outbuildings, and at the Memorial Hospital we saw them pushing out large wheeled containers, rather like laundry-hampers.

Velma said, "I have to get back to work now. My shift starts at six."

"I don't understand this, Velma," I said. "They were carrying dead cattle out of those farms, but USDA regulations state that cattle have to be processed no more than two hours after they've been slaughtered. After that time, bacteria multiply so much that they're almost impossible to get rid of."

“So Mr Le Rengas is using rotten beef for his hamburgers?”

“Looks like it. But what else? I can understand rotten beef. Dozens of slaughterhouses use rotten beef. But why did the van call at the hospital? And the veterinarian?”

Velma stopped the car outside the motel and stared at me. “Oh, you’re not serious.”

“I have to take a look inside that meatpacking plant, Velma.”

“You’re sure you haven’t bitten off more than you can chew?”

“Very apt phrase, Velma.”

My energy levels were beginning to decline again so I treated myself to a fried shrimp sandwich and a couple of Molson’s with a small triangular diet-sized piece of pecan pie to follow. Then I walked around to the hospital and went to the rear entrance where the van from St Croix Meats had parked. A hospital porter with greasy hair and squinty eyes and glasses was standing out back taking a smoke.

“How’s it going, feller?” I asked him.

“Okay. Anything I can do for you?”

“Maybe, I’ve been looking for a friend of mine. Old drinking buddy from way back.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Somebody told me he’s been working around here, driving a van. Said they’d seen him here at the hospital.”

The greasy-haired porter blew smoke out of his nostrils. “We get vans in and out of here all day.”

“This guy’s got a scar, right across his mouth. You couldn’t miss him.”

“Oh you mean the guy from BioGlean?”

“BioGlean?”

“Sure. They collect, like, surgical waste, and get rid of it.”

“What’s that, ‘surgical waste’?”

“Well, you know. Somebody has their leg amputated, somebody has their arm cut off. Aborted fetuses, stuff like that. You’d be amazed how much stuff a busy hospital has to get rid of.”

“I thought they incinerated it.”

“They used to, but BioGlean kind of specialize, and I guess it’s cheaper than running an incinerator night and day. They even go round auto shops and take bits of bodies out of car wrecks. You don’t realize, do you, that the cops won’t do it, and that the mechanics don’t want to do it, so I guess somebody has to.”

He paused, and then he said, “What’s your name? Next time your buddy calls by, I’ll tell him that you were looking for him.”

“Ralph Waldo Emerson. I’m staying at the Chandler House on Chandler.”

“Okay...Ralph Waldo Emerson. Funny, that. Name kind of rings a bell.”

I borrowed Velma’s car and drove back out to Robbinstown. I parked in the shadow of a large computer warehouse. St Croix Meats was surrounded by a high fence topped with razor-wire and the front yard was brightly floodlit. A uniformed security guard sat in a small booth by the gate, reading *The Quoddy Whirlpool*. With any luck, it would send him to sleep, and I would be able to walk right past him.

I waited for over an hour, but there didn’t seem to be any way for me to sneak inside. All the lights were on, and now and then I saw workers in hard hats and long rubber aprons walking in and out of the building. Maybe this was the time for me to give up trying to play detective and call the police.

The outside temperature was sinking deeper and deeper and I was beginning to feel cold and cramped in Velma’s little Volkswagen. After a while I had to climb out and stretch my legs. I walked as near to the main gate as I could without being seen, and stood next to a skinny maple tree. I felt like an elephant trying to hide behind a lamppost. The security guard was still awake. Maybe he was reading an exciting article about the sudden drop in cod prices.

I had almost decided to call it a night when I heard a car approaching along the road behind me. I managed to hide most of me behind the tree, and Mr Le Renges drove past, and up to the front gate. At first I thought somebody was sitting in his Lexus with him, but then I realized it was that huge ugly Presa Canario. It looked like a cross between a Great Dane and a hound from hell, and it was bigger than he was. It turned its head and I saw its eyes reflected scarlet. It was like being stared at by Satan, believe me.

The security guard came out to open the gate, and for a moment he and Mr Le Renges chatted to each other, their breath smoking in the frosty evening air. I thought of crouching down and trying to make my way into the slaughterhouse behind Mr Le Renges' car, but there was no chance that I could do it without being spotted.

"Everything okay, Vernon?"

"Silent like the grave, Mr Le Renges."

"That's what I like to hear, Vernon. How's that daughter of yours, Louise? Got over her autism yet?"

"Not exactly, Mr Le Renges. Doctors say it's going to take some time."

Mr Le Renges was still talking when one of his big black vans came burbling up the road and stopped behind his Lexus. Its driver waited patiently. After all, Mr Le Renges was the boss. I hesitated for a moment and then I sidestepped out from behind my skinny little tree and circled around the back of the van. There was a wide aluminum step below the rear doors, and two door-handles that I could cling on to.

"You are out of your cotton-picking mind," I told me. But, still, I climbed up onto the step, as easy as I could. You don't jump onto the back of a van when you're as heavy as me, not unless you want the driver to bounce up and hit his head on the roof.

Mr Le Renges seemed to go on talking for ever, but at last he gave the security guard a wave and drove forward into the yard, and the van followed him. I pressed myself close to the rear doors, in the hope that I wouldn't be quite so obtrusive, but the security guard went back into his booth and shook open his paper and didn't even glance my way.

A man in a bloodied white coat and a hardhat came out of the slaughterhouse building and opened the car door for Mr Le Renges. They spoke for a moment and then Mr Le Renges went inside the building himself. The man in the bloodied white coat opened the car's passenger door and let his enormous dog jump out. The dog salaciously sniffed at the blood before the man took hold of its leash. He went walking off with it – or, rather, the dog went walking off with him, its claws scrabbling on the blacktop.

I pushed my way in through the side door that I had seen all the cutters and gutters walking in and out of. Inside there was a long corridor with a wet tiled floor, and then an open door which led to a changing-room and a toilet. Rows of white hard-hats were

hanging on hooks, as well as rubber aprons and rubber boots. There was an overwhelming smell of stale blood and disinfectant.

Two booted feet were visible underneath the door of the toilet stall, and clouds of cigarette smoke were rising up above it.

“Only two more hours, thank Christ,” said a disembodied voice.

“See the playoff?” I responded, as I took off my raincoat and hung it up.

“Yeah, what a goddamn fiasco. They ought to can that Kershinsky.”

I put on a heavy rubber apron and just about managed to tie it up at the back. Then I sat down and tugged on a pair of boots.

“You going to watch the New Brunswick game?” asked the disembodied voice.

“I don’t know. I’ve got a hot date that day.”

There was a pause, and more smoke rose up, and then the voice said, “Who *is* that? Is that you, Stemmens?”

I left the changing-room without answering. I squeaked back along the corridor in my rubber boots and went through to the main slaughterhouse building.

You don’t even want to imagine what it was like in there. A high, echoing, brightly-lit building with a production line clanking and rattling, mincers grinding and roaring, and thirty or forty cutters in aprons and hard hats boning and chopping and trimming. The noise and the stench of blood were overwhelming, and for a moment I just stood there with my hand pressed over my mouth and nose, with that fried shrimp sandwich churning in my stomach as if the shrimp were still alive.

The black vans were backed up to one end of the production line, and men were heaving out the meat that they had been gleaning during the day. They were dumping it straight onto the killing floor where normally the live cattle would be stunned and killed -- heaps and heaps of it, a tangle of sagging cattle and human arms and legs, along with glistening strings of intestines and globs of fat and things that looked like run-over dogs and knackered donkeys, except it was all so mixed-up and disgusting that I couldn’t be sure what it all was. It was flesh, that was all that mattered. The cutters were boning it and cutting it into scraps, and the scraps were being dumped into giant stainless-steel machines and ground by giant augers into a pale-pink pulp. The pulp was seasoned with salt and pepper and dried onions and spices. Then it was mechanically pressed into



patties, and covered with cling-film, and run through a metal-detector, and frozen. All ready to be served up sizzling-hot for somebody's breakfast.

"Jesus," I said, out loud.

"You talking to me?" said a voice right next to me. "You talking to *me*?"

I turned around. It was Mr Le Renges. He had a look on his face like he'd just walked into a washroom door without opening it.

"What the fuck are *you* doing here?" he demanded.

"I have cook this stuff, Mr Le Renges. I have to serve it to people. I thought I ought to find out what was in it."

He didn't say anything at first. He looked to the left and he looked to the right, and it was like he was doing everything he could to control his temper. Eventually he sniffed sharply up his right nostril and said, "It's all the same. Don't you get that?"

"Excuse me? What's all the same?"

"Meat, wherever it comes from. Human legs are the same as cow's legs, or pig's legs, or goat's legs. For Christ's sake, it's all protein."

I pointed to a tiny arm protruding from the mess on the production-line. "That's a baby. That's a human baby. That's just *protein*?"

Mr Le Renges rubbed his forehead as if he couldn't understand what I was talking about. "You ate one of your burgers. You know how good they taste."

"Look at this stuff!" I shouted at him, and now three or four cutters turned around and began to give me less-than-friendly stares. "This is shit! This is total and utter shit! You can't feed people on dead cattle and dead babies and amputated legs!"

"Oh, yes?" he challenged me. "And why the hell not? Do you really think this is any worse than the crap they serve up at all of the franchise restaurants? They serve up diseased dairy cows, full of worms and flukes and all kinds of shit. At least a human leg won't have *e-coli* infection. At least an aborted baby won't be full of steroids."

"You don't think there's any moral dimension here?" I shouted back. "Look at this! For Christ's sake! We're talking cannibalism here!"

Mr Le Renges drew back his hair with his hand, and inadvertently exposed his bald patch. "The major fast-food companies source their meat at the cheapest possible outlets. How do you think I compete? I don't *buy* my meat. The sources I use, they pay me to

take the meat away. Hospitals, farms, auto repair shops, abortion clinics. They've all got excess protein they don't know what to do with. So BioGlean comes around and relieves them of everything they don't know how to get rid of, and Tony's Gourmet Burgers recycles it."

"You're sick, Mr Le Renges."

"Not sick, John. Not at all. Just practical. You ate human flesh in that piece of hamburger I offered you, and did you suffer any ill effects? No. Of course not. In fact I see Tony's Gourmet Burgers as the pioneers of really decent food."

While we were talking, the production-line had stopped, and a small crowd of cutters and gutters had gathered around us, all carrying cleavers and boning-knives.

"You won't get any of these men to say a word against me," said Mr Le Renges. "They get paid twice as much as any other slaughterhousemen in Maine; or in any other state, believe me. They don't kill anybody, ever. They simply cut up meat, whatever it is, and they do a damn fine job."

I walked across to one of the huge stainless steel vats in which the meat was minced into glistening pink gloop. The men began to circle closer, and I was beginning to get seriously concerned that I might end up as pink gloop, too.

"You realize I'm going to have to report this to the police and the USDA," I warned Mr Le Renges, even though my voice was about two octaves above normal.

"I don't think so," said Mr Le Renges.

"So what are you going to do? You're going to have me gutted and minced up like the rest of this stuff?"

Mr Le Renges smiled and shook his head; and it was at that moment that the slaughterman who had been taking his dog for a walk came onto the killing floor, with the hellbeast still straining at its leash.

"If any of my men were to touch you, John, that would be homicide, wouldn't it? But if Cerberus slipped its collar and went for you – what could I do? He's a very powerful dog, after all. And if I had twenty or thirty eye-witnesses to swear that you provoked him..."

The Presa Canario was pulling so hard at its leash that it was practically choking, and its claws were sliding on the bloody metal floor. You never saw such a hideous brindled

collection of teeth and muscle in your whole life, and its eyes reflected the light as if it had been caught in a flash photograph.

“Kevin, unclip his collar,” said Mr Le Renges.

“This is not a good idea,” I cautioned him. “If anything happens to me, I have friends here who know where I am and what I’ve been doing.”

“Kevin,” Mr Le Renges repeated, unimpressed.

The slaughterman leaned forward and unclipped the Presa Canario’s collar. It bounded forward, snarling, and I took a step back until my rear end was pressed against the stainless steel vat. There was no place else to go.

“Now, *kill!*” shouted Mr Le Renges, and stiffly pointed his arm at me.

The dog lowered its head almost to the floor and bunched up its shoulder-muscles. Strings of saliva swung from its jowls, and its cock suddenly appeared, red and pointed, as if the idea of tearing my throat out was actually turning it on.

I lifted my left arm to protect myself. I mean, I could live without a left arm, but not without a throat. It was then that I had a sudden flashback. I remembered when I was a kid, when I was thin and runty and terrified of dogs. My father had given me a packet of dog treats to take to school, so that if I was threatened by a dog I could offer it something to appease it. “Always remember that, kid. Dogs prefer food to children, every time. Food is easier to eat.”

I reached into the vat behind me and scooped out a huge handful of pink gloop. It felt disgusting...soft and fatty, and it dripped. I held it toward the Presa Canario and said, “Here, Cerberus! You want something to eat? Try some of this!”

The dog stared up at me with those red reflective eyes as if I were mad. Its black lips rolled back and it bared its teeth and snarled like a massed chorus of death-rattles.

I took a step closer, still holding out the heap of gloop, praying that the dog wouldn’t take a bite at it and take off my fingers as well. But the Presa Canario lifted its head and sniffed at the meat with deep suspicion.

“*Kill*, Cerberus, you stupid mutt!” shouted Mr Le Renges.

I took another step toward it, and then another. “Here, boy. Supper.”

The dog turned its head away. I pushed the gloop closer and closer but it wouldn’t take it, didn’t even want to sniff it.

I turned to Mr Le Renges. “There you are...even a dog won’t eat your burgers.”

Mr Le Renges snatched the dog’s leash from the slaughterman. He went up to the animal and whipped it across the snout, once, twice, three times. “You pathetic disobedient piece of shit!”

Mistake. The dog didn’t want to go near me and my handful of gloop, but it was still an attack dog. It let out a bark that was almost a roar and sprang at Mr Le Renges in utter fury. It knocked him back onto the floor and sank its teeth into his forehead. He screamed, and tried to beat it off. But it jerked its head furiously from side to side, and with each jerk it pulled more and more skin away.

Right in front of us, with a noise like somebody trying to rip up a pillowcase, the dog tore his face off, exposing his bloodied, wildly-popping eyes, the soggy black cavity of his nostrils, his grinning lipless teeth.

He was still screaming and gargling when three of the slaughtermen pulled the dog away. Strong as they were, even they couldn’t hold it, and it twisted away from them and trotted off to the other side of the killing floor, with Mr Le Renges’ face dangling from its jaws like a slippery latex mask.

I turned to the slaughtermen. They were too shocked to speak. One of them dropped his knife, and then the others did, too, until they rang like bells.

I stayed in Calais long enough for Nils to finish fixing my car and to make a statement to the sandy-haired police officer. The weather was beginning to grow colder and I wanted to get back to the warmth of Louisiana, not to mention the rare beef muflettas with gravy and onion strings.

Velma lent me the money to pay for my auto repairs and the Calais Motor Inn waived all charges because they said I was so public spirited. I was even on the front page of *The Quoddy Whirlpool*. There was a picture of the mayor whacking me on the back, under the banner headline HAMBURGER HERO.

Velma came out to say goodbye on the morning I left. It was crisp and cold and the leaves were rattling across the parking-lot.

“Maybe I should come with you,” she said.

I shook my head. “You got vision, Velma. You can see the thin man inside me and that’s the man you like. But I’m never going to be thin, ever. The poboys call and my stomach always listens.”

The last I saw of her, she was shading her eyes against the sun, and I have to admit that I was sorry to leave her behind. I’ve never been back to Calais since and I doubt if I ever will. I don’t even know if Tony’s Gourmet Burgers is still there. If it is, though, and you’re tempted to stop in and order one, remember there’s always a risk that any burger you buy from Tony Le Renges *is* people.

Copyright © by Graham Masterton