

The Wine Project

Simon looked at the clock. It was six and he should go. The office was clearing and it was Friday. If he wanted to see the children he needed an early train. He switched off the PC and grabbed his coat. The phone rang. It was Doug. He hadn't talked to Doug for over a year. "Look, Doug, I'm running for a train, can I call you around nine tonight chum?" Doug agreed, and Simon ran for the tube. It was manic as ever. He stood in the scrum of the carriage wondering what Doug was up to. Doug was his oldest mate and they went back to Nursery together. Doug was the one who always lost out in life. "Mind the Gap!" Simon changed tube lines. Simon had spent his time with Doug shouting "mind the gap", to no avail. Doug never listened. It was Doug who had driven a chisel into his hand in woodwork, Doug who fell into the river on the geography field trip, Doug who fell in love with the school flirt... Simon wondered what was up. One thing was certain, Doug wanted a hand with something.

Simon read the next chapter of the BFG by Roald Dahl and turned out the light. His daughter snuggled down under the covers and mumbled good night. He gave her a sloppy kiss and repeated the greeting, slipping gently out. Mission accomplished, time to call Doug.

Doug had lost his job. Why wasn't Simon surprised? It was a real shame though. Randomly Doug had slipped into the role of wine importer for a prestige wine merchant in the home counties. Once he had learned the technicalities of importation he enjoyed the life and became something of a connoisseur. Now he went to France and Spain tasting wines, ordering and shipping for his boss. He liked the travel and was a good French speaker. He didn't get paid enough but he felt independent and skilled, a man with a trade. It was one of the oldest. The English had been buying and shipping wines from France for well over a thousand years.

Doug had fallen out with the boss and had been sacked without notice. Now he wanted Simon to help with the legals. Simon was a lawyer and understood employment law. Typical, he thought, you left the office for the week-end and got ambushed by a mate. Simon's wife Kate rolled her eyes and poured them both a gin and tonic. This was going to be a long call. Doug was needy. He lived in a small flat with two cats and had never had a partner. Sometimes he got into scrapes and his mates bailed him out. Kate had no patience for Doug. She let out a long sigh and opened the paper. Simon reflected she could have eaten Doug for breakfast.

It was Sunday morning and Simon stood on the touchline in the park watching his son play footie. His mind wandered. Jamie played right back so Simon didn't have to pay too much attention unless the game moved to Jamie's end. A gentle rain swept across the grass, making the play less sure. An idea was forming in his mind. Doug had had long periods of un-employment in his life and it affected his confidence, making him depressed. Simon spent his life advising entrepreneurs on business ventures as a lawyer. He was doing well in the City and had just inherited some money from his grandmother. Doug would get a pay-off for his dismissal from the wine merchants. It was 1995 and the Eastern Block was beginning to open up to the West. Simon knew from a client about Georgia, which had been an early leaver from the Soviet Union and had recently ousted the dictator Gamsakhurdia. Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Soviet Foreign Minister, had been elected President of Georgia and was trying to get the economy moving. Georgia had been the wine grower of the Soviet Block, and the cradle of wine making for seven thousand years. Surely this was the time to get Georgian wines out to the West, and Doug could be the man to do it? Simon would give Doug a call when he got back.

Doug was surprised. He had never run a business and had always been an employee. The whole idea seemed mad to him. Simon asked him to come over and stay for a couple of days next weekend. They could have a beer and talk old times.

Doug stood in his kitchen, looking at the garden, and fed the cats. He had sent his form to the tribunal office, and queued for the dole. Now he had to find a new job. He might as well catch up with Simon, but he didn't think that anything would come of this madcap idea. Simon always thought big. He didn't seem to get that Doug lived from hand to mouth. Survival was the name of the game, not risking large amounts of money. Anyway, just because Doug had asked him for help didn't give him the right to take over Doug's life. Besides, wasn't Georgia practically a war zone? If Doug could get his old banger started he would go to Surrey on Friday and stay over. The neighbour fed the cats anyway, so nothing to arrange there. He needed to ask them to stop feeding the cats if anything...

Simon and Doug waited in Paris for the plane to Kiev. It turned out Air France had subbed the flight to Aeroflot on a wet lease, which was not ideal. They had hoped to avoid the Russian carrier. Simon made a note to leave that detail out when he rang Kate. They had a beer and talked about their plans. Doug was a babe in arms when it came to business. There was no need for paperwork. They were old friends, after all. If the thing ran they could split the proceeds and agree a deal. Simon could do the contracts. Simon knew his old mate would do as he was told and fit in.

Doug would explain to the supplier his skills in importing and tasting for the Western market. Simon would explain they could act as an agent in the U.K. finding sales for Georgian wines, and would negotiate the commission on sales. Image was important. Simon and Doug agreed that Bulls Blood was a good example of a brand from the Eastern Block which had wowed the West. They had brought a couple of Western bottles with examples of labels for low cost wines. Simon had offered to pay the cost of the trip, so Doug had agreed. If they got a deal from the vintners then they could decide how to structure the business between them. Doug was nervous. Apart from family holidays in France he hadn't travelled much until he bought wine in Western Europe. The idea of crossing into the Eastern Bloc did not attract. You heard of violence in the press and it all seemed too much like the Wild West to Doug. It was only a year since the coup in Tbilisi. There were the South Ossetian Separatists and the Chechens and God knows who else!

The gate was called and they went to the plane. Simon and Doug travelled with hand luggage to make life simple. They wore business suits and ties, posing as the international businessmen they played. As they got on the plane they could hardly believe the state of it. The seats were torn and dirty, the spaces cramped and safety cards missing. Some moveable seats lay stacked against the sides of the plane. The safety lecture was in such bad French Doug could not understand it. After the seat belt sign flashed off some of the Ukrainians moved folded chairs into fours playing poker and smoking. After a while the cabin crew came round with small cardboard cake boxes full of snacks. The chocolates were out of date kit-kats and mars bars. The beer was cheap and from the Ukraine.

Late at night the friends went through passport control in Kiev. A flight had been arranged across the Caucasus mountains to Tbilisi in Georgia. The plane looked like a second world-war reconnaissance plane to Simon and had a hole in the floor for mounting an aerial camera. The pilot was Ukrainian and spoke in broken English. He joked that the plane was not licensed to fly as high as the Caucasus range, but it did not matter as it was dark and no one would notice! As dawn broke the plane dropped quickly onto the airport outside the city, grey with morning mist. The edges of the airfield bore witness to the destruction of planes by the Russians as they left. There was a theme emerging here. It seemed they had tried to damage the economy to spite the Georgians when they walked out. Stories were told of bulls in the beef herds being slaughtered, vineyards being torched and factories burned down. But the Russians had left a team behind to run the immigration at the border. It seemed this gave them some control over terrorists using the airport.

© Nick Fieldhouse 2017

The contents of this work are entirely fictional and do not relate to real events or persons, nor is any part of it referring to any real historical experiences or people.

Simon and Doug checked in to the new Austrian hotel in the town centre. It was like any international hotel. Payment was in US dollars and similar in cost to New York. The up-side was the security. Anyone accessing the hotel had to go through an airport style scanner and security system with an armed guard. The friends felt relieved. After a large English breakfast they went off for a sleep before starting the day.

Simon woke Doug at noon and they went to find a driver. The receptionist had a friend who could help, it seemed. Boris arrived shortly with an old silver classic Mercedes, sporting bullet holes in the coachwork and a cracked windscreen. Foreign spares were hard to source. Fifty dollars a day, in cash, he shrugged, using a spread hand to emphasise the amount, plus diesel. This was payable daily up front. In case “anything happened”. Simon was happy and they got in the back seat. Doug passed the address of the wine factory to the driver and off they went. They were travelling East along a series of river valleys to the Kakheti wine region where most of the wine is grown in the country. Their goal a winery near Gurjanhi where they had found an introduction. The day was hot, the countryside beautiful, and it only took a couple of hours to reach the factory. It was siesta time and it turned out Boris had a cousin in the area. They would drop in for lunch and his cousin Toma would be happy to oblige for a few dollars. Doug was a little concerned about going off-piste in this way but Simon persuaded him. Any contact with local Georgians would be helpful to their understanding of the people and their wine, he said. Toma was a giant of a man who lived on the family vineyard but was also a lorry driver to make ends meet. He was very happy to see them and in no time his wife had produced a peasant meal of potatoes and green beans, salad and lamb kebabs, washed down with strong local wine. To finish it was obligatory to exchange toasts in a strong local brandy. The boys from England were feeling very sleepy by the end of the meal, what with the food, the wine and the heat. They persuaded Boris to stop in a layby and have a man nap in the car with them, although he appeared unaffected. He walked off for a smoke in the trees.

It was six when they met the factory owner, Giorgu. He looked to the foreigners like an Italian car mechanic, with swept back silver hair and a roman nose. He wore stained blue overalls and wellington boots. He dragged on a roll-up in his left hand as he shook hands with his right. “I show you round.” He said. This was clearly a command, so they followed him into an old industrial barn made of sheet metal and blocks. The stench of the wine hit them as they walked inside, a humid warmth of alcohol and yeast. Some of the liquor was kept in huge earthenware vessels for years before bottling. The plant was basic but effective. It had been there for years, making the strong local wines in bulk for the Soviet Bloc.

After their tour, he showed them to a surprising garden at the back of the factory. It was a cottage garden kept with love and care for food and flowers. The September weather was warm so they sat while Giorgu filled shot glasses with wines for tasting. There was peasant bread to clear the palate, and water. Doug sat down and began to sample. Simon noticed he did so carefully, making notes and studying the labels on the thick glass bottles. They had short necks and shallow corks with Cyrillic writing. Most of the wine was heavy and red with complex flavours and a high alcohol content. Doug started to divide the bottles as went, moving most to his left and a small number to his right. He worked in silence. Giorgu and Boris had moved away and were talking at the bottom of the garden while Doug worked. Simon tried some of the wines but decided to leave the tasting to the expert. Finally Doug was finished. Giorgu and Boris looked at Doug. “We need to stay the night.” Doug said. There were other wines to try. It was late. Giorgu seemed impressed. His wine had kept the foreigners. But of course. It was the best wine in the world. It would do that. He would arrange. He would invite them to his own house. They would be his guests.

Boris went back to Tbilisi with \$50 and diesel money, and the promise to return in two days. Simon and Doug went back to Giorgu’s farmhouse and met the family. The family was large, sons,

© Nick Fieldhouse 2017

The contents of this work are entirely fictional and do not relate to real events or persons, nor is any part of it referring to any real historical experiences or people.

daughters, grandchildren and his wife, all living somehow, around the farmhouse. A room was cleared for the guests and supper was served. Conversation was in smiles and sign language. Only Giorgu's youngest, Ana, had some understanding of English. After the meal the men were left with brandy at the table, to talk business, Ana translating. Doug's wine selection was brought in. As Doug talked Giorgu smiled. It seemed Doug had found only Giorgu's best wines. Giorgu was impressed. The taste of wine seemed to be a language, to those who knew. Simon had marketing issues, but this was out of his league. Doug and Giorgu talked wine and Simon fell asleep at the table.

Simon woke up. It was dark but he could hear noises on the other side of the room, where Doug slept. He turned and was about to speak to Doug when he realised someone else was there. Doug and Ana were getting it together. Simon put his head under the pillow and went back to sleep. This might ruin the project but there was not a lot he could do about it just then. Ana was in her thirties, a beautiful curvy brunette with olive skin and brown eyes. She had high cheek bones and a beguiling smile. Somehow she seemed drawn to Doug, this forty something Englishman with a nose for wine.

Simon rose early and went for a walk in the vineyard. The dew sat on the leaves and the grapes looked ready for picking. The country was rich and fertile around him. He worried about Giorgu and Ana, and what might come of Doug's indiscretion. As he came back into the garden he heard loud voices and laughter. Doug took Simon aside. It was all agreed. Simon would go back with some bottles to the big importers in the U.K. Doug would give him notes for each wine and pricing for bulk wine sale, with volumes and vintages. Doug would stay at the farm and sort out the export and new bottling with Giorgu. Ana was a designer and could label the wines.

Simon went back with Boris and flew home. God knows what Doug and Ana were cooking up. Simon found a buyer.

Simon's phone rang. It was Doug. He hadn't been back to Simon for six months, not since the buyer had been found. Giorgu had made Doug a partner in the vineyard. Giorgu and Doug would share the profit on the exports 50/50. Doug had married Ana and they had moved into a cottage on the estate. He just wanted to thank Simon for helping out. Maybe Simon would like to visit some time? The profit on the contract looked like half a million pounds a year, he said. He just wanted Simon to know how things had turned out. Simon started to say something about his cut in the deal, but Doug was talking loudly about Ana who was pregnant. Simon hung up. Hadn't he always wanted to help his useless friend?