Holiday Magic *by Peter Brooks*

IT was raining, and to a young boy of eight rain on any day during a vacation is torture. When that vacation is a mere two weeks during the Summer of 1961, spent at a tiny boarding house in a small town on the Kent coast of England, every day counts. Even one hour lost to rain is a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions.

There's something about English seaside vacation resorts, particularly the southeastern variety. You can stand in a residential street in any one of them and not know in which town you are—they are so alike. The houses look the same, the street names are often the same, even the seafront shops, which sell everything from postcards, rock and candyfloss to beach balls, buckets and spades, all look the same.

It's oddly comforting. It means that you can vacation in a different boarding house in a different street or in a different town every year for twenty years and every vacation feels exactly the same, and yet it isn't boring. It's like pulling on an old pair of soft shoes or a well-worn winter coat—the memories that are evoked are all different but have a solid common thread running through them, something to which you can cling, the kind of familiarity that doesn't breed contempt. It's part of the sense of home and belonging, I guess.

On this particular occasion, the rain was coming down in sheets and according to the local expert—my father—who scanned the dark cloud–filled sky, it had set in for the day. My spirits fell almost as quickly as did the rain. The boarding house my parents could afford this year was run by one little old lady and one slow helper, and neither seemed to be disposed to cater for young children. There was no tattered collection of musty books from the 1920s or incomplete jigsaw puzzles that were mostly pictures containing cloudless skies and unending bushes—the usual staple fare of other boarding houses in previous years (and probably these days referred to as "consumer entertainment resources"), so we were down to the elemental process of self-entertainment.

Our vacations in those days were dictated by what was then the Berkshire Constabulary —my father was Police Constable Number 4, working out of our police house in School Lane in the tiny hamlet called Bradfield in the county of Berkshire. Our house doubled as the village Police Station, and my father's "patrol car" was a shiny black bicycle with a pump and a bell but no siren or flashing lights. If the Powers That Be in nearby Theale ("headquarters") said "Yes", then our family had two Summer weeks of unadulterated bliss somewhere a train ride or two and 150 miles away on the Kent coast.

The bliss describes the children's view of things; my mother's view was different. She had to continue doing most of the work managing the family and its meager budget, so it was little or no vacation for her. If anything, there was probably more stress than usual, because our expectations were always so high, and so was our propensity to get badly sunburned, which forced her to be on her toes more so than she would have been back at home.

The pelting rain meant that we really couldn't go outside. Our limited wardrobe required us not to get wet or too dirty - we couldn't afford to do laundry locally, so it had to be lugged back home to be done at the end of the vacation (by Mum, again - who else?) - and to keep the suitcases light enough that they didn't need a circus strongman to carry them, our heavy raincoats were usually left at home.

The gong sounded for breakfast. English boarding house gongs have a distinctive timbre—I haven't heard anything that sounds quite like them. No matter which boarding house, the gong manages to sound the same. It's in keeping with just about everything else —even the food.

The six of us—my parents, my younger brother, my two younger sisters and I—walked in well-behaved fashion down the several flights of creaking stairs necessary to get from our large single bedroom on the top floor to the dining room, situated—as was often the case—below ground level.

The tables were laid out specifically for each guest group, and ours was usually the largest. Not many families of six vacation on the Kent coast. Under the guidance of my father, Chief Organizer of Seating and He Who Must Be Obeyed on Pain of ..er.. Pain, we would arrange ourselves according to the seating plan he made up on the spur of the moment.

This time we were sat near an elderly couple, who probably couldn't help noticing our faces, longer than a wet weekend and certainly matching the glum weather. After we had eaten the limited amount of cereal and stale toast (which had probably been prepared a good hour or more before breakfast), the husband turned to us and asked us if we had seen the magic of Peter and Paul.

We hadn't, obviously, so he tore off two small pieces of his newspaper and, moistening them with his tongue, stuck one on the fingernail of each index finger. He then placed his hands at the edge of our breakfast table such that his index fingers lay on the table, displaying the pieces of newspaper, and the rest of his fingers were curled downward into his palms.

Then he said:

Two little dickey birds, sittin' on the wall,
One named Peter
[here he raised and lowered one index finger]
One named Paul
[and he raised and lowered the other index finger]

Then came the first piece of magic:

Fly away Peter
[he raised his index finger high in the air, and when he brought it back down again, the paper was gone from his fingernail]
Fly away Paul
[he did the same thing with his other index finger]

Followed by the second piece of magic:

Come back Peter
[he raised the index finger high in the air again, and when he brought it back down this time, the paper had reappeared]
Come back Paul
[and the same thing happened to the other fingernail]

We were fascinated—especially me, because I had been convinced that the newspaper had simply fallen off the fingernails, but when the pieces reappeared without any obvious attempt to retrieve them from the floor or the table and stick them back on, it had me going.

The elderly gent went through his little rhyme two times more and still I could not fathom how it was done. Finally my parents decided that we should leave the table so it could be cleared, and we made our polite farewells and headed back up the several flights of stairs to our top floor room.

The trick had the desired effect on me, at least. I spent the next several hours of what was rain-induced boredom for my brother and sisters going over and over the trick in my mind's eye. I could not for the life of me work it out, and I wanted to, badly. But we never saw the elderly couple again—perhaps that had been their last breakfast before heading home—so I didn't get an opportunity to put my questions to the amateur conjuror, and my parents couldn't tell me how it was done either.

Nearly twenty years later I saw someone else do that self same trick—and then burst the bubble of mystery by explaining that the trickster substituted another finger for his index finger to make the paper apparently disappear. That had never occurred to me—that another finger was involved. I assumed that the same index finger was used all the time. The old guy's fingers looked identical to my eyes, so I hadn't seen a difference—hadn't even thought to look for one, trusting little soul that I was (and probably still am).

Now when I try to do the trick, just about everyone spots how it's done—my index fingers look sufficiently different from my middle and ring fingers that I cannot pull it off.

Maybe I'll try doing it with gloves on next time…