

An Irishwoman's Diary 17 November, 2000

by Alannah Hopkin

Kinsale, Co. Cork

It happened last August, but Martin Shanahan, chef and co-owner with his wife Marie of the Gourmet Store and Seafood Restaurant in Kinsale, is still reeling: "We've had the shop for eight years now, and I've been cooking seafood here and in America for twenty years, and in all that time I've never had such a bizarre thing happen."

A young American came into the shop one lunch-time with two female friends, when the seafood restaurant was at its busiest. Martin recalls: "I was sitting at an outside table, having a bowl of chowder before leaving for Cork, and one of the girls, came out to me and said there's a guy inside and he wants to buy all the lobsters. I said fine, that's what they're there for. I went in about five minutes later, and Aileen was taking the lobsters out and he was saying to her be gentle, be gentle, don't hurt them."

Martin asked the American whether he was from a restaurant or a boat, or was he having a party? He said no. Martin weighed up all the lobsters in the tank, which came to 60 pounds, at £9 a pound, a total of £540.

The American counted his cash, and he offered Martin £440. Martin offered to put a few back, and he said no, I want them all, I'll give you a credit card. All that Martin can remember about the credit card transaction is that the card-holder's first name was Jupiter, Jupiter Y something or other.

Martin heard Jupiter telling the women that he was going to set the lobsters free. Martin explained that if he was going to release them, he should to do it either at Summer Cove or over in Sandy Cove, into deep water, and not throw them off the pier or the bridge: "So I took them out to the car, and I asked did he want a scissors to cut the bands, and he said yes, that would be a good idea. So I showed him how to take the bands off, and we gave him two fish boxes to carry them in, which I asked him to bring back. He put them in the boot of his car and off he went."

Martin's curiosity got the better of him. Instead of heading straight for Cork he went to Summer Cove to see if the Lobster Liberator had shown up. Was he serious about throwing £540-worth of lobster back in the sea, or was it just a yarn he was spinning to impress the two women?

There was no sign of the Liberator in Summer Cove. While Martin was snooping around, he took a phone call from a lobster fisherman who was coming up the harbour, heading for Lobster Quay. As his tank urgently needed restocking, Martin drove to Lobster Quay, not far from the bridge.

He spotted the two women who had been with the American, and stopped to make sure that they knew where Sandy Cove was, and that they were not throwing the lobsters off the bridge, where the water would be too fresh and too muddy to suit them: "I asked the girls is your friend for real? They said yes, he's a Buddhist, and he doesn't want to see the lobsters in a tank, he has to free them."

This fishy story has an unexpected sting in its tail.

Martin went off to Cork, and came back to find Marie seething. She fumed: "The American came in with his jeans rolled up, no shoes and socks, and all wet, which convinces me that he had put them back in the water. But he was very angry, he said to me in a very abusive manner 'Was that your husband, the ugly guy that was sticking his nose in my business?'

"I didn't know at that stage that Martin had been following it up, so I just walked away."

Martin suspects the American thought he was being spied on: "I guess he was cross because maybe he thought I was going to see where he left them off, so that I could catch them again, but of course the minute the lobsters hit the water, they're gone."

There was a sequel: I wrote an account of the incident for a local newspaper, which was taken up by various national dailies. TV and radio stations, here, in the UK, in Australia, and eventually on the Internet. Jupiter broke cover by answering an Internet search, and confirming that he is indeed a Buddhist, a follower of the Dalai Lama. The morning of the lobster incident he had been told by his spiritual adviser to go and do something compassionate. He decided to release some fish from a tank, but discovered that, unlike American seafood restaurants, Irish seafood restaurants tend to keep lobsters, rather than fish in their tanks. So the lobsters got lucky.

The lobsters, it seems, are unlikely to benefit from Jupiter's gesture for very long, according to Martin: "Of course as he paid us for them, he can do what he likes with them afterwards. The benefit is probably to me and the fisherman. Somewhere down the line, the fisherman will catch them again, and they'll end up in my tank or some other tank in town."