

## A VISITOR

Soon after the three months ban was over, we had a visitor. My father told me later, he was the tenth visitor of his lifetime; seven of them had 'stayed', and three of them had 'flown'. To understand these terms you must understand that the only time a traveller (the name given to a spinner who leaves his home) can get in or out of a tyre under normal circumstances is when a human opens the valve by attachment to an air pump. This process can take anything from a second to a minute, and often involves a succession of valve openings and closings. I understand this is when a human checks the pressure and then pumps in a bit more air. The usual sequence of events is for the tyre pressure to be checked and this involves a brief opening of the valve for air to escape from the tyre - we call this an outflow. Then often, but not always, there is a longer period during which the valve is open when air is flowing into the tyre - we call this an inflow.

During a normal inflow, an experienced spinner can, what we call, 'valve-enter' a tyre, consider the situation, and then decide to 'stay' or 'fly'. If a visitor decides to stay then he/she will be confined to that tyre until the next time there is a valve opening, and this may be days or weeks or even months depending on the routines of the vehicle. Of course, visitors sometimes decide to stay for much longer, or even make their home in the new tyre; but also every traveller (as I was to learn) does find himself trapped in situations that are far from pleasant or even interesting. For example, a traveller will always try and avoid a tyre that is over-crowded. So, if he valve-enters and makes a decision not to stay, he can withdraw quickly on the same inflow. We call this 'flying' or the traveller is said to have 'flown'. A flying visit only lasts a second or two, and there is very limited opportunity for communication.

By the time our visitor came, the first during my lifetime, I was already accustomed to the disruption of an inflow. We lived in an ordered way and it was rare that an inflow troubled us much. We were usually either waiting, wound round the hub for a spin, or dressed for games, and the inflow just caused a rush of air around us. Dad could sometimes tell when an inflow was about to start and then he would tell us to watch out for visitors. On this occasion, I was bouncing around with expectation, hoping desperately that this inflow would bring a visitor. And, as if I had dreamed him, in popped a most unusual character.

I watched with total amazement. He appeared, as if from nowhere. Not only was he a slightly different colour, and I had never realised that was possible, but his manner was so foreign, so direct, so jovial, and, he was only half pulled together - the rest of him was still valve-entering - when he started communicating. It was extraordinary.

‘Hi. Pippo’s my name. I see you got a nice place here. Got much going for me?’

‘We are friendly and we can let you spin,’ my father answered cautiously. This was clearly not enough for the traveller, and he responded without the slightest hesitation.

‘Sounds dull, I’m flying.’ And I could see him already preparing to fly. Almost involuntarily, I screamed out, begging him to stay.

‘No can do,’ he said, but the valve had closed earlier than he expected. He sat there next to it, clasped onto the tyre wall, his front thinned out ready to dart through should a second inflow follow, but the valve stayed closed. Then the move, which usually follows an inflow, started. I heard Pippo speak under his breath, so to speak (or so to human-speak).

‘Damn, and damnation. I was sure this geezer would be pumping longer. Oh well, I suppose I’d better make myself comfortable.’ He dropped off the side of the tyre and, as he fell, he pulled himself quick as a flash into a ball, and this was while we were moving. I had never seen that done before. I was bouncing up and down with glee, as we all did during a move> This is the conversation we had, as well as I can remember it.

‘So you guys, who are you?’

‘I’m ThomasSpin, this is JessieSpin, and our son is called TomSpin.’

‘Well, I am glad to meet you. Don’t mind what I said before, you know we travellers have to be mighty careful of where we stay, and we prefer to fly if there’s a doubt.’

I chirped in almost immediately because I was desperate to know one thing. ‘Why do you call yourself Pippo and not PippoSpin, I thought everybody called themselves Spin?’ My father told me to be quiet, but Pippo laughed - it was not an unkind laugh, and he was to do it again many times.

‘Well boy, I can see you need some educating. Let me just talk to your father first.’ And this is what I heard but I didn’t fully understand it until later.

‘Thomas, I’m here now and I’m glad but I don’t want there to be any hostilities, and I need the freedom to spin.’

‘I’ve already said you can spin,’ my father replied.

‘Everyone says that but doing isn’t always the same as saying.’

‘No, I mean it, you are very welcome. There are no shortages here. But . . . my boy is very precious and I don’t want you setting a bad example or disturbing him in any way. And . . . otherwise, the normal conditions apply - I remain in full charge.’

‘No problems. So we have a deal?’ Pippo said.

‘A deal.’ I could tell my father was rather pleased. I was soon to learn how visitors are almost always considered as highlights in a spinners life - like holidays - even if they turn out disastrous.

After that there was silence while the move continued, all four of us bobbing around. All kinds of questions were going through my mind: where did he come from? did he miss his home and parents? what had he seen? had he ever been trapped? what was the longest spin he'd ever taken? why was he a different colour? I remember I could barely contain my excitement, and every time I bounced near to him I wanted to start my questions. But I thought it might be impolite to pester him immediately and I knew, because inflows did not come very often, that he would be around for a while.

Over the course of the next four weeks I was to learn so much about the world. Imagine, in human terms, if you were about 14 and had been brought up in a small village and you had never seen television and never read any books. You knew there was a world beyond the village but you didn't know how big it was, or even what countries existed. And then, one day, you are given a television and an encyclopaedia. Well, Pippo was my television and my encyclopaedia. Much of what he told me I was to experience for myself later, and I prefer to tell my own tales in my own time. But his visit made such an impression on me I must recount a little of what passed during his stay.

The first proper conversation took place as the move ended and our tyre came to a stop. We all rolled down together to the bottom. Immediately my father began asking Pippo questions. I noticed that, whenever he could, Dad would try and show off his knowledge, but it wasn't much. Neither I nor my mother spoke on this occasion. Pippo told us he was about 25 (in human terms) and that, although his parents had been very good to him, they had used themselves up on having too many children and consequently the tyre had become over crowded. He had left to explore the three other tyres of his vehicle, but found they were all too crowded also. Besides, the trip around the vehicle had whetted his appetite, and so he had decided to travel. He had been travelling for six or seven years. He nearly stopped travelling at one point. It was a small tyre, but one that was very busy and often on the move. There was a family with two daughters one of whom he had taken a liking too. The father was ready to offer him a permanent place, but the mother wasn't sure. Pippo had said he would go for a short travel around the vehicle and bring news of the other tyres, but he had made a mistake and lost the vehicle. He had been very sad but the travelling had been fun, and now he didn't think he would ever settle down. Pippo asked my father if he had ever travelled.

'To my great regret,' he said, 'I never learnt to valve-leave. I tried once but was greatly hurt and never tried again.' I looked at my father with astonishment and I knew he could feel my astonishment even though he didn't acknowledge it. I remember precisely those words - 'to my great regret' - because, when the time came for me to leave home, Dad had no effective argument against me travelling. From

that moment on, I also recall how my feelings towards him changed. He had been a giant, the giant in my life. But Pippo was altogether larger, more interesting, more exciting. By contrast, my attitude towards Mum changed dramatically soon after Pippo arrived and this is why.

Since my earliest memories, it had always been Dad who directed our actions. He often told Mum and I when we should go to the hub for a spin; and he tried to control my growing business (without much success). It was Dad who always set up our games, and whenever Mum or I suggested one, he would always find an objection. Even during conversation, it was Dad's contribution that was always more relevant, more important, more imaginative than Mum's, at least according to Dad, and to Mum most of the time.

But soon after Pippo's arrival, both my parents wanted to know if he had visited any of the their tyre neighbours. He said he had flown in one and stayed in another, and not yet visited the fourth.

'I bet you flew from the front near-side,' myDad then chirped. 'There's only old JimSpin and he can never be bothered to communicate.' I wondered how my father knew this so confidently.

'Ha, well news for you then, Thomas, Jimmy's died and there's a couple of travellers in there taken up residency - Pootren and Ko. They spend all their time arguing as it happens, but I didn't discover that until it was too late. I tried to stop them at first but then . . .' And then my mother interrupted.

'Old JimmySpin's died. Oh dear, I did so like him.' This confused me more than ever - how did Mum know him.

'Yeah, Pootren was there when he gave up, I don't think there was any funny business.' (I had no idea what he was talking about) 'Jimmy just gave up one day and Pootren helped him flatten out on the tyre and die peacefully. Pootren had got fed up of travelling and decided to stay. He told me he'd lost the ability to valve-leave and was happy to stay put until he went the same way as Jimmy.'

'JimmySpin was so good-hearted, I'm sorry he's gone.' At this point I could no longer restrain my curiosity.

'Was he on a visit then once?' I saw my father give me a disapproving look, and then he looked sternly at my mother. But she ignored him.

'No TomSpin,' she said, 'I knew JimmySpin because I stayed with him for a year or so.'

'You mean you've been travelling?' I could hardly believe it.

'Yes, only around our vehicle, I've been in each tyre.' So my Mum had been travelling but my Dad hadn't, yet it was he always who spoke so confidently about the world. I sent out the warmest of feelings Mum's way, and I could feel her smiling back at me, but her smile was tinged with sadness.

‘Didn’t know him myself,’ Pippo said, ‘I can though recommend Pootren and Ko, if you ever get out again. They argue about anything and everything. I tried to stop them but then they would join sides and shout at me. It took me a while to realise they really enjoy it - good entertainment.’

My Mum was lost in her thoughts and then suddenly she turned on Dad, disregarding what Pippo was saying entirely. ‘It’s not true he doesn’t, I mean didn’t, communicate. That’s just what that visitor said one time, what was his name, I forget now. He was ill, and didn’t have the energy. He was a great talker when I knew him.’

And I saw, I think for the first time, how completely I had relied on Dad for information. Yet what did he really know? He must have picked up on my thoughts, for he rolled away from us all, disgruntled, saying he needed a spin. He slouched back soon enough when he realised he was missing out on some gossip.

Pootren and Ko lived in the front near-side tyre. (You may wonder how we know which tyre is which, when our world is confined to dark insides. I have no clear answer for you, and we certainly have no inkling of the geography, as you call it, between vehicles. However, many spinners do, over time, pick up a local knowledge about their own vehicle and the relationship between, and occupancy of, the four tyres - of course the same is not true in the cities, but that comes later, much later in my story.)

As I was saying, Pootren and Ko lived in the front near-side tyre. We also discovered from Pippo that he had spent an unhappy period in the back near-side tyre. He said it was very crowded - seven spinners in all - and there was a very bad atmosphere. Fortunately, on that occasion there had been a short interval, of one or two weeks, between inflows and he did not have to put up with it for long. Mum told us there had only been five spinners when she was there and she talked about it as an ‘evil place’ and said she was lucky to get out alive. Pippo was very interested in information about the fourth tyre, the rear offside, so that he could make a decision on whether to try for it next or not. At the time of Mum’s visit there had been a ‘respectable family’ of four and, unusually, they tried to discourage visitors. They were a very ordered group and the children had finished their growing business and she didn’t think they would be travelling. Pippo said he might give it a miss. But my mother was not above a bit of mischief and she told Pippo how one of the children was a very bright girl and might prove interesting company for him.

Now I must tell you about our games. Apart from spinning, and the growing business, and our telepathic kind of communication (which I am describing for you mostly in human terms of seeing and talking and feeling and so on), we also spend a lot of time in playing games. These broadly divide into two types: physical and mental. I won’t say anything about mental games at the moment because these are more for adults, and they come later. Physical games can also be divided into two

groups, those played when a vehicle is stationary and those played on a move, but the same games can often be adapted for both states. My favourite at the time of Pippo's visit was Tangle, and Tangle I was to discover is one of the most widespread games played among spinners who are relatives or close friends. In its simplest form, all the players simply extend themselves, wrap themselves into a knot or tangle, and then, on a given signal attempt to restore themselves to a given shape as quickly as possible. I always wanted to play this more than my parents. But, because Tangle encourages young spinners to learn to manoeuvre themselves quickly and skillfully and because it is good exercise - my father was always telling me how body laziness is a dreadful disease among spinners - I could usually coerce one or other or both of my parents to play on educational grounds. At the time of Pippo's visit, though, the game had become a bit tedious and I was excited at the thought of a new player.

When the conversation with Pippo died down, my father said it was time to play a game. I immediately suggested Tangle, but was told to keep quiet. I could feel that, once again, Dad was disapproving of me. My mother whispered that Tangle was a game for families and close friends and that, usually, one did not play it with strangers. I was much peeved but kept quiet. The two men discussed a number of games I had never heard of and my mother said nothing. In the first half of Pippo's stay, this kind of conversation - what is called a negotiation - was to take place often, later the two men relaxed and became friendly enough even for Tangle and we had some of the best games I can remember. That first time, though, we ended up playing Twist. This is a boring game. One person says a number and a shape, and then, on a count of three, everyone has to get into that shape with the right number of twists. We started with just speed as a factor, but Pippo won every game and then we introduced a second factor - the tidiness of the twists - and then my mother won mostly, which infuriated Pippo. Pippo never liked losing anything and that was very good for me because I really had to struggle to keep him interested. I don't want to criticise my mother and father but, until Pippo came, they had always let me win games, and I had grown up thinking I could always beat them, even when they tried their hardest.

Without any doubt the time with Pippo was the most exciting of my life up until then. There was all the negotiation between the adults, which I loved to listen to but barely understood, there were old games played with more intensity and new games to learn. Sometimes, when Mum and Dad took a spin together or wanted to be alone, I would have Pippo all to myself and I treasured those periods, because I could pester him with questions without Dad interfering. Then he would tease me and laugh, but only in a friendly way and he always ended up answering my queries. He told me, for example, his name was Pippo and not PippoSpin because where he came from no-one used Spin on the end of their names. As often happened during, my

amazement would inspire him to tell me yet more astonishing facts about the world of the tyre spinners.

On this occasion, he went on to tell me about spinners who cannot communicate and therefore do not have names, and those who can communicate a little but still do not have names. He told me that there are spinners who always use the suffix Spun instead of Spin, and some who use Span, and Turn and Turning and Turningful, and Turningfulness. Once, Pippo said, he had met a girl called CatherineTurningfulnesses who insisted on him using her full name every time he talked to her. Sometimes, though, I would not believe him and thought him given to exaggeration and invention. When I insisted on knowing the truth he pressed home his advantage without pity. There are spinners, he carried on, whose names are so dissimilar to ours that we cannot even say them properly. And then, for another example, he spelt out for me a name something like yycc-yycc-oopxx. At this point I was convinced he was pulling my leg. But he wasn't. To his credit, Pippo had a way of letting me know - a certain tone - that, joking aside, his information about the world was the truth. And, later, I never found anything he had told me in that tone to be false.

Given my preoccupation at the time with learning to spin and the growing business, I was anxious to gather from Pippo as much knowledge as I could about these processes. I had expected him to spend long periods on the hub in order to keep up his energy store but he already knew the pattern of the vehicle having spent some time in the other tyres. He taught me that, if I was ever to go travelling, I would need to be able to recognise time and move patterns quickly. This was not as easy as it seemed. He told me he had been to many homes where the owners lived in complete ignorance of the move patterns yet he, Pippo, had worked them out within one or two weeks. The easiest ones to distinguish are the daily ones, he said, because they are so frequent. The weekly cycle, though, is not so well understood. For example, your father, he explained, does not seem to understand that there is a much better chance of a good spin every sixth and seventh day - the human weekend. In some vehicles, Pippo said, it works the other way round - good spins on days one to five and almost nothing on day six and seven.

So you see, Pippo only needed to sit on the hub on days six and seven to get more than enough energy. Since neither my father nor mother understood the seven day pattern, they thought, at first, it was just luck that Pippo got on to such good moves. After a while, Dad got jealous and had a row with Pippo who told him the secret. That was the single best gift Pippo gave my father. But everything Pippo did and said was a present for me. He also gave me tips on how to move my body while on a spin. I know this kind of information is not really of interest to humans but, in essence, he showed me how to hold on with my ends, alternating loosely and tightly,

and not to grip with the middle part of my body. This system allows a spinner to stretch out much more quickly with the movement of the tyre. On an average move, Pippo managed to wrap himself round the hub forty or fifty times, and on a fast move we saw him do a hundred once. We were all so impressed by this that we congratulated him afterwards as though he had set a record - well it was a record for our tyre.

‘That’s nothing,’ he said, ‘I seen youngsters do 300-400 on a regular basis, and the highest I ever heard of was 1043. The highest I ever seen was 570 and that was something.’

‘And what’s your record?’ I asked in my hero-worshipping way.

‘I did 300 once, and once only, and I was within a molecule of splitting! Of course, the size of a spinner makes a lot of difference; and some folks make an adjustment for size. If you’re going for a real record you need to get your size measured exactly. Very roughly, because I’m small, I would be allowed to increase my number by 55% - so you could say my record is nearer 450.’

Pippo gave me one vital piece of intelligence. He explained how I could undertake the growing business while the vehicle was on a move as long as there were no other spinners bouncing around. If there were any spinners loose, he said, they would almost certainly collide with me and that could really hurt and cause damage. The advantage of doing the growing business on a move, he explained, is that you need far less effort to absorb the same amount of molecules. Pippo advised me not to tell my parents about the technique but just to do it when they went on the hub. His advice, as ever, was excellent. If I had told Dad what I was going to do he would have forbidden me and I would probably never have tried. Later, I also discovered there are some drawbacks to doing the growing business on a move.

What else should I tell you about Pippo’s stay? Not only did he introduce me to a number of new games - Tumble, Tap, Tip, the race game Tyro, Trumps, Topper - but he taught me tactics for most of them too. Tag was my favourite and I never tired of it. I think both my parents knew the game but they had never played it with me, and neither did they want to play it with Pippo. Tag is simply a game of chase. One spinner chases the other, and, when he has caught him, the other has to chase him back. Because he was so athletic and I was still so young, Pippo would always even up our chances through one innovation or another. It was most fun when he divided himself into three or sometimes four different players, so that it was as though there were five of us playing. Of course, each part of him was still connected together by means of what we call a link (a thin part of himself) but it didn’t count if I just caught one of his links. Because it became quite easy for me to catch one of four parts, none of which had quite the manoeuvrability of Pippo as a whole, he was allowed to use his links to get in my way. Sometimes we played Tag on the move, but whereas we could



avoid disturbing my parents when we played it normally, we did annoy them when playing it on a move.

When we weren't playing games or involved with Mum and Dad, Pippo talked to me a lot about the outside world. He lost no chance to tease me with the most absurd tales; but, as I've said, he always made sure I knew fact from fiction. He explained to me that spinners were a different colour depending on the air pressure in the tyre of their home - the less air pressure, the lighter the colour - and that there were many different types of tyres and vehicles. I was sure he was joking the first time he told me that some vehicles have twelve or more tyres and that each tyre can be ten times as big as ours. Lorries, as he called them, are fun because they have frequent valve-openings and you can travel around quite quickly. They are very crowded places though and can be dangerous; as I was to find out.

Inevitably, life with Pippo had to come to an end sooner or later. I felt really miserable when, after a short move, Pippo said he expected an inflow shortly and that he would be leaving when it came. As he was waiting he told us politely how much he had enjoyed staying, and my father returned a compliment. Then, to me alone, he said he had had a great time and he hoped we would run into each other one day. I told him I would never ever forget him. I wanted to embrace him but he was afraid the valve would open and that he would lose valuable seconds. And that was it, a few minutes later Pippo left and our home had never seemed so dull, so empty, so lonely.