



The Fantastic Voyage of Bellingham Sam

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Viewed through rose-colored glasses, it turned into the perfect family vacation...

Coffee. What Sam needed was coffee. He was a walking zombie, desperate for caffeine. It was a condition of his own making, he had to admit, since he was the one who'd wanted to drive on their family vacation instead of flying. And so they had spent more than 40 percent of their holiday — two days down and two days back — stuffed into a Hyundai Sonata, a car which seemed roomy enough during his solo daily commute but quickly became less commodious when his wife and their two children were added to the mix. A giant teddy bear joining them for the return trip to the upper reaches of Washington state had made the traveling accommodations positively cramped. Despite arriving thoroughly exhausted from the drive, Sam had been unable to sleep. His joints, stiff and achy from their hours of confinement, refused to allow him a moment's peace, even in his own familiar, comfortable bed. A mere six hours after pulling into the garage of their home on Grizzly Niche Drive, he trudged into his workplace still exhausted, stiff, achy and now sleep-deprived. He deposited his computer bag in his cubicle, started his laptop booting up, retrieved his coffee cup and then made for the break room. Once fortified with a steaming cup of dark nectar of the gods, he intended to get back to his desk pronto to check what messages awaited him. It wasn't work-related e-mail he was eager to read — he had managed to keep up with that while he'd been away — but rather the postings of his entourage on eKibbitz, an online community for women where he was a member of considerable import. He knew some people thought it odd, or would if they had been privy to his online activity, but he enjoyed being the alpha rooster in an electronic henhouse. "Cock of the walk," he mused, sauntering along the hallway with a self-satisfied smile. To his relief, he heard the coffee maker gurgling and hissing as it completed its cycle, assuring him that the life-restoring elixir in the carafe was freshly brewed, and spied a full box of Haggen doughnuts — the best in town, in his opinion — propped open on the counter. Things were looking up. "Sam! I thought you weren't going to be here until later in the week," Lily Waters commented as she entered the room at a brisk clip. Pouring coffee for herself, she offered by gesture to fill his mug as well. She bloody well should have known I was coming in today — she's the one who approved my vacation request, Sam thought. Before he could say anything in reply to his departmental supervisor, however, she continued: "It's all well and good you're here now, though. Swing by my office after you're finished going through correspondence, and we'll find something for you to do." Well, there you have it, Sam reasoned: I've been directed to spend my morning on correspondence, so I'd best get to it. He grabbed a maple bar to go with his cuppa joe and set off to do as his boss had bid, smirking to himself as he went. With caffeine and sugar coursing through his system, both his mind and his tired joints began to limber up. He knew a crash would hit him in a few hours, but he would deal with that when it happened. In the meantime, he realized that what he was really looking forward to was posting a report of his trip, not catching up with whatever chitchat the ladies had engaged in during his absence, which he was sure to find inane and boring. The time away had been great, and his choice of destination perfect. Convincing Peggy that his selection was a suitable spot to take their 9-year-old daughter and 16-year-old son had necessitated a compelling argument on his part, but he had managed it with relative ease, just as

he'd had no problem getting her to agree to make the 2,500-mile round trip by car rather than plane. By the time they returned home to Sedro-Woolley, he reckoned she probably was of the mind that driving to Las Vegas had been her idea all along. He was just that smooth a talker. Back at his desk, Sam logged into eKibbitz for the first time in 10 days. He hadn't dared sneak in a visit during his vacation, not with the kids along — and especially not with Peggy there, since most of his conversations on the website centered on their sexual adventures, something which would have left her mortified if she had known just how much he shared. She knew of the site mainly for its focus on parenting issues and the mutual support that mothers could give one another. It was she, in fact, who had pointed Sam toward it. He had been totally unprepared when their son seemed to have turned into Mr. Hyde at the onset of puberty and had insisted something was seriously wrong with the boy, that such sudden shifts and mood swings surely were abnormal. Peggy sent him to eKibbitz so he could find out from other mothers just how common — and normal — those changes were. Immediately he found himself at the center of female attention when he started posting about the trials he was facing with Luke. The ladies were helpful and delighted to discover a dad who was actively involved in child rearing. Sam didn't need to remain with the moms once his urgent questions and need for reassurance about his teenager were settled, but he quite happily stayed on after finding a small corner of the place that dealt with decidedly adult (and rather naughty) topics. And rightly so, in his opinion: He acknowledged that women needed to talk to one another openly about personal matters but they didn't always have the proper, male perspective to set them straight. It was a niche that suited him to a T, and one of which Peggy was blissfully unaware. He intended to make sure it stayed that way. As he had expected, his online entourage was eagerly anticipating his return. The top thread in the forum was titled, "Welcome back, Bellingham Sam!" — he used Bellingham in his handle since it was close to his actual hometown, but far enough away to throw off anyone who tried to track him down from the name — and the messages expressed how much he had been missed, along with cajoling him for details of the trip, including all the exciting bedroom antics to which he had treated his angel. "Not this time, ladies, it was a family vacation," he murmured, positioning his cursor over the Reply button. "Thank you for the nice welcome back. My staff gave me a most pleasant greeting too, pouring my brand of coffee for me this morning and surprising me with my favourite pastries," he began. "Unfortunately, as I do have pressing business matters to attend to, I'm afraid this message will have to be brief — just the facts, ma'am, LOL, although some of you will need to check your inboxes later on. You know who you are. (wink!) "All right, time to get down to it. The vacation was everything we could have hoped for, and then some. Just as I had envisaged, Las Vegas was the ideal location. It had something for everyone, plenty of kid-friendly attractions along with certain kinky adults-only diversions. ;) "The girl child was the lucky recipient of a teddy bear larger than she is — seriously, the thing is nearly as tall as my wife — from a midway arcade, attained for her by moi drawing upon my knowledge of physics to outsmart the rigged ring-toss game. The carnie behind the counter was none too pleased. 'Bilbo' (a misnomer, since he is bigger than any self-respecting hobbit) took up more than his fair share of the back seat on the ride home, but everyone survived the trip intact. "Over dinner one night, reflecting on the extremes of Vegas, the topic of the

Enlightenment came up. My son abandoned his usual teenage reticence and surliness for a time since the theme is one he is studying for his advanced-placement social sciences class next term. He was impressed by my erudition and knowledge of the subject, and it inspired him to utter more than two words about anything for the first time in months. "And speaking of inspiration, the Cirque du Soleil ZUMANITY show elicited a certain, shall we say, fervor in my angel that she is allowing to come out with increasing frequency under my guidance, but to reveal anything more would be indiscreet. The show is fantastic, a voyeuristic exploration of hidden passions, sensuality and ultimate seduction. It's amazing. It's fun. It's hot. "As for me, many of you would be surprised to learn what an avid cyclist I am, and to that effect the real highlight for me was a bicycle day trip out to Red Rock Canyon, about 15 miles west of Las Vegas. It's a national conservation area with large rock formations, some of which bear petroglyphs carved by Native Americans in ancient times, as well as indigenous flora and fauna including the rare desert tortoise. Being the most experienced cyclist, I stayed behind the others to ensure they were doing all right — and to keep a close watch on my angel's jiggling butt as she pedaled ahead of me. (evil grin) "And now, my cyber sisters, I have to go do what they pay me for around here. It's nice to feel needed, but a bit of a pain in the ass, too. Sometimes I wonder how the place could function without me. I'll talk to y'all later." No sooner had he posted his reply than Lily Waters appeared at the entrance to his cubicle. "I just checked the vacation schedule, Sam; you're not due back until Wednesday." "No, you must be mistaken. I specifically recall that I was supposed to return on Monday the 11th," he corrected her. "Today is the ninth. You might have been looking at last year's calendar; with this being a leap year, it would be off by two days." He was struck dumb. What a fool he'd been! "It's fine if you want to stay, of course, but we don't really need you here today. Besides, you look tired and perhaps even a little flushed. Are you feeling all right? Maybe you should head home for the rest of the day, and take tomorrow too," the boss offered. "Thanks, but I'll stay," Sam stammered, giving her a weak smile. He couldn't go home! Not after dragging his family back from their vacation two full days earlier than need be. Neither could he log into eKibbitz so soon after declaring how vital his presence was at work. No, he'd remain and find busywork to keep himself occupied for the next seven hours. He finally did leave a little before his normal quitting time, hoping to beat the traffic he often encountered on the 25-mile drive. As luck would have it, however, the backup was the worst he'd seen in ages, and he ended up dragging into the house later than usual. He was relieved and grateful that Peggy had dinner ready within minutes of his arrival. "Rough day at work?" she asked in a sympathetic tone. He shrugged. "Yeah, it was. I don't really want to talk about it." In fact, he didn't much want to talk about anything, and the time passed in near silence. After struggling to stay awake most of the evening, he announced at 9 o'clock that he was going to bed. Peggy entered the master suite a short while later. Studying Sam in the mirror as she removed her makeup and washed her face, she finally said, "It was a nice trip in spite of everything. I enjoyed myself, and the kids had fun, but what about you? You seem kind of down. Did you have a good time?" "Oh yeah, of course I did. Well, I do wish a few things had gone differently..." "I told you, it's OK, I know you were too tired from driving all day. We probably shouldn't have planned our special evening together for the night we arrived. I just felt bad that you didn't even get to see

most of the ZUMANITY show; it really is tremendous. I did try to wake you, several times in fact." After a pause, she added, "Maybe we can fly down to Vegas sometime, just the two of us, and go to it again. And in the meantime, I'll do my best to illustrate some of the things you missed — but on a night when we're not both so beat." "I'll take you up on that...on a night when we're not both so beat," he said through a yawn. "And the other stuff was nothing more than hiccups. Faith loves the bear, regardless whether you won it or bought it, and Luke is going to be sullen and contrary no matter what we do. He's a teenager, that's his job. I know you tried with the Enlightenment stuff but I think, 'Yeah, whatever, Dad' is the best we could hope for at this stage." Sam was so tired he simply mumbled, "Mmm-hmm" as his eyelids drifted shut, relegating her continued attempts at conversation to comforting background noise. "It's a shame that your rental bicycle wouldn't shift properly so you had to lag behind the rest of us, but you did great to keep up as well as you did." Peggy had changed into her nightclothes and was settling into bed beside him. She gave him a quick kiss and switched off the bedside lamp. "Goodnight, my sleepy Sweetie." After several seconds of dark silence, her voice, though she spoke in normal tones, came as a harsh intrusion upon the early beginnings of his much-needed slumber. "But I do need to say one more thing, and I confirmed it with a guy I see at the gym every day: When I cycle, my butt most certainly does not jiggle!" Sam's eyes flew open, and in an instant his heart was doing a drum roll against his chest. No way would he sleep tonight. * * * (Cover photo courtesy of the Las Vegas News Bureau)