

Cambridge English Readers

Level 4

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A Matter of Chance

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Chapter 1 *The roof-tile*

The roof-tile fell.

* * *

After two or three hundred years of rain, ice, snow, wind
and sun the roof-tile fell.

* * *

After two or three hundred years of rain, ice, snow, wind
and sun the roof-tile fell from its place down into the street
of the old town.

* * *

After two or three hundred years of rain, ice, snow, wind
and sun the roof-tile fell from its place down into the street
of the old town and hit my wife in the middle of her head.

* * *

After two or three hundred years of rain, ice, snow, wind
and sun the roof-tile fell from its place down into the street
of the old town and hit my wife in the middle of her head,
killing her instantly.

Chapter 2 *Jacky*

Jacky.

What can I tell you about Jacky?

I can tell you how she looked that bright February morning when she stepped out into the new sun, as the snow was falling off all the roofs, as she went out to buy something for a dress she was making. For a special dinner – we had been married for three years.

I have a film library of her in the back of my head: in the office; our first Christmas together, skiing in Scotland; the wedding; the trip across France to our new home in Italy; and . . . and . . . I also have ten photographs of her that I took. Just ten out of the hundreds.

Afterwards, when I was able to, I looked through all the photos of our life together and carefully chose the ten I liked the best. I then had them enlarged, and put them in a special photo album. Which I have never opened since. All this was many years ago. I am an old man now.

An old man full of memories, and full of thoughts about what could have been. An old man who often thinks about the way that one tiny chance happening can change someone's life: the roof-tile falls a second earlier or a second later, she goes towards a different shop, she goes towards the same shop a different way, she meets a friend and stops to talk, she doesn't meet a friend and stop to talk, the traffic lights change as she gets to the crossing . . . or . . . or . . .

Such a little tiny chance that she was there then and the roof-tile was there then. Such a little tiny chance that left me, at twenty-seven years of age, alone in a foreign country. Italy. So much hope. Such a bright future. Such an exciting thing to do. An adventure. To go and start a new life in Italy.

Jacky and I had met at work in Manchester. We had started at the same time. We enjoyed being together at first because we were both new there, and it was good to have someone in the same situation to talk to. Talk at work led to talk in pubs, days out at weekends, and by November we were in love and planning a first skiing holiday in Scotland . . . the first time together, the first time away with someone I really loved.

After that things moved quickly. We got engaged to be married on her twenty-fourth birthday (January 20) and got married at Easter. We then spent two more years working in Manchester, during which time we decided that we wanted a change. We'd visited Italy twice in those years. Once we'd toured around the northern lakes in a car, and once we'd stayed in a farmhouse in Umbria.

We fell in love with Italy the first moment we got there, for all the usual romantic reasons – the sun, the scenery, the food and wine, the people, the buildings. It seemed right for us. We went to Italian evening classes in Manchester, and got quite good at the language.

'Io mi chiamo Paul Morris, e tu sei la mia moglie, Jacky' I used to sing around the house. We watched Italian films at the Arts Centre, and we went to Italian restaurants regularly.

We wanted a change. Three years in Manchester was

enough. Jacky came from Norwich and I came from Bedford, so neither of us had any reason to stay in Manchester except the job and each other. And then that special day came. One Friday evening I was reading the 'Abroad' part of the APPOINTMENTS section in the weekly company newspaper, when one advertisement jumped off the page at me:

CORVO PHARMACEUTICALS

Well-established company in Como needs two enthusiastic young marketing managers to start September 1st.

Accommodation provided.

Return airfare paid.

Tel: Mrs Robinson on
0183-7674321 for further details.

I remember running into the kitchen with the paper shouting 'Jacky! Jacky! Como!' and nearly knocking her down in my excitement.

We'd been to Como two years earlier and we'd loved both the town and the lake. And now here was a job in that wonderful place!

Jacky was soon more excited than me, and phoned Mrs Robinson at once. We couldn't sleep that night, talking about all the wonderful possibilities if we could get the job. The following Monday the application forms and details about the job arrived. It all sounded perfect. The company

was a good one, and they provided a flat in the centre of the old town. To cut a long story short, we applied for the jobs, we were given interviews and, in late May, we were offered the jobs. And we accepted.

Italy. We were going to live there. Out of cold wet Manchester and into those hot summers, the blue lake, the snowy winters, the beautiful scenery, the skiing . . . it was all going to be ours all the time!

We left our jobs. Everyone, our friends and family, even the people at work, thought we were silly to leave good jobs in England for an uncertain life abroad. We had expected that. We didn't mind. We packed our things, left some things with our parents and sent other things to Italy by train. In mid-August we took a two-week holiday and drove through France by car on our way to Como.

We arrived at the end of August to get the flat ready before starting work in September. It was three years after we'd met in Manchester. What a lot of changes in such a short time!

Even now, after all these years, I can still remember exactly how good it felt to be in Como. Jacky and Italy, I used to say to myself, the two loves of my life, and I had them both! What a lucky man!

And I knew that Jacky felt just the same. Our love for each other grew stronger. We did everything together. Work and play. We were closer than ever before. We really enjoyed our work. The Italians we worked with were wonderful and we made friends easily. And at home all the neighbours were welcoming and helpful. It all seemed perfect.

And then, five months later, she wasn't there any more. I would never see her grey eyes shining up at me again; her hair on the pillow, like in that song by Leonard Cohen – 'a sleepy golden storm'. Nothing. Just me.