

Tales from the Disaster Zone

by Mike Towler

So we're cut off. Vallico Sotto is isolated from the rest of humanity by the biggest damned landslide you ever saw. See this hundred-foot-deep three-hundred-foot-wide mile-long hole? That was a road I walked over just the day before.



It all began with the snow, see. They cancelled the school bus because of the crappy weather, and so I took Froggie the Fiat Multipla down to pick up our four-year old daughter Saska and the three daughters of some English friends who live in the forest below Vallico. It's the week of the *recita* - which I imagine is some kind of Nativity play - and Saska has been given the vitally important role of a *snowflake*. It's not what I'd hoped for actually. Especially since at the big pantomime in her English school a week earlier she played a *star*, not in the showbiz sense, but in the sense of standing at the back of the stage with a gold pointy shape attached to her head and being told to twinkle. You've got to say it's disappointing.

I've got the Virgin Mary in the back of the car though. And to be fair you can see why she got the job, as she looks *exactly* like your internal picture of the real one back in about 10 BC, albeit maybe a bit cleaner. And right now, you can tell from her face she'd rather be on the back of a donkey than in my car. The school is down in the valley far below, and when I got there it was only pretending to snow. As we begin the climb back up the steep, winding road to Vallico Sotto, it *really* starts to snow. Proper snow that sticks to the road. And Froggie, with his old worn-out wrong-sort-of-tyres and total lack of preparation for winter, starts to slip and slide. After ten minutes of incredibly slow driving in second gear we get back to the Vallico car park and I reckon we have something like five minutes to spare before the road becomes impassable. Lucky.

The Virgin Mary's father - sadly called John rather than Joachim - is waiting, and he hurriedly clears off to his forest with the short-arsed holy trio. Saska, my wife Sammy and I are left alone in the car park. Through the swirling snow I gaze at the ugly monstrosity building site which

has been the public face of Vallico for the last three and a half years. When we first came here five or six years ago, it was a beautiful old ruined fourteenth century *palazzo*. Looked quite nice actually. Only reason you couldn't live in it was that there was no glass in many of the windows and there was a huge crack in the stonework of the facade. Then whoever owns it decided to restore it by - get this - completely demolishing it then putting the resultant jigsaw back together from the multiple piles of tens of thousands of ancient stones. Unsurprisingly this took a long time, with a giant crane taking up half the places in the car park, but eventually something that looked remarkably like a modern *palazzo* reappeared. No plaster, still no windows, and then everything stopped. People said that the builders had been banged up in jail for nicking the most architecturally important bits of masonry and selling them on. Some other people said the money had run out. Eventually after a year or so someone came and took the crane away (What's the weekly rent for one of those things? No wonder they had financial problems.). And so now for a hell of a long time an unfinished something like you'd expect the Mafia to build in Sicily has squatted like a monstrous toad in front of our supposedly-protected beautiful village, amid piles of mud and concrete, swathed in scaffolding and the ugly bright-orange netting with which the law obliges you to cover every building site. The hundred or so people I bring here every summer for our public events arrive expecting to see some kind of Tuscan mountain idyll. When they get here and see this thing it's clear some of them want to go home again. On the official building site sign where it says "Estimated Date of Completion: Dec 2007" someone has written, in Italian, "So f***ing complete it then". That'll be the day.

So, slipping and sliding just like Froggie, we walk up the steep path to our lovely old monastery and settle in for the night.



Fast forward to the following morning. After I wake up, I lie in bed for something like four hours, refusing to tunnel from underneath nine layers of bedclothes into the frigid air of my unheated room. When I eventually crack and fling open the frozen shutters, all I can see is a vast uneven field of snow extending as far as the eye can see; the unevenness is caused by a series of giant lumps which I take to be houses. The entire village and all of the surrounding mountain have been completely buried under two to three feet of snow. We are, and not for the last time this Christmas, cut-off from the rest of the world. When I pop next door later, our lovely neighbour Flora Calissi - a resident of Vallico Sotto since around 1896 - told me there hadn't been any

serious snow up here since the 1960s. Before that, she said, it was a regular thing; that's climate change for you. To be fair though, a couple of the younger local lads (the ones in their 70s) remembered that actually there was a pretty fair snowfall here around 1985. Mind you, that's still a quarter of a century ago and you have to wonder whether the council snowplough still works.

OK, snow. Brilliant. Snowmen! Snowball fights! Let's build an igloo! Hooray. However for some reason I don't have any gloves and when the air-temperature is still around minus 10 degrees and the snow is exactly the wrong sort of powdery little crystals that don't stick together you rapidly lose your enthusiasm after picking up your first handful. Unless you're Saska of course. She quickly goes completely mental and buries herself in the stuff for hours on end and amazingly emerges without a terminal case of frostbite..



Back in the world of grown-ups, there are problems. Just around the time of the first snowfall Sammy and I realized there wasn't any food in the house, and we were just about to plan an expedition to the big Leclerc supermarket in Gallicano when the snow came. So now we're likely to be stuck here for days with nothing to eat. Now, why don't we just go to the local shop, you might ask? Well, first of all of course, Sammy's got to have her bloody soya milk and other rare delicacies that they don't stock in village shops - Christ, there'd be tantrums if she was stranded on a desert island - but the most important point is that we don't have a village shop any more. We used to, mind, but sadly it closed a few years back when local baker Mario - husband of the lovely Adelina from behind the counter - built a giant new emporium for her down in the main valley miles away. If you visit Da Mario in Piano di Coreglia, tell them to come back. We miss them. There was a village restaurant too, but that closed a few years before the shop did. There is still a bar, but it's a sort of members-only workin' mens' club (apparently so they don't

have to pay tax on the beer) and it's not the sort of place you go to have fun in winter. So basically we've got no services left at all. When the villagers were offered a mains gas supply a year or so before we arrived they voted against it, on the grounds that Mario would always bring round the enormously heavy *bombole di gas* for your gas fires or your cookers on his little tractor, and these are apparently very slightly cheaper. Bet they're regretting that now.

I should say though that everything in the restaurant is still there (tables, cookers and all that) - it's just that the door is always locked. Some enterprising and very kind local friends of ours actually reopened it this year during one of our summer schools when we had our annual "Vallico Sotto against the World" football match and they made us some quality *pizza*. One little village - with only around eight guys fit enough to run around for half an hour - against a potential pool of something like seven billion people. I've tried importing Brazilians, English, Spanish, Germans. Even Mongolians and Nepalese. But it's no use. Every year we still get hammered by Marco and his boys. The shame of it.

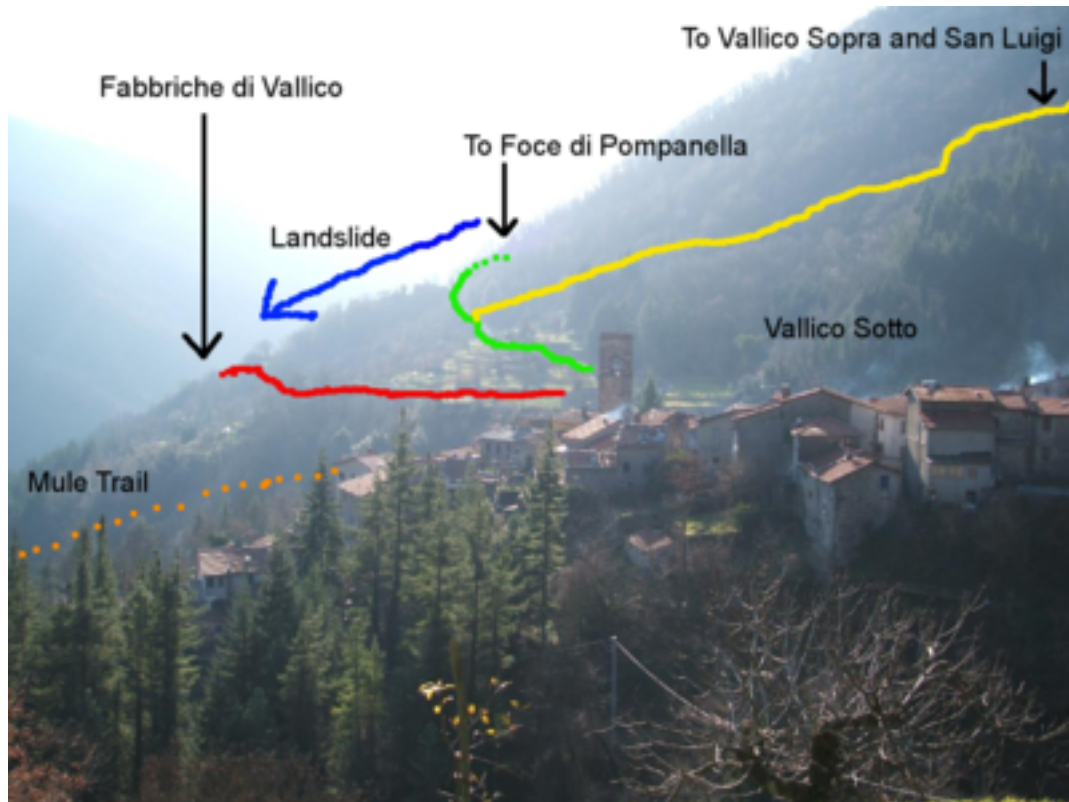
Anyway, I digress. We're trapped, and we'd better get used to it.



OK, so you don't get confused with what follows, let me bring you up to speed with the local geography. The fortress and village of Vallico Sotto - which certainly dates back to Roman times¹ - is built on the ridge of a rocky outcrop high in the southern reaches of the Apuan Alps between the two little rivers Rio Maggiore and Rio Selvano. A few hundred metres higher is our non-identical twin, Vallico Sopra - presumably built not long after Vallico Sotto when some sun-worshipping ancient from the Dark Ages realized that its location got sunshine for a couple of hours longer in the afternoon. This is where our artist friend Mandy lives, of whom you will hear more. She bought a ruin there last year, and the builders have just (like, two days ago) finished putting in the heating. She has - and she's really going to regret this - invited about 200 members of her family to visit during this Christmas holiday to celebrate the completion of her new home. Mandy, husband Dave, and son Tom drove here from England and arrived about twenty minutes before me and the Virgin Mary and the others got back from school. That was lucky too.

¹I am currently translating a history of the village by Gabriella Carli - should be finished soon.

How can we get cut off then? Basically, there's one only way up.. Look at this photograph of what Vallico normally looks like in winter..



The red road is the escape route from Vallico Sotto (population: 120). Just on the other side of the ridgeline the road winds down for about three km past the Da Sandra restaurant as far as the village of Fabbriche di Vallico at the bottom of the Turrtecava valley. Descending from there along the Turrtecava river for about nine km brings you to the main valley of the river Serchio. From there, left to Barga and Galliciano, right to Lucca.

The green road goes past some local *agriturismi* and a few houses. Then the tarmac runs out and the resulting bumpy dirt road climbs steeply up to the ridge at Foce di Pompanella. In principle it's possible to traverse this to get to the village of Trassilico in the next big valley parallel to ours, but in reality you need a four-wheel-drive off-roader with a three-foot ground clearance. Froggie doesn't cut it. The yellow road goes to Vallico Sopra (population: 80) then continues up to the ridge where we find a dead end at the even tinier village of San Luigi (population: 10 and some dogs). There is in fact an old mule trail from there which continues to Verni and Trassilico but it's completely impassable to cars, even expensive ones. That said, I reckon a hundred guys, working for a week, could widen it and clear it to make it suitable for motor vehicles.. Why would you need to do that, though? I mean, really! Don't look at the blue line yet.

The orange dotted line is the mule trail. The lily-livered pansies like me who inhabit the place nowadays talk about being cut off, but you've got to remember that the red, green and yellow roads were only built from 1960 to 1970. Before then, if you wanted to come up here, you had to hitch a lift with a bloody donkey - for Christ's sake - all the way up one of the mule trails now overgrown and forgotten by everyone but the very old. Didn't stop 'em though. There were getting on for a thousand people living up here in the early 1900s.

Just for the record, this is what Vallico looked like a few days after the snow. Reminds me of the hymn we used to sing at school back in the 1970s (though obviously these days you're not allowed to sing hymns, since Jesus was after all only a minor prophet and you might offend someone):



*In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.*

So anyway, we stick it out for three or four days. We venture out occasionally to play around in the snow, but mainly we sit inside, reading, talking, playing. The girls watch about 8 million DVDs. Yeah, and we cook as well. Real back-of-the-cupboard stuff. It's when I find myself looking one evening at a bowl of two-year-old rice to which - in the absence of other options - I have just added some red-wine vinegar and a pinch of cinnamon past its sell-by date, that I realize this is starting to piss me off. Not only the food, but the water pipes have frozen, and we can't wash, clean our teeth, flush the loo, and the only reason I was able to cook the rice was because I melted some snow. It would be good to know when we can get out of the house for a bit. I want to take the girls to Lucca, to let Saska play on the vintage roundabout with horses that go up and down. I want to mooch around the Christmas market, to visit the antiquarian bookstore, to sit in our favourite little bar sipping some deep rich red wine. Vallico Sotto is great, but a guy's got to have a little relaxation. And anyway, I don't have enough presents to fill Saska's Christmas sock.

The council have fired up the rusty old snowplough, sure enough, and they've cleared the roads. But they're all still covered by a thick crust of ice and Froggie has no chance of even getting out of the car park. But it's then that something bad happens. The temperature goes up by more than twenty degrees in the space of a few hours. What do you call it? *A warm front* moves in. And then. And then about five billion tons of snow melts all at once. And then it starts to absolutely piss down with rain, and it doesn't stop. It doesn't stop for a long time.



Not long afterwards it's the 22nd of December 2009 and it's still absolutely lashing it down. It's also my fortieth birthday. No shit, really. Old man now. I'm wearing the funkiest shirt in the world (courtesy of my lovely wife) and we've all gone down to Da Sandra to celebrate with Mandy's family. They get to the restaurant before us, and when we arrive they give me some great presents. First, a machete. There are any number of beautiful footpaths around here, but sadly - and understandably - the denuded population have lost the will to keep them clear of encroaching vegetation. Go on, I'll do it then. Also, knowing my love of filling the house with weird stuff to show our visitors, they give me a beautiful reproduction antique sword. I wave this around a bit, and find myself threatening Sandra with it and demanding she doesn't charge us for our meal. She's a formidable woman though, and she stares me out..

Let me talk briefly about the Mandy family. They live just a couple of miles from us in Cambridge, and by some strange cosmic coincidence they bought a Tuscan ruin to do up only a couple of miles from ours in Italy, and they're now our new best friends (don't worry Dan and Jane, we still love you too!). Mandy is a painter, and a good one - add her to your list, Keane - and she's the co-founder of the *Tuscany Stuckists* with Sammy. Her son Tom causes confusion. He is a strapping 6 foot tall 23-year old babe magnet with big hair, but Mandy looks so youthful and lovely that it makes you think she must have given birth to him aged about 3. And husband Dave, though - he's a wild one. Dave is the boss of a Cambridge company that can make *absolutely anything* out of plastic. He sometime does stuff for artists, and one of his recent commissions involved making a giant six-foot lobster engaged in an act of sexual intercourse with a man. No, really. All those legs and antennae have got to imply some serious plastic-moulding talent. I tell Sandra about this and she falls about laughing. She says she'll think about ordering one for the restaurant car park.

So time passes. We have a brilliant evening with great food and then we head back home up the hill. It's only when we get out of Froggie in the car park that we realize that it is seriously, very seriously, raining very hard indeed and we only have one umbrella between the three of us. Walking up the path is like wading up a river, and it is a relief when I slam the front door of the monastery behind us, and I can take off my soaking wet things. Now let me confess something to you at this point. I'm a bit drunk. I don't normally get drunk (sorry mother), but it's my 40th birthday and the end of my youth and all that, so I reckon I've got an excuse. I've had the

equivalent of maybe a bit more than a bottle of wine, and I've had a good big meal. The one thing I want to do is go to sleep, so I pack the girls off to bed, and head out of their bedroom to check and close down the house and maybe have a cup of two-year-old Ovaltine (I am old now, after all). The best laid plans..



The most miserable night of my whole life then begins, and it starts when I go to the kitchen on the top floor to get the Ovaltine. I reach my hand up to the little wooden tea-shelf but then I stop. Water is flowing down the wall in great streams behind it. I grab a towel and the washing-up bowl and run up the stairs to the attic. Finding water pouring out of a hole below the ridge line I shove the towel roughly into the hole to plug it, and arrange the bowl on the floor to catch the drips. Bloody medieval roofs! Then, covered in cobwebs and filthy, I go back down to the top floor. Shit. Downstairs. Even though it's been raining for the last few days it hasn't occurred to me to look downstairs; I know perfectly well the church roof is a bit porous. In winter, see, with no central heating, we tend to nest on the topmost of our three floors which we heat with gas fires and block off with a trapdoor that I built over the stairwell. I'd got too cosy, and I had forgotten to look at the rest of the house..

I pull up the trapdoor and go down to the second floor and run to the end of the corridor where the door to the church is. OK, so we've got a church in our house. Don't get jealous. I swapped a little terraced house in Bolton that I inherited and sold for less than a hundred grand for this; hardly the Duke of Westminster. Anyway, sure enough. Drip. Drip. Drip. Three streams of drips are pouring through the church roof - I've seen at least two of these before. There's a puddle of water behind the altar at the back of the church too, and I see that water is somehow streaming through the back wall. Definitely haven't seen that before. I run down the stairs to the bottom floor to get some pans to catch the water, and as I enter the pantry I immediately sense something is not right. I look down and I see the crappy inherited piece of linoleum covering the floor that I always meant to replace is floating in two inches of water.. Shit, and double shit. Where's this coming from? I look up? Nothing coming through the ceiling. I look sideways. Ah. Water is flowing into the room through holes in the plaster at the bottom of the wall. I remember that the house is built on a slope and that the bottom floor is something like eight feet underground. The level of the water table has apparently risen so far that it is now higher than the floor and the

pressure is pushing huge streams of liquid through the wall.

Panicking slightly, I reverse back into the kitchen - haven't been in here for a week - and immediately I become aware of a high-pitched gushing noise slightly different from the sound of the incessant rainfall. It's coming from the front of the house. Flinging open the windows into the lashing storm, I see that a high pressure jet of water is hissing horizontally into the front garden. Burst pipe. The one going to the garden bedroom. So that's why the water pressure's been a bit low since the pipes unfroze. Christ, this must have been going on for the last two days. Then it hits me that the only reason that water is coming through the back wall of the church (which is above ground level) is that one of the pipes running through there must have burst as well.

It's midnight. And it's only then that I realize that despite my desperate need to sleep, I'm not going to get to bed for quite some time..

Two days later, it's Christmas Eve, and I feel like death. I reflect back on the night of the 22nd. After putting big buckets under the roof leaks, and turning off the mains stopcock to stop the burst pipes spewing everywhere, I had turned to the water spouting through the wall. There was still some time to prevent a general flood, since thanks to either a cock-up by some mediaeval mason or by ground subsidence the back of the house seems to be lower than the front, and the water was collecting in a big pool against the back wall. If I could mop the stuff up at the same rate as it was flowing in, then maybe we could prevent a major disaster. I quickly found the mop, but the mop bucket wasn't where I expected. When things aren't used for a few years you forget where you put them, and after five comedy minutes of tearing round the house looking in all the different places where things get put, I gave up. How can a mop bucket just disappear? So, already bored, I improvised one. Using the removable plastic vegetable compartment from the bottom of the fridge, and a metal mesh salvaged from the grill-pan of the cooker. I lit a gas fire in the pantry, turned on the dehumidifier, opened a bottle of beer (there's got to be some pleasure in this), and started to mop. Splash the mop into the water. Lift the dripping mophead onto the grill. Rotate five times. Push hard. Squeeze. Repeat. And that's how it was for the next *six-and-a-half hours*. Until dawn. On my birthday. My arm muscles are still killing me.

Oh yes, and every half an hour or so - just for a bit of variety - I had dashed madly through the house looking desperately for squidgy moldable substances to squeeze into the little holes through which the water was entering the house. An early thought was Blu-Tack, but for the life of me I couldn't find the big packet that for some reason I'd brought over from England ten days before. It was only on the third trip around the house that I remembered that the previous week Saska had spent an entertaining evening making Christmas presents for Mummy using Daddy's entire supply of Blu-Tack (including a pussy cat, and an entire *park* - complete with grass and twigs stuck into it). All were now lovingly wrapped in Christmas paper and ribbons and sitting under the Christmas tree. So 2.30am sees Daddy furtively scrabbling under the tree tearing off wrapping paper, wondering how many presents he can nick before Saska will notice (come Christmas day of course, she remembers every damned one..) 'Stealing your own daughter's Christmas presents? Shame on you!!' cry the entire Barganews readership. I know. I know.

And did it work? Was it worth the trauma and the infant Christmas blubbing? Well, when I shoved the Blu-Tack pussy cat into one of the holes (along with half Sammy's supply of silicone ear plugs that for some reason she likes to wear when she's asleep) there was a definite reduction in the water flow. I should write a letter to some nerdy DIY magazine.

The following day was no fun either. With the snow mostly disappeared we got Froggie down the hill for the first time in a week and we managed to bring a wheelbarrow or two's worth of supermarket supplies - plus some emergency plumbing stuff from Brico. I waited the whole

evening for the incessant rain to stop until about 1am I bothered to read the instructions on my two-component epoxy putty. “ALSO DRIES UNDERWATER”. Sigh. And that’s how I found myself at two o’clock in the morning, sitting in the front garden on a white plastic garden chair in the freezing rain, mixing the two components of the putty together in my hands. It grows hot as it begins to polymerize, and I put it down on the window sill while I briefly scratch at the ruptured copper piping with some emery paper. When I pick up the putty thirty seconds later it is as solid as a small stone and completely unworkable. OK, now I know why there was something about ‘careful timing’ in the instructions. The whole twenty-minute process has to begin again, and I head back inside dripping wet. Legendary reserves of patience are beginning to be called for. To stop me from remembering how miserable I am, the whole time I’m declaiming under my breath the Richard Burton narration from Jeff Wayne’s 1978 War of the Worlds concept album which I’d learnt off-by-heart - with the correct melodramatic accent - for something to do during the 19-hour drive from Cambridge ten days before when I realized I’d forgotten to bring my usual CD audiobooks.

“No-one would have believed, in the last years of the nineteenth century, that human affairs were being watched from the timeless worlds of space. No-one could have dreamed that we were being scrutinized, as someone with a microscope studies creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water. Few men even considered the possibility of life on other planets and yet, across the gulf of space, minds immeasurably superior to ours regarded this Earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely, they drew their plans against us..”

.. and the rest of it. Over and over again. During the whole journey down I had a giant six-foot elk in the back of the car. It must have thought I was completely insane.



So back to Christmas Eve. Having found Flora in tears on account of the huge amount of water dripping into her attic and back bedroom (the same leak that's coming into our top floor), I've spent half an hour on the dangerously slippery moss-covered roof. You should see it up there. About an acre of higgledy-piggledy centuries-old tiles weighed down with occasional heavy rocks. Many of the tiles - if you stand on them whilst weighing more than about four stone which, erm, I guess I do - will crack and introduce another leak. Offered this job, I think Sisyphus might have preferred to keep pushing his boulder up the hill. I slap on a couple of tarpaulins in something like the best place and hope for the best. And yes it is still raining.



We'd also managed a run down to Fabbriche di Vallico to pick up a decent turkey from Signor Vanni the butcher. All the preparations for Christmas are made, with the exception of wrapping the girls' Christmas presents in the attic, and having had a total of about five hours sleep in the previous three days I'm hoping they'll go to bed soon. Of course they're both so excited they stay up until about 1.30am. First I have to wait for the sound of infant snoring. 2.30am. Then I have to sneak into the attic, wrap the presents whilst trying not to make rustling noises, and find Saska's Christmas sock. In the end I have to make do with one of my not very Christmassy ordinary socks - the only clean one I have left. Then I run round the house trying to find some little things like tangerines and sweets to put in the sock, then I have to drink the whiskey and eat the *panettone* that Saska has left out for Father Christmas. She's helpfully covered both of them with a thin film of ash from the fireplace. Then I write her a note of thanks telling her to be a good girl next year and that the whiskey was delicious (even though it was actually some disgusting liqueur someone gave us years ago). As I sneak into the girls' bedroom, I feel compelled to don a small beard of cotton wool, a red hat, and a thick dressing gown in case they see me. Of course neither of them do so I just end up feeling a bit stupid. I lay the sock on the end of Saska's bed, and finally I leave a trail of cotton wool snow from the bed back to the chimney. I check my watch. 5.30am. Jesus, they're going to be up in a few hours.

Anyway, before you say I'm destroying the illusion about how these things work (sorry kids!) I'll delete the previous paragraph as soon as Saska learns to read, OK? And you mustn't tell her. I want her to keep believing in Father Christmas until she's at least fourteen. As well as mispronouncing words like 'aminal', 'mazagine' and 'hopsical' which I've been carefully

mispronouncing myself ever since she learned to talk.

Since one of the purposes of this story is to show you what a miserable time we've had then I'll skip Christmas day itself, since it was lovely (apart from the continuing torrential rain of course). Mandy, Dave and Tom came round with Dave's sister and Tomoko's family from Vallico Sopra for turkey and fun. Foolishly we showed them *North Face* in the evening - a German film about Toni Kurz and Andi Hinterstoisser's extremely fatal 1936 attempt to climb the North Face of the Eiger; foolish since Mandy immediately banned me from taking Tom and Dave anywhere near Monte Procinto or on a few other dangerous hikes we were planning.



Unperceived by us, however, just down the mountain something terrible was happening. The first I knew of it was the day after - late Boxing Day evening. Mandy up in Vallico Sopra phones up Sammy. She's been told the *carabinieri* are closing the road to Fabbriche (our link to the outside world) tomorrow at 7am. Permanently. There's been a landslide. If you want to get your car out, drive it down now.. We do need to get it out since it's being driven back to England for the new term next week but by now, of course, you can guess what condition I'm in. Yes, I've just had three glasses of wine and a nice dinner and I want to go to sleep. I wonder if anyone has ever done so much crisis management late at night whilst drunk. In the rain.

So I wearily put on something warm and go to the car park. Soon Froggie and I are rolling slowly down the red road into the inky-black soaking-wet canyon that is the Turrtecava valley. Mandy had said the landslide was just below Sandra's restaurant and that the road had already been cleared, but that there was a huge threat of another which is why they were closing the road. Halfway down, it occurs to me that driving the car directly through the fallout zone of an unstable landslide is er.. well, slightly dangerous. As I hurriedly motor past the Valsozza bridge, Froggie's headlights pick out a confused mass of mud and smashed tree trunks shovelled off the road line, and a minute later, I'm down. I park on the main road somewhere since Fabbriche is full, and then I realize that, as always, the worst part of the evening is yet to come, since I've forgotten to bring a torch and I need to walk three km back up an incredibly steep hill, in the pitch dark, under

a landslide, drunk, while being rained on. Isn't this just the best Christmas ever? Five minutes later I hurriedly pass the landslide gazing upwards through the drizzle into the threatening black void. A couple of eery red warning lamps and a bit of moonlight is all the illumination I have, and it ain't enough to see what happened, but there is - at least in my imagination - a palpable sense of menace.. All the way up there's nothing on my left but gigantic nearly vertical slopes with water streaming off them, and it's at times like this, that I really begin to regret reading all those climbing books which end with the climber getting his head smashed in by falling rocks.

Here's a press picture of what the pleasant little country bridge over the Valsozza looks like not long after about 100,000 cubic metres of mud and half a forest has just blown straight through it.



Now a question - where did all that mud come from? I know the Foce di Pompanella road (the green one on my picture) is a few thousand feet straight up from the Valsozza bridge. Perhaps I'll get a better view from there. The next day I climb about a mile up the road, as far as a tree-trunk barrier that someone has rapidly fashioned to block the way. Past the barrier, round a corner, and you get the shock of your life. The Foce di Pompanella road isn't there anymore.



This quite clearly is a bit of a disaster, to say the least.. Marco's agriturismo "La Fornace" is on the other side of this new canyon, along with quite a few houses and *capanne*. The locals get their wood from there. There's any number of fantastic walks and views that way, and this is not going to be fixed any time soon. Click on the following picture to play my gloomy rainy video which should give you a better idea of the scale.



Repairs are going to cost millions of pounds and take many years, if they think it's worth repairing at all. Eventually, from talking to people and reading press reports, I figure out what actually happened. Believe it or not, it was at lunchtime on Christmas day. 12.30 on the dot. There were 200 people having their Christmas lunch in Sandra's restaurant just a hundred yards up from Valsozza. It's amazing someone arriving or leaving wasn't killed. Apparently the diners were all stuck up there until the road was cleared with big diggers later that afternoon. It wasn't until they sent some geologists along the upper road the following day that they realized only half the mountain had collapsed, and that the other half was in serious danger of following it. Mayor Oreste Giurlani signed an indefinite road closure notice and that's it.. We and the 200 others up here are trapped, and all over the local news programmes.

It's all planned of course. The Mafia (or whoever) are apparently planning to build an incinerator plant next to Saska's school(!), and we've all been summoned to a meeting tonight in Fabbriche di Vallico to protest against it. I wonder how much dynamite it took to stop the 200 *Vallichese* from attending. Those guys have powerful connections.

So, what have the authorities been doing since the landslide? Very quickly, a load of concrete and stones were thrown over an incredibly-steep old path that goes down from a meadow below Sandra's to the main road. So at least young fit people can now walk down the mountain and escape without having to play Russian roulette in the landslide drop zone. I've also read in various news articles that they're going to build a helicopter landing pad, and that the army are going to build a Bailey bridge over the Valsozza gorge away from the fall line, which should be interesting. This could even be done quickly, since these bridges are meant for getting tanks over rivers whilst under fire. At least no-one will be shooting at them this time.



What should be done in an ideal world

- Since the second landslide hasn't happened despite a week of opportunity, the authorities should organize a traffic light system for people to drive past Valsozza (maybe with a bloke up on the hill with a mobile phone to provide early warnings of falling stuff). Even a couple of hours a day would be good. Perhaps also a little two-stage taxi service to take old people shopping and schoolchildren to school in the valley.
- Send a daily Ape (a local motorized three-wheeled little truck - not a chimpanzee - in case you were wondering) up at high speed past the landslide with food supplies to regularly restock the temporarily re-opened (not!) shop.
- Convert the mule trail from San Luigi to Verni and Trassilico via Pian di Lago into a proper road to stop this happening again. This is a week's work for thirty men and some diggers. Until the 1940s we were part of the Trassilico Commune anyway, and this would reunite several villages with centuries-old historic connections.
- The EU gives us millions of pounds and a team of a thousand labourers to stabilize the landslide zone and to quickly rebuild the Foce di Pompanella Road.

What you can do to help

- Prevent the very wonderful Da Sandra restaurant (0583 761712) at Valsozza and the Canapale restaurant in Vallico Sopra (0583 761766) from going out of business by booking a table now. They've already lost most of their holiday season income (Sandra normally seats around 200 on New Year's Eve - that's a lot of missing money). Bring your hiking boots and work up an appetite before your meal.
- Are you the owner of a light aircraft? Parachute in lots of tasty treats and donated teddy bears and all that to stop everyone here from becoming miserable.

- Commercial Opportunity! Buy some donkeys, along with the old ruined mill next to the river at the bottom of the Vallico Sotto mule trail. Restore the mill to its former working glory and make chestnut flour. Persuade the authorities to demolish the ugly old ruined paper factory near by to make it into a proper beauty spot, then run a Tourist Donkey Nostalgia business offering people rides up the mule trail. Use the donkeys as emergency supplies transport during natural disasters (and if we get snowed in for more than two months, we can even eat the poor creatures). Flora says that in the old days she used to walk up and down the mule-trail every day to catch a charabanc to her factory at Borgo a Mozzano, so if she can do it, donkeys can too. Me and the Virgin Mary's father and some other English boys made a start the other day by clearing the mule trail with my new machete and some shears. Now it's up to you!
- Go to Da Mario in Piano da Coreglia and offer Adelina lots of money to move her business back to Vallico Sotto, or better still - Career Opportunity 2! - buy her old shop off her and open it yourself. Very useful when the village is cutoff.
- Chefs! Buy the old closed (fully furnished and equipped) restaurant in Vallico Sotto and make it into a three-star Michelin venue. Offer free meals to Vallico Sotto residents. During landslide events organize a trolley to take free delicious meals to all the local old people.
- Are you a Neapolitan *mafioso*? Stop building incinerators and power stations in beautiful places. What's wrong with ugly places?
- Buy one of the many vacant houses in Vallico Sotto and Vallico Sopra and contribute to the revitalization of these wonderful villages. If we can triple the current population then this would be one of the best places to live in the world. People who only come for two weeks in August not allowed. Families with large numbers of children especially welcome (since Saska needs someone to play with). Also, if there are more people living here, then the government might give more money for landslide relief.
- Buy the Ugly Building Site at the back of the Vallico Sotto car park off whoever owns it and finish it off (this has nothing to do with the landslide crisis, it's just a damned good idea).

So, how was your Christmas, Mike?

Well, Terry, I've been cutoff from civilization for the best part of two weeks, I haven't been anywhere fun, I've been forced to eat two-year old rice with red-wine vinegar for supper, we still can't afford central heating, I've been continually rained on, snowed on, my roof leaks, my walls leak, my floor leaks, I've sat up the whole night of my 40th birthday incessantly mopping, my daughter missed her pantomime and never got to be a snowflake, the local shop is still closed, I have to park my car miles away down a very steep hill and I have to walk down to it and back up (always through the rain, with a whining child) to go anywhere or do any shopping, my job contract runs out next October, and half the mountain has collapsed. Still, mustn't grumble.

Funny though, I've had a brilliant time. Wouldn't be anywhere else.