

Bronze Hermaphrodites and the Fat Boy Filter

by Mike Towler

I don't remember all that much from English lessons in school. I recall that you shouldn't use *very* or *a lot* or exclamation marks in creative writing and that repetition of words in too close proximity is a serious crime against style. I recall snatches of Shakespeare and William Golding. I recall Mr. Shewan dangling me and another twelve-year old - one in each hand - by our hair for talking in the library (My God, he'd be in the Labour Party salt mines these days, wouldn't he?). One piece of advice I remember very clearly though about writing stories is "Give it a snappy title, and if you can follow that with a decent first line then you've got 'em hooked!". So how about this one then? Does that title have you wanting more? What do you think the topic is today? Five euros and a lot of cold Morettis if you can figure it out.

[*Smartarse at the back*] "Go on, it's about caves isn't it? You always write about bloody caves. And you know what? No-one cares. Don't you know that Barganews readers want to learn about jazz, and opera, and what's happening in Aristo's bar. There was something in the discussion forum about it a while back.."

I open and close my mouth and narrow my eyes like a fish in a headlight, and an image flashes into my head of the time last August when I brought a big group of students from our Institute on a tour of Barga. Stopping in a little square in the old town after descending from the cathedral, Tour Guide Towler had pointed to his left. "That's Aristo's - the bar for cool people." He then flicked a casual finger to his right. "And that [*crosses himself*] is the bar for tourists." I had always assumed this to be so, even though the little bar on the left is so cool it doesn't have a sign outside saying Aristo's or anything like that. Inside - probably - are people without first names like Keane the Editor and O'Connor the Award-winning Photographer and Doggybag (can they really all be the same person?). Anyway, out of my crowd Maja the suave Serbian part-time supermodel and Colin the hairy Swiss hippy (*blogs passim*) end up going left. Me and the other fifteen students go right. It just goes to show. It's a big problem with being a physicist.

Anyway, defensive now, I glare at the smartarse. I want to say something cool and clever. Instead I say "Er, yeah. It is about caves actually. But look - this isn't *Mr. Nerd's Speleology News*, you know? Are you not aware that my last contribution to this publication described the occasion when my colleague Evans and I had a heroic caving adventure, and we discovered historical relics described in an old book, untouched since the time they were put there in the nineteenth century. Indiana Jones or what?"

But inside I know - and I know that the smartarse knows - that this story is not like that. Oh no. This one doesn't have a heroic ending.

This is a lament. A lament for my arse.

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It's September 2007. Evans and I are back at the Cave of Cascaltendine (or whichever of its dozen or so names you want to use) and today there are two stories to tell. [*I still hear the voice of Mr. Shewan. "Don't ramble or digress, boy. Why can't you keep to the point and tell them about one simple thing? And clearly 'arse' and 'smartarse' are much too close together at the end of the previous section. Furthermore your ignorant metaphor presupposes that fish close their eyes when you shine lights on them, which, let me tell you.."*].

The first story, just to delay relating the details of my humiliation, is historical and archaeological. They say this cave was inhabited on and off for five thousand years. So what did these people find

to do without Aristo's? Without Barga, even. Without *jazz*, for heaven's sake.

Second story. An adventure. Local guide books tend to have a sentence or two saying that one of the two branches of this cave goes into the mountain for more than a kilometre (although whether it is the left- or right-hand one seems to depend on what book you read, and sadly proper descriptions of cave explorations are very difficult to come by as they only get published in grotty caving club pamphlets circulated to the caver's mum and a few of his mates. *Put 'em on the internet guys! 21st century and all that..*). Well now, in plenty previous trips to Cascaltendine we hadn't managed more than thirty or forty metres in either direction but not long ago Our Boy Drummond went feet first into a hole near the ceiling down the end of the left-hand branch and discovered a huge secret chamber. Inside a massive vertical wall, and an old abandoned rotten rope leading upwards into darkness. Who dares to follow? In the past, er.. nobody. This time Evans and Towler stand unsmiling at a slight angle to the camera, eyes narrowed, hoping no-one will notice they are flexing their biceps slightly. "We do, by God".



The Bronze Hermaphrodites

Although I love history, don't you know, one of the things that drove me to become a physicist instead is that *I want to see things for myself, goddamit*. I couldn't bear the constant disappointment of not being able to personally witness Custer's Last Stand or the Charge of the Light Brigade or whatever. Well that's what I thought. Now it just so happens that not long ago I won a particularly interesting Ebay auction for nothing less than the original H.G. Wells 'Time Machine' prop from the 1960 movie. It appears that following its disappearance in 1971 the disassembled apparatus was rediscovered in a bin-liner in someone's garage and then got rebuilt by some time-machine nerds (not the sort of people you come across every day, I know, but I'm not making this up - see http://www.colemanzone.com/Time_Machine_Project/gallery1.htm). Cutting the long story short and all that, I had it shipped to Vallico and I was able to find some tough guys from Cardoso who were prepared to drag it up past Cascaltendine. And now Evans and I are sitting in the repaired machine on the plateau at the top of Monte Penna (hunched up a trifle close I have to say - only a one seater, you see). But, I hear you exclaim, it's just a movie prop, right? Well I thought so too - I just wanted it to decorate the chapel in the Institute alongside our giant Faraday Cage from 'The Prisoner'. But, get this..

I drew a breath, set my teeth, glanced sideways at the ever-nonchalant Evans who was tapping one of his fingernails on the side of the machine and whistling. Gripping the bronze and crimson leather starting lever with both hands, I slowly pulled it back to its reverse position. Incredibly, the hilltop became hazy and the atmosphere perceptibly darkened. Then the night came like the turning out of a lamp, and in another moment yesterday arrived. The landscape grew faint, then fainter and ever fainter. Yesterday night came black, then day again, night again, day again, faster and faster still. An eddying murmur filled my ears, and a strange numbness descended on my mind. I turned the crystal speed dial to put on pace and night began to follow day like the flapping of a black wing. The dim suggestion of the plateau seemed presently to fall away from us, and we saw the sun hopping swiftly across the sky, leaping it every minute, and every minute marking a day. The twinkling succession of darkness and light was excessively painful to the eye. Then, in the intermittent darkneses, I saw the moon spinning swiftly through her quarters from new to full, and had a faint glimpse of the circling stars. Presently, as we went on, still gaining velocity, the palpitation of night and day merged into one continuous greyness; the sky took on a wonderful deepness of blue, a splendid luminous color like that of early twilight; the jerking sun became a streak of fire, a brilliant arch in space; the moon a fainter fluctuating band; and we could see nothing of the stars, save now and then a brighter circle flickering in the blue.

Watching the instruments, I resolve to stop, and jerk the lever forward again. The whole hideous motion comes to a juddering halt. The solid brass dial reads August 4th 2037 BC. It is 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

Got a job lot of Harry Potter invisibility cloaks and infra-red night vision glasses too. Ebay, eh? Turns out to be have been a good move, because as we peer over the edge of the cliff looking down on the entrance to Cascaltendine we see there are *a lot* of people here. Cascaltendine is considerably more popular back then. We can hear rhythmic beats and chanting. A bunch of long-hairs are banging on hides stretched over wooden frames, and you know what? It sounds a bit like Gene Krupa on "Sing, Sing, Sing". There's even something that looks like a bar, and as we watch, there are a bunch of kids, ten years old or so, apparently being forced to drink something by some older guys and a Chief-Witch-Doctor type with white make-up. They start 'em early round here, it seems.

Evans and I follow the paths we know to get down off the cliff, circle round, and crawl up the steep approach to the cave entrance from below, then we use our cloaks to get past the band and the dancers and head into the gaping hole at the base of the huge parabolic cliff. Inside it's quite a bit lighter and more impressive than the last time we saw it in the twenty-first century; in fact there are flaming torches planted in the ground in two long lines all the way to the back of the enormous

50-metre entrance hall. Someone has even swept the floor. Then, near the back where two narrow passages branch off the main chamber, we see the ten-year olds, flailing now and looking the worse for wear from whatever they'd been given to drink. The shaman guy is shoving them down the left-hand passage out of which runs the magic stream that this cave is famous for. We follow them, trying hard not to give ourselves away by disturbing the water, and we see the boys carried up under the arm of some big guy as he climbs the crack into the upper cavity. We follow discreetly and see them being pushed through the hole that leads into the room which had the dangling rope inside back in our day; clearly we weren't the first people to discover this place. I hear a splash and howl as one of the kids falls into the pool. The shaman barks some commands in an unfamiliar language - for the sake of argument let's call it proto-Ligurian - then he walks away leaving the kids in the cold darkness. Unsure what to do, Evans and I settle down to wait.

Zammo squatted on the bare rock, his unclothed back resting against the biting damp rear wall of the cavern. He was staring sideways at the unmoving clusters of elongated cavernicolous insects dotted around him and, like all other visitors to the cave before or since, he was idly wondering what they ate and what the point was of flying around small holes in the ground in complete darkness. Being more strongly built than the other two lads he had been able to secure the only ledge where he could sit without effort with his whole body out of the frigid pool that covered the floor of the chamber. Tucka, the smallest of the three, had found an unstable perch on a six-inch rocky projection and was shivering uncontrollably not just on account of the cold but also because of the awful agitation that now gripped him. Even back in the village Tucka had rarely strayed far from his mother's skirts and the priests' forced march up to the sacred cave, the overwhelming black drink, and the boys' subsequent abandonment in this freezing grotto was proving too much for him. The third boy, whose name was Grippa, lay insensible half-in and half-out of the water. Zammo was momentarily unable to tell whether he was alive or dead.

His eyes instead strayed to the flickering flames of the torch held by a piece of twine looped over a stalagmitic spike on the giant fin-shaped rock on the right of the chamber. Gobbets of burnt cloth and tar were falling through the air, hissing as they struck the surface of the water. Zammo knew that the light would soon be gone. Then he gazed at the delicate vertical flutings of the huge flowstone in front of him, looking for all the world like a frozen waterfall, and as his eyes failed to penetrate the heavy shadows high above he closed them and saw again the priest grinding up bark and roots and a black powder he took from a gourd. Strong arms had held them from behind. Each boy forced to open his mouth as the black semi-liquid paste was shoved in and washed down with beer. Almost immediately the boys felt themselves in a waking dream. Now, as Zammo opened his eyes again, the grotto began to spin out of control. Multicoloured sputterings and flashes began to fill his vision.

Suddenly there was a tremendous splash as something heavy fell into the pool. For a fleeting second Zammo seemed to see the lower half of a pair of legs, and heard some spirit voice muttering in some unknown tongue. Something about 'Haripotta' then some shushing noises then silence. The proto-Ligurian for "Whoah.. heavy shit" ran through Zammo's mind. Unlike the others he wasn't particularly afraid. Back in the village he had known who to approach and who to ask the right questions. He had been told to expect visions and extreme damp and cold and darkness and isolation. It was all part of the Humpa ritual of becoming a man. A day and a night or more in the cave then he would emerge to claim the token of his coming of age.

Then the light went out. The cave was plunged into a desperate blackness like someone had gouged out the boys' eyes. Despite his bravado, Zammo trembled slightly.

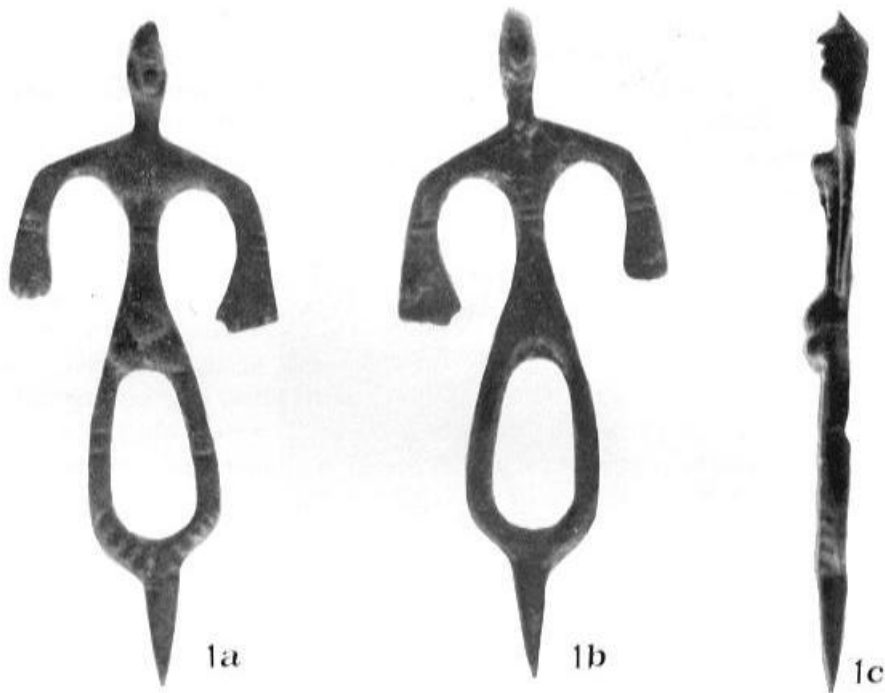
How long they waited they could not tell; any sense of time had left with the light. Zammo began to doze, only to be rudely interrupted by loud howls as Tucka rolled off his narrow perch into the freezing water. The sobbing seemed to take many hours to subside. An aeon later Zammo heard scraping noises coming from somewhere beyond the little hole. A muffled curse as an elbow hit bare

rock. A glimmer of light. They were coming.

At the bellowed summons, Zammo put his head into the little hole and wriggled his way upwards, his back dragging unpleasantly through shallow puddles of muddy water. Into the large cavity then into the hole on the right. He knew he was to climb down but he wasn't tall enough to reach between the footholds, so rough hands grabbed him and passed him down. A bend to the right, over the lip of a small waterfall and into another circular chamber like the inside of a barrel. Left into the long narrow passage with high ledges on either side - Zammo was able to squeeze between them, all the time splashing through the sacred stream that emerges by magic from the middle of the flat-topped mountain.

Finally arriving in the entrance hall he blinked. The rows of flaming torches made flickering shadows jump up and down the wall. Between the torches were long two lines of men, all facing inwards and grasping the hands of the man opposite to form a long arch. The chanting began. A clamorous thunderous rhythmical noise that terrified the boys. Zammo was pushed to the start of the man passage and he ran through, continually kicked by strong feet in hide sandals, then fell at the feet of the familiar figure of the priest waiting at the end. The looming figure smiled kindly through his white mask and held out a small bronze figurine. With unfeasibly large testicles.

"Boy - you are now a man. Here is your gronk."



Boggling slightly, Evans and I decide we have seen enough and head off down the hill. We pass the outer wall of the fortification - not the same as the giant wall that exists in our day but you can see where they got the idea. I glance up the cliff to the right. Sure enough there is the entrance to the Palace of Ismeno, and amazingly there are people inside! The wild fig tree in front of it is much larger than in our day and ladders are lashed from the upper branches up to the high ledge. Two guys are apparently acting as lookouts and a strange blond woman is eating some legumes. I grin and shake my head - hard luck Aleksandra. Evans and I return to the Time Machine, once again I push forward the bronze levers, and not long afterwards we are in the warm sunshine of the summer of 1972. As we peer over Cascaltendine's now ruined retaining wall I hear a familiar sound. No, it can't be - it's Misty Mountain Hop off Led Zeppelin IV - playing through a hissy battery-powered tape recorder. We then hear digging noises. The clink of metal on metal. A long-haired thin man

from the University of Pisa is sifting some soil taken from a silted-up natural basin; he reaches into the sieve and plucks out an object. The crumbs of earth fall away. A figurine! The man's fingers brush away some of the earth. A green patina. Bronze. "Paolo! Vieni qui - ho trovato qualcosa.."

Michelangelo Zecchini - for it is he - is carrying out the first serious archaeological dig in Cascaltendine in the mid 1970s with his mate Paolo Mencacci. He has just found a 4000 year-old bronze hermaphrodite idol (which Zammo had known as a gronk). This was only the first of a great cache of similar figurines. They also found fragments of Greek kylixes, Roman coins, vast number of animal bones, and quantities of other things which showed the place to have been used or inhabited over millennia. This is my translation of the abstract of the paper they subsequently wrote about it:

"Excavations carried out at the Cave of Castelvenere in the province of Lucca have brought to light archaeological remains from various epochs datable from the second millennium B.C. up to the first centuries of the Christian era. The objects discovered suggest that the cave was the scene of cult activity - a conclusion supported in part by the recovery of a number of unusual bronze figurines of great antiquity, all either female or hermaphrodite."

For what it's worth I've translated the whole article into English, and you can find the result at http://www.vallico.net/tti/publications/castelvenere/cave_of_castelvenere.pdf but just so you don't have to read it let me talk (incredibly superficially) about some of the basic issues.

The Humpa were the ancestors of a people known as the Ligurians or the Apuan Ligure who clashed with the Romans in the time of the Republic and afterwards, and were forced to hole up in places such as Cascaltendine (a bit like Helm's Deep in *Lord of the Rings*, hence the big wall). Now of course these people left no written records and normally all we can do is overinterpret things from objects they leave behind. However unlike their contemporaries the Etruscans who left behind art and jewellery you'd be proud to wear to parties today, the Ligurians were quite frankly a bit crap - and quality objects like the Cascaltendine bronzes are pretty unusual.

Up to now no-one has been able to say what the gronks were used for or why they were made. Well, they didn't have a Time Machine did they, and as part of our contribution to original research on this issue, Evans and I can reveal that they were given to members of the tribe in a 'coming of age' ceremony and that thereafter they were the receptacles of the soul of the owner. The little spikes on the bottom were used to stand them up in some appropriate corner of the house. The hermaphrodite ones with huge testicles were for the boys (not sure why they had breasts but there you go - all boys yearn for their mother) and the female bronzes with carefully-engraved private parts were for the girlies. As it happens a cache of unused gronks (they had to make them in batches, you see) were left behind in the cave when the Humpa were forced to flee following an invasion of the valley by the fearsome Oompa-Loompas and these were the ones found by the Pisa boys four thousand years later. Oh yes.

The relationship of prehistoric Italians with caves is well described in a fascinating book called *Underground Religion: Cult and Culture in Prehistoric Italy* by UCL Professor of Archaeology Ruth D. Whitehouse (Get it at Amazon.com..). One thing she makes clear is that prehistoric fellows loved caves associated with what one might call 'special water' - be it waterfalls, steam caves, caves with natural fizzy water, underground lakes, or in the case of Cascaltendine mysterious streams appearing out of nowhere. Usually these places seem to have been used for religious or 'cult' purposes and although Cascaltendine isn't mentioned in Prof. Whitehouse's book it has all the hallmarks of a special water cult cave. Our time trip now seems to have confirmed that.

Anyway, there's a long discussion to have about this but the Towler blog isn't the place for it (for all I know Cascaltendine scholarship has moved on since the 1970s article but the relevant journals aren't easy for me to get hold of). Read my translation of Zecchini and Mencacci's article or Ruth's

book for more professional insight; go to the Villa Guinigi museum in Lucca to see some of the gronks. But just before we get on to the adventure story, it's interesting to note that Pietro Magri - whose little nineteenth century book initially sparked my interest in Cascaltendine and whose chiselled initials and rope Evans and I found in the Palace of Ismeno - had this to say just before leaving the cave back in 1880:

“There was nothing left to see, but I knew it was bad to go back home without taking with me a memento of the Tana di Cascaltendine. I therefore took up a mattock and set myself to digging to see if Fortune would be kind to me, and in fact after excavating perhaps two handfuls of earth I found myself looking at some kind of black object.. I picked it up and examined it; it was.. a bone!”

“Our Diori burst out laughing, perhaps with good reason. For my part it seemed that Fortune had in fact been very kind to me, and I treasure it. I still do not know what it is, I cannot decide, but it certainly has the shape of a human bone and perhaps we will be able to say something about it subsequently.”

If only he had kept digging..

The Fat Boy Filter



Following our return to September 2007, Evans and I make our way back into the chamber where we had watched Zammo and his friends more than 4000 years previously. We are no longer hindered by the Prime Directive of Time Travel (“Don’t let ’em see you, and above all don’t kill anyone.”) so we can now attempt to progress further into the cave. You know, you hear about the Grandfather Paradox but you’ve only got two grandfathers and they’re pretty easy to avoid if you don’t want to shoot them. In 2000 BC - 160 generations ago or whatever - you have in principle 2^{160} (= 730750818665451459101842416358141509827966271488) ancestors. This is just a tad less than a good estimate of the number of atoms in the earth, so you’re pretty much related to everyone (just goes to show the extent of inbreeding though!). And of course you don’t need to go

around slaughtering everybody to affect the future. If you accidentally cause someone not to meet his girlfriend that night because they're too busy gawping at the weirdo time travellers then the long chain of your ancestors will get broken and you will vanish in a puff of logic. Risky business. Doctor Who must have nightmares.

Anyway Evans and I are standing on the small ledges at the edge of the pool that covers the base of the chamber. At the other side of the pool we see the huge fluted flowstone structure erupting out of the water and curving upwards. Dangling down the middle of it is the old rotten rope. Who left it there is impossible to say but clearly it could have been here for decades. Between us we only have two harnesses and a nice modern pink rope, so someone is going to have lead up a wet wall without protection; you can't trust old rotten ropes not to break when you put your weight on them. I'm certainly not going to trust my weight to it. I have a wife and baby. Luckily however, Evans - who has a wife and four babies under the age of five - is an absolutely insane suicidal lunatic and he plunges into the pool, wades over to the wall and starts to explore the possibilities. Even more luckily, as we look around we see that over on the right there are some footholds and handholds which might enable him to stick to the wall and avoid testing the shock loading of the ancient cord. It seems, possibly, that it will go.



Just because he can and probably ought to, Evans ties the old rotten rope into his harness. Stepping up out of the water, with the nice but currently useless pink rope trailing behind him, he places his sodden boot onto a small rocky protuberance at the base of the wall and begins to climb. One hand up. Second hand up. Second foot out of the water. Onwards and upwards. Past the point of no return where he's going to really hurt himself if he slips. I wonder if it will be possible for me to get him out of here if he breaks both his legs? Remembering the narrow holes one has to wriggle through and the walls you have to climb just to get to this point, I think not. I make the problem easier by avoiding thinking about it any further, and instead I wonder whether Samantha and I could cope with four foster children on top of the one we already have. Anyway, Evans continues upwards,

sticking to the rock like one of those absurd cave insects that you still see even down here (what do they find to eat, I wonder?). Quickly, assuredly, he makes his way towards the curving summit of the flowstone about 50 or 60 feet up where hopefully he can find a safe stance. At his confirming shout I feel weirdly relieved..

The pink rope snakes down and I clip on. My turn.

It takes me a few moments to attach myself to the wall with my whole body out of the water. It feels strange to be doing a serious climb again, fifteen years after doing the Avon Gorge under the Clifton Suspension Bridge, and a bit of dabbling in Liguria a few years after that. I get up another metre or so and see immediately that the next bit is tricky. Evans had seemed to breeze through here, but then again he's a better climber than I am. Inexplicably it takes me several minutes to put together the appropriate combination of moves (when in doubt just try to move a few inches higher and solutions will reveal themselves). I've never had problems in trusting equipment and Evans is reassuringly keeping the rope tight above me (it seems there is a kind of "natural bridge" rock formation around which he has been able to loop the rope). After a few more minutes of scrabbling I am level with Evans, and all too aware of the hideous drop into inky blackness behind me. I focus on looking straight ahead and working out how to get off the exposed wall and deeper into the mountain. Evans, who has already found time to do some reconnaissance, disappears into a smallish opening up and to the left.



Splashing and grunts can be heard. The next chamber is evidently wet. When it comes to my turn I poke my head through the opening and groan. The small space beyond is like the inside of a dog kennel and a foot deep in water with another very restricted opening exiting to the left. Evans has squeezed through and has reached the next chamber and he exclaims in pain as he stands up and cracks his head on a protruding fin of rock (of course we didn't bring helmets). I twist around inside the kennel and struggle to angle my body correctly to make the exit while trying to avoid dipping too much of my body into the freezing water. As my head emerges through the second opening, my torch illuminates the walls of another second relatively dry chamber with a proper horizontal floor

and finally I begin to feel safe.

We look around. A large, unusual chamber. Near the back, part of the wall has collapsed and it is clear that it is not solid rock but something like gravel covered by a centimetre-thick layer of limestone concretion. There are some unusual rock formations around the area above the opening we have just come through but at first glance there appears to be no way out. It takes thirty seconds or so to see an exit hole high up amongst these formations. Evans is up like a rabbit (one that knows how to climb, obviously); he squeezes through and immediately calls back. "There's writing on the wall, like." I haul myself up to the opening - it turns out to be like a small ship's porthole - and I poke my head and upper body through. Sure enough, in front of me there is an inscription on the wall - a date in the 1930s and a name (I forget what it was - when you're as senile as I am I should have remembered that I need to write things down.). I wonder idly if this was the owner of the rotten rope - my God - Evans could have been trusting his life to something eighty years old! Looking straight ahead I see there is a great crack in the rock heading more or less east as far as our torches will go. To the right another passage bends out of sight. This is more like it!

I'm excited now we finally have something new to explore (I had been to the frozen waterfall cave many times before we dared the ascent) and I push forward eagerly. I wriggle another foot or so through the tiny hole but suddenly I come to a dead stop. I wriggle some more. And some more. I twist and contort my body to get the correct angle. An awful realization hits me, and I begin to turn ever so slightly pink.

My arse is too big to fit through the hole.

For a man whose personal self-image is still that of the muscular young runner of fifteen years previously, this is a hard blow for me to take. I move my gaze up from the floor towards the far wall, where Evans is leaning nonchalantly against the rock, staring at the strange Johnny Eck-like figure in front of him. As I look into his eyes, I realize that we are both thinking the same thing. If I get stuck, he will be trapped by a human-shaped plug in the Fat Boy Filter and I will have to watch him die of starvation whilst continually having to apologize for weeks on end. If he has brought a knife, he will have to dismember me in order to stay alive. If he hasn't, he'll have to chew his way through.

Immediately I stop struggling forward as my arse is now jammed in tight. I try to go back but the fabric of my trousers is all rucked up, and I have to wriggle for several minutes to free it. I reverse for a foot or so. Relieved and assured of his exit, Evans says he will quickly explore the new passages but it is clear that the enthusiasm has gone from both of us and we agree that given the impossibility of rescue he shouldn't go too far. He disappears round the corner. There are scraping sounds then silence. For no particular reason I reach upwards and turn off my head-torch. Instantly I am in utter blackness and I have an overwhelming feeling of smallness like that guy in the *Restaurant at the End of the Universe*. I am a tiny ant compressed into a tiny hole under billions of tons of rock of a giant table mountain. A tiny ant. With a big arse. Flushed and humiliated, I settle down to wait.

When Evans returns, we say little. He is unenthusiastic about what he has seen down the unexplored passages but it seems there are still new ways to go which will have to wait for the future. We both struggle through the flooded dog kennel and emerge at the top of the frozen waterfall. Both my nice pink rope and the 1930s special are looped around the natural rock beam above us from where they will be difficult to remove. We agree to leave my hundred-quid rope here to help future expeditions (though there is a reward of two Moretti beers for anyone who can arrange its safe return to me - now there's a challenge).

We decide that I should descend first, and as I contemplate what needs to be done I feel my first real moment of serious apprehension. See, the top of the waterfall is not a proper ledge with a flat

top and ninety degree angles. The smooth slippery rock simply curves over into a giant black void which our headlamps don't seem to penetrate. In a wonderful optical illusion *there are no hand-or footholds whatsoever*. The words "Not sure I can do this" escape my lips before the idiocy of the expression becomes apparent to me. The moment passes and I remember to have confidence in the equipment. I'm on a rope now. But it's not the best moment of my life as I slide forwards on my big arse with my feet disappearing over the curving edge desperately looking for something to clutch before the friction is no longer sufficient to hold me.

I take one last look backwards into the shadows wherein lies the hateful Fat Boy Filter, and I think of all the lovely dinners at Mulino and Da Sandra and Rondine and that nice place in Vallico Sopra that I will have to miss, and the amount of bloody running I will have to do to get through that hole. And you want to know the expression on my face at that moment? Well, I tell you. Sullen ain't the word.