

DOWN THE HATCH BY JOHN GRAHAM

This is a true story... It was a lovely weekend and they had just returned from a week on the Costa Smeralda. It was also his birthday, which his wife had, it seemed, totally forgotten. No 'Happy birthday', no present – nothing.

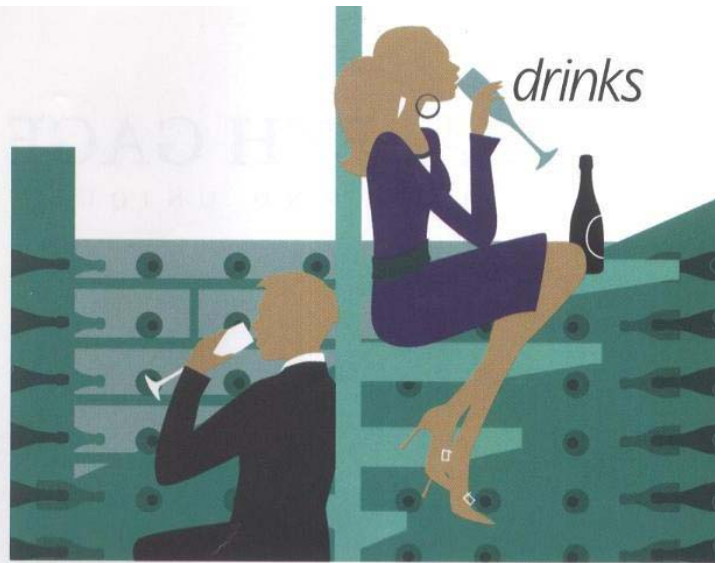
As lunchtime approached, he could contain himself no longer. 'Have you forgotten what day it is?' he asked, partly anxious, partly hopeful. 'Oh my goodness – of course, it's your birthday! Happy birthday, darling. I put your present in the study. It's under the rug.'

He was now more anxious. She had clearly gone barmy – too much sun, probably, or too many Negronis. They trudged into the study together and he looked at the rug. Flat as a pancake, clearly nothing under it. With a sidelong glance at his poker-faced wife, he pushed the rug aside to reveal a large trapdoor, five foot by three.

He was now genuinely alarmed. They were on the ground floor and had no basement, so this was a trapdoor that led nowhere. Then he opened it and saw, to his astonishment, a spiral staircase descending about 10 feet into the earth. Its sides were made of pre-cast hollow concrete moulds, all containing bottles of wine. He was in a spiral wine cellar, and the moulds were not only part of the structure, but were also wine bins, with a 1,800-bottle capacity.

He went down. The cellar had its own lighting, glasses, corkscrew, accessories and phone. It was neither claustrophobic nor cramped. It could double as a panic room, he thought. Burglars would never be able to find it. His insurance company would love it (it did).

What a present! It was like the third chamber full of gold in Hans Christian Andersen's *The Tinder Box*. His wife had had it installed while they were in Sardinia. 'Think of it as a downward extension



to your house,' Spiral Cellars had told her. 'We'll be in and out in five days!' All she had to do was write them a cheque for £15,000. More expensive types with, say, glass trapdoors cost up to £30,000.

These spiral wine cellars are no gimmick. Wine doyens like Jancis Robinson and Michael Broadbent have them, as do Andrew Parker Bowles and Delia Smith (who is a great cook but knows too many footballers' wives). A team of four puts them in and they really are in and out in five days. In the four-month run-up to Christmas last year, the company had five teams at work, each installing one cellar a week.

And they are charmingly low-tech. Keeping the humidity right is child's play, and the earth itself acts as your automatic temperature control, set at an ideal 11°C. Child's play, yes; child's playroom, no. Mama will have to be stern with the children: 'Remember, darlings, whatever happens, you are NOT to go into Daddy's panic room.' Ring 0845 241 2768 or visit spiralcellars.com.