

1. The Gift and a Journey

As we sat in the offices of Huggett, Bellows & Wilde, a firm of solicitors just down from West Hampstead Tube station, I could hear the dull hum of the Underground rumbling through the bowels of the building. It could have been mistaken for a recurring stomach complaint for it came and went every couple of minutes, then settled down until the next train passed beneath us. We had dressed for the occasion: my brother Jack and I were both wearing ties, and had even polished our shoes. This was not a natural look, and neither was Jack's hair, flattened down with Brylcreem. It was an attempt at smartness that didn't suit us. No matter how hard we tried, neither of us could ever achieve the appearance of someone well groomed.

Eventually Mr Bellows came in and sat down: wispy white; unlike us naturally neat. With a tight-lipped smile he looked at us benignly, opened the file, and in ecclesiastical tones told us we had each inherited £6,000. It did feel as if we were receiving a divine gift. We had only met this generous spinster aunt Elsie as children. She had lived on some outer branch of the family tree; I couldn't remember her name being mentioned, recognising her only in faded photographs in the family album. I suddenly felt a tremendous warmth for her, regretted that I could not express my thanks. For little though we knew it then, she had changed our lives.

Jack and I didn't speak about it, not at first, as we walked along the Finchley Road. The money, what we were going to do with it.

That's what I was thinking about when we got to the Cosmo, a café run by a rotund Italian called Giuseppe who operatically shouted orders back to the kitchen where his wife and children slaved. He knew us well; since he was still open at midnight, we would often end up there after the late night film in Swiss Cottage. He slid two plates of baked beans across the table in front of us.

'Grazie.'

'You boys, you're so Italian.'

We buttered our toast without speaking, turning over in our minds the possibilities that now presented themselves.

For the past year I'd been drifting from job to job. The lowest point had resulted from replying to an advert in the *Evening Standard*, filling a vacancy to work in the warehouse of a sausage skin factory. I lasted three months.

I was twenty-three, married to Ros, a Welsh girl, once a children's nurse, now bringing up our six-month-old twins, Sam and Lysta. Jack, fifteen months younger than me, worked for our uncle, a film producer. I never knew quite what he did apart from running around all over the place picking up people from airports and taking them in taxis to various locations.

'I want to leave London, get out into the countryside. Start a new life. Jack,' I said, while he seemed to be counting the baked

beans on his toast, 'this is what they call a karmic moment.'

'You sound like a hippy.'

'Can you finish your baked beans? It's annoying watching you eat them one by one.'

Since meeting Ros I'd become involved with the followers of Rudolf Steiner: 'anthroposophists', they called themselves. They cared about the earth, practising farming methods free of chemicals and pesticides. I started to attend seminars, and the more I heard the more I wanted to know. So in the summer I went to work on a Steiner farm down in Sussex, going home to Ros at weekends. I absorbed it all: phases of the moon, companion planting, the waxing and waning of everything. I lived in a sun-sung zodiac believing I'd found the answer. We even played Beethoven symphonies to a herd of milking cows, convinced it would increase their milk yield.

'I wouldn't mind being a shepherd,' said Jack, spearing a couple of baked beans with the end of his fork. 'But what I'd really like is a dog. A Border collie.'

'Let's buy a farm . . . Yes, let's buy a farm!' I shouted, bringing my fist down on the table. After all, we were country boys at heart, brought up in Dorset. Ten minutes later we realised what a ridiculous idea it was. After all, we only had £12,000. That wasn't going to buy us a farm.

'It would up in the hills of North Wales,' Ros told me later. Her enthusiasm about it all, and her parents in Caernarfonshire, made it a real possibility.

A few days later, Jack and I made a pact to put our money together and get out of London. We washed it down with a bottle of Niersteiner, a cheap German wine. Ros was delighted; she would be returning home, and Sam and Lysta would be growing up close to their grandparents.

Jack bought books on sheep farming, absorbing himself in the shepherd's way of life.

'What have you discovered, Jack?' I asked.

'Looks like it's seven days a week, three hundred and sixtyfive days a year.'

'You can say goodbye to your weekend lie-ins, then?'

Not once did it occur to us that knowing the theory is one thing, putting it into practice quite another.

Gwyn, Ros's father, rather than saying, 'You don't know anything about farming,' was right behind the idea. A consultant paediatrician at Bangor hospital, he was a kind-hearted Quaker whose generosity showed itself in every act. Estate agents' leaflets of hill farms and smallholdings began arriving in the post. Every day Gwyn was out in his VW Beetle to take a look.

A month later we drove to North Wales to stay with my inlaws in Caernarfon for the weekend. By Saturday afternoon we had put in an offer on Dyffryn, a remote hill farm of fortyeight acres above the village of Penygroes, exchanging contracts within a month. We had bought it for six thousand quid! Through the weeks that followed we talked about nothing

else. Ros wanted to grow vegetables, Jack was going to have a flock of sheep, I would look after pigs. Gwyn bought us a Morris Traveller, and I started to learn to drive around the streets of London. I said to Jack that as soon as I passed my driving test we should buy a Land Rover. 'We're farmers now. Straw bales in the back, a sheep dog sitting between us on the front seat.'

'Yes, wearing braces and a flat cap.'

'What, the dog?'

'No, us.'

Jack watched *One Man and His Dog* every Sunday. I had to endure his endless attempts at getting the whistle just right, the one where you stick two fingers in your mouth and a piercing shrill rips through the air. He couldn't master it, but unfortunately never stopped trying.

Jack grew a beard, wore collarless shirts and combat jackets. He got rid of his denim cap. We both bought waistcoats in the Portobello Road, and those old leather braces, the sort farmers wear. Shirt-sleeves rolled up, we were dressed to fill the part. We counted down the days, making plans, and decided to make the move on the first of January 1970. What better time to begin a new phase in your life?

Every night after the twins had gone to sleep I told Ros what we were going to achieve in that first year. I couldn't wait for it to be haymaking time, me driving a tractor and trailer and stacking the bales in the barn. It was left to Ros to put a spoonful of reality into the mix. 'You're flying too high, the both of you.' 'What do you mean?' I said, aghast.

Ros gave us her assessment of the practicalities involved in beginning a new life. She turned our attention to the not insignificant fact that the farmhouse at Dyffryn needed to be made habitable. Had we not noticed that it was no place for the twins to live? Had we not considered that she would probably not be moving in for several weeks?

'You two are actually going to be camping in the house. Why do you think we got the place for just six thousand pounds?'

Jack and I looked at each other as if to say well of course we'd thought of all that. We hadn't, not for a single moment.

'There's a lot of work to do,' she said. 'It's more than just painting and putting up wallpaper.'

I gave her a kiss then, a reassuring one. 'Don't worry, Ros,' I said. 'I realise you haven't seen it yet, but I'm a practical man around the house.'

'Me too,' said Jack. 'We can turn our hands to most things.'

'Or if we can't we can pick them up pretty damn quickly.'

'You're going to need to.'

I'd never put up a roll of wallpaper, though I had painted a friend's back door once. I wasn't going to tell Ros that.

'Everything is in the planning,' she said, 'and I'm leaving in two days.' That's what was worrying her. She was going to be staying with her parents in Caernarfon seven miles north of Dyffryn

while Jack and I got on with turning the house into a home. Then Ros let it be known that she didn't like the idea of me driving the Traveller to North Wales. We had a bit of a row about it but I was determined it was a risk worth taking.

'If the police stop you, you'll have to pay a huge fine.'

'There's nothing wrong with my driving,' I told her. 'I drive the Traveller around London every day.'

'That's not the point, is it?' We never resolved the matter.

I was awake most of the night before Ros was leaving with the twins. Those slow-moving hours when the magnitude of what I had done raised its head and stared at me, the dark shadow of myself. And I couldn't shift it, the enormity of what I had committed us to, and how we were going to cope with what lay ahead. But in the morning, Ros would never have guessed, waking next to me, smiling and whispering 'Today's the day'. I drove them, of course, to Euston station with L plates, which Ros insisted on. Rain swirled along the wind-tunnel streets, everybody struggling with umbrellas, eyes looking downwards. We hardly spoke a word. We would be seeing each other again in a week. 'Won't be long, Ros,' I said.

'I'm sure you'll survive without me.'

'Let's hope you can without me.'

As Euston came into view she came out with a long list of reminders, last minute things that must on no account be overlooked. Each job had to be ticked off in a notebook.

At the ticket barrier I knelt down beside the twins, who were looking up at me from their buggy. It felt strange to be saying goodbye to them. Then I held Ros in a long embrace, staring into her hazel eyes, stroking her wild frizzy hair.

'I will miss you,' I whispered in her ear.

That night Jack and I ate at the bistro in Ladbrooke Grove. We met up with a couple of friends, musicians who were forming a pop group, and spent the evening listening to them talking about chord riffs and great guitar solos with the same enthusiasm that Jack and I felt for our venture out into the wilds of Wales. It's funny how things that once absorbed you gradually wane, no longer hold your interest. London in the sixties, those summers of love, couples swaying dreamily at pop festivals, tripping out in a psychedelic world. All that 'love and peace, man' was wearing a bit thin. It was time to move on. That's how it struck me, sitting there, getting bored. These people were our friends, involved in our lives; now all this was passing away. I wondered who we would still be in touch with a year from now.

So the day came. We were leaving on the stroke of midnight, the moment the new decade arrived. We had survived the swinging sixties and a new life lay ahead. We had indulged in all the excesses, lying in flats in a purple haze listening to Hendrix, being cool; there was nothing more to discover.

Fireworks exploded around us, sky rockets bursting into an array of colours, cascading droplets of light. Everyone cheering, arms around each other. It was midnight, 31 December 1969. I

looked at my brother. 'Happy New Year, Jack. Who knows what it will hold for us.'

I turned on the ignition, put the Traveller into first gear, flicked out the orange indicator: we were on our way. Jack opened the AA map; he was going to navigate. We crawled in first gear between the revellers crowding around us. They blew kisses at us while a girl pressed her wet lips against my window, a symbolic reminder of what we were leaving behind.

On Jack's lap I could see clearly marked in fluorescent yellow ink the route we were going to follow, snaking its way across the page. We had a portable tape player, and as we drove we sang along to the Stones' 'You Can't Always Get What You Want'.

We drove on through the night, heading out into the dark countryside. No street lights here, Jack pouring coffee from a thermos, changing tapes, making roll-ups of Golden Virginia that he lit and passed to me. We talked or hummed along to whatever we were listening to.

Out of the blue Jack asked me how I got on with Eryl, my mother-in-law. He had only met her once, at the wedding.

'What did you think of her?' I asked.

She had given him the impression of being full of her own importance. He described her as a force to be reckoned with.

'You're right there,' I told him.

She had been against the marriage, not wanting her daughter to marry an Englishman. I remember the morning Ros opened the letter expressing her extreme disappointment. She was an international golfer, and in an emotional plea said that if Ros didn't reconsider her decision, in other words dump me, she feared for the effect it would have on her game. That's when Ros told her she was pregnant, and not another word was said about it.

'It doesn't concern you that she doesn't like you?' Jack asked.

'Not really. Ros says she'll come round in her own time.'

We pulled into Ledbury, sleeping quietly in its timber-framed buildings. You wouldn't have known here in rural England that it was New Year's Day. The houses were dark and silent, only an occasional Christmas tree lighting a window, the pub where we parked draped in the orange glow of fairy lights flashing *Happy New Year*. We got out to stretch our legs, whispering to each other, as one does when surrounded by silence. We sniffed the air, taking in the smells of the night, tasting damp grass blowing in on the breeze from the darkened fields.

'Wood smoke,' said Jack, 'the sweet smell of wood smoke,' coming from the chimney of an old thatched cottage. However, our little trip into the olfactory delights of the night evaporated in an instant. Ahead of us the local police constable was shining a torch into the back of the Traveller, bending close to the window, looking at the contents with a suspicious eye. The one thing I feared was now happening; why hadn't I listened to Ros? As we approached, I turned to Jack. 'Let me do the talking.'

'You had better be good at it.'

'Officer, a very happy New Year to you.'

A jovial response was not forthcoming. Instead he gave us the policeman's look: the up and down, or is it the once over?

'Where are we off to, at this time of night?'

'To North Wales,' I said.

He stepped back from the car, directing the torchlight onto the front and back tyres.

'Bit overweight, aren't we?'

'Do you think so?'

'I know so.' He nodded purposefully, walking round to the windscreen, checking the tax disc.

'To North Wales you say . . . and all this stuff in the back? Going camping, are you? A little late in the season,' letting a sardonic smile make the point that he was onto us and knew our game.

'No, no, we've bought a farm near Penygroes. What's in the back is just the basic essentials,' I said. Surely he could see the truth of that.

'The house we're moving into is unfurnished,' said Jack.

'New life, new beginning, New Year.' I could tell he enjoyed the way that tripped off his tongue. 'Tough life, farming,' he said, kicking a front tyre. I've never known why people do that.

'Who's the owner?'

'It's mine,' I said, 'given to me by my father-in-law.'

'Who's driving?'

'I am.'

'Hop in, will you. Turn on the lights . . . full beam . . . now dip them, please . . . left-hand indicator . . . right-hand indicator.' He walked to the back of the car. 'Put your foot on the brake pedal.' Everything worked. I wondered what he was going to do next.

I was waiting for him to take out his notebook, start writing down our personal details, ask to see my driving licence.

'You two don't look like farmers to me. You're too young. Where have you come from tonight?'

'London,' I said. 'Left at midnight. We just stopped here to stretch our legs.'

'You haven't got the build. There's not enough meat on you. You'll be lucky to make ends meet. It certainly wasn't for me; I got out of it and joined the force.'

'We'll do our best,' I said.

'Lonely, as well.'

Then he fixed a benevolent gaze upon us, a reflective look, maybe remembering himself as a younger man. He might have been in his late forties; it was hard to tell under the helmet.

'Go on then, boys. Good luck to you.'

I started up the car, wishing him again a happy New Year.

'You're overweight,' he said.

As we left Ledbury behind us, nerves dancing, I could feel my heart thumping against my ribs. Why hadn't he asked to see my licence, taken our names and addresses? I told Jack I couldn't go through that again. I would take my driving test as soon as we had settled in.

We calmed down singing along to Otis' 'A Change Is Gonna Come', together reclaiming our composure.

After we had passed through Betws-y-Coed the road narrowed; for the next half an hour I never got out of second gear. Around sharp bends stray sheep stood staring at us, their eyes illuminated, blinded by the headlights. A dishevelled motley crew, with tangled coats, loose wool hanging in great balls from their fleeces, these early morning stragglers were indifferent to any danger. I was constantly having to avoid them. I didn't know what the sheep population of Wales was, but I didn't want to reduce it through careless driving on my part.

For the first time on the journey my eyes blurred. Sleep floated up, until suddenly I heard Jack shouting my name. He said the car was veering across the road into a stone wall.

'Don't be so dramatic!'

We opened both windows, letting a vicious wind blast our faces; I was wide awake now. I kept telling Jack, 'It's okay, I'm awake.'

Ahead of us was a stretch of flat road, a chance to conserve fuel. Over the hills an aura of light broke along the ridges; on either side of us conifer plantations appeared out of the darkness. The countryside opened up. Dotted against the backcloth of this barren landscape, balancing on sheer rock, a few suicidal sheep stood staring down on us.

'Sheep have all the best views,' I said to Jack.

As the light increased we could see a ruff of small clouds skirting the peaks. Almost transparent, they vanished like a whim in the high breezes. I was filled with a sense of having crossed over from one country into another.

Then our journey came to an abrupt halt.

Ahead, a herd of cows swayed towards us. Following behind I could see the flat-capped figure of a farmer waving his stick, shouting into the wind. There were fifty of them at least, so we reversed some two hundred yards and sat waiting.

Then followed a sequence of events that whetted Jack's appetite, capturing the magical relationship between a man and his working dog. Suddenly a collie jumped on to the stone wall and raced along the jagged edges, perfectly balanced, overtaking the whole herd in a matter of seconds. Leaping down, lying in front of them ears pricked, swerving rapidly, running between their legs, never barking, holding them on course.

We got out of the Traveller, thinking we could be of some help, at least by waving our arms to steer them through an open gate into the field. But we weren't needed. We could hear the herdsman's short, sharp whistles and see the dog responding, nipping at their hocks, retreating, lying down, tongue flapping, then leaping up again to head after a cow who had taken a fancy to the open road. Moving swiftly, she brought her back to the herdsman and he closed the gate behind her.

He was a drab figure, wearing a hessian sack like a shawl over his shoulders, carrying his crook across his arm. She waited

affectionately for his hand to stroke her face.

Jack shouted over to me, 'What did you think of that? Did you see it? The concentration, the swiftness of every movement. It was beautiful.'

'Balletic,' I said. And I meant it.

Jack was enthralled; I'd never seen that expression on my brother's face before.

'How old is she?' he asked the herdsman.

'She's three now . . . I had her mother before her,' he said, leaning on the gate, taking a tin of tobacco from his trouser pocket. Eyes a watery blue, words softly spoken, his weatherbeaten face seemed to glow with a rusty hue. His deeply lined forehead gave the impression of a frown even when he smiled. Thumb and forefinger were missing from his right hand. He rolled a single-paper cigarette with dexterous fingers, using only his left hand. Even holding a box of Swans, taking a match and striking it, showed a skill that had been refined well beyond adapting to an impediment. As the match lit in his calloused hand, his palm curved elegantly around the flame, sheltering it from the wind, an art well practised.

'Her name is Jess,' he said, exhaling smoke from both nostrils and mouth. We recognised that he was a man at home in his world. On that quiet stretch of road we talked as dawn spread its light over boulder and stone and the silvery grass. We quite forgot about continuing our journey. He was open about himself and Jack, eager to know more about the dog, questioned him with a new enthusiasm.

'Discipline and praise is the secret to having a good dog,' he told us. 'Start them off at six months. Easy on them, mind you; no more than lying down till you call them. Remember, it's in their blood to work.' He clicked his fingers, and she was up at his side. 'You see, they never switch off. They listen to every word. Get away, Jess,' he whispered and she was gone in a flash, tearing up the asphalt. Bringing his hand to his mouth, he stopped her with a whistle.

'Remember, a whistle travels further than a voice in the wind.' He turned and left her there, asked us where we were going, what we were doing out so early on a New Year's Day. We told him our plans. Listening to the naïve aspirations of two city boys, he gave not a clue as to what he was thinking, passed no judgement, said only that we were young men with plenty of time to fail or succeed.

'But you,' he said, looking at Jack, 'I see the shepherd in you.' Then he whistled to bring Jess back to his side. 'Good luck to you,' he said walking away, dog at his heel. We watched them slowly disappear back into the landscape, our hands numbing in a stiff breeze.

It was nearly nine o'clock. On the deserted road with the morning still brightening we continued on the last leg of our journey. I thought of Ros and the children, stopping at a telephone box, ringing to wish them a happy New Year. But it

was too early, and to get a disgruntled Eryl out of bed was not a good way to announce our arrival in her homeland.

‘No more than five miles to go,’ said Jack as the landscape changed from the barren wildness we had seen coming from Capel Curig into the Nantlle valley. Hills of slate spilled over from the Dorothea quarry encircling the terraced houses of Talysarn with an oppressive greyness. Now for the first time I recognised where we were. Talysarn had stuck in my mind when we had driven through it looking at smallholdings in the area. It weighed on me then just as it did now, surrounded by the waste of an industry that prevented any view to please the eye, a constant reminder to all who dwelt there of the lives given to labouring down a huge hole. No sooner had we passed out of Talysarn than we came into Penygroes, the two villages separated by the secondary modern school whose stone buildings dwarfed the squat dwellings that flanked it. Penygroes was not a place of architectural interest, but a rather drab cluster of narrow streets whose faded front doors, once brightly painted, had the flaky look of a community down at heel. The main road ran through the middle, on its way to Porthmadog or Caernarfon.

We turned right and climbed the steep hill out of Penygroes. It was demanding on the Traveller, but she kept going, drinking the last dregs of fuel, until we arrived at the rusting metal gate, the faded sign *Dyffryn Farm* skewed at an angle, flapping in the wind. It was 9.50 a.m., and the whole journey had taken just under ten hours. There was no celebration, not even a sigh of relief, just silence as we sat there, my head slumped on the steering wheel.

We put together a couple of roll-ups and got out of the car, taking in everything around us. In the distance the calm Irish Sea mirrored the quietness of the morning. Cwm Silyn rose as a shadow, its peak sharply defined by the blue background of a cloudless sky. Above us the hills, the irregular shapes of sloping fields. Out of this landscape steel pylons towered, stretching their cables, buzzing with electricity over the grazing flocks. Squawking gulls floated overhead on the sea air breezing in, no doubt eyeing up the newcomers.

We drove down the stony track that cut between the fields of one of our neighbours, Hughie Catchpole, to the middle gate that opened onto the top acres of Dyffryn.

Facing us was a barn with corrugated roofing, surrounded by outbuildings, including a small milking parlour. The drive down to the house was lined on either side by larch trees. Adjoining the house stood another barn, and opposite it a hovel used by a shepherd during lambing, where the keys to the house were hanging on a nail behind the door.

Now that fatigue which follows the endurance of a long journey swept over us. Just to unload the car seemed like a mammoth task. We needed sleep, and although I wanted to speak to Ros to tell her we were here, the phone was dead. Even if I could drive to Penygroes to call her, I doubted I would make

it back. It was all we could do to empty the car, unroll two mattresses and shake out our sleeping bags. We got into them fully clothed, for the house was damp and cold. I pushed the button on the cassette player and drifted off listening to Fats Domino's 'Blueberry Hill'.
I wondered what thrills lay ahead for us.